

VISIT TO USSR. Soviet in 1945, the Party was invited by the USSR - ~~to send the delegation~~
 By the CPSU as the CPGB ~~had~~ intended to send a party of small party a
 a 10-day - sightseeing trip as ~~the~~ guests of the ~~Party~~ CPSU. Hilda and I were offered 2 places
 in the ~~Party~~ group. Hilda had visited the USSR briefly before, after a World Peace Conference in 19??
 I had never set foot in Eastern Europe. We were treated throughout as VIP's, designated as a
 'delegation' - which we weren't; and generally given 5-star treatment. The atmosphere between us
 and our Soviet hosts was warm, and open-hearted. But from the very start, cultural differences -
 and perhaps temperamental differences too - showed themselves. On our first full day, we were told that
 we were all to be taken to a clinic for a thorough medical check. We protested. It was explained
 that there were several explanations for such insistence - first, that it was standard procedure
 concern for what they perceived as battle-scarred veterans of struggle in the capitalist world; then, that
 it was for our own good, because the checks would be more thorough and comprehensive than most
 visitors from the developing world could possibly afford - or get - at home; that they had a duty to protect
 the Soviet people from the chance that ~~they~~ an exotic tropical disease to which they had no acquired
 immunity might be carried in unwittingly by visitors. - as had indeed happened twice before with typhus.
 We submitted with little grace, since there was no apparent way to refuse. They did put
 us all through a more rigorous examination than I had ever had before. And in the course of
 it it began another explanation for the 'standard procedure' began to emerge. Our Soviet hosts had
 a deep fear that, should any unknown illness or catastrophe overtake a foreign guest, it would
 provide a pretext for a new wave of anti-Soviet slanders and accusations of Soviet
 'Repridators' at work. Again not totally without reason. It had happened before.

But their hypersensitivity to our well-being had another negative effect on our group. Among
 us was a young 15 year old Paul Lister, the son of a veteran African Communist, Brian Lister,
 a member of the CC of the CPSA in both legal and illegal times. Paul had suffered all his life
 from a life threatening syndrome - gastric fibrosis. Doctors had given him a prognosis of only a few
 years of life - which he had already outlived marginally. For him, this visit to East Asia South
 Africa, to GB no less than the USSR, could reasonably be expected to be his first - and last. He and
 his family had struggled against his fibrosis for years. The Soviet doctors duly diagnosed it, and
 absolutely refused to let Paul travel with us. They were anxious - over-anxious to hospitalise him
 medically, to try and treat his affliction. Paul had spent a lifetime under medical treatment. He
 firmly refused to countenance any more. The Soviet authorities said there were no alternatives:
 either they hospitalised him; or he would have to return to the UK. We attempted to persuade them
 to change their decision; we explained exactly we knew about his past experience of ill-health, and the
 extent of his own and his family's awareness of the constant danger of his death. But they would
 not budge, much as they regretted the circumstances, and the hurt it would cause their comrade Brian.
 Paul left for the UK; but the unfortunate episode cast something of a blight on our trip.

We happened to be staying in a Party hotel. Quite fortuitously, Moscow Kotsare - OR Tchub
 was in Moscow at the time, and Kotsare's birthday fell soonish during our stay in Moscow. Some
 section of the CPSU decided to hold a dinner party at the hotel in his honour. We were invited. It was a
 very convivial affair - and a great real birthday, also brought in proudly by the hotel staff, and with an
 audience singing of speeches, toasts - and of course loads of vodka. The protocol seemed to require that
 every toast ~~ended~~ ended with the speaker downing a glass of vodka in a single go draught, with the expectation
 that all guests would medically emulate. The Soviet comrades - perhaps better hardened to sustained
 drink than we were, grew heartier, more boisterous and louder as the evening wore on; while our
 party became more and more silent, more busily engaged in devious ways to appear to toss the fair
 liquid back without actually doing so. O.R and Kotsare, sitting in the honour seat alongside the most
 senior of the Russians were becoming visibly, more and more uncomfortable - trying to meet the eyes

demands of diplomatic couvraibility, and their own desire for solidity and retention of their dignity. OR managed it better than any - with the gentleness, skill and politess of the master diplomat, which he has always been. Let me, it was an unbroken introduction to the part vodka played in Soviet culture, out of the boastful macho ~~attitude~~^{attitude} which seemed to equate prowess with the quality of alcohol imbibed.

We saw other aspects of the vodka culture in the few days we had in Moscow. On ~~host~~^{host} ~~bud~~^{host} ~~and~~^{had} when we arrived, our hosts enquired what we wanted to do or see. I wanted to see a building site in normal work routine, carrying out the construction of a large building using prefabricated concrete parts. I had spent my life in construction; but large scale prefabrication had been outside my experience. Our hosts agreed to organize it. But somehow along the way, the request became subverted into a visit to a large, very completed ~~apartment~~^{public} complex, where there was none of the usual, dirt and noise of a building site; only neat houses, tidy, well kept public spaces between the blocks, contrastly so sharp with the squalor and neglect, the ~~poorly~~^{public} of similar spaces in shabby housing complexes. But in the gardens, benches for sitting out. And everywhere, drenks on the benches taking the sun; and empty beer or vodka bottles left under the benches, as memorials to yesterday's occupants. From there we were taken to meet the Moscow City Developter - an elderly man, who quite amicably took time off from master-minding one of the fastest developing areas in the world, to play host to a pretty low-key party of foreign visitors. He showed us a short documentary film of the history of Moscow's development, compiled from historic movie-pictuo records taken over the years since cinematography began. It was fascinating, sitting in the vast ~~offices~~^{auditorium} of Moscow, with its 8 lane highways and斯大林式 concrete apartment blocks, offices, to watch flicky sepia film of the city at the time of the Revolution only 50 years before. Moscow came to life as a large and rather disorderly village - rammed mud streets in the town centre, single and two storey buildings and shacks, mainly ramshackle, decrepit and of wood, where the Stalineque wedding cake towers blocks of the Min. of ?? and of ?? now stand. of horse carts, mafikhs, and mud. It put into perspective the heroic proportion of the city we had seen the day before from the Lenin Hills - tower blocks still standing and away in all directions to the horizon; all built in less than 20 years since the war. We were taken from the cinema to ~~the office~~^{probably} a small waste-and-reception room. The City Developter went through what we were being to expect - the obligatory ~~spat~~^{particular} official 'address-to-a-visiting-delegations' - including a short description of the institutions operational field. In this case, it was fairly ~~of~~^{of} - population statistics, growth projection, and an outline of ~~these~~^{new}, reasonably self-contained micro-districts which were proliferating, cancer-like, in Moscow's growth. And then the inevitable end of the talk: 'Any questions?' probably

