

3: Through Siberia to Nakhodka

During the night I sleep in fits and starts, then awake to a dramatic sunrise, which I can see from the compartment window. With the train winding its way around wooded mountains, and the bright morning sun shining on newly-built, colourful dachas, we now make our way towards the city of Irkutsk. The Russian man next door, who has kindly given me sweets and a badge depicting Lenin as a young man, tells me that people come here on holidays to enjoy the sun, fish, cook their own food and grow their own vegetables. It sounds quite idyllic – for those who can afford it!

Once again I skip breakfast – I just drink some tea – and spend the morning looking out of the window, admiring the scenery. We stop at Irkutsk at about 9.30 a.m. and get out to stretch our legs. The station is featureless and uninteresting; we only encounter some women selling flowers.

Off we go again and continue towards Lake Baikal, the world's oldest and deepest lake – in fact, it's more like an inland sea. As our Russian companions have spoken so enthusiastically about this famous lake, we are all eagerly looking forward to seeing it. On the way, we pass more dramatic scenery, passing mountains and tree-filled valleys. We also flash by a great image of Lenin cut into a mountainside. There is great excitement about this: the Russians come dashing in and out of our compartments saying, 'Did you see Lenin?'



Lake Baikal, Siberia

We then plunge into a couple of dark tunnels and suddenly emerge by the side of Lake Baikal. All we can see is a seemingly endless stretch of water disappearing into the mist. This first view of it is quite disappointing. Many of us try to take photographs, with little success. The train stops a few minutes later and so we are able to take in the view. However, it is spoilt by the presence of an ugly industrial town beneath us. The view looking from the other side of the train is actually more interesting: a valley with small lakes between mountains. In the distance we can see an old woman in a little rowing boat.

Soon we get going again but stop at a much nicer spot. This time we are in a better position and much nearer the shore. The deep blue water sparkles in the sunshine. Several Russians run outside and dip their feet or arms into the water. It is as if they have finally reached a part of their motherland that they consider sacred.

Unfortunately we are not allowed out; I merely lean out of the window, take a welcome deep breath of fresh air and snap a photograph of the people and the train.

Once we start moving again, I walk down to the restaurant car with Sue and Nori. We are ushered into the second car as the first has been reserved for another tourist group. Here we have quite a good meal: cucumber salad, solyanka soup (a thick, spicy, sour soup with meat and vegetables) and then a main dish of beef Stroganov (which we have to wait a long time for). Finally we leave and return to our compartment, where we find Hiro making short work of a big jar of *smetána* or soured cream that he has bought in Irkutsk, thinking it is yoghurt. The fact that it isn't doesn't stop him eating it!



Siberian scenery

As my compartment is almost full at the moment, I look out of the corridor window for a while. By now Lake Baikal has disappeared. As soon as I get the opportunity, I lie down and take a nap. Later I drink some tea while gazing out the window. By now a long range of high mountains to the south stretches across the horizon; beyond them is Mongolia. We are now nearing the city of Ulan Ude, where the English-speaking Russian lady, her husband and children are leaving us. The name of this city is clearly Mongolian, for the capital of Mongolia is Ulan Bator.

Suddenly the wide River Selenge comes into view; we swing around, cross it and skirt it on the other side. The flow of water looks powerful and the river is full of islands. The train stops briefly so that we can admire the view. We then continue, approaching the outskirts of Ulan Ude, which turns out to be a huge, sprawling and ugly city – a real eyesore. Housing ranges from tumbledown wooden shacks to high-rise flats. Chimneys belch black smoke into the sky and the air is thick with dust.

When the train stops, we wish the Russian lady goodbye and wander up and down the platform. We do not fail to notice the wide Mongolian faces of the locals. The women are well dressed, but the men look scruffy and dirty. The station is a most dreadful kip; the shops sell nothing of interest and they are filthy. We are glad to leave.



