

A TRIP TO THE SOVIET UNION 1989

This is a very preliminary draft of my notes from my 1989 trip. All mistakes and bad grammar are mine along . . .

Story One - Moscow

Story Two - Tblisi, Republic of Georgia, USSR

Story Three - Leningrad

Story Four - Talinn, Estonia, USSR

Story One – Boston, Helsinki and then Moscow

In January of 1989 the Boston Society of Architects advertised in it's newsletter that an exchange program had been established with the Union of Architects of the USSR organization and special tour was being organized for April. BSA members and their friends were invited to make inquiry about the particulars and a delegation for the tour was being organized. The tour director would be the BSA PR director, a woman named Lisa Sonier.

Since I was about 10 I have been fascinated by all things Russia. I jump at the chance to travel to the Soviet Union and meet architects there and see it with my own eyes. How exciting. Through February and March, as the list of people going on the tour filled out, the group met on Saturday afternoons at the BSA building. Lisa Sonier wanted us to get to know each other. In the end, surprisingly, only three of us were actual architects. That is Ok. When you are trying to find enough willing people to join a trip like the one being planned anyone with a checkbook is welcome. The point is to fill enough seats to make the trip happen.

The three of us who are architects also are the three youngest members of the group. Besides me there was a couple, also in their early 30s, who are coming on the trip in particular to explore their Armenian heritage. Even though Armenia isn't on the agenda. There is a retired

Harvard Professor of Music and his wife, a very wealthy couple who are doing the trip as the husbands' retirement present, a retired school teacher who is coming because her grandmother was from Estonia, a retired housewife from Connecticut who never shared anything about herself, the wife of a famous MIT physics professor, a 50 year old female public relations director along for the fun of it, Wayne, a Boston city planning department employee who by default was designated as my hotel room buddy, and oh, I almost forgot, a real live Bordello owning madame who runs the escort world in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the site of a large Naval base. The group skews to older and eclectic. Not perhaps a great audience for presentations about architecture.

The trip in the end turns out to not be what I had imagined it would be. It was a strange almost surreal experience for me. After two weeks in the Soviet Union, on April 15th, 1989 I find myself standing in line at Passport Control in Tallinn, Estonia. I am waiting to be processed in order to walk through the departure door and up a ramp to a giant ferry, my head still spinning from everything that has just happened.

We board the Finnish ferry to return to Helsinki and then a flight back to Boston. The ferry takes three hours to make the trip between ports so I settle onto a sofa next to the 'all you can eat' buffet and write down notes of what has happened in the past two weeks while eating smoked Salmon. Lots of smoked Salmon. What I am now writing comes from those notes. A few weeks after returning to Boston I expanded my hand written notes a bit and typed them out on an electric typewriter. Yes, an electric

typewriter. Remember those?

I made photocopies of those notes and handed them around to friends. And the President of my Architecture firm, Payette Associates. Tom Payette told me years later that it was that stapled together eight pages that first made him notice me. It led to his keeping an eye on my work and gave him confidence to assign me to the competition for a new University campus in Istanbul, Turkey. He figured that if I could make it through an experience like my Soviet trip dealing with Turkey would be a piece of cake . . . Being in the Soviet Union at that point in history was topical. It was the era of Glasnost and Perestroika, of Gorbachev and the beginnings of revolt in Eastern Europe. It was the perfect time to plan a visit to the Soviet Union. I saw with my own eyes the beginning moves of the collapse of the Soviet Empire. I got way more for my money than a simple trip to an exotic place. You will see . . .

In 2017 I discovered a yellowed photocopy of my 1989 typewritten notes tucked away in a box that holds my portfolio items. After reading the notes I decided to take a stab at fleshing out the story. Why? I am not sure entirely. For me the two weeks I spent in the Soviet Union and the events that unfolded around me changed my view of the world. It changed me as a person and prepared me for time a few years off when I would start traveling to Turkey regularly and then eventually move to Istanbul and live there for ten years. I learned on the trip how to smile and persevere in the face of amazingly bad events. Who I am today has a lot to do with the experiences I had then. I think it would be fun to be able to pass this story on.

This then is an enhancement of my typewritten notes. Once I have gotten through the four different episodes that my trip broke down into, then maybe I will take a stab at doing another round and turn this into a real short story in four parts. Or a book. Or not. We will see.

In 1989 individuals were not permitted to travel in the Soviet Union as a general rule. American citizens had to be part of an official delegation that was organized and supervised by entities that the Soviet government of the day found acceptable. It was understood that an American delegation traveling inside Soviet borders would be vetted and watched over at all times. Our group was sponsored by the Boston Society of Architects and was considered an exchange program with our Soviet counterpart organization in Moscow. From the moment our group crossed the border we were under constant observation. We knew it. "They" knew we knew it. It was woven into the day to day tour routine.

We had an official tour guide named Marina. She was a senior "Intourist" tour leader and also our chief watcher. She was friendly and personable and knew her way around the rules and regulations of hosting a foreign touring group. In each city we visited she reported to the local police anything she felt was important for them to know. She was also a black marketeer. Anything you had in your suitcase was a potential business transaction. In return for a pair of blue jeans or a piece of electronics she could barter a deal for caviar or art work or antiques. The one thing she never touched was currency exchange. There is the official exchange rate for dollars and there is the black market exchange rate which was in 1989 about 9X the official rate.

