

BEHIND THE DESK

These are dark days in Soviet-American relationships, as leaders of both countries, old and backward-looking, cling to cherished notions about each country being "enemy" to the other. Recently, I find that I spend perhaps too much time thinking about my experiences in the USSR and what I learned about the people and their way of life. These reflections are intensely personal, reflecting perhaps more of my philosophy than the "real" world of the USSR. Indulge me, as I remember.

A TRAIN JOURNEY

In my travels through the USSR, no trip taught me more about the country or the people than the one from Moscow to the Far East via the TransSiberian Railroad, as the Russians say, the "Siberian Iron Road," the longest train journey in the world. The train leaves daily during the summer months from the Yaroslavl Station in Moscow, a perfect copy of a huge gingerbread house, complete with the icing.

The friends who saw me off on August 19, 1975, were not Russian. Rather they were from Moldavia, one of the 14 Republics which the Russians have "liberated" to become part of the Soviet Union, a country now with two and one-half times the land area of the USA. No one who travels to these Republics and talks with the people can ever confuse them with "Russia," the main part of the USSR, called the Russian Federated Republic (RSFSR). The people of these Republics represent nationalities ranging as greatly in ethnic variety as Eskimos and Andean Indians. How Russianized my friends were! They spoke Russian, not their native Moldavian, followed the Russian custom of giving me flowers as a going-away gift, and wished me well with typical Russian expressions.

As a foreigner, I was able to buy a ticket for a two-place compartment although most cars contain compartments for four and even six persons. I was a bit apprehensive because compartments are assigned without regard to sex and I couldn't really see sharing a compartment with a strange man for the eight days that are required to complete the trip. I felt lucky when a Swedish girl appeared; however, an English girl near us was not so fortunate. She stayed in our compartment most of the time.

As the train pulled away from the station, I realized that I felt some relief to be starting my journey out of that country which Churchill described as an enigma wrapped in a puzzle inside a riddle (or some combination of those three terms!). I wondered if I would ever see these friends again. Many things are said so easily at partings: "See you again," or "Come to visit me in the USA." These I had said, and

they had played the word game with me, replying, "We'll surely come to see you." Although we all knew that they would not. This was not an occasion to speak of things we all knew but did not admit aloud, though inside I found myself shouting, "Don't play the game, DO SOMETHING!"

The train passes through the crowded suburbs of the great capital city of Moscow, to the forests beyond and climbs over the Ural Mountains, where Siberia stretches over an area as large as the United States. The meadows, prairies, forests, bogs, cultivated areas, small villages and towns passed by to the constant hum of the train as we passed swiftly over the well-maintained tracks. Completed the early part of this century, during the reign of the last tsar, Nicholas II, the railroad provided then, and now, virtually the only link between Siberian settlements and the rest of the country.

Siberia lies wholly within the RSFSR. The problems of governing such a vast expanse of largely undeveloped country are overwhelming. Indeed, Siberians live pretty much as they please, unhampered by many of the constraints that make life difficult for citizens in the more western parts of Russia. Life goes on here much as it has for hundreds of years. The people have little and live simple and hard lives, working constantly to earn a living in the factories or on the harsh land. A look at a map of the Soviet Union shows the reason for many of their agricultural problems — the southernmost part of the country lies north of the 35th parallel. Most of Siberia is north of the 50th parallel. This explains, for example why fields of corn are cultivated in Siberia although most people have never seen an ear of corn — the growing season is too short for corn to mature. The plants are used as silage.

Watching the scenes of daily life unfold as the days passed, I thought of the countryside of the United States. How different it is! We do not see people carrying buckets of water on wooden supports held across the back, nor do we see people walking to work in large numbers. We do not see large numbers of people, many of them old women, with baskets going into the woods to hunt mushrooms and berries for preserving against a shortage of winter food supplies. Though their decorative windows, vary, especially the wooden houses of Siberia have a remarkable sameness. To eyes accustomed to the great variety of American houses, they can become quite boring.

Several great hydroelectric plants rise along the railroad, producing abundant electricity, though little is used by residential customers.

