

From Russia with Love — There is a Lot More There Beneath the Surface

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Russia had always fascinated me. Much of my life was lived during the Cold War. My early impression was that Russia was our enemy and was behind the Iron Curtain and therefore inaccessible and unknowable to the average person. I remember when Stalin died. I recall clearly when the Russians launched Sputnik which shocked the United States and the world. Was it really true that the Russians could go to Space before the United States? Who could ever forget Nikita Khrushchev, the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the standoff of 1962 when it was discovered that Russia was installing nuclear weapons in Cuba just 90 miles off the coast of Florida? Then there was the race to the Moon when America finally got energized in the early 1960s. There was a time when many in the world thought that Communism just might be the wave of the future.

I was able to go behind the Iron Curtain once when I took a weekend trip from Vienna, Austria to Budapest, Hungary in 1978.

In 1981, I took a job with the newly formed American Scandinavian Banking Corporation in New York. This was a consortium bank owned equally by some of the largest banks in Scandinavia—Finland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Over the years, I interacted with Scandinavians in New York and in Scandinavia. I got to know firsthand what they thought about the US, world affairs and Russia.

When I visited Helsinki, Finland in late 1981, I felt almost as if I were in Russia. Indeed, a film (“Reds” starring Warren Beatty) about the Russian Revolution of 1917 was made in Helsinki around that time. When Lenin returned to Russia in that year to eventually take over, he took the train from Helsinki to what has become the famous Finland Station in St. Petersburg, Russia.

If anybody in the West understood Russia, it was the people in Finland. To be “Finlandized” was to be a nation ostensibly free but very much under the influence of its neighbor. And yet, the Finns were not especially impressed. Some of the Finnish bankers and colleagues quickly gave me a dose of reality. “Why are you Americans so afraid of the Russians? They can’t even make good toothpaste”. They told me that Russia was not in good financial shape and that sooner or later it would collapse. It is commonplace to hear now that Ronald Reagan was responsible for the decline of the Soviet Union because he was tough on the Russians. My Finnish colleagues told me in 1981 when Reagan was just starting his term that the decline of the Soviet Union was inevitable because its economic system simply did not and could not work. It was interesting to see that people in the so-called Socialistic countries in Scandinavia were not believers in Socialism. (Milton Friedman and Margaret Thatcher were popular conversation subjects in Norway, I recall).

By the late 1980s with the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, it appeared that the mighty Soviet Union was ready to open up to the West. Perestroika was a political movement for reforming the Communist Party of the Soviet Union widely associated with Gorbachev and his glasnost ("openness") policy reform.

It became easier to travel to Russia and I got my chance in August of 1987 when I was on a business trip to Sweden and Finland. I was able to get on a one-week tour from Helsinki to Leningrad and Moscow then back to Helsinki. (For years, the city was St. Petersburg. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, it was renamed Leningrad. Then after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it once more became St. Petersburg. When I was there, the city was called Leningrad—so from now on I will refer to it as Leningrad).

There were 18 of us on the tour—8 couples from Kansas City, another New York banker and me. The plane ride from Helsinki to Leningrad took only one hour. We were met at the airport by our Russian tour leader hostess and taken to our hotel, which was supposed to be one of the better hotels in the city. It was run down and shabby looking. Each floor had a lady on guard. The dinner in the hotel was nondescript.

We were in Leningrad for the next three days. I could not help noticing that even the soap was of a very low-grade quality. After dinner we all went outside and on the hotel grounds for a little fresh air. The next day we toured the city by bus. It is well-known that Leningrad is a very beautiful city. Peter the Great hired Italian architects and builders to create this city. I distinctly recall that the lady hostess showed us all of the magnificent buildings in town and had all sorts of interesting stories about these buildings. At one point, we passed by an exquisite building but the lady was silent. I could not help blurting out: "What is that building?" The lady hesitated, looked down and finally said in a soft, sheepish voice: "That was the Stock Exchange until 1929." Russia had become a completely Communist State which means that the government owned practically everything. I also noticed that there did not seem to be anything resembling retail stores in the city. I wondered, but did not ask, where do people go shopping?

That night there was nothing special on the agenda so I decided to take a stroll downtown into the city. It was a beautiful August night. Leningrad is far North so in the summer there is mostly day light. I walked from the hotel toward the bridge and over the Neva River. I asked people for directions to downtown and they told me to follow the main road from the bridge. I had no idea how long a walk it would be. But it was such a beautiful night that I did not care. Once in a while I stopped for a quick chat with a passerby and tried out a few Russian phrases which I had memorized.