I will start my narrative at the airport in Boston. That is where the story began to take on an interesting trajectory for me. There is more to tell about the front end preparations but that can wait for now.

Logan International Airport, Boston

I arrive at Logan Airport with my two fully packed suitcases and a small carry on bag that is just big enough for my brand new camera and unused film canisters. I have had the camera for all of two weeks. Just long enough to have figured out most of the advanced features that made me want to have it on this trip. I am still not used to carrying the camera and its bag. I obsessively touch the case from time to time to make sure it is with me. To date it is the most expensive “thing” I have ever purchased.

My tour group is taking a shuttle flight down to New York's JFK airport to catch a Finnair flight to Helsinki. I find the rendezvous point at the news stand and joining my group. Lisa Sonier, our Boston Society of Architects tour guide, is checking our names off as we arrive. She carries a clipboard and several large yellow envelopes with tickets and liability release forms that we sign at a table in a fast food restaurant in the departure lounge. One of the ladies, an housewife from Connecticut, can't find her Passport for the longest time. I watch as she melts down and panics. After unpacking all her bags onto the Burger King table and emptying her purse she finds it caught in a fold at the bottom. Duh. No passport means not getting on the flight to Helsinki. That would have been a sad premature end to her trip.

We huddle for a moment as Lisa tells us to get to know

each other. We will be at close quarters during next two weeks and she needs our help to keep track of each other. We have been meeting as a group on Saturday afternoons so we recognize each other but this is the first time we have the chance to sit and talk with each other.

It is time to depart. We grab our luggage and head to the check in counter for the shuttle. It is late afternoon, the time when business traffic is flowing back to New York City after a day in Boston. The check in counter is a scene of chaos. A harried check in rep takes my ticket and grabs my two suitcases and sets them down on the floor next to other bags next to the completely full conveyor belt that is not moving. She turns around and finishes processing my boarding pass as the business man behind me is sarcastically complaining about how slow the line is moving. I am already half way to Russia in my head. I don't notice that the overworked check in rep has not attached the tags to my luggage or stapled the stubs to my ticket for claiming my bags at JFK . . . The first mistake of the trip has just occurred.

Boston to New York JFK is a short flight. I always enjoy doing this run in the evening. I always try and get a window seat and pass the flight with my nose glued to the window watching the cities and towns pass below in the darkening light of early evening. I love watching the lights come on below me. We land at JFK and then proceed to the luggage claim area to collect our bags.

Time is short for us at this stop in the journey. We need to collect our belongings and proceed to a different terminal to be processed for our flight to Helsinki. One by one the

group members locate their luggage and pull them off the conveyor belt and load them onto a cart which will transport them to the International terminal. Except for me. Minutes pass as I stand watching the carousel travel round and round, empty. A cold panic sets in. The conveyor belt stops moving. The sign announcing our shuttle flight number turns off. Total panic creeps over me. What? My brain can't comprehend what to think next. No no no no, this is not right. There is no time. I don't even know where to go to report the missing bags. I stand very still and have to remind myself to breathe.

Lisa grabs my elbow and pulls me over for a private chat. What has happened is unknown but obviously not good. Your bags did not get on the flight. They are probably still in Boston. It happens. There is nothing we can do about this. I get the first of many Lisa smiles that say wordlessly that she is sad for me. She tells me I have two choices and no time to decide. I can stay and wait for my luggage but it will be impossible for me to catch up with the group. I can only pass into the Soviet Union as a member of this specific delegation. If I choose to not travel with the group and wait for my luggage I will forfeit the money I have paid for the trip (2,750 dollars at 1989 value). The money is committed, already spent. That is just the reality of how such official trips work.

She pauses and gives me the second of her special pity smiles. Or I can board the Finnair flight with the group and proceed with the trip. I have my wallet with credit cards, my Passport, my camera and the clothes I am wearing. I ask if my bags could be forwarded to me later on. I get the third of what becomes an endless progression

of those special Lisa pity smiles. First, she said, we have no idea where your bags are. Or how long it will take to locate them. Second, you can't forward luggage into the Soviet Union. That is just impossible for any number of reasons. She smiled at me again. She is sad for me . . . You have what you need to stay with the trip but it is up to you. And you have to decide NOW.

During the eight hour flight from New York City to Helsinki I imagine where my luggage might be. I run inventories in my head of what I now do not have with me. My slides for presentations, print outs of the speeches I have written to share with architects at meetings. My . . . well, everything. My winter coat, all of my socks, . . . my toiletries. My underwear. My warm winter gloves. It is still Winter in Russia. Temperatures will often be below freezing. I honestly don't know what to do or even how to start thinking about what has just happened and what I am going to do about it. All I know is I am flying off into the unknown with only the clothes on my back and my wallet and Passport. And my lovely new camera . . . I think I looked like one of those deer caught in the headlights you hear about.

