

## Hemma i Moskva

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This is one of those books salvaged from my parents library. It is written by a Newspaper correspondent of the Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet* in 1961. What it gives is not so much an account of the quotidian life of its inhabitants, as the view presented to a privileged Western correspondent, starting with the assignment of a centrally situated apartment, in fact two, adjoined to each other and having one wall removed (thus being saddled with two kitchens and two bathrooms). The standards of such living, privileged as it may be does not come up to par to that expected by a spoiled Westerner, but the correspondent is young, with a young family, and take the difficulties and concomitant frustrations in stride, greatly abetted by the informal economy and friendly hands around. Apart from that what meets the author and consequently, with some delay, the reader are the touristic aspects of Moscow with an occasional touch down with people in the street, contacts which by their very nature is doomed to be brief and inconsequential, and never deep or penetrating.

What strikes a Western visitor in the heyday of Soviet socialism (of course billed as Communist in the West officially Communism was not a fact but a goal and conveniently situated in the not so immediate future) was the dearth of consumer goods and hence a general dreariness. My first visit to Moscow was in 1968 in connection with the Tenth IMO and I recall a very negative impression. First I was struck by the poverty of large areas of the city through which we were accidentally exposed as our bus drivers lost their way. Even worse than Italy I reported shocked to my parents. The streets were very wide and almost depleted of private cars instead innumerable trucks raced along them, not just ignoring hapless pedestrians trying to cross, but seemingly aiming for them. Everywhere there were banners proclaiming the superiority of Communism and the achievements of the USSR. The lasting impression was that of buildings haphazardly thrown out on the Steppe. Asian was the way I summarized it, then Leningrad would later provide a very pleasant contrast, far more of a European city. To Leningrad, nowadays revived St-Petersburg, I have never had occasion to return, but three times I have been able to revisit Moscow, which by then has presented a much more congenial setting for a spoiled Western visitor than it had done forty years earlier. While my memories of 1968 may have been strong in general mood they are very vague as to details<sup>1</sup>, while those of recent visits are far more vivid if far less exotic and does serve me as a mental guide as I read the book.

The author decries the general lack of surprise that Moscow offers, especially when it comes to basic stores with the same limited displays, the wide intimidating streets, the ugliness and predictability of much of the buildings, still he is no really able to convey the

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<sup>1</sup> I did take a fair amount of pictures, but slides which seem to have been misplaced and lost; had I taken black%white I would at least have had an album which would have allowed my continual refreshment of memories

full dreariness of it all which made me and my companions experience such a deep relief when we returned to Helsinki, as if the air was lighter to breath. The author takes us on excursions by foot or car, but he never seems to descend to the subway which impressed me very much, starting with the Kremlin. I too went visiting the Kremlin back then also parts to which the general public was not invited, I am sorry to say that it was lost on me, I have no collections of it save the vaguest. The author gives a rather detailed description of the riches to be seen with appropriate historical comments, but of course this has very little to do with the Soviet Union but is to be seen as a show piece comparable to the crown jewels. I do recall one thing from the Kremlin and that was the red wall enclosing it and the spruces that flanked it. Those spruces so reminiscent of cold boreal expanses struck me with their desolate barrenness emphasizing the very foreign, almost outer-worldly character of the realm. This was after all at the time when the Soviet Union was seen almost as something dwelling on the other side of the Moon.

Leaving the touristy delight of Kremlin the author explores the commercial districts in the vicinity, the 'Chinese' city, with nothing Chinese about it and having nothing to do with a Western Chinatown, various markets, bookstores along Kuznetsky most, champagne bars along Gorkij. And then churches. Moscow was once known for its forty times forty churches, now most churches are disused, turned into museums of atheism, or used for even more prosaic purposes, just as the case of the monasteries. The great cathedral of the Savior had been blown up by Stalin and replaced by an outdoor swimming pool. The church was not actually persecuted during the Soviet times, at least not during post-Stalinism, because that would give it the status of martyrdom that would revive it. A few churches are still open for worship but only attended by old people, predominantly old women. This was being tolerated as long as they did not perpetuate their superstitions to the young. In school any religious feelings were suppressed leading to widespread ignorance of the Bible and the life of Jesus<sup>2</sup> Now of course the swimming pool is gone and the Cathedral resurrected along with all those classical monasteries and the Russian Orthodox Church given great influence as a National identity. The popular attachment to the Church proving to be far stronger than to the Socialist regime, which turned out to be just a parenthesis in Russian history.

We are also joining the author to various museums dedicated to literary figureheads, of which they are quite a few in Moscow, a fair fraction of which I have already visited. The author is content with listing a few of them, but only Tolstoy makes an appearance. In short most of the sights to be seen in Moscow belongs to the pre-revolutionary past. There are of course some museums devoted to the revolution, strange would it be otherwise, but those are rather dreary places and the most evocative is one that lies hidden in the cellar of a store, namely the place where the Bolsheviks had their clandestine printing press.

But maybe the high point of Moscow was its cultural life, especially the theaters, where Chekhov's plays are regularly performed and the fantastic Bolsjoj theater where a

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<sup>2</sup> I recall how shocked we were when our Swedish speaking guy acting as our interpreter professed ignorance of Jesus when encountering a painting of him. Incidentally I remember that I often asked him whether it was allowed to take a picture when I was about to aim my lens, he was very surprised by my questions until he was lent my Swedish guide book in which the warning was prominently stressed.

performance of Boris Godunov would be unforgettable<sup>3</sup>. Incidentally Chekhov's widow had just died a few years earlier, providing until then a link to the past.

In 1961 the Revolution was only some forty odd years into the past, and thus most people over fifty had vivid recollections of pre-revolutionary times, and the very elderly had lived more than half of their lives before the revolution. Nowadays those who have personal memories of the Revolution are rare indeed, Gorbachev was the first leader who was born after the Revolution, and he was also the last. Now in the early 60's the regime was actually at its zenith of prestige and optimism. It had survived Stalinism and the Second World War and had emerged as a super power along with the States, something which would define the Cold War for roughly forty years, and was for some years a leader in space exploitation, being the first to hit the Moon, taking a picture of the far side of the same and most spectacularly having the first men in space (Gagarin is mentioned in the book). It was the time of friendly competition and co-existence, a year ahead of the Cuban Missile crisis, and it was assumed that the Soviets would soon overtake the West economically as it had excelled in sports.

The book is illustrated in the generously wide margins by drawings performed by a colleague of the author. I recall one on which my mother made a comment back then when the book was newly acquired, namely that of a Soviet man bathing, what she found very comical, what was so special about that?

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<sup>3</sup> I actually attended one such in 2012 and can testify to it