

ПЕТЕРБУРГ*

The Two-day PCS Siege of Leningrad

by Paul Trummel

It was just before midnight on a crisp, clear Friday night when the eighteen-coach train swiftly gathered speed passing between the grotesque, multistory buildings of the Moscow suburbs. This journey was the beginning of the two-day excursion to St. Petersburg (Leningrad) by eight of the IEEE PCS delegates to the 1991 International Colloquium on New Information Technology.

The group had been transported to Komsomolskaya Ploshchad railway station, the oldest of the nine main-line terminal serving Moscow. This station is a fine example of nineteenth century railway architecture, built in 1851 for the new Moscow/St. Petersburg line, from a design by the architect Konstantin A. Thon.

The train, hauled by an electric locomotive, gathered speed for the 400 km, eight-hour, journey to St. Petersburg by moving smoothly and quietly along the welded track. The spacious compartments were superior compared to most European trains, although the lack of toilet accouterment tended to be embarrassing. In the galley there was an American insinuation—a single teabag—the hot water for which was obtained from a traditional railway samovar. How *non de rigueur!*

We arrived in St. Petersburg on a misty Saturday morning and were

immediately transported, in a luxury Mercedes tour bus, to our accommodations at the Hotel Sovetskaya, situated in the central area. After breakfast we returned to the bus and were taken to Zlatoust—a school which offers “a unique opportunity to master the Russian language and see the country in a short time [4-6 weeks].” The representative demonstrated an interesting computerized program, that requires 20 contact hours per week, is designed to improve speech skills, and acquaints one with the phonetic and grammatical peculiarities of Russian spoken language. The software for the computer aided instruction was of high quality and we were given assurances that the courses would be taught by fully qualified Russian language professors—one group member commented that the salesperson had to use an English speaking interpreter to make his pitch! However, I have a positive impression of this [immersion] course and I shall certainly take advantage of the arrangements presently being made by PCS to sponsor a group to attend these courses late in 1992. I intend to learn the Cyrillic alphabet before I take the course as I experienced difficulty with the transliteration of alphabets—so much for 44 years spent as a typographer! I was surprised at how competent Ron Blicq is at speaking Russian after

only three months of part-time self-teaching. He has designed a system of flash cards for alphabet recognition. I hope that he will make them available to participants in the proposed Russian courses. The Russians with whom I came in contact were mostly bilingual, German being the second language. A result no doubt of the political connections with Germany during the past 70 years. This helped me to communicate in what I thought would be a difficult environment.

After the visit to the language school we returned to the bus for an orientation tour of the city. We visited too many places for me to mention them individually. Generally, St. Petersburg is known as the “Venice of the North”—it is built on islands in the delta of the Neva River and also has many canals. Peter the Great (1672-1725), secretly spend about two years in Holland studying the culture and architecture before he designed St. Petersburg and used several Dutch cities as a model. The architecture, which is being preserved (developers *verboden!*), has a distinctly Dutch flavor.

On Saturday evening we attended a modest performance of Tchaikovsky’s ballet *Swan Lake* (1876). It was the first time that I had attended a ballet with taped music—somewhat disconcerting for a traditionalist. However, I ended the evening marvelling at the acoustical coordination and clarity of sound—a sort of hypermedia simulation. It is unfortunate that the dancers were not also part of such a simulation. The building

*The transliteration from Cyrillic to English is:

Cyrillic	П	Е	Т	Е	Р	Б	У	Р	Г	А
Phonetic	P	E	T	E	R	BE	OO	R	GE	A
Roman	P	E	T	E	R	B	U	R	G	A
English	P	E	T	E	R	S	B	U	R	G

PETERSBURG



A Motley Crew!

in which the performance took place was designated a "club." To me it was reminiscent of the old-time music halls in London during the 1940s.

Before, during and after the ballet, occurred the transportation trials and tribulations of Kimberley Manthy—her Aeroflot experience, her 45' long, personal limousine, her return by train to Moscow, and her journey back to the United States. Ah, but that is another story: possibly a book!

