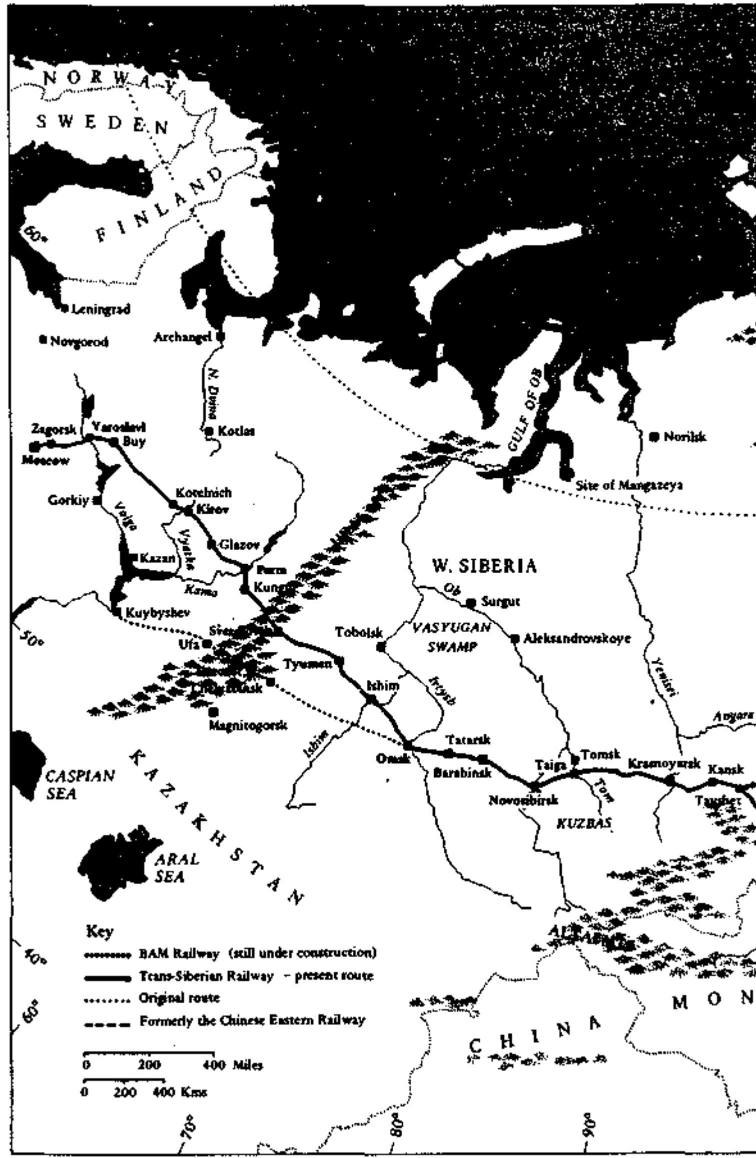
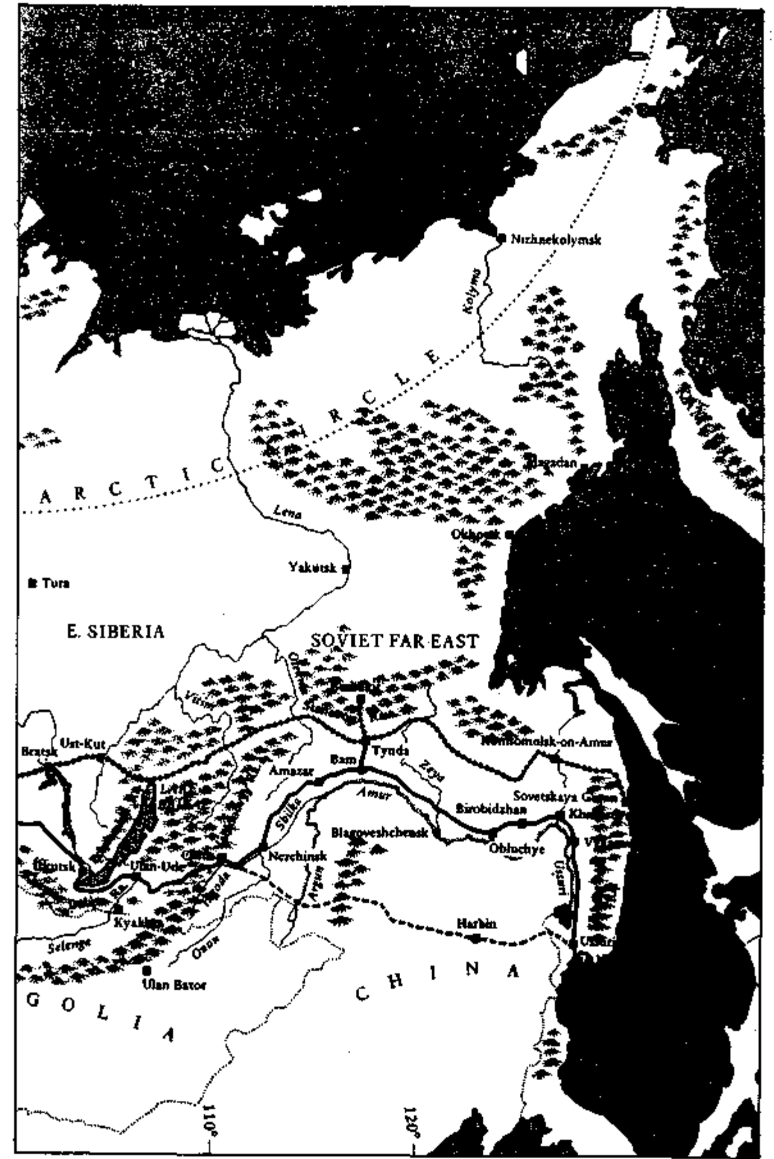
Travelling Britons

Week 12

(E & E Europe)

Eric Newby





Prelude

Long Ago in Leningrad, or New Year's Night on the Red Arrow

The whole of snowy Asia, by way of Moscow ends in this city that looks out on a frozen sea.

Valse des Fleurs, Sacheverell Sitwell

LENINGRAD is a city of canals, a northern Venice of such beauty that there is no absurdity in the comparison, and as the taxi raced down the Nevski Prospekt, here nearly 120 feet wide. over what looked like pure ice to the station where I was to catch the night express to Moscow, it seemed, with the huge flakes of snow drifting down into it out of the darkness of the northern night, yet another enchanted, frozen waterway, brilliantly lit.

It was New Year's Eve 1964. At 11.30 pm, having entrusted a two-kilo tin of the finest procurable caviar to the engine driver who stuck it on the front of his steam locomotive in order to keep it cool, I boarded the *Krasnaya Strela* (the *Red Arrow*), and after disposing of my baggage took a seat in the restaurant car.

The *Krasnaya Strela* is one of the Soviet Union's most famous trains. It covers the 410 almost dead straight and completely bumpless miles to Moscow in eight hours and thirty minutes, arriving at the Leningrad Station on Komsomolskaya Square at 8.25 the following morning, on the dot. The line has a sentimental place in the hearts of Russian railwaymen as it was the first major line to be built entirely within the frontiers of Russia; it took 50,000 serfs working from sunrise to sunset – and who were flogged for the privilege of doing so – eight years to complete. Thousands of them died.

Almost everything about the *Krasnaya Strela* was good. It was warm, even too warm, and the dark blue brass-buttoned greatcoats and fur hats worn by the conductresses who sometimes smiled, sometimes scowled, sometimes were inscrutable – Russian officials of either sex are as unpredictable as fruit machines – were of the finest quality. And it was not only the conductresses who were fitted out in a sumptuous manner: the appointments of the two-berth 'soft-class' compartments, which is how the Russians describe their first-class *wagons-lits*, were redolent of another age – the headboards fitted with linen covers embellished with drawn-thread work, the dark green curtains, the pleated silk shades on the massive cast-iron table lights, the glittering water decanters, the long druggets in the corridors (instantly soiled by the snow-covered hooves of the passengers as soon as they boarded the train), the dazzling white curtains and bed linen, the multiplicity of mirrors – all were satisfactory to the most exacting bourgeois taste and therefore not only to me but to the sort of Russians who were my fellow travellers in 'soft class', many of whom had the air of commuters. It was not surprising that at one period of the war this rolling stock had been used by Hitler and other top members of the Nazi Party, or so someone told me later that night.

In fact, the only remotely criticizable thing about the *Krasnaya Strela*, apart from the thought that I might be occupying a berth once used by Himmler, which was rather off-putting, was the menu in the restaurant car, of which I had been offered an English translation covered with gravy stains, in which all the more agreeable items and most of the less agreeable ones were unavailable. 'Beluga Belly Flesh', 'Goose', 'Roasted Duck wit Garnisch' and 'Plum Cake "Stolichny"' were all out of stock. All that was currently on offer was some luke-warm noodle soup, great gobbets of some unidentifiable meat which looked as if it had been hacked to pieces by a maniac with an axe, and what were literally smashed potatoes.

It was therefore little wonder that I and my fellow diners, all of whom were Russians and therefore endowed with the native facility of making the best of what would have been disastrous for anyone else, had recourse to the bottles with which the restaurant car was well supplied, and on which they had already made a start before I arrived.

The only other passenger at my table was a large man as tall as an early Romanov with glossy black hair, wearing an expensive, hand-built black suit, a black knit tie and a white shirt with a Madison Avenue-type button-down collar with a fashionable swerve to it. He was in his early forties and looked a formidable customer. Anywhere west of the Iron Curtain I would have put him down as the man in charge of the J. and B. Rare or the Smirnoff Account. Here, I identified him as a member of the *apparat*, and a trusty one who had spent a lot of time abroad.

He was uncommunicative – just a very curt nod – but hospitable. He had just filled a large-size glass with Stolichnaya from a 500-gramme bottle and now he did the same for me, which emptied it. We clinked the big glasses and turned them bottoms up in the Russian fashion. I ordered another bottle. Into the Valley of Death.

It was now a quarter to twelve.

'Where are you going?' he said suddenly. He spoke English with a fine voice as deep as he was.

'To Moscow.'

'Of course,' he said impatiently, making me feel like a small boy of about seven, 'but after Moscow?'

'To London.'

And that was the end of that conversation. At 11.50 the *Krasnaya Strela* left for Moscow.

In the course of the next ten minutes of what was becoming a New Year's Eve carouse we emptied the second bottle. I must say it is a boring way of drinking, this ritual. Then, having ordered a 500-gramme bottle of Ukrainian pepper vodka a minute or two before midnight by the restaurant clock, he leant forward across the table and said, portentously, 'Do you know Nakhodka?'

It was like the beginning of that boring joke that begins, 'Do you know Omsk?', which I had heard so many times in my years as a commercial traveller, but instead of waiting for a couple of hundred *versts* to pass as do the protagonist and the blundering reciters of this chestnut half as old as time, he carried straight on.

'You should go to Nakhodka,' he said, 'by the Trans-Siberian Train. From it you will see Siberia and the great progress our

peoples have made in developing the country. It is the longest railway in the world and it was built by Russians.'

By now, somewhere in the outer suburbs of Leningrad, it was 1 January 1965, and any further conversation of a coherent sort in the restaurant car was rendered impossible by great gusts of singing, the drinking of further enormous toasts and an outbreak of bear-hugging among the entire company. It was half past one before I finally got to bed, having sung 'Auld Lang Syne' three times by popular request to great applause and having drunk to peace in our time so often that it should last at least two thousand years, leaving the rest of them still hard at it. Nevertheless, overcome as I was, the man in the black suit had planted the seed of an idea in my fuddled brain.

At 8.26 am I was decanted on to the platform of the Leningrad Station in a city still shrouded in gelid night and one that I have never really grown to like however hard I have tried. There I re-possessed myself of my two-kilo can of *beluga malossol* which was thickly coated with hard snow – it had been a risky business sticking it on the front of the engine as caviar begins to disintegrate around 20°F, but less risky than having it simmering itself into a Russian version of *bouillabaisse* inside the *Krasnaya Strela* where the temperature was up in the 70°s and 80°s.

Then I queued for a taxi to take me to the National Hotel, where I planned to leave my treasured possession in a cool caviar chamber for the next week or so before taking the Ost–West Express to Liverpool Street by way of Brest, Warsaw, Berlin, Rotterdam and the Hook. It was a long queue with few taxis at the end of it, and while I was shuffling forward in it I suddenly recalled through a haze of distilled potato juice the words of my brief acquaintance whom I was to see no more.

'You should go to Nakhodka [wherever that was] by the Trans-Siberian Train. It is the longest railway in the world and it was built by Russians.'

In my hand luggage I had a copy of *Cook's Continental Timetable* and in a few moments I was deep in the USSR section of that heady work, studying the timetable headed MOSKVA–IRKUTSK–KHABAROVSK–NAKHODKA. TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY.

The whole thing appeared even more simple than my perennial optimism about travel would have allowed me to believe. The train, which was called the *Rossiya* (the *Russia*), was due to leave for Vladivostok in approximately one-and-a-half hours time from the Yaroslavl Station, which was so close that I could see it from where I was standing. There was no need for a taxi and I already had a porter.

By reading the small print I discovered that, being a foreigner and therefore not allowed to enter Vladivostok, which was a naval base, I would have to change trains at Khabarovsk on the Amur River, 5331 miles from Moscow and would arrive at Nakhodka on the Sea of Japan on the morning of the ninth day from Moscow. From Nakhodka I could take either a Russian steamer to Yokohama in about 52 hours or one to Hong Kong in 174.

