

Diary of an idealist

Mahfuzur Rahman dwells on an economist's disenchantment

Idealists are a vanishing breed. I suppose every generation has lamented their demise, actual or merely perceived. Looking back on my own generation, I am inclined to believe that the tears are not without some merit. A fast-forward would not perhaps alter much. Vanishing or not, it is a rare breed and Md. Anisur Rahman, economist and ardent exponent of Rabindrasangeet, certainly belongs to it.

In *Through Moments in History* Anisur Rahman takes us from the tumultuous days of the War of Liberation to the end of the nineteen eighties. He has seen much, felt passionately about a great deal, and suffered frustration in equal measure. The present volume is, as he puts it, a memoir of two decades of his intellectual and social life.

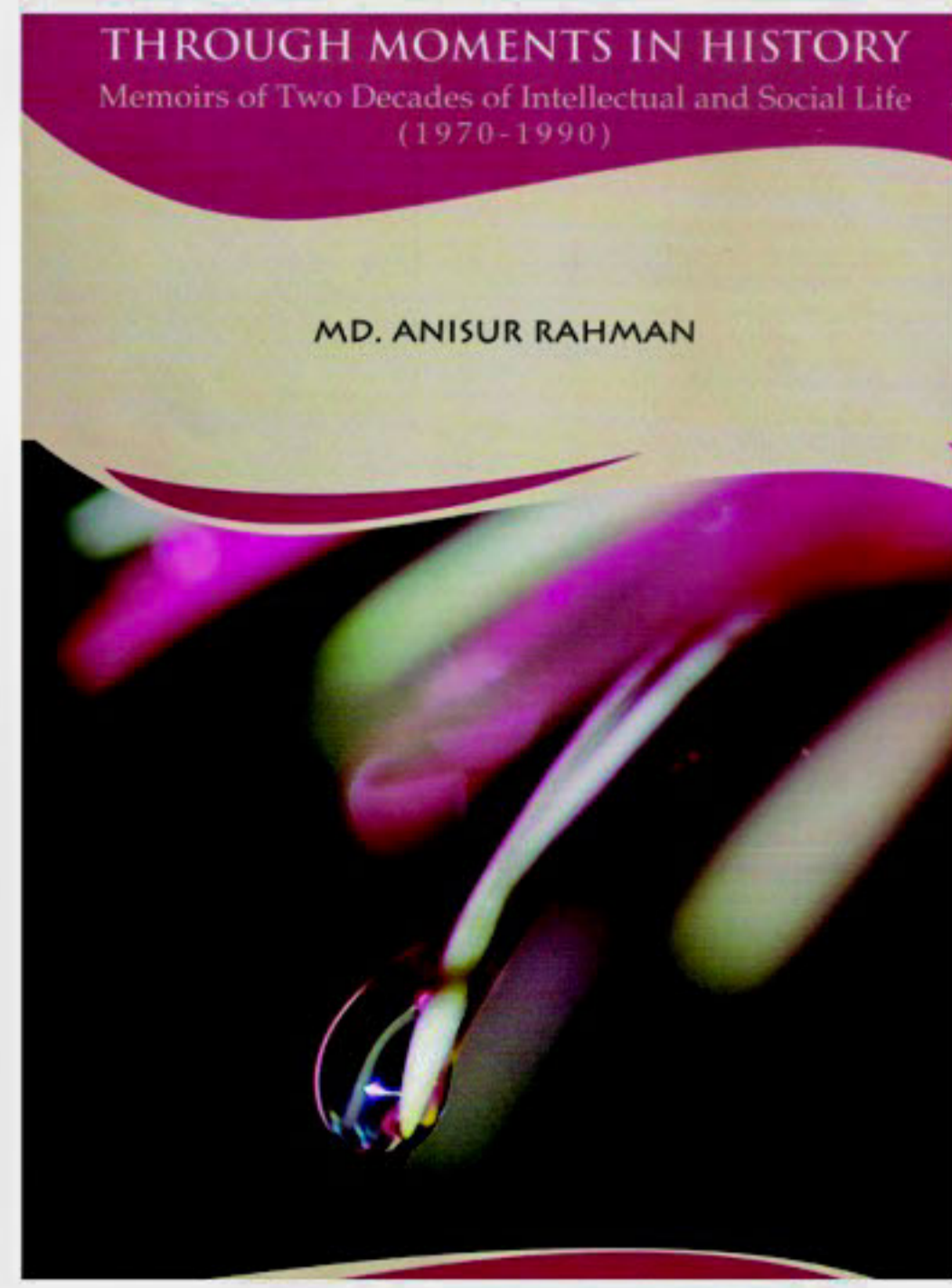
The early pages of the book pack facts about the great economic divide between the two wings of Pakistan, the economic injustice suffered by the Bengalis, the rapid unraveling of the political situation in the late nineteen sixties, with the Awami League coming up with its six-point programme, and the role that some of the Bengali economists, Anisur Rahman among them, played in the formulation of the rationale for economic autonomy for the eastern wing.

