

# A Personal Account of "The Truth About the Soviets"

By Gene Albano

Perhaps you'd like to know if everything you hear about the Soviet Union and its people is true. Chances are, it isn't. My recent trip to the USSR dispelled some myths and confirmed other stories I had been told. The first myth was dispelled when our group boarded the Aeroflot from Helsinki and were served a delicious lunch with Russian wine after being warned that we would not receive any food, whatsoever, while aboard the Soviet airliner. The personnel aboard were not only professional, they were hospitable and friendly.

That first evening out in Moscow proved to be both interesting and a bit intriguing. We were followed in the Metro by a young hoodlum who apparently was interested in proposing some sort of deal regarding American currency or our denims. At first I thought he was interested in my roommate's body because he followed

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him closely. I looked like the affluent one while my roommate looked more the picture of young American male. But when my roommate told me the conversation was about American books and Martin Luther King, I realized it was a pitch for patronizing the American way! We shook the hoodlum for the time being and were entertained by a well-dressed Soviet woman who was sliding down the pole across the aisle from us on the subway. Her young son got his father's attention just in time to prevent the poor intoxicated woman from landing on the floor. Several times during the train ride the husband and son boosted the woman up, and then together they managed to get her safely off at a nearby stop. That episode confirmed the stories I heard about the serious drinking problems. Other rides on their metro suggested that a brewery was just around the corner. Of course, think about it, could our engines run in the Pennsylvania winters without antifreeze?

We're talking about 24 degrees below zero during some of the time we were in Moscow.

Have you ever been stopped by a Soviet police guard? Of course not! Of course we were that first night. We were unsuccessful in shaking the hoodlum on the metro, and when we searched for the right exit, there he was ready to talk about American books and Martin Luther King again. And when we reached the street, he crossed with us and attracted the attention of the Soviet Police guard. Mike and I looked at each other and were probably both wondering if the rest of our group would ever consider looking in Siberia for us. As it turned out, we had jay walked by not using the underground street passage. This was our opportunity to shake our unwelcome follower, and so we did.

Let's talk about the real Soviet people now. The kind Soviets who walk up to offer you help when they watch you stare at all four directions of the metro. The middle-aged gentleman and his mother who walked over and spoke English to offer us assistance while the mother slipped a carefully foil-wrapped chocolate in our hand with her kind smile. She did not speak English, but her son, who had studied American history in the United States, explained that it was his mother's way of welcoming us to their country.

My limited Russian vocabulary permitted me to compliment a husband and wife about their lovely child while riding the metro. The handsome Soviet husband explained to his wife what I had said and then to his shy daughter. The young girl sheepishly acknowledged the compliment as I offered her a Penn State ball point pen as a souvenir. The Soviets are big on souvenirs. They enjoy trading pins or just giving them as signs of friendship. They are not accustomed to tipping, but slip a hotel maid or store clerk a copy of Cosmopolitan or Bazaar and you have earned their smile and gratitude. These are some of the friendliest people I have met in my extensive travels throughout the world. The waiter at our hotel told me how anxious he and his wife are to gain freedom to visit the United States. They must wait two years in order to

gain travel privileges. A Georgian Soviet bought me a Vodka at the dinner table when I didn't have rubels to pay. I offered to pay him in American dollars but he refused, indicating that the drink would be a toast to my health. He didn't speak English so I can only assume that I read his sign language correctly.

Red Square is just about what you would expect it to be: very secured and highly disciplined for pedestrians. One cannot walk around the quadrangle whether he be Soviet or American. Lenin is treated like a God. His picture and statue is seen everywhere. It is possible to go where you please within the city, however. And I proved that to myself by taking the metro at 5:30 a.m., Tuesday, March 3. I couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to waste valuable observation time. So when I learned from the hotel desk clerk the hour that this fantastic travel system opened, I decided to join the rank and file and see if there was anyone I recognized from back home. This was not the fur coat crowd I had seen on the 9 a.m. ride. This group of people included wool blends and fake fur hats. There was that familiar odor which I had sensed that first night: more antifreeze. There are 8.8 million people living in Moscow. I'm sure that during the 7:30 rush I watched one of those million attempt to stampede the metro. Little energy is expelled during that time of travel, however. One only has to stand in place and wait to be ploughed into the train. No rude shoving and pushing mind you. Just a continuous movement that finally finds you aboard and still standing next to the people who were next to you three minutes ago.

As my four days in Moscow approached an end, I realized that if I had not gotten out among the people, I would not have learned much of their ways and eagerness to meet Americans. Of the 3500 guests in the Cosmos Hotel, there were few who were Soviets. I couldn't compare it then to our Holiday Inns or Marriotts in spite of its size. The Soviet window had been opened but the shade could still not be drawn. Leningrad would prove to be even a friendlier city. Also, a city rampant with black market dealings. It has been said that in summer the dealers carry spare shorts with them in order to purchase blue denims on the spot. Leningrad could be considered the stepchild of Moscow. Although it was once the capital (St. Petersburg), it is much more cosmopolitan, and its architecture resembles that of Vienna. Its canals suggest Venice, and its hotels and restaurants Munich.

I cannot tell you about the Soviet Union of the past, but only of the present. It is a mistake to stay away from this country if you are planning to travel abroad. The Soviet Union of today is not a Soviet Union where travel is unsafe or the people are unfriendly. I doubt if the people could have ever been accused of being unfriendly. There is a great need for improved communications, however. And it's going to take you and me to break down those communication barriers and really prove on both sides that we want peace. The comments I have heard before my visit and those I have received as a result of the public learning of my travel tells me that the myths are there and they are just that, myths; myths to dispel.

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