PART TWO

LENINGRAD

6 – LENINGRAD

Thursday, 21 June 1979

Before 1703 a sodden marsh existed where Leningrad is now situated. This city was the creation of one man, the first Emperor of All Russia, Peter Romanov I (later 'The Great'), and was named Saint Petersburg.

Thousands of hired labourers toiled to drain the marsh and build the foundations of the city in this God-forsaken spot, many of them perishing in the process. At last the first man-made structure rose up on the banks of the River Neva: the Peter and Paul Fortress, which remains the emblem of the city to this day. Nearby, a small wooden house was constructed for the Emperor, and then an Admiralty was built for defensive purposes. In 1711, Peter had a miniscule palace built in the Dutch style for himself, which he called the Summer Palace and, in the same year, the famous Winter Palace was begun.

From then on, the city began to take shape as Peter enticed French and Italian architects to build palaces, churches and other buildings to the highest standards of the time. He encouraged Russian experts to copy European architecture and art, and sent many abroad to bring back as much European knowledge and culture as they could, thus breaking away completely from the Russia of the past.

The rebellious Emperor officially transferred the capital to his new city in 1712, and married a girl of his own choice, a Lithuanian servant named Catherine.

The last building to be constructed before his death in 1725 was the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in the eastern suburbs, the church of which contained relics of the venerated warrior-saint. In order to join the monastery to the Admiralty, Swedish prisoners were ordered to build a road, which was subsequently named Nevsky Prospekt.

In this manner, one of Europe's most beautiful cities came into being, its name (Saint Petersburg and Petrograd) connected with that of its founder, Peter the Great, until it was officially changed in 1917 to Leningrad. It is a city full of history and is still bursting at the seams with the best of European culture.

We now sped to Leningrad in the plane, munching sweets and chewing gum in order to stave off our hunger. We were given a glass of fruit juice, but nothing more. After a while, Walter and I dozed off.

Having read several books about Leningrad (or Saint Petersburg as I preferred to call it), taken notes and, in short, done my homework, I was very much looking forward to visiting this city. Sid and Sue, the couple whom we had met, and who had been here before, had told us to expect quite a change for the better. They said that we would find a more relaxed atmosphere and better facilities, better food, commodities, transport, living conditions, cleanliness, and so on. This was because the city was much closer to Europe and was more accessible, thanks to it being a sea port. It was right beside Finland of course, and not far from the other Scandinavian countries. We were also told that we would find the people much nicer and more friendly.

It was delightful to know that we would be here for eight days; my hope was that we would be given plenty of free time. We had also arrived at the right time for the famous 'White Nights', the phenomenon that occurs in June in a city so far north, for the evenings become so long in summer that darkness is rarely seen.

We finally landed in Leningrad at 2.30 in the afternoon. Just as we had approached Moscow, we had flown low over huge uninhabited stretches of forest, but here the clearings of vast fields were bigger and more frequent. The suburbs had suddenly appeared in the middle of all this, to our right, and we had swung around to land in the airport, which was situated out in the countryside.

The airport building looked bigger, cleaner, and far more up-to-date than the one in Moscow, and there were more people in it. Here the white walls were really white – not the faded creamy colour that we had seen so often in Moscow. We had to wait for quite a while in the large and busy arrivals hall until a coach arrived to take us to our hotel. On a huge display nearby was a list of all the flights due to leave from the airport; they went to almost every major city in the Soviet Union.

Eventually we set off at 3.30 p.m., driving along a fine new highway through the countryside which, like the road from the airport in Moscow, was lined with advertisements in English. When we looked back at the airport, we noticed that it was designed to look like a ship – the symbol of Leningrad. Above the roof were five towers that looked like funnels from a distance.

We then approached a huge modern monument. In the centre of a low square platform was a tall slim rectangular slab that bore the inscription '1941–1945'; to the left and right of this were statues of rather angular-looking Soviet citizens striding forward. This impressive though not particularly handsome structure, we were told, was a memorial 'to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad'.

As this large memorial was straight ahead, we had to swing right around it. We now found ourselves hurtling down a wide main street with other traffic; shops, apartment blocks and skyscrapers lined the sides. Here the buildings did seem to be of better quality than what we had been seeing and, like the airport, were whiter. Walter and I were quite amazed at how quickly the outskirts of the city had appeared. We wondered if we were now driving along Nevsky Prospekt which, I had read, was four miles in length, but we quickly realized that we were not.

The road that we drove along through the suburbs seemed to go on for ever and ever; I had no idea that the city was this size. After a while we were told that we were travelling along Moscow Avenue. Shortly afterwards we passed the large and ugly Moscow Triumphal Gates: a huge dark green structure that seemed to consist mostly of pillars. We then drove through more suburbs until we found ourselves skirting the wide Neva River on our right. We passed some ships and then approached a huge but low semi-circular building, very modern in design. This, we were informed, was our hotel. There was an audible gasp. Many of us began to doubt that it was centrally located. As I had not yet got my bearings, I did not know in which part of the city we were. One thing was certain: it was rather busy around here. It was now four o'clock; we were told that we would have lunch in half an hour's time, then dinner at ten.

