

## 2: From Moscow to Siberia

There is a great feeling of excitement in the train. We all spend the first little while talking to one another and introducing ourselves. The four people in our compartment are Sue, the two Japanese lads, Nori and Hiro, and myself. Nori is refreshingly eccentric, and is game for a laugh. The English couple in the compartment next door are Arthur and Jill. It turns out that Sue already knows them, for we have all been staying in the Hotel Metropole. A Dutch couple shares the compartment with Arthur and Jill. It turns out that the matronly woman who has taken our tickets on boarding has a tiny compartment for herself beside the door on our end of the carriage (from where, presumably, she can keep an eye on us foreigners). Her name is Raisa, and she is in charge of this carriage.



Sue in the corridor of our carriage

As it is a fine, fresh day outside, the train is pleasantly cool and comfortable. It's great being able to stand up and walk up and down the corridor. When the initial excitement of introducing ourselves dies down, I stand at a window to watch the Moscow suburbs slip away, revealing the surrounding countryside and trees. Occasional gaps between them afford tantalizing glimpses of attractive countryside: expansive views of fields and villages full of tumbledown but picturesque old wooden houses. Now and then I see the onion-shaped domes of Orthodox churches glinting in the bright sunshine. At one point there is a dramatic view of a monastery with shining cupolas perched on a hill beside a winding, deep blue river. Later we cross the wide

River Volga – another wonderful sight. I notice that the leaves of the trees are beginning to change colour. The trunks of silver birches stand out from the background of darker trees.

But not everything here is idyllic: it becomes increasingly obvious that the houses are all in a deplorable state of repair and that people are almost living in a state of poverty. This, no doubt, is the result of years of chaos and unrest.

As the day wears on – the time goes quickly – the sun begins to set and it becomes cooler. Eventually some of us decide to go to the restaurant car and eat. Raisa shows us which way to go and we walk through the swaying carriages. The restaurant car looks clean enough, but the choice of food is very limited. We are handed menus with a limited choice of dishes printed in Russian with English translations. As expected, there is a total lack of vegetables served with the courses. My dinner consists of a bowl of greasy chicken soup, then greasy chicken and rice with black bread, and a bottle of apple juice. The price comes to 1.08 roubles.

In the middle of our meal, the train stops at Yaroslavl at 6.30 for ten minutes. When I see some peasant women approaching the train with apples, plums and flowers for sale, I rush to the door and buy a newspaper cone full of small apples for one rouble. When we move off, I return to my seat and finish the meal. Later I struggle back to our carriage with my apples, a couple of slices of black bread that I have surreptitiously taken from the restaurant, and the remainder of my apple juice in its bottle. Back safely in my compartment, I eat one of the apples, even though I have already eaten a delicious one that has been given to me earlier by a friendly Russian man next door to us.

I then sit down to try writing my diary, but find it difficult because of the motion of the train. I spend the rest of the evening doing this, now that the light has failed and there is nothing to be seen outside any more. Next door, in Arthur and Jill's compartment, a party, complete with drinks, is in full swing. I join it later, when I have finished writing, and accept a tincture of whiskey, which I drink before retiring to bed.

Before sleeping we must put our watches forward one hour as we have entered a different time zone; from now to the end of the journey we will be losing time. Suddenly it is late in the evening. I climb into my lower bunk bed and prepare to sleep. I read for a while, then begin to doze. I am soon awake again because of the cold and the noise of the train, which continually sways and bumps. I stay awake for a long time; it becomes steadily colder and I am aware of a draught from the window. Nevertheless, despite this discomfort, the journey has got off to a good start and the atmosphere in the carriage has been very pleasant. Everyone, including matronly Raisa, who has been very friendly. During the day she has kept us supplied with tall glasses of weak, though refreshing, black tea, made using water from her samovar. Some of the Russians have also been delightful: their young children are very well behaved and they have amused us all.

Because of the coldness, I wake early this morning after a night of interrupted sleep, but lie on for a while. I then get up, try to shave in the corridor with my electric razor but have to get Raisa to switch on the power. I then go down to the tiny (and smelly) toilet-cum-washroom at the other end of the corridor (where there is only cold water), and shave as best as I can. As the current is so low on the train, this takes a long time. I then wash and complete my ablutions by using the toilet, which is just a hole in the floor, over which one must squat. Using this, given that the train is constantly swaying, proves to be quite tricky.

