Daisaku Ikeda's Recollections of World Figures
Aleksey N. Kosygin
Former Premier of the Soviet Union

THE former premier of the Soviet Union, Aleksey N. Kosygin (1904–80), was a leader on a grand scale.

Being forthright by nature and believing it to be a sign of respect for others, I once asked him quite directly: "China is anxious about the Soviet Union's intentions. Is the Soviet Union going to attack China?"

"The Soviet Union has no intention of either attacking or isolating China," Mr. Kosygin assured me.

"May I convey that to China's leaders?" I asked.

"Please do," he said.

We were in the premier's office in the Kremlin. Across the table from me sat the 70-year-old Mr. Kosygin, his rugged features as seemingly impervious as storm-weathered stone.

Our meeting took place twenty-two years ago [on September 17, 1974], on the last day of my first visit to the Soviet Union. During my ten-day sojourn in that country, I had felt with my entire being the Soviet people's desire for peace. That is why I had presumed to ask the question I did.

Three months earlier, I had also visited China. There, in Beijing, I was shown the underground shelters being built as defenses against possible aerial attack. The Chinese people were busily constructing them of their own accord in case such an emergency arose. With a depth ranging from seven to twelve yards, the shelters were equipped with telephone centers, broadcast facilities and canteens, and underground passageways linked every part of the city. Each family home and school had a door leading down to the underground city.

"We aren't building these shelters for attack," I was told. "We don't plan to dig our way to Moscow!"

I saw the students of a junior high school strenuously digging an underground shelter beneath their schoolyard. The threat of war had even cast its ominous shadow over these children. It was a painful sight. It mustn't go on, I thought.

THIS was a period of great tension between the Soviet Union and China. The two socialist nations hurled harsh criticisms at each other, and some in China were determined to continue the ideological debate with the Soviet Union "for ten thousand years," if necessary. At the same time, China's rapprochement with the United States and Japan was causing growing anxiety among the Soviet people. A situation prevailed where both sides—China and the Soviet Union—feared a military attack from the other.

I wanted to somehow dispel this mutual distrust. Small as its effect might be, I was determined to initiate the beginnings of dialogue.

China had been a victim of Japanese militarism. The Soviet Union had been a victim of German Nazism. Tens of millions had died. Countless more had been engulfed and devastated by the senseless tragedy of war. If the next generation

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could not enjoy a life of peace, then the enormous flood of tears that had been shed would all have been in vain.

"I do not think China is pursuing a policy of aggression," I said.

Though the Soviet premier's expression remained unreadable, a light came into his eyes when he heard these words.

Premier Kosygin was famous for his impassive expression. Since his first appearance in a Soviet cabinet at the age of only 35 [in 1939], he had held important posts in the party and the government. During the Stalin era, he later revealed, he was kept under constant surveillance and never permitted to be alone. In an age when the smallest error of judgment—or even no error at all—could condemn one to being summarily executed, it was a miracle that he survived. Many attributed his staying power to his lack of personal ambition, an extraordinary ability to get things done and, above all, amazing good luck.

Given this background, it was perhaps only natural for the premier, who had walked the edge of the precipice, to have acquired a profound sense of caution in all matters. But on this day, I could feel him gradually relax and open up as our conversation progressed. This became clearly apparent when we spoke about prices in the Soviet Union. With a memory that had earned him the nickname "the walking computer," Mr. Kosygin explained the price controls in effect, effortlessly quoting figures. "There are, of course, exceptions," he said. "We have had price increases, too—for vodka and alcohol products. Unfortunately, I still drink!" The room filled with laughter. When he laughed, the premier's face was transformed into that of a kindly grandfather.

HIS unswerving seriousness and self-control were sometimes misunderstood as coldness. But everyone who knew the premier was quick to testify that he was a warmhearted person. It has recently come to light that he secretly helped the family of a highly placed official who had been ousted.

Although he worked sixteen-hour days, he was at heart a loving family man. Once, on board a ship while visiting Alexandria, Egypt, the premier danced on deck with his wife Klavdiya. The Egyptians were surprised and delighted at the couple's warm affection for each other.

Several months later, on May Day, 1967, Mrs. Kosygin lay in a critical condition, having been struck by sudden illness. Because of his state duties, however, the premier had to leave her bedside to review the troops in Red Square. Locking his feelings with a heroic force of will, he stood before Lenin's tomb throughout the long ceremonies. When he returned, she had already passed away.

That was the kind of man he was.

I intuitively felt that the premier spoke the truth when he said that he wished for peace with China. I lament the present tendency to twist any sincere statement of truth into some kind of political ploy, or to interpret it in purely partisan terms. Unless we eliminate such ignoble moral and intellectual laziness from public life, we will never be able to open a window of hope for our confused and frustrated world. My policy is to take the pronouncements of sincere and responsible people at face

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value. Unless we trust others, fruitful discussion is impossible.