I was terribly tempted. If I did decide to go I would have made the entire journey from the Nevsky Prospekt across Asia, a street of which Sacheverell Sitwell wrote (in *Valse des Fleurs*):

> Down at the far end, which tails off as the crow flies, towards Moscow, the buildings, the people, and even the colour of the sky are already Asiatic, in the extent to which the word means wars and plagues and barbarian invasions. The first suburbs of another and an endless world, all plains and distance.

This is what, in spite of feeling rather ill, my heart yearned for at this moment – those vast nomadic steppes which in their southern parts extend for more than 4000 miles without interruption from the Danube to the Great Wall of China. For I am one who believes that a golden opportunity once rejected is seldom put on offer again.

With me I had everything I needed: a Russian visa which was valid for another ten days and which, as a transit passenger on the railway, I would have little difficulty in extending if the need arose. Even if I failed to get an exit permit at Nakhodka for Yokohama or Hong Kong, neither of which was the exit point named on it, I could always fly back from Khabarovsk to Moscow and get my exit visas there for Poland and East Germany. For once I even had plenty of money on my person. There was time, too, to buy food for the journey, which seemed a good idea as 'Roasted Duck wit

Garnisch' would presumably, more often than not, be 'off'. Anyway, with a couple of kilos of caviar to hand I would not lack for friends *en route*, and if I did I could always stick it on the front of an engine.

It would be a quiet time, something in parentheses in a life that was sometimes almost too full of movement, and yet I would be moving, cocooned in the white sheets and with the heavy water decanter to hand (I would steer clear of burly men in black suits and button-down collars who gave me 200-gramme slugs of Ukrainian Pepper Vodka and bear-hugs at midnight into the bargain), and I would re-read Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, something of which currently I was badly in need.

But this moment of euphoria soon passed. I was also a newspaperman with a piece to transmit to London, and there were others to be written in Moscow in the next few days. How I wished I had a brace or two of carrier pigeons which I could release at intervals beyond the Urals. 'National Hotel,' I said, sadly, when my turn came to board a taxi. More than twelve years were to pass before I finally caught the *Rossiya* from the Yaroslavl Station and made the journey of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

I

Under Starter's Orders

FOR eleven years I roared around the world, but during that time the opportunity to travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway never arose, although I often thought of writing a book about it. Railways, like rivers, are difficult subjects for writers because they go on and on. They are less difficult for writers of fiction who can populate their trains with corpses, villains, beautiful people and *wagons-lits* attendants with seven o'clock shadows. If they get bored they can blow them up or derail them. A non-fiction writer is lucky if anyone pulls the communication cord.

When the opportunity finally arose I discovered that there were three possibilities open to me. One was simply to apply for a transit visa for the USSR, buy a ticket from Intourist in London and make the journey from Moscow to Nakhodka without getting off the train at all, except to inspire fresh air on the station platforms along the route. An alternative would be to make the journey, stopping over for a day or two at Novosibirsk, Irkutsk and Khabarovsk, these being the only cities along the route open to foreign visitors in 1977. The third way, and the most complicated and expensive, was to make the journey under the aegis of the Russians themselves and let The Agency provide one of their representatives to accompany me. The Agency is regarded by Western intelligence services as an arm of the KGB. The theoretical advantage of this was that it might be possible to stop off at places that were not on the normal Intourist agenda and see things denied to ordinary foreign tourists, and this was the course that I eventually decided upon.

Which was why, in the depths of Arctic January 1977, I found

myself keeping a tryst with a senior representative of The Agency in a sauna bath in the West, not much more than a biscuit's toss from the Iron Curtain.

Mr Oblomov (for that is what I shall call him to spare his blushes), whom I was now regarding through a haze of steam in this subterranean hothouse, was a splendidly endowed fellow in every way, both physically and mentally. Dressed in a Western bespoke suit he had been impressive; now, wearing nothing but a piece of towelling and flagellating himself with a bunch of birch twigs, he looked like a pentathlon gold medallist, and when we plunged into the spacious pool after the torture was over he swam like one.

Later, when I had swum two lengths of the bath under water to show him that, although I was not in the same class as he, I also kept fit, we sat swathed in towels, drinking beer and mapping out a programme for him to present to his superiors.

Two days and three bottles of whisky later – there were others in on this act – I left for London. It had been a thoroughly successful meeting so far as I was concerned. Mr Oblomov had a list of Siberian Wonders as long as your arm, which if I was able to see only a few of them would have turned me into a Siberian Marco Polo. It included visits to active volcanoes, to the coldest place in Siberia where the temperature descends to −90°F, to the descendants of the Golds, aboriginals, who until comparatively recently had worn suits of fish skin, to railway construction sites in the remotest wilderness, to gold and diamond mines, ginseng root-collectors and bring-them-back-alive Siberian tiger-hunters. 'I shall also,' said Mr Oblomov, 'recommend that at least part of your journey should take place while there is still snow on the ground. A visit to Siberia without seeing it under snow is like ...'

'A rose without a thorn?' I suggested.

'I was going to say', he said, mischievously, 'like a writer without a head.'

The day after I got back to London I received a message to say that I would not be able to make the journey through Siberia with snow on the ground. No reason was given. I suppose they think it makes the place look untidy.

'Your other proposals', the message said, 'are being considered.' They were still being considered when I caught the train.

Unlike the English, who have largely destroyed their railway system and the morale of its employees, the Soviet Union is actually involved in building more and more railway lines, some of them enormously long. In Siberia, where road-building can cost anything up to a million rubles a mile and the cost of maintaining them is equally astronomical, railways are the only means of communication that can carry heavy freight all the year round. In fact, the Trans-Siberian is still the only continuous land route from Western Europe to the Pacific coast of the USSR. At the time of writing there is no continuous motorable road across Siberia from the Urals to the Soviet Far East, although work has begun on one.

In the course of this immense journey the train crosses nearly a hundred degrees of longitude in Europe and Asia and traverses seven time zones. By the time it reaches the Pacific it is seven hours ahead of Moscow time; but it has observed Moscow time throughout, as have the clocks on all the stations along the route. The journey for a Soviet citizen takes seven twenty-four-hour days, or to be more precise 170 hours and 5 minutes, if it is on time, to cover the 5810 miles from Moscow to Vladivostok, on the Sea of Japan, where it arrives soon after noon on the eighth day.

For foreigners, who are not allowed into Vladivostok in case they might espy some more modern version of the battleship *Potemkin* but have to go to Nakhodka, the only Soviet port facing the Pacific that is open to them, and from which they can take a ferry to Japan, the distance is 5900 miles and the journey consumes almost eight twenty-four-hour days – 192 hours and 35 minutes, which includes a stopover from day 7 to day 8 at Khabarovsk on the Amur River, and a change of trains for the last, exciting lap along the frontier with China, reaching Nakhodka on the morning of the ninth day. There is no railway journey of comparable length anywhere in the world. Even New York–Los Angeles on the *Sunset Limited* via New Orleans is a mere 3420 miles. The Trans-Siberian is *the* big train ride. All the rest are peanuts.

There were four of us travelling to Siberia together: Otto, a

German photographer on a mission of his own, who was Jewish and with whom we were travelling as it was cheaper to share an interpreter; Mischa, a member of the Agency, who had spent some time in India and who was almost certainly godless; me, as British as a Bath bun and a lapsed member of the Church of England (although still crazy about old churches, preferably with singing going on inside); and lastly Wanda, my wife, a Slovene and a Roman Catholic, who dislikes Mass in the vernacular and whose observations during our long journey together in the two-berth 'soft-class' compartment on the *Rossiya* were interesting to record. Put all these unlikely ingredients in the same compartment, stir in a bottle and a half of vodka, leave to simmer for a couple of hours, light the blue touch paper and stand clear!

Besides being singularly ill-assorted, we were also exceptionally heavily laden, apart from Mischa who was apparently set on going a quarter of the way round the world and back with two shirts and a mohair pullover. It was not altogether our fault. We had been warned to 'dress as you would for an English spring', which is a damn sight more difficult than being told that you are going to the Sahara in summer, or the Arctic in winter; besides which, we were loaded with the tools of our trade.

I had a barely portable library of Siberiana and all sorts of other works which included a timetable for the entire route in Cyrillic. I also had two 1:5,000,000 maps which took in European Russia, Siberia and most of the rest of the USSR.

These maps were contained in a four-foot-long cardboard tube which drove everyone mad who had the custody of it for more than two minutes, including myself. I also had, among others, an underwater camera (because it was also dustproof), six Eagle H pencils, a rubber, a pencil sharpener, three pens and a Challenge duplicate book. All of which worked extremely well throughout. Otto had a large, highly professional metal box, which although made of aluminium was as heavy as lead, full of cameras, and a tripod which also drove everyone mad who had anything to do with it.

On the way to the Yaroslavl Station, the boarding point in Moscow

for the Trans-Siberian train, we made a detour to the National Hotel in Manezhnaya, now 'Jubilee of the Revolution', Square where Lenin, who had as keen an eye for the bourgeois comforts of the bed and the board as any of his successors, put up for a spell in March 1918. As we drove to it we passed through Dzerzhinsky Square, so named after the Pole, Felix Dzerzhinsky, whose statue has brooded over it since 1958. Dzerzhinsky was head of the Secret Police from its formation in December 1917, when it was called the CHEKA (Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage), until his death in 1926 from natural causes, something rare in his profession, by which time it had become the OGPU (the State Political Administration). Now, in 1977, its direct lineal descendant the KGB was, almost unbelievably, preparing to celebrate the first sixty Glorious Years of the existence of the Secret Police by giving parties.

At the top end of this square, which is the size of a modest airfield, an immense wedge-shaped reddish building rises on a desirable island site. The pre-revolutionary headquarters of an insurance company, it has been added to and rebuilt many times, the last time in 1946. The back of these premises faces on to a dark and draughty street which for years was shunned by Muscovites like the Black Death, and by almost everyone else in the USSR who happened to be in its vicinity – and still is by those who cannot rid themselves of the habit.

'What's that building?' I asked Mischa. It was intended as a joke. I knew what it was, or what it had been, as well as he did, and so did everyone else in Moscow, where it was as well known as Wormwood Scrubs and the Bloody Tower to Londoners, or the Tombs to the inhabitants of New York – so infamous that some years previously my son, while still a schoolboy of the smaller sort, had tempted providence by photographing it with a rather noisy camera. 'It's some kind of office block,' Mischa said airily. I was damned if I was going to take this from anyone, let alone a 'fellow journalist', even if he was a card-carrying member of the you-know-what. '*You* know what it is, don't you?' I said to the taxi driver, a cheerful fellow who spoke some English. 'Yes,' he said, 'I know what it is.' 'Well, what is it?' 'It's the Lubyanka,' he

said.* And he roared with laughter, exposing a perfect row of stainless steel teeth in the upper storey.

The Yaroslavl Station at which we presently arrived is the setting off place not only for Yaroslavl on the Volga, which was its original terminal point when the railway was first built in the 1860s, but also for the Soviet Far East: Archangel, Murmansk, the shores of the White and Kara Seas – for those who like the seaside and paddling – as well as for Kotlas, Seregovo, Ukhta and Vorkuta – for those who only go to such places because they are sent to them with one-way tickets.

The station, at which we arrived one-and-a-half hours before the train left, is an astonishing building, even in Moscow, where this epithet, especially when applied to architecture, can become seriously over-used. From the outside it looks like the work of a horde of gnomes of the class of 1900, although actually built in 1907 by F. O. Schechtel.

The inside is very different. Entering the waiting room, I had expected to find the customers perched on toadstools. Instead I found myself on an Eisenstein set for a twentieth-century sequel to *Ivan the Terrible* – medieval-looking chandeliers powered by electricity, a complete absence of natural light, squat black marble columns with granite capitals, and filled to the brim with all the extras waiting for the stars to appear and the cameras to roll, hundreds of what could have been Tartars, Komis, Udmurts, Mordvins, Nanays, Chuvashs, Buryats, Koreans, Latvians, Germans, Kazakhs, Bashkirs, Maris, Evenks, Tofas, Ukrainians and possibly some genuine Russians – just some of the people who inhabit the regions through which the Trans-Siberian Railway passes on its way to the Soviet Far East.

I say 'could have been' because even an ethnologist might have found himself stumped, unless he had an identikit with him. None of them, apart from a few Uzbeks in little round hats, whom even I could identify, having once visited their country, wore anything remotely resembling a national costume, so well had the rationalists done their work. The men were dressed in Western-type suits that

*One of the three prisons in or near Moscow which housed political prisoners, and since December 1917 the headquarters of the Secret Police.

looked as if they had been cut with a chopper – the Soviet tailoring industry shares the same master-cutter with the Turks – although some of the younger ones were wearing plastic jackets. Most of the adult males had on the sort of cloth caps worn by British working men before the war. The women wore headscarves and velour topcoats which made them look as if they had been dumped in the waiting room in sacks.

The Uzbeks were at the wrong station, anyway, although they probably didn't know it and if they did, being Uzbeks (and therefore by nature nomads), probably didn't care. They should have been next door, at the Kazan Station (architect A. W. Shchusev, who was also responsible for Lenin's Tomb), waiting for Train No. 24 – 'soft' and 'hard' class, with dining car – to whirl them to their capital Tashkent, 2094 miles away, beyond the Aral Sea. They had plenty of time to find out that it wasn't the Kazan Station – their train didn't leave until 11.20 pm, and it was now 8.30 am.

As in every other railway waiting room in every other communist country I had ever visited, this one was the exclusive preserve of the *lumpen proletariat*, the hoi-polloi. There was not a single traveller to be seen in it of what one might call the administrative or managerial class. I knew, from previous experience, that if any such chose to travel by train they would arrive at the station by taxi or office car, as we had, not as the occupants of the waiting room appeared to have done, on foot and a couple of days early; and they would arrive just before the advertised time of departure. Then their neat luggage would be wheeled up the platform in front of them by porters to whom they would give tips, just as their counterparts in East and West Berlin, Paris, Prague, Warsaw, Rome, Bucharest or Peking would do; everything here is just as it was under the last of the tsars, and just as it still is at Waterloo, King's Cross, Victoria, Euston, Paddington and Liverpool Street under Elizabeth II in my own country – that is, if anyone can find a porter to tip at any of these six last-named termini.

