

**Margaret Thatcher's memoir**  
*Return to Moscow*

**Written 16 March 1985**

**This memoir came to light in the Thatcher MSS only after MT had finished writing *The Downing Street Years*. MT seems not to have annotated or added to it at any point after composition, suggesting she may not even have re-read it.**

**Chernenko's funeral took place on Wednesday 13 March 1985. The memoir was written at Chequers that Saturday, 16 March. MT spent the day there alone, apart from an appointment with her dressmaker.**

**Christopher Collins**

**Margaret Thatcher Foundation  
4 June 2015**



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

16<sup>th</sup> March 1985

## Return to Moscow

On Monday's early morning news - BBC. I heard that military music was being broadcast - in Moscow and that the previous night's broadcasting had closed down without giving details of programmes for the following day. Not unusual - we had had military music before, but not the other thing. A few days previously Mr. Gorbachev had been made to appear on television at some event to "reassure" the people. He looked ghastly - his actions were mechanical and watertight, one felt that he was scarcely there.

We had not long to wait. I was chairing a meeting in the Cabinet room when at about 11 a.m. the news came through that Mr. Gorbachev had died. Shortly afterwards - that Mr. Konstantin had been put in charge of the funeral preparations. He seemed that he had been appointed leader for following Mr.

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Andropov's death Mr. Chavrilko had similarly been in charge of his funeral. Before the day was out Mr. G's appointment as Secretary-General was confirmed and the funeral fixed for Wednesday.

Very soon telephone calls were coming in from Opposition parties to say they would like to come on the plane.

We decided that we could just complete Questions on Tuesday afternoon and still get to Moscow in respectable time. I took 'Questions' in a very busy businesslike fashion giving short replies - indeed we got through a record number of supplementary questions in 15 minutes. We made a dash for Wellington barracks where a helicopter was waiting to take us to Heathrow. The Russian Ambassador was there to see us off. We greeted the New Zealand High Commissioner who was coming with us

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to represent his Government in Moscow.

On the plane I read and analysed Mr. Gorbachev's Axiomatic speech - [no deviation from settled policies but more ~~and~~ initiative needed - their fundamental dilemma!] - and also a speech he had recently made at Kiev. All confirmed the impression gained at the press the previous December, that even if he wished to change matters he wouldn't know how to because a rigid Communist system was the only one he had ever known.

We landed in Moscow at 10.30p., and were met by a deputy foreign minister, a battery of cameras and a fleet of cars. They gave me a very large one and as the Ambassador climbed in beside me I expected to have to wrap my hand in the air, was the car likely to be "bugged". He nodded and the conversation proceeded carefully!

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It is a long journey into Moscow along a very straight road. There was still a lot of snow and it had got very dirty. There were not many letters in the shops as we went down Gorki street, but then there were quite a number of shops even though it is the main shopping centre. We all poured into the residence where miraculously the staff even at that short notice had everything prepared. With security and security we were quite a crowd. On one previous occasion I had taken over masses of fresh vegetables and fruit and English cheese because that is what they wanted most.

The residence is sited perfectly - opposite the Kremlin, on the other side of the river. It is a magnificent house, built by a sugar baron who married into the aristocracy and built a suitable house for such a bride. The story goes that the architect asked him what style he preferred: "Something



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of everything came the reply! And so some is Flemish  
some German, some French, some Italian - but all  
lavish and large and superb accommodations. The  
bedroom I have has an enormous bathroom/dressing  
room all panelled heavily in dark wood and  
partitioned heavily into bathroom area. Toilet is a  
large grand white, massive linen cupboard, and  
another shallow cupboard that opens out into mirror.

Funerals are great occasions for meeting other  
heads of government, and two or three interviewed  
already been arranged for the morning. Because I had  
to get back on Wednesday night we had been given  
a slot at 7.15 p.m. with Th. G.

