

SITTING IN RASPUTIN'S CHAIR

By Oliver Trojak

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Train Itinerary¹

Winter 2015

1. Saint Petersburg
2. Moscow
3. Nizhny Novgorod
4. Kazan
5. Yekaterinburg
6. Perm
7. Tyumen
8. Novosibirsk
9. Irkutsk/Listvyanka
10. Vladivostok

¹Commonly in travel books an itinerary page is nowhere to be found explicitly in one complete section. Many books opt to instead feature a map that traces the journey a writer took. These maps are not always as helpful as intended. One of the maps in a Paul Theroux book seems to depict that he stopped in a city called Kirov. However, this city is only briefly mentioned in passing and he never got off there. Maps may also appear clear in hardcovers, but they often lose their elegance in paperbacks.

Prologue

“Why do you come to Russia?”

This would come to be a frequent question throughout my time in Russia, often asked very bluntly. There was a curiosity not just among my new Russian comrades² but also my friends back home. My comrades’ bluntness caught me off guard at first, but over time I learned that Russians were simply upfront. Any perceived hostility was unintended. It was the first time I realized that cultural differences might be further intensified by the language barrier. Nevertheless, it is an important question.

Ask yourself, what is the first association you make when thinking of Russia?

For my American friends, I venture to guess your association did not bode particularly well. Also, as an American, it is problematic to have an unbiased impression of this region. We are taught from within a democratic system, which our primary school studies inherently imply is superior to other forms of government, particularly Communism. You would be branded unpatriotic to entertain otherwise.

My childhood is filled with action movies that cast the Soviet Union in an adversarial role, such as *Rocky IV* or seemingly every other James Bond villain.

²A few of the Russians with whom I interacted with used the term “comrade” in a good-humored way. I use it the same light-hearted fashion.

Hollywood, even in a post-Soviet Union era, has not been kind to Russia either. The movie *Crimson Tide* underscores the nuclear threat still posed by the Russians and manages to bring a U.S. Navy crew to mutiny. It is a struggle for me to recollect any media involving Russia that portrays a neutral or positive relationship with the United States. This undoubtedly colors not only my perceptions of Russia but also those of my friends.

My first attempt at getting a deeper understanding of an authentic Russia came in 10th grade World Studies. This course was taught by one of those teachers that managed to leave an indelible mark: Maury Molin. Mr. Molin gave everything he had to his students. In turn he lived up to the reputation of demanding nothing but the very best. No other high school course comes close to the amount of knowledge I can remember from that time.

Our curriculum dedicated weeks to studying Russian history from around Peter the Great's time to the fall of Communism. It was the first time I heard of such figures known as "the Great" or "the Terrible." U.S. History does not bestow such titles. Learning about the various Czars brought intrigue. That type of leadership is in contrast to our U.S. Presidents. Influential individuals like Rasputin fascinated me. Communism and Soviet leaders like Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev captivated my attention. It showed that western values were not universals. That Russia experienced more revolutions in a hundred year span than most countries underwent over the course of several hundred years was astonishing. As Mr. Molin eloquently pointed out, no other country's history was filled with so many "magnetic personalities, so much remarkable architecture, and so

many noteworthy happenings past and present.” His course left me filled with a desire to visit Russia.

Also, I believe that to understand a country requires having your “boots on the ground.” I do not desire my knowledge base to be buttressed by Hollywood and influenced by inherent biases that are hard to shake. Traveling within a foreign country provides new perspectives on history and culture and serves as a vehicle toward authenticity and knowing. Carl Thompson in *Travel Writing* describes how critical a “boots on the ground” approach is in his discussion of Christopher Columbus’ Voyages across the Atlantic. He writes, “one result of Columbus’s startling discoveries was accordingly a new emphasis on the act of eye-witnessing, of seeing for oneself and establishing facts through empirical enquiry rather than through reference of the great authors of the past” (40). Imagine, had Columbus continued to take for granted society’s conception of the world, the circumference of the Earth might still be in question!

Additionally, the world is in a constant state of flux. What may have been true about a place in the past does not necessarily mean it is true today. Thompson points out how “there are many layers of mediation between the world as it really is, and the world as it is subsequently rendered in travel writing” (62). It is simply not possible to provide an account that offers a “continuous flow of sensory experience that occurs as one travels; the sheer quantity of data would be overwhelming...” (27). Thus, inevitably content is left out, supplying only a “partial depiction of the world, and incomplete picture of a far more complex reality” (62). This has an effect on our worldview in ways many never consider.

Taking this journey myself provided the opportunity to cut through the “layers of mediation” in what a place may be like. Tainted by their preconceptions, some question the choice of Russia. They say, “surely there are other compelling countries that can offer a similar experience that are safer and easier.” However, it is important to go beyond what is easy and to absorb all that is feasible in order to construct a comprehensive, sophisticated take on the world. Scholar Dennis Porter said the high water mark of travel writing constitutes “a worthy attempt ‘to overcome cultural distance through a protracted act of understanding’” (as cited in Thompson 7). I strive to achieve that aim and hope to build a bridge to another culture. Hence, my decision to explore Russia through its Trans-Siberian Railway was one not of just leisure, but of purpose.

Chapter One

It was the second Sunday in November when my alarm went off. I anxiously chuckled at its dedication to me for sleep had proven elusive. It was time to leave Helsinki, Finland and cross the border by high-speed train to Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Coincidentally, it happened to be Father's Day in Finland. I considered calling my father for kicks but was too afraid that he would sense the fear in my voice.

My anxiety was a surprise. The point of entering Russia by train from Helsinki to Saint Petersburg was to make it less stressful than flying into Moscow. I had already been on the road for two months in Northern Europe. Every detail had gone off without a hitch. Visiting Russia, as an American, may be unusual but not uncommon enough to merit my apprehension. No matter what I told myself, I could not quell my uneasiness.

At four-thirty in the morning, I slogged off toward the train station. This was one of those occasions where my planning in striving to wrinkle every instant of opportunity overwhelmed my energy. Daily, there are several scheduled departures toward Saint Petersburg. I chose the earliest departure to maximize my time sight seeing. On paper, it looked great, however in practice, this was exhausting.

The trudge along the empty streets of Helsinki treated me to a gorgeous fog covered, dimly silhouetted downtown. It did not trouble me to be out and about this early.

I thought about how safe I felt throughout all of Northern Europe. Would that continue heading further toward the Russian Far East?

The train station was deserted. I guess there were not many kids who thought taking their father to Saint Petersburg for the day was an ideal way to spend Father's Day, but I thought how I would envy that opportunity if I lived here. Boarding the train, the conductor greeted me. Learning I was American visibly changed her demeanor. Her smile faded to a stoic expression as if to say, "Of all the places in the world you can visit, you decided on Russia? Why would you put yourself through this?" She closely examined my passport and visa as if to find a way to get me off the train. She softly grinned and handed back my documents along with a migration card, a record validating my permission to travel within Russia and aided the government in tracking my movements. This migration card was the first sign that I was leaving the easy and more open immigration procedures of Europe. The train departed with a mostly empty carriage.

The first set of immigration officers passed through to the front of the train. I could not immediately tell if they were Finnish or Russian. However, they looked somewhat agreeable. I quickly realized that must make them Finnish. After coming back through and stamping my exit, I waited nervously for the Russians to sweep through.

I reflected on whether the stress and effort would be worth it. The duration of my long-term travels had forced me to abandon the comfort and security brought by a respectable full-time job along with additional part-time employment. This was the first time in over a decade I had not held at least one job. It was strange to be spending my life savings for the first time. Lingering thoughts doubting the merit of this trip haunted me.

This type of trek was something most people put off until retirement. Was I immature to pursue these travels now at the age of twenty-eight?

Finally, a group of eight stoic-looking Russian immigration officers suddenly filled the aisle to interrupt my thoughts. Russian Immigration has a reputation for attention to detail. On this entry my face received scrutiny. I like to think it was because I am so handsome. For a solid five minutes the passport control officer compared the way I looked in front of her to my passport photo and then to my visa photo on her hand held computer. Going through a cycle of glances, it was as if she was dissecting my face feature by feature and scoring every comparison made. Outwardly, I maintained a smile and façade of composure. Internally, I tried to figure out how to respond if told my passport and visa photo did not match me. All I could hope for was that her analysis would yield a sufficient score. Still with some reservation, she called over another passport control officer for a second opinion. Fortunately, this officer swiftly concluded that I was indeed the individual photographed! All my worry dissipated. I was officially granted entry.

Chapter Two

Now, I was worry-free and optimistic that the most stressful part of my passage was behind me. Only since the end of World War II has the border been stable and peaceful here. As I looked through the window observing Vyborg, the first town on the Russian side of the border, I struggled to grasp why so much blood was shed over so little. Nothing appeared of significance. Battles fought in this region seemed to have been fought in effort to maintain a buffer of territory for each side. This was evident when Peter the Great captured Vyborg saying, “by the help of God a cushion is now made upon which St. Petersburg may rest secure” (qtd. in Mead 12).

I mused how proud Peter the Great would be today for just having crossed the border peacefully from Finland via the convenience of a railway in under four hours. The establishment of Saint Petersburg was a direct result of the changes he wished to incorporate into Russia. He was born into a time when, according to historian Lindsey Hughes’ biography *Peter the Great*, “Russia was still regarded as a ‘rude and barbarous’ kingdom, with rulers more akin to the emperors of China or the sultans of Turkey than to European kings” (8). Prior to his founding of Saint Petersburg in the early 1700s, Russia had a weak connection to the West. Russians of that era looked dissimilar to their European counterparts due to their robes and long beards. Journeying to and from

Moscow, at the time the capital, to anywhere West was difficult during even the best of conditions. These differences diminished cultural and commercial exchange.

After touring Europe undercover and admiring what Peter the Great observed, he decided that Russia had to turn to the West and conform to their norms. He was particularly fond of shipbuilding and felt that a strong Navy was an important component for the westernization of Russia. To facilitate his naval and cultural ambitions, he concluded that he needed a significant port in the Baltic to make commerce easier. The result was Saint Petersburg. It is hard for me to imagine how heads of states today could remotely accomplish the transformation of their culture to the extent Peter the Great was able to. Hughes' biography quotes nineteenth-century historian M. P. Pogodin, who described eloquently the importance of Peter The Great:

The Russia of today, that is European Russia, diplomatic, political, military, commercial, industrial, scholarly, literary – is the creation of Peter the Great. Wherever we look, everywhere we encounter that colossal figure, which throws a long shadow over our entire past, and even eliminates old history from our field of vision – a figure which is still stretching, as it were, its arms over us, and which, it seems, will never disappear from sight, no matter how far we advance in the future. (219-220)

Much of this heritage has been made possible by the development of the city of Saint Petersburg, fittingly nicknamed the “Window to the West.”

As I pondered Peter the Great's legacy, the train arrived on time at Finlyandsky station, Saint Petersburg. I chuckled to myself about its on-time arrival. Amtrak, which

has dismal on-time performance, should come see how the Russians do it. This was even on an international itinerary! Exiting the station I found the iconic Lenin statue pointing forward into the future. I pictured him saying “Dear Comrades...” and inspiring the masses to join him in the revolution as Nikolai Sukhanov described in his recollections (273). This monument commemorates Lenin’s return to Russia in 1917, prior to the October Revolution. I had just taken the same route as him, however I suspect his immigration to have been easier. The Germans, who were at war with Russia at the time, aided his journey (270-271). They hoped his return would cause upheaval, compelling the Russians to declare a truce during World War I (271). Of course, as history shows, Lenin did not disappoint. The October revolution followed just months after his return. This led to a radically new form of government never before seen on the continent, modern Communism. I am sure if historian M. P. Pogodin were alive today he would rank Lenin’s influence on Russian history near that of Peter of Great, if not greater. However, I harbored no desire to stoke any revolutionary fires. I was just eager to begin my exploration of another country.

Within minutes of stepping off the train, I hopped onto the city metro toward the center. The first thing I noticed was the long escalator ride, which was typical for the Saint Petersburg metro. The city’s soil has never been well suited for underground construction. However, that did not stop Russian grit. Rather, the Russians dug significant depths below the surface. Today, it ranks amongst the deepest metro systems in existence. Contrary to my experiences in the States, the metro here was vast, reliable, cheap, frequent, and swift. I found it easier to use than metros back home. Aesthetically, many of the original stations are decorated with the finest material such as marble. Their

design and architecture was augmented through paintings, mosaics, reliefs, and sculptures. Although, sadly, a Western influence of commercial posters has begun to permeate the station walls.

Chapter Three

Checking into the Hotel ibis Saint Petersburg Centre just off Nevsky Prospect, which is the city's main thoroughfare, went seamlessly. This ibis was like any other I had previously stayed: comfortable, budget-friendly, and well-located. Strangely, I was surprised. The feeling of the hotel lacking in some way was a concern I could not shake. I suspect it was a reflection of having been taught about the Cold War and how its history conveyed the Soviets were backward. Supposedly, decades ago there was even a period where toilet paper was in short supply due to a flawed five-year plan, a type of economic policy. Even though my visit was more than two decades after the collapse of the USSR, it was something that shamefully resonated in my thoughts.

After checking in, I ate a convenient early lunch in the hotel restaurant. I had the classic Borscht soup, a Russian staple with the main ingredient being beetroots while making sure to order a Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola abroad uses real sugar rather than the high-fructose corn syrup used in the United States. I have found the use of sugar to be superior in taste. Different countries use different amounts of sugar, so I am always sure to sample the local version when visiting new countries. I was pleased to find that Russian Coca-Cola also used real sugar and was on par with other countries I had sampled. Even in

Russia, Coca-Cola managed to taste better than the American version of an American product.

Not to waste any more time indulging my soda curiosity, I already had plans to tour the Hermitage, one of the largest art museums in the world. Getting there I took a stroll down Nevsky Prospect. This main street takes its name from Saint Alexander Nevsky Monastery that anchors the street on one end. Alexander Nevsky was a prominent leader from thirteenth century Russia who defeated the Swedes in the West and steadied relationships with the Mongols from the East. A 2008 poll the BBC reported on found him to be considered the greatest Russian of all time (*Stalin Voted Third-best Russian*).

Peter the Great liked the architecture he saw throughout Europe. As a result, many of the architects involved in early construction were the best he could bring from abroad. Mary Morris in *Wall to Wall: From Beijing to Berlin by Rail* describes the facades of the buildings being “splendid as any” she had ever seen. Writer Nikolai Gogol wrote, “No element is lacking in the splendor of this great thoroughfare, the jewel of our capital” (St. Petersburg). From the shopping malls to supermarkets to coffee shops to the hotels and everything in between, no expense on the design seems to have been spared. Typically, such extravagance is limited to a few buildings. However, on Nevsky Prospect every structure’s appearance rivals architecture customarily reserved for churches or palaces. This majesty was enhanced by the generous width of the street and the similarly thoughtfully designed bridges spanning over the intersecting canals.

It felt remarkable to have had the privilege to walk this street. Saint Petersburg, known as Leningrad throughout most of the twentieth century, was under attack for over

two years during World War II. Hitler was intent on total destruction of the city, as the Nazis did not have the resources to occupy it. *The Greatest Battles in History: The Siege of Leningrad* by Charles River Editors discusses the Nazi viewpoint:

After the defeat of Soviet Russia there can be no interest in the continued existence of this large urban center... Following the city's encirclement, requests for surrender negotiations shall be denied, since the problem of relocating and feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for our very existence, we can have no interest in maintaining even a part of this very large urban population.

