

Back in the USSR

In July of 1969 at the age of 16, I left Toronto for London England with my father to join a Thomas Cook Tour featuring sightseeing through East Germany, Poland and the USSR. Convinced that we would be monitored and spied upon, I borrowed a small glass prism from my high school science teacher. I had heard that if held correctly against a mirror you would be able to see through any two-way mirror and thus expose those monitoring you. Other than that, I took no other precautions and set off on our adventure.

While over fifty years ago, many memories remain quite vivid from that trip. I recall driving through West Germany on the tour bus, seeing miles of barbed wire separating East and West Germany. Crossing the border, we made our way to West Berlin. West Berlin was a lively place. On the first evening in West Berlin, many from the tour group went off to a beer garden and I tagged along with my father. The place was crowded, loud and spirited. I was particularly pleased when the waitress asked me what I wanted to drink. "Ein bier bitte" I replied of course, while careful to see if my father was paying attention. I'm not sure what the drinking age was in Berlin, but that's what I was served. After all, why wait to be 21 in Canada to order beer; live for the moment in West Berlin.

Leaving West Berlin, we went through Check Point Charlie to tour East Berlin. Passports were taken and carefully examined by the East Germans. East Berlin looked like the war had just ended. Half collapsed buildings, all vacant, not a soul in sight until we were well away from the border. They took us to park where there were some huge statues to Lenin and other communist heroes, all quite stark in appearance. I was totally unimpressed. On our return to West Berlin at Check Point Charlie, everyone had to get off the bus and passports were collected again by the East Germans. Large mirrors on wheels were rolled under the bus to ensure no one has hiding underneath and the bus was thoroughly checked inside before we could proceed into West Berlin.

Leaving Berlin for Poland, we stayed in Warsaw. We went to a visitors' center and were shown a movie about the liberation of Warsaw by Soviet troops. It was very much a propaganda piece but still educational, showing the complete devastation of the city in pictures and video from the war. I remember to this day them telling us the population of Warsaw, when liberated by the soviet army, was zero. No one was left!

After leaving Warsaw we went to Moscow by way of Minsk [now the capital of Belarus and scene of populist demonstrations against the recent fraudulent elections there] and Smolensk in the USSR and then onto Moscow itself. When crossing the Polish-USSR border Cooks Tours provided us all with box lunches as the border waits were notoriously long. The delays were not because it was crowded, we and our bus companions were the only ones there. Guards entered the bus, collected passports, carefully making sure you looked at them directly to compare you to the passport photo. Leaving the bus with our passports we waited and waited. It just took the guards forever. I have no idea what they were doing. Finally, my father suggested I might go out and reserve one of the picnic benches in the shade in the adjacent parkette where we would have our box lunches later. In no time the people on the tour bus were banging on the windows and shouting for me to get back into the bus. Two Soviet border guards, complete with automatic rifles,

were running down the road to intercept me. I got back on the bus before they could reach me. Rule number one – don't get off the bus!

Later, arriving in Moscow, the first thing that struck me were the number of elderly ladies working with picks and shovels doing road work. Hard to imagine that back in Canada! And you couldn't ignore the huge murals on the sides of buildings with the very serious portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin. They were everywhere throughout the Soviet Union. Father, Son and Holy Ghost I suppose.

The tour of the USSR was limited to Moscow and Leningrad. So, some general comments might be in order. The toilet paper was atrocious throughout the Eastern bloc countries [Western Europe wasn't much better]. In fact, I started collecting samples of toilet paper in each city as none of my friends back in Canada could imagine the terrible paper they used. It was either wax paper, crepe paper or what seemed to be paper thin sheets of particle board, complete with wood chips imbedded in it! [pictures included below]

Oddly, the Soviets seemed to be incapable of building and maintaining elevators that worked properly. They were regularly out of order in the hotels or of suspect reliability. Amazing for a country that were first to send mankind into space. The large roads and avenues were largely empty, apart from the occasional taxi or official car. I could easily walk down the middle of most roads; they were that empty.

This was 1969, so western culture was well known around the world. When I walked down busy sidewalks in Moscow the crowds parted like the Red Sea. I was brightly attired [a lime green shirt with white polka dots if I recall correctly] while they were all in drab dark clothing. Soviets knew a westerner immediately and were reluctant to be seen to be near one in public. But, in private, a completely different story.

Barter and trading were the order of the day. As a young person, I was approached, on the side of course, to trade their souvenirs, buttons and pins for ballpoint pens, chewing gum or for anything in denim. On our first Moscow cab ride the cabbie offered my father an extremely generous exchange rate of Rubles for our Canadian or American dollars. This happened on several occasions. Oddly, there were officially sanctioned stores in Moscow where only hard currencies could be used [dollars, pounds, francs, lira, you name it]. The Soviets were desperate for hard currencies since the Russian Ruble was valueless outside the Soviet bloc. So desperate where they, that on the concluding link of our tour, the official currency on the Russian ship from Leningrad to London [by way of Helsinki and Copenhagen] was the Canadian dollar! As a side note, the Americans landed on the moon while we were on that Russian ship in the Baltic Sea. How ironic.