Then suddenly March 1971 was upon the nation. Anisur Rahman the idealist found a place in the great awakening among the Bengalis, singing Brotochari songs in street marches, rousing people to "be a complete Bengali", something in which the reader might see a precursor of the author's later ideas and passions. On that terrible night of 25 March he and his family narrowly escaped death, while his colleagues were murdered by the Pakistani army. His escape to India was only a little less gripping. Helped by a number of devoted friends and patriots, he made his way to Agartala, but not before being manhandled by fellow Bengalis who would probably have lynched him as a suspected Pakistani spy, and was saved by the timely intervention of a group of students. The British novelist Robert Payne, in his 1977 novel, *The Tortured And The Damned*, retells the story.

The flight to Agartala was only the beginning of an odyssey that would take him to Delhi, and finally to the United States in May of that year. During the short few months he was at Harvard and Williams College, he agonised as much over the situation in Bangladesh as over that of his family, which finally joined him in exile. He used his academic connections in the United States in the best way he could, primarily lobbying US politicians for Bangladesh.

Anisur Rahman returned home briefly even before the country had been fully liberated. He felt he had to. In a few more weeks he was finally back home, eager to help in building a new nation. To him, the nation had to be built on the foundation, most importantly, of "egalitarianism", and "the creativity of the people." As a member of the newly created Bangladesh Planning Commission he felt it was his duty to work for that ideal. While not in doubt that the political realities in the country were hardly congenial to his ideas, he nevertheless went right ahead in propounding them wherever he could. There is a long list of action he wished taken. Here is a selection.

For a desperately poor country trying to emerge from the trauma of the War of Liberation, the need for austerity was immediate. Anisur Rahman proposed, among other things, to explore the formulation of an incomes policy in a committee that included not only the Finance Minister and political leaders but also student leaders who had participated in the war and representatives of the working class. He also proposed that most of the cars used for carrying government



Through Moments in History
Memoirs of Two Decades of Intellectual
and Social Life (1970-1990)
Md. Anisur Rahman
Pathak Shamabesh

officers should be sold or exported. He personally urged Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to stop all displays of ostentatious consumption and launch an austerity programme that involved freedom fighters and dedicated youths from among the student community. He recalls ruefully that the Prime Minister fully agreed to his proposals on austerity, and then said to him, "But how do I do it?"

Anisur Rahman believed that the critical food situation in the country could be tackled and food self-sufficiency achieved within two years by use of the same dedication and patriotism that had led the people to victory in the War of Liberation. He enthusiastically supported the idea of village brigades to achieve it. But the idea remained only that, an idea. In a few months he was leading some of his students in participatory development programmes and, in one his projects, living in farmers' homes, planting rice, digging canals and doing a host of other things. He lived on the farm for only a few weeks on this occasion; his active commitment in the programme remained. His thinking continued to be dominated by participatory development at the local and national levels, to which formal planning by the likes of his Planning Commission was no substitute. He eagerly joined a number of local self-reliance movements, and came to love a village literacy programme initiated by the villagers themselves, which was a complete success. It pained him immensely when the latter success went unappreciated by mainstream political leaders and planners. And of course he was swiftly disenchanted when none of his ideas found any takers in the Planning Commission.

