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In 180,000 Smuggled Photographs, Vladimir Sichov Gives a Rare Glimpse of Russia's Real People

By Pamela Andriotakis

Vladimir Sichov's problem was that his camera did not lie. In his pictures of life in the Soviet Union, soldiers sometimes had their tunics unbuttoned; fields were occasionally plowed with horses, not modern machines; citizens often did not look prosperous. Soviet officials were unhappy about that and made sure Sichov could not get such photographs published in his own country. So he painstakingly smuggled 180,000 negatives of "real people, real situations" out via Western friends and diplomats. Then, in October 1979, he fled, posing as a Jew with relatives in Israel (though he is Russian Orthodox) to obtain exit visas for himself, his wife and their two children. Last year LIFE published some of his treasured photos, and now 132 of them have been collected in a book, *The Russians* (Little, Brown, \$17.50), from which the sampling on these pages is taken.

Sichov, 36, was born poor in a village east of Moscow, on the Volga. His father died before Vladimir's birth, and his mother did the best she could for him, selling ice cream at a railroad station. While studying electronics at a university, he took up photography and the saxophone. But pictures soon became his passion, and he traded in his sax for two lenses.

Becoming a free-lance photographer in Moscow in 1972, Sichov did well until he married his fourth and present wife, poet Aida Hmeleva, a political dissident who was passing information to Western journalists about life in a political prison (where a former husband is still being held). Vladimir and Aida displayed avant-garde art—then banned in public—in their tiny three-room Moscow apartment. The home showings were legal, but in 1974 Vladimir was arrested, jailed for four days and charged with "hooliganism" for photographing government bulldozers flattening an avant-garde art exhibit. That, he says, was when "all my problems began."

Soviet publishers would not touch his photos. He snapped vacationers at beach resorts and, with the help of the pop-musician grandson of former Soviet President Anastas Mikoyan, made good money shooting record-album covers. During this time he took an average of 30 pictures a day and gave them to his Western diplomat friends to smuggle out.

Vladimir finally got his visa, after almost five years of waiting, during which time his case was included in the American report on violations of the Helsinki agreement on human rights. He, Aida, her daughter, Anastasia, now 14, and their son, Nikita, now 7, settled in Paris, where they still live. (Four children by previous marriages remained behind.) Vladimir published the book and started getting assignments from European magazines to shoot fashion spreads ("At the beginning it was as if I came from the moon") and more recently, the Karpov-Korchnoi chess tournament in Italy. "I haven't changed my style," Sichov reflects now. "I take the same kind of pictures in the West that I made in the East. The real problems of life are the same everywhere." (<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20080949,00.html>)