River Selenge, Siberia

Back on the train I continue to watch the scenery roll past the window. By now it is rather bland, though pleasant enough. After the new group of tourists returns from the restaurant car at eight o'clock, I walk up to it and join a couple of nice lads from Sweden. This time I have a more modest meal: bread and cheese, then meat and potatoes, all washed down with tea. Although the tourists have been given peas with their main course, I am told by the waitress that there are no vegetables available.

Just as we finish eating, the train stops at Petrovsky Zavod – undoubtedly an industrial city, as its name means ‘Petrov Factory’. I pay one rouble and four kopeks for my meal and jump out. After a quick walk, during which I stop to look at a dreadful revolutionary piece of sculpture, I hop up into carriage number one and chat with an English lady whom I have met earlier and who is a member of this new tourist group. She tells me about their itinerary and says that this is the dirtiest train that they have travelled in so far. They have stopped in Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow, Leningrad, Irkutsk and have boarded our train this morning. When they arrive in Japan, they will go their separate ways. I am interested to learn of this itinerary, for, had I known about it some time ago, I could have arranged to travel across Europe by train as originally planned. Presumably the group’s itinerary has been organized by a travel agent.

I then return to our carriage, where I do a little translating for one of the young ladies in our section, who is trying to talk to Raisa and show her some photographs. Afterwards I join Jill, Arthur and the Dutch couple in their compartment, as mine is full thanks to an impromptu party in full swing. I then manage to fetch my diary and, sitting in the corridor, I start to write today’s entry. However, I am interrupted several times. Firstly there is some wild singing and crazy antics with Raisa, then a young daughter of one of the Russian families begins to ask me how to say various Russian phrases in English. I end up giving her a short lesson, writing the words in Russian, followed by their translation in English, then writing a phonetic version of the English words using Russian letters, so that she can pronounce and remember them. She seems very pleased and is grateful. Later Sue allows her to use her portable stereo tape recorder so that she can listen to some European pop music.

I finally manage to move back into my compartment, where I finish my diary and hit the sack. Quite an interesting day.

After a night of sound sleep though strange dreams, I awake to a glorious morning. From my bed I can see little cottages built on the side of a hill. Although I know that I should get up and enjoy a better view of the surrounding scenery, I lie on for a while. At last I rise, shave and wash, take my morning tea and apply myself to admiring the view. The Russian man next door, who presents me with another Lenin badge, tells me that we have passed the city of Chita and points to our position on a map. We are now north of the border with China, skirting the River Amur. Sure enough I can see a wide, twisting river that flows between bare, rounded mountains, reminiscent of what I have seen on programmes filmed in Mongolia. After I have told fellow passengers that China lies on the other side of the river, I am surprised to see a couple of ruined churches in that direction. When somebody produces a more detailed map, I realize that the man's information is incorrect. We are not far from Chita and are now skirting the Shilka river, north of Mongolia and China. The scenery, which changes with every twist and turn, is truly breathtaking. As we drift through this unfamiliar landscape, there is a great sense of being somewhere exotic and perhaps forbidden.



Scenery near Chita, Siberia

It is only when I stick my head out of the window to snap a photo that I notice that we now have two diesel engines. Gone are the overhead cables and the rows of poles. Presumably we have changed engines at Chita during the early hours of the morning.

As I cannot take my eyes off this amazing scenery – wild and mostly uninhabited save for one or two lone cottages and an occasional village – I keep postponing lunch. Eventually, when the landscape begins to flatten out and the mountains to retreat, I go to the restaurant car with Mike, the Norwegian chap. We are joined at the table by a pleasant young Swedish couple. A young Russian fellow turns round to us, introduces himself and tries to talk to me. He then keeps interrupting the conversation either to talk to me or to Jacqueline, the Swedish lady. As he is obviously slightly drunk, he soon becomes a nuisance and then something of an embarrassment when he presents Jacqueline firstly with a large bar of chocolate and then a bottle of red wine.

