

THE ARTIST IN RUSSIA



Lake Foresters Franklin and Irene McMahon were in Russia last summer during a tour of Eastern Europe. This is their report on their travels in the Soviet Union, before the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. boycott of the summer Olympic Games. McMahon is the widely known painter and illustrator.

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Winston Churchill's 1946 speech in which he said that an iron curtain had descended across the continent of Europe "from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic" was a rhetorical flourish which went a long way toward describing, and at the same time furthering, a mindset then prevalent on both sides of the curtain, a mindset that persisted through days of Cold War and, indeed, for over 30 years. It remained for Willy Brandt, Richard Nixon, and more recently Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Pope John Paul II to make possible the opening toward the East.

How seriously this move has been set back by recent political events remains to be seen. The 747s and other airbuses had intruded over the years carrying business people, wives, husbands, children, journalists, dancers, writers, scientists, soldiers, and more recently rock musicians; Americans, Germans, Japanese, Arabs, French, British, Latin Americans. They were expected to carry some 300,000 sportsmen, press people and tourists to Moscow for the summer Olympics of 1980.

Russian Intourist insists that you complete all your travel plans at the time of acquiring your visa before leaving the United States, but you don't come to know the name or location of your hotel until you arrive in the Soviet Union. Most tourists, therefore, travel in groups. But we went to Moscow on our own, by train from Warsaw and were met at the station. It was Igor who materialized on the train platform, introduced himself and took us to our car. "Yours will be the Intourist Hotel" he said, not surprisingly. "Your driver knows the way."

Later, at the hotel, we talked with an Intourist representative who sat under a sign that read "Everybody smiles in the same language."

"We have many plans to work out," he said, "and we will have many big meetings between now and that time [the Olympics] to discuss the necessary changes. It is difficult when foreigners come in groups. The government is building 46 new hotels, motels and campsites that will be ready."

Though the Soviets think of themselves as citizens of a new country, their major city is 800 years old. Guides like to tell of progress made since the October Revolution and suggest tours of

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the U.S.S.R. Exhibition of Economic Achievements and, though there are long lines to enter Lenin's tomb, those visitors who go seem most impressed by the architectural contributions of the Czars, the stunning Cathedral of St. Basil the Blessed and the spectacular Byzantine towers of the Assumption, Annunciation and Archangel churches that give a gilded dominance to the view of the Kremlin from across the Moscow River.

Having seen paintings of the Great October Revolution, experienced the dour black-and-white films of Eisentein, and the wintry landscape of "Dr. Zhivago," we were unprepared for the ladies of summer Moscow in their outrageously colored polyester prints of blue and red and flowered yellow, older women well-fed and thickly set young girls in bright white ankle socks, the children's braided hair tied with large, chiffon-like white bows.

In July, Red Square seemed a cobblestone arena of all that is going on in Russia as it made preparations to welcome the rest of the world. Blue jean clad young people wore T-shirts celebrating Miami Beach, Pittsburgh Steelers and U.S.A. 1776-1976. Muscovites and visitors from the provinces, soldiers on leave, stand in the intense heat as their tour guides tell them of the creative genius of the Rus-

sian people and urge them toward the History Museum. Young boys precisely goose step in imitation of the changing guards at Lenin's mausoleum as a wedding party appears and the bride and groom embarrassedly approach to place a bouquet on the heavy marble balustrade.

The tour buses pull up behind St Basil's. Belgians, Scandinavians, Italians, Arabs and Americans emerge into a cacophony of elucidation on the glories of the Kremlin. A West German group scrutinizes the superstructure surrounding the onion domes of the cathedral as it undergoes refurbishing. Along one side of the square a covey of Japanese heads toward the G.U.M. department store. Whistles blow as a black Cadillac-like limousine, its back-seat occupants curtained in mystery, races out of the South gate of the Kremlin, the crowd parting just in time to avoid being run over by a very important errand.

The G.U.M. is the state department store. It has everything you want if they have it. There highly vaulted art nouveau galleries extend its block-long length, reminding us of the galleria in Milan, Italy, but without the exquisite dressshops, book store, elegant shoe stores and fashionable eating places. There is an elaborate fountain in the center with people sitting

Opposite page: Workmen refurbish St. Basil's cathedral for Olympics visitors. Above: Sunday afternoon in the Lenin Hills, a Moscow suburb, with V.I. Lenin Stadium in background. The stadium is the focal point of the summer Olympics. Right: A moment at the Bolshoi ballet.

and standing around waiting for something to happen. When a woman employee came out into the crowd with a tray of ice cream cones there was a flurry of activity, people quickly lined up and they were all soon purchased.

Sixty years of the new society has failed to wipe out the exercise of capitalism in everyday life. In fact, the shortage of consumer goods seems to have heightened the acquisitiveness of its citizens. Muscovites are constantly alert for quick changes in the marketplace and they must spend a good part of their day in queues.

Soviet housewives carry plastic shopping bags and the men carry briefcases. As they hustle down the street, perhaps on the way to work, they check the stores and wheel around with an instinctive reaction to join a line for something they think they need. We

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saw lines half a block long and heard of others that went on for a mile. Sometimes they get in line before they know what is being sold.

A car pulls up to the curb, the driver opens the trunk and quickly a line forms. One day in June we saw people near the Lenin Stadium buying good-looking padded winter jackets distributed from the back of a panel truck.

In some department stores the customer must make the selection, have the form filled out, go to a cash desk to pay for it, then return with the receipt to pick up the purchase, thus waiting in three lines instead of only one. If you wish to change a train reservation in Russia a bundle of forms must be filled out, stamped and initialed, the process taking at least half a day.

It is wise everywhere in Eastern Europe and Russia to carry a bottle opener. It gets very warm in Warsaw and Krakow and in Moscow the asphalt sidewalks turn soft underfoot. The heat is dry and parches the throat. Shoppers stop along the street to pick up a bottle or two of diluted lemon squash or line up to buy mineral water, chilled, for three kopecks, mixed with a fruit syrup. You drink out of the same glass as the fellow before you, inserting it first in a quick wash of cold water.

Leningrad is an island city in the Gulf of Finland, a Baltic port at the mouth of the Neva River. An international city interlaced with canals and stuccoed in soft shades of green and blue, grey and rust red by Italian architects imported by Peter I, it reminded us of Venice with sudden glimpses of Amsterdam.

It is not an intimate city. The distances are great between bridges, but the soft light glancing from the water gives it a warm and luxurious ambience.

You can take a "midnight" sightseeing cruise on the Neva, sail under the Palace Bridge in the momentary sunset and walk back to your hotel with the Hermitage Museum reflected in the sunrise. Though it was June in Leningrad we heard a calypso Christmas song mixed into the jazz from passing transistor radios.

So, human nature reaches for the unknown, parting curtains, letting in the light. At that moment of detente last summer the Iron Curtain seemed as sheer as lace curtains. The world watches Russia now as the decision to boycott the 1980 Olympics there is made by one country after another. Will the Iron Curtain fall again, dimming the light and darkening the shadows?