It was a bit different in the waiting room. Here, the submerged classes, most of whom displayed a stoic attitude which under the circumstances was most surprising, were laid out for inspection, in some cases quite literally. The majority of them were sitting or

sprawling on the varnished wooden settees with which, just as in every other waiting room in a main station anywhere, this one was inadequately provided: sleeping, sawing away at huge, dark loaves as if they were cellos, talking, quarrelling, belching, smoking cigarettes, laughing, crying, taking milk from the breast, extracting gobbets of meat from horribly greasy parcels, engaging in dreadful spasms of coughing, or just sitting, surrounded by black bags made from American cloth, cheap suitcases and cardboard boxes, all bulging at the seams and held together with bits of string. Those who could not find a seat – and I never saw one unoccupied for an instant unless it was piled high with bags or coats which indicated that it was already somebody's property – either stood, supporting themselves with unfurled, unopened umbrellas, or squatted among their possessions with which they had walled themselves in like settlers preparing to resist an attack by Red Indians. Some simply lay on the floor. Of these, the most determined to find peace and quiet had flaked out in a little enclave that led off the ticket hall one floor up, built in 1964; vast, airy, full of natural light, the complete opposite of this lugubrious place, but almost empty because there was nothing to sit on except the floor.

Meanwhile, down on the ground floor others queued to buy lumps of boiled chicken and equally pallid sausages, Scotch eggs and delicious-looking macaroons, washing these delicacies down with Russian coke, squash or coffee – no beer, vodka or even tea available at the station, apparently, except possibly in the restaurant on the upper floor, outside which a queue had formed. A good thing, too, judging by the Bacchanalian scenes enacted outside in the vicinity of Komsomolskaya (Young Communists') Square, even at this unseemly hour, by what I hoped were non-fellow-travellers.

Over all hung the smell of Russians *en masse*; no worse than the smell of an *en masse* of English or Italians, or inhabitants of the Côte d'Ivoire, or any other nationality; but just different. A smell that one traveller compared, I think inaccurately, to that of a laundry basket on the weekly collection morning; inaccurate not because it is impolite – it is impossible to describe smells of people *en masse* politely – but because the smell to my mind is more pungent, and I think comes in part from eating the strong, black bread. I wondered what we smell like to them.

In these surroundings it was not surprising that Otto, a somewhat conspicuous figure in Russia, although he could never understand why (his jeans – the going black market rate for which was in the region of £100 – his Nikons and Leicaflexes were under continual offer from the locals) contrived to get himself arrested twice in the space of an hour: the first time by the Railway Police for photographing an elderly lady on one of the platforms in the rain (which, apart from one miraculous day, had been falling more or less incessantly ever since our arrival in the country); the second time, which was far more serious, by the Military Police, for taking pictures of some conscripts from the borders of Outer Mongolia, who were on their way to be turned into soldiers elsewhere in the Soviet Union.

The clothing of the conscripts was exiguous. Mischa explained that they were wearing their oldest clothes because, on their arrival at their training depot, their clothes would be burned, as was the Red Army custom. One had a paper hat on made from a sheet of *Pravda*. It seemed a shame to burn that. They looked cold, tired, hungry, fed up, and far from home. I felt sorry for them and I felt alarm for Otto, but I also sympathized with the lieutenant in charge of the draft who had called on the Military Police to take Otto away to their home-from-home in the station. He was as grumpy as an Irish Guards officer would have been at Paddington Station, lumbered with a similar collection of recruits straight from the back blocks of Connemara and Mayo and on his way with them to the Training Depot at Pirbright, if he found them being photographed by a Russian.

It was fortunate that I saw Otto being marched off as Mischa was elsewhere; otherwise we would have started looking under trains for him or calling up hospitals. As it was, Mischa had to produce the small, oblong red pass entombed in plastic, the one I never managed to get a really close-up look at in the weeks to come, which sometimes worked in difficult situations. This time it did work; but only after much serious telephoning.

2

The Way to Zagorsk

BY now it was 9.45 am. The *Rossiya*, otherwise Train No. 2, was due to leave at 10.10. Train No. 1 is the *Rossiya* from Vladivostok to Moscow. Both ways the service is daily.

It was time to board. With the recently-released Otto, savouring his freedom, and preceded by a porter wheeling our eighteen pieces of assorted luggage, including several cardboard boxes of drink and more or less imperishable food – we had all heard gruesome reports about the quality of the food on the train, and the cost of it, from survivors of the journey – we plugged up the platform against intermittent rain squalls and a blustery north-easter, past a bunch of tough-looking soldiers wearing fore-and-aft caps and loose-fitting uniforms, to all of whom I was tempted to say, and would have done if I had been in charge of them, 'Dirty Boots!' (The only clean army boots I saw in Russia were on the two men guarding Lenin's Tomb.) All the cars on the *Rossiya* were steel-built in East Germany. On every other passenger train except the *Rossiya* No. Ones, which in the course of the journey we saw from time to time flashing past in the opposite direction on the way from Vladivostok, the cars were pea-green with two horizontal yellow bands around them. On the *Rossiya* they were red. In addition each car was embellished with a metal plaque embossed with the coat-of-arms of the USSR: a golden hammer and sickle against a brown and yellow globe, golden wheat-sheaves wrapped in red scrolls with the names of the constituent republics on them picked out in gold, and a red star over all. And, to me, most exciting of all, beneath the plaque, there was a sign with the magic words MOSCOW–VLADIVOSTOK inscribed on it in Cyrillic characters.

Awaiting the customers at the door of each car was a pair of conductresses, dressed in black jackets, peaked caps and mini skirts. Some were comely, some were so-so, some were really rugged. Those with knobbly knees could have done with some inches on their hems. What sort of pair were we going to field?

Our car was about halfway up the train, but there was no cause for alarm. One of ours was a platinum blonde, going on for twenty-four with rather weak legs and the peroxide just beginning to grow out, and a mouth with some bits of steel filling showing, but otherwise OK. The other was in the prime of life, with chestnut hair, good legs and a really charming smile, with some real gold in it. Short of getting the twin daughters of Helen Osekina, the top Russian fashion model in the sixties – that is, if she *had* twin daughters old enough to be conductresses – or Pola Negri out of a deep freeze, it would have been churlish to complain. For a moment I wondered if it was chance. Then I dismissed the thought as unworthy. Soviet Railways must have more important things to worry about than whether a bunch of foreigners get conductresses who are easy on the eye.

The windows on the corridor side next to the platform were all locked, presumably to prevent foreigners escaping into the USSR, a temptation that we were all able to resist during our journey to the Pacific. There was, therefore, no possibility of shoving the luggage through the windows, which is what Italian and French sleeping car porters often do when loading bags into sleeping cars. This meant that the luggage had to be ferried down the corridor, piece by piece, past other passengers who, like passengers in corridor cars everywhere, prefer to have their toes trodden on twenty-four times or more by an assortment of individuals rather than withdraw into their compartments, even for an instant.

Meanwhile, up at the head of the train, with the underwater camera, I was just about to photograph the big Czechoslovakian electric engine, Type CHS2, which was to haul the *Rossiya* over the first 210 miles of the course, giving it, and the two motormen (one scowling, the other grinning like a before-and-after ad for Dr Collis Brown's Chlorodyne), 1/125th sec at f5.6. By now the weather was redolent of Clapham Junction in December rather than

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Moscow in May with spring, at least in theory, breaking out on every side. Then, just as I was pulling back on the shutter release lever (a peculiarity of this camera is that you pull rather than push), a large, soft hand the colour of lard closed over lens and viewfinder and for the first of what was to be dozens of times I heard the dread words '*Nyet razreshayetsa!*' ('Not permitted!').

On the other end of this massive organ of prehension was one of the less comely conductresses. She looked like a full-length cast of Khruschev fitted with tits.

Fortunately, I had my phrase book open at page 13, 'Some Basic Expressions'. 'Mee*noo*tahchkoo, *yah* pahsmah*tryoo* smah*goo*lee yah yee*yo* nigh*tee* v *knee*zhkyee,' I said, which was what it told me to say, or as near as I could get to it. ('Just a minute, I'll see if I can find it in this book.') Finally, after skimming through the Russian equivalents of 'What is your telephone number?', 'Thank you it has been a wonderful evening', 'Where's the nearest filling station?', 'Excuse me. May I park here?' and 'Suppose I come back in half an hour?' I found something that might be more to her taste on page 22, under 'Passport Control – IF THINGS BECOME DIFFICULT'. 'I'm sorry. I don't understand. Is there anyone here who speaks English?'

'Here, you read it,' I said giving her the book and taking the picture of the CHS2 from the hip which is a piece of cake with this sort of camera. I wasn't pointing it in the right direction. All I got was a Moscow sky.

In the course of this little adventure, besides having it confirmed that there is such a thing as reincarnation ('KHRUSCHEV LIVES!' – I could just see the headlines in *The Sun*), I learned that altogether there were fifteen passenger cars on the train, a restaurant car with a kitchen belching steam and a girl peeling spuds in a bucket at an open door, a mail van, and a compartment containing a radio transmitting set with an operator already bent over it, in case we hit an iceberg – '*Sparks!*'

I had also discovered that, of what I estimated to be the 500 or so passengers on the train (the number of adults, including staff, was actually nearer to 650), none were the sort of people we had seen in the waiting room; but thoroughly urbanized, solid citizens,

well-off workers, mostly young, mostly married with one or two children and sometimes with grandparents in tow. The men wore white drip-dry shirts if they had not already changed into track suits of a poisonous shade of royal blue for the journey, which were marginally better than the ghastly striped pyjamas, that gaped in the wrong places, I remembered from the train journeys on my previous visit. The women were positively formal in shiny print day dresses covered with cabbage roses or sunflowers and some of them had huge bouffant hairdoes. Their children were as spick-and-span as if they had been given the man-made fibre treatment at Marks and Sparks, or Ohrbach's. I wondered then, and still do, when and by what means Eisenstein's extras were destined to leave the Yaroslavl Station and whither they were bound.

There was one late arrival, and he was very late; he was a junior *apparatchik* in a suit of pure new wool and with luggage all of a piece, which was being propelled up the platform ahead of him by a porter travelling flat out. He had cut it a bit too fine and although only about the same age as Mischa, about thirty-five, he was puffing like a steam engine on a 1:30 gradient.

By 10.10 am the people seeing the *Rossiya* off had been reduced to two, a girl wearing white shoes who had a Soviet sailor in a crafty hold, and an ex-fighter pilot turned journalist from the Agency who had been seeing us off with a farewell picnic of vodka and cold meat. At this precise time the CHS2 uttered the sort of noise a snake makes while being crushed underfoot, which communicated itself to our car by way of some rubber pipes; the conductresses on the platform (now reduced to one per car – the others having gone to get their heads down until they came on shift) held out their yellow batons which looked like corn-cobs, stepped aboard and closed and locked the doors; and we were off on the line to Yaroslavl, the carriages swaying backwards and forwards with the sort of gentle movement that a car on a big dipper makes just before it finally comes to rest, or that a horse makes when swimming a river. We had been told that we would not be allowed off the railway till we reached Novosibirsk 2089 miles up the line.

Almost at once the view from the train windows became much more rustic than one would normally expect on a main railway line

near the centre of a city of more than seven and a half million people. Lime trees and silver birches plugged the more horrible vistas. To the right was the Sokolniki Park, named after the imperial falconers whose hunting territory it was, which certainly didn't look like falcon country any more. Now for a moment we were in marshy land in which lengths of cement pipe leading nowhere were semi-submerged in a sort of pond. Then we crossed the little river Yauza and passed through a marshalling yard somewhere near the Yaroslavl Highway full of flat cars loaded with thousands more pipes, *en route* for the oil and gas fields beyond the Urals.

Standing around in this marshalling yard was a squad of dumpy women, a small detachment of the million or more women who make up about a third of the 3,500,000 Soviet Railway workers, wearing headscarves, padded black cotton jackets, yellow plastic waistcoats to make it more difficult for drivers to run them over, short black skirts, thick black stockings and sensible boots. They were supposed to be lubricating points with what I assumed to be, having greased wire ropes with it when I was a sailor, a filthy mixture of grease and tallow. (This is just one of the troubles about travelling by train. You can never find out about important matters like this. Next thing you find yourself writing to the Head of the Russian Railways asking him what he thinks they grease them with, and he doesn't know either.)

Instead of getting on with this horrible task, and in spite of the rain, to which they appeared oblivious, they were having a bit of fun with a group of male railway workers. Two of the men had their arms around two of the women's waists, or as far round them as anyone's arms could go around a couple of short-waisted hip 44s with something like five layers of clothing between themselves and the outside world. The rest of the party, apart from a couple of do-gooders who were working with all the animation of the participants in a slow-motion film of a coronation, shrieked with laughter, slapped their thighs and waved derisively at their bourgeois-type female comrades with the bouffant hairdoes on the train.

Now the *Rossiya* ran through Mytischi, where an enormous factory produces subway cars. In 1926 it made the first electrically powered railway cars in Russia for a line at Baku.

This was the last stop, although the *Rossiya* didn't make use of it, before the *dacha* land of the Muscovites, the wooden weekend and holiday houses, ownership of which is the dream of every citizen. Some of the dachas were so small that they must have fitted their occupants closely round the hips. Each one had a television aerial and a small patch of garden, and looked out on to a muddy but arcadian lane lined with lime trees.

