

RUSSIAN SUMMER

Ellen Ryan



In the heat of the Cold War, the USA and the USSR offered scholarships for students to learn each others' language and culture.

So it was that I spent the summer of 1968 in the Soviet Union. This was a memorable time in Europe because Alexander Dubek was decentralizing Czechoslovakia, opening up the country after 20 years of 'occupation'. Like many Czech expatriates, my thesis advisor was headed to Prague to visit his mother for the first time since his defection years earlier. Journalists were writing article after article about whether this was the beginning for all of Eastern Europe or whether there would be a Soviet crackdown.

This was a time of transition for me. Just before graduating from Brown University that June, I became engaged to marry a Canadian and committed to moving to Canada within a few years. I would begin PhD studies at the University of Michigan in the fall.

I chose to study Russian in college because I realized in my teens that the Red Scare of the 50's and 60's was at least partly propaganda. Even though I had only studied the language for two years, I was keen to travel, to see for myself. Our group of 100 Americans studied Russian for six weeks at the University of Leningrad, with afternoon cultural lectures and weekend tours. We took advantage of the low cost for cultural activities central to communist policy to attend the opera and ballet and to visit the Hermitage Museum repeatedly. Then we embarked on one-week tours of Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa.

This being my first travel outside North America, I had much to learn. In addition to the formal InTourist activities, we interacted with students in the university residence, went on picnics, walked the city, attended student

parties with the locals. Russian individuals (younger and older) would initially greet us with a standard opening – "We disagree with your country's policy on Vietnam... but we know you have little say in what your government does." – then be friendly and helpful. I did not know enough Russian to discuss politics. So I could not tell them about my recent protesting on campus and my view that citizens in a democratic country are indeed responsible for their government's behaviour.

Foreshadowing my eventual

Entrance to Leningrad (now again, St. Petersburg)





Exploring

specialty in gerontology, I relished visits with my friend Maryusha's babushka in the tiny apartment where stacks of books held a board for her dining table. Maryusha's parents fled during the devastating Siege of Leningrad 25 years earlier. Growing up in the USA, Maryusha had long prepared for this student trip to get to know her babushka. We sipped glasses of hot tea in traditional metal holders while listening to stories of family, loss, courage, secrecy, hidden radios for Radio Free Europe, and reading, always reading.

This cross-cultural summer launched my citizenship in the world. Not only did I learn from Russians and Czechs that summer, but also through conversations with my American peers from different universities, areas of the country, and social class. From students of Slavic background, like Maryusha, we heard stories of emigration by choice or in flight from war or threat of imprisonment for political views.

My husband and I moved to Canada with our three children after a decade. Over the years we travelled with them to other countries. No surprise that our son Kevin went to Stockholm for the adventure, met his Slavic/Swedish wife Anna, and is raising his family in Sweden.

The world is a gentler, smaller place when individuals from disparate regions talk with one another. Now, at a time when world tensions mount again, and politicians speak of building physical and ideological walls, I think it is important to revisit and share my early experiences in international dialogue.

The two poems on the next page emerged from reliving my Russian Summer. The first poem describes one particular walk in Leningrad (now again, St. Petersburg). The second poem tells how we met Czech students in Odessa and our emotional overnight train ride together to the international airport in Kiev. We did learn later that the Czechs arrived home safely, after a day of detention while officials tried to decide what to do with them.

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Reminiscences by Ellen Ryan

Butter Butter

On Nevsky Prospekt
Czars' gracious boulevard
we American language students walk
in dreary grey Leningrad
where clothes never dry.

The summer of misplaced forgiveness
for U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War
"We know you are not responsible
for what your country does."

My friend Linda commands vocabulary
her Russian intonation flows.
She cannot roll her r's.
Budding linguist and psychologist
I know only tourist phrases, baby grammar
yet fall upon a trick to teach my comrade.

While we stroll in colorful capitalist clothes
gaudy among government-issue drab
long-ago outdoor lessons come to mind.
Pépère Morin taught me to roll my r's
while tending his vegetable garden.
What glee when I could pronounce his
name
en français, the French-Canadian trill.

"Butter butter, better butter"
Say the words
speak fast
lengthen middle sound
repeat middle sound
"bu**er bu**er, be**er bu**er."

By the time we reached the Hermitage
Linda was rolling her r's
French-Canadian path
to pure Winter Palace rolled r
in elegant old St. Petersburg.

Prague Spring¹ Ends in Odessa

Naive American language learners
we land in Odessa after rainy Leningrad
to holiday on the Black Sea

Sunrise aerobics on the beach
comrades stretch toward coming light
smooth waves glint among rocks

As we return along grand boulevard
a crowd spills outside our hotel
we shiver despite bright warmth

Engineering students from Prague
hold American radios to their ears
our festive mood vanishes

Radio Moscow intones
"We'll end democracy's oppression.
Czechs invite our tanks."

That night both groups board airport train
Radio Prague squawks
new hiding place each hour

Tank locations named in turn
Czech youth exclaim "My street" "My
street"
In anguish they talk of home

Parents followed rules
eyes kept forward
left secret-telling to the old

Aspirations were preserved
sovereign republic recalled
possibilities sparked

In these voices we hear Grandma
enshrining time before time
when all could walk free

¹Prague Spring - 1968 Democracy Move-
ment in Czechoslovakia