

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-28
To Russia

c/o American Embassy
Kabul
Afghanistan
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

I have just completed a 16-day visit to Russia. Actually I visited only a small area of the Soviet Union: three of the five Central Asian Republics, three of the whole sixteen. At that, it was a matter of air-hopping over mountains, valleys and deserts from one oasis city to the next---Termez, Tashkent, Samarkand, Stalinabad, Alma Ata. In each place I would get the guided tour for three or four days, then fly on.

My host (at \$35 a day) on the 2000-mile trip was Intourist, the "USSR Company for Foreign Travel." In tow of one or more guides, I took in more museums and parks than I cared to, but also a college, a school, a university and an Academy of Science, a youth camp, a textile factory, two collective farms and a State farm, a city sub-mayor's office, a soccer match, and opera and ballet. In all the interview-visits I was ushered into the Front Office and permitted only the briefest look at the Back Yard. In that sense the whole visit seemed like a 16-day-long reception line of Directors, Principals, Rectors and Managers.

There were places and persons I asked to visit, but couldn't: the Ferghana Valley, to begin with, a village, workers' dwellings, Republic and Regional government offices, a Communist Party headquarters or school, a newspaper office, a Writers' Union, a hospital, a mosque or church, a handicraft industry and a film studio. And I wanted to talk to some students, workers and farmers. The recurrent Intourist answer to these requests was the Russian equivalent of "Mañana," and then I finally left the country.

The standard Intourist "day" consisted of one visit in the morning, one in the afternoon, and usually a concert or film or stroll in the evening.

Once it had been clearly established that I knew no Russian language, there was ample free time for me. Then I wandered about on my own, looking around, watching people sweep walks, stroke cats, draw water, scold their children, board a bus, buy bologna, get a haircut, eat ice cream, drink vodka and dance.

Sometimes I got to talk with somebody met by chance, or see some places that I wasn't encouraged or permitted to see officially. Once while strolling alone in a slum in Samarkand, I noticed that I was being followed. Later, in a bazaar, I was arrested for taking photographs, but was quickly released, with camera and film intact.

Accompanying me from city to city as guide was a 25-year-old instructor of English at the Tashkent teachers' college, Haffiz Abdunazarov. He was only temporarily engaged by Intourist, because of the rush of tourists, and he was obviously rule-conscious and cautious, and it was a pleasure in the out-lying cities to meet other young Intourist guides who were more relaxed about the whole thing.

Although I was on a solo tour, I kept running into other foreign guests and paying guests: a Japanese writer, an Egyptian irrigation expert and a touring Chinese basketball team, a Colombian businessman, a young French diplomat on leave, an American diplomat on holiday, a University of Wisconsin professor, a New York music teacher and his wife, a retired Cincinnati manufacturer, an Indian stationed in Afghanistan for the UN, and a party of two dozen Indian tourists. Some were touring, some working, and some just passing through on the way home.

My own purpose in visiting Russia was to further my education generally by being in that country of (to put it mildly) "momentous interest." However superficial a visit to Russia must be, even the superficialities tell something.

Specifically, I wanted to see Soviet Central Asia, the area adjacent to parts of Pakistan and India that I am acquainted with.

The Eastern Turks, the Afghans, the Moghuls, all coming from Central Asia, have made their impression on India in the past. The tide of Islam covered Central Asians and Western Indians alike. Both Central Asia and India were subject to colonization in the last century, by the Russians and the British respectively.

And now, in the past 40 years, the so-called Socialist Revolution has been attempting to transform the land of Central Asia, to make the towns busy with industry and the deserts prosperous with agriculture, and also to transform the people of Central Asia, to make them over in the image of Soviet Man.

What communication, what influence, what impact could come from New Central Asia to those adjacent lands, India and Pakistan, where at a different pace and with different goals the land and the people are also being transformed?

Before I went to Russia, I think the only Russians I had ever seen were those I had come across in India: the wives of diplomats shopping loudly in New Delhi's uncloud Connaught Place, a couple of officials emerging from the former State house of the Maharaja of Travancore now the Russian Embassy, the hail-and-hearty Tass man covering a Congress session or a meeting of Parliament, a party of black-booted Soviet Army officers joking with their Indian Army hosts under the arcade of the Grand Hotel in Calcutta, a noisy group of Russian women tourists buying ivory brooches at a stall in Calcutta's Dum Dum airport, the engineers at the Russian-assisted steel plant at Bhilai at lunch in their club chins down slurping soup but listening attentively to the recorded music of "Swan Lake," and the witty, sly writer Ilya Ehrenburg addressing a group of New Delhians on the theme, "Peaceful Co-existence."

And then Mr. Timchenko, the Russian attache in charge of Intourist, whom I went to see about the trip to Russia. I could not reach him by telephone either at the Embassy or at his house, and it was only on the third try at his house, in the well-off Jorbagh section of New Delhi, that I finally met him. When I knocked on the front door a figure at a window waved me around to the side door. This amused me, because I'd heard that the Russians in town make it a practice to come and go at their own side or rear doors.