During the Siege of Leningrad, “four times more died than in the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima combined” with approximately “eleven thousand buildings destroyed and wreckage strewn everywhere” (River Editors).

Near the end of Nevsky Prospect, I finally reached Palace Square, situated in front of the renowned Hermitage Museum. In its center rests Alexander Column. It literally rests, as it is held down only by its own weight. This column, named after Czar Alexander the First, pays tribute to Russia’s victory over Napoleon. The landmark serves a common meeting place where I had agreed to meet my guide, Valery. However, this proved to be problematic. Metrojet Flight 9268, a flight carrying mostly Russia nationals, was destroyed midflight from an act of terrorism. Mourners, dressed in their Sunday best, had congregated to grieve together the victims by placing flowers and wreaths beside the column.

Fortunately, only after a slight delay we managed to spot one another. Valery was a native Russian who has been conducting English-speaking tours to the Hermitage for

over two decades. Proceeding into the museum with a licensed guide brings about a great benefit: the fast line. At the ticket counter, invariably manned by an old Russian lady, Valery got into what I could best describe as a quarrel. However, the tone dissipated and we acquired our tickets. Asking what happened, he was surprised at my question. It was not a quarrel just a “clarification” over the price of our tickets, ensuring my International Student Identification Card was honored. It must have been something about the way Russians converse because it would not be the last time my ability to gauge the character of a conversation to be flawed. I later attributed this to the tension I felt dealing with the old Russian ladies manning the various *Кассы*, Russian for ticket windows. Poet Alexander Pushkin once said, “you live here not as you want to live, but as old women want you to.” Although he was referencing Moscow, it showed I was not the only one leery of the old Russian ladies.

The Hermitage Museum is a complex comprised of several palaces, the most well-known being the Winter Palace. Catherine the Great founded it back in 1764 after purchasing a collection intended for what was then Prussia. The Hermitage’s grand staircase of marble stairs and columns, complimented by an extended ceiling with large windows accented by real gold and red carpet was visually overwhelming. The Louvre may be larger, but the Hermitage is grander. I have not seen such opulence even in a Hollywood movie. The grand staircase itself could be a stand-alone attraction. Valery highlighted an intact Egyptian mummy acquired long ago. He explained, “Mummies of this quality are impossible for museums to obtain today. This particular mummy was acquired during Catherine the Great’s era in the eighteenth century. The Hermitage is very lucky to have such a rare well-preserved artifact of this nature in its collection.”

Valery also led me to the small and large throne rooms, where the lavishness was profound. There seemed to be no room without gold either accenting the ceiling or walls. An important room was the War Gallery of 1812. It depicted the portraits of the war officers and significant figures from the victory over Napoleon. To dedicate space in such a distinguished manner demonstrates the deep reverence Russians have toward their military. The elaborate, two-level library with its stylish woodwork was left intact from the Czar's era. I could have stayed there forever sipping coffee and playing chess. Incidentally, near the library Valery paused, raising his eyebrows in front of a plaque he had never noticed. The dates had caught his attention. It memorialized the anniversary of the revolution and storming of the Winter Palace, the very place we were standing. The date was October 25 – 26 (November 7 – 8, Gregorian Calendar), exactly ninety-eight years to the day that we were touring the complex.

There was one disappointment. Mr. Molin swore he saw hoof marks in the bedroom of Catherine the Great. He had presented this as evidence of an urban legend that her death resulted from a mishap of engaging in intercourse with a horse. Valery had heard the same legend, but could not confirm its validity. After double-checking the bedrooms, I can confirm there are no hoof marks left behind.

After the tour, Valery walked with me along Nevsky Prospect. He was very curious about the rest of my itinerary and enthusiastically offered his suggestions. Learning that I was visiting Perm, he provided the contact information of his daughter-in-law's family who lived there insisting on reaching out to them if I needed assistance. As we parted ways, he wished me well but warned me not to take anything for granted saying, "Russia is very dangerous."

Chapter Four

The next day began at *The Bronze Horseman*, an enormous bronze sculpture of Peter the Great on a rearing horse upon a colossal stone on the banks of the Neva River. It was one of the first statues of its size ever created of a horse on two legs (Schekner 263). The artist ingeniously used the horse's tail as a third point of support. Peter the Great's head was reminiscent of a Roman Caesar, which the word Czar traces its origin to. He was depicted as trampling a snake, which represents Peter's conquering of enemies, while the colossal stone, shaped as a wave, signifies Peter's mastering of the seas. The pupils of Peter's eyes were shaped into hearts, demonstrating the Czar's love for the city.

It was under the gaze of this monument where Jane, a city guide, greeted me. Her real name was Eugenia, but my pronunciation required reprieve. If there were ever worldwide standards for guides, she would be the exemplar: patient, knowledgeable, and most importantly, passionate. After explaining the main features of the monument, Jane directed my attention to details I overlooked. She translated the inscription: "Catherine the Second to Peter the First, 1782." She explained how Catherine wanted to tie her reign to the successful legacy of Peter's. It reminded me of how Democrats occasionally

reference John F. Kennedy or how Republicans sometimes mention Ronald Reagan in a similar vein. It turns out this political tactic predated U.S. politics.

Jane took me to significant Orthodox places of worship in Saint Petersburg: Saint Isaac's Cathedral, Kazan Cathedral, and Church of the Savior on Blood. Saint Isaac's is one of the largest Orthodox cathedrals in the world. The interior is composed of marble and granite of various colors. One can ascend its dome for a panorama of Saint Petersburg, an unrivaled view. Kazan Cathedral interested me because it was built in honor of the victory over Napoleon. During the war, a Russian general requested worshippers to pray to the icon *Our Lady of Kazan*. It is said that soon after, the tide of the war turned. The general was also buried inside the nave of this church. Even today, fresh flowers adorn his tomb. Next was Church of the Savior on Blood, built in memorial to Czar Alexander the Second, who was assassinated on this site. The church is famous for its intricate mosaics depicting various biblical scenes. Most fascinatingly, inside the nave of the church there was the original cobblestone street where Alexander's life ended. It was an intense feeling understanding that one was at the actual site just as it looked at the moment a Czar had died over one hundred years ago.

Next, on the way to Peter and Paul's fortress, we stopped at a few metro stations worthy of sightseeing. This was where I first learned that in Russia asking "why?" was sometimes a fruitless endeavor. We had reached a station that was not at the end of the line, but required everyone to disembark. Confused, I asked if everything was okay. She said yes, this was normal. I then questioned why we had to disembark. She indicated that this used to be the end of the line and not all the trains went to the new terminus station.

Continuing on, like a small child, then I said, “Why is that?” to which she replied, “Sometimes in Russia, we do not ask ‘why?’ It is just the way it is.”

After touring the metro, we arrived at Peter and Paul’s Fortress, the oldest part of the city. On the way in, Jane pointed out an easy-to-miss, tiny statue of a hare. The fortress rests on Hare Island, likely named after the hares that inhabited it. She told me of a legend that during a flood, Peter sailed to the island and rescued the animals from drowning. Biographer Lindsey Hughes tells the legend of what inspired Peter to select this site for his dream city:

One recounts how Peter walked to the centre of the island (the present Peter-Paul fortress) and saw an eagle hovering overhead. He grabbed a bayonet, cut two strips of turf, laid one on top of the other in the shape of a cross, then made a cross from some wood, which he erected on the turf, with the words: ‘In the name of Christ Jesus on this place shall be a church in the names of the apostles Peter and Paul.’ The story goes on to recount how later two birch tree trunks were driven into the ground to suggest gates, on one of which the eagle, first mentioned hovering over the island, landed, then hopped on to Peter's arm. The writer records the legends that Constantine the Great was led to Byzantium by an eagle and that the apostle St Andrew, en route from Kiev and Novgorod, planted his staff in a spot not far from St Petersburg and blessed the region. Peter's city was placed firmly in the context of Christian world history. (66-67)

The main feature of the fortress was the Cathedral. Its bell tower is among the highest for an Orthodox church. The remains of almost every Russian Czar from Peter

the Great to Nicholas the Second were interred here. In contrast, Washington D.C. only has one President buried within its boundaries, President Woodrow Wilson. Intriguingly, he was entombed in a church that also honors Saints Peter and Paul.

The fortress features a boathouse that contains a replica of a small boat used by Peter to master his naval skills. Russia's national mint, still used today, is located within. Of course no fortress would be complete without a historic prison. This fortress was no exception, known to have jailed Lenin's older brother Alexander Ulanov and writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Just outside the fortress was Peter's Cabin, the first structure in Saint Petersburg. Of wooden construction, it has survived to this day. Inside, one can view what are believed to be his belongings. However, it was the outside that struck me with wonder. The wood was painted red, with white vertical lines. This was to create the illusion from faraway that it was of brick, a testament to his strong desire to incorporate a Western image.

Before I parted ways with Jane, she assisted me in obtaining a data plan for my iPad. Prior to entering Russia I had successfully relied on public Wi-Fi. However, other travelers had cautioned that doing so in Russia would not be as easy. Taking their advice, I purchased a data plan. I found it to be a bargain at approximately ten U.S. dollars for thirty gigs of 3G data! Finally, Jane had a surprise gift of Old Spice deodorant to replenish my dwindling supply. She invited me back to visit, insisting I come in June for what are known as the "White Nights." This was the time of year where the sun never sets low enough to become completely dark and the city gardens are typically in full bloom.

Chapter Five

My last day in Saint Petersburg was for objectives I had not yet achieved: the Zoology Museum and Yusupov Palace. I had also added, on Jane's suggestion, another cathedral. Strolling down crowded Nevsky Prospect in the damp cold weather, I had made it a point to stop at *Starbucks*. Although it was not surprising to locate a Starbucks here, there was still a certain irony enjoying a prominent American product in the heart of a Russian city.

Several Woolly Mammoth remains have been discovered in Siberia, which encompasses much of the central and Eastern parts of Russia. I had heard the Zoology Museum in Saint Petersburg houses a unique specimen: the only stuffed adult Woolly Mammoth in the world. As I proceeded to what I thought was the entrance, a voice abruptly bellowed, "bilet," (Russian for ticket). The stern voice came from an old Russian lady manning the door. I pulled out my rubles and I received what sounded like a frustrated "neyt" (Russian for no) along with hand gestures, which suggested going down the block. Fortunately, down the block was a ticket window for the museum! Having learned that asking "Why?" in Russia can be futile, I blocked out contemplating why the ticket counter and the entrance were not one in the same.

My second go-around through the main entrance received the same bellowing of “bilet” as if I had not just been there a few minutes prior. I was grateful for not having been foiled in my second attempt. Finally, I reached the Woolly Mammoth discovered in 1900. The mammoth had met its demise in permafrost, preventing its decomposition. It was smaller than textbook descriptions and artists renditions I had viewed, but no less spectacular. The tusks, the hair, the skin, with its wrinkled trunk, were all there. I would best characterize it as a time-capsule’s gift to science.

Next, I headed to another cathedral. During my tour with Jane, she had mentioned how the Soviets closed many of the Orthodox places of worship. Rather than demolishing them, they were often converted for other uses such as museums, storehouses, swimming pools, parking lots, movie theaters, and ice-skating rinks. Hearing of ice-skating rinks piqued my curiosity. She knew of one such place and provided directions. Although I presume much of the iconography was removed during those times, can you imagine a stray depiction of baby Jesus looking down at you as one glides across the ice? I had hoped to find evidence, but nowadays the church bears no scars of its past.

The last goal was to visit Yusupov Palace, the site of Rasputin’s murder. Rasputin was a monk who gained prominence as a healer to the Czar’s only son, who suffered from the blood disease hemophilia. Rasputin’s success earned him influential access that the aristocracy no longer tolerated, culminating in his murder. At the palace, they have a special exhibition complete with wax figures portraying his demise. However, on this occasion the infamous old Russian ladies thwarted my opportunity. Tickets to the special exhibition required some sort of archaic procedure that I had failed to follow. I did not ask, “Why?” I knew by the determination from her tone of voice that I would be more

likely to have coffee with Vladimir Putin. Journalist David Greene recounted similar experiences with asking “Why?” in chapter six of his book *Midnight in Siberia: A Train Journey into the Heart of Russia*:

Rose and I had a rule in Russia: Never ask why. Asking why in daily life (Why do train-ticket agents’ microphones never work? Why don’t the authorities do something about those fatal icicle incidents in Moscow? Why can’t I order some of the butter you told me you have in your kitchen?) gets frustrating. And why would you want that? In the daily humdrum of life here, it’s advisable to avoid the question and move on or your blood will remain at a boil...

I heeded his advice.

Chapter Six

On the way to Moskovsky Railway Station to catch the overnight train to Moscow, a sense of uneasiness returned. Although I had made all my ticket arrangements in advance, I had not yet received my physical tickets. This needed to be done at the station. I was apprehensive about approaching a Russian ticket window. Writer Ian Frazier gave a dismal description of his ticket window experience in his book *Travels in Siberia*:

At the cavernous train station, the Baltiskii Voksal, ceiling lights of pitiful feebleness pushed back just enough of the darkness that you could see to get around. Russians were congregating densely at the two open ticket windows in their usual free-for-all style. Somehow I purchased a ticket, divined the train platforms in the farther gloom, and boarded a train. That it turned out to be the wrong train came as no real shock to me. (155)

David Green mentioned in chapter two of his book that even if you are brave enough to venture toward the window “the chances of everything on the ticket being clear and correct are fair at best. And there is usually a lot of yelling and stress in the exchange with the ticket agent, not to mention angry passengers in line behind you, hogging your space and giving every hint that you’re taking.” As if that description were not clear

enough, he later wrote, “as with many experiences around here, I typically approach a Russian ticket window with a great deal of anxiety. Over time, I have learned to treat this affliction prophylactically, taking deep breaths and distracting myself by imagining pleasant scenes of sailboats and seashells.”

However, I had a secret weapon. Today’s train travelers in Russia have the possibility of using electronic kiosks to get physical tickets. Previously, kiosks had frustrated me. On a trip in Sweden, I had counted on using a kiosk at an unmanned station. I had a tight connection and did not want to purchase my ticket ahead of time for fear of missing the connecting train. The one and only kiosk was out of order. Fortunately, the conductor understood and allowed me to use the train’s onboard Wi-Fi to purchase my ticket. This did little to suppress my anxiety because I felt the result could not be the same in Russia.

Oddly, often ticket windows in Russia and the location of where one needs the ticket do not strongly correlate like they do at home. It took me a few minutes to pinpoint the ticket windows and kiosks. It had turned out that they were in an adjacent building of the railway station. However, triumphantly the kiosks were available in English and I was able to print out all the tickets required for the remainder of my trip!