As I sit lost in my thoughts members of the group come sit next to me and commiserate. The strangest thing starts to happen. A retired Harvard Professor of Music History offers that he has brought two Winter coats and wonders if I could use the spare. We seem to be about the same size. Another lady in our group has brought along several extra pairs of gloves. You can never have too many gloves in Winter she says. Could use the pair she is holding. They are pink and fuzzy hand knit gloves with little fluffy pink

balls hanging from threads at the wrist. But they are gloves. Yes, why thank you. Lisa comes and sits next to me with yet another of her “I am sad for you” smiles and hands me a folded up warm looking scarf.

What remains most clearly in my memories of that flight however, are the flight attendants. They are elegant in a Nordic European way. They wore white caps with the Finnair logo. Their uniforms were elegant and crisply appointed. They wore white linen gloves that went all the way to their elbows. The gloves totally fascinated me. They were sexy, something that just wouldn't be worn in the United States. As I marveled at the those long white gloves I look down at the fuzzy pink gloves sitting in my lap. I laugh out loud. It is going to be OK. I will make the best of this.

Helsinki

We arrive in Finland early in the morning. We have most of the day to spend here before boarding the train to Moscow in the evening. The tour has booked a lounge at a big hotel across the street from the train station where our luggage can be stored. I sit in the lounge for a few moments and try to imagine my lost suitcases. Then it is time to fill the day with tours. Helsinki is a clean and prosperous city filled with Neoclassical stucco buildings. It is the beginning of April and this far north it is still cold. Spring has not arrived here yet. The patchy and dirty snow of late winter is everywhere. The people on the streets are all well dressed and happy looking. The streets are spotless.

Part of the reason for using Helsinki as our gateway into

the Soviet Union is to tour several of the most important buildings designed by a Finnish architect named Alvar Aalto. We are driven around the city in a tour bus and walked through his house, which is now a museum. He had been dead for 13 years when we tour his house but he is a Finnish national hero. In Finland and indeed among architects around the world he was and still is a superstar. His buildings stick out. They are sensuous and clever and well crafted when seen in person. We were even introduced to his widow at the house museum. My mind boggled.

The Alvar Aalto tour ends in the early afternoon and the schedule allows for the tour group to rest for two hours while we wait for the train to depart in the evening. A buffet table is set up in the lounge for us to nibble at. The train will not have food and it will be some time before we can get a meal in Moscow. Just as I am reaching for a plate with my eye on the smoked Salmon Lisa grabs my elbow (she does that a lot) and smiles at me. I can stay and eat Salmon and have no changes of clothes for the entire tour or I can join her in a whirlwind shopping spree.

The two of us slip out of the lounge and cross the street to the Stockmann department store. Stockmann is the flagship department store in Finland. It is well stocked and oh so expensive compared to an American equivalent. My credit cards got a work out in the next busy hour. I end up with a sophisticated European set of clothes, which is definitely not my style. I tend towards a rumpled absent minded professor look. My new purchases will be good for traveling about inside the Soviet Union though. Oh, and I bought lots of fancy Finnish underwear . . .

The sun sets early in Finland in April. As the darkness unfolds we walk across the street from the hotel to the train station and find the platform where our train will arrive. The Moscow Express pulls into the station arrives a few minutes later, exactly on time after its twelve hour journey from Moscow. The front of the engine sports an overly large Hammer and Sickle logo of the Soviet train network. The group is hushed. We are all thinking the same thing – Wow, this is real, we are going THERE.

The passenger list is affixed to a sign board at the door to each train car. We find our door and Lisa checks off our names on her clipboard and hands us our Passports. During most of our trip our Passports are kept in a large sturdy yellow envelope and not with each of us. At each of our stops the envelope is deposited into a safe room behind whatever hotel reception desk we are at. This gives the authorities control over our movement as foreigners need their Passports to travel more than ten miles outside of the cities on their approved itineraries.

We step onto the train car. Just inside the door is a man with his own clipboard who checks our Passports and notes the particulars on his paperwork in Russian. This will be the routine for the next two weeks. We will be obsessively checked and rechecked and counted with our particulars being noted on clipboards. One of the signs of authority in the Soviet Union is having a clipboard and something to write on it.

The train is painted inside and out with a particular shade of light greenish gray. It is quite dreary but I am told it is the official state color for vehicles like trains and buses and

subway cars throughout the Soviet Union. The train compartments are small and stuffy but comfortable once you get situated in them. Each compartment has four berths. The upper berths fold up out of the way during the day and all four compartment occupants sit on the lower beds. A thin mattress lays on top of the metal bases and on top of this lies something that resembles a sleeping bag which is open at the top. The first thing I thought of when I saw this was a box of Kleenex tissues. You were expected to crawl into this through the opening at the top. No blankets are to be seen.

The train pulls out of the station and travels east. In a short time we pass through the well lit suburbs of Helsinki and enter an endless pine forest. I doze off as we travel arrow straight through that forest for four hours. I once again try and imagine where my suitcases are at that very moment.

The Soviet Border

In the middle of the pine forest there is a clearing that stretches off into the distance in both directions. It is the middle of the night but the cleared area is lit brightly by giant sodium lights mounted on tall poles. These lights cast a yellow orange light over the ground of the clearing, which is about 300 yards wide. In the middle of the clearing is a well built tall fence. At intervals of about 300 yards there are guard towers with observation cabins mounted at the top. I wonder if these stretch the whole length of the border from the arctic ocean to the Gulf of Finland.

