

Night Train to Riga

A true story based on a night of travel from Moscow to Riga in the very early and confusing days of the Post-Soviet era. It is in essence a social commentary of the period.

Oleg maintained a brisk pace as he led the way down the dimly-lit snow-covered platform of Moscow's Riga station to the last car of what seemed like an endless train. I commented that it had been my intention to ride to Riga not walk. Oleg is heavy-set and led the way with pride. He had managed to obtain a first class sleeping compartment for me at the last minute after Intourist plus two levels of Moscow contacts had failed to find me space.

Buying a ticket to Riga may not seem like much of an accomplishment, but in the Russia of 1992 it can be a major affair. I had not planned to take the Moscow-Riga train in any event. It was now late evening and that morning had started in Rostov-on-Don a thousand miles to the South along the Black Sea Coast. The flights from Rostov to the Baltics had all disappeared from the schedule so we switched to Plan "B" and headed for the Rostov airport at 5:30 a.m. to fly via Moscow. We were accompanied by the Deputy Governor plus numerous other officials. I wondered how often our Premier went to Winnipeg airport before sunrise to say goodbye to relatively obscure visitors.

Information about Moscow-Riga air connections had been a bit sparse in Rostov. The printed schedule showed three flights but the computer screen was blank. The performance of the computer screen had not particularly increased or decreased our confidence in the availability of flights to Riga. On arrival in Moscow it was indeed confirmed that the computer was right – no flights to Riga. The fuel situation in Russia in general and the Baltics in particular was given as the reason – I suspect good old-fashioned economic hardball is a better explanation. There were no flights to Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia and flying via St. Petersburg was equally doubtful – so it was the train or nothing. I would be 12 hours behind in my already tight schedule in Lithuania, but flexibility is a necessary requisite in Russia.

After Intourist, Lila, Bolodja and Vladimir all failed to find a ticket, Oleg had come through. Vladimir had pulled miracles out of many hats before – so things must be getting tough. Vladimir is Jewish and recently returned from Israel when his wife couldn't handle the fear and uncertainty of the Middle East and preferred the known chaos of Moscow. Vladimir also shared with me that as an all-purpose arranger he knew how to make a living in Moscow – but his somewhat unorthodox skills were not very marketable in Tel Aviv. Vladimir helps many Christian agencies with ticketing so gave his company the name "Christian of Russia". It did not seem inappropriate to him. When pressed about the source of the ticket, Oleg gave his little smile and told me that there are always a few seats reserved for senior government officials and I now had one of them. On other occasions I had obtained KGB seats in regions where I was not even legally present, so this situation seemed reasonably appropriate.

An economy of scarcity overlaid with a regime fueled by suspicion operates on the basis of personal rather than corporate relationships. I don't really know Oleg's past, but a substantial well-furnished apartment in a prime location in Moscow, two cars including a used BMW and the ability to finance his daughter's studies in the West, suggests he may be something other than a selfless member of the glorious proletariat. Oleg is also powerfully-built and I felt safe and even a bit smug as we marched through the brisk night beside the seemingly endless train.

The Russians have an expression for Oleg's ability to purchase a ticket – the word is "Blad" (pronounced "Blaht" to those of non-Germanic background). I have asked many Russians about the origin of the word "blad". They assume it is a Russian word and have no doubt of its meaning. Blad is in fact a German word meaning quite literally "sheet of paper". In the old days of imperialism there were many Germans and other foreigners in the St. Petersburg region giving a European façade with their technical and artistic skills to a Russia of forests, log houses and feudal estates. Just as the Mennonites enjoyed special privileges granted by Catherine the Great (greatness is a perspective which depends upon your location on the totem pole of a society), the foreigners of St. Petersburg also had special privileges. Their names were recorded on lists – so if your name was on the "blad", you had priority access to something. The origin of the word has been largely forgotten, but the concept of blad has become a genuine Russian institution.

Oleg was accompanying me to my seat for more than one reason. I had helped him solve some visa problems for his daughter – something a thousand tins of caviar shipped to the Canadian Embassy could not have accomplished – but a bit of Canadian "blad" accomplished with ease. He wants to keep the books balanced and can't be enough of a host. Oleg was also with me because mine was a ruble ticket. Legally a foreigner can only travel for hard currency but since Intourist could not find a seat – it was Oleg's ruble ticket or nothing. Oleg understands that the conductor of my car can refuse to allow me to travel on my ticket, but he is carrying an expensive foreign chocolate bar in his pocket to ease the mental anguish of the conductor in permitting this special situation. The conductor will have no trouble justifying her action – her monthly salary will not feed her family for a week.