With tickets in hand, I traveled on to Moscow, Russia’s capital, overnight, a logical next stop. The train path is said to be almost a straight line all the way to Moscow, designed in a way only a Czar’s autocratic authority could demand. In fact, the minor deviations from the straight path were explained away by a popular urban legend describing the divergences to be where the Czar’s “fingers projected over the edge of the ruler” as he drew the path for the engineers (Wolmar 18). I chose an overnight sleeper

train because of the cost savings from not needing lodging. The train served both that function along with being my mode of transport with a convenient scheduled departure at 23:55 and arrival the following morning of 7:55, ideal for a good night's rest. This particular train was called the *Red Arrow*. The train was given special distinction being uniquely stylized with a special red color accented with a vibrant yellow along with being sent off with a special song that plays throughout the station. During the Soviet Era, it was a popular choice among the elite who frequently shuttled back and forth between Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Chapter Seven

In the past, describing my travel plans had always elicited an upbeat interest. Mentioning Moscow did not. People reacted as though I was going to the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). One friend stated, “Be careful, that’s a backwards country.” Another asked, “Don’t they hate Americans?” Some were concerned for my safety. Others warned I would not be welcomed, saying, “They don’t smile or like foreigners.” I always asked if they themselves had been to Moscow. The answer was always “no.” I wondered, “How could they know?”

Having reached Leningradsky Railway Station, one of nine major Moscow train terminals, I became momentarily confused regarding where I had arrived. Was that really a T.G.I. Fridays I had just passed? Upon exiting the station all doubt immediately dispelled. There was no mistake. The cube-like, utilitarian architecture of Moscow stands in juxtaposition to the sophisticated elegance of Saint Petersburg.

Moscow being among the largest cities in the world necessitates use of public transit. Station names were given in Cyrillic letters, the Russian alphabet, making it a challenge to use. Now, having my iPad linked up to a data connection, live transit directions became possible. I could immediately tell if I was heading in the wrong

direction! I also noticed signs written in English were actually being added in preparation for the World Cup.

The Hotel ibis Moscow Centre Bakhrushina eagerly welcomed me. Along with the standard benefits, I had chosen to stay here because this hotel had provided the necessary visa support during my application to visit Russia.

Chapter Eight

Moscow began developing several hundred years prior to the birth of the United States. The Moscow Kremlin, a fortress, as it appears today, was erected around the time Christopher Columbus became the last person to discover America. Writer Arthur Joyce in *The Moscow Kremlin: Its History, Architecture, & Art Treasures* summed up the Kremlin best, having labeled it the “nucleus” of Moscow (1). He perfectly described its location writing, “Situated in the center of Moscow, on top of a hill whose crown is about 125 feet above the level of the Moskva River, the Kremlin dominates the entire city, and holds within its walls all the memories and souvenirs of the city's past” (2). From here past Czars and Soviet Leaders alike have governed over their empires.

As I studied the metro map, I thought to myself if all roads lead to Rome, then all metro lines lead to the Moscow Kremlin. I had pictured the site as massive castle. However, this was not the case. Rather, it was an imposing wall enclosing a compound of palaces, cathedrals, and other buildings, defended by a series of towers. The Kutafia Tower serves as the main visitors’ entrance. As a clever jibe, the cannons and armaments Napoleon had left behind were on display as a memento to his failed occupation of Moscow. Nearby rested the Czar Bell and Czar Cannon. The bell has never been struck and the cannon has never been fired. Both are too large to be of any practical use, a

testament to the excesses of autocratic rule. I jokingly suspected they were manufactured in Texas.

The Senate Palace, serving as President Putin's office, is also protected within the Kremlin walls. The flag on top of this palace is said to signal Putin's presence. Russians quip that it was never taken down because President Putin is always working. The large Palace of Congresses, originally built for the Communists, nowadays accommodates conferences as well as opera and ballet performances. The Kremlin's armory has been converted into a museum that houses the personal possessions from past Czars. Incredibly, numerous original royal horse carriages are displayed. Their refined golden-coated woodwork and fairy-tale inspired design were well suited for royalty. These were the limousines of the day and surely turned heads.

Down from Kutafia Tower is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier commemorating those soldiers who died during World War II, which Russians call the Great Patriotic War. I equated the reverence to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. However, the eternal flame burning at the center of a five-pointed star in conjunction with the marching goose steps during the changing of the guard provides a distinctly Russian ambiance.

Adjacent to the Kremlin is the quintessential postcard image of Russia: Red Square. I was modestly disappointed to find it smaller and narrower than I had envisioned. I suspected many of the images I had previously seen were driven by propaganda, purposely exaggerated. However, this had not detracted from its obvious exquisiteness. Once an open market, the square has been famous for its elaborate May Day parades during Soviet times. Writer Mary Morris wrote, "despite what many

Americans think, the ‘red’ of Red Square does not refer to the political persuasion of the Kremlin,” rather it originated from “Old Slavonic, in which the word “red” was synonymous with ‘beauty’” (127). Saint Basil’s Cathedral, commissioned by Ivan the Terrible to memorialize his military victories was the focal point of the square. Its multi-color onion domes added pleasant contrast to the grey sky. Morris shared the myth and her commentary regarding the construction of Saint Basil’s:

Ivan the Terrible had the architects blinded so that they could never repeat their marvels anywhere else in the world. Though the legend is without basis in historic fact, this conglomerate of churches, consisting of eight cupolas and eleven multi-colored domes, is one of the unique architectural splendors of the world, the crowning glory of Red Square, of Russia itself. (127)

The GUM, known as the state department store, borders another side of the square. Having served many functions, it presently operates as an upscale mall. It includes stores such as Armani, Burberry, and Hugo Boss. Opposite the GUM, alongside the Kremlin Wall and adjacent to the square was a necropolis of significant figures buried within the wall itself. Among well-known figures such as Stalin and Yuri Gagarin, there is a surprise. I noticed some Western sounding names not written only in Cyrillic, such as Charles Emil Ruthenberg. It turned out he was a socialist and later prominent Communist Party of America member. Although he died long ago, his legacy was still relevant. The 2005 law article *A Curious Concurrence: Justice Brandeis' Vote in Whitney v. California* by David Skover and Ronald Collins quotes Ruthenberg in regards to his conviction stating, “I am not conscious of having committed any crime. The thing that I am

conscious of is having endeavored to inspire higher ideals and nobler lives. If to do that is a crime in the eyes of the government, I am proud to have committed that crime!” (341). My textbooks implied that the Soviets would never bestow such an honor upon an American. I wondered what else they had left out.

Finally, directly in front of the necropolis was Lenin’s Mausoleum. Many come to see the stepped pyramid housing the glass coffin of the embalmed body of the deceased founder of the Soviet Union. He looked as good as the day he died.

Chapter Nine

Although I could relate to many of the experiences previous travelers to Moscow had, one area stood in contrast: the Moscow Metro. Like in Saint Petersburg, it too is vast, reliable, cheap, frequent, and swift. While writer David Green would not disagree with those traits, in chapter two of his book he offered criticism regarding the temperature:

Whatever the temperature outside happens to be in Moscow, there seems to be some rule that the temperature will always be fifty degrees warmer in the metro. So if it's about freezing outside and you're bundled up in winter wear, it's a veritable sauna on the subway, making the whole place stink of sweat and sweat-soaked fabric.

I am relieved that this was not my experience.

I hired a local guide specifically for the metro. Her description of the station terminals as underground palaces was perfect. It is said that during one station inauguration in which Stalin was to give the opening remarks, he became speechless. The guide explained that the principle behind their monumental construction was if the previous aristocracy was able to have palaces then so should the common worker.

However, the account revealed that the construction of such a lavish system was also sinister. While the Communists could show they were wisely spending state resources by investing in public transit, it also provided a large audience in which they could employ visual rhetoric to reinforce ideology. The art throughout distinguished not only famous Russians but also the common worker. This showed that even the common worker was to be celebrated. It frustrated me that the décor I had just admired was employed as a tool of repressive propaganda.

The metro is also considered among the deepest in the world. Some stations are said to double as bomb shelters. Indeed, I saw impenetrable looking doors that appeared sturdy enough to confirm this theory. Before we parted ways, my guide shared a popular legend about the circle line. It is often said that its construction was based on a misunderstanding between the engineers and Stalin. As Stalin was reviewing the plans, he placed his coffee mug on top, which left a brown ring on the plans. Too afraid to ask for clarification, the engineers opted to construct the line. Today, the circle line is color coded brown.

Chapter Ten

After Moscow, I departed toward the city of Nizhny Novgorod on a regular commuter train from Kursky Railway Station. This city was situated on the Volga River. I remembered Mr. Molin proudly showing us personal pictures of the river in his lecture notes to explain this river's strategic importance during the Battle of Stalingrad. The Russians had paid dearly to retain access. Now I had the chance to see the river for myself.

Conveniently, the train schedule to Nizhny Novgorod offered several daily trains not requiring an overnight leg. Being my first train connection on the Trans-Siberian Railway, this arrangement reduced my biggest fear: missing the train and being swallowed by bureaucracy in attempting to arrange a new ticket. I was concerned the further I headed east, the less tourist-friendly the logistics would become. The Cyrillic alphabet, compounded by my inability to converse in Russian, did not instill confidence.

Reviewing my ticket for the tenth time, I headed out early to catch the train. Moscow has many train stations with routes based on the direction of the destination in relation to Moscow. Basically, the train stations in North part of the city trend North, etc. Shamefully, I worried the train stations would somehow be seriously confusing and lacking in amenities. While the station's information booth and departure hall for general

seating were closed, it indeed was a fully functional station. There was even a Dunkin Donuts. Announcements were frequently made in Russian. However, I found it surprising anyone understood what was said. While I don't know the lifespan of public announcement speakers, these sounded as though they were original and decades old. The sound coming out of them was fairly inaudible. A terrible echo and constant announcements being attempted compounded this. Also, I noticed that certain ticket windows seemed dedicated to certain regions rather than being for general tickets. This created very uneven lines at only a few ticket windows and several bored looking workers waiting for something to do at others. I did find humor in the *Important Information Board*. While it was labeled in English, all its content was written in Russian. I did not ask why.

The platform layout and numbering were odd because it appeared the station had been expanded over time to add a distinct section for short distance trains, which started the platform numbering back at number one, making two platform marked as number one at the same station. The only reliable initial indicator I had as to which train to take was its departure time. It took a few moments to be sure the Cyrillic matched up on the ticket. My train was due to arrive at platform one, however it came to platform eleven. The information board never updated, although no one but me seemed phased.

Tickets were checked twice, prior to boarding and after the train departed. My passport was also required during the first ticket check. Tickets were only valid for the individual who was named. On the second ticket check I dreaded thinking what happened to stowaways, particularly in the harsh winters. It took over 45 minutes for the train to clear the metro area of Moscow. I fretted about knowing when to get off, as I had not yet

discovered the consistent impeccable punctuality of Russian trains. Would there be signs in English? I began to notice through the train window at some of the scheduled stops there were actually signs in English on the platform, such as for the city of Vladimir. However, I soon realized this was the exception not the norm as the train continued to make stops. It was now also taking only a few minutes for the train to clear the city limits as it departed from station to station. It turned out announcements on commuter trains are also made in audible enough English. I ended up with no problems disembarking.

Fortunately, Nizhny Novgorod was a big enough city to have its own metro. Armed with my iPad, I managed the metro with the skill of a local. This was convenient because a 30-cent metro ride had saved me from over two miles of walking in the bitter cold from the train station to the hostel.

Chapter Eleven

Something I could not count on my iPad for was determining which metro station exit to take as I began my walk into the city center. However, this was minor. Earlier travelers had it worse. Ian Frazier complained about the cost and hassle of his satellite phone:

A big expense was the satellite phone. I didn't think I would need one, but my wife insisted...This \$1,000 piece of equipment, when it arrived in its foam-padded case, looked like a combination of a cell phone and a field radio. It had an extendable antenna shaped like a pistol barrel, and many accessories—batteries that cost \$85 each, a battery recharger, two kinds of foreign-current adapters for the battery charger, another charger attachment that fit into the cigarette lighter of a car, a remote antenna for use on the roof of the car, and so on. (175)

Mary Morris described the difficulty of just calling someone when she made her journey: “I placed a phone call to my companion in New York and miraculously the call went through within an hour, but there was no answer” (163). If she was grateful for having a phone “miraculously” connect after an hour, I could maintain my gratitude for only having to decipher which exit to take. The sign, divided into two, had lots of Cyrillic

words on one side and very few on the other. I reasoned the odds were better in heading toward the side with lots of words, as I felt it implied more activity, unless, of course, the few words conveyed, “everything else this way.”

On my way to Smile Hostel, I walked through a massive traffic circle. Its width allowed cars to park within what I assumed were designed to be lanes of travel. This was not an arrangement that would be tolerated in the States. However, I was happy to find that pedestrians were treated benevolently as they attempted to traverse the circle’s expanse. Although Smile Hostel was well positioned in the city, my iPad saved me from uncertainty and time in pinpointing its whereabouts.

Chapter Twelve

Nizhny Novgorod ranks amongst the largest cities in Russia. For many decades it was known as Gorky, for the Russian Writer, Maxim Gorky. The Soviet Union deemed it a “Closed City,” meaning no foreigners were allowed to visit. This restriction was due to military research and production that took place here. It caught me off guard to recognize the lengths the Soviets would go in the name of security, never realizing the size of these closed cities, some of which had over one million people. I had envisioned them on a smaller scale. Secrecy was so high in Nizhny Novgorod that for a time even locals could not have street maps. Scientists who would fall out of favor were also exiled here to keep them away from any foreign intervention.

The unique geographic layout was reminiscent of Budapest in terms of being divided by a major river. The city was laid out alongside the banks of the Volga River, the longest river in Europe and divided by the Oka River into two distinct areas: Upper City and Lower City. The city’s Kremlin sat on a hill near where the Oka River met the Volga, giving the Kremlin a strategic location. Inside the Kremlin was an eternal flame with an honor guard commemorating the sacrifices made during World War II. The age of those in the honor guard, none of which looked like they had graduated high school yet, stunned me. It was great to see traditions upheld by the next generation. The view of

the Volga River and Upper City from here rivals John F. Kennedy's graveside view of Washington, D.C., with a more industrial flare, dotted with golden "onion domes" from the Orthodox Cathedrals. I had finally seen the Volga River for myself.

Inside the Nizhny Novgorod Kremlin was a building called "House of the Soviets." It was built during the Soviet Era as an administrative office. It looked out of place and I found it absurd to locate such a structure surrounded by buildings of a much older and elegant style. Just outside the Kremlin, was the Chkalov Staircase, which has over one thousand steps leading from the riverbank of the Volga to the top of a hill. The monument atop honors Valery Chkalov, the first person to fly from Moscow to the United States routing through the North Pole, a big deal for that era.

Lastly, I had attempted to visit Maxim Gorky's childhood home but the infamous old Russian ladies had decided to take a day off.

Chapter Thirteen

The impression of Russians I had expected to find was that of a cold, reserved people. In Moscow, I had not recalled many smiles. The few English signs had not given me a welcoming impression. My visa application process was arduous, compounding these feelings.

However, I think my preconceptions colored my observations of Russians. At my hostel in Nizhny Novgorod I met a Russian girl, Anna, fluent in English with a surprisingly mild accent. She had been observing from afar in the hostel common area my chess matches with some of the other hostel guests before coming over to translate between whomever I was playing and myself. I could not count my blessings, as beating my Russian opponents was not the best way to continue making friends. Plus, I was excited to show off my intellectual feats of strength up close.

On the account that she was the only English speaker in the hostel, I mustered up the courage to invite her for coffee after the chess matches. Anna came from Cheboksary, a city about four hours to the west. She too was in town sight-seeing. As I tried to explain where Pennsylvania was, she interrupted me explaining that she knew where it was because of the TV show *The Office*. After describing my first train leg to her, I had mentioned my anxiety about catching the next train toward Kazan. The station in Nizhny

Novgorod was smaller and conveyed a different sense of organization from what I experienced so far. This was to be my first overnight leg, adding to my uneasiness.

