

From Here to the Soviet Union — Part V

By Patty Gorelick

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

After three days in Tbilisi at the Iveria Hotel, which by Soviet standards is their best, but by U.S. standards is dusty and rundown, we are ready for our next destination, Riga, Latvia. I am prepared for the travel hassle to begin — and it does. Luggage for the 11 of us is watched at the curb by my son, Rael, while several of us run around looking for the bus driver, the Intourist guide, the baggage handler, the travel documents and the family stragglers. Finally, all is assembled and we arrive at the tiny Tbilisi airport. Our luggage is unloaded into a pile on the asphalt pavement where other tourists and luggage are already waiting. Intourist did not accompany us and we are at a loss for directions. Again, we appoint a luggage watcher and several of us take off in different directions, including up and down several flights of stairs, to find the correct procedure and the correct airplane. Finally, an Intourist agent is found and she gives us tags for our luggage. There are no Riga tags available. Helsinki tags are used and we cross out Helsinki and write in the city of Riga. She also hands us what will be used as our ticket. It consists of a small piece of paper with handwritten permission for our group of 11 to fly to Riga, the most unofficial looking ticket we have ever seen. We then went back down the

stairs outside to tag all the luggage and find a luggage handler who was tipped with Marlboro cigarettes.

The wait to board the plane was about 30 minutes, during which time we met several interesting people, one of whom was an American and most excited about setting up his company's new business of trading Pakistani sweatshirts for Soviet wine. They were also interested in building resort hotels in the Soviet Union and he was in the process of collecting whatever information he could in this regard. A few feet away was another pile of luggage and what appeared to be a team of young men all wearing the same t-shirts. We introduced ourselves and learned that they were a U.S. college baseball team on a government sponsored good-will tour to teach the Soviets about baseball. Everyone seemed to feel that the Soviet Union was on the brink of great change and, of course, in the months since our return we have seen exactly that.

Later that afternoon, we arrived with all our luggage, miraculously intact at the Latvia Hotel, Riga. We had a beautiful view of a wide tree-lined avenue and a flower-filled park facing the hotel. Todd joined us in our rooms and telephoned a refusenik, whose name had been given



The flower vendor wanted to give us a free bouquet at the flower market, Riga.



Outdoor waiting area at Tbilisi Airport.

photos/Patty Gorelick

to him by B'nai B'rith. His wife answered and my services as a Yiddish translator were called upon since she could only speak Yiddish or Russian. We set up an appointment for him to come to our hotel the next day.

Rael, Bill, Todd and I left the hotel to walk through the streets of a cool, drizzly Riga. We walked to the old city with its cobblestone streets, old cathedrals and town squares. On our way back, we passed a flower market with displays of beautiful fresh spring blooms underneath a canopy of umbrellas keeping the drizzle off the kerchiefed heads of the flower vendors. We stopped to admire a bunch of pansies and the flower lady insisted upon giving them to us.

She was showering us with her love for Americans and we caught her beautiful smile with our camera.

Dinner that evening was a comedy of errors. We requested and paid Intourist on our arrival for tickets to dinner and a floor show at the hotel for that evening. We arrived promptly at 8 p.m. and sat down to three excellent tables immediately next to the dance floor/stage. There were platters of cold hors d'oeuvres on the table and a pitcher of juice. The floor show began with lovely costumed dancers and singers. We kept waiting for our waiter to bring food, as he did for the other tables, but none appeared. As time passed, our hunger grew

and our patience diminished. Where was our waiter? Everyone else seemed to be getting served all kinds of food and drinks, but nothing for us. Finally, as I was responsible for all group arrangements, I went to the matre'd and asked him to have our dinner served. He could not speak English and said, in Russian, that no one there spoke English and that we hadn't paid for our dinner, only hors d'oeuvres and entertainment. It was totally impossible to change these arrangements and no matter what I said, I could not get dinner for us that evening. I kept thinking how rigid the Soviet system was and how unlikely that this would happen in the U.S.

Our experience the next evening was not much better at a restaurant recommended by the Fodor's guide to the Soviet Union. We were seated at two separate tables and a middle-aged heavy set woman gave us menus. However, there were only two items available on the menu, chicken or lox. The lox was fried, so we all settled on the chicken which turned out to be a cold chicken salad. There were also some other cold salads, but when we asked for water and tea, "No" was the only word in our waitress's language. I really think she was just being rude. It seems impossible not to have water or tea, but who knows? We all laughed and told Rael he had better behave or next year we'd send him to "Camp Latvia."

During one of our waits in the hotel lobby for our group to assemble, we met Murray Glickman, a widower of about 65 from Florida, who was in Riga searching for lost family. He told us he had been to the synagogue during a minyan and asked the

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