



4-8 July, 1999 XVI Soroptimist International Convention,
Helsinki, Finland

Travelling to St Petersburg

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As part of the Helsinki Post Convention Tour Programme, we had decided that the opportunity to visit St Petersburg was one we could not miss.

However, knowing it was likely to be a late evening on Thursday 8th when the Installation Banquet ended, we decided we would travel on Saturday 10th July. So, up with the lark very early on Saturday, the obliging staff at the Hotel InterContinental providing breakfast - we were downstairs in the hotel lobby ready for the off by 5.30 am! We were transferred to the station by coach where we joined Soroptimists from other hotels, and waited patiently for the train. In due course the train 'Sibelius' drew into the station and we boarded. Most people had stored big items of luggage at their hotels and we managed with a couple of small hand pieces. All seats were reserved and Elizabeth and I found ourselves almost opposite Lorry Roberts and Joan Cromer from SIA. Our packed lunch was already on the seats and we were soon settled and on our way through the lovely wooded Finnish countryside.

Soon the couriers handed out Russian visas and two copies of the customs declaration form. As our Presidential Chain has four precious Russian stones, we put this down with other valuables and cash. Quite a performance. On arrival at the border the passports and visas were collected, and a customs official inspected, circled and stamped our customs declaration. On the return journey these were collected with the outgoing customs declarations.

What of the journey? Well, I can tell you there were some very tired Soroptimists around! It was easy to tell that we had all enjoyed the Helsinki Convention to the full because our carriages were full of gently snoozing, or sometimes heavily sleeping Soroptimists! It was very warm with no air conditioning, something we were to get used to over the next three days.

What of the scenery? I have described the landscape in Finland with its lovely woods and also lakes, pretty homes and pleasant views. Somehow it changed soon after we crossed the border into Russia - a different landscape with shabby homes, dirt roads and everything looking somehow drabber.

We arrived in St Petersburg on time at 1317 where we were met by our English speaking guides and proceeded to the waiting coaches. Two hotels were used to accommodate the party but unfortunately Elizabeth and I were in a different hotel to the rest of our party. However, we were in good company with IP Jane and her brother staying in our party at the Hotel Ohtinskaja, by the Neva River. There was a lovely view across the river to a cathedral - shining white and gold spires in the sunlight. Unfortunately the proximity of the river meant the 'Alaska State Bird' - the dreaded mosquito was in abundance - hence my urgent visit to see the doctor this morning! The Russian mosquitos couldn't read the instructions on the spray can that I used liberally - it assured me that it prevented mosquito bites!! <VBG>

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One delightful occurrence - as we entered the hotel, we were met by a member of the Neva St Petersburg Soroptimist Club that was being chartered later that afternoon. This delightful lady was so welcoming and helped to quickly organise the taxis to take us to the charter where we had arranged to meet her. In all, seven from our hotel were attending the charter, but the total party was 27 - including the NWR members and Tex and Joyce's party.

The taxi drivers were obviously 'on call' for the hotel and their charges were double that we were told to expect by my contact Oksana. The fast drive down to Sheremetev Palace on the Fontanny Dom gave our first view of the Imperial City with its 700 palaces. It's obvious that money needs to be spent on road construction. The tram lines were set in now crumbling concrete, trams were very rusty and looked very basic and many of the buildings needed attention. However, we were to later learn just how high a price the Russian people have paid for their freedom with many factories at a standstill and many trying to exist on a 'pension wage' of between 12 and 20 US dollars per month. To put this into context a kilo (2 lbs) of tomatoes costs 1 dollar! Someone said, "it is not a wage to live on, but to die on". Nurses and technicians in hospitals earn between 12 and 20 US dollars a month, and many people live in communal flats. Maybe four separate rooms with a family in each, and all sharing a communal kitchen and bathroom. Our Russian guides for the tour were very informative and happily answered all our questions.

On arrival at the Sheremetev Palace we were met by several young women carrying 'Soroptimist' signs, and we were hurried into the entrance hall of one of the newly restored areas. The Palace is on the banks of the Fontanny River. This river was used to provide water for the fountains at the Winter Palace, hence the name Fontanny. The Sheremetev Palace is one of the finest in the Imperial City and will be fully restored as a show piece when the funds are available.

Inside the entrance hall we were met by three ladies anxious to make us welcome and, to take our money. Oksana who I had arranged everything with had stressed that our 80 dollars should be paid 'up front', and there she was waiting. This young Russian girl who works for one of the members of the new Soroptimist club had started corresponding by addressing me as 'Dear Mrs Moore' and ending with 'Yours very sincerely'. Later correspondence changed to 'Dear Friend Kate' and ended with 'from Russia with love'. As soon as she realised who I was, she was on her feet, ran around the table and hugged and kissed me, then introduced me proudly as 'my friend from England', it was amazing. As an employee of Luba she had not been invited to attend the Installation Banquet, so I had written to Luba and informed her how helpful she had been and that I hoped to meet her. Well it worked, and Oksana excitedly told me she would see me at the Banquet.

