

Moscow memories

Autor(en): **J.J.F.S.**

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MOSCOW MEMORIES.

In these days when the problem of Russia holds so insistent a place in current affairs, it may not come amiss to recall a few impressions of a glimpse beyond the iron curtain. It is neither my intention, nor am I qualified, to formulate an objective judgment on the Soviet system; all I shall attempt is a simple description of the things I have seen during a short and uneventful pre-war journey to Moscow. I shall draw no conclusions and indulge in no generalisations. It is well to remember, and to avoid, the classical example of the disgruntled traveller who, after spending one night in a small town where he was ministered to by a fiery-headed waiter suffering from an impediment of speech, wrote in his diary: "The inhabitants of the town have red hair and stammer."

It was in Stockholm, in the course of a Scandinavian tour, that the invitation to visit Russia reached me. Several days went by before the necessary permits were ready and I had ample time to explore the beautiful Swedish capital, the Venice of the North, and its delightful surroundings. One night, as I returned to my hotel, I found the dining room unusually crowded and presently caught snatches of "Schwyzerdütsch" from the centre-table. They came from a Swiss football team just arrived from Oslo for an international match. It was played at the Stockholm Stadium a few days later; the Swiss team lost.

The following morning a telephone message from the kindly old gentleman who acted as Russian Consul in Stockholm conveyed the information that my papers were at last in order and that I could proceed on my journey. On a clear, sunny evening I set out, first by steamer across the Baltic and through the Åland Islands as far as Hango in Finland, and thence by train to Helsinki. From there I took the midnight train through Karelia, soon to be the scene of bitter fighting, and arrived early next morning at the Russian frontier. Here the train was emptied and all travellers were herded in the Customs-house, a modern building with a large inspection hall. Around the walls ran an inscription in Russian, French, German and English: "Workers of the world, unite," and the hall was adorned with the henceforth ubiquitous busts and pictures of Lenin and Stalin. The actual frontier-line was a small river spanned by a bridge one half of which was painted white and the other, the Russian half, red. After my luggage had been carefully searched, I was allowed to take my seat in the broad-gauged Russian train and arrived in Leningrad by mid-day.

I had a meal in the hotel after which I was taken by car on a sight-seeing tour through the city, the cicerone being an English-speaking young Russian lady. Compared to the St. Petersburg of Czarist times, Leningrad struck me as dilapidated, poverty-stricken and depressing. The majestic St. Isaac's Cathedral where, thirty years earlier, I had heard black-bearded priests chant their wonderful credo, had been converted in an anti-religious museum. In the Cathedral Square young men in shirt-sleeves were engaged in military drill and anti-aircraft exercises. The Winter Palace, formerly the sumptuous residence of the Czars, stood empty, silent and shuttered. The Nevski Prospect, once a scene of bustle and elegance, seemed deserted, only a clanging tramcar now and again broke the stillness. Over all this brooding desolation seemed to be written: Ichabod, thy glory hath departed!

A sleeper on the famous Red Arrow train conveyed me to Moscow. The railway from Leningrad to Moscow runs in almost a straight line through flat uninspiring country. It is related that when the engineers who built it submitted their plans for the imperial approval, the Czar took a ruler and drew on the map a straight line between the two towns. The track had to be constructed accordingly.

On the train tea was obtainable from a steaming samovar standing at the end of each coach. Young women went from one compartment to another offering for sale bottled beer and mineral water. As it was a stifling hot night they did a roaring trade. A few miles outside Moscow the train was held up a considerable time. Wreckage could be seen on the line and I learned later that an accident had occurred the day before for which several railway workers including a station master had been tried and shot. Inefficiency and dereliction of duty, I was told, are not tolerated in the Soviet Union.