My lunch consists of cucumber salad, chicken soup, then schnitzel with potatoes – not too bad. Mike eats his breakfast now: eggs and bacon. While we are eating, the train stops at Chernyshevsk and the restaurant car is invaded by local people looking for cigarettes. I hop out and find women on the platform selling hot potatoes, fish, tomatoes and mixed salad. I use all the money in my pocket to buy a newspaper cone full of tomatoes and another full of salad. I then jump back into our carriage, transfer

all the salad into Hiro's soured cream jar (he has eaten it all and he's still alive!) and fetch some more money. After another quick look around outside, I return to the restaurant car and finish my meal, which by now has gone rather cold. I add a tomato to the main dish which only includes cucumber – this seems to be the only vegetable available on the train by now. All through the meal the Russian fellow continues to bother us. He wants me to go to his compartment and talk, but I wave him off. As soon as possible we pay for our meals (the waitress is rather slow-witted and forgetful), then leave.



Scenery near Mogocha, Siberia

Back in our compartment, I watch the scenery again for a while – it is now becoming more wooded and colourful – and then, as I feel a little sleepy, I lie down and take a nap. Later, when I wake, I discover that the scenery is becoming quite breathtaking. We now skirt, cross and recross a tributary of the Shilka, a beautiful blue, wide, winding river flowing between wooded mountains. The colours of the tree leaves, all in different stages of autumnal change, range from green through yellow and gold to brown and even red. Like this morning, each twist and turn brings another spectacular view. I attempt to take some more photos from out of the window.

Later, at about seven o'clock, the four of us have a slap-up meal, using bread that I have bought in the restaurant car, my tomatoes and salad, and some tinned meat of Sue's. It is quite adequate and tasty. Soon afterwards we approach a fine, wide valley and stop at the small but reasonably pretty town of Mogocha for fifteen minutes. Walking up and down the platform, I look at what is for sale and buy two meat-filled dumplings. I eat one on the spot and decide to keep the other for tomorrow.

Soon it is time to set off once again. When we get moving, the sun begins to set and it turns dark. I spruce myself up and settle down to write my diary. When we stop at another station, Amazar, we all jump out and run around. All there is for sale are sticks of candy and potatoes. I run to the back of the train and then to the front, where I notice the *real* 'hard' class for the first time – it looks pretty grim and makes our carriage look luxurious by comparison. On my way back, I hear somebody playing, or rather trying to play, a horn. It turns out to be a group of Germans, though more probably Swiss, experimenting with an alpine horn. The Russians do not seem to be very amused; Raisa certainly scowls and registers her disapproval. I then join a group of Russian girls and a fellow from the train in a skipping game. A person in the middle twirls the rope and those on the outside have to jump over it. The person who

fails to do this and stops the rope then has to go the middle and twirl it. We do this with a lot of laughter until it is time to board the train again.

When I rejoin my companions, they are playing tip and tig with Raisa on the platform and are having great fun. Suddenly the train moves and there is a mad dash. I get caught up in the middle of the scramble, but manage to clamber aboard. Everyone is screaming and shouting. Just as I have thought, the driver is having his little bit of fun and stops the train moments later. This little incident puts everyone into an excitable mood and so, when we are waiting for the train to go, we cheer Raisa and sing *For she's a jolly good fellow*. She responds by singing a popular song and the Russians join in. Once we are all in the train, this develops into a full-scale singing (or rather shouting) session, organized by Raisa. She divides us into two groups: Europeans and Russians, and commands us to sing in turn. Unsurprisingly, everyone sings at their own pitch and so it is quite a cacophony. The Russians roar lusty patriotic songs in their powerful voices, drowning us out. The 'competition' is very good humoured and is conducted with a great deal of laughter. Unsurprisingly, the Russians finally win – they sing us to a full stop. Once we realize that we have run out of songs (and energy), Jill waves a white towel as a gesture of surrender. The big fat man next door to us (whom I have nicknamed 'Ivan the Great' and now, when he sings, 'Chaliapin') produces a red cushion and waves it at us, laughing. I have a feeling that the farther these people travel from the capital (and officialdom), and perhaps the nearer they get to their home towns, the more relaxed and good humoured they become.

Finally we retire to our compartments, Raisa turns off the lights and we reluctantly settle down for the night. A wonderful day: we've seen the best scenery so far and we've had the best fun.