On the tour, we visited the huge department store GUM, by Red Square in Moscow. Very crowded as I recall, but not much of value to buy. Coincidentally, while we were touring Red Square there was a large crowd of reporters and onlookers. Curious, we joined the crowd to see Hubert Humphry, the ex-senator and Democratic presidential candidate in the middle of Red Square! Small world.

Later, we were then taken to see Lenin's tomb. There was a huge lineup of Russians waiting to go in, but the officials interrupted the line and in we marched, a couple of dozen touring capitalists. That must have irked the Russians waiting hours to get in. Once inside, you followed a path that lead you around the tomb and then out again. Guards were everywhere. In no time they were screaming at me in Russian. I shrugged and took my hands out of my windbreaker pockets. Rule number two – no hands hiding in pockets when viewing Lenin. I still wasn't impressed with Lenin, he looked like wax to me. I later learned there had previously been several attempts to damage the tomb and Lenin in it. A couple of years later a bomb was detonated in the mausoleum, reportedly killing three people, but Lenin was unharmed, so to speak.

In hindsight I was a little cavalier towards the Soviets and lucky I didn't get into more trouble. We were told by our tour guide, a pleasant young woman, not to take pictures of military personnel. Naturally, I made a point of subtly taking pictures of men in uniform, being careful to hold my camera nonchalantly at arm's length by my side. Later at home, I discovered I had a fine collection of photos of military personnel from the waist down. On several occasions, when on the tour bus, we passed military convoys, the location of which I would record. Later I would write a postcard to friends, carefully placing a large Soviet stamp over an abbreviated note as to the location of the convoy. Alas, I returned to Canada only to find my friends had long discarded the postcards. Oh, and the prism. I routinely used the prism to try and see through any two-way mirrors in our hotel rooms. I couldn't quite figure out how best to hold the prism to get the desired results and concluded if there was anyone on the other side, I must look pretty stupid.

Epilogue

While the differences between the societies was stark, Russia was a wonderful place to visit as a tourist. While there is no place like home, it was also a fabulous education and eye opener for a naïve, cocky young Canadian. Red Square, St Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin in Moscow, the Hermitage in St Petersburg, in fact all the art and architecture throughout Russia was and is well worth seeing.

As a senior executive at The Weather Network, I was fortunate to visit Moscow again on business in 2005, representing Canada as part of a media working group of the World Meteorological Organization. Much was different, while much was the same. You could still walk down the middle of the road in downtown Moscow, but only because of the traffic gridlock. Everyone was in a car! No one shied away from tourists anymore, quite the opposite. Sadly, many stores and restaurants had private guards monitoring who came and went. It was never clear to me if they were there to prevent robberies or simply as a "protection" racket by local gangs. Oh, and the elevators still don't work. One elevator at the main Russian meteorological offices had no buttons in the face plate and the second one creaked and groaned as it slowly went from floor to floor. We took the stairs.

Excerpt from Thomas Cook Motorcoach brochure

7th day CONTINUED

is Smolensk, where we spend the night. It is one of the oldest cities and is mentioned in historical annals in the year A.D. 865 and used to be a major trading centre as well as a strategical stronghold of ancient Russia. During World War II Smolensk was reduced to ruins and ashes, but much of the city has been restored and reconstruction work is still under way. Among the relics of the past which survived the devastation of the War are fragments of the Old City Walls, several churches, the 1812 War Memorial and the monument to the outstanding Russian composer, M. I. Glinka.

8th day

SMOLENSK: depart 08.30 **MOSCOW:** arrive 16.00

There will be a short sightseeing tour in the City.

Our route now takes us through the lovely country of the central Russian highlands. In places the dense forests come right up to the highway; in places they recede to the distant horizon, giving way to broad fields. To the right and left we catch glimpses of collective-farm buildings and machine and tractor stations. Passing through several small towns, we enter Moscow.

Here we spend three nights.

9th & 10th days

IN MOSCOW

During our stay here an extensive sightseeing programme will be arranged which will include visits to the main points of interest.

Moscow, the capital and largest city of the U.S.S.R., has a population of about seven million and is the country's main political, industrial and cultural centre. It is situated on the River Moscow and has developed into one of the world's largest cities and the capital of the first Socialist

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The fantastic domes of St. Basil's Cathedral, Moscow

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My toilet paper collection

[Note: Texture difficult to tell from the photos, however Leningrad, Smolensk quite waxy, Moscow and Warsaw like crepe paper and Poznań somewhat woody.

