

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CM-16
Cigars and Socialism

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Dear Dick:

It was a race against time. Either I was going to find cigars in the Soviet Union, or give up smoking. I was down to my last four hand-rolled Dutch Masters, courtesy of a friend in Belgrade, when my Intourist guide proposed a visit to Russia's second largest cigarette factory in Rostov-on-Don. I leaped at the opportunity to make this inspection in company with a group of English tourists who had been conned into the same visit.

At the last moment - much to the disgust of Intourist - the English tourists revolted and refused to visit a factory dedicated to preservation of the vile cigarette habit. Thus it was that Mildred and I were the exclusive guests of the Manager, the Assistant Manager, the head of the Research Department, the Chief Doctor, and most important of all, the Chairman of the Worker's Committee. I believe we saw the 18 million cigarettes they manufacture each day!

As we gathered in the Manager's office to voice our appreciation and sign the book - a standard procedure* - I popped the question: What about cigars? "Of course," said the Manager, as he produced a king, king sized cigarette, one-quarter filled with tobacco and three-quarters filled with air. The air pocket at the mouth end keeps cigarette stain from the hands, explained the Manager.

Then I made my mistake. I showed him one of my cigars to indicate what I called a cigar. He promptly took my cigar and gave me a package of cigarettes - which I don't smoke. My Intourist guide, looking on with approval, remarked: "Cigars are more healthy," which might not be a bad line for Madison Avenue cigarette promoters. I suggested to the Manager that he should smoke my cigar at home at night, otherwise he might be thought a capitalist. Without a trace of humor he remarked that he wasn't afraid - he had smoked cigars before.

* Every factory and institution which opens its facilities to foreign tourists keeps a book. At the end of each visit, the tourist is invited to write a paragraph about what he thinks of the institution. What does one do when he is grateful for the time and attention he has received, but finds the institution gloomy, except for the colorful and plentiful slogans and goals, and perhaps also dirty and poorly organized? Or what does one say when he is invariably asked - or interviewed by the press as I was in Sochi - "What do you think of our beautiful city and its heroic workers?"

I might interrupt this account for a moment to explain, with tongue in cheek, that one of my collateral research projects this year has been to study the overseas market for tobacco from states with members on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and to determine what has happened to Castro's cigar exports. I thought a simple and relatively painless way to conduct this research would be to see if a cigar smoker travelling for a year on a 40 pound baggage limit could circumnavigate the globe without giving up the habit.

My research indicated the cigar supply situation was tolerable, well into South Asia. Philippine cigars of good quality and low price were available. But by the time this traveller reached Cairo, the situation was tight. I was prevented from swearing off cigars only by a call on the Editor of Al Ahram. He was smoking a big Churchill-type Havana cigar and gave me a fistful. In answer to my query, he said the U.A.R. had lots of Havana cigars which it gets from Moscow - the exchange rate is quite favorable, he explained. When I asked how much the cigars cost he said: "I don't know. I get mine free!" Soviet foreign aid, I guess.

After a considerable search, I did find Havana cigars for sale in the flower shop in the lobby of the Nile Hilton Hotel. When I remarked to the sales girl that a flower shop was a strange place to buy tobacco, she stopped me cold. "Well," she said, "tobacco is a plant, isn't it?"

I only bought one cigar because the price was a horrendous \$2.30 each.- research enough on that subject in Cairo. Someone was being taken, American tourists, I suspect. Nevertheless, I awaited the visit to the Soviet Union with some anticipation since Moscow apparently has the regional agency for Havana cigars. But again frustration.

The automatic reply of an Intourist guide to the query: "Do you have..." is "Yes, of course." But the tourist then has to find the product. Maybe I simply wasn't persistent enough in Moscow, Volgograd, Rostov, and Sochi. But finally in Kiev, I found Havana cigars - not the best - but Havana.

In many of the cities in Russia the nearest things to small businesses are the Kiosks stationed every two or three hundred feet along the main thoroughfares. Of course they aren't "small business" as they are stocked by the State and run by employees of the State who receive a salary from the State - plus a bonus if perchance their sales exceed their quota. These Kiosks have their specialities; one sells books, another toiletries, another tomato juice, vodka, and other potables, and so on. Finally I found a Kiosk, No. 255 on Kreshchatik Street, selling tobacco. Unfortunately, the sales girl was on vacation. Eventually, with the help of Intourist, a warehouse type tobacco store was found. As a result I can assure my readers that Mr. Castro is exchanging some tobacco - though not his best - for the aid he gets from the Soviet Union.

The price for 25 "Panetela Romeo y Juliet" cigars was $8\frac{1}{2}$ rubles, which, at the tourist rate is about \$8.50* The price had been marked down from $10\frac{1}{2}$ rubles, indicating some sales resistance to the higher price. Apparently it will take many more visits by capitalists and by Castro to build up a cigar market amongst the Russians - either they can't afford cigars or are just an inherently sensible people when it comes to the use of tobacco. Their vodka consumption - to judge from the weavers and winders on the streets - is not as restrained.

During the visit to the cigarette factory in Rostov, I asked the doctor if she thought there was any relationship between cigarette smoking and cancer. She laughed - evasively, I thought - and said: "There are no health hazards in this plant." The Manager was equally noncommittal when I asked how the State could justify operating and expanding a plant manufacturing cigarettes when there are possible health hazards as well as food and industrial shortages. "They let us operate," he said, "and we have 4,000 happy workers." Perhaps there is a force in the Soviet Union called public opinion which may not always be in step with Pravda, the slogans hung in public places, and the blaring loudspeakers which festoon lamps in public parks. At least one young man in Kiev hasn't received the message. He offered me one Young Pioneer Medal in red and gold in trade for my half-smoked capitalist cigar. Out of deference to youth, I refused the deal.

Sincerely yours,



Carl Marcy

* For non-cigar smokers, this price is about the same as similar cigars at the Mayflower Hotel Tobacco Counter in Washington, D. C.