

## USSR: An Enjoyable Education

By Martha Nell Crow

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My husband and I had travelled extensively with our children, ages fourteen and eleven, but had always thought that taking them to the USSR was something to avoid. We thought the journey would be difficult for adults alone and that it would be that much more tedious with-- and for--children. One day we decided spontaneously: "to heck with it": we would just go ahead and take the kids. Probably the governing reason was that our fourteen-year-old daughter had been studying Russian history and was also extremely interested in Russian ballet, being a serious ballet student at home.

Difficulties we did run into but no more, no less than if we had been adults travelling alone. Anyway, children really seem better able to handle frustrations and travel problems than adults. Overall, though, the trip was not as arduous as we had anticipated and certainly much more enjoyable. We had thought it would be educational but had truly wondered if it would also be pleasurable.

Customs, for instance. We went into the Soviet Union by train (from Helsinki to Leningrad) and out again by train (from Kiev to Budapest). Arriving at the Russian border at one in the morning, we were awakened by a pounding on our compartment door. The customs officials. We felt as if we were playing roles in a Grade B movie. The men demanded all of us sit up in our births so that they could get a good look at us--our faces had to match the considerably more alert ones on our passports.

We passed the test! Now: "What literature do you have?" Our daughter's Mark Twain threw them for a while but they finally came to the recognition that it must be harmless. "What fruit?"

We presented our store of bananas. (We had planned on them being our breakfast along with space sticks and the good Russian tea served in silver containers.) "Eat them now." Obediently, we gobbled our bananas.

Coming out of the USSR at the Hungarian border, we had a much more prolonged time. The delay resulted from the fact that the train gauge in the Soviet Union is narrower than the one in Hungary--or is it the other way around? This problem is solved by raising the train cars with hydraulic pumps and replacing the old wheels with new ones that conform to the width of the Hungarian tracks. While this was going on, the Intourist representative came aboard the train to see if our documents were in order. We seemed to be the sole passengers that he had to look after; there did not appear to be any other Americans or even Western Europeans on the train.

Again, an interest in what literature we had with us. "What books and magazines?" By then we were down to three paperbacks, having given away some of our books. "Would you trade?" he queried. I felt--cynically--that there was probably no choice although I hated giving up a half-read One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. I anticipated that there would probably be no true trade--but back came three Russian books--fiction not propaganda.

Customs we had anticipated could be a problem. But obtaining tickets to events we had understood would be easy and smooth. That was our surprise. Our first attempt to get tickets to the ballet was in Leningrad, where we asked an Intourist representative what we might be able to see that night, Saturday. They informed us that everything was sold out, that the Kirov (the best ballet company) was sold out for Sunday night but that the Maley Ballet was available for Sunday. Okay. Settled.

They collected our rubles and told us to return the next day at 5:00 p.m. Obediently, punctually, we returned Sunday. But when

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the Intourist girl heard our name, she thrust our money into my hand, proclaiming "nyet." "What do you mean?" I came back. "There are no tickets; nothing." Obviously, that was that.

Never wishing to be defeated, we thought we would try what we have done in other cities when events are sold out--arrive at the box office 45 minutes before curtain to try to get standing room or to try to buy from someone who wants to dispose of his tickets. When there is not a common language, when one cannot even read the alphabet of the other language, how in the mane of heavens can you buy a ticket from some man standing on the steps of a theatre?

Our frustration was not really as great as that of two Americans, who arrived for the performance with tickets in hand. Only they were turned away. Although Intourist had said their tickets were for that night, that theatre, that time, obviously they weren't. But the man at the door could not speak English to tell them where to go, no one else could either. No cabs were available so the poor men stood on the steps not knowing where to go.

Then, in Moscow, an exact repetition. Only this time we were attempting to see the circus. Our ballet tickets to the Bolshoi had been achieved through an introduction we had to a women's group. Again, no circus tickets that night but the next night would be okay. Again, they took our money and told us to return for the actual tickets. We returned at the allotted hour to be told "nyet." This time, we did not walk away demurely. We exploded, raised our voices, pounded our fists, demanded to see the manager--all those things we thought we should never do in the USSR.



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In fact, we were acting totally against our usual pattern. But later we found out that this is an acceptable modus operandi. This is how to get things done. However--we still did not get our tickets.

We had always heard that dining presented a problem as far as interminable waits. The service wasn't as bad as we had expected but it was still a challenge to our patience. Especially at breakfast, when the waiter would bring one fork, then one water glass, maybe two rolls. More difficult on him even than on us.

Our frustrations in eating came also from the fact that often we would order milk but there would be none, chocolate but there would be none at that time (chocolate seemed to be available only at breakfast), Chicken Kiev, which was right on the menu, but there would be none. Back to Beef Stroganoff, borscht, cranberry juice.

Then there were the long waits--as individual tourists--to turn in vouchers for more specific ones. One line at Intourist for meal vouchers, another line for sightseeing vouchers, yet another line for train vouchers, and still another for air tickets. And to get our air tickets, we could only obtain one leg at a time. In Leningrad, we could have the ticket to Moscow but we had to repeat the process in Moscow to get the ticket to Kiev.

In our first Intourist exchange we were told that we underpaid for our daughter. This threw us--were we going to have to fork out each time we went to get our vouchers? But, in our last Intourist transaction in Kiev, we were told we had overpaid for our rail tickets from Kiev to Budapest. We could be refunded the money on the spot in rubles but they had to be used up before we left the

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country; this meant using up \$70 in four hours time. Or, we could wait and get the money upon our return. We gambled on the latter and received our money very promptly when we returned home.

Only after we had been on the train four of the twenty-two hours did we realize that what Intourist had done was to downgrade us to second class. Thus, the refund. This became clear when we found that some of the cars had clean restrooms and ventilation, both of which were lacking in our car.

Tremendous patience was also required for journeys by elevators. For example, The Ukraine, our Moscow skyscraper, did not have an adequate number of elevators to service the number of guests accommodated by the hotel. But on top of that, only half of the elevators were ever functional. We truly had to plot our day to take into account the vertical travel. Also, the whereabouts of the stairs was kept top secret. Not that we really wanted to walk up and down eighteen flights of stairs.

Then, there were the incredible waits for cabs. The quiet queue in the snow, in the rain. Again, the tremendous need to allow sufficient time to get to the tour or the performance.

Yet, always the kindnesses of many of the people transcended the difficulties, the memory of joyful occasions obliterated the remembrance of tiresome, tedious moments. And so it is when we talk of our trip to the USSR, we recall:

-- The graciousness of the ladies at the Peace Committee in Leningrad. After all, it was they who took us to rehearsals at the Kirov Ballet School, our daughter's greatest thrill.