

## October 1944

# A Visit to Moscow

In the late 1930s, when I was approaching the end of my high school years, I took the nation-wide Civil Service entrance examination and began work at the Ministry of Labour office at Kew in September 1937. War began in 1939, and one good thing it did was to take



care of the unemployment problem, which had been a grey cloud over the economy throughout the 1930s. Men and women went into the armed forces or war-related jobs. In 1940 I was transferred to the Communications Department of the Foreign Office, Downing Street, London, to work on messages sent to, or received from, British Embassies and Consulates overseas. The messages were sent in code (letters of the alphabet) or cipher (numbers). I really enjoyed this work.

### **British Team in Moscow**

In the autumn of 1944, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, went to Moscow to confer with Russian Leader Joseph Stalin. I was among the London-based staff chosen to go to Moscow as part of the British 'team'. RAF crews manned about five planes taking us over southern France, (then in the control of the Vichy French, who took a 'pot-shot' at our plane). We stopped briefly at Teheran, then flew north over devastated Stalingrad to Moscow. The Russians gave

us a warm welcome. We were 'comrades in arms'. The RAF crews were housed in a Moscow hotel called the Savoy and so were most of the London-based visitors. We had been brought over to assist the regular British Embassy staff in coping with the extra work -load occasioned by the conference. I worked

alongside them during the day and was 'on call' evenings and night-time. I also had lunch every day at the Embassy and savoured caviar for the first time. It looked like frog spawn but was very tasty.

### **Red Square is Oblong**

We London visitors were free to walk around the city, and I did not feel nervous to do so. The streets were paved with grey cobbles in the older parts. There were several Russian soldiers there, and I noticed one wearing a greatcoat, the hem of which was hanging loose. I also saw a woman wearing a headscarf, army padded jacket, grey army socks and wooden, summer sandals (in mid-October). I think some of the Russians were hit harder by the war than we in England were. But I did see one woman in a fur coat.

I visited world-renowned 'Red Square' and to my mind it is oblong. On one side was a glass case, which I have been told, houses Lenin's body, but I did not go to look at it. The highlight of my visit was a guided tour of the Kremlin, and this came

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about as a bit of luck. I was on a late shift; I worked a pattern of three eight-hour shifts in the day, as in England. One afternoon at the Savoy, word rang out that the RAF crews were invited to a Russian-guided tour of the Kremlin.

Those of us not immediately committed to a shift became instant 'crew'. We were escorted by a Russian guide who spoke perfect English. The first part of the tour was the more modern (probably 19<sup>th</sup> century) area, very like the Victorian style decor: crystal chandeliers, satin-covered chairs and sofas; shades of pink, blue and cream predominated. The contrast with the old Kremlin was stark. I was reminded of our Tower of London: cold, grey stone walls, narrow windows. One feature of the Kremlin which intrigued me was the number of icons (small, framed pictures of the Madonna and child). There seemed to be at least one in every room in the 'old' part. Our guide ended his tour in one of the grim, grey rooms, where, he told us, Ivan the Terrible had murdered his son. "Did we want to ask any questions?" No one spoke up. I piped up and asked "Why did Ivan the Terrible kill his son?" The answer: "Because he thought his son was plotting against him" - a Russian 'Game of Thrones'?

### **The Bolshoi by Contrast**

In contrast to the grim, grey Kremlin were the Moscow theatres, where I saw 'Swan Lake' (at the famous Bolshoi Theatre). I had seen it in London, where, perhaps because of our war-time comradeship with Russia, ballet became fashionable. I also saw, at the Bolshoi, an opera/play called 'Eugene Onegin', based on a novel by Pushkin. Ballet is Russia's own 'art-form'.

Two somewhat amusing incidents occurred at the Bolshoi. During the interval, my colleague and I were taking a

stroll when two soldiers, in traditional tunic and knee-high boots, approached us and started to talk to us. They left with smiles all round, when we responded in English. When we returned to our seats, two strangers were sitting in them.

We retreated, uncertain what to do. There was no attendant in sight. We went back to our seats a little later and found the strangers (a young man and woman) nattering to others in *English*. They were Canadians and great theatre lovers, on long-term assignment to the Canadian Embassy in Moscow. After a friendly chat they went to find their own seats.

### **Churchill, Cossacks and Collars**

The evening before we left, we all assembled in the foyer of the Embassy, and Prime Minister Churchill gave a speech, largely directed to the Embassy regular staff. He assured them that, although they were a long way from home, their colleagues in Whitehall kept them always in mind.

I believe we stopped first at the Black Sea, where the Russians had a naval base. They received us with warmth, and put on a show. One of the men gave a demonstration of Cossack dancing, where the dancer 'squats' and from that position kicks out one leg and then the other, and keeps going without stopping. It must take much practice. Besides the men on the base there were some girls, also in navy blue. Their outfit had what used to be called a 'sailor's collar', which hung down over the shoulders (fashionable, I believe, around 1900).

We stayed there overnight and the next day took off for a British Military base in North Africa, on the Mediterranean coast. That was our last stop before England.

### **Joyce Tremlett**