Arrived in Moscow, I was taken to one of the best hotels in the city. It was early afternoon and I thought I would save time by starting on my calls straight away. But I had reckoned without the Soviet reforms. All offices were closed; I had hit on a Russian Sunday although according to the Western calendar the day was Wednesday. In Soviet Russia the week has five working days, every sixth day being a day of rest and I had unknowingly struck such a one. I therefore went sight-seeing. A taxi would have been useful, but the only available means of transport were the unbeliev-

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ably overcrowded tramcars and the Metro, Moscow's underground railway. Ah, this Metro! Every station entrance is a temple of sheer beauty with marble halls in different colours and designs, really unique of its kind. No wonder the Moscovites are proud of it. Down in the white-tiled tunnels there was less magnificence and the ventilation such as to induce my hurried exit after but a few minutes' travel.

I went to see the Red Square and looked once more on the grim walls and turrets of the Kremlin, now closed to the public, and the glittering beauty of St. Basil's Cathedral with its many variagated onion-shaped cupolas and its dome of inlaid gold. The Cathedral was built by Ivan the Terrible who was so pleased with it that he ordered the Italian architect's eyes to be put out so that he could never plan anything so beautiful for, possibly, another prince.

After dinner I strolled through the crowded streets. I passed a large building from which a loud-speaker blared forth without a pause. Inside, a long queue of people trickled past a counter behind which several officials attended them. It was a Post Office, but what business was being transacted after eleven o/c at night, I could not discover. Of night-life such as exists in most large towns, I saw no sign. The few cafés that were open were almost empty, but at the Hotel Metropole a dance band was playing to quite a crowd and there were a few couples solemnly fox-trotting in a subdued atmosphere lacking all spontaneous gaiety. The English, it would seem, are not alone in taking their pleasures sadly.



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My quarters in the hotel included the luxury of a bathroom. When I took my bath, a shower of rubble and plaster fell in the water, the taps and fittings being badly and loosely cemented in the wall. At night, my room gradually filled with steam from the faulty pipes, which somehow filtered through the badly fitting bathroom door. But worse was to come. I had gone to bed, tired and sleepy, when somewhere in an adjoining room a table-tennis tournament started. To the sound of the ping-pong I finally dropped off to sleep. Next morning I discovered that the noise I had heard was that of the hotel book-keeper manipulating his abacus. This ancient and primitive instrument is still in general use throughout Russia and I later saw it in Government offices. It consists of small ivory balls running on wires within a wooden frame. By flicking the balls to and fro, rapid calculations can be made without the use of pen or paper. It was the click of these balls, as the clerk made up his accounts, that had kept me awake.

When I rang for my breakfast, a white-coated waiter appeared to take my order. He produced a formidable menu and with a grubby finger pointed out certain suitable and delectable dishes. I said no to all of them and tried hard to make him understand that I required nothing more than coffee and bread and butter. He nodded violently and withdrew. Half an hour later he re-appeared with a large tray laden with a variety of dishes including an omelette and the inevitable caviare and vodka. The floor-manageress who could speak French put matters right for me and on the succeeding mornings I was served with the breakfast I wanted.

Later in the day I applied for and secured a chauffeur-driven Lincoln car and an interpreter-guide. I had several of those guides during my stay in Moscow, all of them young women with an astonishing fluency in English, yet none of them had ever been outside Russia. They were, I learned, college undergraduates who volunteered for this much coveted job. One of them, a girl of about eighteen, was most attractive, but Lord, to hear her talk, as Samuel Pepys would have said! I was prepared for small talk, for art, music or poetry — instead of which the charming, chain-smoking communist maiden treated me to statistics of heavy industries and steel production, the blessings of the Soviet system and of its superiority over all others. She held forth on the glory of the October revolution which to her marked the dividing line between the bad old times and the present millenium and expressed her pity for the wretched slaves (here she looked hard at me) of capitalistic tyranny. These idiological lectures were the price I had to pay for the company of the sweet child. I seldom got a word in edgeways.

One day, as we drove through the streets of Moscow, I noticed a number of women working with pick and shovel in an open trench. "I am surprised," I said, "that you allow women to perform such heavy work." "Surely," answered the pretty one, "women have the right to work as much as men." "That's not the point," I ventured, "it is the kind of work I am referring to." "Oh! they don't mind, they are used to it," said Olgo, airily.