The train comes to a halt at a little station building in the middle of the clearing. Additional bright lights snap on,

illuminating the train like it is daylight. A man and a woman in civilian clothing jump onto the train the moment it stops. They march down the corridor briskly and efficiently. I had never considered how one would walk efficiently before. Their strides communicated authority. Do they practice walking like that?

Outside the train we can hear barking dogs. Lots of barking dogs. Behind the first two people to enter the train a line of uniformed border guards half run down the corridor. They are little more than boys, maybe 18 and 19. They all have shaved heads and carried clipboards. One soldier per compartment. We were told to stand in a line inside our compartment while the luggage and bags are opened and inspected. Our documents are inspected and noted on the clipboard. They make a lot of noise. They talk loudly and stomp around in their military boots. I chuckle to myself. The front line of the Iron Curtain is manned with teenage boys with acne.

A young man comes into our compartment where the four of us are lined up as instructed. He speaks broken English. Well enough to go through his list of questions and to check our documents. He asks each of us to point to our luggage after which he checks the contents. He comes to me and I give the universal signal of having nothing. I show my small carry on bag and he is instantly suspicious. What, you not have bags? Why is this. I launch into an explanation. Finally someone to tell the story to. He stops me. "Not important" he says. Next he collects our passports and holds each one up to our face to confirm the photograph matches the face in front of him. When he is satisfied with that inspection he writes

something on his clipboard.

He leaves. Two new uniformed teenagers enter almost immediately. These guards look rougher, dare I say less educated. They do not want us to speak with them. We are ignored in our line up as they proceed to pull up the carpeting around the edges and poke at the bedding and shine flashlights around the metal ceiling. They leave.

For the first of many times during the trip I feel helpless. Everything that has just happened is designed to intimidate. I keep thinking about my suitcases. Where are they right this minute? I feel exposed and monitored and I am barely across the international border. This is a new sensation for me. I feel what it is like to be truly afraid. This is just the beginning of it though. Throughout the trip an undercurrent of fear and intimidation will hang in the air.

After twenty minutes the first guard who entered our compartment, the one who seemed a bit better educated and who spoke some English, returned. He is smiling and jovial and carries a tarnished and battered aluminum tray with cups of hot black tea and small cookies. In a heavily accented English he says "Welcome to the Soviet Union".

In the compartment next to us Charlie, who mysteriously joined the group in Helsinki, is having a harder time of it. His luggage is opened and every item is being taken out and inspected and piled on the floor. They pat him down. They ask him pointed questions. The civilian dressed woman is reading through his notebooks and making notations on her clipboard. We learn a little later that Charlie is a free lance reporter on assignment with CNN. There are rumors of unrest in the Soviet republic of

Georgia and Charlie has joined us as the easiest way to get there. The Republic of Georgia is itinerary stop number two on our tour after Moscow. A little corner of my brain not already preoccupied with my lost luggage goes hmhhh.

The teenagers and their minders evacuate the train finally with the efficiently walking man and woman bringing up the rear. They are the last to step off the train onto the platform. A whistle sounds and the train jerks into motion. We are told to get some sleep as this next twelve hours are mostly at night and through a continuation of the vast pine forest that circles the planet at this far north latitude. I am too keyed up to try and sleep. I plant myself in the hallway outside the train compartments and stare out the window.

Every once in a while we pass through a small town with a sleepy brightly lit station. In preparation for the trip I have learned to read the Cyrillic script that Russian is written in. I try reading the signs announcing the towns at the stations as we pass by. This train from Helsinki is an express. It doesn't stop at any of these small stations. We travel at full speed for hour after hour after hour. As we come close to Moscow a glow paints the horizon. We start passing through districts of large factory complexes. These are brightly lit. I see smoke stacks in the dawning morning light belching smoke. The train is running parallel to roads with street lights and filled with early morning bus traffic. I can see tall apartment buildings crop up on the horizon. We are almost there.

Moscow

We arrive at the Moscow Leningradski Station early the next morning. The weather is gray and overcast and just

above freezing. There are still small piles of snow here and there along the platform. Our official tour guide Marina is waiting for us with a clipboard as we exit the train car. The guard who collected our Passports back at the border has traveled with us to Moscow. He hands the yellow envelope with our Passports to Marina who checks each name off of the list the guard has handed her. She checks the photographs in the Passports against our face in front of her just as the guard had done at the border. Charlie once again generates quite a bit of interest. He is pulled to the side for a short conversation with Marina and another unidentified gentleman in civilian clothes who looks important. He does not have a clipboard but it feels like he should. Satisfied that the paperwork is in order, the guard shakes Marina's hand and walks briskly back to the train and jumps onto the same car he had come in on.

We are escorted through the train station with the groups luggage piled onto a cart that is being pulled by two rough looking men in shabby uniforms the same green gray color as the train cars. We board a minivan with "Intourist" written in Russian on the side. It needs cleaning. Light blue curtains are installed over the inside of the large windows. Stepping into the vehicle I notice that the seats are covered in faded blue upholstery with airplanes and trains stenciled onto the fabric. After once again being counted we are driven into the central city on an eight lane highway that is mostly empty.