Idealism is not only ennobling; it is perhaps emboldening too. On a number of occasions his frustrations propelled Anisur Rahman to face the Father of the Nation himself with great insouciance. He was perhaps among a very few people in Bangladesh in 1972 to address Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as "Sheikh Shaheb." And he spoke his mind, as some of these

pages make clear, telling the leader what qualities of leadership the latter should have had and how he had failed as a leader.

Further disappointments awaited Anisur Rahman at the Department of Economics of Dacca University to which he returned from the Planning Commission. Since the constitution of the country enunciated socialism as a goal for the nation, he thought, rightly, there should be an academic course of study on socialism. Here too his efforts were stymied, by some devious means, he tells us. He tried to create a parallel department: Department of Theoretical Economics, without success. Finally he left for abroad but his idealism and his disdain of mainstream economics never left him. There was a period of flux, during which he continued to work on participatory, or alternative, development in a number of institutions, writing papers and giving seminars, for a time delving into the psychological aspects of development, a venture that must have tested heterodoxy to its limits.

Ever the idealist, he spurned several offers of financially attractive jobs. One such was a senior position at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) which he declined because, in his own words, he "was committed to self-reliant development of countries of the south while UNCTAD wanted to kill self-reliance of southern countries with dependence-generating trade and aid...". "It was obvious to everyone", he continues, "that UNCTAD would not be able to buy my philosophy of self-reliant development." (p. 214). In 1978 he joined the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to develop a programme of "Participatory Organisations of the Rural Poor" (PORP). He devoted the next decade or so to the programme before returning home on early retirement.

This is an important book, though not an easy one to read, and not only because of poor editing. It is also laden with the author's frustrations over his ideas being unappreciated, rejected, even mocked, by those who he believed could make a difference to society. Yet his frustrations would be fully matched by exasperation on the part of many readers of the book. To some, this would be due in part to the encompassing egocentricity of the book that sometimes verges on the self-righteous. To others, exasperation would arise primarily from Anisur Rahman's total rejection of mainstream economics and conventional tools of economic development in favour of participatory development.

However imperfect these tools are, they are indispensable. On the highest stilts, to vary slightly a quote from Montaigne, you still need to walk on your legs. There are macroeconomic variables, thrown up by conventional economics, a development planner can ignore only at his peril. Total savings in the economy must be increased, investment must be nurtured, balance of payments has to be watched and exchange rates examined. Input-output coefficients, taught by Anisur Rahman the professor, and excoriated by him as member of the Planning Commission, remain a useful tool. A modern economy cannot develop simply by using a mantra of self-reliance. Neither is trade a Circe of dependency, as Anisur Rahman, and others, think.

Yet there is plenty in the book that most readers would easily relate to. His depiction of the lack of political leadership in the immediate post-independence years would be readily acceptable to many. And many would also empathise, as I would, with his humanity.

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Complex emotions at work

Efadul Huq tries unravelling a character

Imagine a man attempting to understand a woman. He would fret over the complexities of female psychology, scratch his head in frustration and waste uncountable pages and pens. There would be several rewrites, broken threads of reason, sparks of emotion and passages of to-and-fro analytical narrative. And in the end after implementing much intelligence our diligent writer would come up with something very similar to The Golden Notebook.

Yes, dear readers, that is clearly what Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing does in *The Golden Notebook*. Lessing, keenly and creatively, dissects Anna Wulf, a middle-aged writer who lives with her young daughter and is often visited by her friend Molly. Despite the fact that Anna's first novel about Africa was a success, she lives a writing career of dissatisfaction. She is just not happy with her writing. To add to it, abandoned by her lover, Anna now faces a writer's block. In the wake of her inability to write and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, she decides to maintain four coloured diaries to salvage her confused identity.