Eventually I return to dress. It is a horribly dark, cold and wet morning. Raisa, who is shivering, calls a workman who duly appears, does something, whereupon the carriage begins to heat up.

At breakfast, Sue and I sit with a pleasant American lady whom I have already met in the hotel in Moscow, and a nice young Swedish fellow. Both of them share a two-berth compartment in a first-class carriage. Afterwards, Sue and I go with them to admire their roomy and fairly luxurious quarters. Despite the extra comfort that they enjoy, the carriage lacks the convivial atmosphere that exists in ours; here it is silent and dead. I am not surprised to discover this, for I have deliberately chosen second class as it is more lively. The American lady and I examine maps, swap notes on travelling, and she tells me that she plans to visit China on her own. I write down the address of her travel agent in Australia, which looks as though it is very well organized. I ask her to write to me and tell me about her trip when she returns home.

I return to our carriage, where I look out of the window and chat with Jill. By now the weather is improving and it is becoming warmer. When we stop at Perm at around 1.30 p.m., we all dash out to the platform in order to see what is for sale (nothing of interest) and to walk about. Out of curiosity I wander into the station restaurant. It is an unbelievably dirty place, serving the most unsavoury and unhealthy specimens of food that I have ever set eyes on. Again, there is not a vegetable in sight. I see greasy dumplings, a selection of different types of bread and cakes, and hunks of scraggy chicken covered in flies. I flee from the place, return to the platform and run up and down a couple of times by way of exercise.

Back on the train I go to the restaurant car, where I wait for a good hour or so for service. The Russians are served first and I notice that they are ordering from a different menu that offers decent food: cabbage soup, a tomato salad, and fish with potatoes and tomatoes. I have once again been given the other menu with the English translations; it was produced this morning at breakfast, when I had just ordered bread and cheese. (This had cost just 32 kopeks.) How Intourist has estimated a sum of £8 to £10 per day for meals on the train puzzles me, for the food is dirt cheap – normally I spend only about £3 per day. Although disgusted at being offered the same menu yet again, I choose a fairly decent soup of mixed vegetables and meat, then schnitzel with rice.

Later Sue and one of the Japanese lads join me for a light lunch. When we have all finished eating, we return to our carriage, which by now is roasting hot. We have to open windows in order to let in some air. I am asked to explain to Raisa that as it is too hot, the heat needs to be turned down, or a window, which is stuck, needs to be opened. As I do not have enough Russian to convey all this to her, I fail to make her understand. However, when somebody else summons her to open the window and she cannot do it, she obviously gets the message and the heat is turned down.

In the early evening, Sue shares some of her food with me and we have an improvised meal together, which makes a change from the restaurant food. While we are eating, the Russian man from the next compartment tells me that we are about to pass the sign indicating the border between Europe and Asia. I pass on this information to my fellow Europeans and everybody looks out of their windows. Sure enough, a sign flashes by. We are now crossing the Ural mountains; once we are over them, we will be in Siberia. The name in Russian, *Сибирь* (*Sibir*), is said to come from a local language, and means 'Sleeping Land'.

At 7.25 we stop at Sverdlovsk for fifteen minutes, but as it is raining outside I stay in the compartment, writing my diary. This city, formerly named Ekaterinburg, was where the last Tsar, Nicholas II, his wife and children were shot in the basement of a

house by order of Lenin. Thinking of this makes me shudder. My thoughts are interrupted by the sudden appearance of Nori bearing a cooked chicken wrapped in a sheet of paper. He tells us that a peasant woman has just given it to him, refusing any payment. As the train is about to leave the station and there is no sign of his pal Hiro, he hollers out the window. A moment later Hiro appears in the corridor to a loud cheer from everyone. He has acquired a bottle of milk and three hard-boiled eggs. Although we have all eaten plenty, we attack the chicken and I remove the legs and wings. We eat some of it with the milk and send the rest to somebody else in the carriage.

