Western Fact Finders: Entering the Soviet Union

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This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

I first entered the Soviet Union in 1987 with an unusual group of people. I traveled under the mantle of the World Media Association (WMA). This group had invited me to attend a conference in Seoul, Korea earlier in the same year with all expenses covered. Curious, I had accepted, and found myself amid some of the most extreme republican media writers in the United States, as well as very conservative Republican senators and congressmen. They launched into assault on what they termed the "liberal media," culminating in an appearance by their leader, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon on the final day, Moon ascended to the podium to a standing ovation, accompanied by athletic young men clad in black, who allegedly all had black belts in judo. Once there, he predicted that the next such forum would be in Moscow in five years' time, a statement applauded routinely but perhaps without much real belief in its accuracy. Oddly it turned out to be true.

In Seoul, I met Arnold Beichman, an editorial writer for the newspaper founded by Moon, *The Washington Times*. He held a research position at the Hoover Institution but spent his summers with his wife in Penticton, British Columbia. He was already 74 years of age and could perhaps be described as an old-school conservative intellectual who distrusted the Soviet Union wholeheartedly, and had written a book on Soviet violations of arms control agreements. Arnold would iterate choice phrases, such as "Capitalism is what people do when you leave them alone." Though I disagreed with him on most political issues, I found him an engaging and amusing companion. Quite why he associated with the WMA I did not know (other than its newspaper promptly published his weekly editorials), but evidently it was he who had passed on my name to them after reading my articles on Chernobyl.

After this meeting, I was invited to a "fact-finding trip" to the Soviet Union, something I found too good to resist despite my lack of political or religious affiliations to the group and general wariness of its political leanings. In short, I thought it might have been the only way for me to visit the Soviet Union, nicely concealed within a group of the political far-right. In retrospect, I do not know whether it was a wise decision, but I accepted and flew in November to Helsinki, the only part of the trip that was not covered by the WMA. It appeared that they wanted some academic specialists on the USSR to accompany the journalists and group members – Beichman had also recommended John Dunlop, a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, who became a good friend. We traveled by plane to Leningrad, and descended on Passport Control. Likely we were expected but the authorities seemed unprepared for the number of times the red warning light would turn on as we were filed through.

I had anticipated some problems because of my time at Radio Liberty, short though it was, but the long staring match I had with the border guard paled beside that of Ray Cline, the former CIA chief in China. By November 1987, however, a number of changes had occurred under Gorbachev, and after some delays we were all permitted to enter. Our assigned guide from Intourist was a 29-year old man called Igor, who spoke English without accent, and had a sardonic sense of humor. We would not be sent to the Gulag for speaking out, he said, so you are welcome to ask any questions. The other guide, Vladimir, was more senior and more obviously KGB.

We stayed at the Hotel Leningrad, alongside the water, with the cruiser Aurora nestling in the bay. Our arrival was relatively late at night and some of us decided to visit the bar, which was a place of mayhem. Numerous Finns were

practically insensible with drink, some even to the extent of falling down and passing out. A group of Germans regarded them with benign contempt. We did not remain long.

The idea behind the fact-finding mission, and one of its appeals, especially at this point in Soviet history, was access to high-level officials (though not Gorbachev) and institutions, as well as major newspapers, and to ascertain the authenticity of the changes taking place. Such access would have been inconceivable for the individual scholar. And we were no ordinary group of tourists: we were mostly comprised of very outspoken right-wing Americans, a few Europeans (mainly Germans), and one lone Canadian, all ready and prepared to bring up controversial topics such as Afghanistan, the Mathias Rust incident (the young German who had flown a Cessna under Soviet radar and landed in Red Square), and of course Glasnost and its progress. Beichman typified the attitude when, entering a plush conference room at the Novosti Press Agency he observed an airbrushed picture of Gorbachev on the wall and bellowed: "Where's his raspberry"?

