



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

Back to St Petersburg

by Kate Moore, Nantwich Club, Cheshire North Wales & Wirral Region, SIGBI

When I left you thinking about the wonderful Charter Ceremony of the Neva St Petersburg Club, we were on our way back to the Hotel Ohtinskja by bus, having the opportunity to look at some of the wonderful buildings we passed, and to see the outside of St Isaac's Cathedral. A visit to St Isaac's and a city sightseeing tour was the organised tour scheduled for our official visit. Although we regretted the opportunity to see this wonderful building, it was something we gave up readily to attend the Charter.

On Sunday 11 July, I awoke to the news from Elizabeth that she had successfully 'dealt with' a couple of mosquitos in the bathroom during the night! A quick body search revealed that we had both escaped being bitten, however in my case, this was short lived. One week later I am still sporting around twenty large red bites with one on my leg still over two inches across! There's a price to pay for almost everything <g>

After a fairly leisurely breakfast we left the hotel at 10.00 am for our drive back into the city for our visit to The Hermitage Art Museum, the imposing Winter Palace of the Tsars on the banks of the Neva River. The name 'Hermitage' meaning 'a place of solitude'. That morning it was far from a place of solitude, with tours already lining up as we passed by in our bus. The driver, Victor did a circuit around the Hermitage to show us where the bus would be parked later, then dropped us off at the entrance.

As we passed in the bus, I spied one group of Soroptimists 'standing in line'. Those who had left Helsinki the day prior to us, and there in the midst was Major Jeri of 'the high hair and pink sequins!', Ruth Reeves, Carol Patterson and other Chat Liners. Once we were also in the line, I rushed forward and managed to find everyone - yet another joyous reunion, and the opportunity to actually say au revoir to friends missed the night of the Installation Banquet.

After a short wait we were escorted in by our guide. She stayed with us through all the tours, and was an excellent, informative and had an tremendous knowledge of Russian history. Mounting 'The State Stair Case' our imaginations ran riot! This was the Winter Palace stormed in 1917 - were these the stairs they rushed? Did Catherine the Great really ride her horse up and down these wide marble stairs? Thoughts of the last Tsar and his family who were related to our own Royal Family, and for me of the late gracious Lady Zia Werner who lived at Luton Hoo, near my own home. This kindly elderly lady, a member of the Russian Royal Family was married to Sir Harold Werner the industrialist, and was usually on hand to talk to visitors to The Hoo, famous for its collection of Faberge.

Our guide warned us there would be a lot of walking, and she was so right; it was also extremely hot and humid and most of us found it uncomfortable and were 'really glowing', with perspiration dripping down the backs of our necks.

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I think it was in 'The Small Italian Skylight Hall' that we came across Tex, Joyce and members from La Mesa who were on a private visit. Chat Line reunions and farewells all over again! The treasures of the Hermitage are absolutely incredible and its only now I am home and can look through the guide books, that I can even begin to appreciate the size and complexity of the collection of paintings, objects d'art and oh! those incredible rooms.

I was disappointed to miss the Mid 15th century painting 'St Luke Painting the Virgin' by Rogier van der Weyden. His incredible painting of 'The Last Judgment' hangs in the Hospice in Beaune, France which we have visited on many occasions.

Meryl, Mary Cassell, Lois Sagel, Elizabeth Hughes and I decided not to climb to the second floor but descend downstairs for a 'comfort break'. Nothing much in the way of 'comfort' - but as they say, a welcome relief! Fortunately I was travelling with my usual large quantity of kleenex tissues in my handbag! Incidentally as we descended the State Staircase, Elizabeth and I entertained the others by doing so, as if dressed in long robes with flowing trains! Me walking (demurely!!) behind Elizabeth as she 'graciously moved her flowing train sedately and carefully behind her each time she turned a corner on the stairs'! Little girls dressing up become big girls and eventually 'grand dames' - and can still have fun doing the silliest of things :-)

Some of the main Hermitage Museum exhibits are:

The Small Hermitage (built between 1764 and 1775). The first foundation stone for the Small Hermitage was laid by Catherine the Great who, in the third year of her reign, resolved to have a Hanging Garden built by the Winter Palace and then, by that garden, two miniature pavilions and galleries to house her growing collections. The Small Hermitage was build where she could escape in solitude from the fuss of ceremonial life.