I have a positive impression of the Russian language course and I shall certainly take advantage of the arrangements presently being made by PCS to sponsor a group to attend these courses late in 1992.

Sunday morning was, for me, the *pièce de résistance* of the trip—the Hermitage Museum. The Hermitage is one of the world's largest and most famous museums and consists of four buildings. Vallen de la Mothe was commissioned by Catherine the Great (1729-96) to build the first of these buildings, the Small Hermitage. She arranged for the walls to be hung with a collection of paintings—it seems that she cornered the market in

the works of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) before others appreciated his work and made him famous. When I return to St. Petersburg I intend to spend several days exploring the Hermitage—a tourist incursion cannot possibly do it justice.

Sunday afternoon we visited the Peterhof (Petrodvorets), some 30 km west of St. Petersburg, which was primarily designed by the architects Braunstein and Leblond, and ceremonially inaugurated in 1723. During the second world war, the Nazis used the palace as a general headquarters

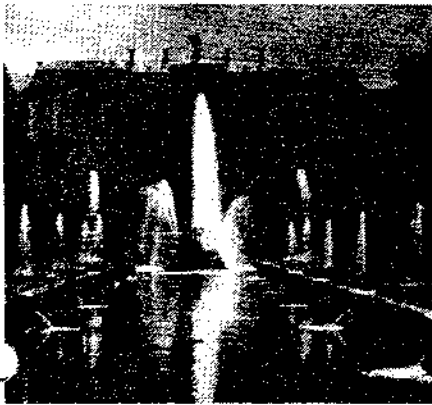
during the 900-day siege of Leningrad and stole many of the art treasures. On leaving, they virtually razed the buildings to the ground. What we saw was a painstaking reconstruction of the original palace and gardens to specifications produced from old photographs, scraps of wallpaper, and other materials. Each one of us was supplied with special felt slippers so as not to damage the beautifully finished floors. I treated our visit to Peterhof as an orientation and I would like to return and spend at least a full day there.

A Canal in St. Petersburg (with apologies to photographer Hayden Rochester, Jr.)





1946 — Great Palace and the Grand Cascade after the Razing by the Nazis.



1955 — Great Cascade Restored.

1958 — Great Palace Facades Restored.

1964 — First Halls Restored.

The bus ride back to St. Petersburg was a nightmare. The driver of the Mercedes tour bus was a cowboy of the first order. He broke every rule of the road, if any exist in Russia, and spent most of the journey either careening and overtaking weekend traffic on the soft shoulder, or bluffing oncoming traffic in the dusk-light. We survived!

Now, three observations derived from first-hand, personal experience:

1. Children, attending the museums in groups, appeared to be unregulated, attentive, questioning, and disciplined. There was no horseplay. Such attentiveness and discipline may contribute to 90% literacy in Russia compared with 50% literacy in the United States. Surely an indictment of both the family and educational systems in the U.S. The U.S. may have the edge on communications technology, but does it adequately address the learning of communication skills?
2. The Russian economic climate was similar to that which I experienced in London during the second world war. A survival type of situation. There seems to be enough staple food for most of the population—of poor quality by U.S. standards—which seems to constitute a palatable and nutritious

diet. Consumer goods are virtually non-existent. I found, by personal contact, the Russian poor (working class) to be adequately fed and housed, clean, and neatly dressed. A result, it appears, of knowing how to cook and sew, probably the result of family nurturing and vocational or domestic science education.

3. The craftsmanship in the reconstructed museums is superb, but craftsmanship at the consumer level is virtually extinct. The master/apprentice relationship, so important to the crafts of Europe, seems to have completely disintegrated under the Marxist maxim of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." This policy has resulted in a lack of incentive for quality work and craft initiative.

It was just before midnight on a crisp, clear Sunday night when the eighteen-coach train swiftly gathered speed passing between the grotesque, multistory buildings of the St. Petersburg suburbs. This journey was the end of the two-day excursion to St. Petersburg . . . a memorable experience.

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