

Khrushchev in the Cornfields

How an Iowa Corn Farmer Befriended the Soviet Premier,  
Modernized Russian Agriculture, and Warmed the Cold War

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## Introduction

Over the past three decades, the Cold War has become the victim of gross oversimplification. In the collective consciousness of the Western world, the series of conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union between 1947 and 1991 can be mapped onto an arc that begins with the emergence of two superpowers following the end of the second world war, reaches its dramatic climax during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 1962, and resolves satisfyingly with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In reality, if one were to chart the rise and fall of U.S.-Soviet tensions between those years, the resulting line would look less like the neat arc of a pop fly and more like the bouncing path of a ground ball—a series of rises and falls, some sharp and others more gradual.

This paper first seeks to argue that the period between 1955 and early 1960—popularly perceived as an era of increasing hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union in the run-up to the Cuban Missile Crisis—represents a gradual fall on that chart; a period of increasingly warmer relations, and one that may have led to a much earlier end to the Cold War if not for a series of events beginning in May 1960 with the disastrous U-2 incident. While others, too, have argued that an easing of U.S.-Soviet tensions occurred during this time, their arguments have mainly cited initiatives at the national level by the Khrushchev and Eisenhower administrations as the cause. Many have failed to acknowledge the positive impacts of American and Soviet civilians in facilitating warmer relations during this period through person-to-person diplomacy, and even more have ignored the prominent contributions of one American citizen specifically: the Iowa corn farmer and salesman Roswell Garst. Between 1955 and 1960, Garst was able to become Nikita Khrushchev's closest American advisor, confidant, and friend—no

small feat considering the powerful anti-Soviet sentiment in the United States, Khrushchev's supreme position within the Soviet presidium, and Garst's humble origins and non-diplomatic status.

Without seeking to refute the other reasons that have been put forth for the U.S.-Soviet thaw of the late 1950s, this paper seeks to argue that Garst's relationship with Khrushchev played a significant role. Khrushchev's increasing openness toward the West—culminating in his September 1959 trip to the United States and Garst's Iowa farm—can be traced in no small part to the influence of Garst himself, “the one American civilian Khrushchev specifically placed on his visiting list” and the man who believed he might have had “more influence with Khrushchev than anyone from the United States.” Likewise, the United States' increasing cooperation with the Soviet Union during this period, evident in the State Department's gradual change of heart toward the exchange of agricultural, cultural, and trade delegations, all began with the trade of the first Soviet and American delegations in 1955—agricultural delegations in which Garst played a key role. Additionally, the friendship between Garst and Khrushchev acted as a kind of barometer for relations between the East and West: as U.S.-Soviet relations worsened, so too did the friendship between Garst and Khrushchev, and vice versa. The interpersonal consistently reflected the international.

This paper next seeks to identify some of the key factors—particularly the replicable ones—that made the remarkable relationship between Garst and Khrushchev possible. Chief among these factors was the complementarity of each man's goals: each facilitated what the other set out to accomplish. One of Khrushchev's main goals as first secretary and premier was to modernize the farms of the Soviet Union through rapid expansion and the introduction of new technologies and more efficient agricultural practices. Meanwhile, Garst devoted his life to

selling the most advanced farm technology available and educating farmers about “how to raise more food with less labor,” his lifelong credo. The relationship was mutually beneficial, with Garst introducing a host of new technologies and techniques to the farms of the Soviet Union, and Khrushchev providing Garst with a vast new market in which he could teach and sell.

Other important factors which will be explored in this paper include the complementarity of Garst and Khrushchev’s personalities, the mutual respect that existed between the men despite their opposing ideologies, and Garst’s unrelenting persistence to open lines of communications with the East and improve relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Despite widespread Red Scare paranoia, a U.S. Department of State that repeatedly scoffed at his attempts to establish diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, and a multitude of international incidents between the United States and Soviet Union, Garst remained committed to improving U.S.-Soviet relations. By identifying the replicable factors that contributed to his relationship with Khrushchev, perhaps other citizens who do not wear the formal title of “diplomat,” but who are concerned statesmen with an interest in improving their country’s foreign relations nonetheless, might have a roadmap to follow, and a role model to emulate in Roswell Garst.

## 1. Virgin Lands

On January 25th, 1955, Nikita Khrushchev stood before the Central Committee of the Communist Party berating the managers of the government's agricultural programs.<sup>1 2 3</sup> The farms of the Soviet Union had been within his purview since late 1953, when the newly instated premier, Georgy Malenkov, issued a statement asserting that the Soviet Union had for too long prioritized the hammer of heavy industry over the sickle of agriculture, particularly under Malenkov's predecessor, Joseph Stalin. "At present," Malenkov said at a plenary session in 1953, "we can and consequently should, in the interest of securing a more rapid rise in the material and cultural living levels of the population, force as rapidly as possible the growth of light industry."<sup>4</sup> Khrushchev expanded upon Malenkov's message and codified it in a September 7th, 1953 report presented to the Central Committee, cementing his role as "the architect of agrarian policy in the post-Stalin Soviet Union."<sup>5</sup> By the beginning of 1955, Khrushchev was unsatisfied with the lack of growth in Soviet agricultural output, and was particularly displeased with the low acreage of farmland planted to feed crops for livestock. He argued that the Soviet Union's agricultural managers could learn much about increasing their output by examining the recent advancements in farming operations in the United States, whose farms had pulled far ahead of the Soviet Union's in the previous two decades in terms of both area and production.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Salisbury, Harrison. "Soviet Plans to Copy U.S. Corn Economy." *The New York Times*, February 4, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> Soth, Lauren. "If the Russians Want More Meat..." *The Des Moines Register*, February 10, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> "Garst's Pre-Khrushchev Visit Continues with the Communistic Area," 1.

<sup>4</sup> Volin, Lazar. *A Century of Russian Agriculture: from Alexander II to Khrushchev*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970, 330.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Soth, "Russians."

During and immediately following the second world war, the United States poured capital into its farming operations. Between 1940 and 1955, mechanization and electrification revolutionized rural America. By the mid-1950s, American farms that once depended largely on horse-drawn plows now used tractors to complete the same work with greater speed and efficiency. During the same period, however, the Soviet Union lost nearly all of its resources fighting and recovering from the war. Nazi Germany had destroyed almost half of all housing in the Soviet Union, cost the government over \$100 billion in warfighting efforts, and killed over twenty million Soviet citizens. By comparison, 418,500 Americans were killed in the war. So at the time of Khrushchev's speech in January of 1955, the Soviet Union was just beginning to once again have the luxury of investing significant amounts of capital in its farms. And it now had a leader in Khrushchev who, unlike Stalin before him, was open to making those investments.

Khrushchev had begun allocating more resources to agriculture almost immediately following Stalin's death, introducing a sweeping plan in 1953 to cultivate the virgin and fallow lands of eastern parts of the Soviet Union and plant them to wheat. Now he was in the midst of developing a program focused on a rapid and massive expansion of areas planted to another crop on which he was particularly fixated: corn.

In January of 1955, corn grew in few regions of the Soviet Union, especially compared to the massive acreage of other feed grains like oats and barley. The previous year, corn had covered 81 million acres of the United States to the Soviet Union's relatively paltry 10.6 million. Eager to compete with the United States, Khrushchev ordered his agricultural managers to increase the Soviet Union's corn area by no less than seventy million acres by 1960.

His preoccupation with the crop went beyond his desire to contend with the West. More corn, he reasoned, would result in more feed for livestock, more animal protein, and eventually a more robust Soviet people. The need for more feed for livestock had long been viewed among Soviet leaders and agrarian experts as one of the primary bottlenecks for a Russian diet which was low in protein and depended too heavily on starches, and Khrushchev's plan to expand the Soviet Union's corn area was meant to target this problem.

Khrushchev told the committee to look West for the answer to its problem. The United States, he said, was able to produce enough grains for livestock feed because of its massive Corn Belt region, the sprawling flatlands of the American Midwest responsible for producing a majority of the nation's corn. Therefore, he said, if the Soviet Union wanted to address its shortage of livestock feed and compete with the United States in corn production, then the Soviet Union would first need a Corn Belt of its own.<sup>7</sup>

The Central Committee approved Khrushchev's proposal for expanding the Soviet Union's corn areas on January 31st, 1955, and newswires carried Khrushchev's remarks across the Atlantic, where they were translated and printed in the *New York Times* on February 4th and the *Des Moines Register* on the 9th.<sup>8 9</sup> Lauren Soth, editor of the *Register*'s editorial pages, saw the comments and was compelled to reply. An Iowan by birth, agricultural economist by training, and journalist by trade, Soth possessed precisely the expertise and platform required to issue an informed response. In its Thursday, February 10th edition, the *Register* published an editorial by Soth titled "If the Russians Want More Meat..." in which the writer presented a kind

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<sup>7</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, December 12, 1964.

<sup>8</sup> Salisbury, "Soviet."

<sup>9</sup> Salisbury, Harrison. "Khrushchev, Army Agree on Bulganin." *The Des Moines Register*, February 9, 1955.



of mock invitation to Khrushchev to send a delegation of Soviet farmers to Iowa to discover exactly how to operate a Corn Belt.<sup>10</sup> While acknowledging the newspaper's lack of diplomatic authority, he offered on behalf of the state of Iowa to host any kind of group that Khrushchev wanted to send. Along with entertaining a Soviet delegation, he wrote, the state would gladly send a return delegation of Iowa farmers to the Soviet Union to inspect its farms and provide recommendations for improvement.

Of course, Soth had not conferred with any Iowa farmers about hosting a Soviet delegation prior to writing the article. Nor had he spoken to them about traveling to the Soviet Union as representatives of the Corn Belt. He had no illusions that the suggestion was realistic, and doubted that the historically antagonistic governments of the Soviet Union and the United States would be willing to entertain such an "adventure in human understanding." So it likely came as somewhat of a shock to Soth—not to mention the U.S. government—when Khrushchev promptly announced that he had accepted the invitation and would be sending a delegation to Iowa as soon as the United States would allow one to visit.<sup>11</sup> Soth could not have imagined that his editorial in a Midwestern newspaper would find its way to the Kremlin, or that Khrushchev himself would read it and issue a response to it. More surprised than Soth, though, must have been the U.S. Department of State, which had been unable to organize an exchange with Soviet delegates since the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922. In an editorial consisting of seven paragraphs, each two to four sentences in length, an Iowa newsman did in a day what diplomats in Washington had failed to do for over thirty years.

Still, the State Department was pleased by the turn of events; the fact that Khrushchev had asked for U.S. government permission to send a delegation meant he may be open to

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<sup>10</sup> Soth, "Russians."

<sup>11</sup> "Garst's Pre-Khrushchev Visit," 1.

negotiating. Following lengthy internal discussions about what they could ask of Khrushchev in return for their authorization, the State Department officials settled on Soth's original quid pro quo: a Soviet delegation for an American one.<sup>12</sup> Khrushchev immediately accepted the offer, perhaps leaving the State Department to question whether it could have asked him for more. Negotiations between Washington and Moscow concluded in April of 1955, just two months after the *Register* had published Soth's invitation. For the first time in history, the United States and the Soviet Union would be exchanging delegations, and they would be agricultural delegations.<sup>13</sup>

The editorial finally put a crack in the ice that had existed between the two nations since the end of World War II.<sup>14</sup> And if not for a series of disastrous missteps in the years that followed, it may very well have marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War. While the conflict would continue for decades, Soth's invitation is still of great importance, leading to thousands of Americans eventually visiting the Soviet Union, a series of exchanges between the United States and Soviet Union. The invitation started the two nations on a path that would dramatically ease tensions, if only for a few years. If not for Soth's article and the chain of events it set into motion, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union might have worsened much more quickly—and perhaps with much graver consequences. For writing the invitation to Khrushchev and initiating a crucial dialogue between the United States and the Soviet Union, Soth was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Editorial Writing the following year.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the State Department invited Soth to join the delegation of American farmers that would be

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, December 12, 1964.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "Garst's Pre-Khrushchev Visit," 1.

travelling to the Soviet Union in the summer. Like Khrushchev, Soth was quick to accept the invitation.

Roswell Garst was attending a dinner party at the Washington, D.C. home of Gardner Jackson, a prominent labor union leader, when he learned that the United States would be exchanging farm delegations with the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Garst, who had made his fortune as a corn salesman and was aware of Khrushchev's predilection for the crop, immediately saw the exchange as an opportunity for new business. He was fifty-six years old with leathery skin, a shock of silver hair, and, as the Romanian politician and writer Silviu Brucan noted, "a stomach that made him look as if he had just swallowed a watermelon."<sup>17</sup> He told the other dinner guests that he would go to the Soviet embassy the next morning and offer the Soviets ten bushels of his company's hybrid seed corn for free if they agreed to ship it to Moscow. That way, he explained to the guests, the American delegation could see some American hybrid corn varieties growing there when they arrived.

"Everybody at the dinner table pretty near fainted at the suggestion," Garst recalled. The other dinner guests warned Garst not to go to the embassy because, they claimed, the CIA and FBI were staked out in an apartment across the street keeping a detailed record of anyone who entered or left. If they saw him go into the embassy, he could be called on to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Reluctantly, Garst said if he couldn't go to the embassy in person, then he would make the offer over the phone. The others discouraged him from doing that, too, claiming the embassy's wires were tapped.

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<sup>16</sup> Roswell Garst to Harrison Salisbury, June 2, 1960.

<sup>17</sup> Brucan, Silviu. *The Wasted Generation: Memoirs of the Romanian Journey from Capitalism to Socialism and Back*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993, 89.

Frustrated, Garst called his friend Dick Wilson, a reporter at the *Register*, and asked him to call the embassy under the aegis of the newspaper to make the offer. To Garst's exasperation, Wilson said that he, too, was concerned about potentially being summoned to testify before Congress if he made a call to the Soviet embassy. He told Garst he would first have to get approval from the *Register's* main office. Wilson called his bosses, who told him the paper had gone as close to the Soviets as it was willing to by granting Soth the imprimatur to print his original invitation. They told Wilson that he and Garst ought to "lay off" trying to contact the embassy. "McCarthyism had the whole U.S. by the throat," Garst recalled, and the stranglehold was preventing any American civilian from establishing a line of communication with the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> Still, Garst was determined to make contact, and his persistence would lead directly to his eventual trips to the Soviet Union and his friendship with Nikita Khrushchev.

That summer, the American delegation—which included Soth and was headed by William Lambert, the Dean of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska—left for Moscow and the Soviet delegation arrived in Iowa.<sup>19</sup> The Soviet group was led by Vladimir Matskevich, who was then the Soviet Union's acting Minister of Agriculture. Stout and bald, he might have been a younger version of Khrushchev himself. The group, made up of farmers, agronomists, and agriculturists, was wowed by the efficiency of Iowa's highly mechanized farms, which stood in stark contrast to their relatively labor-intensive *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*, or collective and state farms.

During their week in Iowa, the delegation spent a Saturday night at the homes of some hospitable residents of Jefferson, a small town fifty miles northwest of Des Moines, and two

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<sup>18</sup> Roswell Garst to Harrison Salisbury, June 2, 1960.

<sup>19</sup> "Garst's Pre-Khrushchev Visit," 1.

members of the group happened to stay with Garst's cousin, Warren. When he learned Warren would be playing host to the pair of delegates, Garst saw his opportunity to make inroads into the Soviet market, so he invited his cousin and his houseguests to have breakfast the next morning at his home in Coon Rapids, a half-hour southwest of Jefferson by car. A journalist once described Coon Rapids as a "backwater farming town where almost nothing changes but the seasons... thin trails of soft dust rise slowly into the warming air here behind red and green and tan tractors that grind their way across the rolling miles of open earth... rabbits bound across the few residential streets... people live in small white shingled houses along clean, shaded avenues called First, Second, and Third... It is a town of no stop lights, no jail, and no movie."<sup>20</sup> Reportedly, Garst's farm was similarly idyllic. When the novelist John Dos Passos visited the farm in 1943 to research an article on the Midwest he was writing for *Life* magazine, he wrote to his wife, "It's wonderful here. Nobody talks about anything but corn and hogs and steers and fertilizer and I'm finding it very educational."<sup>21</sup>

The delegates arrived to Coon Rapids on Sunday morning, passing a welcome sign which boasted that the town was the "HOME OF THE LARGEST HYBRID SEED CORN PLANT IN THE WORLD! GARST & THOMAS HYBRID CORN CO." Garst's breakfast quickly transformed into a sales pitch. He gave the delegates a tour of his land and showed them all of the advanced American farming technologies and techniques he was prepared to introduce to the Soviet Union, including fields of robust stalks of hybrid seed corn, proprietary equipment for the grinding of corncobs and cornhusks to use in livestock feed, mixtures of molasses and urea to use as cheap protein for

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<sup>20</sup> Malcolm, Andrew H. "Coon Rapids: Unchanged Since Khrushchev." *The New York Times*, May 23, 1972.

<sup>21</sup> Carr, Virginia S. *Dos Passos: A Life*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004, 464.

cattle, and machines for the drying and cleaning of corn so that it could be stored in kernel form rather than by the ear.

Eventually, the group arrived at the farm's crown jewel, the Garst & Thomas Hybrid Seed Company plant, an industrial marvel of smoke, steam, and convulsing machinery.<sup>22</sup> He walked the men through the plant, explaining its operations along the way. Fleets of cargo trucks hauled shucked ears of corn from farms in nine surrounding counties to the plant.<sup>23</sup> Outside the plant, workers loaded the corn onto conveyor belts that whisked it up ramps to containers that dispensed it onto production lines inside. Three shifts per day of 230 men each were responsible for inspecting every kernel of every ear of corn, removing damaged kernels and discarding inferior ears. More belts shuttled the sixty percent of acceptable corn to drying bins, while the other forty percent went into Garst's personal supply of livestock feed. Wheeled drying machines outside the plant pumped hot air into the bins through massive ducts until the corn's moisture content was reduced to twelve percent. Once the corn was sorted and dried, it went into machines called shellers that stripped the kernels from the cob, shelling a thousand bushels per hour. The shellers spat the kernels onto more whirring conveyor belts that led to sorting drums, which separated large kernels from small ones, then grading machines, which separated flat kernels from round ones. Sprinklers coated the kernels in a fine mist of mercury to make it resistant to fungal disease. Finally, workers in gas masks at the end of the production line scooped the corn into burlap sacks, sewing each sack shut by hand.

Having never before seen such high levels of agricultural mechanization, the Soviets were astonished. They were equally impressed with Garst himself, with one reporter noting that

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<sup>22</sup> "Garst's Pre-Khrushchev Visit," 3.