Page by page, she records her sexual experiences, emotional upheavals, political disillusionment, reactions to her society and the confusion of being a 'free woman'. The black notebook relates Anna's early years in Africa on which her debut novel was based. The red notebook documents her political views, especially that of communism in a post-war Britain. The yellow notebook shelters a fictionalized version of Anna's personal experiences, which are basically the raw material for her next novel. Finally there's a blue notebook which is Anna's true personal diary where she mentions Saul Green, an American ex-communist and self-confused personality, who was her lover.

Having fragmented herself unintentionally by writing the four diaries, Anna then faces a greater risk. She is no more just one person but is a disjointed combination of four different wholes. She grows fearful of losing her personality altogether and tries to restore order in her life by bringing together all four notebooks in a final notebook called the golden notebook.

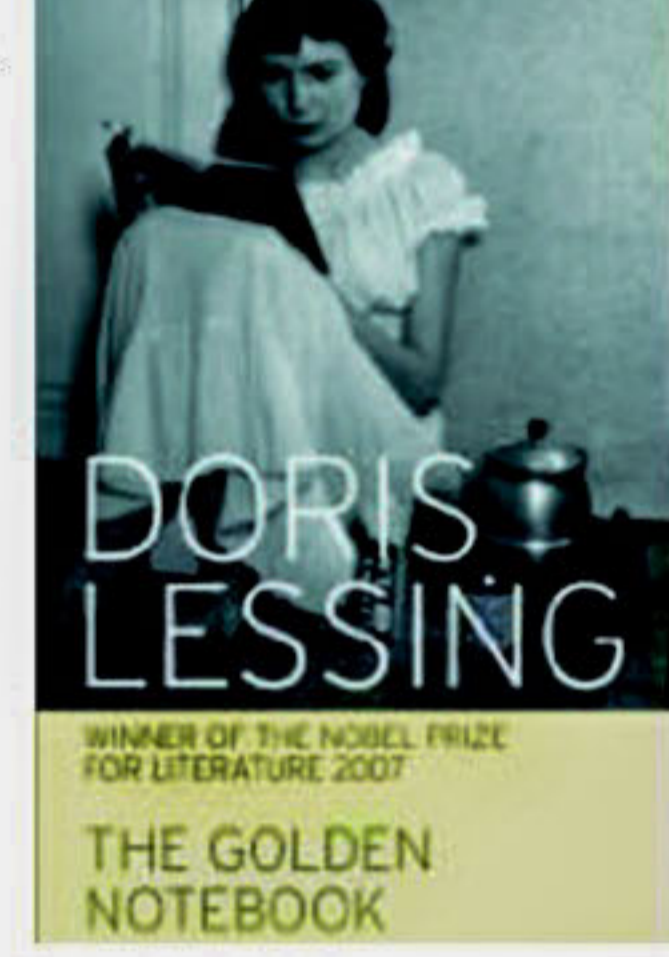
Initially looking at herself from four different angles and then unifying those viewpoints, Anna's journey takes her to her true self, to the ultimate whole of a 'free woman'.

Structurally *The Golden Notebook* is significantly complex. One must sit down with a pencil and scribble on the sides of pages to grasp the book quickly. Otherwise it will take several readings before one can comprehend the larger picture of the novel. On the other hand, in terms of psychoanalysis this novel could be a landmark. Every word, every glance, every gesture exchanged between a man and a woman is depicted with great insight. Lessing vividly portrays the transformation of a man-woman relationship from moment to moment.

As for Anna calling herself a 'free woman', nothing could be more ironical. Anna's newly declared 'freedom', instead of being a source of happiness, brings her misery. With a 'freedom' to love as many men as she wants, she feels the pangs of desolation more than ever. Having 'freed' herself from communism, Anna is now terrorized by the news of threats to humanity in the daily newspapers. For Anna life as a 'free woman' is more of a pain than bliss. Who knows, maybe Lessing intends to show that regardless of a woman's desire for freedom, she ends up feeling lonely and miserable when she achieves it.

