

## To Or From Russia With Love by Beulah Gross

It all began some years ago when we visited Nicholas and Olga in Russia. Because of their Jewish heritage and the general apprehension inherent in inhabitants there, they were most unwilling to have us visit them in their home which is about 50 kilometres from Moscow. Fear of being 'listed' prevented them from coming to our Moscow hotel so they arranged to meet us in the apartment of non-Jewish friends. It was pretty stressful because of their fear and difficult to communicate in bad English and broken Yiddish/German. Despite these problems we found them such delightful company that we asked them to visit us in Sweden. They agreed but wouldn't commit themselves to a definite time. Many letters and invitations followed, the last one being at the beginning of February this year. To my astonishment, this time they accepted and said they would stay a fortnight.

They immediately went to Moscow to apply for passports, taking a 5 o'clock train to be at the passport office at 6 even though it only opened at 9. When they arrived they found hundreds of people already waiting. They queued for hours. Eventually they were given a number and told to return in ten days. They did this, were given another number and told to come back in eight days. This happened several times. After many frustrating weeks, they were issued with passports and told they could now go ahead and change their money into Swedish krone. They were also informed that they could not take any gifts out of Russia unless it was underwear which they declared as being their own. Underwear is obviously much prized in Russia!

They were allowed to take 2000 roubles out of the country. This equals 2000 Swedish krone which, at about 4.5 krone, translates to \$444 Australian. This amount was enough for them to live on for six months in Russia but wouldn't go far in Sweden being barely enough for four to five days in an hotel - but they didn't know that! To change their money they had to go to a certain bank, the ONE bank in Moscow and for the WHOLE country. This involved more train journeys to the city and standing in long lines. By this time, Olga and Nicholas, exhausted by the stress of travelling and queuing were ready to give up the whole idea, but with the help of their two sons, it only took six weeks.

The next step was to go to the Swedish Embassy for a visa. I had been told by the Embassy in Sweden that this was merely a formality but it was a formality that took another

fortnight of more queues ending in a huge questionnaire about me and my family, my late parents and my relationship to Olga and Nicholas.

They then went to book their flight but found that all flights were fully booked for the next two years so they had to take a train. Just before they left, the Russian authorities announced that the border would be closed within two days to buses leaving the country and a few days later it would be closed to trains. In desperation, bus passengers 'occupied' the train lines by lying down on them and refusing to leave. Eventually the authorities backed down saying that everyone who had tickets would be allowed to go but that the borders to other countries would be closed in the near future.

I received a letter on the 9 July with their date of arrival. I wrote back at once, and twice more that week, but when they left for Sweden five weeks later none of my letters had arrived. Imagine their distress travelling to a strange country and not knowing if they would be met!

As soon as our visitors arrived, on the 5<sup>th</sup> August, they told us that they had to book their return journey at once; it was not possible to do this from Russia despite having paid for it there. We found that all trains were fully booked except for 12 August and 9 September.

We went for a cup of coffee while Olga and Nicholas decided what they wanted to do.

When we went back we were told that on 12 August and 16 September were now available. Somewhat nervous of getting into trouble for staying out of Russia too long, they decided to take the former date. Although this cut our time together from a fortnight to just one week there was nothing we could do to change their minds.

Our visitors couldn't believe that our little apartment in Malmo housed only two people and when we took them to our tiny, old, summer cottage in the country - something so many Swedes have - they called it a palace!

They live in a small apartment with Olga's sister and brother-in-law, both professionals, and her 94-year-old mother who is blind, deaf, totally bedridden and cannot be left alone for a minute. Every other month, Nicholas, who has retired, looks after her while Olga is at work. On alternate months, Olga's sister and her husband take care of the old lady by taking turns working days and nights. When we took Olga and Nicholas to visit one of the many Swedish homes for retired people they cried. They told us that in Russia old people who have children cannot get to any home as long as they aren't very sick.

Olga and Nicholas's visit was very stressful. They told me that 'in every way it was like opening a door to heaven and then closing it in front of their eyes and that's what hurt most'. Facilities and time-saving gadgets that we take for granted astonished them. For instance, they had never heard of electric mixers, electric knives or food processors let alone seen them. We spent most of our time visiting shopping centres because that is what they wanted to do more than sightseeing - I could see it in their faces. They couldn't believe that the shelves were so full of so many and varied goods and commodities. The variety of foods and flavours at our meals never failed to delight them - and we live very simply. When Olga asked me about the price of meat, I replied that it depended on the part of the animal and the quality. She was amazed.

'We buy whatever they give us, if they give us any at all, and never ask what part or quality!' she said. 'All our prices are low, only there is never anything to buy - no meat, no fish, no fresh vegetables. And if there are vegetables, we are afraid to buy them after Chernobyl.'

In addition to their wonder at the easy availability of everything were their constant comments about how expensive things were here. As Nicholas' pension is 200 roubles per month, equalling 200 krone (about \$45) and a pair of shoes costs 500 krone (\$110), I saw their point. They had thought that their meagre allowances would be enough to buy a Geiger counter (to measure radioactivity at home) but this cost 20,000 krone (just under \$4500). A video recorder for one of their sons was 4000 krone (about \$890) and a camera for the other son was just as out of reach.

Because we felt so guilty at having so much when they had so little, we persuaded them to change their money into American dollars to use in the 'dollar shops' at home. They couldn't believe that 'it was possible to just go into a bank, any bank, and in five minutes change whatever they wanted!'

We then went on a shopping spree, buying as much as possible for them without embarrassing them. Their needs were so simple - wall can-openers, nylon stockings (15 pairs which she said she would only use in winter), dishwashing brushes, bed linen, potato peelers and mountains of soap and other cleansers. We wanted to buy them a food processor but Nicholas became emotional and said they couldn't allow us to spend any more on them. We found this traumatic because every minute we were reminded of the luxury life we lead. Each time we bought something, Nicholas almost cried, 'asking her what sort

of person she was, letting us pay and pay. I understood what this meant to his pride but I tried to make him understand what a pleasure it was to give them things they badly needed' but in the end we couldn't insist.

Too soon, the week was over and they had to leave. I gave them plenty of food for the 42-hour journey as there was no dining car or snack trolley and packed with it with paper plates and plastic cutlery. They had never seen anything like these before and said that they would save them to show people back home.

`No one would believe me if I only told people about those things!' she said.

Saying goodbye was emotional. We asked Olga and Nicholas if they would visit us again next year, but they refused because 'we cannot go through all this again'. They assured us that the short time with us had been `a long, long dream from which they (and their whole family) would relive for the rest of their lives.'

Olga and Nicholas are highly educated people yet their lives are abnormally narrow, kept that way by the system. The longer they were with us the stronger grew my impression that the Russian authorities do whatever they can to make life as difficult and humiliating as possible - for what purpose and to what end is anybody's guess but I think it is to seek and destroy all human dignity.

Now I tell my son, `We all need to meet with people like those from Russia to understand and be thankful for what we have and that we happen to be born in a 'normal' country. Appreciate the life you are allowed to live and don't complain as soon as something doesn't suit you.

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**To Or From Russia With Love:** To or From Russian with Love actually happened to Beulah's late cousin in Malmo many years ago. Beulah wrote it in the first person as the cousin related it.

**Written in 1989**

**Posted on the CHOL 'Share Your Stories Site' in September, 2023**