The Old Hermitage (built between 1770 and 1787). The Old Hermitage was intended by Catherine as somewhere to house her collection of books.

The New Hermitage. Built during the reign of Nicholas I, who recognised the necessity for a special building to accommodate art treasures belonging to The Crown scattered in different palaces in the capital.

The Hermitage Theatre. An added attraction is the memorial exhibition of the Winter Palace of Peter the Great. Unfortunately time did not permit us to visit the Theatre.

It was lovely walking along by the Neva river, and then across the square at the rear of The Hermitage - plenty of opportunity to purchase souvenirs, guide books etc. However, we had been approached by someone in the Hermitage who was selling guide books at ten dollars each. As it was difficult to get close enough every time to hear what the guide was saying, I decided to buy Hermitage and St Petersburg Guide Books. This was a wise move as in the shop they

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were fifteen dollars, and I later learnt that the sale of guide books by private individuals is allowed. Presumably they can sell what they can carry in and as they have no overheads can sell much cheaper.

Once we were all back at the coach, it was off for the opportunity to purchase souvenirs - again there was nothing I wanted to purchase! Is this really me talking? Well, as you know I was able to buy such lovely things at the Charter Banquet. Nothing else seemed to come up to that standard and no where equalled the reasonable prices we paid.

We met the rest of our group for lunch in the Stroganov Yard, which is at The Stroganov Palace and yes you are quite correct that is where the culinary dish acquired its name! Again a very warm location and this time I know we had smoked salmon, borsh, coulibiac of pike perch with salmon with red caviar sauce and blinis with cheese. I still have the tour details to complete my menu! Then it was a welcome return to our hotel where we were able to take a necessary rest and get ready for the Gala Dinner. Unfortunately while I took a quick snooze those d.n mosquitos descended again - and too their fill!

The Gala Dinner was served at the Shuvaloff Palace which is directly opposite the Sheremetev Palace on the Fontanny Dom - the venue for the Charter and Concert the previous evening. On our arrival at the Shuvaloff, which is a cultural centre for Russian Folklore, we were met by young women wearing very elaborate (and different) Folk costumes. A quick question confirmed they were very happy to be photographed, and soon the cameras were flashing. We were particularly happy to see Nelli and some of the members of the St Petersburg Club. Nelli was soon introduced to Governor Carol and some of the members of the North Western Region of SIA. In fact, Nelli saw both Ruth and Carnet Falconbury from the Portland Club.

We were also delighted to see two members of the newly chartered Neva Soroptimist Club, the (real) sisters we had met and talked to the previous evening, they sat with Judy Dreis.

The evening included yet another four course meal, and we were entertained in a spectacular manner with music, singing, and dancing performed to the highest standard by the young people who had met us on our arrival. I understand this group was 'the best', and we certainly enjoyed every single minute of each performance and marvelled at that incredible dancing. Folk singing, and music - definitely something to remember.

At one stage Nelli acted as translator for some of her club members, and extended a very warm welcome on behalf of the St Petersburg Soroptimists.

They concluded by mentioning the new club that had been chartered the previous evening, and we immediately saw and heard, right from the back of the room, two excited members of the Neva Club shouting, "We are members of the new Club"! We gave them a standing ovation!

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Soon the food, the festivities and the entertainment were over and we made our way to the coaches for our return to the hotel, leaving the Shuvaloff Palace around 10.00 pm.

On arrival at the hotel most of us went to 'ask' for the return of our passports and Russian visas which had been collected from us when we registered the night before. It may seem silly, but I was much happier when my passport was safely back in my possession!

