

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WWU - 23

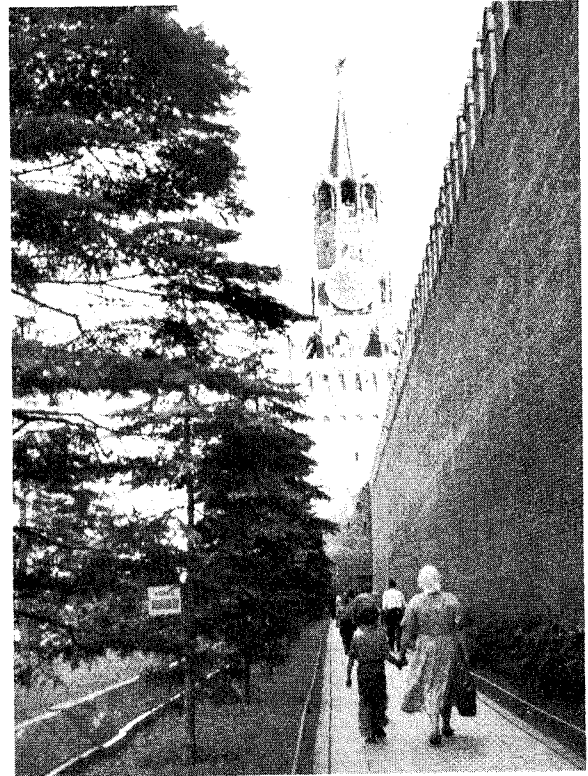
THE OTHER POLE - I

Hotel Astoria  
Leningrad, USSR  
July 21, 1959

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

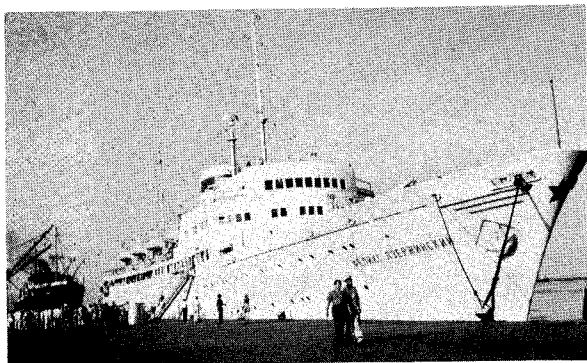
In this hotel, named, I assume, after that good old early American Marxist, William Waldorf Astor, I can finally pound these typewriter keys and say that I've been to Russia. And I use the word "finally" advisedly. Since Russia (with the notable exception of the current Nixon visit) discourages reporters, I gave my occupation as "student" when I had my passport made out last Fall. To be even more discreet, my luggage tags have my parents' address in California, thus sparing me the use of that controversial word, "Washington". Yet with all these preparations, I couldn't obtain a visa last year in the U. S. because my trip was considered too far in advance. I couldn't obtain a visa even in New Delhi in March, because it was still too far in advance. (Although not so far that the Soviet Intourist didn't insist on collecting its \$300 in dollars in advance, for ten days of travel within Russia. This was done through its regular Indian booking agency, the Mercury Travel Bureau of New Delhi's Hotel Imperial.) I finally obtained the visa from the Soviet Embassy in Djakarta in May. And now I've had two days and nights on the Soviet's new passenger liner, Felix Dzerjinsky, crossing the Black Sea from Istanbul to Odessa, and 10 days of strictly tourist gawking in Odessa, Kiev, Moscow and here in St. Petersburg - - oops, Leningrad.



RED SQUARE'S KREMLIN WALL:  
Its brick is perforated with the  
ashes of Revolutionary notables  
and U.S. author John Reed

Now within a few hours of my boarding the Soviet ship, I became suspicious of a fellow passenger, an Institute of Languages student from Leningrad, who seemed to be immediately aware that my cabin was only two down from his and who seemed to take an undue interest in which deck I would be on when. Then I noticed that my briefcase seemed to have been moved askew from its place under the table (I am fastidious about keeping the world around me in parallel, or at least at right angles) and that while it was still locked, the flap was out of the lock. Maybe I had been careless in failing to secure the flap when I locked it - - but it would have been the first time during my trip. Anyway, I soon decided that I couldn't post round-the-clock guard for the coming 12 days and decided the Hell with it. With that assumption, everything went smoothly. My mail came through in Moscow. I dialed my own phone calls from the hotel room. And customs were so simple that even though the officials boarded ship three hours out in the Black Sea, nothing was opened and Soviet Russia

didn't even ask for my health certificate.