To my surprise, Anna immediately offered to come with me to the station. It may not have seemed like a big deal; however, my time in Russia was limited. While, I knew that rebooking a ticket might not be difficult, it was a process I wanted to avoid. Other Russians from the hostel learned about my apprehension and decided to accompany me to the station as well. Not all of them spoke English, but they were eager to support me. I ended up with an entourage escort of six comrades to the station and a new impression of Russians.

It was my good fortune they came. The November 2015 Paris Attacks had just occurred. The police had increased document checks and searches. I was stopped. Having my new Russian friends all there to interpret was a blessing. It also made the police feel more at ease with me. After checking my papers and searching my Tortuga Travel Backpack and Tortuga Packable Daypack, I was allowed to proceed. Happily, my first experience with the Russian Police will be remembered as professional and positive.

Chapter Fourteen

I was in an ecstatic mood having successfully transitioned again from city to train. The police encounter was so blunted by the escort from the hostel that it inspired a new confidence in myself. Heading further east was not turning into the black hole I had psyched myself into believing. This train was an overnight sleeper, as every subsequent train on my trip was scheduled to be. My ticket was in Kupe class, Russian for second class. This level of service indicated a carriage with nine compartments comprised of four berths each. A window and common table divided the berths in two sets composed of an upper and lower berth. I had made sure to reserve the lower berths throughout my trip to save myself from the risk of embarrassment of climbing to the upper berth. Writer David Greene in chapter six describes the experience I sought to avoid:

Next challenge: avoiding slamming your head into the roof of the train in midthrust. Ducking your head can avoid a collision, but ducking while thrusting can be more than the mind— and body— can handle, and often you lose focus and tumble to the floor, which amuses other passengers. Fear of this embarrassment can be consuming, worse than fear of hangovers and frostbite, which in Russia says a lot.

Upon finding my compartment down the narrow carriage aisle, I found two male passengers already in the process of settling in. As I settled myself, I was thankful my backpack fit neatly below my berth allowing me to keep everything in one place. I introduced myself to gauge their English ability. To my disappointment, it was zero. However, I quickly learned that the undressing protocols were liberal in these small quarters, with both men undressing to their undershirts without a second thought. One passenger had even exchanged his pants into pajama bottoms.

Soon, a fourth individual arrived. After letting him get settled, I made another introduction. Surprisingly, he was conversational. I am not sure who grinned with excitement first; it may have been simultaneously. This was surreal; Russia ranks as “low proficiency” on the English Proficiency Index (Education First). Finding someone not just on the same train, but in my compartment across from my lower berth speaking English was dreamlike.

My new comrade’s name was Yuri, a professor at Kazan State Technological University in the Physics department. As we began getting to know one another, Yuri placed a bottle of cognac and a box of chocolate covered marshmallows on the communal table. I felt awkward not having anything to offer in return. Meanwhile, our cabin mates seemed disinterested and slowly ascended to their upper berths, each on their first attempt. Maybe it was not so difficult to get up there after all. I still had no interest in finding out.

Like a fish out of water, it must have been obvious to Yuri I was out of my element. On the train, consumption of your own alcohol was not allowed. Yuri explained not to worry, “just one drop.” He interrupted the conductor, who was passing by,

requesting two mugs. Momentarily, I thought Yuri was crazy. The cognac was out in the open; it must have been obvious to the conductor why the mugs were needed. However, to my amazement the conductor honored the request. It was de facto approval as far as I was concerned. And so aided by cognac, the evening progressed.

What Yuri had meant by one drop must have been a mistranslation. He began by pouring a generous amount into our mugs or as he might have said, “a few drops.” Our first shot was to our meeting, followed by chocolate covered marshmallows. Yuri had been in Nizhny Novgorod “for business.” He explained his research, which was varied but primarily seemed to involve improving existing methods of oil exploration and drilling. Part of his role at the university included travel throughout Russia and abroad as a spokesperson to recruit students. Pulling out his tablet, he proudly gave his presentation. It astounded me that Russian universities actually were interested in recruiting foreign students; it just seemed so uncharacteristic of Russia. Somewhere in his speech, he poured another generous shot while saying “only a drop.” This time we drank “to women.” I had initially declined the marshmallow, but his persistence required otherwise.

He had a deep curiosity about my travels, particularly in Russia. When I told him how smoothly my trip was going and how friendly I was finding Russians, we immediately had another “drop” of cognac and marshmallows, this time toasting “to love” with him adding, “may Russia continue to love you.” He was slightly embarrassed for our cabin mates, who were trying to sleep instead of partaking, indicating “they were not real Russians.” We laughed and engaged in another round of cognac and of course

marshmallows, as Yuri insisted. I would later learn that the “drinking etiquette” in Russia demanded that every shot be chased by some sort of food.

We moved onto sharing family photos, requiring a repeat of cognac and marshmallows as we discussed our parents and toasted their memory or health. After a few hours of chatting, all the “drops” of cognac were depleted. Yuri was quite pleased as he pointed to me and then himself saying, “We, my friend, are non-linear people,” followed by, “they are linear people” as he pointed to the upper berths. After more laughter than the observation likely called for, we finally broke for bed. I thought to myself, “if every train ride was like this then I'm not leaving Russia until my savings run out.”

Chapter Fifteen

At precisely 6:17am, the train slowly rolled into Kazan Passazhirskiy Station. If tardiness were ever suitable, this would have been the occasion. Simply, I was hung over. I am sure I had just drunk more cognac than previously in my entire lifetime. It was dark out. I knew it would be freezing. There was over an hour before the sun was to rise. Childishly, I thought to myself, “Why couldn’t this be more like an Amtrak arrival: delayed?”

Yuri, on the other hand, appeared unruffled and eager to tackle another day. As we exchanged emails, he apologized for not escorting me to my hostel saying, “I must prepare my morning lecture.” I thought, “Seriously, this guy is going straight to work?” He asked me where I was staying. After attempting to say, “Kazanskoe Podvorye Hostel,” and getting nowhere with my pronunciation, I merely said it was in the center of the city and that I would email him the information.

When we parted ways, I pulled out my dependable iPad. It was below freezing and lightly snowing, but the iPad readily navigated me. Stumbling through Kazan, I came across a hotel name I recognized: Ramada Hotel. Tempted to stop, my iPad motivated me, showing it was not much further to my hostel. I pressed on looking for *Bauman Street*, the main pedestrian thoroughfare. As the sun rose through snowflakes and thick

clouds, the streetlights dimmed. Finally, I located Bauman Street and swiftly found Kazanskoe Podvorye Hostel.

It was my intention to go out and explore. Instead, I gently slipped into my assigned four-person dormitory and slumbered. After recharging, I found that I was sharing my dorm with a newly minted physics PhD from China. His name was Jiang-Ming, traveling from Germany back to China. He had been hired for a tenure-track teaching position after completing a postdoc program at the University of Augsburg.

Meanwhile, Yuri emailed, “I invite you today at 5-00 clock in restoration Rubai” [sic]. Thankfully, his mastery of writing was sufficient enough to convey his intent, as “restoration” was meant to be “restaurant.” After detailing the preceding events to Jiang-Ming, I convinced him to accompany me to dinner. I was concerned about bringing an uninvited guest, however I felt the PhD in Physics connection justified any cultural faux pas I may have been committing.

Still looking quite composed, Yuri zealously greeted us. As predicted, Yuri and Jiang-Ming bonded over their mutual interests in the sciences. Seeing our puzzlement over the menu Yuri thankfully ordered on our behalf. This included a bottle of vodka with a main course of goat served over rice alongside a yogurt-based drink. After more toasts than I can remember, dinner sadly came to end. Jiang-Ming and I attempted to pay the bill, but Yuri had us out maneuvered. He was clearly a regular at this restaurant. We had no hope of convincing the waitress otherwise.

This was not the Russia I remembered learning about in school.

Chapter Sixteen

Weather conditions in Kazan continued to be cold and snowy along with gusty winds. I decided this would be a good occasion to catch up on my schoolwork. While traveling, I had been taking online graduate courses at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania in pursuit of a master's degree in Professional and Digital Media Writing. It was often difficult to balance my travels with my schoolwork. I have always assumed when visiting a foreign city that it will be my last opportunity, encouraging me to make the most of the chance. The flexibility my coursework thankfully provided had begun making it easy to procrastinate in favor of exploring. Having the weather slow me down was a welcomed excuse to focus on my studies.

Meanwhile, Jiang-Ming was readying for his next train leg toward Yekaterinburg, a city where the continents of Europe and Asia meet. His ticket was in Platzcart, Russian for third class. He was concerned about the power outlet situation. He hoped to pass his time reading research on his computer. This level of service is an open carriage with no private compartments, packing up to fifty-four people. Typically, it was equipped with one or two outlets to be shared between everyone. After telling Jiang-Ming his best option was to make sure he charged his computer, he revealed the battery no longer held a charge. Shocked, this exchange made me feel grateful for the resources available to me.

I thought, “how did he get his PhD in the twenty-first century with such a worn out computer?” My new MacBook Air was specifically bought for this trip and boasted a twelve-hour battery life. However, Jiang-Ming was determined. With the help of the hostel worker, he located what was essentially a Russian version of Kinko’s. He emailed the PDF of the research and returned with a printout, no longer needing to rely on his computer. His willpower and ingenuity inspired me.

Jiang-Ming had another issue: unwieldy baggage. I was backpacking with only the essentials. He was relocating back to China, which entailed carrying more luggage than one should ever travel with on a train. Seeing him struggle and a bit dumbfounded he even had made it this far, I decided to escort him to the train station. The sidewalk conditions were frequently perilous for traversing with more than just a backpack. I thought about back home and gained a new respect for winter sidewalk ordinances that required snow to be removed from sidewalks. At the station we tried to determine the correct train platform. Staring at what we thought was the arrival and departure display was futile. It had just kept scrolling, providing no platform information. Calling someone over yielded confused looks. They pointed toward the Russian Ticket windows, but neither of us was ready to go down that rabbit hole. Fortunately, we located another display monitor with the platform information we sought. Later, I concluded that the first display was just a fancy electronic timetable.

Bidding Jiang-Ming farewell, the train conductor allowed me onboard to assist in loading his baggage. I was quite surprised by this arrangement. I could not imagine boarding a train without a ticket, even for just a moment, back home.

Chapter Seventeen

Kazan actually is south of the tracks for the Trans-Siberian Railway, but everyone suggests it is worth the detour. Blogger Katie Aune in her guest post for the blog *Nomadic Matt* wrote, “every Russian I met ooh-ed and aah-ed” upon hearing she was going to Kazan. Similarly, telling people that I planned on stopping there provoked nods of approval. Of particular interest was Kazan’s Kremlin, which differs from Moscow’s as it was constructed of a white sandstone rather than red brick.

Shielded within this Kremlin’s imposing walls is the Qolşärif Mosque (pronunciation is comparable to “Cool-Sheriff” Mosque). Established in 2005, it is believed to rest on the same site as a Mosque destroyed centuries ago by Ivan the Terrible. This new construction was one of the largest located on the European continent. Its sky-blue minarets and cupolas made for a pleasant contrast against the white sandstone. Never having been in a mosque, I used the opportunity to venture inside.

After placing plastic covers on my muddy shoes, I was allowed in. The mosque actually had a balcony for tourists providing a bird’s-eye view. Within the main prayer room, there were no seats. Prayers were done while standing or kneeling. Just like in Christian churches, expensive materials such as what I guessed to be marble were visible

throughout. The large stained glass windows filtered the incoming light, enhancing character. The sky-blue color scheme of the ceiling resembled the heavens above.

Unclear about other design elements, I realized I could use my iPad to google information, a pattern that would come to repeat as I progressed throughout Russia.

Conveniently, I pulled up an article from Khan Academy titled “Introduction to Mosque Architecture” by Kendra Weisbin. I learned a “niche in the wall” called “the Mihrab” indicated the direction of Mecca. This ensured all worshippers were facing Mecca while praying. What Christians would likely recognize as a pulpit was called a “minbar.” The article went on to indicate that while “the five daily prayers prescribed in Islam can take place anywhere, all men are required to gather together at the mosque for the Friday noon prayer.” Weisbin mentioned that the main prayer hall for a Mosque such as this one was specifically sized to “hold the entire male population of a city or town.”

One missing element caught me off guard. I anticipated some sort of a barrier to divide gender. My impression was that gender segregation was a strict, even aggressive element within these places of worship. The only difference I spotted was that the men were praying at the front while the women prayed in the back. While I still have not grasped the overall gender topic within Islam, this visit altered my worldview. It showed me that Islam, like other religions, had a broad spectrum of beliefs and customs.

Chapter Eighteen

It was now my turn to head onward to Yekaterinburg. Having helped Jiang-Ming the evening before, getting to Kazan Passazhirskiy Station was stress free.

My train compartment wound up filled with three older Russians: a gentleman and a married couple. The close confines of the train had a way of getting its passengers together; I never did figure out if they were related to one another. This train was older. In new trains, the bedding was in place for the upper berths while built into the seatbacks for the lower berth that only needed to be folded down. This older train had separate mattresses and blankets located within the compartment, requiring unraveling and prepping. The conductor kindly provided the sheets, but passengers were required to make their own beds. I discretely took cues from my fellow Russians for the best approach and quietly went to sleep to the gentle swaying and low rumble of the train.

The following day there were still a few hours until my arrival in Yekaterinburg. I woke up to find the communal table filled with tea, instant coffee, sausages, cucumbers, and bread. Not to be embarrassed again, I came prepared, having brought cookies and pretzels. Placing my goods on the table to be shared became an immediate icebreaker, leading to a dialogue mostly through pictures on their flip phones and my iPad. I learned

they were from somewhere deep in Siberia and had many hours to go beyond my disembarkation.

In particular, they were inquisitive about my clothing and concerned about me freezing. Pulling up my pants to reveal my ankle, I showed them my long underwear and Merino wool socks. They laughed, unimpressed, as if to say, “please, long underwear and warm socks goes without saying.” Next, I demonstrated that my leather jacket had a special winter liner. This did not excite them. I then pulled out both my Uniqlo vest and jacket made from down, a warm feather found on birds. It was unclear if I was able to convince them that the material was designed to keep me warm. However, I modeled the clothing, putting on the down vest, the down jacket, and my leather jacket with the winter liner at the same time. Their fear eased. To further quell any lingering doubts, I pulled out one of my Uniqlo HEATTECH undershirts, designed to keep warm. They felt the material and closely examined it, but were skeptical. I felt grateful for their concern, but troubled that they might be right.

The conductor interrupted my fashion show having come by to return my ticket. This signaled approximately thirty minutes until my next stop. I would come to learn that on overnight sleeper trains this procedure ensured passengers were aware their stop was coming. I admired how this protocol communicated critical information without needing to speak a word.

Chapter Nineteen

The opening scene from the 1965 film *Doctor Zhivago* portrays workers solemnly arriving and departing work. They appeared miserable and hopeless. A line from this movie, “The personal life is dead in Russia. History has killed it,” speaks to how different the worldview was during this era. But, my good fortune running into welcoming Russians had not been the Russia I was expecting to encounter either. It certainly was not the impression I had conceived of back in Mr. Molin’s class. My imagination was never rich enough to allow for helpful escorts, invitations to dinner, and concern for my preparedness.