After a while, I took a bus which took me downtown. I remember walking into the Finland Station where, as noted before, Lenin came back into the country to start his revolution in 1917.

In those days, I was young and relatively fearless and perhaps more than a little naïve. I admit to spending too much time admiring all the beautiful women out on the streets that summer night. It

struck me that we had this common image at the time in the US that Russian women were not very attractive. But what I noticed that night was that there were more attractive women in that city than I could ever have imagined. I was an international banker and have traveled all over the world. I am not the only person who has made this observation about the beauty of young Russian women.

When I had seen enough of the city, I decided to take the bus back to the hotel. It was easy, I thought. I would take the bus going back the other way up the major street. That was a big mistake. As the night wore on, I saw that I was outside the city with the bus heading in the wrong direction and certainly nowhere near the bridge over the Nevi River near the hotel. I spoke to the bus driver and showed him my identification with the name of the hotel on it. He told me what to do. I walked perhaps a half mile to another bus stop. I was lost. Fortunately, a man with a uniform passed by and he helped me find the right bus stop.

When I got on the bus, I was fortunate to find a young couple who could speak English and were happy to help me get back to the hotel. The man was a chemist and very interested in speaking with an American. He eventually told me where to get off and gave me directions to return to the hotel. As we shook hands goodbye, he said that he hoped there could be peace between our two countries. There was a certain amount of sorrow and even fear in his eyes. I could see that the Russians of course were afraid of the mighty Americans.

When I got back to the hotel, it was past 1 AM and the lady on my floor frowned as I walked past her back into my room. The next day we continued our tour with the same lady hosting us. She seemed to like me probably because she knew of my Greek background. The Russian alphabet was created by two Greek Monks; and also, the Russians and Greeks follow the same brand of Christianity commonly called the Eastern Orthodox Church. We had some conversations and she seemed like an eminently reasonable and decent person who believed in Communism. The way she described what her husband did made me think that perhaps he was in the KGB.

On the last night in Leningrad, she took us all out for a dinner in a restaurant. In those days, there did not seem to be any fancy restaurants in Russia. The meal however was excellent. At one point, the hostess asked me a question (while the people from Kansas City were lounging around the premises with their wives): what do these Americans (to her I guess I was a Greek even though I was born in the US) think of Russia. I was diplomatic and said I think we all like Russia and mentioned the great Russian culture (music, dance, literature, museums). I said in all honesty that Americans were not enamored of Communism. She seemed to understand. Then I asked her: "what do you think of American tourists?" She seemed sincere when she said to me that they were very nice, no problem at all. And I must say that the group that I was a part of was very well behaved, curious and deferential.

Then, she told me, tourists from some countries are awful. I asked for an example. She said that just the week before she was hosting a group of older women from Germany when she was told in a not very pleasant way: "You dirty Communists, you killed my son during the war". For those who do not know the history, Hitler invaded Russia in 1940 and got bogged down and never successfully accomplished

his mission. This was the beginning of the end of the Nazis. It is estimated that the Russians lost more than 20 million people during the World War II and were instrumental in defeating the Nazis.

Our next stop was Moscow. We flew from Leningrad to Moscow and got caught in an awful thunderstorm which felt very threatening at the time. But we landed safely. The group was transported from the airport to a hotel in Moscow. We walked through the famous Red Square. I was told that Red Square is a mistranslation. The word for red and beautiful (krasnaya) in Russian are the same. To the Russians, it is the beautiful square and that it is.

One of the highlights of the visit to Moscow was the visit to the circus at Gorky Park. One thing you have to say about the Russians—they know how to run a circus. The acrobatics were better than anything any of us had ever seen before; the animals were varied and very well trained and the clowns were very funny. All of us in the group walked out of Gorky Park in awe at what we had just seen. One is tempted to say, the Russians do not know how to run an economy but they know how to run a circus.

One day, I was suddenly surrounded by a band of children. They must have been early teenagers. I wasn't sure if I should be afraid. Suddenly, one of the boys yelled out to me: "chewing gum". They had seen me take out a stick of gum and put it into my mouth. It just so happened I had a good deal of gum on me and I gave it to them. They were delighted and left, having accomplished their mission. Chewing gum and other things we take for granted were scarce luxuries in the Soviet Union.

When I was in Moscow, I made it a point to visit one of my colleagues there. The Finnish Bank had a Representative Office in Moscow. When I went to see my colleague, he waived to me that we should leave the office. When we left, he told me that the majority of the staff were Russians: "We can't talk here. It is me, my Deputy and three spies". We got in his car and he drove all around Moscow and discussed the country. He was adamant that Russia would never really change despite the glasnost of Gorbachev. At one point, I recall, we went to the grave of Nikita Khrushchev. I was struck by how ordinary and simple the headstone was.