SS FELIX DZERJINSKY: Four classes

language students, etc. on vacation, and a good many unpolled. I was told that Russian vacations were pretty much government paid, with the Russians putting up just a token amount on their own.

There was a nice Kiev topographical engineer named Vasilii and his wife Tamara (also a topographical engineer) who winked understandingly at me across the dining room when they saw my initial charades in trying to order. But our conversations never got much beyond the winks and the back-slapping and the words "good" and "nyet good." I had better luck, naturally, with the language students. One named Arkadiy Aksionov, actually spoke American English. He is 22, married, a student at the Institute of Languages in Leningrad. He told me he didn't like the English-English he was taught and so has concentrated on American pronunciations given him by Canadian friends in Leningrad. Arkadiy also had an American smile and some of the easy-going nonchalance we like to think we have. He is a devotee of American jazz and said he listens regularly to the "Music USA" hour from Tangier (I gather he meant the Voice of America's booster station aboard the vessel Tangier anchored off Rhodes). He is the son of a civil engineer.



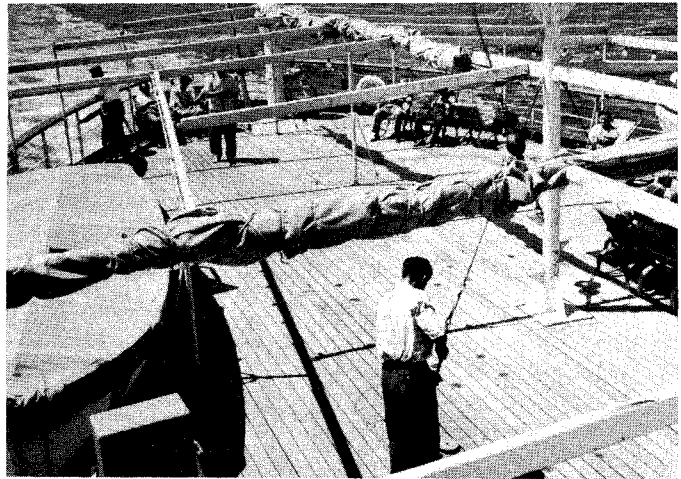
VASILII

Georgi (I never got his last name), same age, same Institute, is the son of a Leningrad driver. It was he who seemed to take such an early interest in my whereabouts. And then I found myself becoming curiously irritated by his repetition of the phrase, "But of course." "But of course, the Soviet Union has this." "But of course, all the passengers have the run of the ship," and "but of course this includes the deck over the bridge." It began to have the focused discipline of "Achtung!" Georgi, by the way, is studying German and English. Ark adiy is studying German, English and French.

Stanislav (he introduced himself as "Stan" just as Georgi had used "George" and Arkadiy "Ark") Medvediev is also 22, also a student at the Leningrad Institute and studying English and German. His mother was widowed early and then became a chemical engineer. He is an only child, has warm brown eyes, and tends to be very self reflecting. Stan was returning to

Leningrad and a final year at the Institute after serving a year in Cairo as an interpreter for the Soviet Embassy. We were sunning by ourselves on the ship's deck one afternoon and he slowly put down his reserve. He asked me if I had read "Dr. Zhivago". And then, what did I think of it? I suspected he must have read the book to have asked the second question and it turned out he had. He had obtained a copy in the UAR. But he said he didn't like the book at all: "It is historically inaccurate." Then Stan said he didn't really like the Arabs. I asked him if he was then glad to be returning to Russia. He paused a long while and eventually replied: "I don't think I am looking forward to it." He didn't seem to know where he wanted to live, or what he really hoped to do. When I cautiously got around to politics, he shrugged and said: "It's all a mist here. We never know." As meager as these remarks were, Max Frankel, the New York Times' man in Moscow, told me I should be grateful for them. Max said he has found it highly unusual to find any Russian even this self-revealing.