Now the clock had moved two hours ahead and I was several hundred miles from Moscow by rail. I had left Europe and arrived in the Ural Mountains on the edge of Asia. Paul Theroux on his first arrival to Yekaterinburg recounted in *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar* how he was greeted here by the image of a boy hoisting “his dead father in a stretcher off the train” and how demoralizing that was. I was more fortunate. A hotel across from the train station said Marins Park Hotel in huge English letters atop its roof. Immediately beside the hotel was what is likely the most recognizable American architectural icon: the golden arches of McDonalds.

After checking into Novotel Yekaterinburg Centre, I met up with Jiang-Ming who still had the evening in the city. Facebook had facilitated our contact. I pondered how today's generation of travelers required little effort to maintain their link to one another. I was even able to send Jiang-Ming walking directions along with a map from his hostel to my hotel. Imagine how many Facebook friends Marco Polo would have had.

Yekaterinburg is home to one of only a few Starbucks locations this far east within Russia. It was a goal of mine to acquire a collectable mug for my collection. This simple souvenir was something I had been collecting for a long time. A wall in my childhood bedroom displays over one hundred of these mugs from various locations around the world that I had previously visited. One from this part of Russia would be a crown jewel.

Walking there, assisted by my iPad's GPS under a moderate snowfall, Jiang-Ming and I paused to admire how flawlessly the drivers navigated the snow-covered streets. No road lines were visible under the accumulating snow, yet the traffic flowed effortlessly. It was clear drivers here were used to these conditions and their cars were prepared. Back home these circumstances would have emptied the streets. We came across a team of workers operating some of the most robust snow removal equipment I had ever seen. It snows too much here to simply plow it aside, so the snow has to be hauled out. What a Jaws-of-Life is to a firefighter, this snow-eating contraption was to the snow removal workers. The machine resembled one of those asphalt removers except rather than chewing up the street, it had insect-like mechanical arms that gently but rapidly swooped snow onto a conveyer belt that emptied into a dump truck. After uploading pictures onto

Facebook, a friend commented this was the type of equipment used in the snowy city of Buffalo, New York.

Locating the mall while maintaining our balance on the slippery sidewalks turned out to be the easy part. The tricky part was finding the *Starbucks* inside. The blue prints must have come from Mall of America, the largest mall in the United States. In fact there were many Western names I recognized such as H&M, Zara, and even GAP. We were caught off guard at the number of shoppers, with their bags, plodding from store to store. Russia is said to be in the midst of a financial crisis. Indeed the value of the Ruble had eroded roughly from 35 Rubles to 65 Rubles to the dollar in two years. Evidently the news of a recession had not yet reached these shoppers.

Stopping in a few clothing stores, Jiang-Ming teased how all the clothing was made in China, making it affordable. More seriously, he speculated Russians still had disposable income despite the recession due to government-subsidized healthcare and other services. He reasoned when one was not stressed about going bankrupt from illness, one became less attached to cash. I disagreed, explaining that during the recent recession in the United States I witnessed similar crowds in shopping malls. I countered instead that an individual's desire for material goods trumped the sense of security storing cash might bring.

After over half an hour of meandering, we finally stumbled upon Starbucks. We found no collectible mugs on display. It was discouraging to think that I had come halfway around the world to find the collectible mugs out of stock. I pulled up an image of the mug onto my iPad and showed the barista what I was looking for. Her frown did not instill a positive prospect. However, she went into the back and a few minutes later

came out with the exact mug I was searching for! I briefly considered why these mugs were in stock but not on display before remembering in Russia such questions did not have answers.

Chapter Twenty

Yekaterinburg was one of the few cities in Russia I could name prior to planning my itinerary. Mr. Molin's lectures on the Communist Revolution included discussions of Czar Nicholas II and his family. They had met their demise in this city as casualties of the collapsed monarchy. The family included five children: Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia, and Alexei. All were ruthlessly executed. Alexei was a young teenager when he died at roughly the same age as myself when I was learning about him. In my studies, I recalled leaders and perhaps their spouses being violently removed from power but never five children. Mr. Molin told the legend of Anastasia's possible survival, which the popular Disney movie *Anastasia* drew inspiration from. I remember wanting to believe it to be true, just to have something positive to hold on to from this tragic story.

To help me explore this city I hired the services of a city guide. The first impression I had from her online video was, "Hello, my name is Luba. I am a city guide and I am happy to invite you to my favorite city, Yekaterinburg. In the Soviet times it was called Sverdlovsk, so I am sure you love it. Let's go!" The presentation looked as though it came straight out of a Rick Steves' television travel show. Our tour began under an uncommon November drizzle, which she immediately expressed shock about, explaining the temperature was rarely above freezing this time of year. It seemed global

warming intervened before I would find out if my clothes could tackle a true Siberian winter.

Our tour started off at a massive snow-covered computer keyboard made of stone along the Iset River called the QWERTY Monument, a contemporary addition to the city. After seeing so many tributes to Lenin, Russian Writers, and the common worker, it was strange to come across something that commemorated technology, particularly on the edge of Siberia. I had imagined petting wild bears or tripping over sables rather than gazing at oversized computer keys. Next, was another shocker: a monument to the Beatles. The centerpiece was a chic silhouette of the group flanked by the “Wall of Love.” It had the Beatles lyrics “...the love you take is equal to the love you make” and the song title, “Imagine” from John Lennon. I found it amazing that the Beatles material written in English had transcended both the language barrier and the Iron Curtain. I also thought to myself, “Wasn’t there a ‘Russian Beatles’ that was deserving of such an honor?”

The cultural surprises continued as we crossed Stone Bridge, one of the oldest in the city. At the end of the bridge, Luba pointed to a sewer entrance labeled “Ekaterinburg Turtles” stylized with the same red and green colors, fonts, and original design as the “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” logo. This cartoon and film series based on an American comic book had also become known here. Close by we came across a distinctly Russian statue: a sculpture of Ivan Malyshev. His figure actually stands taller than Lenin’s in this city. However, besides being an early prominent communist who died in battle against the White Army, no one recalls why he was honored with such distinction. Its odd backstory finally trended toward the Russia I had envisioned.

We briefly paused in front of city hall and Lenin's statue. Luba revealed that the present mayor, Yevgeny Roizman, belonged to an opposing party of Vladimir Putin. In disbelief, my immediate reaction was, "Does President Putin know?" She chuckled at my reaction and the absurdity of my question; she proudly explained that Yekaterinburg had a reputation for being independent and paving its own way. Next we arrived at where the city first emerged. In the early eighteenth century Russia needed to expand industrial capacity to meet its military ambitions. Peter the Great sent Russian Engineer Vasily Tatishchev and the German-born military officer Wilhelm de Gennin to survey the best area to harness the energy of the river. I did not expect to learn that a foreigner had been instrumental to the foundation of a significant Russian city.

Nearby was Sevastyanov's house, an iconic structure of Yekaterinburg. It was a mansion of a stunning turquoise color accented by a red-orange hue, which combined elements of classic, gothic, and baroque architecture. The owner, Nikolay Sevastyanov, was a successful businessman who profited heavily during a war between Russia and Turkey. However, he was jealous of the architecture his peers had in Saint Petersburg and Moscow, proving that "keeping up with the Joneses" was not just an American attitude. Luba added that Sevastyanov had tried to construct the roof from gold. He gave up the idea when the Church intervened by insisting such prestige could only be given to churches.

As we continued, Luba highlighted a sculpture of Alexander Popov. She explained this gentleman was the inventor of the radio but got no global recognition for it. He had failed to patent his device prior to the Italian Guglielmo Marconi, who is widely credited as the inventor. Regardless of who was really first, I wondered how often

nationality or bureaucratic circumstances led historians to assign credit wrongly where credit was due.

Finally, we arrived at Church on the Blood. After being banished from Saint Petersburg and held captive in Siberia, the Czar and his family were eventually brought to Yekaterinburg in the spring of 1917. The church rests on the location of the now demolished home where they were imprisoned. This had been a turbulent time in Russia with a civil war being waged by the Red Army loyal to the communists and the White Army in opposition. Placing the family in a communist stronghold like Moscow or Yekaterinburg had been viewed as places the family could be best secured from hindering communistic ambitions.

Inside the church there was a gallery of photographs of the royal family and house prior to demolition. Luba emphasized one particular picture: the basement in the aftermath of the execution. In the photo, the back wall was completely wrecked with bullet holes. It was shocking to see how tiny the basement was, appearing smaller than the average master bedroom. I had difficulty envisioning twenty-two or so people gathered there on the ill-fated night. The family of seven and their four remaining servants were called downstairs where a contingent of eleven or so men were waiting under the pretext to aid in evacuation due to the approaching White Army. One of the executioners suddenly announced that due to the ongoing attack on Soviet Russia it had been decided the royal household was to be executed: Moments later gunfire erupted. Many of the females did not die instantly. They had jewels hidden in their clothing that inadvertently safeguarded them. This resulted in the executioners resorting to knifing. The shrine to commemorate this event has been constructed on what was believed to be

the exact spot and dimension of the original basement. This area was dark to maintain a solemn ambiance, which was reinforced by the red granite floor symbolizing the bloodshed that occurred here.

Before ending the tour, we drove to visit the marker that represented the Europe and Asia continental border. On the way there we stopped at a grim memorial to one of Stalin's repressions. During the late 1930's, an era now called the "Great Purge," Stalin's regime executed thousands of citizens throughout Russia. He was motivated by paranoia rather than any actual wrongdoing by victims of the purge. The site honors the approximately eight thousand bodies buried here in a mass grave only discovered in the 1990s when the highway was being widened. Sadly, it is believed that there are still quite a few mass graves from this period waiting to be uncovered. Finally, we reached the border between Europe and Asia. A tall obelisk marks the spot where one continent changes to another. It pays tribute to when Czar Alexander II crossed the threshold during his journey into Siberia. As Luba and I said our goodbyes, she left me with a present of a postcard depiction of Yekaterinburg.

Chapter Twenty-one

The last full day in Yekaterinburg was set aside for my coursework. Beginning bright and early in the hotel lobby at 5:00 am local time I attended the online lecture, which started at 7:00pm local time in my professor's time zone. It was disorienting to find the hotel bar open and occupied by a few men drinking. I wasn't sure if they had just started or had not yet finished from the night before. Another shock came when I observed a group of three men who entered the lobby, two with long guns. They had not caught the front desk or anyone at the bar off guard, which kept me calm. Thankfully, it turned out they were armored truck workers who had come to refill the ATMs. Although I had no issues using credit cards, there was a saturated amount of ATM's throughout Russia. It seemed cash was the choice of payment for locals. As class was wrapping up, I was grateful the hotel's Wi-Fi had held up through to the end of class at 8:00 am. Finding reliable Wi-Fi robust enough to live stream lectures was not always straightforward. I mused how peculiar it was that my classmates were now only going to bed while a day for me was just about to begin. Looking outside, the sun had still not risen and would not for another hour. For comparison, the sun would greet my classmates the following morning almost a full two hours sooner.

In the evening, I set out for the English Club that Luba organizes every week at a local restaurant. The club started out as a venue for English learners to come together and practice their language skills, which over time expanded to include foreigners. On my way there I began to hear some yelling, “NEYT...NEYT.” Quickly I froze, realizing it was a police officer. Seeing him motioning to turn around, I made a U-turn and walked away. It was unclear to me what I had just done but was relieved the cop was appeased. Moments later I saw blue and red lights reflecting onto the nearby buildings and turned around to see a motorcade passing through. This was President Putin, who was in town for the inauguration of the Boris Yeltsin Center, a new presidential museum.

Seeing the police depart, I again followed the directions of the iPad toward the English Club. After checking my coat at the door, I was escorted into a restaurant not realizing that the building had multiple eateries within its walls. Somehow my English was not a strong enough indicator to the doorman to usher me to the English speakers. Instead, I ended up in a Cuban restaurant hosting karaoke not just in Russian but also Spanish. I had already been a bit amazed there was a venue for English speakers and now I was bemused to find myself listening to Spanish karaoke. I never found the English Club. The irony that I had somehow managed to be fairly successful overcoming the language and alphabet barrier in Russia through the iPad only to fail to locate the English Club did not escape me.

Chapter Twenty-two

I arrived at Perm after a five and half hour train ride. It was my first time needing to keep track of both local and Moscow time. The ticket listed 6:40 am as the departure to Perm, but it was actually 8:40 am local time in Yekaterinburg. The train schedules run on Moscow time regardless of time zone. This also directed me northwest before going east again because my stop at Kazan was technically a side trip that took me South of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, bypassing Perm the first time.

Perm is the closest stop to the only gulag preserved as a museum: Perm-36. Gulags were forced labor camps used during Soviet Times. The Trans-Siberian Railway played a role in transporting prisoners. Ian Frazier wrote:

During the Soviet era, the Trans-Siberian Railway would take on the dismal role of transport for millions of prisoners shipped eastward to camps in the gulag. Accounts of Siberian exile and prison under the tsars had always included a journey, usually on foot, along the Siberian Trakt. All twentieth-century descriptions of Siberian punishment would begin with a rail journey, usually torturous and long. Soviet-era prisoners who had read about prison and exile of tsarist times sometimes scoffed at how tame those former sufferings were compared to their own. (145)

Fortunately my arrival at Perm 2 station was as a curious tourist, not a political prisoner.

When planning my visit here, I saw that the hotel was a forty-five minute walk from the station. It had been enough for me to consider skipping the city, as there was no metro I could rely on and taxis were an anxiety that was difficult to bury. I laughed at how the iPad now made those fears irrelevant. The most challenging part was the decision to enter the building, along with the seven flights of steps to the Gallery Hotel. Oddly for me, the hotel occupied only one floor of a multi-use building. The outside of the structure, with its Soviet utilitarian cube-like design was in desperate need of a paint job. It did not give a positive impression of a comfortable stay. I hoped it was some mistake and that the iPad's GPS misguided me. However, I would learn that in Russia the outside of any building often did not correlate to the interior. Stepping inside, I now thought I was in too nice of a hotel for it to be mine. Shining tile, elegant leather furniture, and beautiful paintings adorned the lobby.

Chapter Twenty-three

After a good night's rest, the familiar face of the receptionist brought me a cooked-to-order breakfast of pancakes with a side of condensed milk along with a few cottage cheese dumplings. She also dropped off a city map in case I got lost, all in Russian. I am not sure how she expected me to use it, but I appreciated the gesture. She was the same person who checked me in the previous evening. It turned out that the hotel staff worked in twenty-four hour shifts. I quietly reflected that it was Black Friday back home where most retail workers would also be putting in unusually long hours for the occasion. For the staff here, those long hours were the norm. I thought back to Mr. Molin's class and his booming voice teasingly threatening to send us to a gulag when we failed to stay on task. Now, he would be able to claim he actually sent a former student to a gulag through his stirring lectures.

Soon after breakfast, the receptionist called to inform me my taxi driver was waiting. As we were leaving the hotel, he immediately corrected the receptionist: "I am not your taxi driver! I am your guide for Perm-36." Any fear his accent would be too strong or his English weak dissipated. Alexander was a lifelong resident of Perm having spent his entire life working in tourism. His success in tourism was evident from his

spirited and vigorous stature. Our car was also no taxi but rather his personal Volkswagen Tiguan. I began to feel like a VIP in this part of the world.