Most of the group were not merely suspicious of the changes in the Soviet leadership, they were downright hostile. If one had wished to rekindle the Cold War, then this was probably the group to do so. But our hosts were unfailingly polite, no matter how rude (or ignorant) the questions might be – Bill Gertz, a reporter from *The Washington Times*, was particularly aggressive. At the office of the Mayor of Leningrad, one could ask direct questions about the Bolshevik Revolution. In Moscow, at *Izvestiya*, I was allowed to start a discussion about why the newspaper had not revealed more information about the Chernobyl disaster the previous year – the response was that it had received orders from the government not to do so – and even the touchy subject of the war in Afghanistan, then nearing its end, did not go unanswered.

One visit was to the ornate Orthodox seminary near the city of Zagorsk where clerics gathered to answer our questions. Their reticence irritated Vladimir, especially to the question:

"How many Orthodox believers are there in the USSR?" The clerics had hesitated.

"Tell them!" He demanded.

The priest then muttered "There are millions." A simple answer to a simple question.

Igor was open to discussion. One evening I found him sitting alone at the hotel bar and joined him. We discussed the education system in the USSR and what he had read at school and beyond. He remarked that he had few problems wading through the works of Lenin.

"But Brezhnev was another matter," he continued. "Can you imagine? We had to read nine volumes of his nonsense."

I found Igor far more open and reasoned than many people in my own group.

After several days with the guides visiting the usual tourist spots, I decided to venture out alone into the streets of Moscow, enjoying the freedom. I visited the Old Arbat and was on the way back to the hotel when a car pulled up alongside and a man in full military uniform ordered me to get in. I refused but he continued to insist, with his passenger door open. Eventually, I just walked away and he could not follow without getting out of his car. I had no idea who he was or whether I had been watched all the way from the hotel. But he was alone. I could only imagine that if there were serious intent to follow and detain there would have been more than one person in the car. I learned later that several members of the Glasnost informal group had been arrested that same day.

When we visited any museum, ballet, or opera, our group was always shepherded to the front of the line, while the red-faced freezing Muscovites in their hats and scarves waited patiently. Moscow's overall impression was that of a dark and grey city, with few lights on anywhere. We travelled everywhere in a comfortable bus and stayed at good hotels though we had to share rooms – there were no single rooms in 1987. I shared a room with a true fanatic who told me that he had helped foment uprisings to support military takeovers in Latin America against pro-Communist

regimes. Our room phone would often ring several times during the night and go silent when we picked up. Virtually all the WMA men had Korean wives, whom they had not met before the wedding ceremony arranged by the Unification Church.

In between the two major cities we spent time in Samarkand, where two local KGB men followed us around without any pretense of concealment, and where an Uzbek journalist reported quite frankly about those who had "volunteered" from the republic for cleanup work at Chernobyl who had returned sick and many of whom had died, but were not on any official list of medical casualties. The city was outstandingly beautiful as were its people. Most importantly, the Soviet Union was now accessible to me for the first time. Thus, when the WMA invited me once again in 1988, with Kyiv (Kiev) now added to the usual Moscow-Leningrad segments, I decided to return. Roma Hadzewycz of *The Ukrainian Weekly* was also among the invitees, at my suggestion. Though Moscow was exciting and amid great changes, Ukraine was the place I really wanted to visit. It was November, very cold, and the flight to Kyiv on Aeroflot was hair raising.

Kyiv was notably slow to adopt to the "new thinking" proclaimed by Gorbachev. Whereas in Moscow and Leningrad informal groups proliferated, Ukraine lagged behind, governed by the Brezhnev-era party boss Volodymyr Shcherbytsky.[1] Though Chernobyl had inspired some new movements, their leaders often appealed directly to Gorbachev for support, struggling against their own party authorities, who operated from stronghold cities such as Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk. Our arrival coincided with the first popular protest in Ukraine, by an environmental organization, and attended by about 10,000 people.