We clambered out of the coach and entered a huge, low-ceilinged foyer; at the far end were service desks. At the door were elderly men dressed in mulberry-coloured uniforms, whose job was to make sure that we were tourists and that we were staying in this particular hotel, the Hotel Moskva. We now made our way to one of the desks, where we were given little cards with our room numbers on them. Ours was 6132,

which meant that we were on the sixth floor. Here the lifts – there were four of them – were much more modern and quicker.

The Moskva Hotel, Leningrad (photographed on a different day)

The landing on our floor was very modern and comfortable, but the young *dezhurnaya* with blonde hair looked extremely surly. We detected a more slick and impersonal atmosphere about this place; although the hotel in Moscow was not so nice or as comfortable, it had more charm.

Our room looked like any other hotel room in Europe: it was an ordinary and comfortable bedroom that was tastefully designed. It had textured grey wallpaper and a low white ceiling. Although we were at the back of the hotel, overlooking a yard and some uninteresting buildings, we were fortunate in that it was very quiet.

After we had freshened ourselves up, I went downstairs. While waiting for Walter outside the large restaurant, I read a notice that the metro station was just outside the entrance, in the same building. It also mentioned that the Alexander Nevsky Monastery was across the road, and that the church, which was an active Orthodox one, was open every day at six in the evening, when there was a service. I took note of this. When Walter appeared, we went into the restaurant together.

Here, the meal was excellent and the service was quick and efficient. Although the food that we were given was similar to what we had eaten in Moscow, it was much better and more tasty.

Julia, our guide, had told us that she did not like this hotel, as it was difficult to organize groups of people in it because of its size. She preferred smaller hotels like the one that we had stayed in previously. I could understand this point of view. This comment and others like it had quite surprised me, for our guides had often expressed their criticism of certain things that they encountered. I guessed that the guides had not been able to indulge in such free speech several years previously.

After our excellent meal, Walter and I ambled outside into the evening sunlight and crossed the road to the entrance of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, making our way to an elegant stone gateway painted yellow and white. Once inside, we were surrounded by trees; the noise of the city faded away and we could hear birds singing.

The red and white monastery, which had been built in 1724, was a refined and elegant baroque building, which looked lovely in the mellow early evening light. Although the main wrought-iron gate was locked, we were able to enter through a

side gate. We now found ourselves in a square, where we were surrounded on all sides by the monastery complex. To our right was a little wood, situated in the middle of the square, and in it, under the shade of the trees, was a cemetery. We discovered that it contained the graves of war victims; one grave had a couple of aeroplane propellers over it instead of a tombstone.

The Alexander Nevsky Monastery, Leningrad (photographed on a different day)

Straight ahead of us, standing out against the blue sky, was the roof and steeple of an elegant church. This, I concluded, must be the Holy Trinity Cathedral of the Alexander Nevsky Lavra, built in 1778–1790 by Ivan Starov, where the service would take place. I had read that an earlier church had been built on the site before this one: the Church of the Annunciation (built in 1719 by Domenico Trezzini), but that it had to be demolished because of severe cracking in the supporting masonry.

As it had just gone six o'clock by now, we headed for the cathedral, passing by some ragged men and women who were stretching out their wrinkled hands, piteously begging for some money. The sound of a choir singing in harmony could now be heard wafting from the cathedral.

As we approached it, we walked past a booth where candles were being sold; inside, the birdsong faded away and it felt cooler. The interior was magnificent. In contrast to what we had seen up to now, this Orthodox cathedral looked more like a conventional European church, for it was large and was Neoclassical in style. Fine paintings adorned the walls and the iconostasis rather than icons; the icons here were contained in special glass cases and looked as though they were much later as regards style. However, the place was only dimly illuminated by the remaining daylight coming in through the windows high above us or from the multitude of candles burning in front of the icons. I noticed here that each icon stand, which resembled a small altar, had a rail on which a small towel was hung. I presumed that this was used to wipe the glass from time to time, as it was frequently being kissed by members of the congregation.

Quite a number of old women, elderly and middle-aged men and women, a number of young people, and even some children, were standing up at the front of the cathedral. In front of the iconostasis stood a majestic-looking and well-built young priest dressed in grey, who was chanting words in a powerful monotone from a book that he held in his hands. At every cadence he crossed himself three times, and the

choir, singing from a gallery at the back of the church, answered by way of a short, though very beautiful, response.

Through the openings of the iconostasis we could glimpse the proceedings around the altar, though it was difficult to see what exactly was happening. There was plenty of coming and going; the main celebrant went in and out of the iconostasis doors many times. Later, a younger priest emerged and began to chant, from a lectern, what I presumed was the epistle and then the gospel.

When two old ladies came around with cardboard home-made collection boxes, I threw in a handful of kopecks, for I suspected that the churches in Russia depended very much on the generosity of their congregations for their survival. I was heartened to see several teenagers here. I had noticed two nicely-dressed teenage girls standing stock still and praying intently in front of a side altar, to the left of the iconostasis.

The congregation paid little attention to us tourists, especially as we were only observing and not partaking in the service. Walter and I had become quite wrapped up in the ceremony, for this time we had the leisure to do so; it was quite a wonderful experience for both of us.