As we made our two-hour journey toward Perm-36, Alexander was inquisitive about my impressions of Russia. He was delighted to hear of my satisfaction traveling throughout his country. That I had not succumbed to accepting the flawed esteem Russia carried throughout the world was a marvel to him. He explained that his tourists occasionally expressed shock that the supermarkets were stocked with various food options! I explained I was here tearing down those stereotypes. Having asked me about any difficulties moving around, I mentioned how the first train from Moscow departed from a different platform than posted on the information board. He chuckled but insisted it was extraordinarily unusual for the trains to be anything but punctual. Another issue was that the platform numbers at many train stations were often confusing, with numbers seemingly skipped or not sequential. Alexander gave a hearty laugh, explaining this was on purpose, “In case of foreign invasion, foreigners will never decipher the train platforms!” More seriously, he added, “To prevent foreign trains from being used in an invasion, our track widths do not conform to neighboring countries.” My experiences with the question “Why?” drew amusement. He explained that a foreign friend of his had three rules for travel in Russia: one, never ask the question “Why;” two, never lean on anything; and after a long pause, he could not remember the third rule. Paradoxically, I found the uncertainty quite appropriate for the subject.

Our route to Perm-36 involved some recently improved roads. Alexander said the locals jest, “This is what five minutes of driving in America must feel like.” In reality, most roads I traveled on in Russia may have been narrower, but their quality was on par

with the roads back in Pennsylvania. As we approached the main entrance, I felt relief to have Alexander beside me. The warm welcome we received at the ticket window demonstrated he came here frequently enough to keep the infamous old Russian ladies from spoiling our visit.

Paul Theroux in *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar* described Perm-36 as the “worst gulag” (475). Ian Frazier highlighted details that shed light on how awful gulags were:

When the war was over, and the United States made agreements with Stalin whereby Russian P.O.W.s brought from France and Germany at the end of the war would be repatriated, some of those slated for return committed suicide in places of temporary confinement like Ellis Island and Fort Dix, New Jersey, rather than face the gulag. (424-425)

Frazier added that some individuals had the unfortunate fate of surviving a concentration camp only to find themselves in a gulag, “Some who had lived through the Nazi occupation said Hitler was nothing compared to this, and they now wished they had fought on Hitler’s side” (424-425). As if those details were not grim enough, Frazier commented,

Gulag prisoners who knew the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* regretted that fate had put them in this time and place, and not in slavery in the American South a hundred years before. As Negro slaves, they reasoned, at least they would have lived someplace warm, and would have been whipped and branded but not worked to death outright. In 1945, news reached the camps that the United States now possessed the atomic bomb.

According to Solzhenitsyn, this unexpected development gave hope to many prisoners, who began to pray for atomic war. (425)

Our assigned guide for the site was Sergey, a retired high school teacher, while Alexander served as his interpreter. Sergey proudly introduced himself in English but apologized that his tour would be conducted in Russian. Sergey brought us to the front of the camp, pointing out the Soviet National Anthem scribbled onto the wall with the outdated lyrics incorporating Stalin's name. He explained this camp was part of the system of forced labor prisons during the time of the Soviet Union, which we commonly refer to as gulags in English. Perm 36 started as a common camp, a low-level gulag. Soon after, it was converted to harsher camp for police officers and military personnel. Later, from about the 1970s until its closure in the late 1980s, it was used for political prisoners. A special regime section, one of the most severe levels of gulag, was also added while the site transitioned to house political prisoners deemed "enemies of state." The threshold for being sent to these gulags was shockingly low. Ian Frazier noted, "A single ill-considered remark could be enough. An actor named Shirin, of the Lenin Collective Theater, landed in a labor camp for bursting out, "Don't feed us Soviet straw; let's play the classics!" A woman got ten years for saying that a recently convicted enemy of the people, Marshal M. N. Tukhachevsky, was handsome" (218).

Sergey took us to a preserved area of the multi-layer fence that once enclosed the entire compound. The exterior fence was a wood barrier, followed by a high barbed-wire enclosure. The in-between area was known as "broken land." It was designed to "break" if anyone stepped in it. This also signaled the guards that someone had made it to this section. The next segment was a wooden boundary with a barbed-wire trap lining its top.

Between this boundary and the previous section was the dog gallery, an area guarded by mean dogs. The next fence was an additional barbed-wire obstacle that was connected to motion detectors. If someone touched this, the guards would immediately be signaled. One more barricade followed, an electric one. This too, would immediately send a signal to the guards if tripped. For good measure, this also featured “broken land” and was surrounded by guard towers. I doubt a hybrid of Houdini and MacGyver could have slipped through.

Sergey took us through the various structures, which included an electric plant, a boiler building, a warehouse, and other workshops. One of the products manufactured here was electric irons for clothing. Throughout the day, prisoners were subjected to searches to ensure they were not concealing tools or other items from the labor portion of the camp. The housing unit originally included bunk beds of flat wood with no mattresses. Later, more comfortable bedding furniture was added. Ian Frazier perhaps best described this arrangement as an interior that “offered little to think about besides the limitless periods of suffering that had been crossed off here, and the unquiet rest these bunks had held” (422). Additionally Frazier’s research found that “for covering they might have had a single blanket, or nothing besides the clothes they wore during the day” (423). Food was also on the level of a Greek Tragedy, with the prisoners never being provided enough calories to cover the energy they expended. Oddly, there was a cinema in the main hall, which Sergey said was used about once a month.

It turned out that Paul Theroux was mistaken calling this the worst gulag. Alexander mentioned that tourists who had previously visited the remnants of gulags in the Far East were surprised at the comfort of Perm-36. Sergey added that these conditions

were better than other gulags due to its one-time population of police officers and military personnel. However, the punishment barracks was awful. Food rations of bread and occasionally fish or potatoes would be more limited, showers would be less frequent, sleeping conditions were worsened, and inmates rarely went outside because the workshop was across the hallway from their punishment cell. A prisoner here was only entitled to an occasional forty minutes outside, in a tiny, enclosed box. The view was of the sky interrupted by the harsh lines of barbed wire and the face of a guard towering above. When guards came to check inmates' cells, inmates were required to be facing backwards to the guard, bent over while reciting how awful their crimes were. This was to prevent the inmates from building a rapport with the guards.

It startled me to learn that areas were even added as recently as the 1980s. I had thought this system of gulags had become less common after the death of Stalin. There were about 175 guards watching over approximately 250 prisoners, a proportion that seemed high. I cannot imagine the stench of prisoners given their infrequent access to showers. The plumbing was just a hole in the ground. This was all compounded by long, cold, dark winters. The image that will forever be ingrained in my mind is of the multi-layer fence. Its formidability, being wide and densely filled with barriers, motion sensors, and fierce dogs, was a testament to the fact that people were doomed here.

Before departing, I asked Sergey why Perm-36 managed to be preserved as a museum. His theory was that many gulags were further east and removed from population centers. Perm City is only an overnight train ride from Moscow with an accessible and high quality road infrastructure toward Perm-36 to support tourists. I commented on how Ian Frazier throughout his book described the awkwardness he

experienced discussing gulags. I too felt the need to tone down my curiosity, as if my interest was somehow an insult to Russians. He responded asking, “How many slave plantations are on display in America? Are you excited about visiting them?” His point was well taken. As we said our goodbyes, Sergey made it a point to thank me as an American for the Lend-Lease act, which aided Russia in World War II. He quickly added, “Russia would have succeeded no matter what, however the United States aid helped speed up Russia’s success.” It was interesting that despite his upbringing during the Cold War era, he could still say something positive about America.

During the drive back, Alexander took an interest in my travels and studies. He revealed that his boss’s tour company occasionally provided tour services to writers, such as myself. His boss was even instrumental in providing the guide services in a well-known American book: *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar* by Paul Theroux. My jaw dropped. I found it serendipitous to be following Theroux’s tracks on my own travel trek. As we parted, he left me with a gift of a pin depicting the American and Russian flags side by side.

Chapter Twenty-four

Leaving Perm, I headed east again toward Tyumen where I would finally go past the threshold of Ural Mountains entering Siberia. It was not difficult to see why the railway had expanded to Yekaterinburg and Perm, as both cities were industrial hubs for Russia. In *To the Edge of the World: The Story of the Trans-Siberian Express, the World's Greatest Railroad* Christian Wolmar added that this part of the railway was not difficult to construct due a reliable road infrastructure already in place to facilitate the movement of both labor and raw materials (5). However, "...thereafter the going got tougher" (5). Historian Steven Marks summed it up succinctly saying, "Siberian transportation west of Lake Baikal was bad, and east of the lake it got worse" (qtd. in Wolmar 5).

So, what incentive was there for Russia to expand in Siberia? As Ian Frazier eloquently wrote, "In fashionable restaurants in New York and Los Angeles, Siberia is the section of less-desirable tables given to customers whom the maître d' does not especially like. In one of the most important places to be seen having lunch in midtown Manhattan, Siberia is the tables next to the ketchup room, where the condiments are stored (3)." The railway "seemed to offer little to attract potential immigrants who would be needed to justify the massive cost of constructing the line. Given the likely poor

demand for travel the need for the line could, therefore, be questioned” (Wolmar 1). The road network in 1800’s Russia was not of the highest quality and harsh winters diminished the effectiveness of transporting goods. So ineffective were the roads that ironically even “the mills in the Urals, the heart of the Russian iron industry, proved capable of supplying only a small proportion of the rails and their products were far more expensive, not least because it actually cost more to transport on Russia’s terrible roads than the British imports brought in by sea” (20). Another important element was the military factor (27). The railway to Warsaw proved useful in putting “down one of the perennial Polish rebellions” which gave rise to the notion railways were “now the strongest and most decisive element of war” (28).

The Railway was also seen as a link to continue to keep the European part of Russia unified with Siberia. There was concern about the rhetoric revolutionaries had advocated that dreamed of “the same kind of future as America and Australia, with a combination of settlers and the indigenous population creating prosperity” (35). Wolmar also suggested that the American Civil War had an impact on moving forward with construction of the railway (34). Having seen that the South had seceded from the United States in attempting to form their country caused concern that Siberia might be inspired to seek its own independent state (35). In fact

Tsar Alexander III (who had assumed the throne when his father, Alexander II, was assassinated in 1881) issued a series of decrees that aimed to accelerate ‘the gradual abolition of any sign of the administrative separateness of Siberia and the destruction of its internal administrative unity’. 10 The region was broken up into various administrative entities,

which meant that by 1887 the very name Siberia was no longer used for any part of the Empire. 35-36

These military and industrial ambitions were successful as Siberia continues to be ruled from Moscow. A by-product of these motivations has also created one the longest passenger rail adventures in the world. Settled in my second-class compartment, I looked forward to what would come.

Chapter Twenty-five

The city of Tyumen is not a common stop for English speaking tourists. My *Lonely Planet Trans-Siberian Railway* guidebook highlighted it as the first Russian settlement in Siberia, founded in 1586, but advised “there’s enough here to keep you (mildly) entertained for a day or so...” This was surprising, as I had read the women of Tyumen were among the most attractive in Russia. Colin Thubron shared in his book *In Siberia* an anecdote conveyed to him about their exquisiteness: “...after the Revolution all the prostitutes from St Petersburg and Moscow were pushed out to the Urals, then to Tyumen! And these are their descendants. A paradise of them! You can sin all night...” (26). Regardless, I had my own important objectives for Tyumen that merited a stay. The first goal was to visit the most Eastern Starbucks on the Trans-Siberian Railway and grab a mug for my collection. My next aim was to visit the museum dedicated to Rasputin in the settlement of Pokrovskoe, his hometown.

Dostoevsky Hostel in Tyumen was located within the line of sight of the train station. Disappointingly, I was the only guest for the first two nights. It would seem tourists heeded the advice of the Lonely Planet guidebook. Getting to the Starbucks, located within *Galeria Voyage Mall*, was straightforward. The ease in which I could navigate the streets with my iPad made it seem as if I had walked the streets of Tyumen

my whole life. I did not get lost once. The mall was again large, even by American standards. Despite its distant location in the world, Starbucks was able to maintain its standards. It was clean, had a complete menu, well-located, comfortably furnished, and was rounded off with a friendly staff. Happily, I was able to acquire my mug depicting the city's iconic Bridge of Lovers, along with oil wells, which represented one of the major industries of the region. On the way back I sighted another famous American icon, McDonalds. I considered stopping but the place was at capacity with people lined up into the foyer. Siberia, at least along the Trans-Siberian Railway, was certainly not the void I had anticipated. In fact it was not difficult imagining myself living in Tyumen, as it seemed nothing was missing.

The location of the Rasputin Museum about an hour and half outside of Tyumen meant I would need some assistance getting there. While there were buses that stop at the settlement, chancing getting lost in Siberia during the winter was enough to dissuade me from a solo trek. However, there was a big obstacle: no Russian tour agencies with English services. Undeterred, I reached out to Luba, my guide from Yekaterinburg. A company she had previously worked with was able to make arrangements to provide me with both a driver and an interpreter.

As scheduled, Vladimir, the driver and Nadya, the interpreter, picked me up. It was fortunate that the exchange rate allowed me to afford these arrangements, as this was something I would not be in a position to afford back home. My good luck continued as I conversed with the interpreter, whose language skills were the quality of a United Nations translator. In fact she had studied linguistics at Tyumen State University and was presently an instructor there. It was remarkable to learn that English was even offered as

a major course of study in Siberia and evidently taught so well. She also worked in a program funded by the American Embassy in Moscow!

Ironically, Nadya had never been to the museum. She was curious as to why an American was making all this effort to visit. I explained that I found it fascinating that a monk who seemingly came from nothing was able to exercise so much influence over the last Czar and his family. The only direct heir to the throne was Alexei. Unfortunately, he suffered from the blood disease Hemophilia. Doctors struggled in their treatments. However, Rasputin seemed to have an exceptional capacity at controlling the disease. This earned him an important role in the family, giving him extraordinary sway in the Royal hierarchy. Historians are not sure how he managed this feat. I still remember Mr. Molin suggesting hypnosis as a means to calm Alexei, slowing any bleeding. As proof, Mr. Molin displayed portraits of Rasputin where his eyes did seem to carry a hypnotic quality.

Enthusiastically, I recalled to Nadya what I remembered most vividly from Mr. Molin's lectures: the legend of Rasputin's death. The aristocracy, having grown tired of his authority, set him up to be murdered. He was invited for a friendly dinner with a prince, where his drink was laced with arsenic. However, this proved to be completely ineffective. Startled and eager to dispose of Rasputin, he was then shot. Somehow this too failed to incapacitate him. Finally, he was physically beaten and thrown under the ice of the frozen Neva River. His final cause of death was drowning. I explained to Nadya that going to Rasputin's hometown to see the museum was in a way coming full circle in terms of learning about someone in a classroom and then seeing that history on display for myself.

The Communists destroyed Rasputin's original home in an effort to erase any memory of him. Today, the museum is housed in a tiny home once owned by his relatives and identical in its size and floor plan. A husband and wife team curates the site, claiming to be the first privately owned museum in Russia. They opened their presentation with "Rasputin is possibly the most well-known figure and perhaps most significant in all of Russian history, even more so than Lenin." I chuckled at first but then thought I was an American on the far side of the world taking the time to visit Rasputin's neighborhood in Siberia. They explained Rasputin might have inadvertently accelerated the collapse of the monarchy in Russia. He had convinced the inexperienced Czar to take control of Russia's military on the frontlines of the World War I, proving to be a disastrous decision. In turn, this created the opportunity for Lenin to rise to power, fundamentally changing the course of Russian history. Perhaps it was not as much of an exaggeration as I initially thought.