<sup>23</sup> "Happy Harvest." DVD 002 995, Iowa State University Special Collections and University Archives, Ames, Iowa.

they were “electrified by the sparks which radiate from the Garst personality as if sprayed off a grindstone.”<sup>24</sup> They would return to the Soviet Union and assure Khrushchev that “American agriculture is the most advanced in the world, and that Mr. Garst is the most advanced of American agriculturists.”<sup>25</sup> They thanked Garst and invited him to a reception the delegation was having that evening at the Sheldon-Munn Hotel in downtown Ames in honor of all the Iowans who had hosted them during their visit. Reporting to Matskevich later that day, the delegates said they were so amazed by the efficiency of Garst’s farm that he must visit Coon Rapids to see it for himself. When Garst and his wife, Elizabeth, arrived at the reception that evening, Matskevich immediately approached them and introduced himself. He explained to Garst that, while the delegation had set a strict itinerary for its visit to the United States, he was so interested in seeing Garst’s farm based on the reports he had gotten from the others that he wanted to change the schedule so he could see it himself.

The next morning, while the rest of the delegation proceeded with its schedule as planned, Matskevich travelled to Garst’s farm with another delegate and J.S. Russell, the agricultural editor of the *Register*. Garst spent the afternoon giving them the same tour he had given the others, and Matskevich was just impressed as they had been. After the tour, the group went back to Garst’s home. Over glasses of lemonade in the living room, Matskevich asked Garst if he would be interested in traveling to the Soviet Union, touring its farms, and meeting with Khrushchev. Garst wanted to accept the invitation right away, but he hesitated, concerned that any closer associations with the Soviet Union might result in his being called before a

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<sup>24</sup> “When President Eisenhower invited Nikita Khrushchev,” 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

congressional committee.<sup>26</sup> Matskevich also extended the invitation to J.S. Russell, who, perhaps fearing the same, quickly declined.

Elizabeth's interest was piqued. "Does the invitation include wives?" she asked.<sup>27</sup>

"Mrs. Garst, if you do not trust your husband, I will of course be forced to invite you," Matskevich said, brushing her off.

Garst's son Stephen, thirty years old, tried his luck. "Does the invitation include father and son?"

"You are a young man," Matskevich told him. "You will have many years in which to visit the Soviet Union."

Garst, still fearing it would be unwise to accept the invitation right away, told Matskevich he would give the matter his deep consideration and tell him when he had come to a decision. He was unsure of whether the government would even allow a private citizen to visit the Soviet Union. After all, the State Department had only allowed the first official American delegation to visit the Soviet Union a couple months earlier, and that had taken nearly two months of negotiations to arrange. As he would need the U.S. government to validate his passport if he were to travel to the Soviet Union anyway, he decided it would be best to speak directly with officials at the State Department, so he scheduled a meeting and flew to Washington.

He had rehearsed a brief monologue for the meeting, and he recited it for the State Department officials when he arrived. He said he only knew how to do one thing in life: teach people how to produce more, higher quality food with less labor. However, he knew that well. He told them he was unsure of whether it was in the interest of the United States to send him to

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<sup>26</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>27</sup> "Garst's Pre-Khrushchev Visit," 3.



educate the Soviets and it was up to the State Department to decide. If they felt it was in the country's interest, he said, then they should validate his passport. If not, then they shouldn't, and he would have no way of going. He would abide by their decision either way, with one caveat: if they were going to send him, then he wanted to go not just as an educator, but also as a salesman. He could teach the Soviets all about American crops, machinery, chemicals, and breeds of livestock, he said, but he would only be effective if he were also permitted to try to sell them all of those things. If he could not go as a man of commerce, he concluded, then he did not wish to go at all.<sup>28 29</sup>

The State Department officials were hesitant to validate Garst's passport. They told him they would need to bring the issue to the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and that they were currently unable to do so because he was out of the country. When he returned, they said, they would talk to him about it and invite Garst back to Washington to tell him their decision.

Garst left the meeting confident that the State Department would sign off on his trip. While he waited for them to contact him, he began to research the farming conditions of Eastern Europe. "I came home and did my homework," he remembered.<sup>30</sup> He called his brother Jonathan, a former professor who lived a few blocks from the University of California at Berkeley, and gained access to the university library's extensive collections on the farming conditions and history Russian agriculture. He also checked out books on Rumania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia—countries bordering the Soviet Union that were either occupied by or allied with it—in the hope that the State Department would allow him to travel to those countries, too.

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<sup>28</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>29</sup> "Garst's Pre-Khrushchev Visit," 5.

<sup>30</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

He learned that the Danube Valley, which passes through Hungary and Rumania, was a historically fertile region for corn, and that the same types of corn that grew in his fields in Iowa would be able to grow there, too. The principal corn-growing regions were sections of the Caucasus, southern Ukraine, and Moldavia, but it was only a major crop in Moldavia and Georgia, where it was a staple of the local diet and second only to winter wheat in terms of acreage. However, he quickly discovered it would be difficult, if not impossible, for Khrushchev to realize his dream of a Soviet Corn Belt. Most of the Soviet Union had a short, dry farming season, with few areas receiving more than twenty inches of rainfall per year.

“Most people think about Russia and try to compare it with Iowa or Kansas, but this just isn’t fair,” he said later.<sup>31</sup> Moscow and Leningrad had about the same farming conditions as the areas around Hudson Bay, while conditions in the Ukraine resembled those of the Dakotas, Minnesota, and the Prairie Provinces of Canada. Based on his research, he doubted that the Soviet Union would ever surpass the United States in crop production as Khrushchev hoped it would, saying that most of the Soviet Union was more like Minot, North Dakota than it was like Kansas City. While he knew Khrushchev was unlikely to meet his lofty goals, Garst remained committed to helping the Soviet Union increase its yield by as much as possible.

Garst was driven by a combination of altruism and self-interest, motivators he didn’t see as entirely incompatible. “The world’s population is increasing and must be fed,” he once wrote.<sup>32</sup> He pointed to the lack of access to food as the root cause of unrest in the world, and he believed that a decrease in a country’s hunger directly resulted in an increase in its stability. “Hungry people are dangerous people,” he wrote, “hungry nations dangerous nations.” He would

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<sup>31</sup> “The Real Story of Khrushchev’s Farm Failure.” *U.S. News and World Report*, April 2, 1962, 79.

<sup>32</sup> Hanson, Gordon. “Former Khrushchev Host Iowan Roswell Garst Has Own Détente Formula.” *The Lincoln Star*, August 4, 1974.

later say, “I tell people that a hungry dog is dangerous, but a well-fed dog is lazy. The same general thing is true of people.” He was convinced that the United States had the ability and thus the obligation to share everything it could with the rest of the world about the agricultural advancements it had made during and following World War II. “Hunger is an anachronism,” he once wrote. This conviction, he admitted, had made him unpopular even among some of his friends, but he stayed true to his commitment to teach people—regardless of race, religion, or political affiliation—how to raise more food with less labor, later writing, “It really doesn’t make any difference to a corn plant whether it is planted by a capitalist [or] a Communist...it only makes a difference whether he plants hybrid corn or not.”<sup>33</sup>

The qualities of Garst’s personality that made him a successful farmer-turned-salesman would also predict his success as a salesman-turned-diplomat. The first Garsts came to the United States from Holland, settling in Virginia in 1750.<sup>34</sup> In 1868, Edward Garst arrived on horseback to Coon Rapids, a town on the Raccoon River sixty miles northwest of Des Moines.<sup>35</sup> There, he built the town’s first general store with his cousin, Crockett Ribble.<sup>36</sup> The pair soon had a falling out, the partnership ended, and Edward struck out on his own, opening a general store across the street that would outlive its competitor. Like many of the businessmen of his era, Edward invested his earnings in property, buying up two hundred acres of Coon Rapids farmland.

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<sup>33</sup> Roswell Garst to Harrison Salisbury, June 2, 1960.

<sup>34</sup> Garst, Roswell. “Why Mr. Khrushchev Will Visit Us in Coon Rapids,” 4.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, Harold. *Roswell Garst: A Biography*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1984, 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

“That is how I grew up,” Roswell recalled. “The son of a merchant who wanted to be a farmer and who became a farmer.”<sup>37</sup>

Roswell was born in 1898, named for a parcel of land his father had recently purchased in Roswell, New Mexico that he hoped would be a lucrative investment.<sup>38</sup> Edward’s earnings gave Roswell an easy upbringing, but his comfortable childhood dissolved into an aimless adolescence. He drifted from Iowa to Wisconsin, Wisconsin to Chicago, and Chicago to Canada, attempting college four times at three different universities but never receiving a degree. Finally, he settled back in Coon Rapids, where he worked on his family’s farm and purchased a small house. His inability to finish school would bother him for the rest of his life—particularly considering his love of education and reverence for titles and degrees—but the self-perceived inadequacy would also serve to fuel his trademark ambition, a quality he first displayed in the summer of 1921, when he became infatuated with Elizabeth Henak, a bright student a few years older than him from a Czechoslovakian enclave of eastern Iowa called Oxford Junction. He pursued her doggedly, but his biographer noted that she was “a reluctant participant in Roswell’s speedy and aggressive courtship.”<sup>39</sup> He made frequent trips to visit her at her college campus in Cedar Falls, 120 miles from Coon Rapids, where she was studying to become a schoolteacher. And he sent her a series of marriage proposals by telegram—one of which, to her humiliation, was delivered to the dean of her school and read aloud in front of her classmates. Following a monthslong campaign, she finally relented, agreeing to marry him. Triumphant, he hauled his reluctant bride back to Coon Rapids like a spoil of war, where she burst into tears at the sight of the tiny, poorly decorated home she would have to share with him.

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<sup>37</sup> Garst, “Why Mr. Khrushchev Will Visit Us in Coon Rapids,” 5.

<sup>38</sup> Lee, *Roswell Garst: A Biography*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

The relationship gradually improved. The couple had children and, in 1926, relocated to Des Moines, where Garst bought an eighty-acre tract of land and, crucially, met a young Henry Wallace. Wallace was then a successful farmer and salesman, as well as the editor of his family's farm journal, *Wallaces' Farmer*. He would go on to serve as Secretary of Agriculture, and later Vice President, under Franklin Roosevelt. Wallace introduced Garst to the burgeoning field of seed corn hybridization, a process by which multiple strains of corn are bred together to produce new strains with certain desirable characteristics, such as stalk strength or pest resistance.

The move to Des Moines started promisingly, but the stock market crash of 1929 left the Garsts penniless. In debt from the plot of land and the house they had purchased in Des Moines, they moved back to Coon Rapids. With little to his name but land for which there was no longer a market, and convinced that Wallace's method of growing corn was ascendant, Garst decided to start planting and selling hybrid seed corn for Wallace's Hi-Bred Corn Company. To do so, however, he needed to purchase foundation seed, and to do that, he needed literal seed money. When he learned that Charley Thomas, an acquaintance from high school who had become a wealthy farmer, had recently fallen into a corn picking machine and mangled his right arm, Garst sensed opportunity and contacted him. In the time since his marriage proposal campaign, he had honed his powers of persuasion considerably. "You won't be able to farm again because of your injury," Garst told Thomas bluntly. "I'd like to invite you to go into the seed corn business with me." Fearing he now had little other use as a result of his injury, Thomas agreed to become Garst's financier. "Actually," Thomas recalled, "there was hardly any discussion about it."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Lee, *Roswell Garst: A Biography*, 42.

Copying Wallace's play on words, the pair formed the Garst & Thomas Hi-Bred Corn Company in 1930.<sup>41</sup> The partnership quickly worked to both men's favor: by the following year, the company was producing three-hundred bushels of seed per year, about a tenth of all American hybrid seed corn.<sup>42</sup> Garst paid off his debts with ease and quickly expanded the market for his product. He spent the next twelve years travelling the Midwest preaching the benefits of using hybrid seed rather than conventional seed. In Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, Missouri, and Kansas, he converted many, making loyal customers of farmers throughout the country. In 1942, he learned of another agricultural breakthrough, nitrogen fertilizer, and Garst & Thomas began producing that, too. He spent the next ten years on another tour of the Midwest, this time teaching farmers about the benefits of using chemical fertilizers rather than rotating crops in order to introduce nitrogen to the soil. In the late 1940s, he discovered a technique for combining corncobs and cornstalks—traditionally the discarded byproducts of the corn industry—with a ten-percent urea and ninety-percent molasses mixture to create cheap, high-protein feeds for livestock, and he toured the country once more, teaching and selling.<sup>43</sup>

By 1955, Garst had become a very rich man, and he was finally prepared to bring the expertise he had acquired over a lifetime as a farmer, educator, and salesman to the developing world—starting with the Soviet Union.

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<sup>41</sup> Garst, "Why Mr. Khrushchev Will Visit Us in Coon Rapids," 5.

<sup>42</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>43</sup> Roswell Garst to Bourke Hickenlooper, September 29, 1964.

## 2. Visiting Dignitaries

True to their word, the State Department officials called Garst two weeks later to tell him they had reached a decision, inviting him back to Washington. At the meeting, they prefaced their decision with the disclaimer that they did not believe anyone was capable of teaching or selling the Soviets anything. However, they said, the U.S. government believed it was in the best interest of both the United States and the world for Garst to try anyway, and they hoped he would be able to continue the positive dialogue that had been opened with the Soviet agricultural delegation over the summer.<sup>44</sup> The open-mindedness of Dulles' State Department toward unorthodox forms of diplomacy in 1955 would pay off, allowing Garst and a host of other American and Soviet citizens to improve relations between the United States and the Soviet Union in the coming years in ways that professional diplomats had previously been unable.

Having now been granted authorization to travel to the Soviet Union, Garst asked whether the State Department would also allow him to visit Rumania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. The officials agreed to validate his passport for all three countries, but warned him that none of them had issued a travel visa to an American non-diplomat in years and it was useless to try to visit. Garst asked them if, were he able to gain entry to any of the three countries, the State Department would give him permission to educate them and sell to them, as he planned to do in the Soviet Union, as well as invite return delegations to visit the United States. Positive that he would be unable to get into any of the three countries, the officials laughingly said yes.<sup>45 46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "Iowan Has 'Good Fun' as Lone Guest of Khrushchev." *The Minneapolis Star*, October 10, 1955.

<sup>45</sup> "Garst's Pre-Khrushchev Visit," 7.

By this time, the Soviet delegation had left Iowa but was still in the United States, touring farmland in Montana, California, and Texas. Garst met with Matskevich to tell him he would accept his invitation to travel to the Soviet Union, but did not want to sail under false colors: he would be traveling to the Soviet Union not as a tourist, but in the dual role of educator and salesman.

Lacking Eastern European cultural expertise and able to speak only English, Garst invited a friend named Geza Schutz, an intellectual born and raised in Hungary, to accompany him.<sup>47</sup> Educated at the Sorbonne, Schutz had written his Ph.D. dissertation on the conditions of workers and peasants in the Danube Valley between 1890 and 1914. “Briefly,” Garst wrote later, summarizing Schutz’s research, “it was tough to be a worker or a peasant in the Danube Valley between 1890 and 1914.”<sup>48</sup> While Schutz knew little about farming, he was an expert on Eastern European history and spoke French, German, and Hungarian fluently. “He furnished the culture and I furnished the agriculture,” Garst recalled.<sup>49</sup>

In early October of 1955, Elizabeth and Schutz’s wife took the Garst family car on a road trip of the East Coast and their husbands flew to Moscow. When he finally arrived in the Soviet Union via London, Paris, and Prague, Garst was struck by how far removed he felt from the Western world from a purely geographical perspective. It was a small wonder, he noted, that any of Napoleon’s troops had made it back to Paris after the French army was routed by the

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<sup>46</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>47</sup> “Garst’s Pre-Khrushchev Visit,” 9.

<sup>48</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Brucan, *The Wasted Generation*, 89.



Russians. “It is a long way from Moscow to Paris in winter months and on foot,” he recalled thinking to himself.<sup>50</sup>

In Moscow, Garst and Schutz were received by Matskevich, and the group spent the next week meeting with various Soviet government officials and answering a barrage of questions regarding American agriculture and economics. In their spare time, they immersed themselves in Russian culture, attending performances at the Bolshoi Theatre, visiting the Kremlin, touring Moscow State University, and spending a day at an agricultural exposition on the outskirts of the city. During a meeting at the end of their trip to Moscow, Matskevich laid out maps of the Soviet Union and told Garst and Schutz to choose any areas they wanted to visit.<sup>51</sup> Garst, having researched the areas where corn farming made up a significant part of the agricultural economy, pointed out the regions he was interested in, and the team spent the next two weeks travelling all over the Soviet Union, studying its farms and making recommendations on how the Soviets could increase their crop yields. Then, despite the State Department’s pessimism, Garst and Schutz visited Hungary and Rumania without resistance, visiting each country for ten days. In each place they visited, Garst gave presentations at various agricultural institutes on how to raise corn and feed it to livestock, and the governments of the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Rumania provided Garst with their top interpreters so that his talks could be translated in real time and his audiences could get immediate answers to their questions.

While he had known prior to his trip that the United States was far more advanced than the Soviet Union in terms of agriculture, he was unaware of exactly how far ahead Americans were until he toured Soviet farms. Most Soviet livestock, he learned, drank water from wells dug by the Turks during the imperial campaigns of Suleiman the Magnificent four hundred years

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<sup>50</sup> “Garst’s Pre-Khrushchev Visit,” 10.

<sup>51</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963, 3.

earlier.<sup>52</sup> At one farm, Garst witnessed the jarringly anachronistic scene of hundreds of people in one field digging up potatoes by pitchfork.<sup>53</sup> The contrast between the highly mechanized farms of the United States and the relatively primitive ones of the Soviet Union was shocking, but he quickly discovered that his hosts did not appreciate him bringing attention to this disparity. They were aware of how far ahead the United States was and had no desire for an American to travel five thousand miles to remind them of it. Finding that he risked losing his audiences' respect if they perceived him as condescending, Garst developed a prologue to his talks in which he expressed his sympathy for the people of Eastern Europe in light of the setbacks they had faced.<sup>54</sup>

There was an agricultural gap between the United States and Eastern Europe, he said, in terms of amount of labor required, yield per acre, and road systems. However, this had nothing to do with intellect; it was not because Americans were smarter or because Soviets were dumb—it was a matter of circumstances and circumstances alone. Those circumstances began with access to education. Under the Tsarist government, general education of the masses simply did not exist, so neither did opportunity. Garst figured it took ten years to organize the new government and educate the teachers who would be needed to teach the masses. “That brings you down from thirty-eight years to twenty-eight years,” he said. He then subtracted another ten years for the second world war and the recovery from the war. “I know that Leningrad was surrounded and besieged for a year and a half,” he said. “I know that the Germans got to the outskirts of Moscow. I know that Stalingrad was utterly destroyed.”<sup>55</sup> He told them he was also aware that the Soviet Union had suffered greater losses to its infrastructure and population than any of the

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<sup>52</sup> Garst, “Why Mr. Khrushchev Will Visit Us in Coon Rapids,” 4.

