On Pilgrimage: First Visit to Soviet Russia

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, September 1971, 1, 7, 8.

Summary: Describes her trip to Poland and the Russian cities of Leningrad and Moscow where she visits museums, Churches, and cemeteries. Visits the grave of Dostoevsky and debates with a group of Soviet writers about the works of Solzhenitisn. Notes his role in keeping faith in God alive in Russia through his writings. (Continued in Document #515.) (DDLW #513).

I mentioned in my column last month that this trip was through the generosity of the philosopher Corliss Lamont (author of *The Illusion of Immortality*, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, *and Freedom of Choice,* in addition to works on literary criticism) who heard, third hand, that I desired to go to the Soviet Union and called me to offer the annual travel fellowship which he gave to his friend Dr. Jerome Davis, who had long been a friend of Russia. For this great act of kindness, may God bless him mightily, and Jerome Davis also, who heads yearly tours to Eastern Europe, under the title "Promoting Enduring Peace." Now I am back again from our three week jaunt which began July 15 and from which we returned on August 5.

I am home again with a handful of colorful postals, including reproductions of ikons and a folder of picture postals of Lenin's exile in Siberia, where he lived, where he studied, where he taught his peasant neighbors and their children, where he fished and hunted and rested in the forest! How I wish we had such a Siberia where the Fathers Berrigan and all the prisoners of conscience could go and meditate and study and prepare for a new social order "wherein peace and justice dwell."

First of all I will try to give the FACTS (I have been reading about Mr. Gradgrind in Dickens' **Hard Times** and the word FACTS is imprinted on my mind.) We took a plane at Kennedy Airport on the 747 which is comfortable, rises easily from the ground despite its size, and comes down from the air with the same gentleness and ease! We landed in Amsterdam, then in Brussels. Took another plane there for East Berlin, a small airport and from there, still another plane flew us to Warsaw, where we stayed at the Grand Hotel (cannot remember a thing about the hotel) and rose the next day to board a sightseeing bus for a tour of the city. It reminded me, and was to continue reminding me, of the sightseeing buses which empty tourists out into Chinatown, New York, to see other sights of the great city which we had just left, though in travelling like this "one day is as a thousand years."

POLAND

I was most moved by Poland. Nina Polcyn, and one Canadian woman, Helen MacGinnnis, were the only other Catholics on this trip of Quakers, Baptists,

Methodists, Episcopalians, and perhaps a number of "unbelievers" whatever that all-encompassing word means. The city charmed us, clean and spotless, the churches beautiful and frequented, benches everywhere in the little parks and squares, and even for those awaiting busses, and many outdoor cafes where doubtless at night people took their ease.

But though this was Saturday no one seemed to be loafing, everyone was at work, even the school children were being taken from museum to church, and to other public buildings. Nina told me that when she and her aunt, who spoke Polish, had been there not many years before, there had been much more poverty, the airport was a poor one, there was much evidence of barbwire and soldiery. The tour included two weeks around Poland where they saw the extermination camps. Nina's family is Polish on both sides, and she remembered some of the Polish of her grandparents who had come to the United States long ago. It had been a sad trip and she had been looking forward almost with dread to this revisit, thinking of the tears she had shed there. Now we saw order, cleanliness and restoration, children in schools, and people with what Peter Maurin always called a philosophy of Work. With all our unemployment at home it was a cheerful sight.

We were shown a film, **Poland Reborn**, in one of the museums. It was our first day of sight seeing and I had been tempted to sit out in the sunlit square and avoid the mustiness of museum touring, but I am glad I went. It showed the deliberate destruction of Warsaw by the Germans, from film taken from the Germans themselves after the war. It showed also the rebuilding, the work of the men clearing away the rubble, salvaging what could be salvaged, using what could be used, with all the vigor of men and women who loved their country and their church–it was inspiring and my heart rejoiced. We saw too, the Square of the Ghetto Heroes and the Parviak prison. One sensed what St. Paul called thy mystery of iniquity. That there should have been a ghetto at all is part of that mystery. On that extensive wasteland in the heart of the city which has not been rebuilt, there was only a monument, by the American sculptor Rappaport. The dome-like reddish stone entrance to the sewer was like a monument to the children of the ghetto. They were smuggled out by night to forage for food for the starving victims within this prison area. The story of the three weeks uprising in 1942 has been written by John Hersey in **The Wall** and cannot be forgotten.

MAN'S COURAGE

To start our tour with such sights as these, is to make us realize how little we have suffered from war and oppression except in the suffering of seeing our country corrupted by luxury mainly derived from war and preparations for war in all parts of the world. How much need we have to plumb the depths of voluntary poverty, humble work and acceptance of suffering as penance.

But I must stick to my facts.

