

1968 IMPRESSIONS OF SWEDEN AND THE USSR

by

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(In connection with this Summer's homeleave to the United States it was our privilege as a family to travel to the World Council of Churches meeting at Uppsala, Sweden and from there on to the Philippines via the USSR. This paper contains some impressions of our brief time in Sweden and the Soviet Union.)

We left Seattle on a S.A.S. Polar flight that flew non-stop to Bergen, Norway. The weather was clear enroute and the view of Greenland with the ice breaking into the North Atlantic was really breathtaking. The only drawback was that our children (Anne age 6 and Jon age $2\frac{1}{2}$) were completely thrown off schedule with the staggering 8 hour time change and we paid for that upset with 4 days of agonizing readjustment. The way it works is that about 1:00 A.M. Norwegian time both Anne and Jon are wide awake and ready for dinner in a hotel and town that is closed up until 7:30 A.M. You take little walks through the hotel hallways, you eat little snacks, at 4:30 A.M. the father and his children feed ducks at a lake in the city, first we had to wake up the ducks of course, it is breakfast finally at 7:30 A.M. and then everyone goes back to bed. Eventually by our arrival in Uppsala the family was adjusted. Shirley, Anne and Jon had a great time for the two weeks of the Assembly at a little hotel about 5 blocks from the Assembly meeting hall. I was able to visit them each day between 2:00 and 4:00 P.M. They established a routine of morning shopping at the public market, participation in a park program through which they were invited into the homes of Swedish families that they met during these daily outings at the park, and a steady stream of neighborhood children were at the hotel to play with Anne. Language was practically no barrier at all.

The lake region of Sweden is the beautiful mixture of lowlands, rolling hills, lakes and looks a lot like western Washington. Uppsala is the interesting old university city of Sweden dominated at its center by the great Cathedral which can be seen for many miles. The country is prosperous and in fact the cost of living at least in food items we're sure is higher than any place we have been. Sweden is proud of its achievement in citizen benefits and its complete freedom of expression. At least one result of this liberation is apparent at every "Tobak" store where pornographic magazines are openly sold that make "Playboy" look like the "Ladies Home Journal." I thought it was significant that this one result of the permissive society was referred to on several occasions by churchmen from communist lands and many Asians as an all inclusive proof of Western decadence. So it was that Sweden itself with its obvious wealth and success notwithstanding became a kind of symbol, fair or unfair, of what can happen to people when freedom drifts toward the heresy of self flattery and indulgence. On the positive side, however, the Swedish Church which has been experiencing years of slump is coming to life and several of the young Swedish Christians that we met were very serious and determined to see their church renewed.

We left Sweden on July 20 by a two hour flight to Leningrad, a city of 2.7 million that faces to the west astride the magnificent Neva River. At the airport in Leningrad we were met by Intourist and taken to the hotel Europa, an old fashioned hotel in the heart of the city. (Throughout our $5\frac{1}{2}$ days in the USSR Intourist, which never failed in any detail, was our constant guide and reference point.) Leningrad is a really beautiful city on a grand scale. The old pre-revolutionary buildings are architecturally eloquent; everything about

the city is monumental. The third largest church structure of Christendom is there: St. Isaac's Cathedral with a capacity of 15,000 people. The greatest single building is the Hermitage Museum (the old Palace of Peter the Great). I am sure that very few residences of the world can match this structure. We were told that to visit every room of the Palace would involve 17 kilometers of walking. As a museum it is unequalled; even the Louvre is surpassed. There are more Rembrandts at the Hermitage than in any other single museum in the world and for us the Rembrandt collection was the cultural high point of our trip.

From Leningrad we went by an areoflot jet to Moscow which is a city of 6,700,000 people. Moscow lacks the grandeur of Leningrad but possesses its own dynamic in that whereas for the Russian Leningrad is the symbol of old Russia and of the historic turning points in Soviet history: i.e. the defeat of Napoleon, of Hitler, and also of the Czars in 1917, but it is Moscow that is the place of consolidation of power and the present center of world communist ideology. In fact Lenin may have moved his revolutionary government to Moscow because he feared the distraction that Leningrad posed to revolutionary motive in both its location so close to the West and its glorious reminders of old Russia.

