Russia: Land of Contrasts, Land of Opportunity

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From the Editor

Ah, spring. The time of year when a young man's thoughts turn to thoughts of how to fill this page without lapsing into meaningless babble. And love—but at the moment, that isn't foremost on my mind.

Modern technology is often a wonderful thing. Oh, sure, I know it has its critics—most notably that Unabomber guy—but most people tend to agree that it tends to be useful most of the time. A perfect example is this issue's cover. If you haven't seen it yet, go ahead and sneak a peek now. I'll wait.

See, you didn't miss anything. Anyway, this piece of art started out as a relatively simple drawing (a copy of which can be found right across from this line). I scanned it and saved a copy to disk. As a result, I was able not only to make it whatever size it needed to be for this magazine, but I could play around with it a little using a program called Adobe Photoshop™. I was just messing around, not planning anything serious, but I ended up with something I thought looked rather sharp. The artist, Caitlin May, agreed with me, and a cover was born.

I firmly believe that this issue represents a new standard for The Promethean. It is a standard that would not have been reached without the efforts of many people. First, Caitlin deserves another mention for not only the prize-winning artwork, but for agreeing it looked neat when "enhanced."

Special mention should also go to Dr. Lynnell Edwards, who decided to require her...
back bumper. I knew now what St. Paul was speaking of when he told us to be “instant in prayer.”

With a thankful sigh of relief, we arrived at our destination, paid the $20, and rushed up the stairs to the Deputy Chief’s office. Volkov was there to meet us, and, more importantly, so was the Deputy Chief. Still trembling from the ride, we entered the room to present our vision of the Concordia International Environmental Council. And so began yet another in the series of meetings that brought me to touch with the heartbeat of Russia.

The view of Russia I received in my two-week visit was eye-opening. To be honest, my first impressions of Russia were unfortunately skewed by events surrounding my arrival at Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow. Deplaning the Delta airliner, I entered the airport and was greeted by a nearly empty building with grim decor and a population of equally grim Russian militia. Herded into long lines—first the passport clearance, then customs—! was impressed by the efficiency and officialdom. After more than an hour of processing, it was a relief to see the cheerful face of my good friend and colleague from Concordia, Dr. Polozov, running up to greet me.

I was impressed with the starkness of the facility, its lack of cheer, and the apparent coldness of the officials. After more than an hour of processing, it was a relief to see the cheerful face of my good friend and colleague from Concordia, Dr. Polozov, running up to greet me.

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There is never a dull moment in Russia.

With a burst of machine-gun fire, less than 20 meters from where I stood, the car stopped. So did my heart. As Sergei is fond of saying, there is never a dull moment in Russia.

Continuing early impressions were based largely on the sensory impact of new surroundings. I noticed things that differed significantly from America. People wore clothing that was of a poorer quality, and drove cars that tended to be old and small. Many disabled cars lined the streets. Traffic was incredibly confused, with impatient drivers making three lanes where only two existed, and anxious peoplejaywalking at the buildings were older and in need of significant aesthetic improvement. Streets were generally littered and only rarely did anyone bother to plant gardens or cut lawns. The apartment in which I first stayed, with Andrei and Genya Stepanov, was generally run-down, with a crumbling front porch, waist-high weeds, abandoned cars nearby, graffiti-coated walls, paint-chipped hallways, and an odor of unsanitary conditions. It almost appeared as if the complex had been abandoned to entropic decay years ago. The Stepanov’s apartment measured about 600 square feet, with a tiny kitchen, two small bedrooms and a small dining room. The furnishings were of poor quality by U.S. standards. The bath and toilet were standard Communist issue, common in all apartments. There is barely enough room for one person to stand between the bathtub and the wall. Even the toilet paper was depressingly springpapersque. Food was spartan, with the typical meal consisting of excellent Russian black bread, cucumbers, tomatoes, and a bit of sausage and cheese. Vodka, at a little over one dollar a bottle, was ubiquitous. Water, more expensive than vodka, was almost never drunk due to high contamination levels in the Russian water supply. Bottled mineral water, heavy in sulfer and mineral taste, was substituted instead.

We left Moscow for the more rural Smolensk region later in the week, and I was again greeted by significantly depressing, yet at the same time fascinating, sights. The Minsk-Moscow highway, which serves as the main arterial between Europe and Moscow, is a belt of asphalt with no lane demarca­tions. As a result, it is often three lanes in one direction and one in the other, depending only upon the whim of the maniacal, suicidal drivers who take it as their personal Indy 500. The many trucks that line the highway carrying consumer goods to and from the marketplace of Moscow are generally ill­tuned, smoke-belching behemoths whose exhaust pipes are places strategically to emit their foul-smelling pollutants directly into the windows of passing passenger cars. Coupled with the undulating, poth-marked road surface, it is enough to make queasy the strongest of stomachs. Rest areas consist of an open area along the road where people dump their trash into non-existent bins and retrieve themselves wherever they see fit. The few restrooms that do exist consist of concrete slabs with holes cut in them. Those who choose to use them must squat to defecate, and many miss the opening, making these wretched places of the worst description. Food is sold by operators of small booths along the roadway, or simply by individuals hawking anything from mushrooms to teapots. Gas stations are few and far between and none sell anything except gas from pumps that date to the Stalin era. Many gas truck drivers simply sell directly from their trucks, along the side of the road. The combination of speeding drivers and gawkers deciding whether to stop for eggs or not is a deadly combination, a fact evidenced by frequent wreck scenes along the highway. And were the person unfortunate enough to be injured in an accident! Ambulances as we know them in the West do not exist, and tow trucks are virtually unknown.