With complex but rounded characters, in-depth psychological portraits, fragmented structure, sometimes conversational and sometimes stream of consciousness mode of writing, *The Golden Notebook* is a difficult but rewarding book. In order to reap its benefit, a reader must be patient and must invest time because this novel must be read and discussed with other readers. This novel must be written about and debated over. Eventually *The Golden Notebook* must be read again, to start a fresh discussion, a new interpretation.

Efadul Huq is currently pursuing higher studies abroad



The Golden Notebook
Doris Lessing
Harper Perennial

Gromyko and the death of a promise

Syed Badrul Ahsan looks into the soul of a diplomat

Andrei Gromyko was a regular target of cruel humour, all the way from Joseph Stalin to Nikita Khrushchev to Leonid Brezhnev. And yet all these men knew of the invaluable expertise which Gromyko, beginning with the onset of his diplomatic career at the height of the Second World War, brought into Soviet dealings with the rest of the world, especially the United States. He was there at Dumbarton Oaks when the United Nations was given shape. As Soviet permanent representative to the world body, he stamped his nation's signature on the formative stages of the UN. He served as deputy foreign minister. As ambassador to the United Kingdom in 1952 --- he presented his credentials to a very young Queen Elizabeth II even before she could go through her coronation --- he cemented a relationship forged between London and Moscow in the crucible of the struggle against Hitler. As ambassador to Washington, it was his job not merely to present Soviet diplomacy in as bright a light as possible but also take a measure of the way American policy makers shaped attitudes to his country.

Gromyko's place in history has been assured through his long innings as Soviet foreign minister from 1957, when Khrushchev appointed him to the job, to 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev eased him out of it and kicked him upstairs as President of the Supreme Soviet, a largely ceremonial post he abandoned two years later. Gromyko certainly had not reckoned with Gorbachev's insensitivity, for he had been the individual, after Konstantin Chernenko's death in 1985, who nominated Gorbachev as general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. Clearly bent on inaugurating a new era, one that we now know led to disaster for the Soviet Union, the new man in the Kremlin had little need for a holdover from the past. The foreign ministry went to Eduard Shevardnadze, the no nonsense politician from Georgia who was, post-Soviet Union, to become president of a free Georgia only to be run out of office by a mass movement led by the young Mikhail Saakashvili. Ironically, it is Saakashvili who today is an authoritarian ruler