We are being housed at the Hotel Belgrad. This is a huge modern looking 20 story tall building on a busy six lane wide boulevard. Across from the hotel stands the Soviet Foreign Ministry tower. The hotel lobby is huge and ornate

in an odd eclectic way. The walls are covered in bright festive mosaics in semi-abstract compositions. Except I can make out rockets and workers in hard hats and over there, a dam. Everything in the lobby seems a bit worn out. Like it is time for a renovation. The air smells of mold and boiled cabbage. How odd.

We are checked in by Marina. Our Passports disappear into a secure room off the reception desk and room assignments are read off. I am designated to share a room throughout the journey with an older man named Wayne. He is a planner with the Boston Planning Commission. He is a recovered alcoholic he is quick to inform me. I am deputized to keep an eye on him and to help him in awkward moments when he refuses the Vodka toasts that are sure to come. He is worried about the obligations that come with Russian culture to drink toasts. He doesn't want to offend but he doesn't want to fall off the wagon either. I oblige through the trip. I think in the end we found a way for him to cope. You know, a small glass of Vodka and a small glass of water look exactly the same. As his wing man I often had to arrange for a switch out of view. It amused the hosts but they played along. I was told that drunkenness is a given among the Russians, a way to cope with the crazy world of the Communist Paradise they find themselves trapped in.

As Wayne and I are escorted to our room we come off the elevator on the tenth floor and enter a large lounge space. The room is filled with sofas and chairs in groupings. There are remnants of party decorations hanging on the walls and from the ceiling. I can't tell if they have been there for a day or six months. As we walk through the

lounge it is hard to not notice the six pretty young women sitting in the chairs. They seem bored, reading magazines and smoking. They are dressed in revealing dresses. I ask Marina what they are doing there. She says they are not important and I should not associate with them. Hmm. Hey, you don't suppose they are . . . oh never mind.

Settling into a hotel room is simple for me. I have a plastic Stockmann shopping with two changes of clothing, many many pairs of underwear and a few toiletries picked up in Helsinki. And a camera bag. I open a dresser drawer and drop in the plastic bag. The camera bag stays with me all the time. When I open the ceiling to floor curtains that cover one entire wall of the room I find I have a panoramic view of the Foreign Ministry wedding-cake skyscraper and the Kremlin beyond. It is such an amazing view that I pull out my new camera and a couple of shots of the city skyline. This is my next mistake . . .

After a short rest we are herded back into the drab gray Intourist minivan and driven to the Kremlin for an afternoon of museums and ancient churches. After the tours we walk along a pathway leading from the courtyard in front of the churches to a gate through the Kremlin wall and out into Red Square. It is so amazing to be standing in front of Lenin's tomb watching the solemn changing of the guards. We take turns having our photos taken in front of St. Basil's Cathedral.

After our next scheduled "rest" period we are driven back to the Kremlin once again and dropped at the another gate. We walk into the part of the walled enclosure where the Soviet government buildings are located. There are armed

security guards everywhere but we are not searched. It find that odd. And surprising. At the center of this area is a modern building called “The Palace of Congresses” where the Soviet Parliament sits. This evening we will sit in the Parliament Hall and watch a special performance of the Bolshoi Ballet as it performs a selection of dance pieces from several famous ballets.

I have my first experience of the “coat ritual” in Russia. It is very bad etiquette to walk into a building with your coat on and keep it with you. In the United States we usually keep our coat with us in cold weather and drape it over the backs of chairs or hold them in our laps. This never happens in Russia. As soon as you enter a building you find a long counter staffed with pleasant young ladies who take your coat and hand you a token for later retrieving it. Everyone does this. No exceptions.

After handing over our coats we travel up several floors on a massive escalator. We arrive at a long spacious lobby lined on one side by a row of huge double doors. Going through these doors we enter into the Hall of Parliament. The auditorium is massive, bigger than anything I have ever been in. I recognize it from news reports on TV and marvel that I am here. There is a mix up with our tickets and we are seated interspersed with a group of college students from Uzbekistan. I sit next to an art student who is sketching the hall and dancers in the dim light. He speaks a little English and we work at a broken chat.

At intermission we are told to proceed up several more floors on the giant escalator to a banquet hall where long tables full of foods is available to the audience as a part of

the ticket price. Mind you, we are talking of thousands of visitors milling around and eating. Another new experience for me. There are no chairs. The tables had big stacks of clean plates and the custom is to put a few items on your plate and then eat while standing back from the table. Then you go back for a little more and then stand back to let others get their chance.

There were open bottles of Vodka among the food trays on the table and people were pouring small glasses and proposing toasts. In Russia Vodka is drunk straight up from small glasses and the polite practice is to down it all in one gulp. After several toasts proposed by our new Uzbek friends I am a bit wobbly. Just then a series of loud bells began to ring and the thousands of people at the banquet turned as one and headed for the down escalator. Many were a bit wobbly like I was. Back to our seats we went for the second half of the performance.

I confess,. I drank quite a bit of Vodka during the toasting in the banquet hall. The next morning the scheduled excursion was to an ancient monastery complex called "Pskov". A must see Marina pleads with me at breakfast and then gives up. I tell her I need to just sit and regroup from last night. After the gray minivan pulls away I sit in the lobby for a while and then, to clear my head, I take a short walk by myself around the block. I found myself standing in front of the Soviet War College at one point. At the entrance to this famous institute there is a dramatic sculpture featuring a tank carved out of stone. I took a photo with my new camera of the sculpture next to the entrance. This was the next mistake I made.

