

From Here to the Soviet Union — Part III

By Patty Gorelick

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

Aunt Bella survived the Tzar's pogroms, Stalin's purges, and the Holocaust to marry and have a son and daughter, Wolfe and Sopha. Although Aunt Bella died in 1985, we looked forward to meeting Wolfe and Sopha, two first cousins we hadn't known existed. Michael told us that Wolfe and Gary (Sopha's husband) were both members of the Communist Party. I knew we would have many questions to ask them the next evening when we were invited to their home for dinner. These thoughts flashed through my mind as I lay on my narrow bed bathed by the warm night air of June in Moscow.

In the hotel dining room the next morning, we consumed our usual breakfast of eggs, cheese, bread, jam and coffee. Our appetite satisfied, we took off for a walk around the center of Moscow but were disappointed to learn that the Kremlin was closed. The Soviet government is nervous. The discontent of the Soviet citizens is almost palpable and while the historic first Soviet Congress was meeting, the soldiers on Red Square prevented people from entering.

Throughout our trip wherever television sets were available, in hotel lobbies, department stores, or relatives' apartments, people were tuned in to the live broadcasts from the Kremlin of the congressional meetings. The avid viewers brought to mind our own countrymen watching the Iran/Contra investigations.

Realizing entrance to the Kremlin was unattainable, we walked to the other side of Red Square to visit GUM, the famous Moscow department store. The facade of the 19th century limestone building was quite elaborate with tall, narrow arched windows and doors. These are surmounted with a generous display of dentil moldings. The interior is composed of three separate wings joined by arched pedestrian bridges adorned with fanciful wrought iron balustrades. Not only is the building unlike any department store I have ever seen, but so is

the displaying and selling of the merchandise. There are separate booths for each type of merchandise; a booth for ribbons, for lingerie, for blouses, for socks, etc. In most cases the items for sale were hanging on the walls or standing on shelves behind counters. In order to purchase something, one had to stand in line for a salesperson to write the order slip, then take the order slip to another line to pay a cashier, and then return to the original line to pick up the purchase. The quality of the merchandise was poor, the design outdated, and the prices were high. In spite of this, the store was crowded with shoppers, many of whom were in line trying to make their purchases. This is the only game in town!

Out on the street again, we walked through the crowds. On the way back to the hotel we took pictures of "the weigher." This entrepreneurial person sits on a high stool next to a doctor's scale in the middle of the street and weighs people. A line of customers were waiting to pay their kopek and be weighed. It occurred to me that one member of my family (whose name will go unmentioned) would not allow her weight to be taken publicly if the weigher paid her.

Other curious sights on the streets were public drink machines. One puts a coin in the machine and juice flows out into a glass standing under the spigot. After finishing the drink, the glass is returned to the spigot for the next brave customer who is undaunted by the germs on the public glass.

We were now on our way to the Pushkin Museum to see the Van Gogh exhibit. As we walked through the streets, we were constantly being approached by teen age boys to trade with them. They wanted our American clothing and in return would give us Soviet t-shirts, military clothing or watches. They also were eager to change money for us. The official Soviet rate of



Exterior of GUM department store.



Inside GUM, shoppers on pedestrian bridges connecting wings of building on second and third floors.



Merchandise displayed in GUM. Photos/P. Gorelick

exchange in June was \$1.65 for one ruble. However, the street rate was 8-10 rubles for \$1. We had read and were warned before we came on the trip not to trade money on the street. For the first three days we complied with the warnings. However, the black market traders were so flagrant and so numerous that we believed the police were not enforcing the ban against trading money. And, after our In-tourist guides said "Why not?" we wondered if we should give it a try.

The Van Gogh exhibit turned out to be excellent and everyone in our family enjoyed the time spent there. As we were viewing the paintings, one incident occurred that was most enlightening. Our cousin Michael pointed out a painting of Ahashueros and Esther that he particularly liked. We mentioned to him that it was from the story of Purim. "What is Purim?" he asked. We had to explain since he had never heard of this Jewish holiday. Slowly I began to comprehend the fact that the younger mem-

bers of our Russian family had not been given any Jewish education. I felt a deep sense of loss for them. Not only were they deprived of the material things in life, but they had also been robbed of the precious spiritual and cultural Jewish heritage which was rightfully theirs. In addition to the Jews, the remaining Soviet people have also been deprived of their rich heritage and traditions. The discontent that is surfacing today is being expressed by the protests of many ethnic groups demanding the right to speak their ancestral languages, use their separate currency and practice their traditional beliefs.

Nineteenth century and early 20th century Russia had been at the forefront of European culture. In literature: Tolstoy, Dostogevsky and Chekov; in music; Mussorgky, Rumsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky; in dance: Diaghilev, Balanchine, Pavlova and Nyinsky, are just a sampling of the brilliant stars that lit the world from Russia. All this abruptly ended with the entrenchment of the future Soviet government.

We were seeing firsthand a country frozen in time as we walked back to our hotel and passed the many magnificent 19th century buildings whose facades were in different stages of decline through years of neglect. The food stores that once housed food fit for the most discriminating gourmet now held barren shelves except for the simplest utilitarian items. Other shops had merchandise of the poorest quality. Just as the buildings were decaying before our eyes, Soviet culture had withered and all but died. The best of the Soviet Union today appears to be in what remains intact of pre-1917 Russia. Even the people themselves have been stunted by the government's domination of their lives. All assertiveness, initiative and incentive have been squelched by the ruling powers. From what we observed, their economy appeared in shambles. There were no fruits or vegetables even in the midst of summer. I had the impression of being in an extremely poor country that could not do much to improve the lives of its citizens.

The understandable paranoia of the Soviet Union (due to a violent history of frequent invasive attacks) has led them down the road to economic ruin. At what appears to the 11th hour,

See FAMILY next page

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