Ever since the *Rossiya* had got beyond waving distance of the platform at Moscow, not that there had been anyone left on it to wave to when it did leave (even the girl in the white shoes who had been saying goodbye to the Navy had by then sloped off), the Russian passengers, who appeared to make up about 90 per cent of the total cargo, began to run hither and thither like a nest full of ants which someone had stirred with a stick, and the corridors were filled with milling humanity.

Small boys and girls zoomed up and down continuously, licking hideously sticky toffee apples and caressing the door knobs of the compartments thereby turning them into miniature replicas of toffee apples; sailors in uniforms that looked as if they had been designed by Bakst and soldiers who looked as if their greatcoats had been designed by a blanket manufacturer clonked past with armfuls of beer bottles on their way to orgies; some of the large, determined-looking matrons in floral prints swayed down on us like clipper ships under stun'sails, carrying everything before them; and old men in striped pyjamas that made them look like survivors of a concentration camp tottered on their way, stopping to have a look at the big yellow samovar with which our car was equipped. It was all extremely Russian and interesting; but when, in spite of the crowds, the blonde conductress arrived with one of those recumbent, wheelless vacuum cleaners and began to give the corridor carpet a going over, it was too much, and we took refuge in our compartment. 'If it's going to be like this for the next 5800 miles all the way to the Pacific, I shall go mad,' Wanda said. 'Well, what about me?' I said. 'Perhaps we should get off at the next stop. Breathe it to Mischa.' 'You breathe it to Mischa,' she said, 'it was your idea, this crazy journey.' 'I didn't know it was going to be like this,' I said. 'And anyway, what are you doing on this train if you thought it was a

crazy idea?' 'I came to see that you didn't get drunk,' she said, pronouncing it 'dronk', 'and say things you might be sorry for.' 'Thank you very much,' I said, as I closed the door, becoming nice and sticky in the process.

We now took a closer look at our deluxe, 'soft-class' compartment, which was one of nine such two-berth compartments in the only soft-class, two-berth car on the train. It was certainly a bit different from the Russian sleeping car on the *Krasnaya Strela* in which I had snatched a few hours' sleep on New Year's morning in 1965, and less ample than the first-class sleeper occupied by Maurice Baring, poet, man of letters, diplomat, war correspondent and linguist, while on his way to report the Russo-Japanese war in Manchuria in 1904, which had a 'bathroom and a small bookcase of Russian books'. Some trans-Siberian trains had at that time a church car on them. On this May morning in 1977 the compartment was almost as dank as the weather outside, but only because the heating had not yet had time to seep through the pipes to it from the furnace at the end of the corridor, which was fuelled with coal.

The compartment was clean and, apart from a brown tabletop and a strip of carpet similar to that in the corridor, remarkable for its lack of colour. The walls and ceiling were the palest of pale greys; the cotton covers on the upholstered back rests and the curtain on a rod, which obscured the view from the lower half of the window and kept falling down, were off-white, not because they were dirty but because this was their natural colour. All the metal fittings were of some pallid alloy. Altogether it was rather like looking at a photograph of a sleeping compartment that had been heavily overexposed.

There was a ceiling light which could be dimmed to a sinister, frigid blue and a couple of well-meant but rather inadequate reading lights above what would be the beds when they were made up. These were side by side, opposite one another on the ground floor – no nasty little ladders leading to upper berths which make going to bed in the upper regions of a four-berth compartment on a train as dangerous as footling about on the Eiger without a rope.

But there was nothing wrong with the design of the appurtenances. The folding table was a miracle of ingenuity. There was

a water carafe, stable and heavy enough to survive a force 9 gale in the Bay of Biscay. There was sufficient space in the containers under the seats to take a folded corpse, as well as a large suitcase, and the seats had enough overhang to accommodate a couple of small suitcases behind one's feet. There was also a space in the bulkhead above the door ample enough to take a small trunk. At present it was occupied by our two sets of bedding: a mattress fitted with a sheet covering, a top sheet, two pillows and a blanket and two handtowels, which had to last all the way to Novosibirsk, although we did not know this, two nights and two days to the east.

Between us Wanda and I disposed of two large suitcases, two small ones, not much bigger than document cases, a formidable black overnight bag which looked as if it might contain a brace of human heads, Wanda's handbag, as commodious but somewhat less sumptuous than a buyer's from I. Magnin, the cardboard telescope containing maps, a camera bag, and a pile of raincoats, windcheaters and sawn-off Wellington boots, all of which had defied our efforts to contain them in any sort of portable container, plus the food-and-drink box. The various luggage depositories swallowed all these impedimenta quite effortlessly and with room to spare. I began to wish we had brought more.

We now received a visit from the ticket inspector, a man of about fifty. With his mahogany, Mayan-type face and thick, straight, greying black hair he looked as if he had just pole-vaulted the Bering Strait. He was unable to clip our tickets as Mischa had them in the other compartment further up the car where he and Otto were, one hoped, making the best of it.

Instead we had a chat, in agonizing, sub-O-level German which was the best he or I could manage. Personally, I would never have started it.

'Ich,' he said, banging his chest to emphasize who was speaking – it emitted a sound like a broken drum – 'Ich arbeit acht Uhren jeden Tag. Hundert ziebzig Uhren jeden Monat.' And he stood back so that he could better take in the effect that this pronouncement was having on such an obviously shiftless fellow.

It was difficult to know whether to congratulate him on having a cushy job, or commiserate with him on having a rotten, over-

worked one. What *were* the German equivalents of 'Cor!' 'Ripping!' or 'Hard Cheese!'?

'Wieviel Uhren arbeiten Sie?' Now he was banging *my* chest, which gave off no sound at all, as if I might be in doubt as to who I was.

'Ich weiss nicht.' How boring foreigners tend to be. No one would dream of asking me such a question on the 9.30 to Penzance – certainly not a ticket inspector.

'Weiss nicht? Warum weiss nicht? Was sind Sie? Americanets?'

'Nein, Anglichanin.' The Russian for 'English' sounds like something smelly you rub on your chest when you're not feeling so good.

'Anglichanye arbeiten nicht zu viel,' he said triumphantly.

'Well, you can hardly accuse the Russians of overdoing it,' said Wanda who had been listening to this conversation with increasing impatience.

His mood changed. Now he looked solemn, if not gloomy. For a moment I thought that he would ask me some impossible-to-answer-without-giving-offence question, such as 'Do you like Russia?', while I was still searching my peanut brain for some shattering reply to 'Anglichanye arbeiten nicht zu viel.' But he didn't.

'So, Anglichanin,' he said. 'Dann warum haben Sie ein so schrecklich Wetter aus ihrem Land gebracht?' pointing at the sodden landscape whirling past outside the window. Then he went on his way in search of other tickets to clip, laughing at his little joke.

'And next time you come to England don't bring any of your snow with you,' I shouted after him in English; but it was too late, he was already in the next coach.

By this time things had quietened down and the corridor was practically deserted. It seemed a good time to have a look at the lavatories, something we had been putting off. We approached them with the trepidation that all travellers experience when visiting such places for the first time.

There were two lavatories, one at each end of the car, and we inspected them with care, knowing that we were going to be stuck with them for the foreseeable future whether we liked them or not. There was however no cause for alarm – at least at this stage of

the journey, when few passengers appeared to have discovered their existence.

The washbasins and the loos were clean and the basins both had plugs, thus rendering superfluous the black squash ball (a dog ball for the smaller sort of dog will perform the same function) which we had brought all the way from England to serve as a plug and which we had guarded with our lives. It had been a godsend in Moscow at the Ukraina Hotel where, if our first-class accommodation was anything to go by, there are more than 1000 plugless rooms.

On the deficit side there was no trap under the washbasin, so that if you dropped your toothbrush, earrings or contact lenses down the hole they would end up on Russian soil. These basins were also equipped with those devilish taps, which they also have on ships to prevent the user sinking them from the inside, that work only with the exertion of superhuman pressure, and when they do, finally and grudgingly, deliver either scalding hot or freezing cold water, but never at the same time.

The lavatories were huge, large enough almost to accommodate a Siberian mammoth, and fitted with seats. These mammoth traps came from the same factory as the taps, shooting up, when there was no weight on them, with a vicious and resounding clang, revealing two non-skid plaques on the pan itself, intended for those who, like me, prefer to stand rather than sit on strange, outlandish objects. On the other hand there was a big bar of pink soap, an adequate supply of tough paper and a 220-volt, two-plug socket for electric razors (of which there were more out in the corridor for those who like to shave in public). I have spent many a night in far worse places.

It was 11 am. The *Rossiya* was running among pine trees. The *dachas* were behind us. Now the country began to open out and there were green fields between the trees. It was a bit like any stockbroker belt but without the houses and without the stockbrokers. The only human being in sight was a man carrying a heavy pack on his back making his way across a clearing and getting nice and wet.

Now the girl whom I had seen peeling potatoes appeared, wearing a potato-stained white coat and a limp little white hat, from beneath which strands of damp hair hung down over her face, partially

obscuring it and making her look indescribably pathetic, like a wai who has been crying over a sinkful of washing up – in her case about a dozen bucketfuls of potatoes. She offered us cream in bottles, borsch, rice, and meat the colour of the weather outside swimming in a sort of greasy bouillon, all of which she carried in nesting aluminium containers – the potatoes were, presumably, reserved for those brave souls who had reached the restaurant car, that undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns – none of which we felt like trying, especially the meat which was distinctly off-putting. Mustering a brave little smile in answer to ours, she dragged off down the corridor.

Now, as in a play in which no time can be wasted as it invariably is in life, the blonde conductress who was named Irina appeared bringing glasses of lovely hot tea in shiny metal holders embossed with figures of cosmonauts, sputniks zooming through space, battleships ploughing the seas and Soviet-type skyscrapers like the ones on Stolichnaya vodka bottles, all commemorating fifty years of communism, and therefore almost ten years old, having drawn the boiling water from a bright yellow samovar which she kept fuelled with blocks of peat. This samovar, which looked like a trench mortar, stood in a recess at the end of the corridor outside the den of whichever girl was on duty, and alongside it was an exploded plan of the thing in case it blew a gasket or needed other help.

Irina also brought some little cakes which cost 19 kopecks each and some small chocolate bars, labelled 'Red Front' in Russian, at a colossal 1 ruble 80 each – colossal to the English, anyway, with the ruble, which is divided into 100 kopecks, currently standing at 1.26 to the pound. Wanda had a cake; Otto had a choc'bar – perhaps the Germans were getting a better exchange rate – and so did Mischa, to whom rates of exchange meant nothing. The tea was free unless you took sugar, in which case it cost 4 kopecks a glass.

Irina was petite, slim and slightly anaemic-looking, as many Russian women seemed to be. In an attempt to redress her rather transparent pallor she had gone to work on herself with an orange lipstick and some eyeshadow of an unfortunate shade of green. Now, having removed her clumsy uniform jacket which was rather like that of

a London bus conductress, she was dressed in the tight black uniform skirt, a white shirt with a railway badge pinned to it and black, sling-back sandals. She looked as if she had been asked to go to a fancy dress party as Monroe and had done her best to comply.

Outside in the corridor there was a rack loaded with helpful literature in English, French, German, Japanese and Spanish, with a polite notice inviting all and sundry in 'soft class' deluxe (the service did not extend to other parts of the train) to study this material at no further cost to themselves. A lot of it emanated from The Agency in Moscow. These boys miss few if any chances to make their mark in the world about them.

As always undecided when it comes to choosing literature, especially when it is of an ostensibly improving nature, and because there were no other contenders for it anyway, I took the whole lot back into the compartment with the intention of sifting out some bedtime reading for the next 1125 miles or so to Novosibirsk.

The choice narrowed itself to: *Marx-Engels-Lenin: On Socialist Revolution* and *L'URSS vue par un Étranger: Notes de Séjour*. All four of us were now crammed into our two-berth suite with Mischa sitting opposite me. As I skimmed through the stuff I realized that I only had to utter one 'Ha!' or 'Ha-Ha!' to bring him in on the act and I would then be up to my neck in dialectics. I therefore preserved an air of gravity.

The first to go was the *Marx-Engels-Lenin: On Socialist Revolution*. Page 22 recorded an interview granted by Marx to a correspondent of *The World*, in London, on 3 July 1871.

Interviewer: It would seem that in this country the hoped for revolution, whatever it may be, will be attained without the violent means of revolution. The English system of agitating by platform and press until minorities become converted into majorities is a hopeful sign.

Dr Marx: I am not as sanguine on that point as you. The English middle class has always shown itself willing enough to accept the verdict of the majority so long as it enjoyed the monopoly of the voting power. But mark me, as soon as it finds itself outvoted on what it considers vital questions we shall see a new slave owners' war. . . .

Notes de Séjour were the thoughts of Arthur Feslier, chief publi relations officer of New Zealand Airways, which had surfaced re cently while he was being interviewed on a Soviet radio programme rendered for some inscrutable reason into French.

Question [it read] (often propounded, but not on radio): Do the Sovie People have some characteristics which do not please you?
Reply: No, they have their own characteristics, we have ours. And wh am I to make absurd comparisons?
Question [The questioner obviously getting bored with this subject which could go on being batted about until kingdom come]: Have you met any Soviet women?
Reply: Only on official occasions. I have seen some in offices and at Radio-Moscow.
Question: Do you consider that the absence of unofficial meetings constituted a gap in your programme?
Reply: Yes I do. But I have not given the matter much thought. Certainly, I would have liked to meet some Soviet women: some intellectuals, some employees, some officials, some housewives, and have a talk with them in private. I will do it the next time.