Still feeling the effects of the night before, I walked back to the Hotel Belgrad and went to my room and laid down and took a nap. I woke up some time later, feeling oddly dizzy. The curtains were drawn. That was funny, I had left them open when I laid down. In the dim light I could make out in the shadows someone going through luggage. It must be Wayne I thought. I don't have any bags but my camera bag. Sleep overtook me again.

I woke up a few hours later as Wayne came into the room, just back from the excursion to Pskov. I asked him if he had taken a nap, assuming he had been the one going through the bags earlier. "No . . . I just got back from Pskov". It hit me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Then who was in room earlier . . . a wave of fear runs through me. The only thing of value I have with me is my camera. A really high priced camera. The bag is sitting there at the foot of my bed though. Whew. I go over and open the camera bag. I see unopened rolls of film. And empty space. The camera is gone. No No No No. I tear the room apart. Everything else is in place. Wayne checks his bags. They have been opened and the contents gone through but nothing is missing. His clothes are a mess.

So far it has been a rather dramatic trip for me. I stand completely still for five minutes, afraid to breathe. Afraid to say anything out loud. I remember now, you are not to take photographs of Soviet government buildings, airports, strategic motorways, Train stations . . . but especially as an American, do not, repeat, do not be seen taking photographs of government buildings. It was an awful idea for to throw open my hotel curtains the day before and start taking photographs from across the wide street from the

Soviet Foreign Ministry. And now what a coincidence, some unknown person has entered my room (while I was there but oddly unable to wake up) and goes through all of the luggage in the room and . . . my camera is gone. Only my camera.

I feel very small and stupid and vulnerable. I imagine all the books I have been reading about the bad old days when a knock at the door comes in the dark of the night and men in black trench coats take you away in unmarked vans. What is going to happen to me?

Wayne has slipped out of the room and gone to Lisa's room and reported the news. She comes running down the hall with Marina. Marina starts asking questions and taking notes in her little note book. "Yes, this is unfortunate, Jim. We must report this to the proper authorities so you will come with me now". Marina does not smile. This worries me. Lisa, on the other hand, gives me her signature pity smile and pats me on the arm.

Marina and I walk down the endless hotel corridor to the bank of elevators fronting the lounge. She presses the down button and the doors open immediately. She fumbles about in her pocket until she finds a single key with a metal tag on the chain. The number 12 is stamped on the metal. Key in the elevator? Then I notice. Between the push buttons for floors 3 and 4 there is a round plug the same size as the buttons above and below it. Instead of a button with a number on it there is a slot to insert a key. I know I have stared at this panel of elevator buttons many times . . . what else is there to do in an elevator. I swear I have never noticed this in between key slot before.

Interesting. We often don't see what we don't expect to see.

The elevator door opens and we are on a floor without windows. All I can see is a long corridor with blank doors covered in green leather. Instead of the carpet on the other floors this floor has gray linoleum tiles. The walls are painted that same green gray as the trains and buses and government vehicles. The ceiling, I note, is very low. What is this place? A simple name plate by each door carries only a series of numbers. We walk half way down the corridor and Marina stops me in front of one of the doors. She opens the leather covered door and there is another gray metal door without a door nob. I am imagining ten thousand things that are about to happen next. This was not an item on the tour itinerary.

Marina knocks on the inner door and I can hear someone inside use a key in the door. It opens. The room beyond is painted that same damned green gray. I hate that color by now. Nothing good comes when it is on the walls. No windows. Overhead exposed fluorescent lights and along the wall bank after bank of tall filing cabinets. In the center of the room is a ponderously large metal desk with five telephones. Old style dial telephones. Green gray . . . A man sits at the desk writing while smoking a cigarette. The air in the room is thick with smoke. He sees us and puts the cigarette out in a huge ash tray that is almost full. He motions Marina and I to sit in the two chairs facing his desk. This man is dressed in a uniform that is a bit rumpled, as if he has been sitting at this desk for a long time. After we sit down he lights another cigarette and for about two minutes he just stares at me.

He smiles. "I am told we have a problem. We do not like to hear of thefts at this hotel. I am quite certain such a thing could not happen here. Are you sure you didn't leave your camera somewhere during your tours. That seems more likely."

He makes a few notes as I answer a series of questions. He is interested in why I did not go to Pskov with the tour group as the itinerary said. When I told him I had slept in and then taken a walk around the block his interest perked up. A new sheet of paper was started just to record my walk. He kept stopping his questions to just stare at me for too long. It was unnerving. After the questions are finished he pushes back in his chair and stubs out his third cigarette and stands up. "We will investigate and you will come back in the evening and fill out the appropriate police statements."