I wake late after a sound sleep. It is a fine morning, but the scenery is now flat and boring – the type of featureless landscape that I have expected to see all the time in Siberia. Nothing much happens during the morning; I merely drink some tea, eat an apple and laze around. There are a couple of brief stops. Most of the people in the carriage are busy packing and clearing things up as today will be our last full day on the train. As my European and Japanese friends want to end with a good dinner in the restaurant car this evening, I am asked to reserve seats and discuss the menu with the head waitress. I am told to order chilled champagne. I walk to the restaurant, find the waitress and together we work out the details.

Mission accomplished, I return to the carriage and tell my friends that everything will be in order. They then leave for the restaurant car. As I am hungry, I decide to stay put and have a simple lunch of leftover bread, the dumpling that I bought yesterday and some salad. Just as I am about to finish, the train stops at a station and I hop out. There is little to see and buy: there are a few kiosks selling bits and pieces, and some old peasant women offer hot potatoes, salad, tomatoes, and corn on the cob.

Back on the train I finish my meal, sit back and listen to Sue's tape of *Finlandia* and the *Karelia Suite* by Sibelius, then have a good nap. Later I drink a cup of Sue's coffee and then amble out to the corridor, where I endeavour to talk to a Russian fellow who seems very anxious to make conversation with me. He speaks a little English haltingly and, as usual, I do not have enough vocabulary to say everything that I would like to say. We have spoken before and already he has somewhat embarrassed me by giving me a set of postcards of his home town, Volgograd and then, this morning, an old (and possibly valuable) five-kopek piece. Wondering what I can give him in return, I have asked Jill for suggestions and she has encouraged me to

give him a 50p piece with the encircling hands symbolizing peace. Fortunately I have one of these in my wallet and so I give it to him and explain the significance of the hands: мир (*mir* – peace). We then exchange addresses and I give him one of my cheap bios.

I now discover that a ‘visitors’ book’ belonging to the train is being passed around, and I am asked to write something in it. In between trying to translate for various people, I manage to cobble together a short eulogy of the train, the people and Raisa with the help of a dictionary borrowed from Catherine, an American lady who is travelling first class. She also wants me to translate a sentence about envelopes and stamps. I finally arrive back in our compartment, having been waylaid several times en route, and polish my entry, which I finally write in the big visitors’ book. Later, after some of the others have written their contributions, Raisa calls me and asks me to translate the various comments. As two of the entries have been written in Dutch and Danish, I have to ask the writers to give me English versions. I return to Raisa’s little compartment-cum-office and do my best to complete the translations for her. It is tricky enough, but I manage somehow or other. She thanks me and takes me into her confidence, showing me a collection of old photographs of her parents, her deceased husband, her children and so forth. Her little room is neat, spotlessly clean and homely. I can sense that although most of the passengers must regard her as something of a harridan, she has a kind heart, a soft spot and even a sense of humour. Undoubtedly her life, like the lives of many of her compatriots, has been hard.

I now set about going to everyone in our end of the carriage and explaining the details about this evening’s meal: the time, the menu and so forth. Jill compliments me and says that I have been a great ‘ambassador’. What I don’t tell her and the others is something that Raisa has explained to me: that she has secretly bought a couple of bottles of brandy for us and that she has organized a party in the carriage after our meal this evening.

The rest of the afternoon passes without incident, apart from stops at various nondescript stations. We get out for twenty minutes at one of them, and some of us wander out into the square in front of the station, where I peep into what appears to be a shoddy supermarket.

Shortly after eight o’clock, during another stop at a station, we enter the restaurant car and sit down to our meal. As there are fifteen of us, I squeeze in between the American lady, Catherine, and the Danish girl, Jette. Although rather squashed between the two of them, I’m fine. The bottles of champagne I have ordered are opened and the first course, a cucumber salad, arrives. We raise our glasses and clink them together to cries of ‘cheers!’ and ‘*kampai!*’ from the Japanese lads. Nori attracts lots of attention with his hoarse exclamations and his antics with his camera and tripod. How both the camera and the tripod manage to stay upright on the swaying train with waitresses coming and going is beyond our comprehension. The head waitress, now run off her feet and quite confused this evening, must think that we are crazy, but she cannot help smiling at us.