We had a Sunday afternoon at the park which was Chopin's country home and sat on benches listening to a concert of his work which came to us through loudspeakers. On the way back we visited a collective farm which impressed me by its ugliness. No wonder people want to move to the city! The barns were near the road and we stood among them talking to the young and modest manager of the operation. I am sorry I do not have the facts, which would be interesting to me too, as to the proportion of private farming and collective farming. I do know that communal, cooperative farming could illustrate more of a synthesis (as Peter Maurin said) of cult, culture and cultivation.

The highlight, I suppose, for the leaders of our tour was the seminar we had with the prime minister of Poland and members of the Polish Peace Committee. We were regaled with refreshments of coffee and cold drinks and cake. There were speeches, ably translated by an interpreter who did not give a running translation as they do at the United Nations, and as our friend Anne Marie Stokes did for us a number of times at the **Catholic Worker**. It was instead a phrase by phrase translation, with a great insistence on accuracy, which slowed up the conference a little. Yes, we both, East and West, must try to work for general and complete disarmament. There are two large peace groups in Poland, the PAX group is the largest. (When I asked about the one closer akin to our own CW peace work, ZNAK, the question was evaded, though they admitted there was such a group). The parting message was "Withdraw all troops from the rest of the world," and send more Polish Americans over to Poland to see all that had been accomplished for their people by the troops of the Soviet Union.

LENINGRAD

Three days in Warsaw and we were on to Leningrad, "Peter the Great's Window to the West." There we stayed at the Hotel Sovietskaya, made the usual tour along the Nevsky Prospect, the Fifth Avenue of Leningrad, which seemed to be crowded at all times. We had a delightful guide named Helene who spoke very good English and who gave us untiringly her time and her interest in all our needs. We learned during the trip that these guides had twelve years training in languages, and not only in the history of their country and its economics and political theory, but in art and music etc. They were not at all mechanical in describing the places we visited. In describing the taking of the Winter Palace, she said "The Revolution was well prepared by Lenin while he was in hiding and living in disguise. Only six were killed in the storming of the Winter Palace." We saw the armored car in the garden at the Lenin Museum from which he had given his speech. We saw Lenin Square and the Finland station, and as we drove along the Neva, it made me happy to see fishermen and sun bathers loafing on the Peter the Great Embankment. Of course there was a trip in a hydrafoil along the Neva to the Summer Palace on the Gulf of Finland with its fountains and gardens. And of course we visited the Hermitage, perhaps the most famous museum of art in the world. I cannot remember whether it was

there or at the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow that I saw Rembrandt's "Prodigal Son" which moved me deeply, reminding me as it did of our companions on the soupline on First Street, and the men who come in off the road at the farm.

ALEXANDER NEVSKY LAVRA

But my lasting impression of Leningrad will always be the afternoon I spent with a friend I had arranged to meet in Leningrad, who had spent quite a few summer vacations from her teaching in New York in that branch of Leningrad University located on the Finland Gulf, studying advanced Russian. She was my companion all one afternoon and evening there and later in Moscow, and her knowledge of the language made possible some exploring on the side. She took me by cab to the monastery which has on either side of the entrance two or three cemeteries, very well kept and we walked through these before we went on into the church. I visited Dostoievsky's grave and those of Moussorsky and Rimsky-Korsakov and many other musicians. There were flowers on all the graves and people were visiting these cemeteries as they did museums. The other cemetery was for priests, monks and nobles and there the graves were not well cared for, nor were there visitors. My friend said that she had gone there to try to find the grave of Helene Iswolsky's grandfather, but had not been able to.

This Lavra, or monastery, is made up of three churches, actually only one of which is what the people term a "working church." Of the others, one is a museum and the other is under repair. There is also a seminary where, if my memory is not faulty, there are sixty seminarians, and I was told that throughout Russia there were seminarians who worked, but studied theology and scripture by correspondence course.

It was in the middle of the week so we did not expect a service, or even that the church would be open. But as we passed the rear of the church in our exploration of the grounds (there was a dining hall too, where in more happy days the congregation used to break their fast after the long services) we saw seated on some boxes a row of little old ladies, drably dressed and with baboushkas over their heads, murmuring together like a row of birds. Pretty soon a nun joined them and my friend asked about a service. Yes, at five vespers would start and the church door would be open. So we too sat and waited and it was good to sit. I was fortunate in having a cane which opened out like a seat, which had come in very handy ever since I left home in New York, and which had excited much comment. I used it later, I am ashamed to say, in the church which filled up with worshippers little by little. Even the czar had to stand! There was much scaffolding all through the building showing work was underway here also. It was a long service but there was a good choir of mixed voices and some beautiful singing. We left before the service was over and by that time the church was full of lighted candles and the smoke of incense. We too venerated the ikons and went away happy that we had had the opportunity to praise God. Yes, of course it was mainly older people, both men and women, who have more time. The

younger ones were no doubt busy with family duties at the time of life when it is proper to be so. Who can judge another's state of belief?