I used to think that there was no market system in Russia – but there is. The market is not in products, but in permission. The person controlling the ticket which Oleg purchased, the conductor who will not object and a million others have power to permit exceptions to a rigid system. This market is the inevitable product of an authoritarian permission-oriented political economy. We play our free Market game in the West – the Russians play their game in the East. The results do not produce equality on either side – but one type of market is certainly more efficient in meeting supply. I also made an interesting discovery about access to hotel rooms on this visit. It had taken us 30 minutes to check into the 6,000-bed Rossija Hotel, the world's largest. How could they ever register enough people to fill all those rooms with that kind of approach? Yet, they claimed the rooms were full. What I discovered is that my Russian friends suddenly all had rooms around my room – including the view of the Kremlin I had hoped to rent. The real keepers of the keys are the entrepreneurial "key" ladies on each floor – and it

seems while I stand in line 30 minutes and pay an exorbitant price in dollars, my local friends, along with half of the population of Georgia and Armenia and many young ladies in fake furs, simply make their arrangements with the key lady. So much for international reservations!

The Riga station platform was of more than incidental interest to me. In the early 20's my grandfather had decided to abandon his substantial business interests and emigrate. It had been a substantial business – he was more than a millionaire in today's terms. The main purpose of this trip was in fact an effort to repurchase the old family flour mill together with some other industrial properties. People in the town knew our family history in great detail – and spoke highly of my grandfather's reputation. Folklore has it that when they departed Moscow from this very platform, officials read a list of names of those who would be denied permission to leave Russia. My grandfather was on the list but somehow persuaded authorities that one letter of the name was incorrect and it must be a different person. I suspect his methods of getting on board were not all that different than those used by my friend Oleg. The consequences of failure would have been a bit higher. If you were on the list, your ticket was one-way East.

As we neared our car we noticed a well-dressed young man lying in the snow along the track. A friend was desperately trying to get him on his feet again since the train would depart in minutes. I sent up a silent prayer that he would not be my room-mate, since a luxury compartment means two beds rather than four or six beds. First class consisted of compartments further back. Alcoholism remains a great curse in Russia and will be a sea-anchor on their path to development. Earlier that week we had spent a few days in Mineral'nyye Vody, a tiny resort in the central Caucasus. Our host was the Mayor (equivalent to Governor of a region) who welcomed us into a spa guesthouse favored by the likes of Brezhnev, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin. Since we were the only guests of note in the region at that moment, we were each given the luxury apartments located at the end of every floor. Four rooms of antique furniture, two full baths, kitchen, etc... The meetings were about agriculture and industrial development but were enhanced by visits to a world-ranking breeding station for Arabian horses, sampling of the various ill-tasting mineral waters and visits to the sauna and huge swimming pools. Every event was lubricated by vodka or cognac and it took unusual creativity to keep on good terms with the hosts while minimizing or avoiding the toasts.

At one point it occurred to me that they had reasonably good wines in the region and if they would put wine on the table, I could substitute the 100% proof vodka with something less powerful. The nearby "Kuban" Mennonite colony had in fact pioneered the growing of grapes in the 1880's when all other forms of agriculture were not successful. My compliment of the local vintages backfired somewhat. The Mayor, in his vodka-induced exuberance, ordered the staff to bring out six different local vintages and after detailed descriptions of each variety added a wine-tasting event to the evening. The Mayor's attractive young wife was publicly furious at her husband for getting stoned while his guests barely touched the stuff. It helped me understand why Russian women are so willing to marry outside of their culture.

Alcohol isn't the only abuse of Russian officialdom. Many also avoid work at any reasonable opportunity. Our next official stop was to be Rostov, some five hours by car. We decided to visit the old "Kuban" Mennonite settlement, birthplace of my mother, spend the night with a Russian friend in Maikop and visit the Logos Bible School in Belorechensk. Our friends from Rostov meanwhile stayed behind at the spa to fill a large container of mineral water for their boss. We arrived in Rostov 30 hours later – two hours before our hosts – it must have been quite a container.

Oleg and I finally arrived at the car somewhat breathless; the chocolate bar was offered and accepted quite publicly plus enough rubles changed hands to pay for my tea all the way to Riga and probably to China. We found our compartment and discovered that my travelling companion would be a pleasant looking woman of around 40. The Russian rail system sells you a bed – there is no scope for negotiating who your companion will be – presumably it's another version of Russian roulette. I had been worried about a drunk companion – but how does a Russian woman deal with travelling alone? My daughters have both traveled extensively in Europe and Russia – but I will take more care to send them with a companion in the future. On our earlier rail trip my Russian companion had purchased all four beds in a compartment. The conductor was most indignant, but after something appropriate for her children, had asked if we wanted sugar with our tea and left us in peace. Considering that the four beds on a 30-hour trip had cost us a total of US \$6.00, it had not been a particularly expensive decision. On that occasion I had been on a train because I could not obtain a visa for my destination – and it's difficult to fly without visas. Sometime I may actually take a train trip by choice!