Next comes the caviar – it is excellent and goes well with the champagne. Finally the main course arrives: chicken with macaroni. Needless to say, this is something of an anti-climax. Earlier the waitress has explained to me that this dish is this evening’s ‘tourist special’. I should have known better and ordered something else. The portions of chicken are miniscule and mine, a leg, is almost non-existent. However, the others assure me that their portions are very tasty and thank me for having organized the meal.

Now that we have finished, the next thing is organizing how we are going to pay. With a little bit of difficulty I manage to make the head waitress understand that we need an extra bottle of champagne for later, and that we need the grand total to be divided by fifteen so that everyone can pay individually. The bill comes to a modest 4.71 roubles per head (about £5) – very reasonable considering that we’ve had the luxury of eating caviar and quaffing champagne.

Shortly after nine o’clock we are asked to leave and so I holler at everyone to vacate their seats. After a little more confusion, I manage to get hold of the extra bottle of champagne, which the head waitress has forgotten in the general chaos, and before we go I thank her very much for all her help.

For the last time we make our way down through the swaying carriages, using our acrobatic skills in order to cross from one to another. We now return to our section, where we are greeted by Raisa and some carefully selected Russian companions. (I notice that she has excluded certain newcomers and has everyone under her thumb.) I present her with the champagne and compliment her on her appearance, for by now she has donned her glad rags and applied makeup to her wrinkled face. Although she now looks quite good-looking, her raucous voice and boisterous manner are still evident. She presents us with measures of brandy in borrowed plastic cups, pours out champagne and another singing (or rather shouting and bawling) match begins, just like last night. The ear-splitting din goes on for some time until we begin to run out of songs and so, with approval from Jill, I shout, ‘Все вместе! (*Vsye vmyéstye!*) All together!’ and everyone roars the melody of *Midnight in Moscow* in various keys.

Thus ends the official party, but as people are still giddy, I accept a little white wine and join some of the others in another compartment. However, before everyone gets too drunk, I ask Raisa about our time of arrival in Khabarovsk tomorrow, as nobody is really sure of it. She tells me it will be 5.10 a.m., Khabarovsk time (one hour ahead) and that she will call us at four. She then informs me that everyone in our party needs to pay her one rouble for all the tea that we have consumed during our journey. I tell everyone this, collect the money and give it to her.

I then join our little group, have a bit of a laugh and finally retire to bed. However, as Mike, Sue and Hiro continue to talk, neither Nori nor I can get to sleep. When Mike finally leaves and the others fall silent, I make an attempt to sleep, but all I can do is rest and doze until four o’clock.

Fortunately everyone surfaces at about 4.30 a.m., for there is no sign of Raisa. Waking Sue proves to be rather difficult. At last Raisa appears, looking rather bedraggled and sleepy. Ten past five comes and goes, but still we have not reached Khabarovsk. We reach the city at about 5.20 and say goodbye to Raisa, who now, I notice, is crying. I feel sorry for her; no doubt she envies our freedom to come here and go anywhere in the world, as we please. Although living in the USSR is tough, the Russians are famously devoted to their motherland and its rich culture. Raisa thanks me for my help and I bid her farewell. As I have little or nothing to give her, I present her with my bar of soap in its fancy box, for I have been told that she loves soap. We end our brief acquaintance with a hug. I can still see the tears in her eyes when I am down on the platform, from where we cheer and applaud her. As the friendly Russian man who has given me little presents of food and badges of Lenin is up and about, I thank him and say goodbye.

And so this memorable Trans-Siberian journey comes to its end. The reason why we must leave the train at this point is because it will continue to Vladivostok, a

military port that is closed to outsiders like us. This evening we will take a train to another port named Nakhodka, and from there will sail to Yokohama in Japan.