Eventually I decided to put the leaflets back in the rack where I had found them, but when I reached the rack, padding along the drugget, it had already been replenished with a fresh, identical supply. It was like being at the source of a river.

At 11.14 am the *Rossiya* trundled past some melancholy brick-fields and through a rustic-looking station at Zagorsk, 46 miles from Moscow.

For almost 550 years Zagorsk was called Sergiev after Saint Sergius, the son of a boyar from Radonezh in the Rostov region who lived and died there. In 1930 it had the honour of exchanging it for the name of Vladimir M. Zagorsky, secretary of the Communist Party, who was blown up by a bomb in Moscow in 1919.

And now a few hundred yards away to the left of the line the great brick towers and pale, machicolated walls of the Troitsko-Sergievskaya Lavra, the Trinity Monastery of St Sergius, came into view, dwarfing the trees and clapboard houses beneath them. Within this perimeter a mass of spires and domes, one a belfry about 300 feet high designed by Rastrelli (the architect of the Winter

Palace at St Petersburg), rose against the sky: bulbous domes, domes shaped like helmets, some gilded, some painted cerulean blue and studded with gold stars – all of them, spires and domes, topped with glittering gold crosses supported by spidery antennae, all shaming the unutterably gloomy weather.

Sergius founded the monastery in 1340. He died in 1392. In 1408 the Tartars sacked Moscow and the monastery, burning the wooden church that he had built and in which he was buried. It was Nikon, his successor as abbot, who recovered the body of Sergius from the smoking ruins, still miraculously intact. As a result the monastery became immensely popular as a place of pilgrimage, as it still is to this day. Between 1422 and 1427 Nikon built the Cathedral of the Trinity to house the remains of St Sergius. He himself was also sanctified, and his body lies in the Church of St Nikon, next door to the Cathedral of the Trinity.

Since its rebuilding the Monastery of St Sergius has survived every vicissitude in a way that, if not actually miraculous, is as near miraculous as makes no difference. It was never visited by plague (in 1570 200,000 persons died of plague in Moscow and its neighbourhood alone) or by cholera, which in 1892 killed more than 150,000 people in European Russia.

But perhaps the greatest miracle of all was that it was not plundered under the Bolsheviks. On 20 April 1920 a special decree was promulgated by the Council of People's Commissars establishing 'The Museum of Historical and Art Relics of the Troitsko-Sergievskaya Lavra'. The principal signatory was Stalin. It then became a museum and a refuge for savants; but by the time the English traveller, art critic and historian Robert Byron succeeded in visiting it in 1930, the savants had been dispersed, accused of plotting – 'some to manure Socialist fields, others to populate the Ural towns and lumber camps', as he put it.

Today it is the centre of Russian Orthodoxy, with a seminary and academy for young priests, and the religious capital of Russia. A day or two before setting off on the train we had visited the monastery by car from Moscow, although it is equally possible to go there by train. The coming of the train had been vigorously opposed by the Metropolitan of Moscow in 1860: 'Pilgrims would come to the

monastery in railway cars, in which all sorts of tales can be heard, and often dirty stories, whereas now they come on foot and each step is a feat pleasing to God.'

It is difficult to think of any church building more austerely beautiful than the little Cathedral of the Troitska, with its glistening walls of smooth white stone, gilded roofs and helmet dome supported by a slender, soaring drum of masonry, pierced by tall, narrow windows; or one with a more memorable interior, its darkness and mystery enhanced by the long shafts of dust-filled light that stream down into it from above.

On the day we visited it, before boarding the train, it was crowded with pilgrims, the majority of them women, mostly poor (if one can properly use such an expression to describe citizens of the USSR), the younger ones the sort of women whom I had just seen greasing points on the railways. They were buying candles from a little stall in the narthex, which also sold Soviet-made ikons, and were setting them up before the iconostasis, the screen separating the sanctuary from the main body of the church, on which the ikons are displayed, in an atmosphere heady with incense and resonant with the constant chanting of the plea *'Gospodi pomilui!'* ('Lord have mercy upon us!') It was this iconostasis that displayed until after the Revolution the 'Trinity' by the monk Andrei Rublyov, which he painted in the early part of the fifteenth century – one of the finest, perhaps the finest icon ever painted, now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

There were hundreds of pilgrims awaiting their turn to kiss the jewel-encrusted silver sarcophagus given to the monastery by Ivan the Terrible, which houses the mummified remains of Sergius and stands beneath an enormous heavy, solid silver baldacchino, presented by the Empress Anna Ivanovna. There they were, confessing their sins ('instead of greasing points near Babushkin I allowed a fellow railway worker to put his arms around my waist, as far as he was able'); paying their respects to St Nikon; drinking and taking away holy water from the miraculous well housed in a little multi-coloured chapel close by; and crossing themselves before the sarcophagus of the usurping tsar, Boris Godunov.

I was told that I might ask questions of the civil administrator of the monastery and of two young priests who sat on either side

of him, so I inquired whether the membership of the Church in the USSR was declining or increasing and what was the estimated number of members at the present time. To both of these I received the reply, 'We don't know.' After this I gave up and concentrated on the monastery.

These two priests, one of whom was deputed to act as guide – a portly young man with a fine, glossy beard which looked as if it had been given frequent goings-over with brilliantine – I did not find attractive. They were too well fed, too well groomed and too self-satisfied. Nor did I find agreeable the offhand, impatient way in which the fat one offered his ring to be kissed by pilgrims during our tour of the monastery. Admittedly, there were many who asked the right; but it was a great day for them, and he should have complied with better grace.

3

The Way to the Volga

THE *Rossiya* now left the Moscow *oblast* for that of Vladimir, two of twenty-two such *oblasts* that make up the Central Economic Region. This enormous region has a population of over 28 million people or 11 per cent of the entire population of the USSR. It is a gigantic industrial area, some of whose industries had first been set up in the seventeenth century by Peter the Great. Now it produces more than half of all the textiles in Russia, which is saying a great deal, for Russia is the world's biggest producer of cotton textiles, not to mention silk, wool, linen and synthetic fabrics.

The USSR is divided up into fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) of which the largest and most populated is the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. In addition some major ethnic and other groups have been given the status of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs). An *oblast* is at the same level of political jurisdiction as an ASSR but it is a unit without any ethnic significance which has been created solely for reasons of economic convenience.

The Central Region goes in for shoe and clothing manufacture, food processing, steel rolling, the production of every kind of machinery from diesel engines and aeroplanes to watches and cameras – in fact everything that a Central Economic Region in a capitalist country would produce and which everyone in a capitalist country takes for granted.

This is a distinctly chilly part of the world. Its northern limit is in 59°N, about the same latitude as Uranium City, Saskatchewan, far north of the effective limit of settlement in North America; temperatures can go down to −45.6°F, and below-freezing temperatures occur in every month except July and August.

Here, on the line of the Northern Railway, we were in a rural part of the Central Region. There was no doubt about that. It stretched away among woods of birch and conifer with reaches of clover and alfalfa meadow running between them. This was country which, long ago, had been covered with dense forest, but forest that had been cut again and again until it assumed its present aspect. Now, according to the Russian *Atlas of the USSR*, it was cattle and dairy country, although there was not an animal to be seen.

In it the villages were mostly long lines of *izbas*, single-storey log cabins with corrugated iron or tarred roofs. They stood behind picket fences, each with its own vegetable plot, in which the dark, sodden earth had only recently been dug, and to every six or seven cabins there was a well for drinking water, worked by a windlass; in some of these little villages, but not many, there was a wooden church.

At 11.52 am, 70 miles from Moscow, the *Rossiya* came to a halt for one minute at Alexandrov on the Seraia River, the first of the ninety-three scheduled stops it would be making on its way from Moscow to Vladivostok. As we trundled over the bridge into the station, the Cathedral of the Trinity could be seen hemmed in by factories and yards full of cans.

This was the place to which, at the end of 1564, Ivan the Terrible retired with only a few followers, to make it his temporary capital. One would have thought that the boyars, the territorial nobility, would have been delighted to have got shot of a ruler so ingenious in the infliction of cruelty; but, in fact, it was the boyars who actually travelled to Alexandrov in order to implore him to return. Which he did, setting up a regime in which even more blood flowed, culminating in 1570 in the butchery of 60,000 of the inhabitants of Novgorod, which had been rash enough to consider opening its gates to an army of invading Poles.

Novgorod, one of the oldest cities in Russia, was founded by Scandinavian Vikings, whose principal business had been trading furs with the Hanseatic and Scandinavian cities. By the twelfth century a German settlement was established at Novgorod, the 'Deutscher Hof'. It also had close commercial ties with Constantinople by way of the Dnieper; and it was strong enough to resist

the Tartars and at the same time to remain on reasonably good term with the Khan of the Golden Horde on the Volga.

Sir Jerome Horsey, an English adventurer and traveller who wa for a time Ivan's envoy to Elizabeth I until he fell into disfavou because of alleged frauds, left a profile of the Tsar which he wisely put off publishing until after his death.

> Thus much to conclude with this Emperor Ivan Vasiliwich. He was a goodlie man of person and presence, well favoured, high forehead, shrill voice, a right Sithian, full of readie wisdom, cruell, bloudye, merciless; his own experience managed by direction both his state and common-wealth affares; was sumptuously intomed in Michell Archangel church, where he, though garded daye and night, remaines a fearfull spectacle to the memory of such as pass by or heer his name spoken, who are contented to cross and bless themselves before his resurrection againe!

After Alexandrov the *Rossiya* entered the first time zone beyond Moscow, so we were one hour ahead of Moscow, three hours ahead of Greenwich. The line now crossed an open plateau on which there were big plantations of pines and broad-leafed trees. For some time the sun had been trying to break through the low cloud, and now it finally succeeded and for a few minutes bathed in an unearthly yellow light the sombre dripping woods, the fields in which the earth was all sorts of shades from black to claret, newly sown with potatoes, oats and barley, and the birch trees in the snow breaks along the line. Then the weather closed in again and everything was as before.

Just over two-and-a-half hours from Moscow the plateau began to fall away in a long, gradual descent towards the basin of the Volga, and now the *Rossiya* picked up speed, racing down past big freight trains, mostly loaded with lumber, which were slogging up the incline in the opposite direction. While it was going what seemed to me flat out, Otto made an excursion to the restaurant car, which was about half a dozen cars downhill in the direction of the engine. When he returned it was with a whole heap of depressing news. The food was as unappetizing as that being hawked up and down the train, and the kitchen was equally so. In the course of gaining this information he had nearly lost his nose and the front part of

one of his cameras when the head cook – Otto could not bring himself to call him *chef* – had slammed a door in his face. There was no beer or vodka on board, and the only wines on offer were Russian champagne at 5.40 rubles a bottle and what appeared to be some sort of dessert wine of a sinister brown colour which cost 5.25 rubles.

By now the other conductress was on duty, the more mature one with the chestnut hair. She was called Lilya and she had a charming smile which lit up the whole sleeping car – nothing like the sort to which we had already grown accustomed, which were switched on and off like 40-watt bulbs, but a real one filled with gold which was itself a welcome change from the everlasting stainless steel. She could speak a little English, but she understood much more than she spoke.

Vodka was no longer served on the *Rossiya*, Lilya said, or on most other trains in Russia. The reason was obvious. In the short time we had been in the USSR I had never seen so many drunks anywhere in the world, with the possible exception of Finland, and at such odd times of day – early in the morning, when most people are still contemplating having breakfast. In Moscow it had been commonplace to see men embracing lampposts.

I could understand about the vodka; but why no beer? Anyone would have his work cut out to get even mildly drunk on any of the Russian beer I had tasted.

'Why no beer?' I asked Lilya.

'Because there is not enough beer in Russia.'

'But why isn't there enough?'

'Because not enough is made.'

We were in the Yaroslavl *oblast* now and around a quarter past one we all opened up our 'tuck boxes' and ate delicious slices of buttered, black rye bread and cuts off a 2-foot-long German-type sausage, and drank vodka and Carlsberg beer. All these items we had bought from one of the eight Beryozka shops in Moscow, which accept foreign currency for food, drink and other items of a sort that few Russians ever see unless they are invited in, or unless they are armed with what are known as certificate rubles, a special currency issued to those who have earned money abroad, which can sometimes be obtained on the black market. We ourselves would

have done even better if we could have visited the so-called 'Bureau of Passes' at 2 Granovskovo Street, where the Soviet nobility shop or send their chauffeurs to collect what they have ordered by telephone – just like Harrods.

Just as we began this feast, as if as a warning against excessive indulgence, a completely paralytic Red Army soldier was propelled past our compartment towards the administrative part of the train at the engine end by my friend, the German-speaking ticket inspector.

While eating I kept a sharp look-out over the rather swampy country through which we were now passing for the miraculous Church of St John-upon-Ishnaya, which, in the sixteenth century, had floated along the river Ishnaya from Lake Nero, rather as if an Edwardian houseboat had broken its moorings at Henley-on-Thames and drifted down towards the weir at Hambledon Lock. Fortunately, instead of prolonging its drift indefinitely (the Ishnaya flows into the Volga, which ends up in the Caspian Sea), it had come ashore at a place called Bogozlov, all ready to be worshipped in. Unfortunately, at the very moment when the *Rossiya* flashed over the Ishnaya, I happened to be trying to recover a piece of dropped sausage from the floor and therefore failed to catch a glimpse either of Bogozlov or the Church of St John. I also missed Lake Nero, which lay somewhere on the corridor side of the train, to starboard; but by trampling on the feet of what had up to now been my friendly companions on this venture and completely disorganizing their eating arrangements I managed to reach the corridor in time to see, away to the east beyond the railway station, 140 miles from Moscow, another lot of domes, spires and crosses, this time of the city of Rostov-Yaroslavl, rising behind earthen ramparts.

