

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Tashkent: A Talk, a Walk and Dinner

Hotel Tashkent  
Tashkent  
Uzbekistan S.S.R.  
U.S.S.R.  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

My "de luxe" room in Hotel Tashkent was furnished in a style that struck me as a sort of Overwrought Victorian with a French accent. There were formidable stuffed chairs and a sofa, a dark-veneered almirah, and a ponderous desk. The desk-lamp shade was adorned with silk tassels, and the marble ink-stand and pen-holder was a piece of furniture in itself. Under the desk-top glass were instructions for guests printed in English, French, Chinese and Russian. On a small table in the corner sat a small-screen television set, jarringly modern. It was very warm, and I would have traded any five pieces of furniture for one fan. A pair of purple plush curtains closed off a bedroom lined up with three boxy beds. The bathroom was large and bare and smelled of iron rust.

Presently Haffiz, the Intourist guide, came calling to "draw up the plan." But first, by way of personal preface, he said, "I am not Intourist," but rather an instructor of English at Tashkent Institute of Pedagogical Science, now working for Intourist temporarily because of the tourist rush. "But regard me as Intourist.

"Now, what you want to do depends on your profession," he continued, with no apparent condescension. "If you are a sportsman, soccer matches and...If you are a student, then museums and schools." I interrupted to say that I had written Intourist regarding the sort of places and people I wanted to see, and I repeated the list, off hand.

Haffiz looked through me with a glimmer of the Oriental stare. "What things we see," he said, slowly, "depends on your profession, what work you do. If you are a journalist..." I had been a little slow. He was satisfied when I told him my occupation.

"Now, do you speak Russian?" he asked, the next item. I said No. "In that case you will always need the services of a guide," he said.

"You have not studied Russian?" he asked, as if it were a new question. No. "Well," he said, "I will confer with the Chief---you can say, the Boss!---about the plan. Tomorrow, a full day. Now you have free time." I was glad that I would not "always need the services of a guide," not so much, it appeared, because I knew Russian, but because I didn't.

Before he left, Haffiz led me down the hall to show me the dining room, a long hall dark with drawn shades, and to introduce me to Nadja, the waitress who spoke English. Nadja was fortyish and wore rouge on

her cheeks. She pumped my hand heartily and gave me an enthusiastic smile. Her gold tooth more than made up for the missing ones. "Speaking English my!" she proclaimed, and she patted her chest to indicate that she would take charge of me in the dining room.

I was anxious to get out on the street and look around, especially not knowing how much free time there would be in the future. On my way out through the lobby, a gentlewoman from the hotel "administration" intercepted me and politely asked for my "document," my passport. She was a gracious woman, vaguely old-fashioned.

The policeman standing stationed at the hotel entrance did not return my glance on the way out, but when I glanced again over my shoulder he was looking. I turned left and walked along the board sidewalk shaded by a row of mimosa trees. At the curb, a narrow channel carried muddy irrigation water along slowly. A taxi drove slowly down the street. No passenger. The driver yawned. I felt ignored.

On both sides of the street, on the edge of the sidewalks, were lines of all-connected one-story cottages with white-washed walls. I tried to peep into the rooms as I strolled past: curtains of coarse cotton lace, a potted plant, an old-fashioned brass bed-post, on the wall a photograph of Grandfather in an oval frame. From a window across the street came the sound of somebody practicing scales on the piano, and not very well.

And now coming up the sidewalk was a young couple, locked arm in arm, taking big strides in step, laughing. Dalliance by daylight: I hadn't seen that in a long time. I tried to congratulate them with an approving smile. They interrupted themselves to look at my shoes with interest.

The street led into a broad cross street. Now there were lots of buses and taxis, and people on the sidewalks talking a stroll. There were obviously two races of people, Europeans and Asians. The blond, fair-skinned, stocky people were the Russians. The men typically wore vertically striped silk shirts or rich-looking embroidered Ukrainian blouses, baggy dark wool trousers, and grey sandals. The women wore silk dresses with large floral patterns and frills and scallops, cotton anklets and high-heeled shoes, and their hair in a bun. They all seemed well-fed and hearty, even loud. The children were primmed up, but they looked as though they were given a free run.

The black-haired people, with the dark eyes and the slight Mongoloid look, would be the Uzbeks, the Asians. They were of slighter stature. Most of the men wore Russian clothes, plus a black and white four-cornered skull cap. The women wore full "sack" dresses of jagged stripe design, low-heeled black shoes, and the Uzbek cap on top of black braids. The Uzbeks seemed quieter, more shy than the Russians, and though they were almost as numerous as the Russians, they seemed much less conspicuous.

I watched for a while, then boarded a bus. The young woman conductor asked me where to, and I shrugged my shoulders Anyplace. This

was quite funny to her; she with titters publicized my case among the other passengers. Some of them, speaking Russian, tried to help me out earnestly, then gave up good-humorously. I gave the conductor 30 kopeks and she gave me a ticket and a you're-a-strange-man smile. She went about her business and I went about mine, which was simply looking out the bus window at the city of Tashkent.