A couple of po-faced female Intourist guides now step forward to inform us that we will be taken to the Intourist Hotel by bus. Most of us leave our luggage on the platform for the porters, and we follow the guides outside to a couple of waiting coaches. We are whisked to a large and quite impressive modern hotel, where we gather and queue in the reception area. As we will not be staying overnight, those who have paid for rooms either keep them or have their money refunded. I am lucky in that I am able to share a room with Irwin, the Swedish chap. I simply ask if I can leave my luggage in his room and the girl behind the desk says yes. The rather scatterbrained *dezhurnaya* on our floor does not question us and so I am able to go into the room with Irwin, lie on the second bed and rest for the remainder of the morning. Again, I am unable to sleep.



Khabarovsk, Siberia

Later I get up and write my diary. There is a fine view from the window of the River Amur (which forms the border with China), and also a public park.

At nine o'clock I bestir myself and shave. Irwin shaves, takes a shower and goes down for breakfast. As there is no hot water and as I do not fancy a cold shower, I give myself a good all-over wash and hurry downstairs. In the lobby I meet the husband of the young Dutch lady, who gives me a ticket to the restaurant for breakfast. He tells me that I should have no bother using this ticket as at least two others have already used it! Although it is now a couple of minutes after ten o'clock, the official closing time, I decide to chance my arm.

Sitting beside Irwin and an American girl, I try to attract the attention of a waitress, but to no avail. When they leave, I join a couple of Swedish young men who finally succeed in asking a waitress for tea. When I ask her for breakfast, she merely shakes her head, as if to say, 'No'. As I am obviously too late, I pick some leftover bits and pieces from a nearby table: bread, slices of cold meat and an almost full glass of juice. When I get started, the waitress returns and surprises me by giving me tea, an omelette and more bread. This time she is full of apologies and very attentive to me. What a strange hotel – nobody seems to know what is going on!

After my free breakfast, I hand in my train ticket, which I have forgotten to do earlier, and take myself off for a walk around Khabarovsk. It feels strange walking on solid ground after travelling in a swaying train for the last seven days; I still feel the

motion of the train in my head. This city of wide streets and fine modern buildings looks quite smart – although it is soulless, it has a much more casual and airy atmosphere than drab Moscow. It is a fine, hot and sunny morning. I go off in search of two museums indicated on the hotel map: the Far Eastern Museum and the Fine Art Museum. The first is closed and the second does not seem to exist – or at least I am unable to find it. During my wanderings, I find several quaint wooden houses sandwiched between the high-rise apartment blocks.

Back in the main street again (Karl Marx Street), I meet Irwin and Jetta and join them. We just simply walk around, looking at the shops and the people. We see many queues in shops and at stalls; in most cases, people are lining up to buy fresh fruit. Indeed, I am surprised at the amount of fruit and vegetables that seem to be available in this region.

We then make our way to a large and impressive square, then turn off into a rather tumbledown housing estate. From here we walk to a wide but uninteresting boulevard. We soon find ourselves back in Karl Marx Street, where we decide to buy food for a picnic lunch. Irwin buys a huge and very heavy melon, Jetta buys three bottles of beer and cheese in a *gastronom* (food shop) and I buy three pastries with a fish filling. We then return to the hotel where we collect a few things, such as my bag of food, and set off for the river, which is only a minute's walk from the hotel. We descend to the water's edge by a very rough and slippery path, sit on some steps and eat our food in the sunshine. It is absolute bliss to be here, out in the fresh air. A number of pleasure boats are floating up and down the river, and people are swimming and sunbathing. All we eat are the pastries, which are very tasty, then huge slices of the juicy melon, the pips and rinds of which we throw into the river. Afterwards we sit back to enjoy the sun, then finally we return to the hotel, taking care to avoid boys who are looking for foreign coins in return for badges. Some of them are a perfect nuisance.