<sup>53</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, February 8, 1959.

<sup>54</sup> Roswell Garst to Richard Nixon, August 8, 1959.

<sup>55</sup> “Garst’s Pre-Khrushchev Visit,” 12.

other participants of the war, and that ten years was, in all reality, probably too short a time to deduct given everything the Soviets had lost. He then compared the history of the Soviet Union with that of the United States. While the Soviet Union had existed for less than four decades, the American government extended back more than one hundred fifty years. “We have not had any war in the United States since the Civil War, ninety years ago,” he said. “We have had free schooling and the finest kind of an education system for many more years than I am old.”<sup>56</sup> The United States, he continued, had the benefit of a diverse, ambitious workforce of immigrants, providing the country with a constant infusion of fresh labor and new ideas. “We became a hybrid people,” he said. Agriculturally, he believed the United States had made the greatest progress in the past twenty years. In 1935, as in Eastern Europe in 1955, American farms generally had poor road systems, few had discovered the advantages of hybrid seed, and few were mechanized. “We had horse agriculture,” he said. “We did not have more than a scattering of rural electrification.” Because the United States had not been invaded during the war, he continued, it had the ability to focus its efforts on improving its farms. He ended his prologue by telling his Soviet audiences that he believed they were, on average, thirty years behind the United States. However, by learning from the United States and avoiding the mistakes it had made, they might gain as much in ten years as it had gained in thirty.

His audiences appreciated not only that he was so well-versed in their history, but that he sympathized with them for the many challenges they had endured. Garst found that his audiences were far more receptive to an American’s suggestions on how to improve their farms—not to mention less resentful of Garst himself—once he had delivered these opening remarks.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 13.

The crowds also softened to Garst following his defense of American corporations, which many Soviets viewed as having far too much political influence and accused of lobbying for war between the United States and the Soviet Union because of a war's potential profitability to the military-industrial sector. When Garst asked people to identify the corporations they were talking about, "they almost inevitably said 'DuPont' and 'General Motors,'" Garst recalled. "I was wearing a nylon shirt. I would grasp the sleeve, pinch the material between my fingers, and say to them: 'Look, this is nylon. DuPont makes this. DuPont would much rather make nylon and a thousand other articles of peaceful commerce than to make anything with which to wage war. General Motors makes automobiles, and they much prefer the making of automobiles to the making of anything associated with war.'"<sup>57</sup>

As a result of his meetings with the agricultural representatives of the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Rumania, Garst sold five thousand tons of hybrid seed corn at a profit of about one million dollars and secured additional orders for American hybrid chickens, farm chemicals, and machinery.<sup>58</sup> And in a particularly savvy diplomatic gesture, he told the governments to send representatives to the United States to inspect all the things they had ordered before finalizing their purchases, ensuring the exchange of return delegations. Contrary to the State Department's warnings that the countries would receive Garst coldly, or not at all, he recalled finding everyone he met on the trip cordial, writing, "We were treated as well as the president would have been treated."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> "When President Eisenhower invited Nikita Khrushchev..." 5.

<sup>58</sup> "Another Khrushchev Comes Calling." *The Des Moines Register*, February 5, 1995.

<sup>59</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

At last, Matskevich brought Garst to the Crimean Peninsula to visit Khrushchev at the First Secretary's seaside dacha in Livadia. Garst was first struck by the magnitude of Khrushchev's estate, a mansion built by a duke near the Livadia Palace, the site of the Yalta Conference.<sup>60</sup> He met Khrushchev—a few years older and a few inches shorter than Garst, but with a comparable paunch—and the two men began doing what both did best: they talked.<sup>61</sup> They spent two hours alone, save only for an interpreter—Khrushchev did not speak a word of English.<sup>62</sup><sup>63</sup> Garst tried to impress upon Khrushchev the importance of growing corn as a feed crop. He was enthusiastic—and Khrushchev would later even say “militant”—about promoting corn in the Soviet Union, saying it was much more than a mere cereal grain; it was better utilized as feed for livestock so that it could be converted into protein—“the superior food”—for human consumption in the form of dairy, eggs, and meat.<sup>64</sup><sup>65</sup>

“Corn,” Garst simplified, “is little sausages,” a metaphor Khrushchev enjoyed so much he would repeat it for years in defense of his sweeping corn campaigns.<sup>66</sup> In an East German cornfield in 1957, pointing at a thick cornstalk, Khrushchev would laugh wildly, shouting, “Here is the complete sausage on the handle! Here is beefsteak! Here is bacon! What will these plants look like in a month and a half when the harvest comes? Then the cobs will be a half meter

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<sup>60</sup> Roswell Garst to Harrison Salisbury, June 2, 1960, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963, 4.

<sup>62</sup> “Iowan Has ‘Good Fun’ as Lone Guest of Khrushchev.” *The Minneapolis Star*, October 10, 1955.

<sup>63</sup> “What Russia's No. 1 Man Will Learn on an Iowa Farm.” *U.S. News and World Report*, September 14, 1959, 55.

<sup>64</sup> Khrushchev, Nikita S; Khrushchev, Sergei. *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 3: Statesman, 1953-1964*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2007, 145.

<sup>65</sup> “When President Eisenhower invited Nikita Khrushchev,” 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

long!”<sup>67</sup> And in a 1959 speech, he would declare, “Corn is sausage on the stalk, corn is beefsteak, it is bacon, it is butter—that’s why I am a booster for corn.”<sup>68</sup>

Garst went on to explain the advantages of some of the farming practices he championed: spraying crops with herbicides, adding nitrogen to fertilizer, burning manure rather than spreading it in the soil. He explained that mechanization was the reason just twelve percent of the American population was needed to produce more than enough food to feed the entire nation. By comparison, in the Soviet Union, fifty percent of the population farmed using traditional methods only to produce a food supply that still fell far short of that of the United States in both quality and quantity.

Khrushchev was immediately impressed with Garst’s almost obsessive fixation on maximizing efficiency. “All his arguments came down to what was cheaper and more profitable,” Khrushchev recalled. He saw no reason that Soviet farms should not adapt Garst’s capitalist approach to serve socialist ends, using the profits gained by his cost-cutting methods to enrich the lives of all rather than one. He also respected Garst for his “determination to see things done correctly” which “did not distinguish between socialism and capitalism.”<sup>69</sup> Khrushchev enjoyed being Garst’s student, calling him “the sort of man you could probably listen to and memorize everything he said, so that his experience might be transplanted into Soviet soil...He did most of the talking, and I listened.”<sup>70 71</sup> This was a markedly different dynamic for the notoriously long-winded Khrushchev, who Nixon would later say would have made a great lawyer given the way he usually dominated a conversation. Garst described the scale of his farm

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<sup>67</sup> “The Quotable Khrushchev (1934-1957)” *Soviet Affairs*, Number 215, October 14, 1957, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Soth, Lauren. “The Iowa ‘K’ Will See.” *The New York Times Magazine*, September 6, 1959.

<sup>69</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 396.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Khrushchev, Nikita S.; Khrushchev, Sergei. *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 2: Reformer, 1945-1964*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006, 136-7.

in Coon Rapids, and Khrushchev said he was anxious to see it for himself, particularly interested in the ways mechanization could reduce the amount of manpower needed to run such a large operation. Garst explained the specific techniques he had learned throughout his lifetime, and Khrushchev admired that he was “not only capable of giving orders, but could get on the tractor himself, drive out into the fields, and do the plowing or the harvesting.”<sup>72</sup>

Garst took an immediate liking to Khrushchev, too, calling the meeting “good fun” and describing him as “just like any Iowa-Kansas-Nebraska farmer” he ever met on his tours of the Midwest, and just as easy to talk to.<sup>73</sup> <sup>74</sup> “This guy Khrushchev is not without agricultural sense,” he said. “He’s planted lots and lots of acres to corn. He realizes that, with the short growing season, he can’t harvest it for grain like we do in Iowa. He said all along that an acre of immature corn, harvested as silage, will produce more feed than an acre of mature oats. Well, a lot of farmers in the United States haven’t realized this yet.” Indeed, Khrushchev’s corn expansion program had already been a success by October 1955, at least in terms of sheer acreage: between 1954 and 1955, the Soviet Union’s corn area had quadrupled, expanding from 10.6 million acres to 44 million.<sup>75</sup>

“Small wonder that [Garst] got along very well with Khrushchev,” a reporter later noted. “They were alike—both were ebullient and corpulent, talked bluntly, and enjoyed being showmen and sometimes behaving outrageously.”<sup>76</sup> Garst was immediately aware that his quick rapport with Khrushchev could lead to warmer relations between the United States and the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>73</sup> “Iowan Has ‘Good Fun’ as Lone Guest of Khrushchev.” *The Minneapolis Star*, October 10, 1955.

<sup>74</sup> “What Russia’s No. 1 Man Will Learn on an Iowa Farm.” *U.S. News and World Report*, September 14, 1959, 55.

<sup>75</sup> Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture*, 498.

<sup>76</sup> Brucan, *The Wasted Generation*, 89-90.

Soviet Union, later telling reporters, “I told Khrushchev we two farmers could solve the world’s problems a lot better than any diplomats.”<sup>77</sup>

Aware of Khrushchev’s interest in mechanized agriculture, Garst proposed another exchange of delegates. “Send two of your tractor drivers to my farm,” he said. “I will teach them how to cultivate up to a hundred hectares of planted corn without using manual labor.”<sup>78</sup>

“I would be very happy if that were possible,” Khrushchev said.

“Choose some intelligent people and send them to my farm,” Garst said. “They will work with my son, and my wife will feed them.”<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps Khrushchev viewed Garst’s invitation as an opportunity to test his willingness to conspire, which led to the following proposal. In return for Garst’s offer to host Soviet tractor drivers on his farm, Khrushchev invited him to visit a Lysenkoist plant-breeding institute in Odessa primarily concerned with corn so that he could inspect the varieties that were being developed there. The Soviets were aware, Garst found, that ninety percent of the corn raised in the United States would mature so late in the year that it wouldn’t be able to grow on ninety-five percent of the land in the Soviet Union, so Khrushchev was developing his own inbred strains using early-maturing varieties. He was particularly proud of one strain the institute had developed called Odessa-10, which was bred to be ideal for the climate of the southern Soviet Union. “Let’s have an exchange of varieties and exchange our secrets of seed selection,” Khrushchev said to Garst. “We will give you ours and you give us yours.”<sup>80</sup>

Garst delicately rebuffed Khrushchev’s conspiratorial advances, telling him that, if he had the ability to decide for himself, he would gladly accept the proposal, but he was merely a

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<sup>77</sup> Malcolm, “Coon Rapids.”

<sup>78</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs, Volume 2*, 390.

<sup>79</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs, Volume 3*, 148.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



stockholder. He said the decision would fall to his company's board of directors, who would almost certainly not agree. He would let the Soviets see his entire business, he told Khrushchev, but unfortunately could not give them the source data from which the American hybrid seed varieties had been developed.

Khrushchev was taken aback by Garst's refusal to cooperate. "In offering you this exchange," he said, "I don't know if I will get a better product from you in return for our varieties. I think actually that our varieties are better."<sup>81</sup> Garst again refused, but Khrushchev would later brag about the amount of information he was able to obtain from Garst. "He revealed all his secrets to us," Khrushchev recalled in his memoirs. "In fact, he simply thrust them on us."<sup>82</sup>

After their private meeting, Garst and Khrushchev were joined by Matskevich, Minister of State Farms Ivan Benediktov, First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan, and a collection of managers of the Soviet Union's agricultural programs.<sup>83</sup> Garst once again showed his diplomatic side when Khrushchev and Mikoyan brought up the subject of the Soviet people's lack of access to animal products. Garst responded by asking them if they would be interested in trading with the United States, which had an overabundance of animal products. Though perhaps overstepping the boundaries of his role as an educator and salesman by proposing a trade deal, Garst was unable to tolerate anyone being malnourished when the means to properly feed them existed. Khrushchev and Mikoyan said they would welcome a trade delegation if the United States was willing to send one, which it had not been up to that point. Garst responded by asking

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>83</sup> "Iowan Has 'Good Fun' as Lone Guest of Khrushchev." *The Minneapolis Star*, October 10, 1955.

what the Soviet Union had to exchange, and the Soviets suggested lumber, paper pulp, and rare metals like manganese, an element essential to the steelmaking process.<sup>84</sup>

According to Khrushchev, Garst was “sincerely indignant” about the fact that the United States did not trade with the Soviet Union. “He thought it was a stupid policy, and he didn’t restrain himself in expressing his views,” Khrushchev recalled.<sup>85</sup> At that time, “the United States didn’t even buy Stolichnaya vodka or caviar from the Soviet Union,” Khrushchev’s son later wrote.<sup>86</sup> Just as Garst believed hunger was the path to conflict, he believed trade was the path to peace. “In my opinion,” Garst wrote later, “the best way to learn how to get on peacefully with anyone is to get acquainted and start doing business with them—business of mutual advantage.”<sup>87</sup> He failed to understand how the U.S. government had not come to some kind of trade agreement with the Soviet Union sooner, but resisted the temptation to disparage anyone. “I never was much of a man to look backward,” he wrote.<sup>88</sup> He admitted that he could have easily blamed diplomats on either side for their lack of communication up to that point, but that he had “no heart in looking backward at any of it.”

“I just think the less we look backward and the more we look ahead,” he wrote, “the better off we will all be.”<sup>89</sup>

After the meeting, Khrushchev invited Garst to stay for dinner at the estate, where they were joined by twelve others including Khrushchev’s wife, Nina, and one of the couple’s two daughters.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Roswell Garst to All Salesmen Everywhere, December 10, 1955, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs Vol. 3*, 152-3.

<sup>86</sup> Khrushchev, Sergei. “The Cold War through the Looking Glass.” *American Heritage*, Volume 50, Issue 6, October 1999.

<sup>87</sup> Roswell Garst to All Salesmen Everywhere, December 10, 1955, 3.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

Later, a blurb appeared in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* stating that Garst had dined with Khrushchev. The article caught the attention of Daniel Schorr, an American journalist at the Moscow bureau of CBS News, and Schorr contacted Garst while the latter was in Soviet Moldova on his way home. Schorr was eager to find out who was in attendance at the dinner, and Garst began listing the members of the dinner party: “Mr. and Mrs. Khrushchev, their daughter—”

Schorr cut him off. “Is the guy married?” he asked. “How old is the daughter?” He told Garst that no American journalist had ever written an article about Khrushchev’s family. In fact, he said, no American was aware that Khrushchev had a family at all.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Roswell Garst to Harrison Salisbury, June 2, 1960.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3. Living Among Wolves

Following the success of his trip, Garst became Eastern Europe's unofficial point of contact for all matters agricultural. In the spring of 1956, he sent one of his sons to Rumania to teach them how to plant corn using the modern machinery he had sold them. In the fall, he sent his other son to show them how to harvest it.<sup>92</sup> In October, a year after his first visit, the governments of the Soviet Union, Rumania, and Hungary invited Garst and his wife to come see the results of the five-thousand tons of hybrid seed corn he had sold them. The Garsts accepted, but the trip hardly went as anticipated.

While in Hungary, they found themselves involuntary bystanders to one of the most violent chapters of the country's history. On October 23rd, 1956, a student-led protest of the country's Soviet-imposed policies led to a violent police response, a nationwide uprising, and the collapse of the government. On November 4th, under increasing pressure from Mao, Khrushchev sent Soviet tanks into Hungary, crushing the resistance and instating a new regime. The conflict left 20,000 Hungarians and 1,500 Soviets dead and forced hundreds of thousands of Hungarians to flee the country as refugees. All the while, the Garsts were stranded with other international visitors in a hotel on Margaret Island, a narrow strip of land on the Danube between Buda and Pest, while gunfire rang out all around them.<sup>93</sup> For ten days, the couple was stranded on the island until a temporary ceasefire allowed them to escape.<sup>94</sup>

Khrushchev's response to the Hungarian Revolution would be the first in a series of events that would strip back the good will that Garst had built between the Soviet Union and the

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<sup>92</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963, 5-6.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>94</sup> "Another Khrushchev Comes Calling." *The Des Moines Register*, February 5, 1995.

West. The next would be Khrushchev's open threats, starting in 1957, of attacking the West with nuclear weapons—threats whose credibility was boosted by the Soviet launch of the world's first intercontinental ballistic missile in August of that year. And in April of 1957, a test pilot for the Lockheed Corporation died in the crash of an experimental spy plane called the U-2, a warning of further disaster three years later.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the heightened tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union as a result of Khrushchev's provocations, the governments of both nations were beginning to recognize that non-governmental exchanges like the ones Soth and Garst had initiated were an effective—and sometimes preferable—means of diplomacy. In a September 1956 speech, Eisenhower declared, "If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together and leap governments—if necessary to evade governments—to work out not one method but thousands of methods by which people can gradually learn a little bit more of each other."<sup>96</sup> Eisenhower had envisioned an exchange of thousands of college undergraduates between the United States and the Soviet Union, a plan J. Edgar Hoover discouraged Eisenhower from pursuing.

In 1957, the United States and the Soviet Union began negotiations to exchange limited cultural delegations, a model which proved successful when, in May of 1957, the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould became the first North American musician to perform in the Soviet Union since the end of World War II. On January 27th, 1958, the Lacy-Zarubin accord codified an agreement to exchange American and Soviet delegations in the fields of art, culture, and

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<sup>95</sup> Powers, Francis Gary. *Operation Overflight: A Memoir of the U-2 Incident*. Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2004, 17.

<sup>96</sup> Eisenhower, Remarks at the People-to-People Conference, September 11, 1956.

education, and in the spring of 1958, the Moscow-based Moiseyev Dance Company toured North America as part of the deal and the Dave Brubeck Quartet became the first American jazz band to perform in the Soviet Union.<sup>97</sup> It is difficult to imagine that such formal exchanges would have existed without the earlier, unofficial agricultural exchanges proving the benefits of cooperation between delegations of extraordinary Soviet and American civilians.

Perhaps because of his experience during the Hungarian Revolution, or because of the resulting escalation in tensions between the Soviet Union and the West, Garst had little communication with his Soviet contacts until the summer of 1958, when he finally delivered on the offer he had made to Khrushchev to host a second Soviet agricultural delegation.<sup>98</sup> The group, made up of tractor farmers and representatives from the Soviet Union's Department of Agriculture, arrived in Iowa in June of 1958. Garst showed them his techniques for the mechanized sowing and harvesting of corn and made a list of equipment that he recommended the Soviets purchase in order to duplicate his results. He urged them to make an early decision so that, should they decide to proceed with his recommendations, the items could be shipped in the fall and arrive in the Soviet Union in time for planting in the spring of 1959.