The Soviet premier was in earnest. He told me, "All our actions are based on the fundamental position that we value peace and will not initiate hostilities."

Premier Kosygin is said to have consistently opposed acts of military aggression, including the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

"We have more than enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world," he said, with some feeling. "We don't know when another Hitler may appear and what he may do. If that should happen, we have no means to preserve global civilization. Sooner or later, the human race will have to opt for nuclear disarmament."

In a sense, this was a surprising declaration, since the public position of the Soviet Union around that time was that its nuclear arsenal was necessary to preserve world peace.

"Another Hitler.…" During our conversation, I touched upon Hitler's siege of Leningrad (present-day St. Petersburg). The Nazi policy of complete annihilation created the bitterest struggle in human history, lasting almost 900 days (from September 1941 to January 1944). According to one source, nearly half of the 3 million citizens of the Soviet city died of starvation or cold.

THE worst time of the siege was the winter of 1941–42. Temperatures were below zero. The daily ration of bread (adulterated with paper to make supplies last longer) at one stage dropped to only four ounces. There were no lights, no telecommunications, no running water. When one went to the banks of the Neva River to drink, the smell of abandoned corpses assaulted the nostrils. Earsplitting mortar fire raged day and night. Each day seemed like several months. When loved ones died, their family members, themselves weakened by starvation, often didn't have the strength to carry them to the cemetery. At night, rats came to gnaw at corpses that were left lying on the floor. People even ate the rats. They ate their pets. Others even sold human flesh. If there was ever a hell, this was it. Still, the people of Leningrad continued their long struggle despite these horrors, until finally the siege ended.

Four days before my interview with Premier Kosygin, I had visited Leningrad. I went to the Piskarevsky Cemetery. The 200 gravestones over mass graves were inscribed only with the month and year—"December 1941," "January 1942." There were so many dead that the names of most were unknown. On the wall of the memorial in the cemetery was the inscription, "Let no one forget; let nothing be forgotten!" It was a desperate cry for peace. I couldn't help but exclaim: "Why isn't anything known about this in Japan?!"

By even the most conservative estimates, the Soviet Union lost more than 20 million of its people in World War II, around ten percent of its total population. Everyone in the nation had lost someone they loved. I struck up a conversation with the hall attendant at my lodgings in Moscow one day— a sturdily built, middle-aged Russian woman with a friendly word for all. I will never forget the sadness that filled her eyes when she said, quietly and simply, "I lost my husband in the war."

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THE Japanese are not the only ones who suffered the tragedy of war. All of the world's peoples long earnestly for an end to war for all time. We cannot allow that universal wish for peace to be splintered and diluted by the concerns of nationalism. We must unite across borders. We must unite and lay siege against war itself.

"We in Japan need to know more about the Soviet Union," I said to the premier, relating the profound sense of shock I had experienced on my visit to Leningrad.

"You know," he replied, "I was in Leningrad during the siege." And he said no more. Perhaps he was afraid of the emotions that might come pouring out if he dared to speak further.

Leningrad was Premier Kosygin's hometown. Earlier in his career, he held a high-ranking position in that city's government. And during World War II, he was responsible for the difficult task of evacuating the residents during the Nazi blockade.

At the City Museum of History in Leningrad, I saw a little diary by a child named Tanya Savichev. The display constituted just seven small scraps of paper—pages torn from an 11-year-old girl's Russian ABC notebook. Each page was set aside for the practice of a letter of the alphabet. The notebook's young owner had written simple entries starting with the letter on that page:

Z—Zhenya [Sister] died 28 December,
12:30 in the morning, 1941.
B—Babushka [Grandmother] died 25 January,
3 o'clock, 1942.
L—Leka [Little brother] died 17 March,
5 o'clock in the morning, 1942.
D—Dedya Vasya [Uncle Vasya] died 13 April,
2 o'clock at night, 1942.
D—Dedya Lesha [Uncle Lesha], 10 May,
4 o'clock in the afternoon, 1942.
M—Mama, 13 May, 7:30 a.m., 1942
S—Savichevs died. All died. Only Tanya remains.

Though safely evacuated from Leningrad, Tanya herself died a little more than a year later.

There was an uncountable number of Tanyas across the Soviet Union. And in China. And an uncountable number of Savichev families in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Okinawa and all across Japan and throughout the world.

"We must abandon the very idea of war," said Premier Kosygin. "It is meaningless. If we stop preparing for war and prepare instead for peace, we can produce food instead of armaments." He made these comments after I shared my vision for the establishment of a "World Food Bank" as a response to the problem the world faces in feeding its ever-growing population.

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MR. Kosygin always advocated the importance of the economy over the military. He opposed the state of affairs in which missiles ate away the bread of the Soviet people. Soon after taking office, he carried out the so-called Kosygin Reforms, introducing market mechanisms into the Russian economy and bringing new life and energy to society. But the petrified apparatus of Soviet power doomed the reforms to failure.