I was looking fleetingly, for Rostov-Yaroslavl is not a stopping place for this train although it is one of the oldest towns in Russia. Here, in AD 862, according to the chronicle of a monk named Nestor, which is based on legend, the Slavs of Novgorod invited three Viking chieftains, Ryurik, Sineus and Trivor, to come and protect their trade routes. 'Our land is great and fruitful, but there is no order in it; come and reign and rule over us,' were the words of the invitation. And they did. On the death of his brothers two years later

Ryurik became the sole ruler. 'From them our land is called Rus,' Nestor wrote.

Rostov-Yaroslavl was situated on the bank of Lake Nero, which was the scene of an astonishing mass baptism, one of many such that took place all over Russia in the year 989, when Vladimir I, the ruler of what was then a completely pagan country, ordered the conversion of the entire population to Christianity.

Until the previous year, when he himself had been converted, Vladimir had been a monster of cruelty and depravity. He had become sole ruler after killing his brother, the ruler of Kiev, who had previously killed *his* brother.

While on a visit to Constantinople, Vladimir, already much married, married Princess Anna, younger daughter of the Emperor Romanus II, and was converted to Christianity. On his return to Kiev he ordered an idol that he had set up on a bank of the Dnieper – it represented Perun, the Slavonic god of thunder – to be overturned, beaten with staves and thrown into the river. The following day the inhabitants of Kiev and its environs were assembled on the right bank of the river. They were then ordered into the water where they were baptized by priests from Constantinople. The baptisms at Lake Nero were performed with even greater economy of effort. The entire population of the area was made to enter the water in small groups, each numbering between ten and fifteen persons; and there they waited while the priests from Constantinople – there were no Russian priests as up to this time there were no Christians – sailed or had themselves rowed around the lake, baptizing each group with a single name.

As a result of this vast operation, in the course of which the whole of Russia was Christianized without any recorded dissent on the part of the inhabitants, both Olga, his pious but terrible grandmother, who had been converted in 955, and Vladimir were canonized, which is rather like canonizing the bosses of Cosa Nostra and Union Corse.

I could go on for hours about Rostov, without having seen it for more than fifteen seconds: about the great fair that was held there every year far into the nineteenth century and which attracted thousands of Russians, Greeks, Armenians and Tartars; about

the trade in linen, vinegar, white lead, vermilion, soap, candles, leather, hemp, corn, chicory, dried sweetpeas, apothecary's herbs and enamelled pictures of saints (the manufacture of linen and the production of enamelled work, though probably not entirely devoted to sacred pictures, still persists to this day), together with the manufacture of coffee from chicory, and treacle. I could go on but now we were nearing Yaroslavl, on the last heights above the Volga. To the right, on an escarpment, factories, chemical plants and/or refineries – being scientifically illiterate I had no way of knowing which was which – were belching smoke into a sky so dark that it was immediately assimilated without trace. Whatever they were, they looked too large and important to be producing treacle or the enamelled heads of saints. More likely they were churning out some of the things Yaroslavl is famous for: motor tyres and engines, scientific instruments and paint.

To the left of the line the land fell away, lightly wooded here and there, to the basin of the Volga, a plain full, according to the *Atlas of the USSR*, of flax fields, pigs and dairy cattle, none of which were currently on view. This plain extended northwards as far as the eye could see. It was reminiscent of one of those spacious landscapes by Koninck, but without the luminous light cunningly inserted by the artist, which would have transformed this particular scene for the better, too. There was no sign of the Volga. Had the Russians with their current passion for pipes run it underground?

At 2.11 pm Moscow time and 3.11 pm local time the *Rossiya* slid into Yaroslavl through the south-eastern industrial district, which was as lovely as south-eastern industrial districts are anywhere, and came to rest in front of the station building, a large, bilious-looking structure which would have effectively blocked the view of anything that was worth looking at in its immediate vicinity. There wasn't, as I discovered when I took a quick look out of the front door.

The *Rossiya* remained immobile in the rain for ten minutes, in the course of which Otto took a picture, I think of someone with an umbrella up – one of the few of the half million people of this, the largest city after Moscow in the Central Economic Region, who was visible to the naked eye – for which he was rebuked by an official. I for my part employed what was left of the time after my

little excursion to the station building hunting for what Anton Chekhov had written upon alighting here from the train in similar weather conditions while on his way to Siberia in April 1890:

> In Yaroslavl the rain beat down so hard that I had to put on my leather coat [he wrote]. My first impression of the Volga was spoiled by rain, the tear-stained windows of the railway compartment, and the wet nose of Gurlyland (a law student of Yaroslavl), who came to meet me at the station. . . . There are many signs grossly misspelled, it is dirty, jackdaws with huge heads stalk the street.

While we were still there I read Otto the bit about photography in the 1914 Baedeker, which I thought he would appreciate:

> The taking of photographs near fortresses is naturally forbidden; and even in less important places the guardians of the law are apt to be over-vigilant. In order to escape molestation the photographer should join the *Russian Photographic Society*. Imperial châteaux and the like may not be photographed without the permission of the major-domo.

'Remind me to ask the major-domo for permission next time I photograph Brezhnev's *dacha*', he said.

Most of the interesting things in Yaroslavl, which in 1914 included some sixteen churches and monasteries and many fine old houses, are congregated in the part of the city called the 'Strelka', developed in the seventeenth century on the high ground above the right bank of the Volga, at which time Yaroslavl was renowned for its art and architecture and had a considerable cultural influence on the rest of central Russia.

Baedeker made it all sound very attractive. One could stroll along the Volga Promenade which was carried over three ravines on viaducts; take a steam-ferry across the river from one of the landing-stages ('The appearance of the town, especially as seen from the Volga, is very picturesque'); and in the evening frequent one of the restaurants on the Kazansky Boulevard, which runs along the west side of the town and 'which presents a scene of great animation, especially in the evening' – '*Restaurant Buttler*, to the north of the theatre', sounded a likely one. There one would have sat on a warm, bright night in the summer of 1914, struggling with the *St Petersburger Zeitung* and wondering whether, what with all these goings-

4

Over the River and into the Trees

THE *Rossiya* was high up on an embankment now, and from it I looked down into a little coppice on the northern outskirts of Yaroslavl which someone had omitted to cut down. In it two small boys were warming themselves at a blazing fire and smoking what I hoped were their first cigarettes – they weren't more than eight or nine – from a packet that didn't carry a Government Health Warning.

And now we were running out towards the big bridge over the Volga, the Spies' Delight, with Mischa in an agony of indecision as to which foreigner to stay with in order to ensure that no photographs were taken of this highly secret construction which was originally set up here about the time of the Boer War and was probably rebuilt soon after the First World War: Otto, whose pictures might reasonably be expected to be more attractive and rendered in colour, or Newby, whose more conventional method of aiming might produce results more useful to some foreign power getting ready to destroy it – forgetting, too, that it is almost impossible to take pictures of bridges when one is actually on them.

Meanwhile, as we chugged up to it, I zipped through *Rules for Cine-Camera Fans and Photographers*, a little brochure published by Intourist and intended to help one to survive in the USSR.

It is forbidden [it said] to photograph, film or make drawings of all kinds of military weapons and equipment and objects of a military nature, sea ports, large hydro-electric engineering installations, railway junctions, tunnels, railway and highway bridges, industrial plants, research institutes, design bureaus, laboratories, power stations, radio beacons, radio stations. It is forbidden to take pictures from a plane, to photograph or draw pictures of industrial cities on a large scale, or to take pictures and

make sketches within 25 kilometres of the border. 'Intourist' hopes that you will take home many interesting photos and films of your visit to the Soviet Union.

It is also forbidden to take photographs of any railway station, or photographs from trains, as it is to take photographs of any factory or government office, or of anyone in service uniform, without special permission.

By the time I had tried to figure out whether these regulations applied to station platforms, on which everyone seemed to object to photographs being taken, or to the trains themselves, provided that they weren't loaded with tanks or hydrogen bombs, and what size paper I would need to make a large-scale drawing of an industrial city, we were well out on the bridge, high above Europe's longest river, here several hundred miles from its source in a swamp in the hills north-west of Moscow. Now, some six weeks after the break-up of the ice, which in this part covers the river from the end of November to the middle of April, it looked like Brown Windsor soup.

To the right, as the *Rossiya* rumbled slowly through the webs of girders in the spans, the oldest part of Yaroslavl came into view on the high, right western bank of the Volga, what the people who live along it call the Nagorny Bereg, the Hill Bank; the low, left, eastern bank which we were now approaching being known as the Pugovoy Bereg, the Meadow Bank. These banks are like this all the way down the middle and lower Volga, as far south as the salt earth steppes of the Caspian Depression, which form the real boundary between Russia in Europe and Russia in Asia.

Now the sun came out, and the whole scene was transformed. The white steamers tied up at the landing stages, to which an *izvoshtchik* driver would have taken me from the station in 1914 for 50 kopecks plus the customary tip, were as spick-and-span as yachts moored in a river not more than half a mile wide, now, in the eye of the sun, flowing away, slowly and majestically into the mist, down towards the Caspian Sea.

If all the tributaries of this river – which drains an area larger than the whole of France, Germany, Italy and Britain put together – are delineated in black ink on white paper without any extraneous

detail, as they have been by Soviet cartographers, the effect is a wind-blasted thorn tree devoid of leaves and something like 112 miles high. Its roots (its delta) are in the Caspian Sea. Its trun (the main stream before it receives any real tributaries) is some 37 miles long, with an almost right-angled bend in it at Volgogra and is almost branchless until the river Torgun joins it from th east. And above this, reaching upwards and outwards for anothe 750 miles or so as the crow flies, is an increasingly dense and tortuou labyrinth of branches (the tributaries of the Volga) from whic sprout countless thorns (the lesser streams that feed them). Know ing all this, I thought it would look bigger. It was, it's true, a wide river, but not as grand as I'd expected. I would like to have seen it lower down.

Now the *Rossiya* was running off the bridge, which was guarded, as are all the bigger bridges and all the tunnels on the Railway – this one by a very small sentry in a very large greatcoat, who looked as if he could do with a spring clean, and who was giving himself an airing outside his sentry box, a sight that would have cheered the Pentagon. From here I could look down the embankment on to the low-lying Meadow Bank of the river, on to orchards, fields of what looked like heavy brown clay which was sown with something, probably potatoes or flax, and on to the rooftops of wooden houses which were painted in shades of ochre, ginger and the same dark brown as the earth: a scene that a few moments ago would have been gloomy in the extreme, now transformed by the brilliant early afternoon sun. Could it be that spring had really come at last?

Chekhov too took a less jaundiced view of Russia as soon as the weather took a turn for the better. In April 1890 when he was travelling, there was no through road to the Urals and work on the Trans-Siberian had not yet begun. Instead, after he had reached Yaroslavl, he boarded a steamer to go to Kazan, where he boarded yet another steamer which took him to Perm.

> On waking I saw the sun [Chekhov wrote to his sister]. The Volga is not bad: water meadows, sun-drenched monasteries, white churches, an amazing expanse; wherever you look it's cosy, inviting you to sit down and cast a line . . . now and then a shepherd's horn is heard. White seagulls hover over the Volga. . . .

'What I want to know,' I said to Mischa (never one to let sleeping dogs lie), 'is why your government gets so steamed up about bridges. This book I've got describes every bridge on the Trans-Siberian Railway in detail, and there are photographs of all the really big ones. I know we're not in Siberia yet; but I bet there's another book with pictures of all the bridges on the way to the Urals. Anyway, what difference does it make? They all get photographed from satellites.'

'I have never seen such a book,' he said.

'Well, would you like to look at it? Here!'

'I do not want to look at it.'

'Well, just listen to this then: "At the 1328 verst* the line crosses the river . . ."'

'Which river?'

'The Ob. Would you mind if I get on with it, as it's rather long?'

> 'The line crosses the river by a bridge 372.50 sahzens† long having seven spans. The I and VI openings are 46.325 sahzens, the II, IV, 53.65 sahzens, and III and V, 53.15 sahzens. The upper girders of the bridge are on the Herber's system.'
>
> I'm going to cut it short: 'The stone abutments of the bridge are laid on granite rocks, the right pier, No. 1, near the bank is not supported on a caisson, the other piers, Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are laid on caissons sunk to a depth of 1.81 to 3.40 sahzens below the lowest water level. The minimum elevation of the trusses above the low water mark is 8.23 sahzens and 4.42 above its highest level . . .

'Look, there's an awful lot more: you don't want me to go on do you? It's terribly boring.'

'You should not be in possession of such a book,' said Mischa, severely. 'Such a book is a confidential publication.'

'But this is the official Russian guide to the Trans-Siberian Railway, published in English in 1900. And it's a reprint. I bought it in Britain a couple of weeks ago. Look, it's even got a picture of the Boss.' And I tried to show him the frontispiece, a photograph of that supreme twit His Majesty Nicholas Alexandrovich, Autocrat of All the Russias, Most August President of the Committee of the

* 1 *verst*=0.663 mile; 3500 feet

† 1 *sahzen*=7 feet

Siberian Railway, without whose untiring efforts to bring about the Revolution I would probably not have been sitting here on the *Rossiya* arguing with Mischa.

'You should not have brought this book into the country. You should have declared it to the Customs authorities.'

(A facsimile of the *Guide to the Great Siberian Railway*, first published in St Petersburg in 1900, has been published by David and Charles of Newton Abbot, Devon, which is how I came to acquire it, it being otherwise a rare work.)

'No one asked us to declare anything. We've got *Vogue*, *Harper's and Queen*, the *Observer*, *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Time Magazine*, Italian *Panorama* and *Country Life*. We thought you'd be interested. Anyway, it was you who took us through Customs.'

