

# The adventures of Harriet the spy novelist

Newton author draws inspiration from her childhood visit to USSR

By David H. Goldberg  
*Special to the Advocate*

Spies seem to have trailed Newton author Harriet Costa all her life.

After years of looking over her shoulder, Costa finally encountered the genuine article: a business colleague turned out to be one of 10 Russian agents the United States arrested and deported last summer in a scandal that made headlines across the globe.

On the anniversary of the scandal, Costa published her debut novel, "Love in Leningrad," a young adult book about romance and intrigue behind the Iron Curtain.

"It was very ironic; finally I met a real spy," said Costa recalling her unwitting association with the Russian agent locally after a lifetime of traveling to the Soviet Union.

The agent, Ann Foley, trained Costa to work at an Internet-based real estate company. Costa described her as having a strong accent.

"She was obviously Russian, but she wouldn't let you ask her about being Russian. She kept evading the question. A typical Russian would say 'I came here in the '90s from such-and-such a place,'" Costa said.

Foley was also known as Tracey Lee Ann Foley, but her actual name is Elena Vavilova.

Costa, who is Jewish and descended from Eastern European immigrants, became curious about her supervisor. "I looked up her Web site, which indicated she was from Canada. She was a lovely woman but mysterious. In the end, when it came out a month and a half later that she really was a spy I said, "Wow."

As the story emerged, Costa found out how Foley had pulled off the deception.

"She couldn't say she was Russian because she had a stolen Canadian identity as did her husband," said Costa.

Foley's husband, who went by Howard Heathfield, is actually Andrey Bezrukov.

"He started his own business eventually, and she had been in real estate. They had a couple of kids; they were living the dream," Costa said.

Costa's connection to spies began in her childhood, thanks to her first name.

"When I was young, 'Harriet the Spy' had come out, and people would run up to me and say 'Oh Harriet, Harriet the Spy,'" she said, referring to Louise Fitzhugh's popular 1964 novel.

The subject of spies moved from fantasy to reality when Costa traveled to the Soviet Union as a college student. "You were always looking behind you because you always were afraid someone was watching you or following you. There was so much distrust. In



Harriet Costa plans to promote her spy novel with performance pieces. Below: Costa as a student near the Gulf of Finland.



discreet. She said officials told her "if I had any information, I had to write it down, because all the people who worked there – all the support staff – were Soviets, and their job was to listen."

While "Love in Leningrad" doesn't have a religious theme, some of the characters have Jewish sounding names, and they mention attending bar and bat mitzvah parties.

Set in 1973, the novel traces the adventures of Lisa Bochner and her classmates during a steamy summer in the fabled port city.

"She's an American girl going to Russia in the '70s. It's more the culture approach," said Costa, who majored in Russian in college and studied the language in high school in Needham.

"I first went to the Soviet Union when I was just like Lisa in the book," she said. "It was a summer study tour when I was 16. Every first book is semi-autobiographical; you want to write what you know."

Costa had her own adventure that high school summer, when the Soviets balked at letting her leave the country. "They wanted to keep me overnight," she said. "It turns out that my visa was for only two weeks, and everybody else's was for a month. I overstayed my visa for two weeks. Someone obviously had made a mistake."

the communist countries, everybody was spying on everybody else," she said.

During a trip to Leningrad in 1978, she met dissidents and Jewish professionals who were trying to emigrate. "Soviet Jews were very lovely and welcoming to us," said Costa. "They would have these beautiful meals, and if there was anything we could do we would do it."

An émigré in America had asked Costa to visit his parents in Leningrad and help them get exit visas. The authorities didn't want them to leave because his father had worked in the defense industry.

Costa got to know the parents. "At their house, I would meet different refuseniks. I would talk English with the people who wanted to leave. ... They were practicing their English," she said.

"You had to keep quiet about that. You didn't want your Russian roommate to know who you were seeing. You didn't want anyone to follow you."

When Costa went to the US consulate on behalf of the couple, she was cautioned to be

As occurs so often in the novel, a teacher came to the rescue. "My chaperone from Needham High said to them, 'Listen, I won't leave the country if I don't have Harriet with me.'

"In the end, they hustled me out to the plane just before it left because they didn't want my chaperone hanging around."

Costa completed the novel in the late '80s and managed to interest Penguin Books. But the publisher declined to print it, citing the political climate. "It was just the wrong time because that was during Glasnost, and my book is about the Cold War," she said.

Costa has spent her professional life working in Internet technology. But as in the case of a good spy, appearances can be deceiving. "I'm really a comedian," she said. "In fact, that's my greatest talent is acting and singing."

Her dream is to write comedy and act full time.

To promote the novel, she is putting her entertainment skills to work. "I'm going to do some performance pieces," she said. "There are more to the stories of going to the Soviet Union that aren't in the book."

"Love in Leningrad" is self-published on Createspace, a di-

## Excerpts from 'Love in Leningrad'

"I knew he was too nice to be a real teacher. ... His lips are sealed and I can't mention his research. Maybe it's a front. Maybe there is no real research, so he can't discuss it in much depth. He certainly has been working on his degree a long time. Maybe it's just an excuse to come to Russia and be a spy. Maybe he's not on our side. Maybe he's on both sides."



\* \* \*

"There's a place called the Dom Droozshbi that we're invited to Friday night, the House of Friendship in English, where we can meet Soviet students, but can we trust them? I've never had to deal with these kinds of problems. Crazy people, nasty people, lying people, I stay away from, but what do I do with less than straightforward people?"

vision of Amazon.com. It is available online at [www.loveinleningrad.com](http://www.loveinleningrad.com) and at the Brookline Booksmith.

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