



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

Travelling to St Petersburg

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

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

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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



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Gala Banquet for the Charter of the Neva St Petersburg Soroptimist Club
by Kate Moore, Nantwich Club, Cheshire North Wales & Wirral Region, SIGBI

I left us travelling by coach in the company of excited members of the newly chartered St Petersburg Neva Soroptimist club, driving through the city to the Nikolaevskij Palace. On arrival we stepped through the huge door into the entrance hall where we were asked to wait. As we gazed ahead up the long staircase which appeared to go straight up to the top floor of the palace, we could see the reason for the request to wait. On the second floor landing, dancers in costume were performing a minuet, from their white powdered wigs and the hooped skirts of the elaborate dresses I would suggest the period was the end of the 18th century.

We eventually proceeded up the stairs. It was so easy looking around this impressive Palace to imagine the grandeur of the lives of those who had lived there several centuries ago. Again, much renovation needed to be carried out, but the room to which we were ushered was absolutely beautiful. As we stepped in, to the right were three or four tables covered with magnificent blue and yellow glass ware, and other beautiful articles - these were all for sale. One of the new members is an artist in glass and I understand her work can be purchased in galleries throughout the city. Here was the opportunity to buy one of the special blue and yellow pieces specially designed for the occasion, which incidentally, was also to raise money for the Club.

Many of you know that I collect paper weights, and I now have a lovely blue and yellow glass apple which I successfully brought home in one piece. Not wishing to appear greedy I only purchased a few things. They were extremely reasonable and many others took advantage of this special opportunity. I also bought three small decorated eggs with ribbons - at which point a very excited Soroptimist came to grip my hand and tell me "my daughter made this". Incidentally, it was only when we had the chance to buy souvenirs in the shops the following day that I realised how very inexpensive all the articles were.

Everyone who was expected to attend the dinner found a delightful place card, a painting of a blue and yellow apple along side their name. It was lovely little touches like this that showed how much planning had gone into the event and this surely helped to ensure the success of the evening. The meal was excellent, but at this stage I am quite unable to remember exactly what we ate! There was so much excited chatter about, especially when all visitors were invited to go to the head table and meet the new club President and give greetings. Of course, it was all the more special because of the presence of one Chat Liner, our new International President Jane Zimmerman. Our new friends were so thrilled that IP Jane was part of their celebrations. So, we all lined up and in turn received a cheer from those present as they realised we had really come from all corners of the world.

I gave greetings from the Region, because by that time Elizabeth had received a call on her mobile phone. This confirmed that at the Region AGM earlier that day when elections for

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Region Office were carried out, I had been appointed incoming Region Vice President and will take office at the Federation Conference in Durban - South Africa in October 2001.

Elizabeth gave greetings from 50 year old Nantwich <g>, and gave the President a print of the town. Then it was my turn again, as I felt I should give greetings from The Chat Line, together with a small donation of fifty dollars towards their first service project, other Chat Liners present, later gave me money towards this.

It was a special thrill to hear Joyce Byrne give her greetings. Joyce was President of SIA and had the honour of chartering the club in Magadan, the first club in the former USSR.

The whole evening was a very joyous occasion, but let me tell you about the lottery - this was hilarious. At the Charter Ceremony we had been asked if we would like to purchase tickets for their fund raising lottery - now, doesn't that sound like an established Soroptimist Club! Of course we were all delighted to do so, the cost was five dollars for two tickets and for this we were given two oblong pieces of card, one blue, one yellow, with a number written on the end. Many of us purchased additional tickets during the banquet. What we didn't know is that the Neva members had a gift for every single ticket so no one went home empty handed. Yellow tickets were for pottery and glass, and blue tickets for linens. There were some lovely things, too many to mention. However, I must tell you that residing on my kitchen window ledge along with all my blue and white china treasures, is a lovely blue and white Russian vase! Oh yes, the 'star prize' in the pottery/glass section was a glass cockerel. This had been designed and made by the glass artist member of the new club. It has a yellow body, blue cocks comb, feet, wings etc - guess who won that one? Absolutely correct, its now home here safe and sound! I also have a couple of linen tea cloths and another star prize which is a lovely white linen table cloth with six napkins, plus several other small pieces. One things for certain, I will regularly think of all those dear ladies, reminded of them by the delightful things I have from their lottery.

Oh yes! Towards the end of the evening the Vice President came with Oksana and presented me with a gorgeous pottery jug with a lid. This was to thank me for arranging to bring so many friends from around the world - I had to ask for packing material to ensure all my treasures would arrive home safely - and surprisingly enough they did. I had so many things to carry that Elizabeth had to lend me a folding bag - there was definitely no room in the small bag I had taken!

One thing I omitted to tell you about the Charter Ceremony in the afternoon; at the close, Natalia sat down again at the piano and the Neva Club members stood round holding the words of our Soroptimist Symphony. They were immediately joined by all of us, and we linked hands in our normal way and sang with them.

At the end of the Gala Banquet, Nalalia again moved towards the grand piano at our end of the room and it was obvious that the evening was to close with the Symphony. This time everyone

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formed a huge circle around the room and we all held hands. I was next to the President, and we sang our hearts out, raising our clasped hands in the traditional manner as we sang the last phrase 'Soroptimist to Stay'. Now - that really was moving!

Many hugs, kisses and very fond farewells were said to our friends old and new as we made our way to the buses the Neva Club had arranged to take us back to our hotels. Such consideration and kindness for the visitors to their city to provide transport, we had expected to try and telephone for taxis.

As I walked towards the stairs I talked with dear Nelli Fedrova, whom I mentioned earlier this week. As I stood on the long flight of stairs stretching down towards the front entrance of the Palace, it was hard to refrain from 'trying' to glide down gracefully, imagining a fine flowing skirt billowing out behind me! One thing for certain, you'd definitely need a hand (preferably male) to assist you <g>, with my arthritic knee I'd have fallen flat on my face without looking down at each step <ggggg>

I risk repeating myself by saying that Nelli is a member of the first St Petersburg Club and will be visiting Oregon on a Grant of Friendship in September. Nelli rode with us on our bus, she needed to get to a suitable metro station in order to get home. This appeared to be the only transport available and she left us not far from our hotel (25 minutes out of the city centre) and still had at least 30 minutes travel.

So I guess that is the end of the Charter Ceremony, the Concert and the Gala Banquet - the Neva St Petersburg Club of Soroptimist International is on its way! Well, not quite! Not one of us who were 'privileged' to be present will ever forget the occasion; the joy and happiness of those wonderful new members and their pride at becoming members of our organisation. How I wish it were possible to inject some of their enthusiasm into members of my own club and region! Now, if that 'could be bottled and sold' they'd make a fortune for their club service projects.

In a few minutes I am going to write to a couple of the members - sisters who came to our Gala Dinner on the final night in the City, but I think I will leave the report on that evening until Travelogue Part 3.

Love and cyber-hugs



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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