Many thousands of logs can

be seen moving down the rivers, a natural form of transportation for carrying them to the mills where they will be processed.

One night I saw a disturbing sight — the train schedule is calculated so that such areas are not passed in the daylight — many small huts, each with a light burning at the door, forming a compound with a fenced area containing scattered towers along its expanse. I saw only this one example of what is referred to by the Russians as the "Gulag Archipelago," a play on words that conjures up the idea of a string of prison islands stretching throughout the land. How many stories had I heard about these? Could I believe my eyes? I wondered then, as I still do today, if I saw this with my own eyes or through those of the numerous accounts I had read. I still question my reliability as a witness of this place.

The train, heavily loaded at the outset, was gradually relieved of its burden of equipment, mail, medical supplies, etc., as many stops were made. These are short stops, many of them as little as three minutes; indeed, the longest is only 20 minutes. They are all given on the schedule which is posted in certain areas of the cars and one of the pastimes of our group of three was to plan how we would use those precious minutes at the next station. Would there be some food available to buy? (The greasy soup became thinner as the variety diminished alarmingly in the one restaurant car as the days passed. About half-way through the trip the supplies of spirits had been completely exhausted!) What would these people look like? (We had seen Russian faces, round yellow Mongolian faces, dark faces — enchanting variety). What would the Soviet passengers buy and do during the stop? (Mostly clad in the typical blue warm-up suits that they wear for all leisure activities, they often did mild exercises on the platform. Most of them needed little food for they had brought almost everything with them. They knew some things that we didn't!) There was never enough time to take everything in. Pictures are forbidden in train stations and from train windows, so we were limited to mental pictures.

The peasants at the stations were friendly, as were the passengers, who regarded us as mild curiosities, since we seemed always to be walking from car to car, asking questions, commenting on the scenery, and in general getting into everything. The Soviets were much more reserved. I was somewhat calm after entering the last car on the train and finding it filled with military men who demanded to know why I was there. I simply pretended that I did not understand Russian and made a very fast retreat.

At one point, in the Far East, the railroad is so near the Chinese border that the countryside can be seen in the distance. This region is heavily guarded and car after car is sidetracked, filled with the material of war.

Seventy-nine stops after the ride began to Moscow, the train arrived, on time, in the city of Khabarovsk, where everyone must spend the night and take a guided tour. Here, foreigners are placed on a train bound for the port city of Nakhodka, on the Pacific, while Soviets leave for Vladivostok, which is closed to foreigners. When we reached Nakhodka, we had traveled approximately 9,000 kilometers and crossed eight of the eleven time zones in this country where the sun literally never sets. All clocks in all stations throughout the country are set on Moscow time and all forms of inter-city transportation run according to this time. A traveler scarcely cares about the local time, but must know what the hour is in Moscow. This reminded me that there are local TV and radio stations in most parts of the USSR; however, all parts of the country receive Moscow TV and radio. The hotel room wherever one stays is tuned to Moscow.

This is the only major power in the world that has kept its territory substantially intact for centuries, and in the last 40 or so years, made additions. The vast natural resources of the country are even now hardly imaginable. Great strides have been made in this century toward upgrading the lives of the people, although shortages of everything are a way of life. Yet, a great price has been paid — the lack of opportunity for Soviet citizens to exercise personal freedom. This fact of life in the USSR is so evident to an American living there that it becomes overwhelming, almost consuming at times. The "average" Russian is like the "average" American — (s)he loves, worries about the future, fears war, wants more material goods, cares for the children, and loves the country. But these are the powerless, the great mass who live out their day-to-day lives without an opportunity to affect governmental policy. Americans who refuse to become involved in governmental decision-making might just as well be Siberian peasants, deprived of this opportunity!

From Nakhodka, travelers take a Soviet ship to Japan. When I arrived in Yokohama and got into a cab, I felt cool air although the day was rather hot. I noticed this with some amazement until I suddenly remembered that it is possible to air-condition cars. So began the process of my re-entry into the highly technological world of the most "developed" countries.

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