Premier Kosygin was a man without illusions. His feet were firmly planted on the ground. He disliked abstract theories and flowery speech. He wasn't fond of ritualistic meetings or ceremonies. He wanted to get to work without wasting time. Precisely because of that, the inefficiencies of the Russian system must have grated on him intensely. In a sense, he was an early proponent of *perestroika* (restructuring).

"What is your basic ideology?" the premier asked me.

I answered without hesitation: "I believe in peace, culture and education—the underlying basis of which is humanism."

"I have a high regard for those values," Mr. Kosygin said. "We need to realize them here in the Soviet Union as well." He said this eleven years before the appearance of President Gorbachev. Premier Kosygin was a person willing to listen to new ideas. He was always open to improving things.

I frankly spoke with him about Japanese-Soviet relations as well: "The Japanese do not feel close to the Soviet Union. We know Russian literature and Russian folk songs, but most Japanese look at the Soviet Union as a nation to be feared. This is unfortunate for both peoples. We must increase our mutual understanding. To achieve that, government and economic exchanges aren't enough. They don't build true friendship. Nor is it enough to leave such exchange solely to so-called pro-Soviet Japanese. What, then, should we do? The only route is for a broader exchange on the level of ordinary citizens, the active promotion of wide-ranging personal and cultural exchange."

MY belief has always been that, when an atmosphere of warm mutual understanding is built between nations, the means can be found to solve the complicated issues that divide them. As in the famous Aesop's fable of the sun and the north wind, the sun of friendship must first rise in the sky. As long as the cold north wind of criticism and reproach blows, people will never remove the cloak that shields their hearts; in fact, they will only clutch it closer to them.

The premier listened to my proposal with an even expression. Then, he nodded firmly and said, "I agree." His voice rang out with determination. And from that moment, many forms of cultural and educational exchange between the Soviet Union and Japan began in earnest, with the Soka Gakkai taking the initiative.

I visited Premier Kosygin again in May 1975, on my second visit to the Soviet Union. The Queen of Denmark was visiting the country at the time and the premier was very busy. But he greeted me with a smile, saying: "I made time."

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SINCE our encounter the previous year, I had met with the prime minister of China, Zhou Enlai [December 1974], and with the U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger [January 1975]. Precisely because I am a private citizen, I can act without the restrictions of profit, position or policy. My only position is that of an ordinary human being, and it was in that role that I hoped, in some small way, to bring together and consolidate the will for peace into a global commitment.

I learned this song in Moscow:

Do the Russians want war?
Ask this wide land and its birch forests,
Ask the soldiers who rest forever beneath them.

Do the Russians want war?
Ask the mothers of Russia,
Ask the widows who lost their husbands in battle,
Ask the children who lost their fathers.
Who can suppress such deep human sentiments? Who has the right?

I learned of Premier Kosygin's death at the end of 1980. He had just retired from office that October for health reasons. His life had been one of hard work. The grief of the Soviet people at his passing was proof of the high regard and feelings of trust they had held for him.

THE following year [May 1981], I visited his grave. At the time, a strong anti-Soviet mood prevailed around the world in the wake of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan [in December 1979], which had led to a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics by some sixty nations. Relations between Japan and the Soviet Union were also frosty. For that very reason, I decided to visit Moscow, and to bring with me a 230-member goodwill delegation from Japan.

After paying my respects at Mr. Kosygin's tomb, I stopped by to see the late premier's daughter Lyudmila Gvishiani at her place of employment, the National Library of Foreign Literature. I had met with the premier as a fellow human being, and it was in this same capacity that I offered my condolences to his family after his death.

Ms. Gvishiani told me that the premier had spoken happily to his family about our first meeting when he arrived home that night. "And he rarely talked of work at home," she added.

She went on to say, "I have spoken with my family, and we have decided that we would like you to accept a few keepsakes of my father. We have chosen some items that he kept close and were of great personal significance to him."

She presented me with a cherished crystal vase that had been bestowed on the premier upon winning the high Soviet honor of "Hero of Socialist Labor." She also gave me two leather-bound books, his last works, which lay in his private library up to the moment of his death.

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"THE warmth of my father's hands still clings to them. I offer them to you in his stead," she said, her eyes filling with tears. I will never forget the scene. Ms. Gvishiani herself died just nine years later, at the age of 61.

Time passes, it flows ever onward. The Soviet Union and the world have changed radically. The tension between the Soviet Union and China has disappeared, the Cold War has ended, and the Soviet Union has chosen the road to democracy.

I recall even now the premier's hearty response when I asked him whether I might presume then that the world would be a brighter place in the next century. He had declared: "That is what we desire."

At that time, a quarter of this century yet remained; now the dawning of the next is just around the corner.

I hope that it will be an era in which all share a deeper recognition of our common humanity. I want to believe that the world, in spite of many twists and turns, is heading toward a growing commitment to humanism.

But what about Japan? Has Japan changed for the better? Can Japan hope for a bright future in the twenty-first century? ❑

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