During the summer of 1958, Garst's nephew and protégé John Chrystal played a significant role in entertaining the Soviets, hosting a young Russian farmer named Aleksandr Gitalov for the entirety of the delegates' visit.<sup>99</sup> Gitalov commanded a brigade of tractor drivers at a machine-tractor station in the fertile Ukrainian oblast of Kirovograd, and Khrushchev thought highly of him, personally selecting him to join the delegation. "From a simple peasant he

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<sup>97</sup> Hallinan, V.A. "Cold War Cultural Exchange and the Moiseyev Dance Company: American Perception of Soviet Peoples" Ph.D. diss., Northeastern University, 2013.

<sup>98</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, February 8, 1959.

<sup>99</sup> Roswell Garst to Vladimir Matskevich, January 26, 1960.

had become an outstanding supporter and practitioner of mechanization,” Khrushchev said of Gitalov. “He studied tractors and other agricultural machinery to perfection and got the maximum economic results out of them.”<sup>100</sup>

In August of 1958, Garst wrote the first of many letters to Khrushchev, informing him that Matskevich had invited him back to visit the Soviet Union and that he planned on doing so at his earliest convenience.<sup>101</sup> In March, Khrushchev had become premier in addition to first secretary, becoming the third and final Soviet leader, along with Lenin and Stalin, to lead both the government and the party simultaneously. Realizing Khrushchev’s increasing power to effect change in the Soviet Union, Garst shared his thoughts on the arms race, suggesting that Khrushchev stop making threats of nuclear war in his speeches. Of course, Garst knew that the United States was as much to blame for the escalating conflict, but he only had a direct line of communication with Khrushchev, not Eisenhower.

“Recriminations of any kind are a waste of time,” Garst wrote to Khrushchev. “We all tend to judge ourselves by our ideals and the other fellow by his actions. We all act so far short of our ideals that there is no end to the possibility of charging that the other man is a hypocrite.”<sup>102</sup> He urged Khrushchev to treat his interactions with the U.S. government with the same cordiality the Soviet and American delegations had had with one another. “If the governments of our two countries could quit the charges and countercharges—the bitternesses—and imitate the citizens of the two countries, this world would be a good deal better place to live right now.”

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<sup>100</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs Vol. 3*, 148.

<sup>101</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, August 19, 1958.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

While Garst had begun his relationship with Khrushchev strictly as an agricultural advisor, he was starting to expand his role, advising Khrushchev on matters of international relations as well. And as Khrushchev himself often noted, he listened to what Garst had to say.<sup>103</sup>

In October of 1958, the second Soviet delegation left Iowa.<sup>104</sup> No one in the group had responded to Garst regarding the recommendations he had made, so he wired Matskevich and the others to once again stress the importance of making an early decision.<sup>105</sup>

Meanwhile, Gitalov was putting the lessons he had learned in mechanized labor to use, and he soon cultivated over a hundred hectares of land by himself. Khrushchev tracked Gitalov's progress with interest, following stories about him in *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* and listening to speeches he gave on Radio Moscow. "Now comrade Gitalov works in a manner that one has to travel to him to learn," Khrushchev recalled proudly.<sup>106</sup> Gitalov was so successful that the Soviet government built an entire propaganda campaign around him, plastering posters of him around the country emblazoned with slogans like WE MUST COME UP TO THE LEVEL OF COMRADE GITALOV! and EVERYONE SHOULD WORK AS GITALOV DOES! Unfortunately, Gitalov himself was the only person to buy into the agitprop: during one speech, he implored his audience to "work as Comrade Gitalov does!" and Khrushchev was disappointed to learn that the publicity had gone to Gitalov's head. "I think he did this because of his youthful enthusiasm," Khrushchev recalled, "but it sounded too self-promoting."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs Vol. 2*, 137.

<sup>104</sup> Roswell Garst to Valery Tereshtenko, February 24, 1960.

<sup>105</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, February 8, 1959.

<sup>106</sup> Wohl, Paul. "Khrushchev Speech Jolts Old Hands." *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 3, 1959.

<sup>107</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs, Vol. 2*, 390.



By mid-December of 1958, Garst had yet to hear back from the Soviet delegation. Growing frustrated, he wired Khrushchev directly. In return, he received only an acknowledgement that his telegram had been delivered.<sup>108</sup>

In the Soviet Union, Khrushchev was busy expanding on his efforts to compete with the United States in terms of agricultural production, building on a prediction he had made in May of 1957 that, within a few years, the U.S.S.R. would catch up with the United States in per capita consumption of livestock products. Starting in 1959, his Seven Year Plan projected a seventy percent increase in total agricultural production. In a speech he gave around New Year's Day of 1959, he announced that the southern region of Krasnodar Krai would be going head-to-head with the state of Iowa for average corn yield per hectare.<sup>109</sup> He had some reason to be confident: due to rising economic incentives and investment, massive acreage expansion, and relatively favorable weather, there had been an increase of roughly one-third in corn production between 1953 and 1957 and one-half between 1953 and the unusually productive harvest of 1958.<sup>110</sup> However, corn production in the Soviet Union still fell far short of that in the United States: in 1958, Krasnodar Krai produced just twenty-nine quintals of corn per hectare to Iowa's forty-four.

On a tour of the region's state farms, Khrushchev revealed his insecurities about the plan after an otherwise unproblematic meeting with a farm manager named Maksimov. The issue began when Khrushchev asked Maksimov about the crop composition of the farm's cultivated areas. Perhaps unaware of Khrushchev's almost irrational contempt for using farmland to plant grasses to "augment the forage supply for livestock," a technique pioneered by the American soil

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<sup>108</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, February 8, 1959.

<sup>109</sup> Wohl, "Khrushchev Speech Jolts Old Hands," 2.

<sup>110</sup> Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture*, 565-566.

scientist V.R. Williams at the beginning of the twentieth century, Maksimov replied that forty-six percent of the cultivated areas consisted of feed crops: thirty percent grass and sixteen percent corn.<sup>111</sup> Khrushchev was apoplectic upon learning that Maksimov used so much of the land to plant grasses, which he saw as displacing more valuable feed grains like oats, barley, and especially corn.

“Could you really compete with Garst?” Khrushchev shouted at Maksimov. “What prices would your products fetch on the market? Garst would trample you underfoot like an elephant. He plants not grasses but corn.”<sup>112</sup> Garst had come to personify not only the state of Iowa, but also the impossibly high standard of American agricultural output that Khrushchev was becoming increasingly fixated on surpassing.

Growing concerned that the Soviet Union would be unable to compete with the United States without the help of the competition, Khrushchev told Mikoyan to invite Garst back to the Soviet Union as soon as possible. In January of 1959, Mikoyan met with Garst in Washington and passed along Khrushchev’s invitation. Garst was reluctant to accept. After all, his last trip had ended disastrously due to the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Furthermore, he was extremely frustrated with the Soviet delegation’s lack of response to his repeated inquiries over the previous seven months; it seemed the Soviets were only interested in having a conversation if they were the ones initiating it. However, like many around the world, Garst was fearful that the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were reaching a boiling point, and he hoped to be able to reason with Khrushchev in person. “By that time I had decided I might have more influence with Khrushchev than anyone from the United States,” Garst recalled, “so I told

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>112</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 2, 622.

Mikoyan we would accept.”<sup>113</sup> Still shell-shocked from her experience in Budapest in 1956, Elizabeth was hesitant to join her husband, but eventually agreed to come along.

It was only after Garst had agreed to revisit the Soviet Union to help Khrushchev that the Soviet delegates finally respond to his repeated messages. It was February of 1959, eight months since Garst had made his initial recommendations to the delegation and urged them to make an early decision. Their eventual response only served to further frustrate Garst. The delegates ordered some pieces of farm machinery from the International Harvester Company, but by the time the company received the order, it was impossible for them to get any equipment for export purposes because they were so busy trying to satisfy their domestic demand. Furthermore, the delegation ordered some hybrid seed corn and hybrid grain sorghums from Garst, but only in small, experimental quantities, and the order was so late that it was impossible for Garst to get the proper export licenses and ship the seed to the Soviet Union in time for proper planting. Incensed, Garst wrote Khrushchev a letter criticizing both him and the Soviet agricultural officials for doing too little, too late.

“My father used to use an expression in describing people that I have always liked,” Garst wrote. “If he wanted to describe a man who had small ideas, he used to say of him ‘He would take two bites at a cherry.’ He taught me to look down upon people who would take two bites at a cherry and I always have done so.” If Khrushchev ever wanted the Soviet Union’s farms to be competitive with those of the United States, Garst wrote, then the Soviet Union would need to start making bigger purchases with greater speed rather than continue “taking two bites at a cherry.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>114</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, February 8, 1959.

As his second meeting with Khrushchev drew closer, Garst was becoming increasingly concerned about the escalating tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union; each day brought new threats of nuclear attack from both sides. Aware of his unique position as an American civilian with direct access to the Soviet leader, Garst attempted to boil down all of his thoughts on the arms race to a single sentence that he could stress to Khrushchev. If he could choose the right words, he thought, then perhaps he could convince Khrushchev to cool down his heated rhetoric. “The insanity of the world,” he would tell Khrushchev, “is the spending of a hundred billion dollars a year preparing for a war that nobody wants, nobody expects, and nobody could survive.”<sup>115</sup> Surely he could get Khrushchev to agree to such a seemingly irrefutable statement. And if he could do that, he thought, then perhaps he could talk Khrushchev into ending his threats, or even drawing back the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons program. Garst brought up the idea with Elizabeth, who warned him against it, saying Khrushchev was likely to respond either facetiously or confrontationally. Garst, however, was unconcerned.

In February and March of 1959, the Garsts vacationed around the Mediterranean before starting their business tour, which included stops in Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union.<sup>116</sup> Garst again toured the Soviet Union’s *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses*, this time getting the opportunity to advise farmers on proper methods for spring planting. According to Khrushchev, Garst was an animated teacher, sometimes literally jumping up and down in anger if he saw a farmer doing something he shouldn’t. At one sovkhos, Garst noticed corn being planted without the simultaneous treatment of the soil with fertilizer, which required special machinery the farm did not have. “You can’t do that without mineral fertilizer!” Garst yelled at

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<sup>115</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>116</sup> Roswell Garst to Mikhail A. Menshikov, May 1, 1959.

the farmers in the field, stomping his feet.<sup>117</sup> The farm's chairman calmly explained to Garst that fertilizer had been added to the soil prior to his visit.

Garst met with Khrushchev at a dacha in Sochi, and the pair resumed the easy rapport they had developed during their previous meeting. "Garst sometimes doubled up with laughter" during their conversations, Khrushchev recalled. "He really knew how to laugh."<sup>118</sup> They sat on a balcony overlooking the Black Sea and discussed the varieties of corn the Soviets were developing at the plant in Odessa, which Garst had by this time visited. Khrushchev recalled that, while in Odessa, Garst had picked up an ear of Khrushchev's favorite variety of corn, the Odessa-10, planted a kiss on it, and declared, "An excellent ear!" According to Khrushchev, Garst said he was so impressed by the varieties the Soviets had developed that they no longer needed to buy seeds from the United States. Khrushchev later stated that, by 1959, he believed the Soviet Union was on equal footing with the United States in terms of developing varieties of corn, but that the country still had much to learn about cultivating it, harvesting it, and transforming it into other products—particularly livestock feed.

Following a lunch of fish and borscht with their wives, who had also quickly become friends, Garst finally steered the conversation toward the issue that was weighing most heavily on his mind: the arms race.<sup>119</sup> He told Khrushchev he was sick of hearing about how many people could be killed in how short a time.<sup>120</sup> The last claim he had seen, he said, showed that the Soviet Union had the ability to kill a hundred million Americans in twenty minutes. In response, the United States had issued a statement claiming it could kill 120 million Soviets in eighteen

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<sup>117</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 144.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>119</sup> "Garst's Preparing for Khrushchev's Visit." *The Carroll Daily Times Herald*, August 19, 1959.

<sup>120</sup> Garst, "Why Mr. Khrushchev Will Visit Us in Coon Rapids," 5-6.

minutes. Garst was exhausted by the rhetoric and said he would like to suggest the two nations change the conversation. Khrushchev said he was interested in hearing Garst's suggestion, and Garst recited the line he had practiced for weeks leading up to the meeting: the United States and the Soviet Union ought to be talking about the insanity of the world spending more than one hundred billion dollars per year preparing for a war that nobody wanted, nobody expected, and nobody could survive.<sup>121</sup> Khrushchev responded neither facetiously nor argumentatively, as Elizabeth had feared, but was surprisingly receptive, telling Garst he believed it was an excellent suggestion. So Garst went on, saying the United States currently spent ten percent of its gross national product on armaments and, while it did not like doing so, it could afford the expense. Meanwhile, he said, it took between fifteen and twenty percent of the Soviet Union's gross national product to compete. Khrushchev followed along. Disarmament, Garst said, was far more important to the Soviet Union because the United States' ten percent spent on arms still allowed it to make so many cars that Americans didn't know where to park them and so many gadgets that they couldn't keep them repaired. However, the Soviet Union's arms spending came "right out of people's hides," and would be better served satisfying their more basic needs. According to Garst, he had told Khrushchev, "You know, for a peasant, you're a damned poor horse trader," then asking him bluntly: "Why the hell don't you quit the arms race?"<sup>122</sup>

Finally, Khrushchev had heard enough, and he became argumentative, as Elizabeth had feared. "How would you like to be surrounded by air bases?" he said, listing off the numerous American and NATO installations in Turkey and Western Europe.<sup>123</sup> Garst might have expected this argument from Khrushchev; it was one he used frequently. "Can we carry out further

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<sup>121</sup> Roswell Garst to Mikhail A. Menshikov, May 1, 1959.

<sup>122</sup> Hanson, "Former Khrushchev Host Iowan Roswell Garst Has Own Détente Formula."

<sup>123</sup> "Another Khrushchev Comes Calling." *The Des Moines Register*, February 5, 1995.

unilateral arms reduction when the Western powers do not?" Khrushchev once asked rhetorically. "When you live among wolves, you must howl like a wolf."

Garst held his ground. "You ought to laugh about those bases," he said. "Besides, you are making great progress...and in my opinion, our maintenance of air bases is a waste of American funds and energies." Garst was frustrated that Khrushchev was unwilling to turn his swords into plowshares. "I'll be darned if I can understand him," he said later. "The logic of the situation is that he ought to want to cool off the armaments race so he would have more capital to put into agriculture."

The tension subsided and the Garsts said their goodbyes. "When will I get to host the head of a nation like you?" Elizabeth asked Khrushchev as they were leaving.<sup>124 125</sup> Khrushchev replied that he had heard so many good things about Elizabeth's hospitality from the Soviet delegates that he was jealous he hadn't gotten to experience it for himself.<sup>126</sup> If he ever came to the United States, he said, he would make sure he visited the Garsts in Coon Rapids.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Perkins, Jerry. "Two sons revisiting history." *The Des Moines Register*, February 6, 1995.

<sup>125</sup> "Khrushchev to revisit here this weekend." *Coon Rapids Enterprise*, February 2, 1995.

<sup>126</sup> Fowler, Veronica. "The day Russia came to Iowa." *The Des Moines Register*, September 17, 1989.

<sup>127</sup> Perkins, "Two sons revisiting history."

#### 4. The Only Good Communist

Shortly after his second meeting with Garst, Khrushchev began negotiations with Eisenhower to visit the United States, which would mark the first time a Russian leader had ever visited.<sup>128</sup> In return, Eisenhower agreed to visit the Soviet Union. Khrushchev's trip to the United States would be the second high-profile U.S.-Soviet meeting of 1959, following July's "kitchen debate" in Moscow. There, Khrushchev had made all of his mixed feelings toward the United States clear, at one moment proposing to Vice President Nixon, "You're a lawyer of capitalism. I'm a lawyer for communism. Let's kiss!" yet at another, threatening to "show [the United States] Kuzka's mother," a Russian euphemism for an unspecified punishment, and a phrase he would come to repeat so often that the builders of the Soviet *Tsar Bomba*, the strongest nuclear bomb of all time, would nickname the weapon "Kuzka's mother."

During his negotiations with Eisenhower, Khrushchev said he would like to visit Coon Rapids to meet with Garst, "the one American civilian [he] specifically placed on his visiting list." Without knowing this when news of the visit finally broke on August 3rd, 1959, Garst wrote Khrushchev to renew the invitation that Elizabeth had extended earlier that year. At a press conference in Moscow on August 4th, 1959, Khrushchev publicly announced his intention to visit Coon Rapids after visiting Washington and New York. Two days later, the State Department contacted Garst to tell him Khrushchev had accepted his invitation and would indeed be visiting in the fall.<sup>129</sup> On August 8th, Garst wrote Vice President Nixon attempting to convince either him or the president to visit his farm along with Khrushchev, and even providing

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<sup>128</sup> Fowler, "The day Russia came to Iowa."

<sup>129</sup> "Another Khrushchev Comes Calling." *The Des Moines Register*, February 5, 1995.



ideas for speeches, but neither would end up visiting.<sup>130</sup> Khrushchev's assistant, Arkady Shevchenko, soon contacted Garst to ask what the best time would be for Khrushchev to visit the farm.

"I'm a farmer," Garst told Shevchenko. "I get up with the sun. From our conversations in the past, I know Mr. Khrushchev remembers what it's like to live in the country; he knows what a peasant's life is like, that it means rising early and working hard. I suggest, Mr. Shevchenko, it would be nice if Mr. Khrushchev agreed to get up early and drive out to my farm—just the three of us: yourself, Mr. Khrushchev, and me. As for the rest of the people with Mr. Khrushchev, well, they're city folks. They don't even know what a sunrise is. We'll let them sleep and they can join us later."<sup>131</sup>

Shevchenko passed along Garst's idea to Khrushchev, who found it preposterous.<sup>132</sup> "Here's a good farmer who knows a lot about agriculture," Khrushchev recalled thinking to himself, "but who doesn't have the slightest idea how important the guest is that he wants to invite to his farm. He doesn't seem to understand that I can't just sneak out of the hotel early one morning without even notifying my hosts where I'm going to. He's being absolutely unrealistic." Khrushchev was to be accompanied on his trip by Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, along with multiple security details totaling over one thousand men charged with keeping track of his whereabouts at all times.<sup>133</sup> "If I tried to run off secretly with Garst when he came to fetch me, it might appear that I'd been kidnapped, like a bride in the Caucasus

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<sup>130</sup> Roswell Garst to Richard Nixon, August 8, 1959.

<sup>131</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, September 9, 1959.

<sup>132</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 137.

<sup>133</sup> Mills, George. "Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker." *The Des Moines Register*, September 20, 1959.

or in Central Asia,” he later wrote.<sup>134</sup> “I couldn’t agree to some sort of ‘bride’s abduction’ ... Given my position as guest of the president of the United States, a huge commotion would immediately arise if the discovery was made that the guest had run off!” Shevchenko told Garst that his plan was unrealistic, though Khrushchev later admitted that it would have been an “interesting experience” for him.