On an excursion to an old monastery, now a historical museum, a few miles outside Moscow, a French-speaking interpreter was supplied because there were several French tourists among the party. This girl,

the only one by the way whom I noticed wearing a hat, spoke French as fluently as the others spoke English, and her descriptions of the exhibits, vestments, chasubles and the like, were technically perfect. In the cemetery adjoining the monastery, I was shown the grave of Stalin's first wife; a simple marble column terminating in her sculptured head, marked it.

That afternoon, back in Moscow, I heard from a side street the strains of a brass band. It was a band of some twelve men in civilian clothes marching in front of a horse-drawn cart on which rested a coffin covered by a red flag. It was a Soviet funeral; the mourners followed the hearse in procession.

One of the most impressive sights I witnessed was a long queue of people in the Red Square waiting to see Lenin in his lying-in-state. There were many hundreds of them, men, women and children, all patiently waiting in the scorching sun for their turn to pay homage to the dead leader. I took my place in the line and presently descended the steps down to the vault in the red marble mausoleum built against the wall of the Kremlin. There, in a brightly lit glass case, at each corner a soldier of the Red Army, lay Lenin, the maker of the Soviet revolution, with his powerful domed forehead and his reddish beard, uncannily life-like, as if asleep. I read later that the body is being kept preserved by means of an antiseptic fluid pumped through its veins by a concealed electric apparatus.

My meetings with the Government officials I had come to see were conducted in an extremely friendly atmosphere. At their conclusion I was invited to an official dinner at the Metropole. It lasted from 1 to 5 o/c and I returned to my quarters vowing I would eat and drink nothing more the rest of the week. If there was a shortage of food, I could see no sign of it that afternoon.

The streets of Moscow, unlike those of Leningrad, were full of life. By Western standards people were poorly dressed, few had leather footwear and even among Government officials I noticed men wearing shabby flannel trousers and canvas shoes. On the other hand I saw delegates from South-Eastern provinces dressed in beautifully embroidered white linen smocks. The shops seemed poorly stocked and prices were exorbitant, quite beyond the means of the average

worker. Cigarettes and cosmetics, however, were plentiful and reasonably cheap.

Housing, I was told, presented one of the most difficult problems. Russia was, at the time, in the throes of one of its five-year plans and much had to be sacrificed for the good of the nation. But in spite of austerity and the generally low standard of life, people seemed, on the whole, content with their lot. They had come through great tribulations, experienced conditions that were much worse and had known nothing better. The social services were certainly improved, illiteracy had practically disappeared and the higher education been made available to all. I was greatly impressed by the well appointed crèches in which parents could park their children during working hours to be looked after by trained nurses far better than they would be at home.

The limited and elementary knowledge of the language I possessed naturally restricted my contacts, but the people I met were all most kind and anxious to be helpful. The Russian, I found, is very human. I can still see the proud smile that lit up the face of the hotel porter as he showed me a photograph of his two children, the friendly grin of the chauffeur as he waved aside the tip I offered him, the well-meaning though unavailing attempts of a dapper policeman to direct me when I had lost my way, the earnest eagerness of the interpreters to improve my reactionary mind, the pains taken by the hotel clerk to explain to me the working of the abacus and the unfailing courtesy of the Government executives with whom I had to confer.

Yet, I heaved a sigh of relief when the Soviet territory lay behind me. Throughout my Russian days I had the uneasy sensation of being a prisoner. My precious passport had been taken from me and I could not leave the country without a police permit. This permit was not granted before I had produced a certificate from the people I had met, vouching for my bonafide. Getting out of Russia was as difficult as entering it.

I returned to London via Poland and through Nazi-ridden Germany, pleased to have caught a glimpse of Soviet Russia but with no regrets at my lot being cast in a Western democracy.

J.J.F.S.

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