The countryside is full of the remnants of Communist cooperative farms, now mostly decaying. The original policy of the commu­nists to remove the relatively wealthy, suc­cessful farmers from their farms and replace them with the poor has had a devastating effect on the farms around the countryside. The original policy of the commu­nists to remove the relatively wealthy, suc­cessful farmers from their farms and replace them with the poor has had a devastating effect on the farms around the countryside.
markets in town squares supply the rest of life's needs. On a basic salary of about 200,000 rubles per month ($40 U.S.), most people cannot afford to buy anything anyway. It is life on the edge. The edge of total poverty. Over 70% of Russia's population lives below the officially designated poverty level.

Contrasting with these grim pictures of the realities of life in Russia is a different picture, one which emerged in the later stages of my stay. It is a picture colored by personalities, not environments. The people of Russia, I am learning, are very proud people with a very proud past. The blight of Communism has taken its toll on many of the more intelligent members, relegating them to positions of secondary status in society and burdening them with salaries incapable of supporting a comfortable life. The average professor at a state-run university makes the equivalent of approximately $60 U.S. a month. The independence necessary for creative thought has been repressed by the sameness of the dwellings and the buildings that surround them. Communism has also wrested from many the self-respect necessary to make the choices that will foster growth, be it of their personal well-being or of the well-being of the environment.

And yet, despite these factors, many continue to struggle for ideals and principles, for beauty and environmental soundness, using the few tools available to them to support their cause. Sergei Volkov is a prime example. After sixteen years in the militia, he had risen to a level of prestige and power. Upon being notified of his advancement to the rank of colonel, he immediately resigned to take up the role of superintendent of the new Smolensk Lakeand National Park. This meant moving from the city to a primitively village, but it had significantly reduced one. It also meant supervising 250 workers whose average salary is 20 rubles per month and attempting to to inspire them to fix up buildings in total disrepair with scant tools and no prospect for significant amounts of materials. In addition, this position is highly unpopular with the surrounding villagers, since the park has infringed on their ability to freely hunt, fish, and cut wood for heating and cooking. And yet Volkov's spirit seems indomitable. He has struggled now for three years, eking out an existence for himself and his family, while slowly building a respectable park program. He will continue to do it because he has a vision of what the Russian people once were and will yet become again, and because he has an abiding love of the natural beauty of the Russian countryside.

Andrei and Jule Shubin are another example of hope for the future of Russia. Both highly educated individuals, they live with Andrei's father, Oleg, and their daughter, Olga, and their rather large Doberman pinscher, Agata, in a small apartment in Moscow. Their combined income of about $180 a month, they have managed to furnish their apartment comfortably, have a good TV-VCR system, and even have scraped together enough for a beat-up Volga automobile. Andrei continues in his pursuit of understanding the birds of Russia and inspiring his students at Moscow State Pedagogical University to the same by taking them on field trips to the remote sections of the former Soviet Union. He is a very soft-spoken, intelligent type, excited by the new ideas that have been generated following perestroika. Jule works as a curator in the Darwin museum of Natural History in Moscow. Her specialty is the genetic aspect of Darwinian evolution. She and a host of ill-paid professionals are in the midst of moving to new quarters and quietly developing a first-rate museum. The sense of professionalism portrayed by both Andrei and Jule, despite overwhelmingly difficult circumstances, is one of the happy anachronisms that provide the seeds for great opportunities in Russia's future.

But finally, the cause for the greatest optimism comes from Russia's children. While many adults are burdened by their history of relationships with the oppression of Communism, the next generation is not so weighed down. Everywhere I went, from the busy center of Moscow to the tiny villages of the forest region, children played like children.
by inadequate enforcement and bribery. Until there is a spiritual and moral renewal in Russia, the economic improvement and environmental protection will be limited and improperly directed.

But here, too, there is hope. Young people particularly are showing a much increased awareness of and longing for spiritual values. In the great Orthodox cathedrals one finds an interesting mix of old babushkas and young men. The seminaries are at full capacity. Christian churches from all over the world have entered Russia in force and taken advantage of the opportunities provided by perestroika. In fact, in Russia the church has more of an influence on the state than in the U.S. For example, a recent monument to World War II victories in Moscow included a new, functioning Orthodox cathedral... paid for by the state! It is the first new church building in Russia since the 1917 revolution. Another, similar, state-supported Orthodox cathedral is being built on the site of the great cathedral torn down by the Communists in 1935, just outside the Kremlin wall. Great opportunities abound in the spiritual realm.

So we see in Russia phenomenal contrasts between old and new, between rich and poor, between environmental beauty and devastating pollution, and between atheism and spiritual renewal. It is possible because of these disparities that the opportunities are so great today. We of Concordia University have much to learn from and much to teach to the Russian people. God grant us the courage to do both.

Night Sounds

Screaming sirens, crying children
lost souls...

Cries for help sometimes heeded

Lonely streets, bitter cold who is
to care...

Why are they there, they are the
future...

To touch but one, is it enough
Someone needs to extend that
helping hand...

To help them understand

Learn to respect themselves
All is not lost out there
someone cares...

I’ve seen, I’ve felt their pain
I cry for them

But help can only come from
within...