In Moscow we stayed in the 22 story Leningrad Hotel which overlooks the train station and was about 15 minutes drive from the Kremlin. Our first tour was of the Kremlin which is a very old fortress with the river Moskva on one side and Red Square on the other. It is a fascinating place. Tourists are shown the great collection of gold icons and Christian relics that comprise the major part of the Treasure House exhibit. The churches within the Kremlin, the Cathedrals of the Archangel Michael, of St. John the Divine, and of the Assumption are the most beautiful part of the fortress; each church has been or is being restored and repaired. Worship services are not being held in the buildings but they and their Orthodox crosses dominate the Red Square.

Lenin's tomb is an odd institution in every way with its shrine-like atmosphere. It is the principal symbol of the attempt that has been made to establish a Lenin myth as the infallible guide for Soviet faith and practice and Lenin is the source for all true communist doctrine. Even in an elaborate space science exhibit that we saw at the airport an obscure quotation from Lenin was highlighted to prove, though not too successfully it seemed to me, that he clearly saw the value and importance of space science back in 1922. But one thing made me suspect that the myth is only superficially effective and that is the stylized, artistically sterile treatment that Lenin has received from the Russian artist. There apparently are about three approved official poses of Lenin and they are visible everywhere in monotonous repetition. Finally you fail to really see them because they stare at you with the same expression from so many places.

Let me share a few general impressions:

(1) The people we saw in the two cities were mostly blond, large builds (in fact the Russian women are certainly the largest women in the world) very plainly dressed, hearty in appearance, their expressions tended to be unemotional and serious not particularly communicative, though I believe the people were more friendly toward us because of our two children than generally toward other Intourist visitors. But the average Russian does not really have much opportunity to be friendly toward the foreign traveler because Intourist has effectively isolated the tourist from the Russian citizen by the very services that are offered to the visitor. For instance at the dining room in our huge Leningrad Hotel in Moscow we were always seated at one of several tables located next to the orchestra - only tourists could sit at these special tables where the waiters spoke English and French. Also on tours we never stood in lines with the people

but we were placed as foreigners in front of the average citizen. This was true at Lenin's tomb where we stepped in front of a line that must have been a mile long. On our areoflot flight from Leningrad to Moscow the foreigners were driven to the aircraft to board ahead of large groups of Russians who had walked from the terminal and were waiting at the plane for us to find the best seats that we wanted after which they were allowed to board. Therefore the best way to meet the Russian citizen is to ride the subway or to go to church or in some way find a more natural setting for human relationships. This happened to us on a few occasions. For example on the plane to Moscow a highly educated Russian woman came to the man seated next to Shirley and asked to exchange seats with him so that she could sit by Shirley and for the whole 2 hour flight they visited. She was a librarian at the Leningrad museum and gave Shirley a fascinating insight into her life as a young married woman in the Soviet Union. But I am sure that the general rule for foreign tourists is very little real encounter with the citizen except of course for frequent contact with the Intourist representatives.

(2) One thing that had a cumulatively depressing impact upon me during the 5 days was the lack of news. English papers except for two week old N.Y. Daily Workers were non-existent and Pravda gave very little actual news in the Russian language for that matter. An Asian who could read Russian told me that Pravda contained practically no news coverage of the Czech crises which was reaching a critical point as we left Sweden. Instead Pravda offered ideological interpretations of the situation. They reported that counter-revolutionary groups high in the Czech Communist Party were plotting against the people and seeking to destroy the great solidarity of the Warsaw Pact Nations, there were also strong hints of Western interference and support for the revisionist faction. This was hardly news but was instead ideological preparation of the Soviet people should any USSR military action be instituted against Czechoslovakia.

