



embellishments of these reports, however, can be useful in gauging the reliability of similar reports of other UFO encounters. This experience confirms the observations of astronomer Frank Drake, whose paper "On the abilities and limitations of witnesses" appeared in 1972. Drake wrote,

"A witness's memory of such exotic events . . . fades very quickly. After one day, about half of the reports are clearly erroneous; after two days, about three-quarters are clearly erroneous; after four days only 10 per cent are good; after five days, people report more imagination than truth. It became clear that later they were reconstructing in their imagination an event based on some dim memory of what happened. This is something that the UFO investigator rarely appreciates."

Storm in a flying saucer

According to Drake, this "garble factor" will destroy the effectiveness of reports of an object's motion, position and speed unless investigators collect the accounts very quickly. However, the garble factor certainly did not apply at Petrozavodsk. Rather than diminishing, the story grew over the passing months.

For instance, the British periodical *Flying Saucer Review* (widely considered the best UFO journal in the world) printed all the initial wild reports without ever later publishing clarifications or retractions. And *UFO Report*, the most serious-minded of the American pulp UFO magazines, told its readers that the damage to build-

ings was caused by the explosion of a space rocket.

Throughout 1979 and 1980, new information about the "Petrozavodsk phenomenon" continued to appear. "Exciting new information has been seeping through from Petrozavodsk concerning a spaceship that visited the area recently," announced Russian UFO buff Aleksandr Kasantsev. The latest description of the "jellyfish" is that "it hung in the night sky for at least two hours at an altitude of 60 miles." In the words of a Russian journalist, "It was the centre of great activity as much smaller bodies appeared to dart away from it, while others seemed to approach and disappear into immense portholes." Moscow physicist Vladimir Azhazha again endorsed the UFO character of the event. "In my view, it was a mother ship from outer space. Its appearance seems to indicate that an extraterrestrial civilisation is in the final stage prior to direct communication with the Earth."

The truth did come out in some quarters, however. The March 1979 issue of the Finnish astronomy magazine *Tahdet Ja Avaruus* published two charts and several photographs about Plesetsk rocket launchings observed from Finland. The magazine listed an average of two launchings per year—many of which the USSR has never officially acknowledged. In 1977, according to the journal, there were as many as five launchings, including the "jellyfish". So the Finns have published eminently respectable data that explain the background to the "UFO that never was". The only problem is that few people, least of all the UFO enthusiasts in Moscow, have noticed. □