

From Here to the Soviet Union — Part IV

By Patty Gorelick

On this warm June day, Arbat Street, one of the main shopping streets in Moscow, was closed at both ends preventing cars from entering and creating a sort of open air shopping mall. Crowds of people were enjoying the beautiful day and we thought the stores were doing a booming business until we went inside to look. The customers were jammed against the single display counters or in line to pay the cashier. There was hardly any merchandise in the stores and we couldn't understand what everyone was trying to buy. Even the shop windows had little to display with nothing to entice customers to enter. Despite this, people were flocking to the stores in hopes of finding some worthwhile item to purchase with their rubles. It was a depressing display of the sorry state of the Soviet economy.

Other than the Beriozka stores (tourist only shops) shopping is probably at the bottom of most tourists' "must do" lists. On the other hand, the Moscow Circus should be at the top.

The circus was performed in a building similar to the old Charlotte Coliseum, only with wood parquet floors. The acts are somewhat different than in the U.S., such as the double hump camel chasing a man around the ring and trying to take a bite out of him. We also saw a trained hippopotamus with a dog riding him and a monkey on top of the dog. The circus is usually sold out with tickets priced so that everyone can afford to go.

Lenin's Tomb is another attraction that shouldn't be missed. In fact, tourists from all

over the USSR come to Moscow and form long lines waiting for a quick glimpse of an embalmed Lenin displayed under glass for all the world to see. Lenin looks as though he could be alive but sleeping. It's quite amazing that his body is so perfectly preserved after 65 years.

The next day, after touring Moscow with our guides, we found ourselves back at Aunt Gesya's apartment. This was our last Moscow family dinner and Aunt Gesya knew at 86-years-old and in delicate health, she would probably never see us again. She told us the story of her 7-year-old great-grandson, Grisha, finding her crying. He asked her why she was crying and she replied, "I'll probably never see them again." "Don't worry, grandma, I'll see them," answered Grisha and she seemed comforted by these simple words.

It was very hard for us to leave that evening. We knew that we would be seeing our cousins, Michael, Alla, Boris and Larisa in Leningrad before we returned home, but we would not see Aunt Gesya again. It must have been fate that I happened to be wearing a small gold necklace inscribed with the words, "I love you." In all the years of owning that necklace, I hardly ever wore it. I knew that it was meant to remain in Moscow with Aunt Gesya and that is exactly what happened; I removed it and clasped it around her neck. Although bodily we would not be with Gesya, our thoughts and love would remain and she would be in our hearts forever.

The Gorelick family recently traveled to the Soviet Union to meet their Russian relatives for the first time. This is Part IV of a series of articles concerning that trip.



Farmers Market in Tbilisi.

Photos/Patty Gorelick

The flight to Tbilisi in the republic of Georgia went smoothly the next day. Surprisingly we found ourselves installed in the Iberia Hotel which supposedly is one of the best Tbilisi has to offer. We had originally requested this hotel but were told it was fully booked and we would be put elsewhere. However, at the airport there was so much confusion that it must have seemed simpler for Intourist to put us there with the tour group that arrived on the same plane with us.

At this point I was experienced with the arrival procedure and before going to our rooms went immediately to Intourist with our vouchers to confirm all guides, cars, tours, etc. which was no simple matter. We

needed dinner reservations for the three nights we would be staying and requested certain restaurants. The Intourist desk in Tbilisi uses a system that probably worked well in the 19th century. There is no telephone directory or telephone information and they didn't have the restaurant telephone numbers. There is also no such thing as a two-line or multi-line telephone in the Soviet Union.

After trying for 45 minutes to reach a restaurant by phone, we were told to take a bus or taxi to the restaurant to make our reservation. We decided instead to go to our rooms, wash and then go out on the street and explore the town while looking for somewhere to eat.

On the street the Georgian

people were friendly and curious. They could tell on sight that we were Americans — and they love Americans. We noticed many young men who were intently watching the young women in our group. Bari and Dana had their husbands (my nephews) to hold onto but I felt responsible for watching my daughter, Marcelle and my niece, Pam (when Shelton wasn't nearby).

A woman and her daughter approached us with big smiles on their faces. They asked us in broken English about the U.S. It is their greatest wish to come here someday. A group of young Georgian street traders sidled up to us and introduced themselves with "How much for t-shirt? Have very nice sunglasses. Nice, pretty girl...believe me, I am gentleman...maybe we meet." They were definitely interested in Marcelle and Pam and there were many traders who all seemed to know each other. My sons, Rael and Todd, made arrangements to meet them later in front of the hotel to conduct business.

Further down the street we found the hotel that had a recommended dinner show and we made reservations to buy tickets. Across from the dinner reservation desk in the lobby was a TV set tuned in to the live broadcast of the Soviet congressional meetings. Several men were sitting with their eyes glued to the set — expressions similar to Charlotteans watching the NCAA basketball finals.

In the lobby later that evening after waiting half an hour, the saleslady finally made an appearance and we were able to purchase the dinner show tickets. She proceeded to guide us down the street and around the corner to another building. We entered, went down the stairs and were seated at three separate round tables in an empty supper club. Why did we need reservations? The empty room was not reassuring. Immediately plates of cold hors d'oeuvres and

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