Having 'paid our dues' we mounted the stairs to the ornate restored room (white and gold, mirrored and quite lovely) where the Constitutive Assembly was still taking place. Giovanna Dara Catinella the Governor from Italy was doing the chartering and there was some excitement when we arrived because in our taxi with us was International President Jane. As she entered,

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we led the way by standing and applauding her, everyone soon caught on and she was given a really enthusiastic welcome. Dear Hanne Jensbo (remember sending her 60th birthday greetings through Lisbeth Hass) was there as Governor of Denmark - the mother Club of St Petersburg Neva is a Danish Club. Of course, Hanne will follow Ayla Selcuk as Federation President for Europe in 2001.

So we were in time to see the Charter being signed. We watched as the Soroptimists from the Mother Club called each new member forward to place around her neck, a blue and gold ribbon with their Soroptimist pin on the bow in the middle. There was increasing excitement as the members lined up, the cameras flashed and dozens took photos. In addition to those people organised to attend the Charter Banquet, many other Soroptimists who were visiting the city post Helsinki had heard about the Charter Ceremony and were attending this part of the function. I found someone from Malaya who knew Indrani, from the Philippines who knew Tes and so on.

Chat Liners were there in abundance! It was really special that outgoing SI Board Extension Officer (and Chat Liner) Lorna Mead and incoming Extension Chair Joan Cromer could both be present for this special chartering.

Eventually when things had settled a little, we were invited downstairs for a cocktail party where 'little nibbles' (including things with pink caviare) were served with champagne, the noise of the chatter was incredible as we all talked to the new members. Incidentally, most of them spoke excellent English and the whole of the days events was conducted in English. This was an unexpected treat for most of us, who had anticipated quite happily to sit back and enjoy the occasion as we tried to follow the events in Russian.

Now I want to rewind your thoughts back to our Federation Conference in Bournemouth last October. Can you remember when my dear friend Lisbeth Hass, together with Hanne Jensbo surprised me, by arriving without letting me know. The surprise was almost as great as the one I gave Carol Kirkby in Alaska in April 1998! Hanne had given me, and Lisbeth had given Elizabeth our President, a CD featuring 'The St Petersburg Virtuosi' - a young member of the St Petersburg Club who as a classical pianist, accompanied the foremost 'classical balalaika' player in Russia. Well, Natalia Gorbenki had become a charter member of the new St Petersburg Neva Club, and the concert arranged after the cocktail party was in fact given by the St Petersburg Virtuosi - and we had the opportunity to listen enraptured as Natalia accompanied Mikhail Sentchourov as he made his 'Balalaika' sing! It was a magical occasion, the music was spine tingling!

The applause was deafening and several times they received a standing ovation. Sneaking a look around the room I noticed several other Soroptimists wiping the tears from their eyes as we enjoyed this outstanding, talented and world renowned couple make music. For Elizabeth and I it was especially memorable, we have both listened to the CD hundreds of times since last

4-8 July, 1999 XVI Soroptimist International Convention, Helsinki, Finland

October, and there we were hearing Natalia and Mikhail in person. My CD was copied on tape so that I can play it in my car! I gave it to one of our older members on her 90th birthday - Kath is blind and loves classical music so I knew it would be appreciated.

I think every Soroptimist who has visited my home since last October has been made to listen to the CD <VBG>, but I never thought I'd hear them in person or get to meet them.

After the concert I made a special request to the Vice President of the new Club and asked if we could present Natalia and Mikhail with a gift. She went backstage to talk to them and it was arranged that immediately they changed out of their 'formals' they would come in to meet us. While we waited quietly by the piano, other Soroptimists were busy buying the CD and when everyone realised Natalia and Mikhail were back in the room, these CDs were taken for autographing.

So, eventually we were able to hand them our prints of Nantwich - we had taken the last few of the limited edition prints, given to guests at our Golden Jubilee Dinner. Of course, I took loads of photos which will form part of the Scrap Book for Elizabeth's year as our President.

Eventually we went out to the coaches the Neva club has arranged would take us to the Nikolaevskij Palace. The venue had been changed because the party had 'out grown' the original location. But our arrival there and the Gala Banquet will have to wait for another day - otherwise there will be too much text for this to go through by email and we mustn't risk attachments :-)

I hope you enjoy reading through this tome - I think you will read between the lines that it was a truly memorable event for me personally! Very emotional, and I wish I could make you feel through the medium of the internet, the warmth and excitement of the 22 new Soroptimists of the St Petersburg Neva Club - such friendship, such pride in being made members of our wonderful organisation. One of my new friends said the following evening, with tears in her eyes: "Yesterday we became Soroptimists, today we have wonderful Soroptimist sisters and friends from all around the world". I don't need to say more.

Love & cyber-hugs