The Felix Dzerjinsky made two stops on its way to Odessa. The first was for a morning at Varna, Bulgaria, where I couldnot get off because my passport was obtained last Fall and the "not valid for Bulgaria, etc." restriction was only lifted this Spring. But I was certainly tempted to jump ship. Varna's beach is considered one of the finest along the Black Sea. And from the top deck I could see the bathers enjoying themselves just on the other side of the break-water. And there was a 50-foot long slide into the water which really excited my envy. The second stop - for an entire Saturday night - was Constanta, Rumania. Here I was allowed to get off without anyone even asking for my passport. It was a magnificent summer evening



SOCIALIST SHUFFLEBOARD

and what appeared to be the whole town was walking up and down the beautifully flowered waterfront boulevards. There were lovers on the park benches and the girls were pretty, stylishly dressed, even to necklaces and earrings, and well perfumed. I looked in a few beachside cafes and couldn't believe my eyes: table after table after table, each with its ice bucket alongside, each containing a bottle of champagne. I decided to walk around some of the back streets. The same thing. And the faces I saw were smiling, not frowning, and the apartment buildings and stores were far from grim. Maybe the Rumanian Government had been alerted to put on a show for the benefit of three stray Americans passing through on a ship. I doubt it. Constanta, Rumania struck me as having far more the air of Paris, than a suppressed satellite town ready to revolt.

I ran into the champagne bucket line-up again in Intourist's Hotel Odessa, only the sippers in the garden dining room were not Western tourists. They were Russians. While on the liquor line, I was told that for the past two years the price of vodka has been raised so as to discourage Russian inebriation. Cognac is cheaper and considered preferable. I don't know who

told the Russians cognac is impotent.

I spent only 24 hours in Odessa but I had a few experiences. I took in an evening performance of Borodin's "Prince Igor" in the highly ornate old opera house and was intrigued to find the conductor in full evening dress and the orchestra members in shirtsleeves. The costumes were so musty their fragrance jumped right over the footlights at me. The singing was rather musty too, but the famous Polevetzian dancing was lively and well done. However when it got to be 11:30 and the buxom soprano was still lamenting and there was still another act promising more, I decided to call it quits.

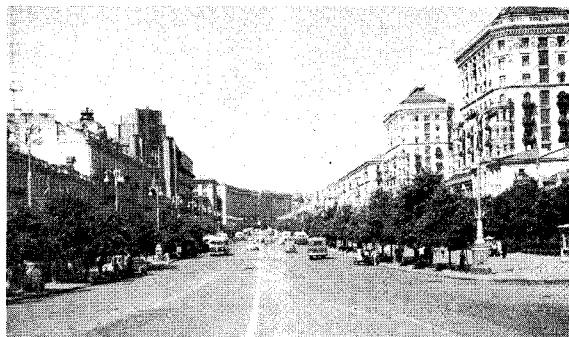
The next day I ran into a New York doctor who had been born in Odessa and now was returning after many years to study the use of novocaine in prolonging life. He apparently was already sold on the theory as he said he gave himself several injections of the stuff a week.

My initial Intourist guide, Nina Sołojeva, might have been called Nina the Disapproving. She didn't like tourists taking pictures and frowned accordingly - - ok. But she had quit teaching because "children are too noisy". She didn't approve of the Russian Orthodox priest's school even though she herself was born "Christian" and wore the ceremonial gold wedding band; and she generally looked pretty sourly on the world. She did point out one thing on my tour: an enormous cliffside elevator which is being built to convey members of one of Odessa's many beach associations from the clubhouse down to the water.

But my crowning impression of Odessa came just as I sat packed in my hotel room reading a book while waiting for the car to the airport. The room was opened abruptly and in burst a whole flurry of housekeepers and maids carrying vases of flowers, bowls of apricots and cherries, wicker baskets of wine and champagne, and an elegant fresh tablecloth - - sort of like a scene from "The Merry Widow". As I sat they began to transform the room. I asked what gives. "Duchess is coming! Duchess is coming!" the chief housekeeper explained. Who? What? "Belgian Duchess, coming here! Very soon!" Well, I didn't suggest it, but if Communist Russia really had wanted to impress Belgian royalty, I think they might have looked beyond the parlor to find that my bed had still not been made for the day, nor had the bathroom walls and tub been scraped of the fly carcasses I had been swatting through the night.

There were also flies accompanying me on my flight to Kiev. I'd say about 50 flies per passenger. I think Red China with its "Swat that Fly" credo, has one up on Russia.

Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine Soviet Socialist Republic, was 50% leveled by the Germans (artillery and bombs) and, along with Odessa, Stalingrad and Leningrad, is one of the four "Hero Cities" of the USSR. By any ideology, Kiev is a beautiful city. Its hills and valleys surround the banks of the Dnieper and the Russians have had the good sense to preserve a large proportion of the city for park land, some natural, some planted. The Russians have not



MAIN DRAG, KIEV: Gargantuan

used as much good sense in putting up new buildings, however. They are awkward and massive and monotonous. But the streets are nice and wide. I took in a performance of the operetta "Silva" at the October Palace one evening and was fascinated to find that the top-hatted soft shoe dancing of the stagedoor johnnies could just as easily have been Broadway, as the music of a Hungarian composer (Kalman, I think) sung in Russian. Here again they were just winding up for another act or so when the clock moved to 11:30. The singing was far better than Odessa and the heroine not only was slimmer, but really pretty. During the first intermission, I was stopped by three youths. A tousle-haired blond with faded blue eyes, a nurtured mustache and the muscular debonair ease of a Nineteenth Century Russian cavalry officer, turned out to be the spokesman. It all sort of came tumbling out at once: "American? Yes? I . . . want Life International. I listen Music USA." His name was Vladimir, he was 20, he was a medical student who taught piano and physical education on the side. One of his companions was his "sweet girl"; the other, a fellow student. I asked how he had decided I was an American. My shoes? My necktie? The cut of my trousers? No, the book I was carrying (Nehru's "Discovery of India" -- actually published in England).

I had another Russian liaison, courtesy Nehru. I went to the main public bathing beach, right in the heart of the city on the Dnieper. I found my way to a dressing pavilion and to a booth whose peek-a-boo window didn't seem to have a woman attendant behind it at the time. Then I checked my clothes through a booth whose peek-a-boo window was attended and left my gear with some misgivings as the woman wouldn't give me a check number. She'd remember. Indeed she did. And handing me back my clothes later proudly announced "Nehru -- English" as she read off the title of my book.

I got my Intourist guide to take me to an ancient Russian Orthodox monastery and to its catacombs in the hills overlooking the Dnieper. We went by candlelight and the catacombs consisted of cell after cell with glass-topped coffins. The faces were covered with a skull and cross emblem. But the hands were shown, often with crippled fingers which my guide said had been "fabricated" to make people believe these churchmen had been martyrs. There were no end of old women, even a few young men, going through the catacombs as we were. And they kissed not only the coffins, but the ikon images on the cell wall above. They also got after my guide for dripping some of her candle wax over the glass coffin tops as she was showing me the corpse. "Country people. I don't like this place," my guide, Milla, explained.



KIEV EXHIBITION GROUNDS

I also looked in at the covered market where the border stalls are run by cooperatives and the center booths rented, at nominal price, by farmers who practice a little private enterprise by selling products they raise on extra strips of land on their extra time. I wanted to buy a pickle which


looked particularly juicy in hot Kiev. The woman vendor said it would be a rouble (10¢). I decided to pass it. My guide explained that she was the only pickle seller in the market and so could charge what she wanted.

I also visited Kiev's largest department store, limited my purchase to two chocolate bars and had a mild argument with the elevator operator. I started to get in at the top floor as she discharged three passengers. She tried to stop me, indicating I needed permission. I just failed to understand her and got my ride down despite her frowns. I also had a ride in a mine shaft elevator in the Exhibition Grounds. The elevator actually drops only one floor but there are all sorts of gadgets to give the impression that you are really going way down into the earth. The last time I had been in one of these was as a Boy Scout in a Chicago museum in 1937 and I've been curious ever since to know whether that shaft had gone down as far as it seemed.

The only place which was announced to me as "off limits" was the palace where the Ukraine Soviet Council meets -- even though they were not then meeting. And in Odessa, the only place where I was told I could not take pictures (even though Guide Nina approved of none) was of the harbor, which was going to be moved elsewhere anyway.

I met a man from Wilmington, Del. in Kiev who was visiting the city for the first time in 48 years. The oldest of the family, he had emigrated to America. He said he returned to find four brothers and a sister still alive: "They looked as old as the devil but I was surprised to see how well they fared. Of course they have nothing. One dress. One suit. And they are all on top of each other in their apartments. But the one saving grace is that nobody has anything more than the other fellow. In Wilmington, we keep worrying when the man next door puts up a house with four bedrooms and two family rooms, when we have only four bedrooms and no family room."

Cordially,



Warren W. Unna

Received New York September 8, 1959