'You shouldn't have all those either.'

'That's a fine thing to say when I've already given you my *Observer*.'

The woods closed in again, and so did the weather. The *Rossiya* was heading almost due north now by Otto's car compass, after having been on a north-easterly course ever since leaving Moscow. To the left was the highway to Archangel, where the driver of CHS2 would end up unless he took some avoiding action pretty soon.

Archangel, terminus of the Northern Railway from Moscow, the great fishing and timber port, is near the mouth of the northern Dvina. The Archangel *oblast* is the biggest timber producer in the North-West Economic Region, which is itself the larger wood producer in the USSR. Not even eastern Siberia, which is more than two-and-a-half times as large, can equal it. The northern Dvina is the principal vehicle by which this timber, in the form of huge rafts, is brought down to Archangel from the unimaginable interior (although some survivors of the logging camps in it have left accounts of what it is like) during the summer months. From Archangel, having been cut up during the winter into more manageable lengths, it is exported all over the world. I found it an awe-inspiring thought, and one to which I had reverted frequently during our journey, that I only had to take the wrong sort of photograph, hit Mischa on the nose or say 'Fuck the USSR' in

public – the last two outrages preferably at the same time – to find myself engaged in tree-felling on the northern Dvina or other rivers in the region for the rest of my life. But soon we rolled into Danilov, and I knew we were on the right line for the Urals.

Mischa (whom I had not the slightest desire to hit on the nose), worn out by his duties as policeman, interpreter, nursemaid, general factotum and purveyor of filleted information, all of which tasks he performed to the best of his ability, was asleep. I must say I wouldn't have had his job with us for all the tea in Russia. How he had come to accept it was a mystery. It must have been a carrot of the kind that has so often been dangled before me during my own life with the promise of bigger carrots, which, if one accepts it, leads to a life of misery as an employee of the Carrot Marketing Board.

Feeling like schoolchildren whose teacher has failed to turn up owing to laryngitis, fallen arches or the heebie-jeebies, the three of us skipped down into the fine drizzle that was currently descending on Danilov Station.

In front of the station house two ancient, pear-shaped ladies dressed in black coats, black felt boots and white headscarves, who in Britain would have been considered ripe to be carted off to a geriatric ward if they so much as put their noses outside their doors, were vigorously digging and hoeing the dark earth in the station flower beds, at the same time talking away to one another nineteen to the dozen.

Meanwhile, other equally ancient protagonists of free enterprise, who were certainly old enough to remember the real thing, were peddling tulips and white peonies in pots to the passengers, who purchased them eagerly. Lilya bought a couple and hung them in wire holders in the corridor of our coach. It would have been difficult to imagine such a happening on British Rail, or any other Rail for that matter; less difficult to imagine it in Russia, because all Slavonic peoples are mad about flowers to the point of sometimes breaching the law in order to acquire them. (At the age of seventy-seven my mother-in-law, in London on a visit to us from the Carso, near Trieste, managed to take extensive cuttings at the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, while 'lagging behind', ostensibly because

of her sciatica. These cuttings did very well on her native heath if one can use the expression to describe something that is about 99.999 per cent limestone; and their progress was noted with interest by a son of the Curator when, some years later, he dropped in by chance and was invited to stay the night while down there on a visit.)

Danilov Station had a small shop. It was about the size of the smallest sort of ticket office but crammed with jars of rice, biscuits, earth-covered objects which looked like ginseng roots but were obviously something more mundane, jars labelled 'KρK' in Cyrillic, which contained various sorts of vegetables steeped in vinegar, little bowls of smoked fish, matches, blocks of soap and the proprietress herself, large and jolly, whose face entirely filled the small window which was the only means by which anyone could do business with her. No sooner had the train come to a halt than she was besieged by eager customers to whom the mere idea of taking their turn in a queue was something they had left Moscow to forget. It was only by a display of equally powerful Slavonic determination that Wanda managed to buy some honey biscuits, and even so it took the best part of the sixteen minutes that the *Rossiya* remained in Danilov.

If I had been attempting to buy honey biscuits, or anything else in competition with about fifty Russians, and at the same time trying to look up the equivalents of 'Excuse me!' and 'Sorry!' in my phrase book but continually turning up expressions equally useless such as 'Good evening. I'd like a table for three', I would have been a non-starter. Instead I went to say goodbye to Czech engine, Model CHS2; but by the time I arrived at the head of the train it had already been replaced by another Czechoslovakian model, a CHS4, which looked much the same to me, whose interest in engines went out of the window at the end of the steam age and to whom any subsequent development in this field is about as exciting as a new car taken in part exchange for one of the same sort, traded in after two years in order to save buying a new battery.

Nevertheless, I waved in friendly fashion to the crew, who presumably didn't see me as they didn't wave back. Mind you, you don't get as much change out of diesel engine drivers in Britain

today as you used to from the drivers of the big steamers when I was a boy, who were always ready to listen to my childish prattle and on one or two memorable occasions even allowed me to sling a shovelful or so of Welsh nuts into the firebox unaided, an act which, today, would immediately bring about the immediate paralysis of the whole of British Rail's Western Region, and all the other regions, on which the threat of non-union labour raises its hideous head.

Then just as I raised my faithful Nikkonos to take a shot of this, to me, boring engine, a charming local official told me in easy-to-understand language, using only one hand, to desist.

After tying a knot in my handkerchief to remind me to ask Intourist what was the position *vis-à-vis* photographing locomotives, old ladies and people sheltering under umbrellas, and if the response was a thumbs-down would they please arrange to have all three added to the 'Forbidden' list before I passed this way again, I said hullo to a rather somnolent horse that was standing outside the station, harnessed to an unsprung, two-wheeled cart, otherwise a *telega*, an instrument of torture in use since tsarist times. I also said good afternoon to its owner, who was comparatively full of fight. Nothing from the horse, but I did get a grunt from the owner, which was better than a slap in the eye with a wet fish, I suppose; although this kind of thing is hurting to a person like me who has been brought up to say 'Sorry' when someone treads on my toes in the lift.

This individual, who was actually old enough to know how to speak, being all of thirty-eight, was sitting on the box of the *telega* and wearing a piece of headgear popular in the fifties and sixties, at a time when the pigeon-chest, minimal lapel suits were also very much a vogue with the boys in the garment industry, door-to-door salesmen, bailiffs, morticians and other men-of-good-cheer: that is to say, a hat with a minimal brim and a vaguely Tyrolean crown.

The difference between those prototypes and this particular model was that it was constructed not of felt, nor of plastic, as was some of the headgear in the good old days of Mr Khruschev, nor of cardboard, with YIPPEE! I LOVE EVERYBODY! written large

across the front, but of wood shavings, this station being on the borders of the lumber country.

'Did you photograph that man with a horse and cart outside the station, the one who was wearing a wooden hat?' I asked Otto, who never missed much, when we were once more safely aboard the *Rossiya*.

'I didn't even try,' he said, gloomily. 'It's all impossible. I've a good mind to give up and go home. All I want to do is ...'

'I know,' I said, having travelled with photographers before, '"take smashing pictures". Well, maybe we're on the wrong train. I'm beginning to think that we should be on the *Settebello*, or the *Train Bleu*, or even the 8.18 am from Wimbledon by way of Earlsfield, Clapham Junction and Vauxhall to Waterloo, something with local colour on board which you don't have to join a society to photograph. Anyway, give us enough time to get our bags out too, if you do decide to leave.'

Now the *Rossiya* was running past a village built along one side of a dirt road, parallel to the line. The houses were very small, built of solid tree trunks with gardens to scale, much the same size as gardens backing on the line in an inner London suburb; but here, in the depths of vast, rural Russia, seeming a bit stingy. And there were goats on long, shiny chains, ponds full of ducks and squads of officious geese who hissed malevolently at the *Rossiya*.

We were now on the southern fringes of the Forest of Forests, which more or less covers the whole of Europe and Asia north of the 55th parallel, from the Atlantic coast of Norway to the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk, an arm of the Pacific: a wilderness of pine, fir, spruce, larch and in its southern parts, through which we were now travelling, of hardy deciduous trees such as birch, aspen and alder.

In those parts of the forest that lie in Norway, Sweden, Lapland and around Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula, the forest extends far north of the Arctic Circle to 70°N and beyond.

Not counting those huge expanses of the forest in Finland and Scandinavia, the USSR still has the world's largest forest, covering over 2 billion acres; or, to put it another way, it accounts for a quarter of the entire forest area of the world. If the whole tract in

European Russia is then subtracted, what remains east of the Urals in Siberia and the Soviet Far East is still one-third larger than the whole of the United States. Of all the trees in the forest east of the Urals, 38 per cent are Siberian larch. I began to think that I should have packed a chain saw.

About an hour out from Danilov, we entered the *oblast* of Kostroma. According to my books the country we were passing through was good for flax-growing, cattle and pigs, although up to now I had not seen a single specimen of either. Perhaps they hibernated in this part of the world and still had their heads down. One could scarcely blame them. Here, in the woods of Kostroma, where silver birches far outnumbered conifers, later in the year, if there was enough sun, innumerable fungi would be emerging under the trees and on the fringes of the clearings, popping up in the mysterious, unpredictable fashion of fungi everywhere, which obey such abstruse laws that they sometimes drive even the most experienced fungi hunters round the bend. Of these some would be edible, some inedible because they have a nasty taste, or cause diarrhoea or disturbing visions, and some would be downright poisonous.

Of the poisonous varieties that occur here, as they do in other parts of the world, none are more lethal than the terrible *Amanita phalloides*, which comes in various shades between white, the pallor of a sickly child, and lemon. Even a taste of *Amanita phalloides* is a sentence of death, as lingering and awful as that from rabies. Until very recently attempts to effect a cure invariably ended in failure. In Czechoslovakia, another huge producer of fungi, one treatment was to feed the victim raw, chopped rabbit brains; but doctors noted for their acumen soon realized that it was difficult in the pre-delirium stage of the illness to get the patient to co-operate by ingesting them.

Of the edible varieties none would be more delicious than *Boletus edulis*, known to the Russians as *borovik*, to the French as *cèpe*, to the Germans as *Steinpilz* and to the Italians as *porcino nero*. One of the many varieties of *Boletus*, not all of which are edible, it is a fungus with a thick, squat stalk, tapering from the base, like the trunk of an old, pollarded tree, and sometimes so thick that the stalk is wider than the cap.

When these delicacies finally appear, able-bodied Russians everywhere with the right kind of woodland within range, which include the *dacha* country around Moscow, are out in force, armed wit baskets (bags, especially plastic bags, are no good as fungi soon g off when deprived of air) and with sticks with which to root among fallen leaves which often conceal them from view.

Forgive this digression. I may not currently be in sufficiently good training to give Anatoly Karpov a good game of chess; but I will take on anyone in the *borovik*, *Steinpilz*, *porcino* or *cèpe* stakes.

At around 5 pm we came to a halt at a place called Buy on the upper waters of the Kostroma River, a navigable tributary of the Volga. Behind what would have been the guard's van on a British train, the caboose on an American one, but which on the *Rossiya* was simply the last coach of the train, with a fine view of the permanent way aft through the glass in what was literally the back door, the sky was now clearing rapidly to the cerulean blue of the blue domes of Zagorsk.

There was nothing to be seen of Buy except the station, which was one of the smaller variety, or of any of the 30,000 inhabitants, apart from about a dozen characters who in tsarist times might well have been Maris or Tcheremisses, or Tartars, but who now were more likely to be Russians. Today the Maris, who are Finnish, have their own Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic between Gorkiy and Kazan, although only 44 per cent of the population are Maris. The rest are Russians.

Like most of the places on this stretch of line, the inhabitants of Buy devoted themselves to the timber business and to making various wooden objects, as well as to producing cheese, chemicals, fertilizer and fibre from flax. Here Lilya bought us a *vatrushka*, a tart lined with sour cream.

Attracted by the sight and/or smell of this freshly baked object, a small boy of about seven, although still in the thumb-sucking stage, appeared in the doorway of our compartment where the four of us, Mischa having awoken from his siesta, were preparing to demolish it. I recognized him as the son of an unforthcoming couple two compartments away who had given me the same treatment

when I said good morning to them as had the train drivers at Danilov.

'What's your name?' Wanda asked him four times in her Slovene Russian, having discovered that the phrase book omits this useful phrase even under 'Dating', where you have to make do with 'You've dropped your handkerchief!' (I know, I'm trying to get rid of it!) or, 'What time is your last train?' If you said that to a girl on the *Rossiya* she would think you were trying to get fresh, or had escaped from a home, and as like as not she would call the conductress, unless she was the conductress.

No reaction. This child had the same, spine-chilling way of observing the world about him and filing the information away in his noddle for future and probably disastrous use as the small, pop-eyed one with a sorbo ball, the midget von Stroheim, in Carol Reed's *The Third Man*.

'What's your name?' Mischa, who also had a son, asked him, but even he had to say it three times before this miniature traveller accepted the fact that they both worked for different branches of the same firm (and I was surprised that he did this without the production of the oblong red pass); upon which the combination began working, things began to click inside the cranium and the door opened a few fractions of an inch. It seemed to me that Mischa should have been getting him down on a short list for The Agency intake of cub reporters in about 1990. 'His name is Vladimir,' he reported eventually.

Wanda cut him a slice of *vatrushka*, using one of those murderous French folding knives with '1er Choix-Opinel-La Main Couronnée' stamped on the handle, which in aircraft can travel only in hold luggage unless you want to be given the treatment, and which she happened to have about her – nice class of girl I married. By the time she'd finished dismembering it and we'd all had a slice, including Lilya, it was time for someone to write the lyrics for a song beginning 'Goodbye Vatrushka, you delicious sour sweet ...'

