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*LEISURE & ARTS*

## **The Mobile Guide: Much Better Red Than Dead**

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New York -- Looking last fall to throw a party in honor of David Corn, author of "Blond Ghost," a book about legendary CIA crusader Ted Shackley, the leftish staff of the Nation magazine found the perfect spot -- the East Village's Kraine Gallery & Bar, KGB for short. With its Lenin busts, hammer-and-sickle floor design and photos of old comrades lining its communist-red walls, what better atmosphere to evoke the good old bad old days of spy vs. Cold War spy? But KGB is hardly just an exercise in mock fellow-traveling, another Goof Bar for the Irony Set. For more than 40 years, the four-story red-brick tenement on Fourth Street really was the U.S. headquarters of the Ukrainian Communist Party, with known links to Soviet intelligence.

This is a twist that has made the place a big hit among New York's scene-hungry younger literati, who flock to KGB regularly for one of the hottest reading series in town. Authors of books published by such top houses as Simon & Schuster and Random House and by the toniest of the slick magazines read from their work here. On a frigid Sunday evening recently about 100 of the city's most book-conscious denizens jammed into the candle-lit second-floor barroom to hear prize-winning young novelist Rick Moody read from a collection of short stories set to come out this summer from Little, Brown. Wondering what to do with the crowd spilling down the staircase, manager Dan Christian thought he might try to open up a listening post upstairs and pipe in the sound with a microphone.

"Hey, man," he joked. "Maybe the FBI left one behind in the walls we could use."

The bar's furtive history goes back to Prohibition, when it was a speak-easy called the Palm Casino. The building became the Ukrainian Labor Home in 1948, when that organization moved from its original, larger quarters across the street after McCarthy-era harassment drove away almost half its membership. The group tried to pretend it was a fraternal organization. But few in the East Village's otherwise predominantly right-wing Ukrainian community were fooled. "Don't go down Fourth Street," owner Dennis Woychuk says Ukrainian children were warned. "That's where the commies are."

In 1992 Mr. Woychuk, whose father set type for the Ukrainian Daily News (published out of the basement), made a deal with the remaining members of the group to manage the building. He leased the first-floor music hall and the upstairs library to local theater groups, and with a trove of old propaganda materials and memorabilia found it easy to give the second-floor bar that recherche red-bitten look.

The reading series clearly reflects the sensibilities of the owners. Mr. Woychuk, a lawyer who specializes in representing the criminally insane, has published two children's books, and his first book for grown-ups will come out within the year. Melvin Bukiet, another partner, teaches creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College, edits fiction for the liberal Jewish magazine *Tikkun* and will publish his third book, a novel, with Harcourt Brace in June. Even the house mascot, a lanky Russian wolfhound named Ivan, gets into the literary act -- he is the borzoi featured on the cover of the Knopf catalog this spring. The reading series, which is "curated" pro bono by two Columbia University graduate students, also reflects a certain zest for capitalistic exploitation. "We told them to get people at the magazines and publishing houses to do all the work for them," laughs Mr. Bukiet. "As we do to you, you do to them."

The bar's literary character is further enhanced by a monthly *Stammtisch*, when editors, agents and authors invited by agent Jennifer Lyons of the Joan Daves agency come together in imitation of a 15th-century German student roundtable. There's also Guys in Ties, a group of editors from the Book of the Month Club who read their own work in public every so often. And once a month, the members of Echo, an on-line "virtual salon," assemble in the flesh for their own readings.

The writers are good drinkers, says Mr. Woychuk; the editors and agents "need some practice." To date, however, no one has signed up for the bar's Five Year Plan -- \$10,000 for all you can drink. But the traffic on regular business nights seems to be taking up the slack. By 11 p.m., the tables are

usually filled with mostly young faces hovering over wide martini glasses or bottles of Troika beer, grooving to tunes Tarantino would approve.

With all the basic black and cigarette smoke it's hard to tell who works for Morgan Stanley and who is a Bohemian adventurer just back from Prague. Yet certain Cold War echoes do endure. The Cuban ambassador to the U.N. hasn't answered the many invitations Mr. Christian has extended, but his assistant did come by and case the joint, offering approval for the old Soviet flag hanging at midbar and a Cuban cigar from her boss.

There is also a thick wedge of leftover Cold War fear. An avid conspiracy theorist, Mr. Christian says he is writing a book about CIA involvement in the Kennedy assassination. To thwart "the agents" he says are on his trail, the lanky, long-haired barman lives "off the grid": with no telephone number, credit cards or bank account. Blackout shades hang over the bar's front windows, one of which is still barricaded by a thick slab of butcher block -- protection against a repeat of the bullets fired into the room last summer from across the street.

The old comrades still in the neighborhood have not hidden their disdain for such blasphemous sights as the cash register flanked by busts of Lenin and the "people's poet" Taras Schevchenko, or Mr. Woychuk's broken-hammer-and-sickle T-shirt, whose logo reads, "Workers of the World, Forgive Me." Worried that the authorities might still be watching, some of the old guard made Mr. Woychuk take down pictures of still-living comrades from the walls. "They just can't shake that old Cold War paranoia," he sighs.

Downstairs in the basement, the elderly editors who still put out the Ukrainian Daily News, now a bimonthly, are starting to warm to the joke, although they shunned the capitalist press for this report. When Mr. Christian goes down there now in his trademark navy-blue FBI baseball cap, the old comrades no longer seem as nervous -- or as baffled -- as they once did. "Irony is definitely not their strongest suit," says Mr. Woychuk. "But they are starting to catch on."

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Mr. McGowan is writing a book about identity politics and the press.