Up in my room I manage to wash my hair under the cold tap and then go downstairs to collect my ticket for the next part of the journey at the service bureau. At four o'clock we pile into a coach and then, after a long delay during which we are counted about five times, we are whisked off to the train station. Our luggage follows in another coach. During the wait for the train, I go off in search of ice cream and find a vendor outside. For just ten kopeks I buy a fine big one. When others see me with it, they follow my example.

The train to Nakhodka arrives at five o'clock and we scramble on board. Although many of us are still together, I share a compartment with a Japanese business man and two Bulgarian ladies. Everyone, by now refreshed after a good wash and lots of fresh air, is in good form; Sue goes prancing about with Nori's mouth organ. The only person who looks glum is our new ashen-faced stewardess: a typical product of Soviet officialdom.

Off we set at 5.30 and the fun begins again. I chat to the Japanese business man and two young ladies who are with him, then a Japanese girl who is returning home after studying French in Paris for two years. She seems to be most impressed by my little notebooks, in which I have written summaries of Japanese history, places to see and some basic vocabulary in case I get stuck. Nori meets a number of students from his university and then his teacher, all of whom have been studying Russian in Moscow.

Later we are told that the restaurant car will be open at eight o'clock and we are given new customs declaration forms to fill in. However, it turns out that the restaurant does not open until nine. I sit in Sue's compartment and have an improvised meal when everyone else goes to eat. Afterwards I go back to my

compartment to write my diary. The Bulgarian ladies return later and I have a few words with them in Russian. Not long afterwards I repair to bed.

After a good night's sleep, I get up at 8.30 a.m. At first the weather is fine, but then it becomes misty and cloudy; later it begins to rain. The scenery is quite dramatic – mountains looming through the mist – but I pay little attention to it.

As we approach Nakhodka, the sky turns blue again and the rain stops. By the time we reach the sea, it is fine again. We get out at the little station, leave our luggage on the train and are taken by coach to the port. We enter a small building containing a waiting room and join a queue to convert our unspent roubles into Japanese yen. Irwin has give me ten 'illegal' roubles to change. I join the queue, ask a German girl to keep my place and then leave to buy a cup of coffee and have some breakfast, thus finishing the last of my food.

I then rejoin the queue and change 46.50 roubles into yen. The exchange rate is not particularly good, but I am glad of the extra pocket money for Japan. I then escape from the stuffy waiting room and sit outside in the sun, writing some postcards. Later I go in search of my luggage, but I cannot find it. I consult the Intourist ladies, we take a look around and finally find it, on its own, in a corner. What a relief!

Although people are now queuing for the customs check, I do not join them but chat to Sue, Nori and some of the others. We jump up only when the queue has dwindled to one or two, and we are soon admitted to the next room. I stride across to one of the officials at the desk that I have been directed to, and plonk my little bit of luggage down for inspection. The man is not exactly easy-going, but he is not too bad. He firstly checks my declaration form and asks me to show him my money. When extracting it from my pocket I inadvertently pull out the 1927 kopek coin that has been given to me. I explain that this is a small present, but the man, now suspicious, takes it. I tell him that I don't really want it. When he begins to fill in a form, another official asks me if I have any books. I show him my one and only book, which he examines and returns with thanks. Then the first official asks me to write my name and address on a form in Cyrillic script, and asks me for the date of my return home. I comply with this rather unusual request and write:

Чарлес Ганнон,
Кнокмароон,
Кастлекнок,
Ко. Дублин,
Иреланд (Ирландия).

This is bloody ridiculous; if anybody tries to post me something to my address written like this, I'll never receive it! The man finally issues me with an official form containing a description of the coin. What is supposed to be the outcome of all this, I have absolutely no idea. He then quickly examines my little bag, looks at my camera, says 'no problem' and waves me on. My luggage is taken, put on a conveyor belt, and disappears briefly into an X-ray machine. Now I am glad that I have taken all my films out of the bag. Thankfully, this concludes the customs check and I'm through. Maybe being last to board is a mixed blessing, as there is no time left to examine my luggage in more detail!

I emerge from the building, walk up the gangplank to the ship and leave Russian soil and officialdom behind me. Next stop: Yokohama in Japan!