Raisa, who now regards me as the official translator, gives me a complicated message about breakfast time tomorrow – no doubt this has something to do with entering another time zone – and asks me to pass it on to the others. Once I have fully understood what she is telling me, I tell the people in our end of the carriage, then return to my compartment to write my diary. By now another party has started next door to me. Raisa approaches me again, complaining about something. Maybe it is about the number of bottles she sees lying about or it is the noise. Unfortunately I just cannot understand exactly what she is trying to say.

I finally retire to our stuffy compartment and prepare for bed. The two girls and two fellows in the compartment with the stuck window are in a bit of a stew as it is so hot. For some reason Raisa will not allow them to leave their door and an adjacent corridor window open. The young people ask me to plead with her, but my lack of vocabulary gets the better of me again and she is stubborn. All I can do is apologize to the passengers and turn in for the night, having put my watch forward another hour.

Because of the warmth of the compartment, I sleep soundly and have difficulty in waking up. Raisa appears at 8.30 a.m., yanks the door open and shouts ‘вставать!’ (*vstaváitch!* – get up!) four times. I stumble out of my bed, but the others don’t move. It turns out that I am one of the few who have managed to sleep; most of the others have not been able to do so because of the heat. Even the Russians look hot and bothered; most of them are still lying in bed, either trying to wake up or sleep. Jill and Arthur have both been up early and down in the restaurant car at seven o’clock, but have found the place deserted and the waitress asleep. This is probably a result of yesterday’s message: I had been told that after nine o’clock there would be no breakfast.

I do not bother about breakfast; Raisa gives us tea and when we stop at Nazyvayevskaya for fifteen minutes, I buy a meat-filled doughnut. As it is a warm and sunny day, I have changed into my tee-shirt. It is great to get out of the train and breathe some fresh air. Nazyvayevskaya is one of the many nondescript scruffy towns that we have seen, with a tumbledown railway station and a chaotic collection of wooden shacks. As in every little town, the air is full of dust and diesel fumes, and great bundles of telephone and electricity cables are held aloft by wooden poles. Never have I seen such depressing places, situated in the middle of nowhere. The locals are all shabbily dressed and plump from an unvarying diet of stodgy food: bread, potatoes, greasy dumplings, cakes and fatty meat.

Although the air and exercise is welcome, it is a delight to leave this place and continue the journey. Back in the train, the carriage is as hot and stuffy as ever. By now everyone has opened the windows and are standing at them, peering out. Once again, a vista of trees alternating with wide, panoramic views of huge fields and countryside rolls by. Now and then a village full of colourful wooden houses, built in traditional style, flashes past; in these villages we get brief but tantalizing glimpses of

a river or pond, geese and ducks, mud tracks and wooden pumps. Here and there we see an occasional field with cows. The land looks very fertile: there is plenty of grass and cultivated crops. Much of the scenery is very attractive and fascinating.

To pass the time, Nori and Hiro try to talk to two young Russian girls who want to have nothing to do with anybody. They are either too shy, frightened or have been told not to talk to any of us strangers. Jill tries to interest them in brochures about England. One girl keeps turning away, but the other looks attentively at them. Jill, who has hung up some of the *origami* decorations that the Japanese lads have made (they have been making them continually), now hangs up a map of the world, which attracts a great deal of attention. Everyone in the carriage comes to look at this novelty, and we show them where we come from and where we are going. The Russians, who are becoming more and more friendly, now begin joking with us. One woman, I discover, can speak English very well. She is travelling to her home town, which is near Lake Baikal.



Sue, Nori and Hiro at the station in Omsk

We stop at Omsk at 11.31 a.m. and go outside for a while. I take photos of the train, the engine, and Sue with Nori and Hiro. I then follow Jill and Arthur through the large but scruffy station to the road outside and have a brief look at the large, unattractive city. In the distance we can see high-rise buildings – either flats or factories – and an airport. Back on the platform I take a photo of Jill and Arthur, using their camera. We clamber aboard the train and then we're off again.

