

## **A Visit to Leningrad - 1981**

*I discovered these notes recently, thirty years after I first jotted them down on old airmail letter forms. Probably, I couldn't find anything else to write on just then, paper being very scarce in the USSR. I think these notes have taken on an historic dimension, since Leningrad reverted to its original name, St. Petersburg, in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. I haven't been there again, but am sure there has been a vast change for the better.*

August 14, 1981.

We are back in Helsinki, heaving a great sigh of relief. Four days ago, on Monday morning, Alex and I had made our way to the railway station, platform 6, to join our group for the trip to Leningrad. We were a casual collection of about thirty people from various countries, taking advantage of the opportunity to have a look inside the mysterious, forbidding Soviet Union. We had even tried to make a longer, more comprehensive visit, once the Russians had started easing their policy on foreign visitors. Some American friends had succeeded by joining high-profile missions. Their tales were not exactly encouraging; cleanliness was not rated highly, toilet paper was in short supply, if at all, and the food very poor.

By the time our holiday date came round, we had not had a reply about our visa application, and decided to take a cruise along the Norwegian coast instead. The only thing available on such short notice was a mail service boat, which stopped each day or so at a different port. It was the coldest summer I had ever experienced, identified as such only by the date, but it was interesting. We had pleasant company, saw unusual sights and we were able to watch the wedding of Diana and Prince Charles.

We ended up in Helsinki, where we had registered for a four-day trip to Leningrad. Alex and I were both tense from suppressed anxiety, yet we tried to act relaxed. I couldn't help wondering whether we might be walking into some terrible trap, "gladly and willingly," (*gerin villig*" my father's voice kept echoing in my head). Were we going to be hapless victims of some odd circumstance? Would next week's headlines announce, "Israeli couple detained in USSR...Group leaves without them"?

"You'll see," I said to Alex, "it will be just another tourist trip and nothing untoward will happen. They've had time to vet us, and they know we live in Jerusalem, so if we've been accepted for the trip, it must be O.K." Nevertheless, we decided it would be wiser for Alex not to admit to speaking Russian.

We had been warned not to take any foreign newspapers, especially *Time* magazine, and passed the security inspection, but perhaps this was sheer luck, because other members of the group were harassed, and not for any apparent reason.

Our first brush with the customs inspection happened on the train before we crossed the Russian border. The customs forms demanded details of all valuables and foreign currencies. We had prepared this meticulously, including Alex's favorite DuPont silver pen. The official, already unpleasant because one young woman had not filled in her form correctly, thought for some reason that this pen was a diamond pen and asked to see what this strange object could be. Slightly mollified by its ordinariness, he cast a glance at the rest of the list and quickly stamped our papers, which we were warned not to lose, as they would be needed again when leaving Russia.

The inspector then returned angrily to the young woman who was keeping him waiting; she hadn't finished filling in her new form, and he demanded to see all her money. It was incredible how the atmosphere changed in a short moment and became so thick it was almost suffocating. Suspicion and fear had entered the scene. I felt we were bit players in a

movie about smuggling and espionage. Because the young woman and her friend had filled in a joint form, the man had to take off his money belt and show all his money. The official looked under the seats, at the luggage in the overhead racks and finally went off. A huge sigh of relief could be heard and, soon after, we crossed the border. This was an insignificant happening in our eyes, but a clear confirmation of how life was conducted in the USSR.

Our group leader was a young attractive woman by the name of Rita. She spoke excellent English and gave a positive presentation of life in Leningrad. She told us that she has traveled a great deal escorting Russian groups touring abroad, so she must be a trusted member of the Party, if not more, who wouldn't dream of defecting.

Three days of sightseeing in Leningrad is not very much. The city is blessed with a wealth of museums and historic sights and we were just able to skim the surface, but our contacts with the Russian officials and our glimpse of life in this metropolis gave us considerable insight into how Russia works and of the quality of life there.

Rita had promised us the newest and most beautiful hotel in all Russia, "even in the whole world," she claimed. A Swedish company had recently built the Baltiskaya, comprising 2,000 rooms, just outside the city. We found it to be an enormous square block, well placed on the seashore, but facing rundown Soviet-style housing complexes. The lobby of the hotel was done in black and gray marble with spotlights, which gave it the impersonal feel of a subway station, especially with all the tourist groups that were milling about.

We had a late dinner in a well-appointed dining room decorated in blue and white with enormous crystal and bronze chandeliers. However, the tablecloth was dirty and the simple stainless knives and forks did not match. For hors d'oeuvres we had sprats, sour cabbage and a piece of tomato. This was followed by chicken and boiled rice, and ice cream.

As for the hotel room, it was large and modern. But we found the bathroom was supplied with cheap striped towels and awful soap.

