

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-29
By Air to Tashkent

Hotel Tashkent
Tashkent
Uzbekistan S.S.R.
U.S.S.R.
June 15, 1958

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The Aeroflot plane to Tashkent perched out on the packed earth apron at Kabul airport. It was an old two-propeller plane, similar to the American "Convair," but with a giant "СССР," Russian for "USSR," painted blue on the shining fuselage.

The five Russians who had been loudly trying to avoid paying the excess baggage charge in the airline office apparently weren't successful. They were still quite agitated as they walked out to the plane.

Once across the hot sun and up the rickety ramp, I expected to be greeted by a hostess, and the prettier the better. Instead there was a sturdy Russian male as steward, dressed in ordinary sport shirt and dark blue trousers, who motioned me into a seat and slammed the door shut as though he were slamming the hatch of a tank.

The plane gathered speed and I knew we were airborne when the rub-a-dub bumping over the corrugated earth runway suddenly stopped. We flew towards and, as it turned out, over a low brown ridge, and then the plane banked sharply to gain the proper northerly direction. I thought that maybe the pilot was a war veteran who hadn't fully made the transition from combat to commercial flying. But we straightened out and flew out over the brown barren hills of Afghanistan.

My Russian fellow-travellers said "Nyet," no English, but there were two other passengers, dressed trimly in Western European suits, in contrast to the baggy-suited Russians, who said "Yes." They were Czechs, industrial machinery salesmen from Prague, they said, en route home from "investigating the market" in India. They were disdainful of the plane and were looking forward to boarding a jet in Tashkent and getting home in a hurry. On the way back to my seat I took another look at the Russians. They looked pretty proletarian.

The plane was barely furnished, and the best I could manage by way of refreshment was a glass of warm water. There was an abundant supply of magazines, however, all in Russian. One had a cover showing a rocket zooming through space toward a distant planet. All of them were full of the good news, to judge from the photographs of smiling school children, new workers' houses, hydro-electric power stations and soccer players, about life in the Soviet Union.

I began to grow dizzy, from the altitude. The steward came past and pointed and said "Oxygen mask." We all put them on, with the big rubber noses. The Russians looked at each other and began smiling.

I looked at them and smiled, and then we all looked at each other and laughed. A little low-level, high-altitude cultural exchange.

Now we were up over the dark, wrinkled, snow-peaked mountains, the Hindu Kush, running from the desert over to the high Pamirs corner where Afghanistan, Russia, China and Kashmir meet, but nobody to see it. Looking out, the white peaks stretched on in broken series to the horizon. Looking down, an occasional lonely frozen pond, round and green as jade, was set deep into the white snow.

Now down again, with the mountains behind, the oxygen masks off, and over the brown, monotonous desert below: the earth blown for so long it looked smooth. Twice across the miles appeared a blotch of dark green spilled on the floor of sand: an oasis. The plane flew slowly lower, and from the smoothness came dunes of sand, and rippled currents of sand. Suddenly, standing still in all that void were the tiny figures of men and animals, a camel caravan. The desert, until then dreary, suddenly became sad. What hopeless destination could those men have?

Then ahead, curving around lowly, came the river, the Oxus or Amu, bordered on this side by a narrow green strip of farm plots---water--- and on the other side, the Russian side, the river bordered by fields interrupted by small quays, and beyond that the tree-shaded streets and houses of Termez, an oasis too, and port of entry into the Soviet Union.

The plane had hardly pulled up to the clump of trees that secluded the cottage-like Administration Building, when a buxom blonde appeared in the doorway of the plane and asked loudly and cheerfully, "Does anyone here speak English?" I said that I did. "Are you all right?" she asked. I said Yes, so far. "Here is the doctor," she announced, pointing to a nice-looking dark young man. Then came the explanation.

She was the air hostess---but "from Moscow; Termez only temporarily"---and they were guarding against the small-pox epidemic in India. I produced a vaccination document which still entitled me to no small-pox for one more year. But the result of a conference with the doctor was that I would have a revaccination "good for three years."

That was a good offer, and furthermore it was compulsory, so I rolled up my sleeve. The two Czechs got caught in the same exchange. The doctor and nurse were good-natured about it, and we tried to reciprocate.

Then on their side of the building, the Customs inspection. By the time I was finished with the small-pox shot and entered their quarters, the three uniformed Customs men were busily picking apart the baggage of the five Russian passengers.

The room looked like presents-opening time at Christmas, with plain wrappers. The Russians had brought new razors, shaving kits, mirrors, shoes, women's blouses, cooking utensils and household odds and ends. They had done quite a bit of shopping in Kabul, it seemed, but there was nothing, as far as I could tell, that I thought could be classified as a luxury.

My turn came next. I filled out the Customs form, using their post office-type pen and purple ink, and handed it to a Customs officer wearing thick-lensed glasses. He beckoned me to open my one carry-all bag, and with practised hands quickly disarranged all my clothes.