My bags had barely hit the floor when a man appeared at the door and asked if I would be interested in exchanging compartments with him since this was his wife. It didn't seem appropriate to ask for a wedding certificate, so Oleg quickly went to the other compartment to check if our vodka-soaked friend or his equivalent would be my companion. The other bed was still empty so we agreed to the change. Minutes later a young lady, about thirty-ish in a well-traveled rabbit fur and living proof of the shortage of soap in Russia, arrived as my companion for the next 13 hours. It would be one more cultural experience to add to my list.

The train pulled out at 9:19, on time to the minute. Our compartment consisted of two narrow beds both at seating level, with a table between the beds under the window. The beds can be flipped up to reveal a compartment under the bed to store your more valuable luggage. Presumably somebody has to physically remove you to get at your possessions. The seats are simply two beds already made up. The linen was adequately clean and in fact the whole compartment was more than adequate – including the little vase with plastic flowers on the table.

Her name was Irena; she is an owner of a small cooperative (private company by any other definition) with a staff of five offering veterinary, breeding and other pet-related services in Moscow. Irena is particularly fond of cats and was on her way to Riga to be the "foreign" judge in a cat show. Since her decisions could determine if certain animals may or may not be used

for registered breeding, the Latvians couldn't agree on a local judge so Irena had been called in. She spoke a very adequate English permitting discussion of a wide range of topics. After an hour covering the political and economic waterfront, she decided that was enough – it was too depressing. Irena reflected the frequently-heard puzzlement about Western fascination with Gorbachev. She considered him a leader who was attempting to lead by saying “yes” to every faction rather than leading on the basis of any conviction of his own.

The conductor appeared and offered us dinner. Since Oleg had fed me rather well in his apartment before the trip, I ordered only tea. Irena opted for several soft drinks and some snacks from her spacious and worn leather purse. All Russian women carry large purses. The name used for the purse translates as “perhaps” or “maybe”. “Perhaps” I shall find something today and my bag is always ready for sausage, shoes or whatever. My wife has also become proficient at filling my “perhaps” bag on travels to Russia. My system works in reverse. I begin the trip with about 30 pounds of coffee, margarine, milk powder, sausage, peanut butter, nylons, music cassettes, Russian New Testaments, bubble gum plus a generous supply of snack items like chocolate bars, tins of oysters, packed cheese, fruit juice, cereal and dried fruit to see me through any occasion. I use the more practical items as hostess gifts to my friends and use the snack items to permit tight scheduling by often travelling during the meal times. I decided that dried prunes would be a good dessert along with my tea followed by a chocolate chip cookie. Irena politely declined my offer of prunes – presumably there is nothing particularly advantageous to a prune from the West. As I dug to the bottom of my supply kit, there was a can of German beer which someone in our group had purchased from the entrepreneurial floor lady at our hotel in Rostov. Irena was delighted to accept the German beer along with the chocolate chip cookies. “How much did you pay for the can of beer”, she wanted to know. I told her 60 rubles and she mumbled why anyone would pay that much. I commented that it was less than a dollar, only a fraction what the same can would cost in Germany. I knew what she was thinking. Earlier that evening Oleg had told me about his wife. She is a well-trained professional woman – but her government salary is only 300 rubles. She has been driven to tears because what used to be an adequate income is now practically worthless. I wonder what it feels like if your professional training is valued at five cans of German beer per month.

Irena is a divorced mother of an eight-year-old girl. As we changed from politics to family, she seemed anxious to share her own story. Irena had made a number of trips to Poland and Holland. In 1989, together with her two best girl friends, they attended a pet show in Warsaw. One is a medical doctor, the other a teacher and all are enthused about dogs and cats. They noticed an ad in the Warsaw paper by a group of Dutch men seeking wives in Poland. This was the middle of the Gorbachev era and many Germans, Jews, Pentecostals and just plain Russians were taking advantage of the tiny opening to the West to get out. Just as the Mennonites of Middle Asia refer to emigration as a “disease”, she says Russians also described the panic to emigrate as a sickness. Irena and her two unmarried friends also had the disease – plus a shared distaste for Russian men who lack respect for women and have a predilection for vodka. As a joke they decided to answer the ad to see if the Dutch would also consider Russian wives. One of the three actually connected with an appropriate partner – but as the affair was being

finalized, the Russian teacher confided in her love of pets while the Dutch bachelor had a serious allergy to animal fur. The teacher did not wish to live without animals so the relationship went to the dogs so to say.

