

## **BEHIND THE BOOK - A RUSSIAN REQUIEM**

It all started in ninth grade. I moved from Revere public schools to St. John's Prep in Danvers, Massachusetts, and for reasons known only to God and the administrators there, was given, as one of my five subjects, Russian Language. I remember getting my list of courses and being puzzled. Russian? I hadn't signed up for Russian! I'd struggled with French in junior high; Russian sounded so much harder.

That turned out to be true. I was a terrible Russian student at St. John's, and later at Exeter, and even later at Boston University and Brown. But I loved the literature so much that I kept going, and ended up majoring in Russian Studies and getting a Master's in Russian Language and Literature.

Still, even after nine years of study, I couldn't speak well at all. But I'd put in so much time that I figured it would make sense to try to go to the country where the language was spoken. Maybe I learned better that way, living the language rather than studying it. My wonderful grad school advisor, Dr. Victor Terras, told me about a program run by the United States Information Agency, a branch of the State Department. The USIA put together traveling cultural exchange exhibits in the USSR and they were looking for Russian-speaking American guides.

It doesn't sound like much, "traveling cultural exchange exhibit", but it was actually a very successful anti-propaganda campaign, and the exhibits themselves were like traveling museums. In those years (my first tour was in 1977 when Brezhnev was running the country), the Soviet government had extremely tight control over information that reached its citizens. With precious few exceptions, Soviets could not travel abroad. At home, the media depicted America, and the West in general, as a version of hell where police were constantly beating students, where blacks and white could not sit down at the same table, where the streets were littered with homeless men and women, where only a tiny group of Capitalists lived well, and the rest of us were a step above slavery.

Our exhibits, meant to counter that propaganda and allowed because we paid the Soviets in dollars, a convertible currency, were huge, expensive affairs, sometimes as much as 50 container loads of displays and equipment, 10,000 square feet of various exhibits centered on a particular theme of American life. I was hired for Photography USA, which had everything from a portrait gallery, a working darkroom, a circular slide-show, Polaroid SX-70s and other exotic-at-the-time photo equipment. It was manned by 25 Russian-speaking American guides, of which I was one. We helped set up the exhibit in Ufa, a city about 900 miles east of Moscow, and 15,000 people a day came through the doors to gawk at an America they had never read or heard about, and to fire questions at the guides.

My Russian was shaky at first, but we worked six days a week for six weeks in each of three cities, answering questions asked by a circle of visitors sometimes three and four-deep around each guide, and we often went out with Soviet friends at night, so it improved quickly. After that eight-month tour, I was called back again in 1987-88 to work as General Services Officer - basically overseeing set-up and take-down, customs clearance, and security - on Information USA, and then, in 1989-90 as Field Director of Design USA (a show that included a rotating red

Chevy Corvette, a working graphic design studio, an American kitchen and lots of other beautiful stuff). Amanda came with me on those last two tours, and did a lot of video and photo work for the show. She also taught herself Russian by walking around the streets taking pictures and talking to people and listening to guides on the stand!

It's hard for us to overstate the impact of those tours (28 months for me, over a thirteen-year stretch). We met some of the bravest, kindest, and most memorable people we've ever known, exhibit visitors who were willing, at great risk, to have us as guests in their homes, to feed us meals that cost them a week's pay or more, to give us gifts, thank us for our work. We saw, firsthand, both Soviet communism and, in the later tours, the death of Soviet communism. We stayed in Soviet hotels, ate in Soviet restaurants, vacationed between cities in Soviet resorts. We saw the country from Leningrad to Irkutsk, from Ufa to Tashkent, from Tbilisi to Kiev to Novosibirsk.

By the time of the third tour I'd already had a book accepted by Houghton Mifflin, so it seemed natural for me to write about the USSR. In 1991 I started a novel that became *A Russian Requiem*. It was bought by a man at Grove Press who was considered the dean of American literary editors, Alan Williams - he'd edited such luminaries as Saul Bellow - but he resigned while the book was in production, my agent moved me to Little, Brown, my editor there resigned or was fired the day the book came out, and it sold poorly and never went into paperback.

It's a fairly complicated novel - a lot of suspense, a lot of characters with Russian names - but some people (my well-read mother for one) consider it my most literary and best-wrought work. I can't say. All I can say is that I tried to put into it everything I'd seen, felt, and experienced in the former USSR, all the beauty, all the horror, all the eccentric characters, and at the same time tried to say something about communism, and capitalism, and America, and love, and fear.

I hated Little, Brown's cover, though. Some years ago PFP reissued the novel, with a beautiful cover photo taken by Amanda, and I've had some nice notes from readers since then. It's very different from the *Revere* books and the *Buddha* books, but I've always tried to write about what I care about. And in the early nineties, our time in the Soviet Union had left an indelible mark, and so, when I went to the well, what came up was Russian water.

In 2010 we were fortunate enough to be invited back to Russia by my good friend John Beyrle. John and I had been guides together. He'd moved on to the Foreign Service, eventually becoming US Ambassador to Bulgaria and then to Russia. All four of us went - the girls were 12 and 8 at that point - and we stayed for five nights in the Metropol Hotel, where I'd stayed as a guide, and then, thanks to John's generosity, five more nights in Spaso House, the Ambassador's residence. The city had changed to the point where it was all but unrecognizable, but we still found the Russian sincerity and generosity, and, for the girls, it was the experience of their young lives. I don't know if I'll ever go back again. My Russian is as rusty as an old hoe left out in the yard for three winters, and it's very sad for me to see the way Putin has dragged the society back into the past. But I still speak Russian in my dreams once in a while, and still remember some great train rides and vodka-sweetened nights. So.....maybe. And maybe there will be another book about the place, a little more water in that well.