(3) Naturally our principal interest was to come to some understanding of the Christian Church in the USSR. The World Council of Churches meetings had helped in providing some very interesting conversations with Christians in the Communist bloc nations and I was personally challenged by the sincere faith of the Orthodox churchmen. It is a fact that the churches are growing in the Communist countries. They have reached their low point and are on the way up. In Leningrad I walked through the Museum of Religion and atheism which is located in the great Cathedral built by Czar Alexander I after the defeat of Napoleon. The exhibit is intended to once and for all discredit the superstition of religion and show scientifically the validity of Marxist-Leninist atheism. I felt an odd kind of peace of mind at the last display case. The whole ideological effort was amateurish and clumsy and hardly scientifically or intellectually impressive. For instance one display sweeps aside the Russian Orthodox Church with a photo of an Orthodox Priest in a room, holding a woman in his arms as if he were caught in some immoral act. With enemies like this who needs friends! I thought to myself that this kind of exposé of the church is really an aid to the church in that as people meet Priests and Christians who are not as grossly immoral as the museum announces then they are forced to consider Christianity in a new light since the Christians they meet in actual daily living are not like the ones they were prepared to meet.

Perhaps this is what has been slowly happening throughout the nation. Communist literature portrays the heroes and villains of society in such black and white terms that the whole educational result of the message is undermined when people get into life situations and find out that Christians are not as evil or blindly superstitious as they were portrayed and also that commissars and Communist heroes are not as clear headed, scientific and free of opiates as they had been presented. Each evening at 6:00 P.M. the Orthodox Churches hold worship

services and on a Tuesday evening I attended the service in a medium sized church fairly close to the Kremlin. The people were very reverent and though the language was different than my own I was deeply moved by the service. When I arrived some 15 minutes early the sanctuary was occupied entirely by older men and women but when the service began younger people came in. There were no chairs or pews in this church so everyone stood and many went from small chapel to chapel lighting candles at various icons. The huge paintings in the church were very beautiful and communicative. There was a very large and simple painting of the Parable of the Good Samaritan that particularly struck me.

(4) The atmosphere in the USSR was serious and even puritan. The contrast with Sweden must have been a shock to Russian churchmen as they admitted it was. In the USSR the worker has been ideologically honored and it is to their credit I think that Russian society could never be dismissed as frivolous or lazy. The extras and luxuries of the West are absent but scientific achievement is not, and of this fact I think every Russian is proud.

The big question regarding the Soviet Union is the one of future direction and drift: What way is the Soviet soul moving? This is a larger and more complicated question than I am capable of assessing but I am willing to venture some guesses. (1) I think that the epic, primeval soul of old Russia is winning against the flat stereotype of the Marxist economic interpretation of man, and the fact that within the generic Russian soul are deep Christian moods and traditions it will mean that the Christian sources in Russian life are going to emerge increasingly as a live option for the youth, and therefore for the future. (2) I think that Soviet society is moderating and that this moderating trend is irreversible, just as it is in Czechoslovakia and other Communist bloc countries. A proof of this moderating trend is being ironically made clear in the Russian military action against Czechoslovakia itself. The fact is that the Russian government's nervousness about liberalization within the Eastern European bloc nations is directly related to their nervousness about the liberalization mood that is growing within their own society. This means to me that the USSR is different now than it was in the days of the Hungarian crises. It means that there is an active tension throughout Soviet Society between hard and moderate factions. It does not mean that there is now the absence of a strong hard line group within Soviet government and if that hard line factor wins out in the Soviet Communist Party then the iron fist of Russian power will be much bolder and oppressive than it is now. If that group wins out then undoubtedly purges will be carried out throughout the Communist bloc. But I don't think that even such a top level turn toward hardness will in the end reverse the fact that the Russian himself is moving toward a more moderate position. All of this is taking place because at both the grass roots level and among the intellectuals the definitions of Marxist-Leninist philosophy are less and less the real basis for motivation of people. Therefore I think that now as never before it is vital to keep up our contacts in every way with the people of the Communist world, as well as their governments.

We left the Soviet Union at 1:00 A.M. July 26 by an Air India flight to New Delhi. The evening was clear and cool, the lights of Moscow seemed like an endless carpet stretched out upon the dark forests of the Russian plain so that the epic sweep of it all which so struck us as we entered the country was our last impression as well.