"Any fire-arms?" he asked, with a heavy accent. There was a vague flick of association in my mind with assassination. I said No. "Any books?" That was a surprise. The only time I had been asked that before was in East Pakistan, by a Customs man who wanted English books to add to his personal library.

I said Yes, and the Russian said, "Show them." Well, I had brought a dictionary, and had borrowed two books about Russia from the United States Information Service library in Kabul. One was by an American, the other by a Englishman, and both critical of the Soviet Union. They were at the bottom of the bag, and I dug them out.

The Customs man looked briefly through the dictionary, but he looked at it. Then he began a more careful examination of the other books. He called over a colleague, and each one looked through one book. I think they were having a little trouble with the English language.

Then the first man asked an additional question: "Do you have any papers?" The flash of association for me was seditious handbills dropped on dark streets in the dead of night. I said Yes, personal papers, letters and so forth. He asked to see them and I handed them over. Taking the two books and the papers, he disappeared into a side room.

For a while I sat there contemplating such topics as "The Totalitarian Mind: Open or Shut?", "Freedom of Expression in the Soviet Union," and "Cultural Exchange Between America and Russia." Then I went off and got some money changed from a waspish young lady at the Exchange table, and then sat down in the dark room marked "Buffet" for a snack of chives and cucumbers with sour cream, black bread and cheese, and hot green tea in a glass.

Afterwards I resumed the watch in the Customs office. Presently my inspector returned. "Where are you leaving the Soviet Union from?" he asked, brokenly. "Right here," I said, "I'm going back to Kabul." He nodded and handed back the books and papers as if they were quite fragile. "Everything," he said, "books, papers, please show when you leave."

For a moment I was piqued, and I wished I could have answered "Leningrad" or "Moscow," to see whether they would have seized the books or burned them or put them in bond. Then I thought, "Why, these big frightened children," and I laughed. My introduction to Russia, through the back door.

We took off and once again flew low over desert. But soon we were passing over vast fields striped with green, fields sown with crops. Now and again there would be a cluster of huts with thatched roofs and mud walls, like villages in many parts of India. But those great fields,

without the maze of paths and parcels, were different.

And then the real city, Tashkent, was spread out below, with new buildings on the bare outskirts and, closer inside, older buildings visible through the criss-cross cover of dark trees along the streets.

Our plane taxied along the concrete runway toward the handsome new airport building, past the slick jets that crowded the off-runway. The Russians had a busy, modern airport.

At the foot of the ramp, a slight young man with a shock of wind-blown brown hair called out to me with a smile: "Hello, sir! You are Mr. Walter!" I said Yes, and he turned to a young man companion and laughed, "I told you!" He introduced himself as Haffiz something, and his friend was Nicholas. "We have come," Haffiz said grandly, "from Intourist! We have come to the airport to welcome you to the Soviet Union!" They turned to each other and laughed again. They seemed slightly odd.

I was led to the front entrance of the terminal and left there while the two went for my bag. I stood on the steps and looked around. As people came and went, it seemed strange, and familiar, to see so many Europeans again: the stocky blond Russians, moving quickly, with certainty. By their modest clothes and luggage, they were certainly not the prosperous travel-by-air people I had seen elsewhere. They were just travellers.

A bus came up the boulevard straight toward the terminal, and I watched it. It was painted red, and was new and streamlined around the windshield. When it pulled in front of the steps, the driver applied the air brakes, and there was that familiar beefy, snorting sound that buses make when they stop quickly.

There was a sign on the side of the bus: "Аэропорт." Once the "p" became an "r" and the Greek "pi" a "p," it was "Airport." All right, I said to myself, that's Russian. But what's the difference between a Communist bus and a non-Communist bus?

I could tell the difference between a Russian bus and an Indian bullock cart, or even a Russian bus and an Indian bus---they're just not that good in India---and I thought I could tell something from that about the different ways of life. But I couldn't tell the difference between this Russian bus and an American bus. I was disappointed that there seemed to be no distinction. The bus looked normal, routine. Maybe life here would appear normal and routine. How do you know what kind of country you're in? Could you actually visit a country without finding out what living there was like, really miss it, make a big mistake? How do you find out what's important in a country, anyway, a new country, or your own?

My Intourist escorts finally came with the bag and the explanation there had been a big rush. We got into a cab, a medium-sized, late-model "Volga," and sped off down the boulevard toward downtown. We made chit-chat about the trip from Kabul. They were friendly, but they were laughing too much. It finally dawned on me that they had been drinking.

At the hotel the plump matron showed me into an overstuffed room intended obviously to be de luxe. Haffiz excused himself: there would be no "big program" today, Sunday. "Today," he proclaimed, "is the day the Soviet people have their rest." For an hour or so, I joined the Soviet people.

Walter Friedenberg