Coming out a long roundabout way through the grounds because of the closing of the entrance, it amused me to see the same weeds, the burdock, the lambs quarters, the daisies and many other familiar weeds. We took a bus and had to transfer to another to reach our hotel and the busses were crowded with people. My friend had some butterflies embroidered on her dress and a number of people commented on them. "They are a symbol of the resurrection in Russia," she told me. We learned later, the day we left for Moscow, that there was a daily liturgy at St. Nicholas cathedral.

ON TO MOSCOW

Just before I had left New York I had read Arthur Miller's article on Russia, and in my note book I had copied those last lines: "Is there still beneath the polemics and the threats, an unadmitted commerce of a humankind? Or is there truly no fresh wind in any corner of the sky to blow away the fumes of fear we all breathe now, this terror of each other that will finally murder us all?

"Circling Warsaw and trying for a glimpse through the fog wet windows, the cabin so silent and orderly, the thought for some reason comes of **The Seagull**. And Checkhov spitting blood in the loneliness of Yalta, and writing those minimal and yet ultimate lines for the betrayed and suffering girl–'. . . to endure. To be able to bear one's cross and have faith. I have a faith. I am not afraid of life.' How terrible that seventy years later, seventy years of the most astonishing acquisition of knowledge in man's history, it is so very much harder to speak these lines without fatuousness on this planet."

SOLZHENITSIN

Had Arthur Miller forgotten Solzhenitsin and that wonderful sense of faith, that of the little Baptist in **A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich** in a labor camp? He takes the precious gospel in his hands and, lying in his bunk, turns to Ivan who in hunger and exhaustion was comforting himself with the extra ration of blackbread he had secreted in his bedding, thanks him and God for the good day when together they accomplished their hard labor and finished the job they had set out to do.

Alexander Solzhenitsin was another of the reasons I wanted to visit Russia, to set foot on the soil that produced the likes of him. There is nothing fatuous about his writing. He is a man of "faith and not afraid of life."

When I got to Moscow the meeting (the first in four or five years) of the Writers Union, was over. Three thousand members had attended. I do not know how many members there are, but I had the occasion to meet three of them and

protest the treatment he had received and pay my tribute to this great writer, whose **Cancer Ward** and **The First Circle** are in paperback now. Helene Iswolsky reviewed his works in **The Catholic Worker** and spoke about them at one of our Friday night meetings at First Street.

We met with the Soviet Peace Committee at the House of Friendship in Moscow, formerly the home of a rich merchant. Raymond Wilson, who has been lobbying for the American Friends Service Committee for the past twenty eight years in behalf of peace, was chairman of our group and elicited questions from the members of the group. My questions were first about religion in Soviet Russia, and I stated appreciatively that I was glad there was no longer any crude expressions of atheism as I had understood there had been in the museum, formerly the church of our Lady of Kazan, which was frankly used to preach atheism to children and expose the "trickery" of the priests and saints with their miracles. Now, we saw that the churches were treated with respect and were all in the process of restoration, and that half of them in Moscow were what they termed working churches, which meant that religious services were held there.

Dr. Andrew Johnson, another member of our group, spoke also of religion. He was the chaplain of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and making the tour with his beautiful wife, a child psychologist working with disturbed children.

Then I brought up the matter of Solzhenitsin and said that I could not be in Moscow without expressing my great admiration for this writer whom one could compare with Tolstoi and Dostoievsky. I said I did not know if there were any members of the Writers Union present at the Peace meeting, but expressed my desire to meet with some of them. Michael Gold, an old friend of mine since 1918, was many a time a guest in the Soviet Union of the Writers' Guild.

Perhaps it was my tribute and my expressions of regret at the treatment of this great Russian that caused the meeting to break up then. At any rate they decided that those who wished to talk about culture could meet in one workshop and those who wished to discuss peace could go to another. So the discussion began again with three writers to whom I was introduced: a critic, Piskynev, the poet, Lukevin and the novelist, Uryev. I am not sure I have their names right, though they themselves wrote them down in my notebook.

I repeated what I had said in the Peace seminar and added that it lifted the world's heart to see Russia still producing such men of genius to inspire the world. I felt that I could not be in Moscow, where the Writers Union had just been meeting for the first time in four years, without paying tribute. There had been silence in the other meeting room at my words, but now the novelist (who spoke fluent English) came out with the flat statement that any writer who has United States publishers competing for his work to the tune of half a million dollars has been betraying his country by his criticisms: he is writing the things the United States wants to hear, that is, he is holding up his country to the criticism of the world. He has "sold out." Besides, he added, he is not a great writer. It is foolish to compare him to Tolstoi or Dostoievsky. It is understood that in every

revolution there are mistakes but that was no reason to write volumes on them.