The museum walls were filled with his portraits, family photos, and copies of relevant documents such as letters and old news clippings. There was a comic with Rasputin depicted as the Pied Piper and the Czar dancing to his tune. I was surprised by the fact that the Pied Piper fable was also in Russian lore. His autopsy photos were on display showing a bullet hole through his forehead, conclusively proving the legend of his death as embellished. The curators were proud to have definitively ascertained Rasputin's birth year of 1869 by having located previously unknown baptismal records.

Their presentation also offered a more generous backstory of Rasputin. They suggested that the aristocracy was motivated by jealousy of his authority in the Royal hierarchy, which was felt to be undeserved. This resulted in what amounted to be a smear campaign against him, contributing to legends of his excessive drinking and womanizing,

forever tarnishing his legacy. Amongst the memorabilia were some of Rasputin's belongings such as an old mirror and a chair he received as a wedding present. It is said that sitting in this chair cures impotency and brings "great power." Indeed, there were contemporary clippings of a politician sitting in the chair indicating his promotion to a higher office shortly thereafter. Before leaving, I also was given the opportunity to sit in Rasputin's chair. My trip to Tyumen proved to be more rewarding than any guidebook had suggested.

Chapter Twenty-six

The next train took me to Novosibirsk. I had chosen to stop here because this was the largest city in Siberia, third largest in Russia behind Moscow and Saint Petersburg. It was founded in the late nineteenth century on the Ob River. The first settlers were railroad construction workers tasked with building a bridge over the River for the railway. The railway giving birth to new cities was not an uncommon phenomenon. Christian Wolmar writes in *To the Edge of the World: The Story of the Trans-Siberian Express, the World's Greatest Railroad* Novosibirsk was one of at least “twenty-three settlements [that] were officially declared towns in the first decade after the line was completed” which “expanded rapidly” (164). Specifically, Novosibirsk “expanded from a population of just 764 in 1893, to 26,000 by 1905 and more than 100,000 at the time of the Revolution” (164).

Unfortunately, my end-of-semester studies would shape my time here. Looking for a nice coffee shop for studying, I decided to seek out a shopping mall. This was based on a strategy a friend had taught me. She pointed out that shopping malls tend to be clean and well-kept, making them a pleasant place to hang out. They frequently have decent Wi-Fi with a variety of cafes and restaurants to choose from. Their locations are often convenient and offer a nice sense of security. The weather was in the low twenties

Fahrenheit, so being inside was a welcomed plan. Also, Ian Frazier had mentioned in his travels stopping at one of the major malls of Novosibirsk:

Today Novosibirsk has its own giant shopping mall, with matches and more— in the event that you have come to Novosibirsk to shop, you'll be fine. I had found the claim hard to believe when I read it in *The New York Times*, but there it was: "Siberia, where Russians waited in long lines to buy food with ration cards not long ago, is the improbable epicenter of one of the biggest mall booms in history." The story cited "trickle-down petroleum money" as the cause and mentioned the new mall in Novosibirsk. (459)

Fortuitously, Dostoevsky Hostel was less than a half hour walk from one of the contemporary shopping malls. I found the Gallery Novosibirsk was colossal at six stories high, possibly larger than the mall in Yekaterinburg. There were many recognizable store brands such as Nike, Levi's, and Swarovski. There were even the cell phone kiosks common in malls back home but instead of AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint they were Russian telecom companies Beeline, MTS, and MegaFon. The mall was even rounded off with what looked to be like a nice movie theatre. The only hint that this mall was Russian was the occasional Cyrillic alphabet in some of the store brands.

Intrigued, I looked up the *New York Times* article *In Siberia, Shopping Malls Are Sprouting All Over* that Ian Frazier had read on his trip. In it reporter Andrew E. Kramer notes, "Russia, ever competitive with the United States, is also neck-and-neck in a new measure of competition: mall size." In fact he found that some of the malls in Russia

were approaching the same size the Mall of America, not counting its amusement park.

Kramer also remarked how prosperity can be unpredictable:

In the fall of 1947, food was so scarce here that children were sent into the fields after the harvesters passed to glean wheat from the discarded straw, according to the city history museum. And, as late as 1993, city authorities rationed food. Printed in cheery red, blue and yellow colors that belied the misery they symbolized, these little slips of paper entitled residents to buy fixed quantities of staples like sausage, sugar or flour.

Based on the large crowds, with full shopping bags in hand, it was obvious how times had changed. I settled into a nice venue called the *Coffeeshop Company*, which could give Starbucks a run for its money. Not only did they have good coffee, but they also provided tableside service to refill my cup and, most importantly, an English menu!

Chapter Twenty-seven

After Novosibirsk, I headed toward Irkutsk on the historic *Train 002 Rossiya*. It runs the entire length of the Trans-Siberian Railway, 9,288 km from Moscow to Vladivostok. For this thirty-hour or so segment, I decided to experience first class, called *Spalny Vagon* (sleeping wagon). It was my most expensive ticket at about three-hundred dollars, roughly twice the cost of a second class ticket and four times the cost of a third class ticket. The carriages in *Spalny Vagon* maintain the compliment of nine compartments, however there are no upper berths. This makes the capacity of the carriage quite roomy at two passengers per compartment for a total eighteen people in the carriage. I was looking forward to a change in pace and the quieter ambiance fewer people would bring.

Heading back to Novosibirsk Glavniy Station proved to be a struggle. Having already ridden the metro to find my hostel, I was confident making the trip in reverse would be straightforward. However, the Cyrillic letters overwhelmed me. I must have looked pretty disoriented because someone actually approached to help me. Shamefully, I was caught off guard by this act of kindness. It revealed I had not yet shed all my bias. Before setting out into Russia, I would have never guessed the stereotypically stone-faced demeanor of a Russian would pause unprompted to provide assistance. I uttered “vokzal”

along with "choo-choo" while pumping my arm up and down as if I was pulling on the horn. Luckily, this conveyed enough to earn a giggle and a finger pointing me to the correct platform.

Before boarding the train, I needed to stock up on provisions of water, chocolate, cookies and pretzels. Now chocolate, cookies and pretzels are not difficult to acquire. In most cases the pictures on the labeling do the products justice. On the other hand, a bottle of water is an image unto itself. There is no reason to place a picture of a bottle on a bottle of water. Despite my preference for still water and what I felt was a decent pronunciation of "vohdah bez guzdah" (water without gas), I ended up with carbonated water. As far as I was concerned, one might as well be drinking seawater.

The conductor's chipper disposition was the first thing I noticed boarding the first class carriage as the sun was setting in the late afternoon. There may have even been a smile cracked upon checking my ticket. Maintaining a carriage with an eighteen-person capacity is certainly much easier for a conductor than a fifty-four-person carriage. As a result, there is probably a correlation between class of service and conductor job satisfaction.

While I never felt cleanliness to be unreasonable in any class of service, the inside of this first class carriage was pristine, as if it was the carriage's first time in service. Disappointingly, the carriage appeared only half full with no one in my compartment. The window included actual curtains along with a tablecloth, adding an elegant touch. Teacups and an assortment of Russian newspapers were already laid out. The compartment even included a flat screen television giving it a modern, twenty-first century feel. I was pleased to find that even in Russia, indulgence meant two pillows for

my berth. Most importantly, there was an electrical outlet per compartment, rather than per carriage!

At about two in the morning, the train stopped at a small town. Surprisingly, the town was big enough to merit 3G service on my iPad. I was skeptical this place would even be a speck on the map of Siberia. However, Google Maps indicated the location to be Mariinsk. The fog, backlit from the station's spotlights, covered the tracks and electrical lines giving the scene an ambiance one would expect to see at a spy exchange. "Was James Bond going to come onboard?" I thought to myself. Why else anyone would be in this remote part of the world.

Indeed, a fellow passenger, boarded to fill the vacant berth beside me. Judging by his grin and the bottle of cognac he placed on our shared table, he was in no hurry to go to sleep. Victor was an older gentleman who did not speak any English. This did nothing to temper his grin as he dispensed generous pours of cognac into our teacups. Enthusiastically, he gestured at me saying "OLIVER!" and then to himself "VICTOR!" as we downed our first shot. The language barrier made it difficult for me to understand our subsequent toasts, however our smiles transcended any need to. However, my desire to stop drinking before finishing the bottle soured the atmosphere, drawing harsh criticism. I received a ten-minute lecture in Russian on why we must continue before he gave in telling me "NEY PRAVADA! NEY PRAVDA!" Based on my understanding of Polish and his gesturing, I suspected he had just told me I am not a true person (or perhaps real person).

The following morning I woke up to find Victor had already ordered four beers for us to share. As the train continued to make scheduled stops throughout the day, cell

service would come and go. He began going through his phone contacts one at time. Guessing from his use of the word “Angliyskiy” (English), I concluded he was looking for someone to interpret. I was amused at the amount of exasperation he showed when he continually failed to find an interpreter, as if English speakers were a dime a dozen in Russia. He never succeeded in finding anyone to translate. Through my iPad translation app he communicated that he too was getting off in Irkutsk, inviting me to stay at his home. After declining, I received another adamant lecture in Russian on what I could only guess to be why I should join him. I appreciated his hospitality, but told him I could not because of school, pulling out my textbooks. Thankfully, this appeased him as I began to spend remainder of our time heading toward Irkutsk on my studies.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Irkutsk is about ninety-five hours from Moscow by train, straight through. My objective was to visit the shores of Lake Baikal, an hour or so away, for what I hoped would be a pleasant break in the scenery. However, my late evening arrival required a hotel stay in the city center. As I planned my trip, I was not sure how I was going to cope being in Russia for extended travel. Using the train extensively was not something I had ever done. Solo travel can be at times draining. The infamous Siberian winters made me nervous. Factoring all this, I decided to splurge on familiarity by reserving a night in a Marriot Hotel. The hotel and a newly opened Kentucky Fried Chicken were the only Western chains in the city. Looking back, this was a completely unnecessary booking as I ended up handling the logistics of Trans-Siberian travel with ease. The weather had also continued to bless me, as it was actually above freezing in December, something unheard of. Any fears my clothing would not be warm enough never came true. And even in Siberia, Marriot successfully met its standards with a comfortable, well designed, and competently staffed location.

The next day I set out by public minibus to Listvyanka, a small settlement nestled on the shores of Lake Baikal near where it empties into the Angora River, the only river that flows out from Baikal. The locals commonly refer to the lake as a sea due to its

vastness. It actually holds twenty percent of the freshwater on Earth, exceeding the capacity of the Great Lakes combined. The ecosystem is unique; there are thousands of species of animal and plant life found only in this region. However, Ian Frazier insisted it is more than just these distinct attributes that make the lake special, writing “beyond its facts, Baikal really does have a magic to it” (Frazier 286). I was skeptical. After a while, the harsh, barren, snow-covered land dotted with groves of birch and evergreen trees as witnessed from the train window gave the impression that Siberia was the neglected orphan of Mother Nature in the winter. Given the destitute landscape I observed so far in Siberia, could Baikal really live up to its reputation?

As my first glimpse of the lake came into focus, the feeling of being in the middle of Siberia escaped me. This fact alone makes it worth the visit. Had Dorothy, from the Wizard of Oz, stumbled here, the iconic line would have been “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Siberia anymore...” The lake swallowed the horizon as far as my eyes could take me. I was fortunate to have a break in the clouds letting the sun bleed through. It looked like the lake was putting out a fire in the sky. Ian Frazier remarked how “it reflects like an optical instrument and responds to changes in the weather so sensitively that it seems like a part of the sky rather than of the land” (Frazier 286). This view combined with the rich shades of blue and muted noises gave off a placid ambiance. This atmosphere was compounded by just having experienced the juxtaposition of the surrounding region, which is ranked among the least hospitable places on Earth.

Chapter Twenty-nine

After spending two nights on the shores of Lake Baikal at *Olga's Guesthouse*, I was ready for my last train segment toward Vladivostok, at over sixty hours in third class. At boarding I encountered a bit of time paradox. The ticket actually had yesterday's date on it due to the fact that all trains run on Moscow time and it was already past midnight local time in Irkutsk. At times, deciphering correctly when to show up to the train station felt like an intellectual feat of strength. As the conductor handed back my ticket she signaled to something on my ticket. I was startled thinking I had mistaken my departure. Most conductors would just say my berth number in Russian expecting I would understand or say nothing hoping I would somehow manage. By this point of the trip I had untangled the confusing Cyrillic to know where the berth number was. What a relief it was to find the conductor simply pointing to the berth number on my ticket.

Onboard it was stifling hot as I settled into my berth as quietly as possible. David Green in *Midnight in Siberia: A Train Journey into the Heart of Russia* commented in chapter three how “it’s an astonishing paradox that you can be traversing a forbidding landscape with howling winds, horizontal snow, and unimaginable cold and yet be inclined to force the window of your train compartment open for relief from the sweltering heat inside.” Although the coal powered heat could be troublesome, it was a

necessary inconvenience. As David Green later reasoned, “the landscape is rugged, empty, and cold— at times twenty or thirty degrees below zero Fahrenheit. If a train breaks down and the electricity goes out in a place this remote, passengers could freeze to death. Except that the heaters would keep working— on coal.” Green would explain that the shortcoming of this was,

the heating in train cars is not easily controlled. To keep things remotely close to a certain temperature, provodniks will add more or less coal to the heating system. I have a guess this is why the trains get oppressively hot overnight— hot as in you rip off your sheets and begin using them to wipe sweat off your face. I imagine the provodnik getting ready for bed herself, not wanting to disturb herself overnight by having to add more coal. So she loads as much as possible before going to bed. Yes, she probably thinks, that will take care of things.

Over the subsequent hours I bonded with a group of young soldiers on their way to Khabarovsk. It is unclear how they figured me for a foreigner, but my presence must have been a novelty because they were eager to engage me. I was a bit nervous being surrounded by six soldiers, not knowing what to expect. All but their commanding officer were under the age of twenty-one. Their youthfulness and smiles betrayed the Soviet iconography of mature, strong, and stoic soldiers seen throughout Russia. Conscription in Russia is still in place for most males, who are required to serve at least twelve months in the military. These soldiers were on their way to training exercises.

Fortunately, they were all pleasant. Some of them knew a few phrases in English and were happy to practice. I was thankful and amazed that even several thousand miles

from Moscow, my iPad still had service at most the train stops to aid in communicating. I imagined how useful Paul Theroux might have found this development had he been able to use a tablet device on his trip instead of his BlackBerry, which mostly received spam messages in this part of Russia (471).

My pictures from Russia and back home kept our conversation going despite our lack of a common language. Some joked I had seen more of Russia than they had themselves. Several also challenged me to chess matches to pass the time. I was most appreciative of their sharing of chocolate included in their military rations.

Typically, I had chosen not to disembark for fresh air during in-between stops to my final destination. My fear was being left behind. However, they insisted I join outside in the bitter cold. Their outfits gave me a chuckle because while each put on their military jackets and elaborate hats, none wore their combat boots. This left them only wearing the slippers they had swapped into onboard the train. Although there were many kiosks for merchants to sell goods, disappointingly many were empty leaving only the most committed sellers on duty.

