

Dining on Russian Polaroids

It was 1981. I was a scientist working for a large natural resource company, and was, along with my boss, visiting a factory in rural Tennessee. We had gone there to try to persuade management and workers, people who knew the real world, that our inventive skills could, for a fee, be put to work to improve their lives. Following our meetings, and with time on our hands, we drove to what was left of downtown Memphis. Here I dutifully trailed my new boss through a shabby department store, avoiding controversial subjects, and indulgently engaging his interest in things, especially things electronic and photographic. This Memphis department store bestowed the SX-70 Polaroid camera that some months later accompanied me to Russia, the USSR as it was in those days. I saw it half buried in odds and ends. A \$20 sticker. To me it was a miracle of ingenuity, with its collapsible body, aspheric optics so far ahead of its time, and ultrasonic rangefinder, capable, bat-like, of focusing in complete darkness before magnesium threads in a disposable flash bar ignited. Most importantly, the camera had a reputation for taking excellent pictures, with that wonder of all wonders, Polaroid instant film. If nothing else, owning it was my way of honouring a triumph of inventiveness.



Some months later I flew to Stockholm to rendezvous with a container of logs from New Brunswick. Atlantic Canada was undergoing a particularly severe infestation of spruce budworm, which rotted the insides of trees. I was on a mission to evaluate an immense Swedish log-scanning machine which, it was thought, might distinguish good from bad wood entering Canadian sawmills. My Polaroid camera, along with a generous supply of film, was with me to bear witness, to gather evidence - images of sectioned logs to be neatly pasted alongside the scanner's encephalograph-like output in the report I was to write.

I had always enjoyed travel, and the proximity of Helsinki, Tallin and Leningrad were not lost on me. Thus it came about that I journeyed to the USSR with my Polaroid camera and the numerous packets of film remaining from my lumber duties. A boat took me from Helsinki to Tallin, a service that owed much of its business to the attraction of low priced Estonian vodka. Weekends were especially busy. I befriended a young Finnish woman, and we had intense conversation about cross-country skiing in Lapland under the light of stars and the moon. Then I invited her to the Estonian ballet, Swan Lake, loosely translated in the Russian programme, as Swan Pond. But she declined my offer of cakes after the performance, and so it happened that on the 12th of December 1981 I stood up in a Tallin coffee house and took a Polaroid photograph of the cakes I had been served with the intention of presenting it to her the following morning by way of compensation for her having missed the real thing.

Within seconds of the camera's flash I was mobbed with desperate requests for portraits by a clientele steeped in the privations of a Soviet winter. The demand was clearly insatiable, even with my generous supply of film. At this point I felt I had two choices; to abandon the cake and run, or to impose order on the situation. Without a word of Estonian or Russian, the unique character of Polaroid photography served as my language for convincing an apprehensive waitress to pose in exchange for a photograph. What could be more persuasive than the astonishing materialization of a photographed serving alongside its actuality? And the uproar notwithstanding, this was perceived as our arrangement - waitress and photographer.



I had found my project. My creative instinct had sensed there was something not to be squandered in having a Polaroid camera and film on such a trip. They were not to be wasted on snapshots or pictures that could perfectly well be taken with the 35 mm camera I also carried. So began an obsessive pursuit of food and waitresses during my week in Russia. I eschewed routine meals. Mine must be as varied as possible, from the most humble to the palatial. That is how I saw it. Stubbornness took hold of me, not to miss an opportunity, not to hold back, not to be timid. I charmed the uniformed lady who minded a large yellow samovar on the Tallin to Leningrad train. She minded me too. For as I travelled, Intourist, the Soviet Union's well oiled tourism machine managed my progress from boat to hotel, from hotel to train to hotel, and finally to my airport departure. This centralized "hospitality" agency, created 50 years ago by Josef Stalin, organized everything in meticulously detail, not least, keeping a watchful eye on potentially subversive visitors. Intourist had assigned the samovar lady responsibility for my safe rail passage to Leningrad. I can still see it in her eyes. The responsibility. It was after spending a night in her carriage in the company of several Hungarians, young men who questioned my sanity in visiting a place where they dreamed of escape, that I realized I could not get lost. Intourist would be there for me.



And so it was in the pre-dawn dimness of Leningrad's vitebsk railway station that a woman in a heavy fur coat faced me as I stepped off the train. "Dr. Lucas follow me," she commanded. I was led to a large black car, the door was politely opened, and the woman walked away fading into the morning haze which enveloped the grey platform. As the driver sped through the empty streets of a beautiful cold

city, its majestic buildings beginning to glow in a pastel winter light, I contemplated the anonymous woman in the coat with the excitement of having been drawn into a cold war thriller. Twenty minutes later I was ushered into the Hotel Astoria.



Women of substantial proportion graced the Astoria's reception counter with abundant energy and attentive hospitality. I felt welcome, and was willing to overlook the deep brown bath water and unsolicited early morning hang-up phone calls. On my way to breakfast the women indulged me with offers of tickets for the Kirov ballet, the circus... Tickets for whatever I wanted would be mine for the evening performance, and in those days the Kirov parterre was more affordable than a Montreal movie.

It was through my connections in the Hotel Astoria's lobby that my Polaroid project progressed from humble soup kitchen to an exclusive restaurant in a palace – a restaurant where my resolve not to be timid faced its greatest test. When I arrived the restaurant was dominated by the laughter and toasting of a large celebratory group of well-dressed men, clearly very much at home in the elegant surroundings of glorious



chandeliers and gilt rococo carving. The Russia of "Darkness at Noon", a country of political prisoners and forced interrogations, appeared remote and unimaginable. Something lively was happening, and it was evident that the mood of despondency I had witnessed elsewhere had not penetrated these walls. In the circumstances, I preferred to be invisible – not to draw attention to myself, to be the solitary foreigner observing from the shadows. But I had a job to do, so this was no time to be faint hearted. I stood up, not to toast my neighbours, but to photograph the caviar which had been placed in front of me by an elegant manageress who made no secret of her belief that this was how a

Westerner should dine. Flash. The room went silent, not a murmur. It seemed as if minutes passed before whispering of the celebrators discreetly conferring among themselves began. Had they been compromised? Who was this stranger? A representative was assigned to investigate, by which time my image of the caviar had developed – proof that I was a harmless imposter. The representative returned to his friends to announce, "gentlemen relax, he was photographing the caviar." Boisterous conversation once again filled the room, I heaved a sigh of relief and photographed the manageress.



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