I pointed out that Solzhenitsin was not profiting by the money which came from the Nobel Prize. The money could not get in to him, nor would he go out to get it, for fear that he would not be able to return to his own country which he loves. His is the bitterness which is a part of love of country, a bitterness which we Americans feel remembering the armaments which our country produces and profits by in their sale around the world. Now in Pakistan, our arms have been used in a war which has resulted in a carnage and displacement of people, not to speak of plague and famine.

So Solzhenitsin lives in poverty and has been expelled from the Writers Union and cannot be published in his own country. He is harassed continually, and recently his small cottage in the country has been vandalized and papers destroyed, and a friend of his who went to bring some of his papers to him was seized and beaten. The letter Solzhenitsin wrote protesting this was widely printed in the west, and I was happy to see as a result a letter of apology by the authorities in Moscow, saying that it was the local police who had acted so violently.

"Now we are in a period, in our literature," the novelist went on to say, "when village themes, close to William Faulkner, close to the soil–grass roots stuff–that is what people want. We like Hemingway, Dreiser, Whitman, Fenimore Cooper. And yes, detective stories and science fiction are popular. I myself write science fiction and a recent book of mine sold 300,000 copies in a few weeks."

The poet and critic could understand English and had studied it, but were not, they said, fluent enough to talk with us. So the novelist translated for them. When Nina asked whether there was interest in philosophy or theology–religious works–like those writings of Bonhoeffer, the critic replied modestly that there was not much interest, but that he himself had done research to find out whether such a man as Jesus Christ existed, but whether he did or not, he greatly influenced man for the good.

(Strangely enough there is at present going on in a New York Russian periodical a debate as to whether Solzhenitsin ever existed! One writer insists that no one man could have turned out such long novels, not to speak of the several volumes of short stories and sketches, early work which has been translated and has just come out here in the United States. His contention was that no such person as Solzhenitsin exists, but a group of writers under that name. Several other Russian writers for the journal or correspondents have kept the controversy going. Helen Iswolsky, one of our editors, gets this journal which has a name which resembles, with its Cyriliac characters, the capitalized word HOBO, and the people around our farm call it flippantly the "Hobo News.")

How many misunderstandings are built up because of censorship and lack of frank discussion!

The poet contributed his quiet statement that he had written fourteen books of poetry. He had written one book of prose, "about pottery, and about myself

and poetry," and he apologized for his lack of fluency in English but pointed out that he had just started to study English at the age of forty.

The critic went on to say that he was working on another book on Soviet realism compared with other artistic methods, a history of Soviet literature. "Neither my wife nor my daughter reads my books," he added.

After this little interchange, I felt more friendly towards these writers who never had the joy of reading anything but **One Day**. Their grim looks, frowning faces and turned down mouths at the beginning of our exchange made me remember an incident I had heard that morning. Another group of students on tour had been given a chance to visit a Young Pioneer camp and when they disregarded the injunction not to ask questions or enter into conversation with the students, they had been transported to the border and expelled from the country. Friends had said to me before I left not to disturb the tour by mentioning Solzhenitsin, but I was sure enough of my companions on the tour that they would take very calmly anything that might happen along the way. They were good radicals, and amongst them were those who had been in jail in the U.S. because of demonstrations.

The criticism made by Edmund Wilson in the August 14th issue of **The New Yorker** shows opposition to Solzhenitsin on what I feel are religious grounds. Wilson accuses the Russian writer of a somewhat masochistic point of view, and speaks of the book **The First Circle** as oppressive. He states that relations between human beings which indicate a recognition of the fact that all men are brothers and are non-judging and forgiving and reflect the teachings of the Gospel "are certainly quite abnormal." But he does of course pay great tribute to this "very courageous man and very gifted writer."

I am glad that Edmund Wilson brings out the fact that Solzhenitsin is sincerely religious, and he concedes that it is this man's religious faith that is responsible for his survival. He quotes a few lines of a prayer which has not been published except in a religious paper in France, and which Wilson says, "sounds authentic." This prayer reads as though Solzhenitsin were writing a letter to the God whom he, by this writing, acknowledges publicly as the object of his faith and hope. It expresses his faith too that God will raise up others, where he has not succeeded, to bring to others the "serene certitude that You exist and that You are watching out to see that all the paths of the good be not closed."

I find it hard to express my own joy that Solzhenitsin himself exists and that not only Russia, through the underground circulation of his writings, is hearing these great truths, but our own confused country also.