For the most part, the residents of Iowa supported Khrushchev’s plan to visit, with the Iowa Poll showing fifty-three percent in favor and twenty-six percent opposed. However, the Iowans who were against the trip were passionate and outspoken, and they eagerly voiced their many concerns to Iowa senator Bourke Hickenlooper. More than a third of those opposed believed Khrushchev would “learn too much about U.S. secrets.” Many others thought Khrushchev ought to be denied entry to the country based on his complicity in the crimes of Stalin—including the program of planned starvation in the Ukraine in the early 1930s which resulted in the death of five million and the 1938 Ukrainian purge, estimated to have killed 400,000—along with Khrushchev’s own invasion of Hungary in 1956, with some Iowans referring to him as “the butcher of Budapest.”<sup>135</sup>

Others expressed their fears that the Soviet Union would use Khrushchev’s visit in its propaganda campaigns as an example of Western passivity to Soviet strength. At the very least, they thought, it would be a “deadly psychological defeat” for the United States, giving the rest of the world the impression that the United States accepted the status quo of Soviet meddling in

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<sup>134</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 397.

<sup>135</sup> “Proposed Joint Statement on Khrushchev Visit.” *American Friends of the Captive Nations*, August 7, 1959.

Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>136</sup> According to the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, Khrushchev's visit would be "an agony of betrayal" to so-called "captive nations," or countries under Soviet control or influence, giving those nations the impression that the United States was not on their side.<sup>137</sup> "This is probably a gloomy night in Budapest," an Asian diplomat told the *New York Times* on the day Eisenhower announced the visit, "at least for those who have dreamed of relief from Communist rule."

Common among the rhetorical strategies of dissenters were appeals to recent history. "What would the country have thought," Connecticut senator Thomas Dodd wrote, "if in 1939 President Roosevelt had invited Adolf Hitler to a barnstorming tour of the U.S., fresh from his conquest of Czechoslovakia, Austria and Poland."<sup>138</sup> One Iowan wrote that Eisenhower's invitation to Khrushchev was "a national disgrace—a diplomatic Pearl Harbor making way for an American Munich."<sup>139</sup> Others echoed this idea: "It almost seems as though Khrushchev is looking over the real estate that he someday hopes to possess," wrote Tom Mitchell of Cedar Falls, Iowa. "The ugly specter of appeasement is on the prowl."<sup>140</sup>

Plenty of Iowans also objected to the visit on a purely financial basis, outraged by the rumored \$500,000 in taxpayer money—a figure the U.S. government later refuted—that would be spent on the cross-country tour.<sup>141 142 143</sup> And some expressed their hopes that, with enough

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<sup>136</sup> Madelynne Sherman to Bourke Hickenlooper, September 2, 1959.

<sup>137</sup> "Visit of Khrushchev – Installment on Surrender." *Christian Anti-Communism Crusade News Letter*, September, 1959.

<sup>138</sup> Dodd, Thomas J. "The Danger of Playing Host to Khrushchev." *Human Events*, Vol. XVI, No. 35, September 2, 1959.

<sup>139</sup> L.M. Smith to Bourke Hickenlooper, September 6, 1959.

<sup>140</sup> Tom Mitchell to Bourke Hickenlooper, September 13, 1959.

<sup>141</sup> "An Iowa Voter" to Bourke Hickenlooper, September 10, 1959.

<sup>142</sup> "Iowa Voter" to Bourke Hickenlooper, September 10, 1959.

<sup>143</sup> The federal government provided estimates for the major expenses on Khrushchev's tour totaling \$100,000, "roughly equivalent to the cost of one Army tank," per *Newsweek*.

resistance, Khrushchev might cancel his trip as he did when residents of Sweden protested a visit from him in August of 1959.<sup>144</sup>

Meanwhile, the less vocal majority of Iowans, and Americans in general, remained quietly optimistic. One anonymous government official was hopeful that the visit would finally take the United States and the Soviet Union “out of the trenches of the ‘cold war’ and into the field of diplomatic maneuver,” and most Iowans expressed a similarly positive outlook.<sup>145</sup> Many hoped that showing Khrushchev how average Americans lived and worked would, as a woman from Des Moines wrote, make him “realize there are many differences among all men, but that our people have learned to work them out together,” while conceding that she also hoped the visit would show Khrushchev that Americans “would rather die fighting than ever submit to Godless Communism.”<sup>146</sup> Some were critical of this line of thought, telling Hickenlooper that the pretense that Khrushchev’s visit had been arranged “so that he may ‘understand’ American principles and American might is as logical as that the FBI should have invited Al Capone to inspect their techniques for law enforcement and criminal apprehension that he would ‘make his boys be good.’”<sup>147</sup> Others claimed that “Khrushchev already knows [how Americans live] because he has an advanced espionage ring.”<sup>148</sup> Still, a majority of Iowans reflected the youthful optimism of one Iowa teenager who had lived abroad, who wrote: “I have seen what great

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<sup>144</sup> Paul M. Walter to Bourke Hickenlooper, August 24, 1959.

<sup>145</sup> “How Khrushchev was Invited—a ‘Mystery’ Solved.” U.S. News and World Report, August 17, 1959, 56.

<sup>146</sup> Mrs. Lyle J. Sweeney to Bourke Hickenlooper, August 4, 1959.

<sup>147</sup> Elizabeth and Catharine Coughlin to Bourke Hickenlooper, August 26, 1959.

<sup>148</sup> “Visit of Khrushchev – Installment on Surrender.” *Christian Anti-Communism Crusade News Letter*, September, 1959.

understanding can be brought through personal contacts...I hope that by [Khrushchev's] personal contacts with the American people much better understanding can be brought about."<sup>149</sup>

Many Iowans even campaigned for Khrushchev to visit their towns, too. Residents of Marshalltown and Boone, believing their towns possessed qualities guaranteed to improve Khrushchev's opinion of the United States, formed committees aimed at getting him to visit.<sup>150</sup>

<sup>151</sup> And a host of Iowa companies, including the Newton-based appliance manufacturer Maytag, were eager for Khrushchev to tour their factories.<sup>152</sup> All wrote Hickenlooper, but the itinerary had already been established, and the governor would likely not have had the power to change it anyway. To his credit, though, Hickenlooper responded to almost every letter he received from his constituents, supporters and critics of the visit alike, and in his replies he offered his own thoughts on Khrushchev's visit. While he believed the visit might not ease international tensions, he wrote, it could not possibly intensify them. He thought Khrushchev's exposure to Americans "may let a little ray of light in on him which may not be evidenced immediately, but which might influence some of his future actions with a little more sober consideration."<sup>153</sup> Above all, he encouraged those who criticized the trip to resist isolationist thinking, ending most of his letters with some variation on the line, "We have opposed the 'Iron Curtain' for a long time and I do not think it would be in the course of wisdom to erect an 'Iron Curtain' of our own."<sup>154</sup>

In the days leading up to Khrushchev's arrival, Garst explained his own hopes for the trip. He told reporters he saw it as an opportunity to both show Khrushchev "how good soil, good seeds and high amounts of fertilizer produce bumper crops of grain and forage, and how

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<sup>149</sup> Cristy Mickey to Bourke Hickenlooper, September 14, 1959.

<sup>150</sup> John C. Bailey to Bourke Hickenlooper, August 5, 1959.

<sup>151</sup> Earl R. Senholz to Bourke Hickenlooper, August 6, 1959.

<sup>152</sup> Fred Maytag to Bourke Hickenlooper, August 6, 1959.

<sup>153</sup> Bourke Hickenlooper to Edwin Willcockson, August 10, 1959.

<sup>154</sup> Bourke Hickenlooper to Marian Tisdale, September 11, 1959.

they are turned into meat, and eggs, and milk,” and reach new domestic markets, knowing that the visit would be highly publicized and would “throw a national spotlight on Garst farms.”<sup>155</sup> He also hoped the visit might have a positive impact on U.S.-Soviet relations. “I have no thought that Mr. Khrushchev’s visit with us in Coon Rapids will end the cold war,” he wrote. “What I do think is this: Mr. Khrushchev is coming here to see and find out some things for himself which his farm delegations have reported to him, he wants to see how we live and work in this part of the country and he wants to renew a personal acquaintanceship. In some small way, this day with us in Coon Rapids might help him to understand all of us Americans better and so contribute to the likelihood of the hopes for peace in the future.”<sup>156</sup> He expressed this sense of cautious optimism again in an interview just before Khrushchev’s arrival, saying, “Mr. Khrushchev’s visit doesn’t mean that the day of peace is at hand. Not by any means. But there is a glimmer—even if a faint glimmer—of hope as long as we can talk and try to understand each other. As for me, I intend to do whatever I can to enlarge and brighten that hope.”<sup>157</sup>

The view from Europe was equally hopeful. The French newspaper *Le Monde* wrote that the trip “could mark the beginning of a new era in international relations,” while one of the major Swedish dailies, *Stockholms-Tidningen*, wrote that the trip would “create a better point of departure for future generations on mutual understanding—and that is a giant step forward.”<sup>158</sup> The *Telegraph* of London went even further, stating that the trip marked the beginning of “a diplomatic revolution, nonetheless profound for being—let us hope—bloodless.”<sup>159</sup> Referring to the day of Khrushchev’s arrival to the United States, the *Telegraph* stated, “Sept. 15, 1959,

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<sup>155</sup> “When President Eisenhower invited Nikita Khrushchev,” 2.

<sup>156</sup> Garst, “Why Mr. Khrushchev Will Visit Us in Coon Rapids,” 6.

<sup>157</sup> “When President Eisenhower invited Nikita Khrushchev,” 5.

<sup>158</sup> “The Khrushchev Visit—As the World Sees It.” *U.S. News and World Report*, September 28, 1959.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

marks the day when the United States and the Soviet Union symbolically affirm their joint responsibility for determining the future of the world.”<sup>160</sup>

In the days leading up to Khrushchev’s arrival, the cultural exchanges that had been agreed upon the previous year reached their peak when the American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein led the New York Philharmonic on a “mission of friendship” through Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev from August 22nd to September 11th, 1959. “Your music and ours,” Bernstein told one Soviet audience, “are the artistic products of two very similar people who are natural friends, who belong together and who must not let suspicions and fears and prejudices keep them apart.”<sup>161</sup> The tour’s programs reflected this attitude, combining pieces by Gershwin and Stravinsky, Copland and Prokofiev.<sup>162</sup><sup>163</sup> The bond between the East and the West that had taken root in Iowa in 1955 was growing stronger, and it would continue to strengthen with Khrushchev’s arrival to the United States.

At ten o’clock in the morning on September 15th, 1959, Khrushchev landed at Andrews Air Force Base, a few miles southeast of downtown Washington, in a new, untested Soviet plane that he had insisted on using solely so that its size might intimidate Eisenhower.<sup>164</sup><sup>165</sup> Fortunately, the trip’s historical significance outweighed Khrushchev’s bravado: that evening’s dinner at the White House marked the first time since 1871 that a high-ranking Russian official

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Gevinson, Alan. “Leonard Bernstein at the National Press Club, October 13, 1959,” National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>162</sup> “August 26, 1959, 8:00 p.m., Tchaikovsky Conservatory Hall, Moscow, USSR.” Concert program. *New York Philharmonic*.

<sup>163</sup> “September 7, 1959, 8:00 p.m., Bolshoi Zal, Kiev, USSR.” Concert program. *New York Philharmonic*.

<sup>164</sup> “Where and How Khrushchev Will Discover America.” *U.S. News and World Report*, September 14, 1959, 48.

<sup>165</sup> Gaddis, John L. *The Cold War: A New History*. New York: Penguin Press, 2005.

had been entertained there, when Ulysses S. Grant hosted Grand Duke Alexei Alexandrovich, a son of Tsar Alexander II.<sup>166</sup> At both the airfield and Blair House, the president's guesthouse, Soviet and American flags flew side by side for the first time.<sup>167</sup>

September 17th, 1959 marked the start of what “for millions of Americans...was one of the strangest things ever—the cross country tour of Nikita Khrushchev.”<sup>168</sup> From Washington he traveled to New York City, staying at the Waldorf-Astoria; he visited Eleanor Roosevelt at the Roosevelts' home in Hyde Park, New York; he toured movie studios in Hollywood; and he met with labor leaders in the Bay Area, toured an IBM factory, and visited the campus of Stanford University.<sup>169</sup>

The trip had gone unblemished until Los Angeles, where Khrushchev publicly threatened to cut his visit short after the city's mayor, Norris Poulson, brought up the premier's 1956 “We will bury you” speech. Khrushchev had long insisted that the comment was meant to be interpreted as an assertion of the Soviet Union's agricultural might and not military might, as many had first assumed. “We do not intend to blow up the capitalist world with bombs,” he once said, explaining the remark. “If we catch up with the U.S. in per capita production of meat, butter, and milk, we will have hit the pillar of capitalism with the most powerful torpedo yet seen.”<sup>170</sup> Nevertheless, Khrushchev did not hesitate to remind the mayor of Los Angeles that the Soviet Union was “turning out missiles like sausages.” To make matters in Los Angeles worse, Khrushchev was famously denied entry to Disneyland as well as scandalized by a performance

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<sup>166</sup> “Where and How Khrushchev Will Discover America,” 48.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> “In the Home Stretch.” *U.S. News and World Report*, October 5, 1959, 43.

<sup>169</sup> “Where and How Khrushchev Will Discover America,” 48-49.

<sup>170</sup> Harriman, Averell. “Khrushchev in the U.S.A.” *Look*, September 15, 1959.



of the cancan at a lavish luncheon thrown in his honor. “It’s capitalism that makes girls that way,” he said with disgust of the bawdy routine.<sup>171</sup>

Tensions were high as Khrushchev flew from San Francisco to Des Moines on September 22nd, and there was a fear among his hosts that one more issue might derail the trip entirely. According to Ben Bradlee, who was then a reporter at the Washington bureau of *Newsweek*, “U.S. officials went to almost ludicrous extremes” to avoid offending Khrushchev during his visit to Iowa.<sup>172</sup> Purely by happenstance, a convention of undertakers was occurring in Des Moines at the same time as Khrushchev’s arrival, and officials spent hours worrying that he would catch sight of the gathering and interpret it as yet another reference to his “We will bury you” speech.<sup>173</sup> Lodge even convinced Garst not to let Khrushchev see any of his Poland China pigs, lest Khrushchev view them as an offensive symbol due to his frequently ridiculed porcine features.<sup>174\*</sup>

Because F.B.I. officials feared someone might attempt to assassinate Khrushchev during his visit to Iowa, he would be the most heavily guarded visitor in the state’s history.<sup>175 176</sup> Shortly before Khrushchev’s arrival, the chief of the Des Moines Police Department announced that security measures along the motorcade route would be far more stringent than those taken for the protection of presidents Eisenhower or Truman during their visits to Iowa. “Khrushchev is just

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\*A popular joke in the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev era involved a newspaper running a photo of the premier in a pigpen, accompanied by the caption: “Comrade Khrushchev, third from left.” Meanwhile, the Russian poet and *Doctor Zhivago* novelist Boris Pasternak took great pleasure in comparing Khrushchev to the chief antagonist of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the pig-dictator Napoleon.

<sup>171</sup> “In the Home Stretch,” 43.

<sup>172</sup> Bradlee, Ben. “The Untold Story.” *U.S. News and World Report*, October 5, 1959, 22-23.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Bradlee, “The Untold Story,” 22-23.

<sup>175</sup> Fowler, “The day Russia came to Iowa.”

<sup>176</sup> Mills, “Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker.”

too controversial a figure for us to take a chance with,” he told reporters.<sup>177</sup> The F.A.A. even issued a special regulation requiring all aircraft to remain away from the route by at least one mile horizontally and three-thousand feet vertically.<sup>178</sup> On the evening of September 19th, unit commanders of the Iowa National Guard met in Jefferson to draw up the final plans for the hundreds of troops that would be stationed throughout Des Moines and Coon Rapids for Khrushchev’s visit, and on September 21st, the State Department led the final security conference on Khrushchev’s arrival to Iowa.<sup>179</sup> Between 700 and 800 Iowa national guardsman would line Khrushchev’s motorcade route, shifting rapidly to new locations once the caravan passed by.<sup>180</sup> All would be armed, though none but the top-ranking soldier would have ammunition in his gun, as commanders feared one of their soldiers might open fire on Khrushchev’s car as it drove by.<sup>181</sup>

At one o’clock in the afternoon on September 22nd, the Des Moines Municipal Airport closed to all air traffic except for the Khrushchev party’s planes.<sup>182</sup> Journalists, photographers, and television news crews enveloped the tarmac near an Air National Guard hangar in the airport’s northwest corner, some standing on rafters to get a better view of the proceedings. Airmen standing at parade rest separated the newsmen from the official greeting party. When his Boeing 707 reached the airport, Khrushchev, clad in a light grey suit, stepped off the plane

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<sup>177</sup> “D.M. Parking Ban on Route Nikita to Use.” *The Des Moines Register*, September 20, 1959.

<sup>178</sup> Mills, “Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker.”

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> Fowler, “The day Russia came to Iowa.”

<sup>182</sup> Mills, “Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker.”

accompanied by Nina, Shevchenko, and Lodge, and he waved his hat to the crowd as he descended the staircase.<sup>183</sup>

The Khrushchev party was made up of around one hundred people including Khrushchev's wife, Nina; their two daughters, Yulia and Rada; their son, Sergei; their son-in-law; Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and his wife; various Soviet officials in the fields of atomic energy, education, health, and foreign cultural relations; and thirty-nine Soviets classified as "newsmen."<sup>184</sup> <sup>185</sup> The visit marked the rare public appearance of a Soviet politician's family. "Before [the visit]," Garst's son David said later, "you'd hardly know that a Soviet leader even had a wife."<sup>186</sup>

The party arrived to brief ceremonies at the hangar hosted by Iowa governor Herschel Loveless and an entourage of state and local officials.<sup>187</sup> Khrushchev, facing the sea of reporters, gave a brief address in which he discussed his admiration for the state of Iowa and restated his plans for the Soviet Union to compete with the United States in corn production.<sup>188</sup>

Khrushchev, Lodge, and Loveless piled into their car, which was driven by Eisenhower's personal chauffeur. For the Iowa leg of his journey, Khrushchev had specifically requested a convertible over the closed-top cars he had been using for the first part of his trip—he was not

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<sup>183</sup> "Nikita Khrushchev's Visit to Iowa 1959." Film K-3056, Iowa State University Library, University Archives.

<sup>184</sup> "Want to See Nikita? Here's Your Best Chance." *The Des Moines Tribune*, September 11, 1959.

<sup>185</sup> "Where and How Khrushchev Will Discover America," 48.