The story does not end here. The Dutch man felt the Russian teacher would be an excellent partner for someone and offered to run a special ad in Holland for her. Nine men answered the ad, the teacher visited all of them, and a happy marriage was the result. Encouraged by this success, the Dutchman offered to run a second ad for the doctor, so the friends could be reunited in Holland. Seventeen men replied. Irena jokes that this represents some kind of an informal survey of the preferences of Dutch men in terms of professions. This also ended in a marriage. Encouraged, the two girls and the Dutch friend ran an ad for Irena – the third member of the Moscow troika. Five men answered, presumably a cat-lover ranks somewhat lower than a teacher or doctor. Nevertheless, a good partner, a rather wealthy Dutch bachelor was found. Everything was negotiated, visas, rail tickets – then a telegram arrived saying that the Dutch man was going on an extended trip to Canada and everything would be delayed. It seems his friends convinced him that Irena was a gold-digger after his money. Irena was humiliated and would not go through the process a second time. She and her daughter will now make their life in Moscow and visit their married friends for Christmas.

Sharing a compartment with a female companion is an interesting experience. I wonder how we would handle this in the West. There seems to be an unwritten but understood rule about privacy. When I was ready to go to bed, Irena immediately left the compartment to have a smoke. The compartment door could be locked tight or locked in a position where it remains open about two inches. This way there is security in terms of entry, but passer-bys can be aware of what is happening inside the compartment. At midnight we turned out the lights for what would be my first long sleep in over a week.

During the night we crossed the Latvian border – non-existent eight months ago, but now a very real barrier in political and economic terms. Latvia and the Baltics hope to be the “gateway to Russia”, but the gatekeepers to the East are exacting their pound of flesh for the undignified departure of the Baltics. Although Latvia is still on the ruble, there have been no financial transactions between Latvia and Russia for two months. All flights are non-operative and gasoline is in such short supply that my Riga friend could not pick me up in his car.

Whatever the problems with fuel and rubles, the border still passes unnoticed on the night train to Riga (or back to Moscow for that matter). At Christmas my nineteen year old daughter visited Lithuania and together with three equally youthful friends decided to go to St. Petersburg “to see the Hermitage”. I was horrified to learn that they made the trip entirely without visas – crossing four borders. Oh, to be young again! Several days later we would travel by night train from Riga to St. Petersburg and also enter Russia without documents. It seems like a useful alternative if you have visa problems – as long as it lasts!

In the morning Irena ordered a greasy platter of eggs and the Russian version of bacon (fat only) while I munched on dry granola, more prunes and the omnipresent tea. The cities of the

former USSR look gray from any vantage point, but it seems the rails run past the oldest of everything. It would take little effort to recreate a turn-of-the-century movie set anywhere along the Moscow-Riga line. Since most homes in Russian villages are still made of logs, one could debate about the turn of which century.

The train schedule read that we would arrive at 10:55 a.m. Since Russia had just moved its time back by one hour, Irena was sure this meant we would now arrive at 9:55 Riga time. It seems that Lenin changed to Daylight Savings Time in 1917 and since questioning the wisdom of the rules was not a profitable exercise in Communist Russia, nobody ever changed it back in the appropriate season. With the putsch of August, 1991, somebody finally recalled that Daylight Savings Time was meant to be seasonal and the clocks were changed. Another interesting example of this fear of the system is the façade of the huge Moskva Hotel squatting a block from the Kremlin. The architect prepared two alternate designs for the façade of the building and they were sent to Stalin to make a choice. He signed both. Afraid to go back and explain that we was to choose – the builders constructed the hotel with the left side of a 20-storey façade based on one design and the right side based on the other. If you doubt the story, just take a look on your next visit to Moscow.

The clock showed 10:00 and we were still among the villages. Irena went to check with the conductor. In someone's wisdom it had been decided that instead of changing the printed schedule to adjust for daylight savings time, the train would simply slow down and stretch the trip one hour and arrive at the originally-scheduled time. Much of the ex-USSR remains in a time-warp, but I hardly thought it would be a literal one. My next stop would be Panevezys, Lithuania, where we would be discussing the role of a Protestant College with local Catholic authorities. There we have discovered that the time-warp is much more than an hour. We are still dealing with the Reformation – but that's another story.

Postscript:

An item in the Herald Tribune this morning: "China will not switch to daylight savings time this year partly because it interferes with rail schedules..."

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