Not long after we arrived in Kyiv, I was greeted at our hotel by Chrystia Freeland, currently Canada's Deputy Prime Minister but then a 19-year old exchange student from Harvard University. She was my neighbor in Edmonton, and very happy to see someone familiar. She remained with myself, Roma, and a few others, and we met with a well-known dissident and political prisoner Oles Shevchenko (b.1940), the new Chair of the Kyiv branch of the Ukrainian Helsinki Union. The interview, foolishly, was held in a hotel room, and was very frank. Shevchenko had served time in the notorious Perm labor camp and was later to be a deputy of the Ukrainian Parliament and leading member of the Ukrainian Republican Party.

After the interview we escorted Shevchenko to the hotel entrance where a fleet of "taxis" awaited him, all, according to him, KGB operated. Promptly, we retreated and called a regular taxi company. Roma and several others accompanied him back to his apartment. I learned from Chrystia, who remained behind, that she had attended the environmental protest and she provided me with the details, which we published as a joint article in the RFE/RL Research Bulletin. I had been recruited by S. Enders Wimbush, the new Director of Radio Liberty, on a two-year contract to write regular articles for the journal.

At Radio Kyiv, the conversation had begun in Russian, but Roma intervened and asked our hosts why they could not use their native language. They were happy to oblige, which instantly threw our hired translator into a quandary because he could no longer follow the conversation. Our Intourist guide was visibly annoyed. I also was able to meet with historian Leonid Leshchenko, who was on the editorial board of the *Ukrains'kyi Istorychnyj Zhurnal* (Ukrainian Historical Journal), with whom I had corresponded for some time.

In Moscow, we visited Spaso House, the residence of the US Ambassador Jack Matlock, who had gathered informal group leaders from across the Soviet Union. They included Taras Chornovil from Kyiv, and the brothers Bohdan and Mykhailo Horyn, from Lviv, with long records as dissident protesters. People from the Baltic States were prominent, as they had been at the Kyiv demonstration earlier, leading the way on the path to independence, though such a word was still premature in 1988. In Moscow there were meetings everywhere, as well as plays, theatre shows, public demonstrations, and endless discussions. Crowds would gather outside the publishing house of *Moscow News*, waiting for the latest edition to appear on the billboards. Gorbachev was still leading the way but at times being overtaken by more radical elements who wished to spread Glasnost much faster, including in de-Stalinizing the country.

During this trip, like previous ones, I always left with some anxiety about the state of health of my daughter, Nicole.

Though her condition stabilized, it was never with the feeling of permanence because the seizures continued and were impossible to stop. Our pediatrician had recommended that we send her to some sort of remedial home, but that thought was never in my mind, nor that of Lan. At some point, I realized that she liked classical music and so would often play Mozart to her as I held her – she couldn't lift up her head – and she would give a rare smile. I believe to this day that she understood a lot more than we could discern.

We were living in a housing community called the "Ukrainian Hromada" in Edmonton, along with the Himkas, Freelands, Petryshyns, local author Myrna Kostash, and others. The Hromada's initiators were all women – Myrna, Halyna Freeland, Marusia Petryshyn, Chrystia Chomiak – and it had an ideological base to support feminism, Ukrainianism, and socialism. It occupied two streets in the district of Old Strathcona. We had joined after returning from Munich and after Nicole's birth had been assigned the largest house because of her special needs. Thus, during my travels, I at least knew that there were plenty of friends close at hand who could assist Lan if needed.

The day before we left the USSR I received a phone call from Lan to say that Nicole had died suddenly. Though she had never been well, it was still a terrible and devastating shock, and being in Moscow at the time I could not have returned any earlier. At her funeral in Edmonton, everyone from the Hromada attended, along with Bohdan Krawchenko and his wife Kim Fraser. It meant a lot to us and helped to assuage some of the terrible grief. I was and remain utterly grateful.

Notes

[1] Volodymyr Shcherbytsky (1918-1990) was born in Katerynoslav gubernia, then in the Ukrainian People's Republic (Dnipropetrovsk region). He led the Communist Party of Ukraine between 1972 and September 1989, when he also served as a member of the CC CPSU Politburo. He reportedly committed suicide on February 16, 1990.

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