Later, as they prepared to disembark, the soldiers insisted I accompany them to their base. Although I am sure it would have been interesting, I decided it was not a good idea to be an American tourist roaming around a Russian military base. As a token, one of them gave me the epaulette of cadet. In return, I left him my American and Russian Flag Pin that Alexander had given to me back in Perm. We mutually saluted one another as they disembarked, leaving me alone for the last eight hours toward my final stop, Vladivostok.

Chapter Thirty

Vladivostok is the terminus station of the Trans-Siberian Railway, a natural finish to my journey, an end that I was not thrilled about. I no longer had a valid data plan for my iPad as its contract was up. After relying heavily on it for my trip, I was uneasy. I made sure to select a hotel adjacent to the station. Having read Paul Theroux's entry in *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar* on Vladivostok from his 2008 visit added to my anxiety. He wrote morosely,

Ignored and neglected, a decaying city and a navy base at the edge of the frozen world, Vladivostok had become one of the Siberian centers of skinhead gang activity. These chalky-faced and blue-headed thugs in boots and black leather jackets were straight out of *A Clockwork Orange*, even speaking an argot similar to that which Anthony Burgess had fashioned for his characters from Russian: droogs and chelovek and glazzies. But the skinheads were meaner and racist, with Hitlerian views. They swaggered the slushy streets, looking for dusky foreigners to beat to a pulp, and misspelling English graffiti (WITE POWER was one) with spray cans on walls, along with swastikas. 460- 461

That is definitely not the kind of portrayal that fills one with enthusiasm. If it were not the end of the Trans-Siberian Railway, I would not have stopped here upon reading that description. Arriving after dusk, I eagerly scurried to the *Zhemchuzhina Hotel*, an easy ten-minute walk, to shelter in place until the subsequent day's light. I was grateful I did not need to ask anyone for directions, as I never mastered pronouncing "Zhemchuzhina."

Although I gave Theroux the benefit of doubt, I had found it at odds with what I had heard about the city. They say Vladivostok is the San Francisco of Russia. Usually when this association is invoked, it conveys similar visual features such as being neatly tucked alongside a body of water on gently rolling hills. However, one detail is typically missing that visually makes San Francisco, well, San Francisco: its iconic bridges.

Within my first few minutes of daylight in Vladivostok, I immediately understood the comparison. Indeed, it was nicely situated on gentle hills arranged beside the Pacific, dotted with Russian Naval Ships. However, I turned a corner and suddenly I questioned where I was. A massive bridge came into focus, its suspension cables glimmering in the sunlight. It immediately cemented the comparison to San Francisco. It was even called the Zolotoy Bridge, or in English the Golden Bridge, named after the bay it traverses: Golden Horn Bay.

A monument to Lenin still overlooks the train station to this day. Nearby was also a tribute commemorating the Bolshevik revolution, called the "Monument to the Fighters for Soviet Power." Its city hall still retained that box-like, no-frills construction that Theroux aptly described as representing a "stone-faced bureaucracy" (460). I was astonished that Soviet iconography and architecture had managed to permeate even to the far reaches of the country. This distance, "if it were twenty-one miles longer, it would be

exactly twice as long as Interstate 80 from New Jersey to California” (Frazier 9). That is an incredible distance to be able to still closely influence and control.

Alongside the bay near the Russian Naval Destroyers docks, raised on a pedestal, is the Soviet submarine S-56. This submarine saw service in the Great Patriotic War, having sunken at least four ships and damaging others. Based on the hotel clerk’s suggestion, I took the walk to the Eagles Nest, the highest point of the downtown area. The panorama gave me a view of yet another immense bridge, called Russky ridge, adding to the claim of Vladivostok being a Russian San Francisco.

On the walk down there was a statue to a woman whose name was not written in Cyrillic, “Eleanor Lord Pray”. Perplexed, I later asked the hotel clerk what that was all about. The clerk explained the statue was the “Far Eastern North American,” which only furthered my bewilderment. Eleanor Lord Pray was an American from Maine who lived in Vladivostok during a transformational era of the city from about 1894 to 1930. She has gained fame through her surviving correspondence with her family back home. Over two thousand letters and numerous black and white photographs were discovered decades after they had been written. Today, scholars worked to piece this collection together in a book titled, *Letters from Vladivostok, 1894-1930*, providing a first person glimpse into what life was like in the city. The fact that one of the famous residents of Vladivostok was American astounded me. So significant to a city of over half a million people, yet there was not even a Wikipedia article on her or any other entry in guidebooks. As helpful as the Internet was in navigating and discovering Russia, I wondered what else might have been left out.

I went back to the station to find the end marker for the railway, an obelisk with a double-headed eagle and the number 9,288, the distance in kilometers from Moscow. Easily overlooked across from the obelisk was an older locomotive, a historic display to another era. There was a small plaque that read,

This steam engine was assembled by the American Locomotive Company using Russian standards and designs. It was brought to the Soviet Union from the USA under the Lend-Lease Act signed by the Governments of the USSR and the USA on June 11th, 1942 as assistance to the allies during WWII. The Far Eastern Rail Road conveyed 8 million tons of cargo under the Lend-Lease (aircraft, tanks, guns, food, uniforms, etc.). This locomotive represents the powerful corporations between the USA and the USSR during the war.” [sic]

To find a monument that honored the contribution of the USA to the war efforts in Russia in such dignified manner was in complete contrast to the city Theroux had set me up to find.

I learned that the downtown area underwent major renovations in preparation for the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, four years after Theroux’s visit. This brought investments to clean up and modernize the city, giving it a comfortable, contemporary feel. Both iconic bridges were added during this time. There was no graffiti or any evidence whatsoever of gang activity. I felt as safe here as at any other point of my trip. Even the “Russian tit-and-bum magazines that were sold by shivering old ladies in ragged overcoats all over town” that Theroux described were gone (460). Today, Vladivostok proudly shines as an encouraging example of what targeted investment can

bring over a period of a few short years, even in Russia. Today, I am sure Theroux would not recognize the Vladivostok he wrote about.

Chapter Thirty-one

The 9,288 km, over 5,700 miles, approximates the distance I traveled within Russia. This journey taught me more than just about places. Meeting so many kind-hearted Russians revealed these people to be among the nicest I have ever met, abolishing my preconceptions. It demonstrated that the actions of a nation's government did not necessarily correlate to the disposition of its peoples. I will always hold more charitable views of a country's citizens from here on out.

This adventure has proven how technology could enrich an experience in the physical world. This trip would have fundamentally been different if it had not been for my iPad and its Russian data plan. I never got lost once. This increased my confidence and ability to navigate far ends of the world. Can you imagine Marco Polo not making a wrong turn? I might still be looking for my hotel in Perm. It also facilitated communication across the language barrier. I never imagined the ease in which I would be able to move around in a country in which I do not share the language. The role Sacagawea performed in interpreting for Lewis and Clark was the function the iPad played. Its utility as a photo album enhanced my interactions. There is no way I could

have carried the quantity of pictures I showed otherwise, which in turn would have shortened my encounters.

Trains as a mode of transport were something I always previously dismissed. Amtrak does not leave one itching for life on the rails. American culture tends to value personal vehicles over public transit. However, the train is what opened Siberia to me. Without it, my experiences would have been curtailed. It is unlikely I would have opted to drive to Vladivostok. There is no way I would have had the confidence to drive a rental across it. I would not have the resources to hire a driver for such an adventure. There would have been no Yuri or Victor to share toasts with. No army soldiers to share their chocolate with me. My only stories would involve places, not people.

My “boots on the ground” approach cultivated experiences that might have otherwise escaped me. The interesting sights of Saint Petersburg served to continue fueling my interests in Russia. The Kremlin Wall revealed secrets never covered in my textbooks. Would I have ever visited a mosque back in the States? I never had until visiting Kazan. The comparisons to Gulags and American Slavery made by Sergey in Perm were an important insight I never came across. Uncovering the shared pop-culture references in Yekaterinburg was astonishing. Sitting in Rasputin’s Chair was a moment that I felt history come alive. The similarities of malls were a cultural characteristic I previously thought distinctly American. Viewing Lake Baikal allowed me to experience for myself the juxtaposition that added to its character and uniqueness. Eleanor Lord Prey in Vladivostok was something so contemporary that I might be the first to write the Wikipedia entry on her.

I am thankful for the opportunity to see for myself what another country is like rather than relying on other accounts and conditioned biases. My worldview has broadened and my understanding of the complexities that compose our reality has become sharper. It is my hope that my reflections instill a desire in others to recognize the importance of travel in broadening and sharpening these outlooks on the human condition.

Thank you for following along. // Oliver - 2016

Visa Story

Many are curious about the Russian visa process. I include my *Russian Visa Procurement* experience for interest (Trojak). The journey to Russia began long before stepping foot onto a plane. Americans often take for granted how far their passports will take them. Throughout much of the world, we can simply book a ticket and arrive at our destination. Not so for Russia. An official “Letter of Invitation” to visit must be provided by an agent approved by the government to give visa support prior to one’s arrival. Visa support? What? No, it is not related to a credit card. A visa is a document issued by some governments that grants conditional permission for entry. Not only is it needed to enter, but also required for exiting.

Visa application processes are enough to sway many people away from entering countries that require them. It is daunting for those who have never needed travel visa because of the many particularities to pay attention to. Fortunately, getting the “Letter of Invitation” for Russia was straightforward. This document can be obtained from most hotels, hostels, or Russian travel agencies. However, many of these organizations will not issue the letter without a non-refundable reservation. Ironically, this results in having a place to lodge prior to having permission to visit. What is even stranger is that the letter comes via email to be printed off at home rather than on notarized parchment that the

process would seem to demand. It is important to make sure the biographical detail in the letter matches the passport information exactly. Simply missing a middle name is an automatic rejection, something I learned the hard way.

With this letter in hand, the visa application process can continue. Russia has an embassy and several consulates throughout the United States. Each serves a particular geographical region of the country based on where the applicant lives. Applying to the wrong one is an automatic rejection. The application must be filled out online. Be sure to answer every question, even if it does not apply, with “Not Applicable.” Any empty prompts cause an automatic rejection.

The Russian consulates all use a third party service that must be visited in order to submit the printed application, along with photos of the applicant, the “Letter of Invitation,” and passport. Yes, the passport, too.

After this visit, the real fun began. If asked to come for an interview, there are no considerations. Take the appointment or leave it. Failure to show is grounds for automatic rejection. Next, visualize visiting the local DMV. Mix in the facts of an unfamiliar language, with an unfamiliar alphabet. The security officials did not speak English. Their pat down and search to enter the consulate made TSA Airport Security seem like a well-oiled machine. The initial line was simply a placeholder for another one, finally to be told to wait in yet another line, unclear what the next move would be. It seemed ripe for a Sherlock Holmes plot.

Finally, a line led to what could be best described as a dimly lit bank lobby. However, this particular lobby was built for a nuclear attack. Each counter was sealed in opaque, thick bulletproof glass. The two-way speaker and microphone sounded like the

speakers on the subway, hopelessly garbled. This was compounded by thick Russian accents on the other end of the microphone. All the counters were staffed, but not utilized. Confused, nervous, and uninformed, the courage to approach what appeared to be an available counter developed. Upon the approach, a voice suddenly hurled, "STOP, I WILL CALL YOU."

Stunned and dazed, this phrase and its tone caused a rapid retreat back towards a seat while hoping the chances of getting approved for a visa were not just jeopardized. Any concept of a line had seemingly evaporated at this point. Individuals who staggered into the lobby after me were being called. Thoughts of having already been called and missing the appointment went through my mind. Momentarily, hope was dashed. Was all this worth it? However, that thought was quickly extinguished by reasoning that it was not over yet; no decision had been rendered. This was not the moment to break down.

Finally, I heard my name garbled over a speaker, commanding me to approach. Throughout the application process, the interview was built up as a big deal. Commonly, an interview is associated with being seated in a room with another person or persons. The interviewers are introduced and they begin to ask questions and record responses. Instead, my interview began suddenly standing at the counter. Most of what was asked needed to be inferred due to distorted microphone/speaker and thick accent.

The questions asked, many of which I had already answered on the written application:

"Are you visiting any friends in Russia?"

"Whom are you travelling with?"

"Are you married?"

“Are you bringing back a Russian wife?”

“Do you have any military or nuclear science experience?”

“Do you have healthcare that is valid in Russia?”

None of these questions were particularly tricky to answer “correctly.” It was shocking that many were duplicated from the written application. The tension dissolved quickly but only momentarily. At the conclusion, the interviewer stated, “A final decision will be made and your passport returned to visa processing agency for pickup.” Finally, after another week passed by, my visa was granted.

ADDENDUM A - Essential Gear

I remember reading Ian Frazier's *In Siberia* hoping he discussed his shoes, as this was something I was worried about. He does mention it, but one must search for it. Gear in general is also frequently asked about. For convenience, here is a list of my essential gear.

1. Tortuga Travel Backpack (Version Two): Carry-on backpack designed for the Urban Traveler
2. Tortuga Packable Daypack: Daypack for keeping valuable items with me rather than at hostel
3. Merrell Men's Moab Ventilator Mid Hiking Boots: Light in weight and quick dry
4. Three Uniqlo HEATTECH Undershirts/Underwear: Clothing designed for warmth and odor resistant
5. Three Merino Wool Socks: Warm, odor resistant, and quick dry
6. Three Short Sleeve Shirts and Two Long Sleeve Shirts made from synthetic materials: Light and quick dry
7. Two Pairs of Cargo Pants
8. Uniqlo Ultra Light Down Jacket and Vest: Warm, light and packable
9. Leather Jacket with winter liner.
10. Apple iPad Air: Navigation, translation, and information
11. Apple MacBook Air
12. Tele 3 Data Plan: Gave iPad the ability to perform its vital functions
13. Bellroy Leather Elements Travel: Durable and weather resistant
14. Travel Laundry Sheets: Hand washed and air-dried all clothing, except pants. Pants were machine washed and dried

ADDENDUM B - Tour Agencies Used

I remember in Perm how wonderful it felt to learn that I actually used the same agency as Paul Theroux by accident. Also, the Lonely Planet guide provided good information. For convenience, here is a list of tour companies I used.

1. Russian Train Tickets: www.realrussia.co.uk

This company spoke good English. They were reliable, patient, and knowledgeable about both the trains and cities to stop at. Most importantly, they provide 24/7 train assistance should something go awry.

2. Saint Petersburg: www.smartfreetour.com

The general tour is free. Paid options include the Metro tour. I found the guide very knowledgeable and well spoken.

3. Moscow: www.moscowfreetour.com

The general tour is free. Paid options include the Metro and Kremlin tours. I found the guides very knowledgeable and well spoken.

4. Yekaterinburg: www.yekaterinburg4u.ru/en/

This guide operates a blog on tourism in the region. This guide is also listed in Lonely Planet.

5. Perm: www.permtours.com

Finding current information on tours to Perm-36 (the Gulag) was tricky. I was fortunate to locate information in Trip Advisor report on visiting the Gulag. Same company Paul Theroux used.

6. Tyumen: www.sun-elephant.ru

There were no English services provided by the tour agencies in Tyumen. The tour company in Yekaterinburg made the arrangements on my behalf and hired an instructor of English as my translator from Tyumen State University.

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