

Agata Tuszynska

RUSSIANS IN WARSAW

I wrote that book in Poland, in 1983. In December of 1981, General Jaruzelski declared martial law; Poland entered its most severe political crisis of the post-war era. I suppose that the title alone - *Russians in Warsaw* - was enough to stop my book from being published then.

I wrote about history. Since the end of the eighteenth century, Poland was a truly independent country for only a little over 20 years, between World War One and World War Two. Throughout the nineteenth century, Poland was partitioned and occupied by three great powers - Russia, Prussia and Austria. Each occupation brought with it a wave of its own influence, which penetrated every aspect of Polish national life. It is the detail of everyday life in Poland's capital under the Russian occupation in the nineteenth century that my book is about.

In the nineteen eighties, under the martial law, the official assumption was that my book was an anti-Soviet innuendo. There is an interesting finale to this story. The book finally appeared in Paris, published in Polish by Institut Literaire, in 1990. In 1991, *Russians in Warsaw* were displayed at a book exhibition in Warsaw. The Soviet ambassador to Poland visited the exhibition and wrote a note in the guestbook, thanking me for creating a book which helps understanding mutual relationships and dependencies of both nations. That exactly was my goal, my objective in writing *Russians in Warsaw*.

There is no story, no plot and no heroes in my book. Its subject is the everyday life of the nation under foreign occupation, things often seemingly trivial and unimportant. It is those details as much as the well documented, memorable historic events that create the relationship between the two nations, between the occupier and the occupied. Without those details, we cannot truly understand the process of osmosis and enslavement, the full impact of Russian influence on the Polish national character.

My book consists of vignettes, of old photographs from a non-existing album of Russian decorations and props in the nineteenth century Warsaw. Like any decorations, the Russian structures remained somewhat skeletal, fragmentary.

The Russian influence penetrated the body of the city, determining its shape for many years to come, and although superficial, it pointed to more fundamental changes in the nation's psyche. Yet, that influence always remained only a net, thrown over the Polish capital city and the Polish spirit.

Some of those vignettes I would like to present to you today.