The first view of Leningrad is enchanting: the delicate golden spires of the Admiralty and of the Peter and Paul Fortress dominate the skyline together with St. Isaac's Cathedral. There are many small parks, rivers, canals and bridges. No wonder the city is called "the Venice of the North." After several outings however, we began to feel something strange and discordant; we noticed that both the new and old buildings were dilapidated; vast, ugly housing projects stretched for complete blocks; and we had glimpses of inner courtyards that looked most uninviting. There were hordes of people in the main streets but the shop windows were empty. Sometimes the curtains were drawn or there was a pile of cans or posters on display. One window showed some nice lingerie but when I went in to buy something, they told me that it would take a month to fill the order.

The general impression was in fact one of utter neglect. Some small shopping areas served the new part of the city but few customers were buying. Most of the business was concentrated on the Nevsky Prospect (Avenue), the main street of Leningrad. Small glass kiosks on street corners sold vegetables, mostly tomatoes and cucumbers. People stood in long queues, and carried their purchases away in string bags. We passed a field with a pile of watermelons for sale. Many newspaper kiosks dotted the streets but the papers they sold were only in Russian. The residents looked adequately dressed but certainly not fashionable. Tourists could be seen in droves and any site we visited contained fifty to eighty busses. The tourists were mostly Spanish, German, Italian and some Russians from the outlying Asiatic areas.

There was little in the way of entertainment because the ballet and theater companies travel abroad during the summer months. We were happy that we could go to the circus. Standing in front of us at the gate were a couple of young girls eating ice cream. The

attendant, a sprightly old lady, refused to let them in until they had finished. We enjoyed the performance and, on returning to the hotel at 10:45 in the evening, we were astonished at the darkness and emptiness of the city streets. As we were wondering why there was no flood lighting, suddenly the lights began to come on just as it was getting really dark. Although some of the lighting was very attractive and dramatic, no people were out on the streets to enjoy it.

One of the main attractions in the city is, of course, the Hermitage Museum situated in the Winter Palace. The guide told us that they had 15,000 visitors a day, but to us it seemed a modest estimate given the feel of the grit on the floor and the streams of people of all classes and walks of life. Special tickets costing an additional dollar over the entrance fee allowed tourists to go ahead of the queue, but we saw no need for this as we came about three in the afternoon when it was less crowded.

We had heard so much about the Hermitage, but I have to admit we were rather disappointed. The pictures were marvelous, of course, mainly Impressionists, Rembrandts and other Old Masters, but badly hung. Some were in direct sunlight, some oil paintings were under glass and the lighting was generally very poor. Of Picasso's Blue Period, the paintings of which we were so anxious to see, there were only three or four pieces; the bulk of the exhibition, it was explained, had been sent to Madrid. We also wanted to see the exhibit of Russian art but that was closed. The Pavilion Room was outstanding with cascading chandeliers and a peacock clock. The art objects and furniture in the Winter Palace were very beautiful, but I think we have seen better collections in other European palaces and museums. The book shop sold no material in English. Here again the guards, ticket takers and cleaners were all old women. In Russia this age group does all kinds of menial work including sweeping the streets.

By the end of the second day we had begun to feel that Leningrad was a soulless, cheerless city, run down and shoddy, and the public harassed and unsmiling. Queues everywhere were very long and in the hotel, the service people coming into contact with the tourists were brusque, sometimes unpleasant and many couldn't speak English. The shop never opened before nine in the morning, just as the tourists were leaving, and closed for lunch when they came back. If the attendant thought there were too many people in the shop, say five or six, she closed the door, which of course caused a queue. In the evening it closed at seven, and so the tourists barely had any opportunity to buy souvenirs. The managers seemed to have no idea of how to run their business.

The hotel did not offer any local folklore programs and as for the TV programming all we saw was a documentary on juvenile delinquency. Any music we heard was American. The food was barely adequate and often cold, because they had no hotplates. Everyone's plate had the same exact portion on it – two slices of bread, a pat of butter, a little jam and sausage. A waiter with an enormous kettle circulated about the room providing tea or some sort of coffee. One morning we had breakfast at the same table with a French family. The mother was trying to explain something to the waitress who did not speak French. Finally, Alex could not contain himself from speaking Russian and explained to the waitress that the French lady wanted a glass of milk for her child. The waitress looked at him in amazement. "But there is no milk on Wednesday!" she explained, as if it were a universally known fact. Who knew if they had milk on other days?

Our visit to Leningrad was soon over and we returned to the station to board the train for Helsinki. This time the customs agents were anxious to check the tourists' foreign currency forms, particularly whether they had bought any in Russia. An unexpected and very unpleasant incident occurred on the train. An elderly German lady was traveling with her son, and it transpired that he had more money going out than he had declared coming in, and he

couldn't explain the difference. The official was very angry, called in his superiors and it was decided to confiscate *all* the money that they had. They were left with nothing, and the other travelers decided to take up a collection and provided them with enough money to get home. We were very, very, happy when we crossed the border again to Finland.

In the Helsinki we were pleased to see that by eight in the evening, even though it was still daylight, the street lights were on, the neon signs were advertising, the shop windows were well lit and plenty of shoppers were walking about. Normality! Capitalism!