He was Mr. Timchenko, blond and burly. He led me into his make-shift Intourist office. I told him I was an American student in India who wanted to go to Soviet Central Asia for two or three weeks. Where could I go?

"Well!" he said in triumph. "Two weeks, or three? Make up your mind. There's quite a difference!"

If he was annoyed by the idiot who faced him, I found myself being patient with the idiot who faced me. "Yes," I said rather gently, "there's a difference of one week. The reason I came to see you is to find out where I can go and what I can see, and then I can decide: two, or three weeks."

He became pleasant and began to talk about the cities of the Central Asian Republics, about the factories and mechanized farms, and the delicious grapes. He poked into his desk drawer and pulled out a book giving a general description of each of the Soviet Republics, and he urged me to take it and read, but to return to him because it was his only copy. "Then," he said (by this time he was treating me like a long-lost cousin) "please go over to Mercury Travels and draw up your itinerary!" I went away thinking Mr. Timchenko would make a rather strange salesman.

The next few days I did a little reading and map-reading, and then drew up a three-week itinerary: From Kabul, I would fly up to Tashkent, the first city of Central Asia, then go by train to the old cities of Samarkand and Bokhara, and on west to Ashkhabad, between the Kopet-Dag mountains and the Korakum Desert; then fly back to Tashkent and on to Ferghana Valley, which is undergoing intensive industrial development, supposedly, then up to Alma Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, and by train up through steppe-land to Semipalatinsk, near Chinese Hsin-chiang; then back by plane.

I took all this to Mercury Travels, in the Imperial Hotel lobby, as Mr. Timchenko advised. Mercury Travels turned out to be a fellow-travel agency, having the monopoly of the embassies of the People's Republics in New Delhi and also handling the trips to Russia of the top-rank Indian Communists. Although Mercury Travels were sponsoring six tourist parties to Russia this Summer, about 150 people in all, there would be no tour through Central Asia: Tashkent would be a one-night stopping-off place. So I would go alone.

In the letter they sent to Intourist headquarters in Moscow, giving the itinerary I had drawn up, I also had them say that I was a student, not a tourist, that I was more interested in seeing factories, farms, schools and political secretariats than in seeing parks and museums.

There was a prompt reply from No. 1 Gorky Street: they could receive

me "on the itinerary including visits to the cities of the Soviet Republics of Central Asia. We regret being unable to receive Mr. Friedenberg in Ashkhabad and Semipalatinsk since Intourist has no agencies there. We suggest that Mr. Friedenbergr take the following itinerary: Tashkent-Alma Ata-Tashkent-Samarkand-Stalinabad-Tashkent." The itinerary they had accepted was mostly theirs instead of mine. I cut the trip down to two weeks.

It took three or four trips to the Russian Consulate to get the visa. On the morning I was seriously interviewed, a young secretary sat down with both me and a young Indian lady on home leave from her job as a Hindi translator for Moscow Radio. When the Russian, Mr. Rana, was called aside by an older officer for a whispered conversation, the Indian girl and I became acquainted: Yes, she loved Moscow, Yes, I had visited her home city.

When Mr. Rana returned, he asked me abruptly, "What is this 'fellowship?'" I was opening my mouth to begin the lengthy task of explaining the Institute of Current World Affairs, when he shot the question over quickly to the Indian girl: "What is it, this 'fellowship?'" She explained neatly what I am up to in India. Mr. Rana seemed satisfied, but he also asked me a leading question on "the value of cultural exchange." I gave him a conciliatory answer. He replied with an elaborate statement surpassing mine, and then the Indian girl topped him. My turn, and I felt like a quitter when I said I had to be running along.

The Russian visa came quickly, but I ran into trouble having my Indian visa extended. "Tell me," I asked some Indians, "how is it that I, the American, can get a Russian visa---you know, Cold War, Capitalism vs. Communism---and I can't get an Indian visa---two democratic nations, foreign aid, etc.?" Finally the visa came through, and I could go and be sure of coming back.

When I told Indian friends I was going to Russia, the usual reaction was "Good!" meaning "How interesting" or "How fortunate."

En route, in Pakistan, the usual reaction was "Oh?" meaning "Exactly what are you up to?" or "Those rascals!" Between India and Afghanistan, West Pakistan is a chunk of enmity towards Russia. There is no Russian to be seen at large. In the bazaar in Peshawar, near the Khyber Pass, the traditional Russian tea-pots are now "Made in Japan."

Over the Pass and across the barren mountains and desert plain in Kabul, I mentioned to a secretary in the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs that I was going to Russia. He said he was thinking about going too "because it's such a good deal." On the generous rate of exchange of roubles for afghanis, he figured he could spend 14 days in Russia for the equivalent of \$165. "Why don't the Americans do something like that?" As it turns out, that seems to be a typical Kabul attitude: both the Russians and the Americans are here, and the Afghans play it down the middle---or both sides at once.

I played all sides. I took my good-deal afghanis down to Ariana Airlines (Afghan, but run by Pan American) and bought a ticket to Tashkent by Aeroflot (Russian) and took off to Russia.

To be continued.