Later I go to the restaurant car with Sue, Hiro and Mike, a Norwegian chap. This time we manage to get hold of the Russian menu – hooray! – and at last I manage to have an excellent meal of tomato salad, borsch soup, and a main course of sturgeon and potatoes with black bread. I wash this down with a refreshing glass of apricot juice. As I return to the compartment feeling quite sleepy, I sit down to relax and look out of the window while the Japanese lads make more *origami* creations using sheets of paper. After a while, Raisa summons me and gives out dog's abuse about Jill and Arthur going to breakfast so early this morning. She orders me to speak to them, but when I reluctantly look into their compartment I find them sleeping. The other people, especially the girls, are having a row with her about their stuffy compartment; she still will not allow them to keep their door open. She seems to be in a foul humour today!

Later we stop at the rather uninteresting station of Barabirsk for thirty whole minutes. I cross a metal bridge and find a little shop with some of our companions

inside. Nori unwittingly makes a fool of himself when he buys what he thinks are cakes. What he has bought are large lumps of pork fat with a tiny sliver of meat in the centre. These appear to be something of a delicacy here; I have seen people cutting off chunks of the fat with a penknife and eating it with black bread and a shot of vodka. I buy a bag of apples (the old lady is delighted that I can communicate in her language) and go outside to buy a cool, refreshing ice-cream. It is still very hot outside.

Back on the platform, we take group photos of each other and finally clamber aboard. The rest of the day is fairly uneventful; I look at the scenery and try taking some photographs. Later, Sue, the Japanese lads and I have a knocked-up meal as the restaurant is closed – it seems that we have now entered another time zone. We later have to advance our watches by two hours, thus shortening the length of the evening. It becomes dark quickly and the temperature drops, though it remains comfortable.

While I am writing my diary, the lads begin an impromptu Japanese lesson and so I join in. I learn a new phrase: 本当に (*hontōni?* – really?), which quickly becomes an in-joke between us. Later we cross the River Ob and stop for fifteen minutes or so at Novosibirsk, which has a large, impressive train station. I do a round of *Taiji* or Chinese shadow-boxing on the platform, much to everyone's amusement. We have certainly become quite a crazy and lively bunch of people – the Russians must think that we are absolutely bonkers!

Soon we are off again; we learn some more Japanese and I write my diary until lights out. I go to bed at 1 a.m. local time, 9 p.m. Moscow time. The loss of hours is very confusing.

After an excellent sleep I wake at about nine o'clock and get up shortly afterwards. It is a magnificent morning: warm, yet fresh, with the sun shining from a clear blue sky. The scenery, wherever we are now, is breathtaking. The train twists and turns as it winds its way around wooded mountains, the sun flashes through the trees and their green, gold and red leaves gleam in the light. Now and then the hills give way to fields, winding rivers and colourful villages that are full of newly-painted wooden houses. Here the landscape looks positively idyllic. People and cows can be seen in the fields; occasionally a farmer can be seen driving an old-fashioned Russian cart or телега (*tiléga*) with its characteristic high harness curving over the horse, and here and there we see an old woman with a goat or two.

Dispensing with breakfast – I just drink a glass of tea – I spend the whole morning gazing out the window at the ever-changing countryside. We stop very briefly at a couple of small towns but do not get off the train.

Soon it is one o'clock – time for lunch, I think. I walk to the restaurant car but am surprised to find it locked. When I return to our carriage, Raisa wants to know what's going on. When I explain that the door of the restaurant car is locked, she beckons me to follow her, marches me back to the restaurant and keeps her finger on the electric bell button until the head waitress appears. A heated discussion takes place between the two women (I imagine Raisa is saying, 'This young man needs to eat! Why won't you let him in?') and much to my embarrassment I am eventually ushered inside and the door is locked again. I apologise to the lady and she leads me to a vacant seat. I notice that nearly all the other tables are being carefully laid with proper cutlery, plates, serviettes, bread and apples. The waitress explains that the restaurant has been reserved by a large party of French tourists who have come on board last night. In fact, we had spoken to their guide: a very pleasant young lady who speaks English perfectly. I am handed the standard menu with the items translated into English.

I order a cucumber salad as a starter. However, when the waitress appears with a tray full of bowls containing a much more sophisticated-looking coleslaw salad for the tourists, I say admiringly, ‘Вот интересно!’ (*vot intirésna* – that looks interesting!). She looks at me quizzically and says, ‘Вы хотите?’ (*vwi khatítyi* – would you like one?). I nod and say, ‘Да, пожалуйста!’ (*da, pazhálista* – yes please!). With a knowing smile, she places one on my table. The salad tastes delicious and is such a welcome change to the normal dreary daily fare.

