

## Part 5—Leningrad

# Spirit of adventure leads to the USSR

By ROCHELLE REAGAN

I just met the most beautiful Russian man named Boyer Bordenoff at the Sadko restaurant tonight. We danced, we laughed and talked, we sipped vodka, and on my last night in Leningrad, I think I'm in love.

Yes, I fell in love—in Leningrad and with Leningrad, the most exciting, extraordinary, enchanting city I have ever experienced. "The Venice of the North," Peter the Great's "Window on the West," or whatever famed symbolism you may choose, I felt Leningrad to be the most cosmopolitan city I have ever found. Leningrad, a highly industrialized center of four million people, has somehow retained the warmth, generosity, and character of a society which deeply enjoys the art of living. Arriving at the very new Hotel Leningrad on a chilly autumn evening, I gazed from my window toward the famous Bolshoi cruiser, Aurora, anchored in the peaceful dark waters of the River Neva. The fact that an almost bloodless but earth-shaking revolution had taken place in 1917 in this now tranquil city seemed somewhat incompatible yet in another way most appropriate.

The positive vibrations I felt from the crisp night air blowing off the Neva had a profound effect upon me. I temporarily forgot that I was deaf in one ear, was coming down with a head cold, hadn't smoked a cigarette in four hours, had missed dinner, and my luggage was yet to be three hours in arriving from Simferopol.

AN INTOURIST BUS and Era chauffeur led me through the famous landmarks of Leningrad: the Fortress of Peter and Paul, Smolny (Bolshevik headquarters during the October Revolution), the Bronze Horseman statue of Peter the Great, the Winter Palace and adjacent Hermitage buildings, Palace Square (site of three revolutions), and the University of Leningrad.

This morning was unusual. I observed a wedding and a funeral within 50 feet of one another. One of the sightseeing stops was a famous cemetery on the outskirts of Leningrad where the 1.5 million people who perished during the 900-day siege of Leningrad are interred in unmarked graves. A funeral was taking place. Several gravesites away, a bride dressed in conventional white dress and veil was placing her bridal bouquet on a grave. It is a commonplace custom in the Soviet Union, I have since learned, for Russians to remember the dead on their wedding day.

Lunchtime held more oddities. I was sitting in the dining room of the Astoria Hotel, an Intourist hotel named in honor of John Jacob Astor and his family. During the early 1800's this American capitalist had been extensively engaged in the fur trading business with tsarist Russia. Within this setting what could be more fitting than to gobble down some very Western food—Chicken Kiev once again, French-fried potatoes, and cashew ice cream. Of

course it wouldn't have been a complete Russian repast without Borshch and blinis dotted with immense globes of sour cream.

NOT BEING MUCH of an art buff, I began to dream up other activities for the afternoon while the tour visited the Hermitage, founded by Peter the Great, continued by Catherine II, and considered perhaps the finest art museum in Europe. The very size of the Hermitage is formidable. It has been estimated that if a visitor spent 30 seconds observing each artifact, it would take that individual nine years to see everything.

I escaped to the nearest park to pursue the national Soviet pastime—reading—and the American national pastime—people watching. These two hobbies seemed fairly compatible while I rested in this picturesque park in urban Leningrad, until my reverie was interrupted by a strange man speaking to me in some foreign tongue which I believe could easily have been Russian.

He was gesturing and pointing—almost as though he were asking directions. I smiled, shrugged my shoulders, and answered in perfect English. "I am sorry but I do not speak Russian." He smiled, then turned to one of my fellow bench sitters and repeated his request.

This entire afternoon could have been a daydream and I could very well have been in any American city. The passersby carried that air of sophistication, yet retained that warmth and friendliness which had charmed me the very first night. Both men and women were physically more attractive and better dressed than any I had seen in the other Soviet cities. Few military vehicles and olive-drab clad people were in evidence. The streets were overrun by motorcycles with at-

tached side cars, like those which zoom through the streets of Moscow.

BY EVENING I had smoked the last of the American cigarettes I was allowed to bring into the country. I dashed for the nearest Beriozka Shop intent upon sampling the Russian tobacco. Russian cigarettes cost 15 cents a pack as compared with American cigarettes which were 60 cents per pack. Besides the price break, the Soviet cigarettes carried much prettier pictures on their packages—pictures such as the Sputnik dog Laika, rocket ships, and country scenery. Now for the taste test. With the looks and texture of a joint but the taste of an unfiltered Kent, I could understand why cigarette consumption in the Soviet Union is relatively low.

READING ABOUT Petrodvorets, the Romanov's Summer Palace, in the Russian novel "Nicholas and Alexandra" is many worlds away from actually being there. This magnificent estate of castles, gilded bronze statuary, emerald parks and forests, crystal clear canals, and cascading fountains faces the Gulf of Finland, 18 miles outside Leningrad. It was inconceivable to me that the Summer Palace had been burned to the ground by the Germans during World War II. At an astronomical cost to the Soviet government, the palace was rebuilt in exact duplicate as a tourist attraction. Several of the rooms are still under construction.

This evening was the evening of my two-hour, spontaneous love affair with my handsome Russian, Boyer Bordenoff. While the orchestra played "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," I partook of vodka, wine, champagne, caviar, blinis, shishkabob, ice cream, and even managed to fall in love on this, my first, full stomach.

In spite of my existence on Cloud Nine, I was curious to know what the

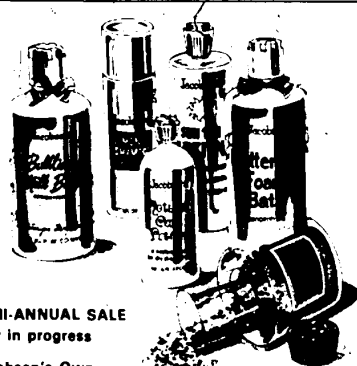
cost of this night on the town at the Sadko restaurant might be for the Soviet pleasure-seeker. Since I never saw a menu during the evening, I had no way of knowing I did not, though, that the Sadko was filled to capacity that evening, with only a small portion of the clientele being American. THE FOLLOWING day, my last in

lovely Leningrad, showed me a more serious, tragic side of Leningrad's history—the Fortress of Peter and Paul—a Russian Bastille for political prisoners where Lenin's brother was once incarcerated. Ironically enough, within the walls of the fortress is an awesome cathedral where many of the Romanov tsars are entombed.

The hurried and hasty three days of adventure in this most Western of Soviet cities could easily have occupied three months of leisurely exploration. Nonetheless, the day was already Friday; Moscow, Pan Am, and the homeward journey were intruding upon my private Leningrad love affair.



Summer palace outside Leningrad



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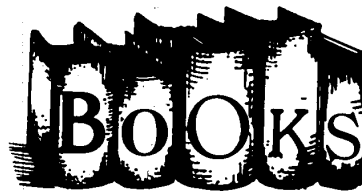
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