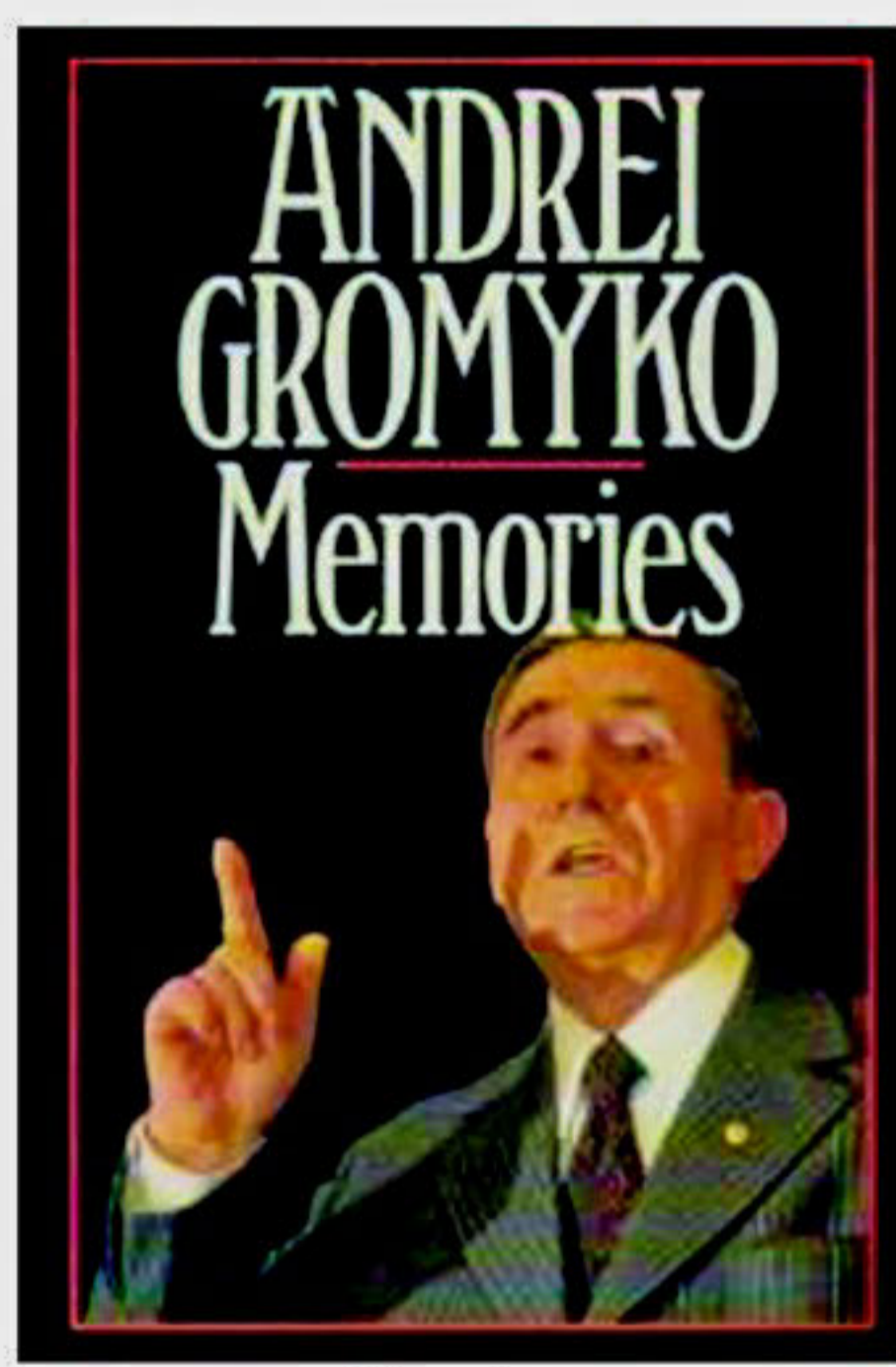
bent on suppressing dissent through an employment of disproportionate force in Georgia.

But, of course, when Gromyko came up with his memoirs in 1989 (that was also the year in which he died), all of this was in the future. *Memories*, a copy of which yours truly stumbled upon at a Charing Cross Road bookstore in London a couple of weeks ago, is considerably a lot more than the story of the man the West often condescendingly called Mr. Nyet. When you read the book, it is a different Gromyko you run into. Gone, suddenly as it were, is the image of the dour Soviet politician to whom humour and the common human touch are strangers. What you have, through the work, is as much a history of Soviet foreign policy between the Stalin years and the beginning of the Gorbachev era as it is the story of a man endowed with huge intelligence and a substantive grasp on the ways of the world. His perception of men and matters, owing specifically to his long hold on Soviet diplomacy, is a good deal more perceptive than what we have so far had from his counterparts in the West. There is depth in the man, despite the joke, made in bad taste, that if Khrushchev asked Gromyko to sit on a block of ice without flinching he would do so. Andrei Gromyko was no laughing matter.

Gromyko's observant nature shines through pretty early on in *Memories*. Note his assessment of Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

'I still firmly believe that (Roosevelt) was one of the most outstanding US statesmen. He was a clever politician, a man of broad vision and special personal qualities.'

Gromyko notes that Roosevelt 'always referred respectfully to Stalin.' Unfortunately, FDR's successor in the White House, Harry Truman, does not inspire in the Soviet diplomat the kind of respect Roosevelt did. Gromyko makes it obvious that where FDR sincerely sought to build bridges between Washington and Moscow, Truman systematically went about creating conditions that could not but lead to the Cold War. The voracious reader that he was, Gromyko always sought a cultural dimension in his dealings with people in the



Memories
Andrei Gromyko
Trans. Harold Shukman
Hutchinson

West. He once asked Charlie Chaplin why he did not produce movies based on the works of Byron, Goethe and Balzac. Chaplin's response was without ambiguity. Americans, he told Gromyko, 'want to see stories that give them a feeling of optimism about everyday life, stories that create a happy mood.' Gromyko interacted with Paul Robeson, Edward G. Robinson and even Marilyn Monroe. He speaks of George Gershwin with fondness, though the composer died two years before Gromyko made it to America.