Our first duty on Wednesday was to go  
to the Hosp. in - state and lay a wreath. The procedure  
is quite different from any I have known elsewhere.  
Two soldiers preceded us each carrying a wreath, the

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of everything came the reply! And so some in Flemish, some German, some French, some Italian – but all lavish and large and superb craftsmanship. The bedroom I have has an enormous bathroom/dressing room all panelled heavily in dark wood and partitioned heavily into bathroom area, toilet in a large square cubicle, massive linen cupboard, and another shallow cupboard that opens out into mirrors.

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The queues of people waiting to pay their respects  
are stopped as visiting politicians go into the main  
room. There the body fully embalmed - is surrounded  
by banked flowers. Music is playing quietly and the  
2 soldiers just stand holding the wreath while the  
Ambassadors sit just the embalmed figure - standing  
quietly for a minute or two. As the protocol officer  
comes forward, we bow to the open coffin and then go  
to see the family who are sitting at the side of the  
room - some in tears and all deeply grieved. It is really  
a terrible ordeal for them. Mrs. Chavrilov is such a  
nice woman - I shook hands with her and she  
pointed to her neighbour who was crying, saying in  
Lithuanian "his sister", and then "daughter". Even the  
head of a Communist country who has no sympathy for  
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for him





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Slowly we left the room and past the waiting press.

Shortly after President Zia arrived at our Embassy and we talked of the problems of the Afghanistans refugees, of the increased numbers of Soviet soldiers - up to 150,000 - in that country in a relentless effort to put down all opposition. But if down they will not succeed. So long as the Resistance can obtain supplies of food & equipment, they will go on resisting.

The official ceremony did not begin until 1 p.m. but we had to leave at 12.15 to take up our appointed places. There is a large space allotted for heads of foot immediately to the left of Her Majesty's as you face it. It is carpeted, but there are no chairs, or stands. Some snow had fallen overnight so everywhere looked nice & clean. The trees were grey, it was several degrees

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also freezing and felt very raw. I do not possess a fur coat so made myself as warm as possible in a wool coat and fur-lined boots. In my pockets I carry warm packs which help a little. Our car park outside the Kremlin & we walk through the Kremlin Gate to the Red Square to take up our position. I recalled the previous occasion when we had come to Dr. Andropov's funeral. As I had passed through the Gate I saw Mr. Gandhi and we walked together to our places. Mrs. Gandhi & I could have sworn that she would no longer be with us because of the assassin's bullet.

The first person I saw was Dr. Peder de Cuellar (S.G. 24.2) and I had a quick word with him about the Cyprus talks which were being recovered under his auspices. President Kyprianou had been to see me and I had urged him to accept the S.G.'s documents. Mr. Willoch, the Norwegian P.M., was standing close by and said he was disappointed that we had

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We still had about 35 minutes to wait - it was cold, very cold. Soon President Ahtisaari and Mr. Dumas came to join us. We could see George Bush and Chancellor Kohl in the crowd, President Kovtun of Finland, several others we knew & many we didn't.

On the pavement in front of us stood a line of Russian Army Officers spaced about 6 or 7 feet apart. They looked very fine young men, mostly tanned, grey greatcoats, white gloves, black boots, grey fur hats. They didn't move a muscle. They were relieved by a new guard just before the ceremony began.

Flanking us, the other side of the road was the band flanked by rows of well ordered people tall men or fat men



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could see] with many in uniform scattered among them. There were banners of Mr. Chervenko at frequent intervals. Obviously there were no crowds, just everyone standing silently in his appointed place, in heavy overcoats, all in fur hats.