<sup>186</sup> Fowler, "The day Russia came to Iowa."

<sup>187</sup> "Want to See Nikita? Here's Your Best Chance."

<sup>188</sup> *Khrushchev in America: Full texts of the speeches made by N.S. Khrushchev, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, on his tour of the United States, September 15-27, 1959*. New York, NY: Crosscurrents Press, 1960, 152.

fond of air conditioning—and the State Department delivered, providing him with a glossy, cream-colored Cadillac with the sleek curves of a rocket ship.<sup>189</sup>

The caravan left the airport and began its 165-mile tour of Iowa starting with downtown Des Moines, where every sidewalk, storefront, and rooftop teemed with spectators eager to catch a glimpse of the premier.<sup>190</sup> <sup>191</sup> Their cars, which reportedly numbered between twenty-five thousand and forty thousand, were restricted near the route; anyone interested in watching the procession was forced to park elsewhere and walk into town.<sup>192</sup> Policemen guarding the route faced the crowds, scanning for sudden movements, inspecting the contents of purses and briefcases, and promptly ushering away those who refused to cooperate.

Despite the crowds, an eerie calm filled the streets of Des Moines. A theater marquee welcomed Khrushchev in affectless, unpunctuated block lettering.<sup>193</sup> When the motorcade finally cruised past, the crowds neither cheered nor booed, but merely watched with quiet curiosity.<sup>194</sup> Meanwhile, those in the Soviet Union were painted a different picture of the scene, with a *Newsweek* representative in Moscow noting that “dispatches from Soviet newsmen accompanying Khrushchev suggest that huge crowds of Americans cheered the Russian everywhere he went...the Russian people have been told that in Des Moines...the crowds tore to shreds an anti-Soviet banner raised by a Hungarian refugee.”<sup>195</sup>

When Khrushchev arrived at the Hotel Fort Des Moines, where he would be spending the night, local reporters asked him to say a few words about Iowa. “Today I saw an interesting

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<sup>189</sup> “Want to See Nikita? Here’s Your Best Chance.”

<sup>190</sup> “D.M. Parking Ban on Route Nikita to Use.” *The Des Moines Register*, September 20, 1959.

<sup>191</sup> “Nikita Khrushchev’s Visit to Iowa 1959.”

<sup>192</sup> “D.M. Parking Ban on Route Nikita to Use.”

<sup>193</sup> “Nikita Khrushchev’s Visit to Iowa 1959.”

<sup>194</sup> Engle, Glen. “Week on Record...A Bear Hug for Disarmament.”

<sup>195</sup> “View from Moscow.” *Newsweek*, October 5, 1959, 22.

poster in English in Des Moines,” Khrushchev said. “It carried the following inscription: ‘We don’t agree with you on many questions, but we welcome you.’ This is a sensible slogan. We also don’t agree with you on many matters, but we also greet you. You can live the way you like best and we shall live the way we like best, but let us be friends in order to ensure peace between our peoples.”<sup>196</sup> Khrushchev was summarizing his theory of peaceful coexistence, a concept he had in the past likened to a loveless marriage. “It happens that people do not get married for love,” he said, “but despite that live their whole lives together. And that is what we want.”<sup>197</sup> At another point during his trip to Iowa, Khrushchev told a simple fable to illustrate the idea: “A woodcock and a snipe meet and have a conversation. The woodcock says to the snipe: ‘How can you live in that dismal swamp? Come with me and live in the forest.’ But the snipe replies: ‘How can you live where you do? Come here and live with me in this beautiful, wet swamp.’ Everyone considers his own system better.”<sup>198</sup> Garst had his own thoughts on the theory, telling Khrushchev in an August 19th, 1958 letter, “I do not like the word *coexistence*. To me it means two different camps just agreeing that they won’t fight. I don’t think that is good enough. I am unwilling mentally to settle for *coexistence*. I believe a real cooperation is so much better that the world ought not to be willing to settle for less.”<sup>199</sup>

Khrushchev spent the afternoon visiting industrial plants and residential areas in and around Des Moines. At the Des Moines Packing Company, a slaughterhouse and sausage factory, he sampled his first American hot dog.<sup>200</sup> “We have beaten you to the moon,” he told reporters, referencing the Soviet spacecraft *Luna 2*, which nine days earlier had become the first

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<sup>196</sup> *Khrushchev in America*, 152.

<sup>197</sup> “The Quotable Khrushchev (1934-1957)” *Soviet Affairs*, Number 215, October 14, 1957, 23.

<sup>198</sup> “In the Home Stretch,” 44-46.

<sup>199</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, August 19, 1958.

<sup>200</sup> Mills, “Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker.”

man-made object to reach the surface of the moon, “but you have beaten us in sausage-making.”<sup>201</sup>

That evening, the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce hosted a dinner party of six-hundred in Khrushchev’s honor at the Hotel Fort Des Moines.<sup>202</sup> The catering crew had raided the Garsts’ garden, using the produce to make an archetypal Midwestern meal of baked potatoes, lima beans, prime rib of Iowa corn-fed beef, and lattice-top peach pie.<sup>203</sup> Loveless and Lodge gave speeches during dinner, and Khrushchev provided a speech in response in which he echoed many of the comments Garst had made to him during their last meeting, calling for a shift away from military competition and toward agricultural competition.<sup>204</sup>

“Some of your periodicals,” Khrushchev told the crowd, “carry articles in which an attempt is made to show that our seven-year plan [to catch up to and surpass the United States] constitutes the ‘danger of Soviet economic offensive.’ But what, may I ask, is the danger of our endeavor, say, to increase the volume of farm output, and to whom is it dangerous? What harm is there in our desire to compete with you, say, in the output of corn, meat, and milk? I don’t suppose anybody will assert that a greater consumption of milk, butter, and meat will make Soviet people more ‘aggressive’!

“We challenge you to competition in the output of meat, milk, butter, consumer goods, machines, steel, coal, and oil, so that people might live better. This is far more beneficial competition than competition in stockpiling hydrogen bombs and all sorts of weapons. May there be more corn and meat, and no hydrogen bombs at all!

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<sup>201</sup> “In the Home Stretch,” 44.

<sup>202</sup> “Want to See Nikita? Here’s Your Best Chance.”

<sup>203</sup> “Garsts Preparing for Khrushchev’s Visit.” *The Carroll Daily Times Herald*, August 19, 1959.

<sup>204</sup> *Khrushchev in America*, 153-161.

“Farming is the oldest, the most vital, and most peaceful branch of human industry. We want grain to grow in the fields and we want orchards to blossom, we want the earth to be turned up by peaceful plows and not by rockets and tank tracks.” He concluded that it was time “to bring a thaw and to melt the ice of the Cold War once and for all. It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good. May the winds of peace and friendship blow over the fields, and may clouds appear in the sky only when a good shower is necessary for a good harvest.”

The audience frequently interrupted the speech with outbursts of uproarious applause. Those in the room were wowed by Khrushchev’s new, more hopeful tone—an optimism he had adopted in no small part from Garst. “Such is the force of conviction in Khrushchev’s speeches,” said one dispatch from Iowa in the Soviet Union, “that a fire has been kindled in the soul of the American people...America is full of expectations [of peace].”

Garst approached Khrushchev after the speech and suggested once again that the two sneak off in the morning. “Mr. Khrushchev, let’s have breakfast together, you and me,” he said. “Let the others sleep, and they can come later. Then while it’s calm and quiet I can show you everything and tell you about it.” And once again, Khrushchev thought to himself, “He has absolutely no conception of my official position as a guest of the government.”<sup>205</sup>

The festivities ended at ten o’clock and Khrushchev retired to his suite. Meanwhile, protesters on the street outside the Hotel Fort Des Moines struck a decidedly different tone from the messages of peace and cooperation that had come from the ballroom throughout the evening, circling beneath Khrushchev’s hotel room window with picket signs reading WANTED: SEED CORN WITH NO RUSSIAN THISTLES and THE ONLY GOOD COMMUNIST IS A DEAD COMMUNIST.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 137.

<sup>206</sup> Fowler, “The day Russia came to Iowa.”

## 5. The Woodcock and the Snipe

The U.S. Department of State had guessed that Khrushchev would want to wake up at nine o'clock the following morning—"I think that is about the earliest anybody connected to the State Department ever got up in his life," Garst told Khrushchev—but Garst telegraphed the Khrushchev party suggesting that the departure be advanced to seven-thirty.<sup>207</sup>

Garst was put in Khrushchev's car, and he took advantage of the seventy-mile drive, using it as an opportunity to talk to Khrushchev about issues which he called "Cases of Compassion."<sup>208 209 210</sup> Prior to Khrushchev's arrival, Garst had received a number of letters from American citizens who had relatives in the Soviet Union that they were unable to contact and were presumably imprisoned. As they drove through the towns of Perry and Bagley beneath banners welcoming Khrushchev in Russian, Garst told Khrushchev that he and Elizabeth were broken up and saddened by quite a few of the cases and said he thought it was of the utmost importance to get them taken care of as soon as possible, pointing out that the number of cases was not large and should be able to be resolved quickly.<sup>211</sup> Khrushchev told Garst to take the matter up with Ambassador Menshikov, and Garst would indeed discuss it with Menshikov later. While it is unclear to whom precisely Garst was referring, increased attention on Americans in Soviet gulags would result in a spate of releases starting the following year.

The caravan—trailed by a fleet of buses carrying over six-hundred reporters—sped past onlookers, military troops, and local police, who lined the route from Des Moines to Coon

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<sup>207</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, September 9, 1959.

<sup>208</sup> Roswell Garst to Mikhail Menshikov, September 28, 1959.

<sup>209</sup> Mills, "Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker."

<sup>210</sup> Fowler, "The day Russia came to Iowa."

<sup>211</sup> Mills, "Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker."



Rapids.<sup>212</sup> At ten o'clock, the motorcade split up about ten miles east of Coon Rapids. Elizabeth and Nina visited various points of interest around the town before proceeding to the Garst homestead in the southeast corner of town.<sup>213</sup> Meanwhile, Garst began giving Khrushchev a tour of the land he owned around Coon Rapids, starting with a 640-acre cornfield which exemplified his method of forgoing crop rotation in favor of using nitrogen fertilizer.<sup>214</sup> Instead of rotating his corn with less valuable crops like oats or clover, Garst restored fertility to the field by dumping tons of nitrogen fertilizer on the land every planting season. To prove the efficacy of his method, Garst explained to Khrushchev that he had been able to plant this same field to corn every year since 1945. The field was also a fine example of full agricultural mechanization, with Garst explaining to Khrushchev that one man could till all six-hundred-forty acres using just four machines: a picker, a chopper, a six-row seeder, and a six-row cultivator. Khrushchev was impressed. "Previously I had pictured Garst as a modest man in his work," he later said. "Now I saw him in his natural element. I saw him in action, and strong feelings of respect for him blazed up in me."<sup>215</sup> Khrushchev, too, appeared to be in his natural element, with one journalist noting, "Nowhere in America was Russia's Khrushchev more 'at home' and relaxed than in the lush cornfields of Iowa."<sup>216</sup>

Despite the high levels of security, one intruder slipped through. A man named Jack Christensen arrived at the first cornfield at the same time as Khrushchev and Garst.<sup>217</sup> He sported

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<sup>212</sup> Fowler, "The day Russia came to Iowa."

<sup>213</sup> "Nikita's Iowa Schedule." *The Des Moines Register*, September 23, 1959.

<sup>214</sup> "Khrushchev in Iowa." *Harvester World*, 2-8.

<sup>215</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 143.

<sup>216</sup> "In the Home Stretch," 43.

<sup>217</sup> Christensen, Jack. "Brash Gate-Crasher's Busy Round with Mr. K." *Life*, Vol. 47, No. 14, October 5, 1959, 38-39.

a flat-top haircut and wore a white polo shirt tucked into khaki trousers. He attempted to break the security perimeter when a guard grabbed his arm.

“Who are you?” said the guard.

“One of the farmhands,” Christensen said, lying.

“Oh, excuse me, go on in,” said the guard. Christensen walked toward Khrushchev and extended his hand. Khrushchev shook it, then patted Christensen on his pot belly.

“Now there’s a *real* American,” Khrushchev said, laughing.<sup>218</sup>

“We’re both alike,” Christensen said, and Khrushchev continued to smile while patting the man on his stomach before moving on with the tour.

After the cornfield, Garst brought Khrushchev to a field of red and silver sorghum. A phalanx of police officers and security guards formed a circle around them, interlocking their arms. Christensen appeared again. He walked up to one of the guards. “I’m a stock man,” he said, and the guard lifted his arm and let Christensen slip inside the circle.

At the third field Garst showed Khrushchev, Christensen appeared yet again. A security guard spotted him. “Let that fellow in here,” the guard said to a police officer, “he’s Garst’s son.”

As Garst showed Khrushchev a stock pen, Christensen stood silently beside them, hands in his pockets, smiling. Later, he picked up a little girl and handed her to Khrushchev as he walked by. “Here, the photographers want to take some pictures,” Christensen said.

“Yes, all right,” Khrushchev said. He took the girl and kissed her on the head as reporters took photographs.

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<sup>218</sup> Fowler, “The day Russia came to Iowa.”

On the way to the Garsts' home, the caravan passed only briefly through the town of Coon Rapids, disappointing the crowds lining Main Street.<sup>219</sup> Helmeted soldiers surrounded the two-hundred acre farmstead. Khrushchev arrived "tired but smiling," and Garst walked him through the sorghum fields, feedlots, and hog pens surrounding his home, explaining everything as they went.<sup>220</sup> The two exchanged jokes and laughed often, but Garst soon grew frustrated with the increasingly intrusive presence of the journalists on his property.

Prior to the visit, Garst had made multiple requests to the media to keep coverage to a minimum. "I'm going to encourage everybody to stay away from Coon Rapids for one day," he said in a newspaper interview prior to Khrushchev's arrival.<sup>221</sup> "I think everybody in the community will do reasonably well to encourage the same thing." It would be easier to show Khrushchev Iowa's farms and small town life, he said, "if we don't get too many curious people in town." Despite Garst's efforts, the media would become "principal characters in the drama," with Khrushchev receiving the most press coverage of his entire American trip not in New York or Los Angeles, but in the town of Coon Rapids, population 1,800.<sup>222 223 224</sup> In the lead-up to the visit, some two thousand journalists had submitted applications for press credentials on Garst's property. News crews had constructed a one hundred foot communications tower at a cost of forty thousand dollars on a hill near Garst's home for the sole purpose of sending live television signals to Des Moines to be broadcast to the rest of the country.<sup>225</sup> Additionally, they had

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> "Troops lined Nikita's route."

<sup>221</sup> Mills, "Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker."

<sup>222</sup> Perkins, Jerry. "Sons relive historic meeting." *The Des Moines Register*, February 5, 1995.

<sup>223</sup> "Troops lined Nikita's route."

<sup>224</sup> Mills, "Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker."

<sup>225</sup> "Khrushchev in Iowa." *Harvester World*, 2-8.

installed pay telephone booths in the farmyard, great lengths of heavy power cable, and seventeen new telephone circuits in order to transmit teletype, wirephotos, and radio signals.<sup>226</sup>

Garst had estimated that between 300 and 500 reporters would be in Coon Rapids.<sup>227</sup> On the morning of the visit, 600 flooded his property.<sup>228</sup> The AP set up headquarters in a grain silo, while UPI was relegated to a barn near the pigpen.<sup>229</sup> When some reporters tried to climb a silo to get a bird's-eye view of the proceedings, Garst's son Stephen directed the farmhands to hold them back with pitchforks. Another group of reporters attempted to maneuver for a vantage point behind a tractor when the vehicle's raised loader unexpectedly rotated, dumping silage all over them.<sup>230</sup> "Never in the history of journalism have so many resourceful scribblers kept each other from following a big story closely, or written so much on a character they couldn't hear and often couldn't see," the *New York Times*' James Reston wrote. "There were so many of them around today they changed everything at the Garst Farm but the smell."<sup>231</sup> Throughout the day, Garst ordered the media to give him and Khrushchev room, but they continued to crowd the pair. Garst told Khrushchev not to worry, "the Cossacks are coming," and Khrushchev "dissolve[d] into tears of laughter" as he watched Garst's neighbors and local police, the "cavalry of Coon Rapids," arrive on horseback and attempt to drive out the invaders.<sup>232 233</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> "Troops lined Nikita's route."

<sup>227</sup> Mills, "Nikita to Get Viewpoint of Iowa Worker."

<sup>228</sup> Perkins, "Sons relive historic meeting."

<sup>229</sup> "Khrushchev in Iowa."

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Perkins, "Sons relive historic meeting."

<sup>232</sup> Speech by Nikita Khrushchev, May 1960.

<sup>233</sup> "Here at Last—The Real Story of Khrushchev's Visit." U.S. News and World Report, October 19, 1959, 58.

Khrushchev was amazed by the number of reporters. “As we say in our country,” he wrote later, “there were so many of them, some you could see and some you couldn’t.”<sup>234</sup> It reminded him of what the gamekeeper on his shooting preserve in the Ukraine, a man named Prokop, used to say when asked how the hunting looked.<sup>235</sup> “Well, Comrade Prokop, any ducks today?” Khrushchev would ask him.

“Ducks everywhere, Comrade Khrushchev,” Prokop would reply. “Ducks as far as the eye can see—more ducks than shit.”

Everywhere Garst and Khrushchev went, the duo was flanked by an army of reporters. At one point, the eminent *New York Times* journalist Harrison Salisbury darted out in front of them to take a photo, only to have Garst run after him, throwing handfuls of silage at him and kicking him in the rear end.<sup>236 237</sup> Later, he uprooted a stalk of corn and hurled it at another invasive journalist.

“You have to understand Garst!” Khrushchev said later, defending his host. “There had never been such a huge number of people in his fields,” he said, adding, “and probably after my visit there never would be again.”<sup>238</sup> Khrushchev claimed Garst feared his crops would be trampled and his farm would suffer losses. “He must have felt as though the Golden Horde had overrun his farm... All of these superfluous people exasperated Garst, and he growled like a bear at everything that was interfering with him.”<sup>239 240</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs, Vol. 3*, 138.

<sup>235</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 397-398.

<sup>236</sup> Fowler, “The day Russia came to Iowa.”

<sup>237</sup> Perkins, “Sons relive historic meeting.”

<sup>238</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs, Vol. 3*, 142.

<sup>239</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 399.

<sup>240</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs, Vol. 3*, 143.