He moves to the gray metal door and opens it with his key and then pushes the outer leather covered door and motions for us to follow him. We start walking down the corridor back towards the elevator doors. He stops us in front of door 408. In my head a voice is screaming. This is where they put you in a room with a bare light bulb overhead and interrogate you about what you were photographing . . . He raps on the outer door and opens it. Hmm. This room does not have the inner metal door. The room beyond is much larger than the room I have just been in. It is painted that same terrible color but is very brightly lit. Floor to ceiling metal shelving fills the room wall to wall. Thick cables snake along the shelves and attach to banks of identical reel to reel tape recorders sitting on the shelving. Some of the tape machines are operating, the

big wheels of tape slowly rotating. Most are not in operation right then and sit motionless. The room is immaculately clean. I remember that. Near the door is a single metal desk just like the one I have just sat in front of. A man in uniform sits at the desk smoking. He is facing us as we stand in the doorway while writing notes in a notebook laying on the desk. A pair of ponderous headphones are sitting on his head as he writes. He looks up and smiles and waves . . .

The officer who is escorting us delivers us to the elevator doors and shakes my hand. He tells me he knows everything that goes on in this hotel and my camera could not have been stolen. I look over at Marina. She says nothing but arches her eyebrows dramatically twice and gives me the “I am so sad for you” smile that she has learned from Lisa. The officer turns around and walks away and Marina takes out her key and turns it in the slot to call the elevator. When it arrives we step in and doors close behind us. Marina hesitates a moment before inserting the key again to start the cab to travel to one of the numbered floors.

She looks at me very seriously and tells me that I will not talk about any of this with the other tour members. “We will not find your camera. You must accept this. We will fill out the police report and you can take a copy back to the United States and maybe your insurance will replace it. “

Of course the other tour members ask where I have gone and what happened. I say very little. “We went and filled out some papers and I answered some questions” is all I volunteered. The look on my face perhaps discouraged

further questions.

We are scheduled to attend a famous restaurant in the evening so the group members turn to talking about this. We are told to take a rest to be ready for an evening of interesting entertainment. Sure, lets rest. I lay on my hotel bed and stare at the ceiling for two hours until there is a knock at the door. It is Marina. "You will come with me now" she says. We repeat the earlier journey to the floor that does not exist and I find myself sitting in a different room that is oddly exactly the same as the one I had visited earlier.

This time, however, the man facing us across the metal desk is wearing a badly fitting civilian suit. He also smokes. A type written statement is pushed across the desk to me. It comes in two versions, the official one written in Russian on official stationary with governmental looking logos at the top and a second one typed in English on plain sheets of paper. Both have copies of each page attached behind a carbon copy sheet. Now there is something that younger people have no idea about. Carbon copies . . .

The English translation says that I have reported a stolen camera and that the camera has not been found. I sign both the Russian and English statements. The man busies himself pulling the carbons apart and then proceeds to pull out the most amazing stamping device. It is all metal with rotating wheels on which rubber letters and numbers are located. He laboriously clicks the wheels around until the current day and time is in place and then stamps all the sheets of paper with ink from a big stamp pad. As he is

doing this I look around the room and finally down at the desk top. In this room the top of the desk is covered by a large sheet of glass that covers the whole desk surface. Facing me under the glass are the photographs of two young girls, maybe 20 years old. The photos look like what you might expect from a graduation photograph. The girls are smiling and look happy.

I turn to Marina and ask who these girls are to have their picture tucked under the glass like that. "They were killed here recently" Marina replies while staring me in the eyes as if to say "please don't ask any more". My carbon copies of the two documents have been folded and put into an official looking envelope and handed to Marina for safe keeping. The man behind the desk lights another cigarette and ignores us. We are dismissed.

Marina and I return to the elevator and to the official public world. She stops me briefly in front of Door 408 and arches her eyebrows twice. Then we move on to the Elevator bank. It dawned on me that this second office had the outer leather covered door and the inner metal door without a door nob but the inner door had not been locked. I wondered at that as the doors opened back on the floor my room was on. Marina reminded me once again that I was not to talk about any of what I had seen. She told me that she would hold onto the envelope with the documents until it was time to depart from The Soviet Union and then she would give them to me. From then on the camera was never officially discussed again.

It is the nature of group tours like the one I am on that they are over scheduled. I am by nature not well suited to these

things. I like to take my time and ponder a place and sit at a cafe and watch the local life pass by . . . for half a day at least. I like to be in a new place long enough to get bored on a Sunday afternoon. That is my way. But the tour must go on. So on the same day that some strange thing has happened to me that led to me losing my camera which led to me going TWICE to the floor that does not exist and seeing a room filled with tape recorders . . . well. Now it was time to shower and get dressed and go to “the world famous Peking Restaurant” according to my photocopy of the itinerary. We are to meet the architects who are hosting us for the first time.

The Peking Restaurant was more like a circus than a place to eat. It was thick with foreign tourists and spread out through several halls decorated in a funky Chinese retro design sense. There were hundreds of people sitting at tables in the hall we are directed to. There is the delegation of local architects. We go through a stilted meet and greet and then are seated so that there is an English speaking Russian architect near most of us. I am seated next to an architect who turns out to be a famous historian. His English is very good is heavy in the accent and we strike up a lively conversation about architectural topics of the day. The food arrives and we eat.