Monday 15 July. Was that just less than one week ago? So much has happened and it really is the last part of this travelogue - our morning visit to The Grand Palace and Peterhof Park. This time our guide had arranged for us to take photographs, the cost presumably being met by her company and most of us took the opportunity to record some of the treasures. Again it was spectacular, I was particularly fascinated by the full set of Wedgwood China from Etruria, Stoke on Trent, only 14 miles from here. So much to see and remember, again purchasing the guide book was a good idea and somewhere in the case yet to be unpacked is a video of Peterhof.

After the tour of the house we had the opportunity to follow our guide on a hurried walk through the park or sit and enjoy the scenery and gold fountains playing, several of us did the latter! It was soon time for the walk back to our coach, by which time I had lost my bearings completely. Thank goodness for Elizabeth and company who knew exactly where we were going! We even had the opportunity to buy an ice cream.

Unfortunately Mary Cassell was not as lucky with directions, and spent a harrowing 30 minutes or so trying to get directions to the exit - all from people who didn't speak English. We eventually got the guide to agree that Elizabeth and I would accompany a couple of guides in a search for Mary as we would be able to recognise her. But by the time we got to the Palace gates the security guard received a radio message to say she had been found. Mary was rather distressed and very apologetic. however, thanks to her we saw something most unusual.

Monday 12 July is the Feast Day of Peter and Paul. Tradition in Peterhof is for the Russian Orthodox Service to commence in the Cathedral in the town, then the priest, icons and treasures, together with the congregation walk down to the gates of Peterhof Palace where a stage has been erected. The Priest continues the service there, and eventually they all move off and return to the Cathedral for the remainder of the service.

Thanks to the wait for Mary, Elizabeth and I were able to see part of this service and I took several photographs of the procession. I happened to be standing outside the coach as the procession moved past and out of respect I bowed my head to the priest - who then moved out of the procession and blessed me with Holy Water! The water was actually running down the inside of my glasses. I was soaked! He also blessed the coach. We then had to wait - following in the coach patiently - until the procession returned to the Cathedral. Thanks to Mary again, something special to remember from Peterhof.

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It was a hot and stuffy drive back to the Akademiya Restaurant at the University in the city for lunch. This was a noisy, animated affair with a high decibel level! More opportunities to purchase souvenirs, then on the buses for our return to Finlandskiy Railway Station and the return to Helsinki on 'Sibelius' at 3.30 pm.

This time we experienced a longer wait at the border. The guards were going through the chain with a sniffer dog, passports and visas were collected, both ingoing and outgoing customs forms collected, and all in high heat and humidity. It was exhausting. I think it was gone 9.30 pm when we arrived in Helsinki, 10.00 pm by the time we booked into the hotel and retrieved our luggage from the store room. Then it was time to say goodbye to Linette Zimmerman and Carol Kirkby who left with Carol's Finnish Cousins; to Ruth Falconbury our roomie - who was now re joining her husband and getting ready for a trip to Sweden the next day; to Judy Dreis - the last sight of whom was from our window as she climbed into the car, taken off by her Finnish cousins for a visit with them.

Tired, actually exhausted, we ordered room service and were soon fed and in bed asleep - trying to get a good night so we could cope with the repacking of luggage etc. the next morning. The airport bus collected us from the rear of the Hotel InterContinental around 11.00 am and once at the airport we met up with many other Soroptimists also travelling home.

Elizabeth was going home by SAS, me by BA, and two other members of our club by Finnair. It soon became apparent that the BA and Finnair flights were actually one. It also appeared that most of SI Ilkley Club were also on that flight! By the time I retrieved my own luggage at Manchester Airport, Elizabeth and David were already waiting for me - and it was home for a quick sandwich, cup of tea and off to our Club Business Meeting - the rest as they say - is history!

I cannot believe I have actually completed the Russian Travelogue - its taken so many attempts, and five minutes typing here and there. BUT, its done! Hope you think it worth the effort.

Love & cyber-hugs