The tour moved to Garst's barns, and Khrushchev was impressed with the extent to which Garst had mechanized feeding operations for livestock. He noted that the process resulted in a perfect balance of nutrients so that the animals could weigh as much as possible using the minimum amount of feed. As a result, the steers were in excellent physical, and Khrushchev later contrasted Garst's feed with that of the Soviet Union, which he described as "unsuitable, half-rotted...grain mixed with garbage and dirt, what the Ukrainians call *smittya*," or rubbish.<sup>241</sup>

Above all, Khrushchev was once again impressed with Garst's insistence on profit maximization, writing in his memoirs, "He is a farmer who knows his work and knows agriculture and makes use of everything new. For me Garst is a benchmark. If Garst does something, that's because it's profitable, and if he doesn't do something, we should stop and think about it. He is engaged in capitalist agriculture, but he makes a profit—and that is a question of life and death. If he can't keep pace with the times, then in the world of capitalism a farmer like him is doomed to failure. 'Mr. Khrushchev, I no longer put manure on my fields,' he told me during my visit to the United States in 1959. 'I use mineral fertilizers. I burn the manure. It's not profitable to spread it on the fields, to haul it out there, and to plow it under. That's expensive.' I can't claim that Garst is absolutely right in all his arguments...But I can say one thing: if Garst does something, it's because it helps him make a profit from his farming, and that allows him to survive under competitive conditions. And if something is useful for capitalist agriculture, it must consequently be advantageous for socialist agriculture as well. It is not a question of the social system; it is not a question of who owns the means of production."<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>242</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 2, 362.

While he was mostly impressed, Khrushchev did not approve of everything he saw on the farm. While touring the livestock pens, he pointed out that the animals were spilling grain from their troughs and told Garst that it was not rational to let the spilled feed go to waste.

“Yes,” Garst said, “inevitable losses occur.” Khrushchev was not satisfied, telling Garst it was necessary to think about minimizing losses. He was again surprised by Garst’s wastefulness when they walked past some empty grain silos that Garst said were outdated and no longer in use, explaining that agriculturists had studied silage production and had found other, easier alternatives to storing fodder in silos and compressing it. It was cheaper and more efficient to store the silage in trench silos than it was to use traditional, above-ground silos.

Khrushchev noticed that Garst’s corn was planted in wide rows, the way Russians had planted it before the revolution. He asked Garst why he used this method as opposed to planting corn in square clusters, and Garst replied that the financial and labor inputs were lower with his method. Pointing to a cornstalk, Khrushchev said, “This is the best way to set out corn, so that there is one stalk growing by itself or, at the maximum, two.” In some places, though, Khrushchev noticed as many as six stalks in a cluster. He noted that the plants were restricting each other’s growth and explained to Garst, “In that situation you don’t get as good results as you could with only one stalk, or at the maximum two per cluster. There needs to be more space between stalks, and the root system has to be able to obtain nutritive elements from the soil more readily; this also ensures that the plants are well aired and get plenty of sunlight. Those are the most favorable conditions for growth. This is true for all crops, but especially for corn because it has such a tall stalk. If it’s planted too close together, the sun won’t warm up the soil; the corn

will still grow but with poor results. And if the planted crop is neglected entirely, there will be no ears of corn.”<sup>243</sup>

Garst agreed. “Yes, you’re right to take such a meticulous attitude toward growing these crops,” he said. “But thinning out the plants would have to be done by hand, and that would require a lot of manual labor.”

Khrushchev picked up an ear of corn from the bed of a truck and smiled for the cameras when the intruder Jack Christensen suddenly appeared with a different ear and handed it to him. “Here, take this one,” Christensen said, “it’s bigger.”<sup>244</sup>

At one point, Khrushchev and Garst discussed the progress that had been made in Soviet corn since 1955. “When Mr. Garst first came to our country,” Khrushchev said, “we bought hybrid corn from him. This year, Mr. Garst visited our country again and saw the hybrid corn *we* now have. Is it any worse than yours?”<sup>245</sup>

“No,” Garst said, “I think—I don’t like to say ‘worse.’ I think it’s very good.”

“And now if I were to say that I want to buy some *more* hybrid corn, now Garst would probably think I’ve grown stupid,” Khrushchev said, and everybody laughed.

“We have a higher rainfall in this area than is true in most of the Soviet Union,” said Garst, who pronounced *Soviet* with a short *o* sound, like *ox*, “and the thickness of our planting is probably somewhat based upon higher rainfall expectation.”

Then, according to one reporter, “the conversation took a very strange twist, at least for an atheist such as Khrushchev.”

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<sup>243</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 142.

<sup>244</sup> Christensen, “Brash Gate-Crasher’s Busy Round with Mr. K.,” 38-39.

<sup>245</sup> “Nikita Khrushchev’s Visit to Iowa 1959.”



“I must say,” Khrushchev said, “that you’re a very wise and intelligent people in this part of the country, but we must also admit that God has helped you quite a bit.”

“That’s right,” Garst said, “he’s on our side.”

“You mustn’t think God is helping only *you*,” Khrushchev said. “He’s helping us, too, because we are developing quicker than you have.”

“Well you tell him,” Garst said to the interpreter, “we have a saying in the United States—he likes to quote sayings—‘The Lord helps those who help themselves.’”

“He always supports the intelligent,” Khrushchev replied.

Later in the day, the Garsts hosted the Khrushchev party for lunch. They had set up a large tent in a sunny, pumpkin-lined garden and allowed only those in Khrushchev’s official party to enter—the hordes of bodyguards, policemen, and journalists were forced to go into town if they wanted lunch.<sup>246247</sup> Elizabeth Garst served a bounty of baked sugar-cured ham, fried chicken, barbecued loin back ribs, and apple pie, all of which Army inspectors tested with Geiger counters prior to lunch.<sup>248</sup>

At lunchtime, Jack Christensen appeared once again, attempting to enter the tent. A police officer stopped him, so Christensen called out to a security guard who had seen him earlier. “Say, I’m having trouble getting in here,” he said.

“He’s all right,” the security guard told the police office. “He’s a member of the family.”

Christensen walked through the perimeter and approached Adlai Stevenson, who was a friend of Garst’s and was then seeking the Democratic presidential nomination for 1960.

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<sup>246</sup> Roswell Garst to Valery Tereshtenko, September 24, 1959.

<sup>247</sup> Fowler, “The day Russia came to Iowa.”

<sup>248</sup> “In the Home Stretch,” 44.

Christensen extended his hand. “Hello, Adlai,” he said loudly. Stevenson looked uncomfortable, but recovered.

“Hello, how are you?” Stevenson said, giving him what Christensen called “the real political look” and shaking his hand. Stevenson was anxious to get away, but Christensen followed him through the lunch line as if they were old friends. Christensen sat down at a table with the Soviet security detail, assuming they did not speak English and wouldn’t ask him any questions.

Just then, Garst spotted Christensen from across the tent. “Who the hell are you?” he said, and Christensen got up from the table, quickly left the tent, and was not seen again that day.<sup>249</sup>

Luckily for everyone involved, Christensen’s motivations were anodyne. “I always had a yen to pull off stunts,” he later recounted in *Life* magazine. “In the fall of 1953 I turned out for football practice at Mason City Junior College and made the team, although I wasn’t a student and had never played football. In 1956 I read that tickets to the Democratic convention were so tight that former President Truman could get only six. So I went to Chicago and wound up sitting with the Pennsylvania delegation.

“When it was announced that Khrushchev was going to be in Coon Rapids, 100 miles from my home, one of my friends read all about the security precautions and said jokingly, ‘Well, that’s one you can’t bust into.’ I decided to try.”

Had Christensen’s intentions been malicious, the day in Coon Rapids might have been notable for very different reasons, especially given the ease with which he was able to repeatedly penetrate security measures.

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<sup>249</sup> Christensen, “Brash Gate-Crasher’s Busy Round with Mr. K.,” 38-39.

After lunch, Garst gave Khrushchev a tour of his home, a modest country farmhouse. “The architecture was standard,” Khrushchev recalled, “no excessive decorations.” He was impressed with Garst’s frugality, later stating the home was the residence of “a businessman who knew how to keep track of his money...with the amount of capital he had, he could have allowed himself great luxury, but wasteful expenditure was not Garst’s way. He was not greedy, but rational. He did not stint on what was necessary and what would bring profit to the farm, but regarded spending that didn’t pay for itself as stupid.”<sup>250</sup>

As they were leaving the house, Adlai Stevenson joined them and suggested the three of them have a photo taken together. Khrushchev had met Stevenson once before and appreciated his views on American foreign policy, particularly his goal of rapprochement with the Soviet Union. One American on either side of Khrushchev, the trio draped their arms over one another’s shoulders and smiled for the cameras.

Garst showed Khrushchev the remaining areas of his farm before concluding the tour, and reporters convened at the side of Garst’s swimming pool to ask Khrushchev to sum up his day on the farm. “I have seen today how the slaves of capitalism live, and they live pretty well,” he said.<sup>251</sup> “But the slaves of communism also live pretty well...Before arriving here I had a picture of Mr. Garst’s good farm from accounts and films. I have known Mr. Garst for several years. However, it is always better to see than to hear. I am glad that what I heard about this farm has been confirmed. I am happy over your achievements and I ask you also to rejoice over our achievements.

“I would especially like to mention the editor of the local *Des Moines Register*,” he continued, referring to Lauren Soth, “who several years ago showed foresight and through his

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<sup>250</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 143.

<sup>251</sup> Fowler, “The day Russia came to Iowa.”

paper advanced the proposal of organizing an exchange of agricultural delegations between the United States of America and the Soviet Union.”<sup>252</sup> He was so impressed with Soth’s political savvy, he jokingly said to him at one point during the day, “If you are ever up for the presidency here, I would vote for you.”<sup>253</sup>

Khrushchev would remember the visit fondly, later praising the day’s lack of tension and artificiality. “Everything went, as we say in our country, *chinno i blagorodno* (with dignity and decorum).”<sup>254</sup> Of the average Americans he encountered, Khrushchev remarked, “It seems they are just as real and as good as our kind Soviet people. We don’t gobble up babies. After all, we eat the same food as you do—a little meat, a little potatoes.”<sup>255</sup>

In the car leaving Coon Rapids for the University of Iowa, Khrushchev and Lodge talked about the swift kick Garst had given the reporter Harrison Salisbury, and Khrushchev fell into hysterics over the incident, once again laughing until his eyes swelled with tears.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> *Khrushchev in America*, 161-163.

<sup>253</sup> “Lauren Soth, editorial writer, dies at 87.” *The Post-Bulletin*, February 19, 1998.

<sup>254</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 152.

<sup>255</sup> “In the Home Stretch,” 48.

<sup>256</sup> Bradlee, “The Untold Story,” 23.

## 6. The Maize Thief

Two weeks later, *Life* magazine devoted the bulk of an issue to Khrushchev's trip to the United States.<sup>257</sup> The cover featured Khrushchev and Garst, with Khrushchev laughing and holding up the comically large ear of corn that Christensen had handed him, and a caption reading: "A CORNBALL ACT DOWN ON THE FARM." The media coverage not only made the Coon Rapids visit the highlight of Khrushchev's trip, it also cemented Iowa's status as the agricultural center of the United States. As a result of all the attention, the *Register* later boasted that "no longer was Iowa just a farming state, it was *the* farming state."<sup>258</sup>

Following the trip, Radio Moscow reported that "a feeling of warmth for the head of the Soviet government is becoming more firmly established among the ordinary people of America."<sup>259</sup> And a feeling of hope was growing in the Soviet Union: "When Eisenhower comes here," a taxi driver in Moscow said, "we shall listen eagerly. Arms will be reduced, we will trade with the United States." A retired steelworker in Smolensk was similarly hopeful: "Now there will be a better life for all the world." And a young student in Minsk said, "Now we will have peace."

On December 16th, 1959, Garst wrote to Khrushchev to express his own thoughts on the trip, saying he believed it "did more probably than anything else could have to lower the suspicions and misconceptions" between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>260</sup> Along with the letter, he sent a bound volume of photos and a sixteen-millimeter film documenting Khrushchev's visit to Coon Rapids, and Garst kept duplicates for his own records. Days later, he

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<sup>257</sup> *Life*, Vol. 47, No. 14, October 5, 1959.

<sup>258</sup> Fowler, "The day Russia came to Iowa."

<sup>259</sup> "View from Moscow," 22-23.

<sup>260</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, December 16, 1959.

sent Khrushchev another letter providing some agricultural recommendations.<sup>261</sup> Khrushchev replied to wish Garst a happy New Year and thank him for the gifts, expressing his “profound conviction that a further development of contacts between” the United States and the Soviet Union would “bring about the growth of mutual understanding between them and then, also, relations of friendship and cooperation.”<sup>262</sup>

*Pravda* and *Izvestiia* printed Khrushchev and Garst’s New Year’s greetings to one another as evidence of increasing cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, relations continued to improve throughout the winter, with the Soviet Union announcing a reduction of its arms and military spending and a reduction of its armed servicemembers by one-third, or over a million troops.<sup>263</sup>

After a few weeks spent recovering from an operation to have his gallbladder and appendix removed, Garst went back to work on improving Soviet agriculture, making more suggestions to Khrushchev including building a urea factory, using insecticides, and buying American machinery for the production of poultry and eggs. The Soviets invited Garst to visit again, but because he was still recovering, he sent his nephew John Chrystal in his place. Chrystal spent six weeks in the Soviet Union and two weeks each in Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria as a guest of each nation’s Department of Agriculture.<sup>264</sup>

In the months following Khrushchev’s trip, U.S.-Soviet relations were arguably the best they had been at any point during the Cold War. “What most Americans felt...and what most of

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<sup>261</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, December 21, 1959.

<sup>262</sup> Nikita Khrushchev to Roswell Garst, December 31, 1959.

<sup>263</sup> “Appeal of the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the Parliaments and Governments of All the Nations of the World,” January 15, 1960.

<sup>264</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

the world felt,” reported *Newsweek*, “was a sense of hope, a sense of relief.”<sup>265</sup> *U.S. News and World Report* was similarly hopeful, stating “Nikita Khrushchev’s ideas about the U.S. have changed. Those changes will certainly be reflected for years to come through a new phase of the cold war.”<sup>266</sup> Eisenhower planned to visit the Soviet Union in June of 1960 to repay Khrushchev’s trip to the United States. And on May 16th, Eisenhower and Khrushchev planned to meet once again in Paris for an East-West summit. By all appearances, the ice between the two nations was finally thawing.

And then, on May 1st, 1960, the sense of hope toward which Soth, Garst, and so many others had worked was dashed as a Soviet surface-to-air missile exploded near an American spy plane over the Soviet Union. The plane, a Lockheed U-2 piloted by CIA operative Francis Gary Powers, had been collecting imagery of Soviet missile sites in an operation codenamed GRAND SLAM. As the wreckage cascaded across the Eurasian Steppe, with it plummeted the trust that had built up between the United States and the Soviet Union in the previous five years. Making matters worse, the U.S. government immediately lied about the operation, claiming the plane was merely a NASA aircraft that had flown off course while collecting weather data. They didn’t know that Powers had survived the missile strike and parachuted to earth, where he was immediately captured by the Soviets and flown to Moscow. Along with Powers, the Soviets had recovered the plane’s wreckage, including the reconnaissance footage it had been recording, and they responded to the United States’ false claims by producing both the plane and its pilot.

Eisenhower and Khrushchev still met in Paris two weeks later, but in light of the U-2 incident, the summit took on a decidedly different tone than anticipated. Khrushchev publicly

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<sup>265</sup> “The Big Moment: Hope from Camp David.” *Newsweek*, October 5, 1959, 21.

<sup>266</sup> “Here at Last—The Real Story of Khrushchev’s Visit,” 59.

lambasted Eisenhower for sending spy planes over the Soviet Union, demanding an apology. When Eisenhower refused to apologize, Khrushchev rescinded his invitation to visit the Soviet Union and stomped out of the meeting prematurely.

When Garst was asked for his opinion of the disastrous summit, he said that he thought Eisenhower was insulted in Paris and that both sides had made mistakes in how they handled the meeting. He soon received a letter from Harrison Salisbury, the *New York Times* reporter he had gone after on the day of the visit, that included the transcript of a speech Khrushchev had recently given in which he responded directly to Garst's comments.<sup>267</sup>

"Mr. Garst," Khrushchev said, "my old friend and a good American farmer who knows everything about maize proved none too strong in politics. I do not take umbrage at his statements naturally because I understand how he feels. But I repeat: it is not feelings but reason that a man must guide himself by when he appraises important international events.

"I should like to reply to Mr. Garst briefly. Suppose someone came at night and stole your entire maize crop. You wake up in the morning and it is gone. You manage to catch the thief at last, you want to take him to court to get the damages but he strikes up an attitude and says: 'I like your maize, Mr. Garst. I had stolen it before and I will steal it again.' How would you feel, Mr. Garst?

"This is roughly how the American government acted with regard to the Soviet Union in sending a thieving spy plane to us. For all standards of international relations were violated by it! I spoke of your maize just now, Mr. Garst, but the same thing may well happen to any other American whose home is broken into by a thief who, on top of everything else, takes umbrage at being stopped!

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<sup>267</sup> Speech by Nikita Khrushchev, May 1960.



“And what if our military plane flew over your farm, Mr. Garst, and we said afterwards that we require intelligence data about your country in order to feel secure? You, too, would have been indignant about this, of course, because you are an honest man. I should like to remind you, Mr. Garst, of how you defended your farm—your sovereignty, so to speak—when I was your guest. Correspondents and press photographers would not comply with your rules, then, and you used every means to protect your ‘sovereignty.’ You had no weapons, I saw that, but you chucked maize roots at the crowd with such zeal that you lost balance and even fell. I looked at you and smiled because I realized: Here is a man really defending his independence, his sovereignty—though, of course, sovereignty limited to his farm.

“When New York correspondent Salisbury got in your way, you, if you will pardon the expression, even gave him a good kick in the pants. It was rather crude but understandable because you were on your farm and he ought not to have pushed the host.

“You, Mr. Garst, did everything to defend your ‘frontiers,’ and when you realized that you would lose the battle if you were left on your own, you summoned your neighbors and you told them to come on horseback. ‘The Cossacks are coming,’ you assured me.

“So, Mr. Garst, think again, think for yourself, do not swallow the propaganda bait, take the counsel of your conscience and you’ll reach the right conclusions.

“You will realize that when an American military plane flies into the Soviet sky, I cannot send a visiting card to the President of the United States to thank him, to make compliments, to call him a peacemaker. If I did, I would disappoint the hopes and demands not only of the Soviet people but of all upright people who desire peace.”

Along with the speech, Salisbury included a note to Garst. “I must say he makes a great case!” Salisbury wrote. “I rather think he’d like to join in giving yours truly a good kick in the

pants because I seem to be one of the leaders in spreading what he considers to be false and misleading propaganda.” In response to the letter, Garst invited Salisbury back to visit Coon Rapids. “I’ll guarantee not to kick you in the pants,” he wrote.<sup>268</sup>

Despite the dip in his communication with Khrushchev, Garst remained committed to modernizing Soviet agriculture, continuing to act as an advisor and salesman to his other Soviet contacts. In November of 1960, he wrote Matskevich and Shevchenko recommending the Soviet Union begin using grain sorghums, expand its nitrogen facilities, and build facilities for cleaning, drying, and warehousing the fall harvest. He also suggested they purchase hybrid chickens from Iowa to expand egg production and buy road-building equipment to improve the quality of their rural farm-to-market roads, which were reportedly nearly unusable in the fall and spring.