Then the trip was over. It was time to check out of the hotel and go back to Finland. We all went to the airport but at a certain point I was not allowed to proceed. A bureaucratic man greeted me and told me he wanted to talk with me. I had no choice but to obey. We walked into a windowless office. He had a thick file on me. He asked me all sorts of questions and specifically asked me what exactly I was doing in Russia. He knew that I had once worked for the US Government (Atomic Energy Commission from 1963 to 1965). I was afraid that I would miss my plane and worse yet that I would never get out of Russia. He kept pushing me with all sorts of questions about my background and why I was in Russia. I thought the grilling would never end. I answered all his questions truthfully and after about 20 minutes he told me I was free to go. Those 20 minutes seemed like a lifetime.

Relieved, I rushed to get on the plane back to Helsinki. As I was going through Customs, I was greeted by two particularly harsh looking Russian women who asked for my passport and glared at me as if I were the personification of evil. Then, after looking at my passport, one of them asked: "Are you

Greek?" I hesitated for a second and said: "Well yes, my parents were Greek." She then broke out into a big, warm, welcoming smile, extended her hand and effusively said: "Glad to meet you." She then introduced me to her colleague who also smiled and extended her hand as if she were my best friend. I could hear the one lady telling the other lady that I was Greek.

At long last, I was on the plane heading back to Finland. I was shaking by now and did not feel comfortable until I understood we were in international air space. In a short time, we landed in Helsinki and it was truly a feeling of coming home.

As I look back at this experience, I realize that this was the first time I had been to a very different and exotic place. It was absolutely true as my Finnish colleagues told me that by our standards Russia did not "work" at all. Our standard of living was so much better. Yes, why were we ever afraid of Russia? And yet, there was something enchanting about the place that is hard to put into words. We visited the Hermitage Museum and I saw more Picassos in one large room than in all the Museums of New York City. In a later trip with my wife, I was able to attend the Russian museum with paintings from Russian masters. This was a hidden gem not available to most tourists.

In a funny sort of a way on that evening when I was lost in Leningrad, I felt absolutely safe. We no longer live in that type of world unfortunately. I also felt in Russia that I had visited a country like no other in the world. Despite its relative poverty and its terrible government, the place had a magical quality to it.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the dream of Communism failed. The world and Russia would be different. But as we all know now, it was not to be. Russia is no longer the formidable Soviet Union but it is still a thorn on our side as is obvious to anyone who wants to see this.

Russia has influenced our elections. It has influenced our politics. It has tried to show with some success that our type of Democracy does not work. We have retaliated with sanctions. Uncontrolled groups inside Russia can threaten our infrastructure by hacking into our power grid systems.

Some 50 years ago, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger had the idea that we could perhaps drive a wedge between China and Russia. It worked well for China and the US for a while.

President Joe Biden can get on national television and say that Putin is a murderer. Not much later he is on the phone with Putin and now there is talk about a summit meeting between the two of them. Could we subtly drive a wedge between Russia and China? Might this not be an appealing prospect to both the US and Russia? If Nixon can go to China and open up a new chapter in the power politics of the world, is it such an outrageous thought that Biden could meet Putin and perhaps even come with agreements and an "understanding among two countries" which a Donald Trump or other Republicans could not do? Is it really such a far-fetched idea that both the US and Russia understand the danger of a soaring China?

The attentive reader at this point may ask—what does your story about your personal experiences in Russia more than 30 years ago have to do with the geopolitical situation and American foreign policy? I am making the point that we should not take a superficial view of Russia. The more you look the more you will find. This is a country that spans nine time zones and has a wealth of natural resources. It has an intelligent and highly educated population. They are masters of the cyber world. They are exasperating in many ways but there is much more than that if we look carefully.

Winston Churchill understood this. In 1939, Joseph Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Adolf Hitler. This seemed to free Hitler to concentrate on taking control of all of Europe including Great Britain. But Churchill saw something else. I am happy to leave the last word to Winston Churchill who said this in 1939: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."

Yes, Russia is a very charming and a very strange place. There is a lot to dislike about it and certainly there is a lot to dislike about Mr. Putin. And yet, Russia is always full of surprises as I have seen firsthand. Might we once more not get a pleasant surprise? Perhaps the US and Russian national interests will not collide but coalesce. Let's not kid ourselves—it was Russia which made the major contribution in the war against Hitler. Churchill foresaw that it was better to have Russia on our side in the face of a larger enemy. As it is said - history might not repeat itself but it rhymes.