The only time when time flies on a train is when you're either asleep or eating, so by the time we had finished the *vatrushka* and Lilya had brought more tea and Vladimir had been given the interrogation by Mischa (which was painfully slow as no truth drugs

or red-hot irons were available), which elucidated the informatio from him that his father was an engineer, his mother – the one wit the sourer face of the two – was a schoolteacher, and that they wer on their way home to Novosibirsk, I had failed to see a river calle the Veski, as well as Lake Galichskoye and the town of Galich itsel which Batu 'Watch-it-Come-Down' Khan had demolished in 1228 It seemed an appropriate moment to give up for a bit and have som sleep, and after making sure that CHS4 was still pounding awa up front I did so.

By 6 pm I was awake again. The *Rossiya* was running almost du east. It was a golden evening, with a gentle wind blowing from the south. The trees in the forest were mostly tall, slender silver birches and their leaves were shimmering in the sun. Once we stopped, and so by a coincidence did the terrible music and singing that was relayed throughout the train from the radio room, and which, even though we kept it permanently switched off, nothing could prevent from seeping into our compartment from the one next door. Then, for some minutes it was so quiet that with the window open one could hear the wind sighing in the tree tops, like the sound of the sea running up on a distant shore. Once we passed a village with a wooden church with a white dome where two boys on one bicycle tried to race the train and rode into a ditch; once we saw a girl driving some geese home; otherwise we saw no one at all in the country we passed through.

At 6.56 pm we came into Nicola Pomola, which sounded more like a beautiful Russian spy than a railway station and was just as elusive. Although the name of the station appeared in the official timetable as a stopping place, it did not figure on the official route map. It was memorable also because on the common land on the outskirts we saw the first herd of cows since leaving Moscow.

Here, we stopped for one minute while two heavily laden ladies who could have done with the services of a porter clambered aboard. This station, as did so many others all along the route, had a larger-than-life, silver-painted statue of the founder on it in what one was later to recognize as one of a number of standard poses. This one, so far as I can remember, was '*Hi! Taxi!*'

Out beyond Nicola Pomola, as the sun went down the wind died

way and the pale trunks of the birch trees closest to the line ccentuated the darkness of the forest behind them. But it was not ll forest. There were big, green clearings in it, meadows in which the grass was short, as if it had already been cropped by sheep, only there were no sheep.

In the settlements along the line – they could scarcely be called villages – the lights were on behind the drawn blinds in the *izbas*. There was not a breath of wind and the smoke from the cooking fires rose straight into the air.

Then, with the sun gone at last, the afterglow illuminated the pools and ponds in the marshy ground near the line over which long swathes of mist were forming. How beautiful Russia was at this moment. Soon the forest closed in again, dark and eerie, and now the sky above it was huge and pale, the colour of pearls. And so it would remain until dawn, the perpetual gloaming of a spring night in the latitude of Juneau, Alaska; Dunnet Head, the most northerly point of mainland Britain; Stavanger in Norway; and, allowing a degree or so, Cape Farewell, the southernmost extremity of Greenland.

Supper was a re-run of lunch, more or less. There was no room for all four of us to dine together, as Otto and I had each contrived to make a shambles of our respective compartments, in which our companions had very little to look forward to – he with camera bodies and lenses and motor drives all over the place, but worst of all with his tripod which had a Nikon with a 50/300 mm zoom lens stuck on the end of it, and which now stood permanently in the space between the two bunks – about as convenient for Mischa as having a Red Indian erect a wigwam in it – and I, with my now-unfurled maps which kept on falling on the floor and rolling themselves up; my twenty-one assorted books, including The Notebook; my cameras and, Wanda's contribution, the rather sticky honey biscuits with which the folding table was now covered.

In the course of this repast, Otto and Mischa, with no gentle female company to distract them from the bottle, managed to get slightly tiddly. I, on the other hand, with Wanda in charge of the drinking arrangements and determined not to let me get drunk in Russia and make a fool of myself, had failed to become even mildly

elevated; but after a while the two of them joined us in our compartment and soon I found myself beginning, albeit slowly, to catch up.

I was, I must say, rather surprised at Mischa, not for any moral reasons but simply because he had been at considerable pains to tell us, while we were still in Moscow, in what I now identified as his 'the Lubyanka-is-some-kind-of-office-block' voice, that Russians drank vodka only with meals.

At first everything was very genteel, everyone talking about how we could all work together to make the trip better (or was it the world?) etc. Then the Second World War came up like a storm on the horizon and we would have been well advised to have begun digging slit trenches among the mattresses; and then one thing led to another and, oh dear! Mischa was saying how rotten Britain had been to leave Czechoslovakia to be overrun by Hitler in 1939.

'Almost as bad as Stalin making a non-aggression pact with a bunch of Fascists' I heard myself saying, like an actor thinking about how long the show will run, and will he be able to pay the gas bill if it doesn't, while spouting, except that in this case I was thinking how much nicer Russia was outside the window.

'He was playing for time,' Mischa said. He had very thick, dark eyebrows which were now meeting in the middle and he looked more angry than he probably was, at least I hoped so. 'Stalin was a great realist.'

'Do you think it was right, what he did?'

'The end justifies the means.'

'Lissun, Mischa,' Wanda said, already bored with this verbal ping-pong among persons already patently half-cut. 'What is your definition of fascism?'

'Fascism,' said Mischa, 'is a regime which, for the purpose of attaining complete power, eliminates everything which gets in its way.'

'Tank you,' said Wanda, in her best fractured English, 'that's what I tought you said about communism – about the end justifying the means.'

And she leaned back in the corner of her bunk with the air of

a lawyer in one of those thirties B-movies, when he sits down and says, 'Mr Attorney, *your witness!*'

Up to this time, and for a little while longer, Otto has kept out of this dreary business, which is the sort of thing sixth-formers used to go on about over cocoa; but quite soon, after some fairly straight talk about the Freedom of the Individual, which raises the temperature some more, the conversation switches to the Jews, and Mischa is not too nice about them either, forgetting present company.

Now Otto, who normally wouldn't hurt a fly unless it walked on one of his Leicaflexes, and who only wants to take smashing pictures, as he has already told me a number of times (and will continue to do so throughout this trip), being Jewish, or partly Jewish, goes into action with arms metaphorically flailing, rather like Kali, the ten-armed Hindu deity who is represented with a hideous and terrible countenance, dripping with blood, encircled with snakes and hung around with skulls and human heads.

Deciding that I had done enough to spoil Anglo-Russian and German-Russian relationships for a decade, not forgetting Wanda's own attempt to wreck any *entente* between Yugoslavia and the USSR that might still exist, I bowed out, mumbling something about having to go to the lavatory.

Instead, I went on past it to the end of the car where the exit was and where, by some lucky chance, one of the girls had forgotten to lock the window.

While I was leaning out of it, inspiring the pure air of Russia and on the rebound expelling the fumes of demon vodka on the environment, the *Rossiya* came to a halt to let a big train of brand-new Uniflex containers from the United States go past to the west, after which it continued to remain where it was for what seemed ages but was probably not more than ten minutes.

From it came the sounds of sporadic singing, distant laughter, the hiss of the samovar and the rumbling of acrimonious voices from our compartment, like a thunderstorm that is almost over but refuses to go away completely. Outside the forest was completely silent. There was no wind sighing in the tree tops, and not a scream, howl, growl, hoot, grunt, groan, whistle or any other sound from the creatures reputed to inhabit it: wolves, great grey owls, northern

bats, Eurasian ground and flying squirrels, brown bears, stoats, mink, marten, foxes and capercailie, to name a few. Nevertheless, I was very impressed by this forest. In theory, if I chose my alignment to avoid settlements and labour camps and the big pulp and paper complexes around Kotlas, it should be possible to travel northwards from where we were on the railway, through this forest belt, here about 450 miles wide, then across another 200 miles or so of mossy, fearfully marshy tundra, to reach the head of the Kanin Peninsula on the shores of the Barents Sea, more than 600 miles north of the railway, without encountering a single human being. With which thought, having heard the party break up in our compartment, I returned to find Wanda, who could have worked the halls in vaudeville as a quick-strip artiste, already in bed and muring something that sounded like 'stupid bogger', while working hard at going to sleep. Whether she was taking about me or Mischa wasn't clear. I didn't ask.

It was obvious, I thought to myself as I undressed, that things were not going to be easy. Perhaps they would be impossible. How sensible I had been to bring Wanda; for a moment I almost made the mistake of calling her Wendy – it was difficult not to think of the male members of the party as The Lost Boys. Our most acrimonious matrimonial difficulties in the course of a not uneventful life could only barely compete with what had already taken place in our compartment on the *Rossiya*.

I was woken by what sounded like a flight of Kamikazis being given the multiple pom-pom treatment off Okinawa, which immediately elevated the top half of me into a vertical position.

The *Rossiya* had come to a halt and a freight train was racing past it in the opposite direction. It was made up of coal waggons, refrigerator cars, boxcars, flat cars loaded with tree trunks, steel girders, generators, transformers, tractors, unidentifiable objects covered with tarpaulins, and more of the brightly coloured containers that had come overland from Nakhodka in the Soviet Far East, our ultimate destination; and as each individual piece of rolling stock flashed past our partially opened window it went *whumph*.

How extensive was this train going to be, I wondered, as it went on *whumph-whumphing*, and I had counted to forty-six, having

missed the first ones. Was it going to be longer than the American one that I had looked up in the *Guinness Book of Records*, which had been assembled on the Norfolk and Western Railroad in 1967 on the Iaeger, West Virginia, to Portsmouth, Ohio, stretch, which was about 4 miles, six diesel engines and 500 coal wagons from end to end and weighed nearly 42,000 tons? It seemed unlikely that the Russians, in whom the spirit of emulation burns with the intensity of one of their own 600,000 candle-power xenon arc lamps (another record), would not have been spurred to put together something even longer. I hoped they hadn't. If they had many trains like that on the go we wouldn't see much of Siberia from our north-facing compartment.

But almost immediately the last car flashed past. It was probably a fifty-waggon train, weighing altogether about 4500 tons and for all its *whumphing* probably not travelling at more than about 30 miles an hour. On the tablecloth, among the honey biscuits and other debris, was a souvenir, a proof that it wasn't a ghost train – a small, shiny nugget of coal, the size of a diamond in a generous engagement ring.

It was 11.20 pm. I had only been asleep for twenty minutes, which included an eight-minute stop at Atsvezh, to which no map which I possessed referred.

I abandoned the idea of going back to bed. Sleep was not what I had come for. I switched on my bed-head light and opened a map, inadvertently rustling it.

'Quiet!' said Wanda. I felt like asking her if she had heard the freight train.

The next station of any consequence would be Kotelnich, the junction for the line to Gorkiy, formerly Nizhny Novgorod, now a city of over a million people, the seventh largest in the USSR. At 11.36 the train stole, ghost-like, into Kotelnich. The station house was a charming building, the sort of place where, before the Revolution, a grand duke might have got down to go shooting. In front of it there was a garden surrounded by white-painted, ornamental iron railings, in which fruit trees with whitewashed trunks grew. It was difficult to believe that somewhere on the other side of this rustic facade, which seemed likely to produce a chorus of peasant

girls in pigtails and embroidered blouses, there were factories producing machinery.

Here, Irina, the blonde, let down the steps, without which it is almost impossible for anyone but an acrobat to get in or out of a Russian train (unless there is a built-up platform, which is the exception rather than the rule in Russia and Siberia), and herself got down on the line; but no one left the train and no one joined it. Apart from one or two other conductresses there was not another human being in sight.

At the end of the statutory three minutes stopping time the train left as quietly as it had arrived, without so much as a hoot or a whistle; so quietly that I wondered if the driver and his mate had got down to stretch their legs, having forgotten to put the brakes on and we were now off on a down-gradient, heading for a spectacular disaster – possibly on the bridge over the Vyatka River, up which, by way of the Kama and the Volga, the Novgorodians had pioneered a route in the twelfth century to Kirov, which was the next treat in store.

However it was not to be. As our car drew abreast of the station entrance I saw the station-master standing rigidly at attention in full uniform and pointing a baton at the train, rather in the manner of an imperious monarch banishing a subject to Siberia, which in a sense was what he was doing. This is the official way in which station-masters-and-mistresses (in which Russian railways abound) indicate that the doors are closed, the train has its full entitlement of wheels, the driver and his mate are in the cab, and all is well.

5

How the Railway Came to Be Built

'THE question of the construction of the Great Siberian Railway, which for a third of a century had occupied the attention of the Government and society, was now settled, representing the most important event of the century, not only in our country, but in the whole world.' Thus says the *Guide to the Great Siberian Railway* in 1900.

As I sat in my seat gazing out over Russia, I could not help wondering how and why they had started to build this immensely long railway line, the thought of which must have daunted all but the bravest. As I hunted through the guides and books that I had brought with me, I found that it was a complicated business, for the line had begun first at each end and had then proceeded in fits and starts piecemeal in the middle, these middle sections running from main river to main river. For many years people crossed Siberia using railway, steamboat, horse-drawn *tarantass* or sledge and railway again, zigzagging along as best they could.

The first passenger line in Russia was built in 1837 and ran between St Petersburg, where the Tsar ruled, and his country seat, Tsarskoye Selo, a distance of 14 miles. Later on it was extended an extra mile to Pavlovsk, where there was another magnificent royal palace. There, a terminus with buffet and ballroom was built. The train ride to it became a very popular outing for the citizens of St Petersburg, and provoked a famous remark by the very anti-train Minister of Finance, E. Kamkrin, to the effect that in other countries railways led to industrial centres, in Russia to a tavern.

In 1851, after nine years of technical difficulty and considerable suffering on the part of the serfs who built it (as many as 50,000