Gromyko's respect for Joseph Stalin, for all the ugliness of the purges the Soviet leader was overseeing, was abiding. Stalin was never sloppy; he 'ate rather slowly and sparingly. He did not drink spirits, but he liked dry wine and always opened the bottle himself, first studying

the label carefully, as if judging its artistic quality.' The bookworm in Gromyko was quick to spot Stalin's aesthetic leanings: 'As for his taste in literature, I can state that he read a great deal... he had a good knowledge of the Russian classics, especially Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin. Also, to my knowledge, he read Shakespeare, Heine, Balzac, Hugo, Guy de Maupassant...'

These memoirs are a passage into the past in order to arrive at an understanding of the present. Gromyko emphasises the early post-war years, a historical phase he believes was twisted out of shape by the suspicious nature of the Western powers. Recalling the Soviet Union's opposition to Western policies, the long-serving Soviet diplomat points out that at a summit, in 1955, as the West continued to harp on the idea of cooperation, the Soviet Union offered to be part of NATO. It was news received with stunned silence. This is what Gromyko remembers: 'They were so stunned that for several minutes none of them said a word. Eisenhower's usual vote-winning smile had vanished from his face. He leaned over for a private conversation with Dulles; but we were not given a reply to our proposal.'

Henry Kissinger once summed up the Gromyko personality: 'If you can face Gromyko for one hour and survive, then you can begin to call yourself a diplomat.' Which says a whole lot about the Soviet Union's spokesperson in diplomacy. One paramount quality in Gromyko was his meticulous probing of the issues his country needed to deal with. He was an informed diplomat, suave and charming who was often embarrassed by his own people. He felt ill at ease when, right after the U2 affair, Khrushchev stared coldly at Eisenhower and was in no mood to shake his hand even as Charles de Gaulle and Harold Macmillan were busy exchanging pleasantries nearby. Likewise, when in 1960 Khrushchev began to bang away with his shoe at the Soviet desk at the United Nations as Macmillan spoke before the General Assembly, Gromyko could not have felt comfortable.

The proper Communist that he was, Gromyko defends Soviet policies, even if they are questionable, with a straight face. He does not regret Warsaw Pact action in Hungary in 1956 or in Czechoslovakia in 1968. In October 1962, at a point when Washington was already in the know about Soviet missiles in Cuba, Gromyko sat talking to President Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk in straight-faced manner about Moscow-Washington ties. In *Memories*, he offers an unapologetic explanation as to why he did not discuss the missiles: no one at that meeting in the White House raised the issue and so he did not feel any need to talk about it.

This work is a pretty fascinating journey into a lost era. Andrei Gromyko speaks of his dealings with various French presidents, from De Gaulle to Mitterrand. De Gaulle is 'an outstanding Frenchman' and Valery Giscard d'Estaing was 'always well prepared for talks, armed with factual arguments.' He has only praise for the scholar Andre Malraux, the 'very embodiment of high intelligence.' Gromyko's opinion of Germany's Konrad Adenauer is poor and of Helmut Schmidt slightly better. He admires Sukarno and Nehru and is charmed by the graces in Indira Gandhi. Egypt's Nasser remains an object of admiration for him. That is not the same one can say about his opinion of Anwar Sadat, who 'all his life had suffered from megalomania.' Speaking of his first meeting with Henry Kissinger, Gromyko recalls telling him in jest that he looked like Kissinger. The American responds: 'And you look like Richard Nixon.' Of Mao Zedong, here is what Gromyko has to say: 'Mao liked people he could have a good argument with, but when a difficult political question arose his expression glazed over and he became a different person, utterly remote.'

You close the book. As you do, you ask yourself if the Soviet Union should not have survived. Its demise was the death of a promise. Andrei Gromyko was part of the promise.

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