We drove along tree-lined boulevards, sharing the street with new-looking taxis and trucks, and only a few private cars. The older buildings had what I could only call a "European" cast about them. The new buildings were scarcely more than great brick warehouses, for all the extravagant trim. There were apartment houses that looked new and upper-crusty, other barracks-like flats, and more of the one-story connecting cottages like those near the hotel. There was a theater with a huge billboard: a soldier and a young woman, both looking as valiant as possible. We came to a great plaza with a towering spray of water from a fountain---and on the other side a settlement of clustered village mud-wall huts. There seemed to be a little bit of everything in Tashkent.

The people I saw from the window and those who boarded the bus looked well off, when I looked with Indian eyes. They were healthy and well-fed, they were well-clothed, and there was at least a touch of prosperity to their contentment. If there was a thin man, he seemed simply thin, not undernourished. There were not the obviously sick people going about, though there was a surprising number of amputees of war-veteran age. There were differences in quality of dress (just as there were car-owners, taxi-takers and bus-riders), but no one was ragged. The clothes looked so good, sound, clean and often new, impressive even allowing for Sunday dressing-up.

There was the general look of satisfaction on faces too---not just the absence of worry but something positive, something like vigor and intelligence and stalwartness. In this, women apparently were full partners with the men.

As an American, I had more difficulty in judging. But I thought that people looked a bit stodgy and drab, and purposeful without the self-assurance that might go with it. They were polite to one another, and friendly in looking at me, the stranger.

I tried to think as I rode back exactly where I was in the world. I was in Asia, supposedly, not so far from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, and half a continent away from Europe. But the Russians had certainly done a job of moving Europe out here, through 60 years of Czarist colonization and 40 years of Communist rule. I wondered about the Russians in Asia and the British in India: If I could tell anything from a walk and a bus ride, the British seemed to have placed something of their own on India, while the Russians seemed to have entered and transformed from inside what was already here. The British may have paved some streets, but cows block traffic and a hawker has as much right-of-way as an automobile. Here, there seemed to be only one, integrated style of life, which everybody lived. Of course, it was a matter of comparative intention and system and number of people---and my snap notion.

The bus returned to where I had gotten on. I got off and walked

along. Then there was a wooden fence, and a door cut into the fence which was open. I stepped inside and found myself immediately on a dirt path that led to a plank bridge that crossed a stream. Beyond that were hovels of brick and dried mud, a little better than the worst of them in a North Indian village. By the stream, the women washing clothes in pails looked up and glared at me. As I began to cross the bridge a woman began shouting at me. I had the acute feeling of being out of place. I turned around and walked back to the street, back to the sidewalk and the taxicabs and the painted housefronts. Wow.

I returned to the hotel, washed and went to an early dinner. The elderly hostess was a gentlewoman too, like the woman in the hotel office. I was again unprepared for a Russian who was so obviously non-proletarian. She ushered me inside, and the hotel dining room turned out to be a busy public restaurant as well.

The hall was filled with customers, and the waitresses, too few for the job, charged around busily. There were some decided differences from Indian restaurants: Unlike Indian waiters, the Russian waitresses actually hurried. Between impatient customer and harried waitress there were some you-hurry-up! vs. you-just-wait! exchanges, a give-and-take on an equal basis.

There were bottles on the tables too---beer, vodka and champagne---and there was drinking, not sipping. People seemed to have come to enjoy themselves, not just to eat dinner, and they seemed to be succeeding. They seemed to be sort of rugged but prosperous workers and their wives, and a few Army officers, who looked rather straight-laced at that. There didn't seem to be any cafe-socialites, or students either.

Nadja, The Waitress Who Spoke English, eventually spotted me and presented me grandly with two menus in Russian. Ah! she smiled, of course! "Soup I recommend you okroshka!" she declared.

I think I hurt her a little by asking her what okroshka was like, and after an unsuccessful struggle to find the English words, she assured me that it would be "very nice." And "Better drinking beer than water!" she advised.

Okroshka turned out to be cold cucumber soup with chives, and then an enormous tomato salad and beef stroganoff. Over the Turkish coffee I tried to figure out, by the Russian menu, how much dinner would have cost, if it hadn't been pre-paid for---and how much it was costing all these other people. It came to about 18 roubles, or \$1.80 by the tourist concessional rate of 10 to 1, or \$4.50 by the official rate of 4 to 1, or about \$9 at the tourist rate of 2.08 to 1. Anyway, I had the feeling that it was a lot of money for a Russian.

At the next table a champagne bottle popped and the cork bounded off the ceiling. That got a big laugh. I looked up the price of champagne. Forty-five roubles.

Well, I had a lot to learn about Russia.