In the spring of 1961, another Russian delegation visited Garst’s farm, and he showed them his latest agricultural equipment and techniques. Once the international tension from the U-2 incident had subsided, Garst wrote a letter to Khrushchev recommending the Soviet Union use more hybrid seed corn, increase mechanization, expand the use of chemical fertilizers, insecticides, and herbicides, and improve its secondary road system. He also expressed his regrets about the strained relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Those relations worsened throughout 1961 with a series of victories for the Soviet Union and humiliations for the United States. On April 12th, the Soviet Union cemented its position as the leader of the space race as Yuri Gagarin became the first man to enter outer space. Five days later, the United States botched its military invasion at the Bay of Pigs—an operation that, in May of 1961, convinced Khrushchev that Kennedy lacked the will and decisiveness to respond if

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<sup>268</sup> Harrison Salisbury to Roswell Garst, May 30, 1960.

Soviet missiles were placed on the island. And in August, Soviet-occupied East Germany constructed the Berlin Wall with little opposition from the West.

In early 1962, U.S.-Soviet relations improved once again, boosted in no small part by the February 10th exchange on the border of East and West Berlin of Francis Powers and the captured Soviet spy Rudolf Abel. Meanwhile, corn area in the Soviet Union reached its peak at over ninety million acres, though the overall Soviet farm economy was rapidly declining. American newspapers and magazines ran a series of stories about the crisis, and *U.S. News and World Report* interviewed Garst to ask for his opinion on the situation. Garst told the reporter that he risked the guess that Soviet agriculture had not met one of Khrushchev's "unrealistically high goals," but that it was still making progress.<sup>269</sup> Additionally, he reiterated his opinion that Khrushchev should stop spending so much on armaments, start spending more on agriculture, build fertilizer plants, and improve his country's farm-to-market road system. Frustrated at the number of times he had made the same recommendations to the Soviet government without them being implemented, he instructed the Washington-based *U.S. News* to bring a stack of copies of the issue to the lobby of the Soviet Embassy so that the Soviets would be sure to see the interview.

Retracing the path of Lauren Soth's editorial seven years earlier, the interview made it not only to the embassy, but to the Soviet Union, the Kremlin, and ultimately Khrushchev himself. When Gardner Cowles, Jr. of *Look* magazine and the *Des Moines Register* called Khrushchev in Moscow for an interview, a good deal of the conversation was spent discussing Garst's assessment of Soviet agriculture in the *U.S. News* interview. Khrushchev told Cowles

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<sup>269</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

that, while Garst did not understand communism, he did understand agriculture, and Khrushchev agreed with Garst's recommendations for improving the agricultural situation in the Soviet Union. Staying on the subject of Garst, Khrushchev said he had enjoyed his visit to Coon Rapids and would like to someday return there wearing a false beard and using the anonymous moniker "Mr. Ivanovich" (the Russian equivalent of "Mr. Smith") to get another look at Garst's farm without all of the reporters and photographers hassling them.

As a result of Khrushchev's renewed friendliness toward Garst, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin invited Garst and Chrystal to visit Khrushchev in the Soviet Union in the fateful month of October 1962. That summer, Garst sent a letter to Khrushchev telling him how much he admired the agricultural progress the Soviet Union had made in the past five years and expressed his eagerness to return to the Soviet Union.<sup>270</sup> However, shortly before the planned trip, Garst discovered he had cancer of the larynx, and the visit was cancelled so he could undergo an operation to have his voice box removed.<sup>271 272</sup> As a result of the procedure, Garst now spoke through a handheld electronic device that he held up to his throat to render his thoughts in a "flat, metallic monotone."<sup>273</sup>

Meanwhile, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union flared once again, and in the month that Garst had planned to visit the Soviet Union, Khrushchev and Kennedy brought the world to the brink of destruction.

Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, it took months for relations between the United States and the Soviet Union to normalize to the extent that Khrushchev was able to renew his

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<sup>270</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, June 6, 1962.

<sup>271</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>272</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, March 28, 1963.

<sup>273</sup> Hanson, "Former Khrushchev Host Iowan Roswell Garst Has Own Détente Formula."

invitation to Garst, but he finally did so in February of 1963. In a message wired directly from the Kremlin, Khrushchev told Garst he was glad the operation had been a success, wished him a speedy recovery, and said he hoped to see him again soon as cheerful and full of energy as he had been during their past meetings.<sup>274 275</sup>

Still recovering, Garst sent a telegram back to Khrushchev in March of 1963 in which he offered to take a trip of no more than two weeks to the Soviet Union with Chrystal.<sup>276</sup> Before they left, Garst and Chrystal visited with Lewellyn Thompson, who had served as U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union under Eisenhower and was then serving as Ambassador at Large for Soviet Affairs under Kennedy. Thompson advised Garst and Chrystal that the ongoing agricultural crisis in the Soviet Union was of the utmost importance because the Soviet government had a tendency to create international crises to drive attention away from their domestic issues.<sup>277</sup>

In early May of 1963, Garst and Chrystal left for Eastern Europe, spending five days in Moscow, five in Kiev, six in Hungary, and six in Rumania.<sup>278</sup> Despite the crisis, Garst was astonished by the agricultural progress that the Soviet Union had made since he first visited eight years earlier. He later wrote that, in 1955, the Soviet Union had no hybrid corn and no chickens for meat, knew nothing about fertilizer, and had hens that laid only sixty eggs per year. (“About the number of eggs laid by a crow—and for the same reason!” he wrote. “The only protein the hens or the crows got was some green grass in the spring and again in the fall.”) By comparison, in 1963 the Soviets used “practically all hybrid corn,” had built a plant on the Crimean Peninsula

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<sup>274</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>275</sup> Nikita Khrushchev to Roswell Garst, February 26, 1963.

<sup>276</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, March 28, 1963.

<sup>277</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

butchering ten thousand chickens per day, were in the process of building fertilizer factories, and had modern egg-laying facilities for hens.<sup>279</sup> The Soviets had dramatically improved their agricultural programs due in no small part to the technologies and practices that Garst had spent much of the previous decade introducing to them.

Still, Khrushchev was falling far short of his Seven Year Plan, which had sought to catch up with the United States in terms of corn production. The plan had been over-ambitious from the start: between 1959 and 1962, the Soviet Union's average yield of corn for dry grain was about 32 bushels to the acre compared to the United States' 61.8 in 1961, and the United States had about triple the corn acreage of the Soviet Union.<sup>280</sup> By the end of the Seven Year Plan, the United States was producing about six times the amount of corn as the Soviet Union.

Meeting with Khrushchev for what would be the last time, Garst again served as Khrushchev's advisor for matters both agricultural and international, reiterating the farming recommendations he had been making for years and strongly urging Khrushchev to agree to a nuclear test ban with the United States.<sup>281</sup> That summer, Khrushchev and Kennedy would indeed sign such an agreement, the Limited Test Ban Treaty, abolishing nuclear tests in the earth's atmosphere.<sup>282</sup>

After the visit, Garst pivoted his attention away from the Soviet Union and toward other developing nations, most prominently India and South America. Now sixty-five years old and believing that Eastern Europe was well "on its way" to agricultural success, he stated that he

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture*, 566.

<sup>281</sup> Lowitt, Richard; Lee, Harold. *Letters from an American Farmer: The Eastern European and Russian Correspondence of Roswell Garst*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987, 163.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 164.

wanted to spend his remaining years focusing on other areas of the world. He wrote Ellsworth Bunker, who had previously served as the U.S. Ambassador to Argentina, Italy, India, and Nepal, to express his frustrations that the U.S. had never had an agricultural attaché for India or Brazil. “I blame you for part of the difficulty!” he wrote, only half-jokingly. Garst told Bunker that he wanted to be more helpful to South America and India, and believed he could be more effective if the U.S. government gave him some form of official diplomatic status. He offered to serve as an agricultural attaché free of salary—“\$1 per year would be fine,” he wrote—but stated there were no excuses for malnutrition or hunger anywhere in the world in 1963. “I am sure that knowledge is exportable,” he wrote, “and that the knowledge is available here in the United States.”<sup>283</sup>

Meanwhile, the agricultural crisis in the Soviet Union worsened, particularly in terms of wheat production, and the Soviet government was forced to import almost 12 million tons of wheat from its competitors at a cost of about 800 million dollars.<sup>284</sup> With his ambitious Virgin Lands campaign in decline, Khrushchev grew concerned about his similarly idealistic corn expansion program. In December of 1963, he finally showed signs that he was becoming more pragmatic about corn, stating: “If corn yields 40 centners per hectare and the same quantity of wheat is gathered by a kolkhoz, it is clear that it is more advantageous to grow wheat...corn is a powerful crop...however, we have not sworn eternal fealty to any one particular crop...we do not plan to worship it.”<sup>285</sup>

He further distanced himself from his earlier insistence on planting corn across the Soviet Union in a February 1964 plenary session at the Kremlin Presidium. “Some officials sometimes

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<sup>283</sup> Roswell Garst to Ellsworth Bunker, June 27, 1963.

<sup>284</sup> Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture*, 343.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

force kolkhozes to plant corn which they cannot grow properly,” he said, either unaware or unwilling to admit that, for many years, he himself had been the most prominent of such officials.<sup>286</sup> His reassessments of his wheat and corn campaigns came too late, and Khrushchev was deposed as both premier and first secretary in October of 1964 due in large part to the widespread perception among state and party officials that he had long mismanaged the Soviet Union’s agricultural programs.

Following his premiership, Khrushchev continued to “have great respect for” Garst, suggesting he did not place any blame for the Soviet Union’s agricultural problems on his foremost American advisor. In his memoirs, Khrushchev praised Garst for his intelligence, practical ability, and honesty, writing, “People might say, ‘Look, in his declining years Khrushchev is eulogizing a capitalist.’ I am not eulogizing him, but I admire a man who knows his business. Also, Garst did not shut himself off from us, but sincerely wanted to help us and was willing to share all his experience.”<sup>287</sup>

Likewise, Garst continued to have a high opinion of Khrushchev, having seen first-hand the progress the former premier had made both agriculturally and in terms of the Soviet Union’s relations with the rest of the world. After discovering that Khrushchev had been deposed, Garst wrote to him: “Before you, Mr. Khrushchev, became chairman, there had, for nearly ten years, been little to no contact between the people of our two countries. Ignorance of each other led to suspicions of each other...Unfounded suspicions such as those that did exist before 1955 have largely disappeared.”<sup>288</sup> Most people in the Soviet Union, he wrote, “now recognize that our

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 502.

<sup>287</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 2, 390.

<sup>288</sup> Roswell Garst to Nikita Khrushchev, December 12, 1964.



form of government works very well for us, that our agriculture and industry have given all Americans a high standard of living, that our democracy has no desire for war or conquest.

“We, on the other hand, recognize that your country is also highly interested in progress, in getting higher living standards for all of your people; that the Soviet Union suffered so terribly in both World War I and World War II that you have every reason not to want war, and a sound reason for being sure that if war ever does come, you will never again be overrun.

“In short, those years during which you were chairman saw a very great lessening in the possibility of conflict of arms between our two countries—because we know each other better.”<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

As a boy, Nikita Khrushchev herded sheep on a large estate in Kalinovka, the town just north of the Ukraine where he was born.<sup>290</sup> A wealthy general owned the estate, growing cereals and sugar beets, raising fine-fleeced sheep for wool, and keeping stables of English thoroughbreds. The buildings on the property, built by serfs, were made of red brick. To the young Khrushchev, they looked like fortresses.

Some years after the revolution of 1917, Khrushchev returned to Kalinovka to visit the idyllic tract of land. He expected it to have remained unchanged, but instead of the fortresses he remembered from his youth, he found a field of ruins, with only the manor house intact. After the tsarist government was overthrown, the laborers who had built and worked on the estate had torn it down. The stables had been dismantled, the farmland razed. Khrushchev imagined the years of resentment that had festered in the serfs who had been forced to build the estate, and the violent glee with which they must have destroyed it; surely they had had every right to do so. But standing among the ruins, he regretted that the serfs had not preserved what they had built. The majestic property might have been repurposed. Instead, it was simply erased.

“Throughout Russia,” Khrushchev reflected, “everything was swept away. The peasants never rebuilt anything to approximate what they had destroyed.”<sup>291</sup>

The cycle of erasure repeated itself following Khrushchev’s quiet death in 1971. Only a small blurb, buried deep in the pages of *Pravda*, notified the Soviet people that he had died. His name was scrubbed from Soviet history books. Even the thirty-volume *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* excised all references to him. Hundreds of *Khrushchyovka*—the 1,700 low-cost

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<sup>290</sup> Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 138-139.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

apartment buildings that were constructed in the early 1960s and named for him—were systematically destroyed. Just as the Bolsheviks had attempted to erase the legacy of the tsars and start anew, so too did Khrushchev's successors make every effort to ensure the premier's name would not be remembered by future generations.

Khrushchev's agricultural programs, often cited as the primary reasons for his ouster, are still widely considered failures despite the great improvements that were made to Russian farms in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The corn area in Russia would never again shrink to pre-Khrushchev levels due to the knowledge that Soviet farmers acquired during his era, an increasing supply of fertilizer due to Khrushchev's heavy investment in fertilizer factories, and Khrushchev's interest in developing varieties of corn that would grow in harsh climates. While he was undoubtedly over-eager in his attempts to plant corn across the country with little consideration for growing conditions, the campaign cannot rightly be considered a failure; the program "boosted corn area from about 9 million acres in 1953 to more than 60 million acres in 1962," and "made corn a kind of universal crop, grown mainly for silage practically throughout the USSR."<sup>292</sup>

Khrushchev's death received far more media coverage in the United States than it did in the Soviet Union. When Garst heard the news, he wrote Nina, telling her that, despite the Soviet Union's silence, her husband had made great contributions to both the Soviet Union and to the world.<sup>293</sup> Garst told Nina he believed Khrushchev was one of the main reasons the Soviet Union had changed from a "primitive, backward nation to one of the truly great nations of the world."

"He established communications with the rest of the world," Garst wrote. "Good communications are important between nations—as well as between people." He added, "Better

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<sup>292</sup> Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture*, 564.

<sup>293</sup> Roswell Garst to Nina Khrushchev, September 15, 1971.

than most men of prominence he knew how to laugh which is a great virtue in this troubled world.”<sup>294</sup>

Nina responded to Garst’s letter on October 14th, 1971. “You wrote that N.S. knew how to laugh,” she wrote. “Yes, he knew. It was his human trait, which attracted people and facilitated personal contacts with them.”<sup>295</sup>

Most important of those personal contacts may have been Garst himself. Khrushchev’s son Sergei, an authority on Cold War history, later reflected on the relationship between his father and Garst. “It seems to me that in those years,” he wrote, “when the turn came from war toward peace or, to be more precise, toward peaceful coexistence between the two systems (as Father put it), the friendship between those two men, Garst and Father, was no less fruitful than many months of negotiations by veteran diplomats.”<sup>296</sup> Garst agreed, and in his later years, did not hesitate to take sole credit for preventing a direct conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, once saying, “I turned what might have been a tragedy into a damned nuisance.”<sup>297</sup>

Referring to the period between Khrushchev’s deposition in 1964 and death in 1971, Garst said, “I never went over to Russia nor corresponded with anybody during that period...I wouldn’t have wanted to go to the Soviet Union and not see Mr. Khrushchev after he had been demoted. It would have been embarrassing to him and to the people who demoted him.”<sup>298</sup>

Following Khrushchev’s death, Garst would return to the Soviet Union with Chrystal in 1972 and 1974 as an agricultural advisor. In the early 1970s, facing continued grain shortages, Soviet

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Nina Khrushchev to Roswell Garst, October 14, 1971.

<sup>296</sup> Khrushchev, Sergei. “The Cold War through the Looking Glass.” *American Heritage*, Volume 50, Issue 6, October 1999.

<sup>297</sup> Hanson, “Former Khrushchev Host Iowan Roswell Garst Has Own Détente Formula.”

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

leadership began importing American grain in huge quantities because they reasoned it was cheaper than trying to produce it at home.<sup>299 300</sup>

The opening of trade with the Soviet Union would revolutionize the world grain market and set the stage for the export-fueled boom in the American farm economy in the mid-1970s. Garst lived long enough to see the prices of farmland in Iowa skyrocket, but not long enough to see the land bubble burst. He died in 1977, the same year the last Soviet delegations would visit Iowa and a few years before the American farm economy declined, destroying the livelihoods of a generation of Midwestern farmers.<sup>301</sup> Corporate farming operations, using many of the efficiency-maximizing technologies that Garst himself had championed throughout his lifetime, bought up thousands of acres of cheap farmland, the number of farmers plummeted, and small towns across the Corn Belt that had depended on farmers to survive died out.

In 1995, 36 years after Khrushchev's visit to Iowa, his son Sergei returned to meet with Garst's son David. As the two drove across the hundreds of acres of Garst farmland, David explained to Sergei that since 1959, American corn production had "increased 261 percent, wheat 215 percent, and soybeans 475 percent."<sup>302</sup> As a result, Americans had the luxury of paying "less for food as a percentage of their income than consumers in any other country."

David told Sergei that this luxury, however, came at a cost. "It's devastated little communities like Coon Rapids," he said. "Iowa is full of little towns that are suffering financial hardships."

"Where do the people who have left the farm go?" Sergei asked.

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<sup>299</sup> Perkins, "Two sons revisiting history."

<sup>300</sup> Lowitt, Richard; Lee, Harold. *Letters from an American Farmer: The Eastern European and Russian Correspondence of Roswell Garst*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987, 193.

<sup>301</sup> Perkins, Jerry. "When Russia met Iowa." *The Des Moines Register*, February 17, 2009.

<sup>302</sup> Perkins, "Two sons revisiting history."

“To Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, our industrial cities,” David said. “I don’t know what the answer to that problem is.”

After Roswell Garst’s death, Chrystal continued his work, travelling to the Soviet Union sixty times before his own death in 2000. “That was the end of the real relationship between the Soviet Union and my family,” said Liz Garst, named after her grandmother, the woman who first invited Khrushchev to Iowa.<sup>303</sup> She noted that many Russians still visit Iowa and the Garst farm, now a nature conservancy listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Roswell and Elizabeth Garst Farmstead Historic District. “We are historically interesting to them,” she said, “but the real relationship is over.”

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<sup>303</sup> Perkins, “When Russia met Iowa.”

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