

## USSR: A Country of Contrasts — cont'd from preceding page

sive as one walks slowly toward it in Fortress Square. The fortress was begun in 1703 by Peter the Great in order to secure the mainland and Russia's outlet to the sea. Today, he lies buried inside this cathedral as do most of his successors.

Our next stop was St. Isaac's Cathedral. This is the largest church in Leningrad and took 40 years to build. No expense was spared in creating the magnificent interior with its fantastic frescoed and gilt domed ceiling, marble-lined walls and malachite and lazurite columns. There were exquisite marble busts, each done in five or six different colored marbles to imitate uniforms or clothing. Surely this elegant building was a source of inspiration for the worshippers.

Back on the bus it was time to return to our hotel. Along the way we had political discussions with Tatiana, our chief Intourist guide. There were two other young girls who also accompanied us as guides but Tatiana was apparently in charge. The others seemed to resent her authoritative manner and made disparaging remarks to members of our group. As far as I was concerned, she was assertive, organized, knowledgeable and managed to get us exactly what we wanted with the least amount of hassle. With my being the trip coordinator, those qualities were most important and counted a lot in her favor. I tended to discount the second-hand messages I heard from her subordinates and wondered if the open discord among the Intourist ranks was a new phenomenon born with glasnost.

My son Todd and Tatiana were having a heated discussion concerning the students' protests in Tbilisi that spring. Todd says that she was giving him a "stock" Communist Party answer that was cold and unfeeling. I am not sure that I agree as we each interpreted her answer differently. The arrival of our bus at the hotel ended the politics and everyone piled out to head in different directions.

Scott, Jeff, Todd and Rael took off for the two large Beriozka stores on either side of the hotel. They were looking for the hottest new Soviet item — watches. We heard they were



**Dom Knigi (The House of the Book):** Leningrad's main bookshop on Nevsky Prospect.

available and priced right at the Beriozka. These stores will sell their merchandise only for hard currency, which means no rubles. Only foreigners are permitted to shop there. There is more variety, from groceries to art objects, and better quality merchandise available than in most Soviet shops.

Meanwhile back at the hotel Intourist office, Tatiana and I were discussing schedules for the next two days. After deciding on plans, I left Tatiana to make the arrangements and headed for the Beriozka store. The only items I was interested in purchasing on this trip were the miniature lacquered boxes done by artists from four small towns near Moscow. My research was done at home and I was armed with a list of their best artists. However, a major problem arose the moment I tried to read the artists' names inscribed in Cyrillic on the boxes. My preparation in Charlotte did not include learning the Cyrillic alphabet. The day was saved by Tatiana who had come to look for us. The boxes were selected and made a nice collection with the additional ones purchased in Moscow. Scott also bought several boxes to surprise his wife Dana on their upcoming anniversary. We were both very pleased when we later saw these same boxes at a duty-free shop



**Marble bust and Bill at St. Isaac's Cathedral, Leningrad.**

Photos/P. Gorelick

in Amsterdam for many times over what we paid. And although we teased the guys for buying so many Soviet watches (some fell apart immediately), they were the "in" accessory at Bloomingdale's upon our return.

That evening we went to a disco at a large hotel. The hotel was so large that when our daughter Marcelle went in search of a bar to buy Perrier (regular water was forbidden to tourists due to a parasite) it took her almost an hour to return. In fact, we were so concerned that we sent a search party — Todd and Jeff — to find her. Much relieved at Marcelle's return, dinner was served successfully with the translating skills of Tatiana. The crowd filled the dance floor to the disco music of a live band. The Soviets love dancing and really get into the spirit of having a good time — we even got Tatiana on the dance floor. The women were quite glitzy in their disco attire and enjoyed watching us while we were watching them.

A good time was had by all as the evening came to a close and we walked to the subway on this cold June night. When we reached Tatiana's station, she explained where we would find the bus to our hotel. A few stops further and we emerged from the subway. In a few minutes from our bus window the huge silhouette of the Pribaltickaya appeared against the "white night" of Leningrad. It took the last bit of energy to walk across the broad expanse in front of the hotel and up the scores of steps to the entrance. I fell into bed looking forward to our final few days with our Russian cousins. Dreams of the Hermitage and Petrodvorets danced in my head as I drifted off to sleep.

— to be continued —

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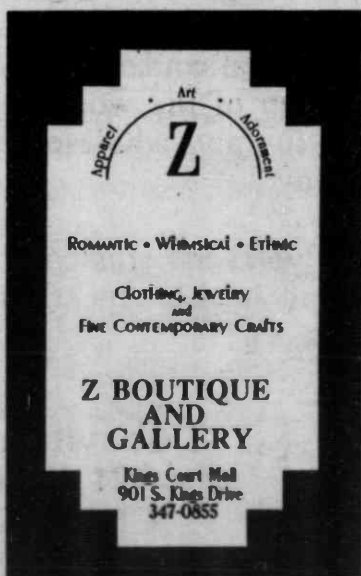
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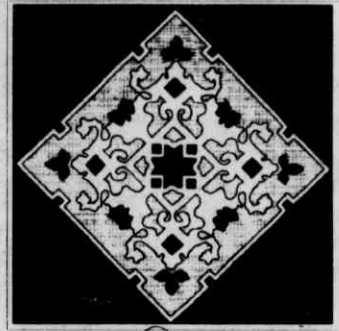
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