

"Passage to Freedom"

The Last Stop Before Returning Home: Leningrad



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Guest Columnist

The Winter Palace in Leningrad, filled with the riches of the Tzars, displays more material wealth than I have ever seen collected in one place. The gold fountains that adorn the entrance to Petroveret, summer home of Peter the Great, located on the Gulf of Finland, are modeled after those built at the grand Paace of Versaille.

How ironic that this should be the last stop on the way home and my last story. I juxtaposed in my mind this historic lifestyle with that of the Leningrad relatives of my tour roommate G.G. Kosch. The highlight of G.G.'s trip to the Soviet Union was meeting her first cousin and her cousin's family for the first time in the baggage claim section at Leningrad's airport. They had arrived by taxi to surprise her, bringing with them flowers, hugs and even a cake baked especially for everyone on our tour to share.

After G.G. returned from dinner at their home that eve-

The writer went this past summer on a trip to the Soviet Union sponsored by International House. This is Part V of a series. Part IV was in the Oct. 1989 CJN Issue.

ning, we cried together as she related the terror in the eyes of her cousin Rivieka, as she was called away from the dinner table to answer the phone. On the other end, her friend described what she had seen on the front of a prominent building. Large letters spelled "DEATH TO THE JEWS." She had called out of sheer fright.

I had to keep reminding myself that this was happening in 1989. All of this is in the history books. It doesn't happen in our world today.

"All the smart Jews have fled, especially from Leningrad," Rivieka told her cousin G.G., Rivieka explained that before "glasnost," the government did not allow overt expressions of anti-Semitism from the people. Now, with Gorbachav and the new freedom which is "glasnost," Jew haters have freedom to speak out.

"The new 'openness' works against us," she asserted. This family believes that a civil war is imminent in the Soviet Union. Several weeks earlier, Rivieka explains further, there had been a well attended demonstration in Leningrad targeted specifically against the Jews.

Elusha, an alert 13-year-old and the youngest member of the family, calls the leaders of this demonstration — an organization called Pamyat — "the Russian Ku Klux Klan." And I remembered the words of my new friends in Tashkent: "They are growing like mushrooms



G.G. Kosch's cousins surprise her at the Leningrad airport.



On their trip through the Soviet Union, G.G. Kosch (L) and Marcia Simon sip fruit juice on a "T-bed" in Samarkand.

after a spring rain."

Because they speak no English, G.G. communicated in Yiddish. She was surprised that her Yiddish was significantly better than theirs. They refused to speak Yiddish in the taxi or on the street, lest someone would overhear them and know that they were Jews.

Circumstances have improved for this family from several years earlier. Before all five of them had lived in one big room with 20 people, sharing a communal kitchen. Spying was common within the group and no one felt comfortable to speak.

Today, Rivieka, a bookkeeper, has her own one-room apartment and her daughter, son-in-law and their two children live in a four-room apartment close-by. Each child has his own room. The parents sleep on a sofa in a room that doubles as a dining-living room. There is no family car.

Young Elusha, stricken with cerebral palsy since infancy,

attends a special school for the handicapped. He is shunned by society in general because of his handicap. And in his school, he is taunted by the other children because he is a JEW. School was about to end for summer vacation. When asked what he would do all summer, Elusha said he would read books about the Cosmos. G.G. has since sent him books through the International Book Project.

All he and his older brother have ever known is discrimination because of being Jewish. If they ever have the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union, they say they want nothing to do with Judaism. They have discussed trying to leave the country but the father, a machinist, is unwilling. Even though leaving would mean a new form of surgery for Elusha that is not currently available in the Soviet Union and the elimination of fear from a life filled with poverty, hate and turmoil, the father is fearful of making a change this late in his life.

This family's plight dominates my last evening in the Soviet Union as our tour group attends our last "gala" at the Hotel Leningrad complete with dinner and dancing. Looking at my face, anyone could tell I was in no mood to celebrate. A group of German tourists seated at nearby tables, began to sing. The thought of Nazi Germany flashed to my mind's eye: a nightclub scene in a cabaret, while Jews are being led to the gas chamber.

This is a true story. The names, places and facts have not been changed. These people I met on my journey will join forever in my heart the memories and stories I've been taught about my great-grandparents — their struggles, hardships, decisions and valor.

I went to the Soviet Union searching for my roots. I came away with new friends and new memories of the same old kaleidoscope patterns though perhaps with an ever so slight momentary new twist of hope.

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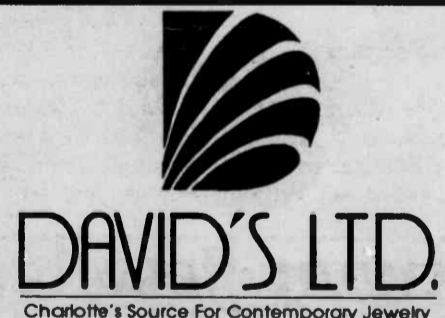
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