It was clearly expected that the delegations would respond. Sandhar - ~~delegation~~^{possibly}, because of my recent Russian travel notably, the others seemed to expect that the responsibility was mine. Perhaps it was also appropriate that the reply to one enquired should be made by another - the only one in our group. Diplomatic speak, this never been my forte. I drummed up a few words of thanks, of appreciation for the vast industrial feats in evidence and so on. And then the question: "While the new ~~small~~^{small} micro-districts and their public works achievements were certainly impressive, did the Comrade enquirer feel satisfied with the environment for living which was being created there?" I was not naively blithely blundering in other angles few to head. I was ~~very~~^{very} seriously searching for the answer, in order to understand the motivation and aims of my Soviet co-practitioners. I expected a dogged defense and justification. He was, after all, the official directly responsible for the built environment, and in the ranks of officials everyone could be expected to defend the world he had developed as the best of all possible worlds. He did not. I was both surprised and impressed by his answer - both by the substance and the openness of it. The quality of the ~~long~~^{long} answer for

for living, he said, was a matter of considerable ongoing debate among Moscow architects. He himself, he said, was ~~now~~^{indeed} far satisfied: he proceeded to imagine some of the areas of failure - ~~failure~~ to the task of any real distinct centre where entertainment, cultural activities, sport etc. could compensate for remoteness from the bright lights of the city centre; the almost total absence of stimulation for the house-bound - the aged, young mothers and so on. It was not that there was anything very profound or new in what he said. But what impressed me profoundly, that he - the chief bureaucrat of the whole process - was open enough and confident enough to ~~say~~^{were} an informed self-criticism.

We found similar refreshing openness in other such formal sessions, which we tried to avoid, but ~~found~~ the system's sexual unbreakable. The rector - or was it the Principal - of Moscow University - gave us the catalogue - x,000 miles of corridor, x,000 students, x million visitors a year etc - all very dull except perhaps to tourists, administrators, who ~~did~~ did not feature in our group. But these delicate-welcoming speeches ~~must~~ seem to be pretty frequently called for; and so must tend to become as routine as any tourist guides' patter. Questions? ~~While~~ I had never questioned in principle the build of Moscow Stalin-era skyscrapers of which the University was one. They seemed to me, for all the wobbly cage detail and exuberance, to serve a useful purpose as orientation beacons, landmarks in the vast undifferentiated flatness of central Moscow. 'But, if you had to build another University, would you design it after this model?' Explosive laughter from the Rector. 'Never! Unthinkable.' And he proceeded now to talk without the rotted spot. He explained some of the social and some of the educational consequences of skyscrapers: vicinity, plummy, indeed, for example that the physics labs had had to be moved out to another location, because the pounds of iron of student feet at the end of lecture periods threw delicate instruments out of calibration. Again an unexpected openness and self-criticism where a rugged defense had been expected.

The same could not be said of all the officialdom at the official reception ceremony. In Leningrad, the home and heart of the Revolution, we were inducted to the District Party Secretary. Here, I imagined, we would learn surely of the spirit and organisational skills which made this revolution, defeated the city from its Nazi invasions in its outer suburbs, and rebuilt it as the showpiece of Russian Bolshevik cityscape. No such luck. We ~~were~~ would be given, he told us, a picture of the Leningrad Party. We were, in eve, trivial organisational detail - how many regional divisions divided into how many districts, and how many areas, branches etc. How many delegates each one was entitled to send to what conferences; and soon, and so on. Not of the least interest; not of the life, activity, purposes of the Party; not, that could ^{not} be learnt better by reading the rule book. Questions? 'With such a large mass membership, how is it that the Party does not mobilise the people to tidy up, repair or repaint their own big and ugly quarters?' Leningrad, far all its beauty, was superficially rundown, tatty with peeling paint and cracked, peeling plaster. Answer: 'There is a shortage of paint and other chemicals.' Not our fault, he implied. All the responsibility of others. I found myself muttering inwardly: What a bloody bureaucrat - an academic man, educated, interested in what he was doing there, or not. I read recently that in the 1989 elections to the Supreme Soviet, the secretary of the Leningrad Party failed to get elected, even in an uncontested constituency! I like to think that it was the same bureaucrat getting his long delayed come-uppance. But perhaps it was only a spiritual successor.

We were taken to a large dairy factory in Estonia, and shown over its substantial social ~~life~~ appendices - social centre, holiday club, youth centres and so on. The managing director was a young, executive type, product of a business management school - efficient, obviously competent, and quite different from the veterans of the revolution' who had received us in most other places. His address confirmed what our guides and interpreters had told us beforehand -

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