Next comes a bowl of excellent borscht soup, made from beetroot, and then a main dish of beef Stroganov, also tasty. As I am finishing my meal, I talk to the waitress, who is now waiting for her customers. We manage to have quite a long and interesting conversation in Russian about our origins and home towns. She tells me how many people there are in her family and how she likes certain Russian cities, such as Moscow, Leningrad and Vladivostok. She is a Muscovite. Once she has opened up, she turns out to be a very friendly lady. I have obviously got the right side of her. I suspect that she has accepted me as a friend because both of us have conspired to beat the system.

The French tourist group now enters and the Russian guide, surprised to see me here on my own, invites me to sit beside her and the tour leader, a pleasant French lady. Although the Russian guide seems to be quite young, she tells me that she is divorced. We have a long and lively conversation, during which she tells me that she has always worked as a guide and that she can speak French fluently. She seems to be very cosmopolitan and liberated, and has none of the typical Russian reserve.

Not wishing to ignore her French companion, we switch to speaking French. When the two ladies begin to converse among themselves, I excuse myself and leave, wishing everybody goodbye, *en français*. The people in the group have certainly been given VIP treatment: I notice that they have been given peas with their main dish and, when somebody has requested red wine, it has been produced for them – even though it is supposed to be reserved for this evening’s meal.

As I feel well fed, hot and tired when I return to the carriage, I retire to my compartment for a rest and take it easy for the remainder of the afternoon. Later, when we stop at Ilanska for fifteen minutes, I take a walk up and down the platform (there is nothing worth buying here) and then accompany a Danish girl on a short walk into the sleepy little village. The rough mud road is lined with attractive wooden houses. We return to the train and set off through wooded hills. The scenery is most attractive around this area. For most people the word ‘Siberia’ conjures up a picture of a frozen wasteland, but here in the southern regions at this time of the year, the autumnal colours and balmy weather are very pleasant indeed. The trees seen in the early evening light are particularly beautiful. As I do not feel hungry after my excellent lunch, I stay put, looking out of the window until the sun begins to sink. Several of us endeavour to take photographs of the scenery as we whizz past it.

At this point, the English-speaking Russian lady in our carriage asks the Danish girl for her address so that she can write to her. Later in the evening I notice her bringing the girl a box of slides for her to look at. For me it is a poignant reminder of how cut off these Russians are from the rest of the world and how much they crave contact with outsiders. I am reminded of a the visit I paid to the Winter Palace in Leningrad five years ago and the joy I had experienced when looking at the many fine paintings in the Hermitage museum. I had with me a fairly modest Thames and Hudson book entitled *The Hermitage*, a paperback edition, which contained colour reproductions of many of the paintings, together with descriptions of them in English. I was now using it as an excellent guidebook. As I went from room to room, I became

aware of a young Russian couple who seemed to be following me. Eventually they plucked up enough courage to approach me. The husband politely asked me, in Russian, if they could take a look at the book. Happily I allowed them to flick through the pages and gaze at amazement at the colour illustrations. Obviously they had never seen such a high quality book before. They expressed their admiration and asked where I had bought it. I told them that it was an English publication and that I had bought it in Dublin. Very cautiously they then asked me if I could sell it to them. Loath to part with it, I apologised to them and said that I could not. I felt so sorry for them not being able to acquire what for me was merely a rather average sort of book. Ever since then I have regretted not having given it to them – I could have easily bought another copy when I arrived home.

At eight o'clock, the French tourists march through our carriage on their way to the restaurant car. Jill, Arthur and I join them and thereby manage to order what they are eating: a generous helping of fresh black caviar (delicious!), followed by a meat dish with properly-cooked rice and cucumber. I do without red wine and tea, and the meal costs just a little over two roubles. The head waitress shows no hostility to us three extra guests and smiles at me.

Afterwards, we thank the Russian guide, who is as pleasant to us as before, and, as we leave, we wish the French good evening, adding, '*Vive la France!*' and '*Dormez bien!*' We make our way back to our carriage, where I settle down to writing my diary as it is quiet. It has been a very pleasant day.