Just before 1 p.m. the band began to play a funeral dirge. The ~~Politburo~~ Politburo and a few others appeared on the balcony as the gun carriage and escort came into view. The coffin lid of the coffin - all covered in gathered red silk - was removed and the coffin itself placed on the catafalque, facing & tilted towards the balcony. At the same time a dozen or so officers each carrying a medal on a scarlet cushion moved to flank the catafalque. Two others held a large portrait of Mr. Chervenko. The family, some 30 or so, moved into position facing the balcony and I was thankful to see that

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When I first ~~was~~ attended a Communist funeral [Tito's] it had been a shock to realize that it contained no religious element whatsoever. Of course one knew that intellectually but just a final political ceremony - it seemed comfortless and matter of fact. Mr. Chernenko's funeral had a bit's got it over conveyed credit about it. Except for the family for whom the ceremonial may have been some comfort.

The speeches began. The voice and command of Mr. Gorbatchev in such stark contrast with the hesitancy and muffled words of Mr. Chernenko's a year previously at Mr. Andropov's funeral. There were four other speakers, one from a member of the Politburo, another from someone in agriculture, a third from the Students of Sciences and a fourth representing the Komsomol. We all

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Turned and faced the balcony as we listened, uncomprehending of the actual words but catching something of the personality and demeanour of each speaker. On the previous occasion [Dr. Anderson's funeral] I had been struck by oratory of Dr. Cromley - a lovely speaking voice and a natural air of authority. We had never seen him quite like that before. This time he did not speak, but stood next to Dr. Gorkachew, still an obviously influential figure.

The speaker took half an hour or so. Then the coffin was moved to the space behind the building for the interment, which we could not see. The band played the same dirge over and over again finishing with the anthem as the Poulthor appeared on the balcony.

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Then, the funeral over, the mood changed sharply as the band struck up for the march past - and very impressive it is - all officers marching in goose step (which we hate because of connotations but which they still adopt) each row matched perfectly in height. The guard in front of us, on the pavement was augmented for the march past. And then it was all over save for filing past the grave.

We moved slowly round from our enclosure - seeing and talking to other colleagues (our friends from Holland, the deputy Prime Minister and De van der Broek) relieved that we could move at last and get the blood circulating. A park, a bus to the grave then back in a long winding file into the Kremlin and towards St. George's Hall for the reception. President Pertini of Italy was just ahead of us looking very frail and supported by his others as he walked



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We moved slowly round from our enclosure – seeing and talking to other colleagues (our friends from Holland, the deputy Prime Minister and Mr van den Broek) relieved that we could move at last and get the blood circulating. A pause, a bow to the grave then back in a long winding file into the Kremlin and towards St. George's Hall for the reception. President Pertini of Italy was just ahead of us looking very frail and supported by two others as he walked

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slowly in the bitter cold.

St George's Hall is unbelievably beautiful. Lefty, all in white with the most magnificent chandeliers augmented by hundreds of electric candle light mantling in continuous line just below the cornice. And not a single bulb had gone! Every one was working! The fire ~~was~~ <sup>dimmed</sup> slowly up the long stair case passing a rather wonderful picture of their addressing a Youth League at the top. Before we got to that point, the protocol officer had come to me (as on a previous occasion at Mr. Andropov's funeral) and said 'hachis first' - come along Mr. T we must move you forward. Redmond and her delegation he also picked out. So we 'were jumped' right into St. George's Hall perhaps a little faintly for we British don't like queue-jumping. We all shook hands with the reception party, Mr. Gorbachev, the Prime Minister and Mr. Gromyko. Once again

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 they were pleased, as they had been a year earlier.  
 Knowing I was to see Mr. Gorkuchev later I  
 confined my words to condolences and congratulations  
 for the waiting queue was long. Then we cross  
 the room - all on a way well indicated by  
 red carpets, bow to a portrait of Mr. Chernenko, the  
 final farewell, pass the press and out again.  
 In the queue we greeted George Bush & George Schultz  
 and Chancellor Kohl, all still with a way to go.  
 We saw and had a word with Ormead Harmer  
 and returned quickly to the Embassy for lunch. It  
 was now about 2.40 p.m. and we were cold &  
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We saw and had a word with Armand Hammer and returned quickly to the Embassy for lunch. It was now about 2.40 p.m. and we were cold & hungry!