After the meal there are speeches and toasts and more speeches and the Russian architect, Andrei Gozak, grabs my arm and says “this is very boring is it not”. He leads me through back corridors meant for the staff and we pop out at a dance revue in another part of the restaurant. On stage there are scantily clad young women doing dance numbers that make their boobs jiggle. That seems to be

the most important talent on display. Andrei is clapping loudly and whistling. What? This day has been too much, let me go back to my room and mourn my camera. I tell Andrei about the camera and a little bit about the floor with no number. He shakes his head when I tell him I think it has something to do with taking photographs of government buildings. "That was very stupid of you" he shares. You are lucky they just took your camera and you didn't have an accident. That hangs in the air for a moment. The stage show ends and we hurry back to the banquet hall just in time for the final toast, sit down and smile.

At the end of the banquet another of the architects named Eugene invites our group to his apartment for informal talking and more toasts. We load into our drab minivan and drive off into the evening along the wide empty boulevards to a six story building. Eugene is a part of the privileged class in Russia. He has a spacious upper floor apartment with panoramic views. The apartment is tastefully decorated with overstuffed furniture and very nice antique carpets are spread around on the floor. The thing that impresses me the most though are the books. Every vertical surface in the apartment has a bookshelf on it, including in the bathroom. I feel like we have arrived at a public library that someone lives in. In the places where there are no books Eugene exhibits an amazing collection of original paintings. We drink toasts. We talk. Eugene sings. I sit at his kitchen table and talk about politics. This amazes me. Especially on this day.

Eugene has a 15 year old son who has his own bedroom. His son invites some of us into his bedroom to listen to him

play his electric guitar. The room is filled with sports posters and looks like any teenagers' bedroom anywhere. The kid puts a heavy chain around his shoulders and cranks out some punk rock numbers. He says the songs are protest music against the oppression of the regime. Wait. What? Did he just say that? He sets down his prized electric guitar on its stand and takes the heavy chain and carefully coils it in the corner on the floor.

The time comes to say our good byes. One last round of toasts around the kitchen table and down the staircase we go. We huddle in the cold air on the sidewalk as we are counted and noted on Marina's clipboard. I am the last person in the line and Marina steps into the minivan without looking back. Now why I got this in my head I will never know. I knew that our hotel was around the corner from the Lenin Library, which is a huge building that takes up a whole block and even has a subway station right at the front door. I knew we had traveled straight down Gorky Prospect to Eugene's apartment. Why not, my Vodka addled brain said, just walk back up Gorky until I find the Lenin Library and then the hotel is right around the corner. Great plan.

The minivan door closes and away my group goes, oblivious to my brilliant plan or that I am not on board. It would have been a great plan if I had not immediately set out in the opposite direction to the way I needed to go. I walked and walked. And walked some more. It is now about 11:00 pm and I am realizing my plan was not so great. I come upon two men who are hanging posters on the wall of an apartment building. I ask if they speak any English. One of them says a little bit. They are students

and the posters they are hanging are protest posters. Against the government . . . there is a theme to the evening. After a few awkward sentences they understand why I am standing and talking to them and the dilemma I am in. "Help us hang a few posters and we will take you to a subway stop and the Lenin Library subway station is only three stops away. So I spend about 30 minutes hanging anti Soviet posters in central Moscow.

True to their word they guide me to the subway station nearby and buy me a ticket and explain which train to look for. We shake hands and away they go with their roll of posters and a pot of wheat paste. I go through the turnstile and reach a place in the station where you have to go right or left. The corridors leading away are clearly marked of course, but in Russian. I confidently choose my corridor and just as I arrive at the platform a train pulls in. I jump on and the doors close and off we go. One stop, two stops, three stops. The train pulls into a station that is not the expected Lenin Library Station. I panic. It takes me two more stops to stand in front of the map slowly reading the Russian names to realize I am on the right line but going in the opposite direction. I am heading to a suburb called Cherkizovskaya on the Red line.

At the next stop I jump off and puzzle my way to the platform going in the direction I want and after many stops I am climbing the stairs of the station in front of the Lenin Library. From there I manage to find the hotel and walk into the lobby at 1:15 in the morning. Marina is sitting in a chair watching the front door. "What am I going to do with you, Mr. Jim. Where have you been"? She didn't count the group until they had arrived at the hotel and were exiting

the minivan. She came up one person short. Matching names to faces it quickly became clear that the 'problem person of the day' had disappeared into the Moscow night.

Before she let me drag myself to my room Marina taught me a valuable lesson. "When many toasts are being given, take very very small sips. You Americans, you never learn this and I am always having to deal with people who are not used to the way Russians drink". Good lesson.

Learned the hard way. But a lesson that has done me well over the decades.

Tblisi, Republic of Georgia

Five hours later I am roused from a fitful sleep and told to pack my plastic Stockmann bag and empty camera case and report to the minivan. It is time to fly to the next city on the itinerary. My head hurts. I can hear a distinct high pitched whine in my ears. Did yesterday really happen? The group wants every detail. I am providing them with entertainment that is not on the printed itinerary. I remain true to my word about not speaking of the floor with no number or what I have seen on that floor. Marina is watching me like a hawk at the moment. It will be good to behave myself and become uninteresting for a bit. The adventure of the night before on the subway is fair game though. The group devours every detail and has many questions. None of them would dare to do such a thing of course. The only part I leave off the story is hanging anti Soviet posters. I am learning the Russian way.

Thus ends the first chapter in my trip to the Soviet Union. This was the least eventful few days of the trip. Well sort of. You will see . . .

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