Suddenly there was a stir and the congregation followed three priests over to the right-hand side of the iconostasis, where they stopped at a covered silver sarcophagus, which I later discovered contained the relics of Alexander Nevsky. Here, a different ceremony began; the members of the choir came down from the gallery and the congregation joined them in the lusty singing of various responses and hymns. The chief celebrant chanted more readings from a book, and the congregation, led by an older and stouter priest with thick black-rimmed spectacles, sang longer and more tuneful responses. The old ladies had produced copybooks from somewhere; these contained the words of the ceremony, which had been carefully written on the pages. Although the modern Cyrillic alphabet had been used, I concluded that the text was in Church Slavonic as I could not recognize any of the words.

The atmosphere now became more intense and, at times, rather frenzied as the stout priest vigorously conducted the choir and congregation with forceful gesticulations of his left hand, becoming quite energetic in his enthusiasm. Now and then the choir broke into a full-blooded hymn, each one of which I found very moving. The fact that the choir members were not quite in tune with each other (the basses were a little sharp and the sopranos a little flat) did not bother me unduly, for it gave the music a certain unusual and unique quality. I was thrilled to be here, listening to such fervent singing.

Standing beside a collection box, which was to the left of the priests, was an elderly woman dressed in black. On the box was a number of unlit candles and some sheets of folded paper. Every so often a member of the congregation passed a candle, or a sheet of copybook paper with something written on it, or both, to the woman. I was curious to know what was going on, but was unable to understand what was happening.

The service seemed to continue without end. Although it became a little tedious after a while, I could not drag myself away from it. Walter stood behind me, absorbed in what was going on, but when I looked around after about an hour, he had left.

I found him outside in the cool cemetery. We scouted around, looking at the names on the tombstones in the hope that we might find some familiar or important ones. I had read that in one of the cemeteries here the graves of the architects Voronikhin and Rossi were to be found, as well as those of Tchaikovsky, Dostoyevsky, Karamanzin, Krylov, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. However, we met with no such luck and decided to have a good look around the city. We left the square, passing by some

more beggars, then walked around the outside and the back of the monastery complex. Some parts of the buildings were rather rundown and dilapidated, which was sad to see. When we returned to the square, we saw several people with red armbands (volunteers for the keeping of public order) and no sign of the beggars. We presumed that they had been shooed away.

As there was another cemetery near the River Neva, we had a look at it, but found no familiar names, even though some of the tombstones were of an earlier period. Some of the tombstones were quite large and elaborate; we also saw a few mausoleums. In the distance, under the trees, two lovers embraced. What cheerful surroundings for a courting session!

After a little while we left the cemetery, walked out to the street, then returned to our hotel room after I had unsuccessfully tried to buy tickets for Glinka's opera *Ivan Susanin* (formerly known as *A Life for the Tsar*) and for a concert of Ukrainian folk music that our guides had told us about. The young lady at the desk had been quite unhelpful and had not been very forthcoming about information.

The Metro, Leningrad

After we had freshened ourselves up, we headed back down to the foyer, where I wrote down instructions on how to use the Metro. We then went outside, turned right, and entered the building once again through another door, this time following many other people. We now found ourselves in a large circular hall, in which there was a row of automatic gates and a number of small change machines along a wall. We headed to one of these machines, where we could get 10, 15 or 20 kopeck coins changed into 5 kopeck coins. We now pushed a 5 kopeck coin into a slot on a machine beside one of the gates; a green light flashed and the gate opened.

Following the people nearby, we stepped on an escalator that transported us at high speed down into the bowels of the earth through a very steep and long tunnel that never seemed to end. It was a strange experience because, as the angle of the tunnel was so steep, I began to wonder if I was standing vertically or not! The only thing to relate to was the vertical strip lighting on the wall at regular intervals. This obviously did not bother the local people, most of whom were busy reading newspapers, magazines or books. I noticed that, generally speaking, the paper in them was yellow in colour and poor in quality.

Eventually the end of the tunnel came in sight. At the bottom was a woman seated at a desk, who either stared intently at the people or the escalators, or spoke to somebody on a telephone.

A Metro platform, Leningrad

The station turned out to be rather unusual. There was only one platform, and on both sides was a series of sliding doors that ran the length of a very long wall. As the doors on our left-hand side were open, we followed some people who were going through the first door, and suddenly realized that we were entering a carriage. A muffled voice from a loudspeaker said something, and then the doors hissed and slid shut with a bang. We immediately set off at a terrific speed through a dark tunnel.

As everything had happened so quickly, it took me a few moments to recover from my bewilderment and take in what was around me. I now found myself in a typical Metro carriage, which was designed for plenty of standing room, was clean, and was full of people from all walks of life: old women and middle-aged ladies with shopping bags, businessmen with briefcases and newspapers, teenage boys and girls heading off for an evening of fun, and students with their noses stuck in tatty library books. The people were silent (probably because of the noise of the train) and, in general, looked rather glum.

Shortly afterwards, the train came to a halt, stopping exactly in line with another set of doors that led to a platform. When the doors slid open, people left and others entered. Having managed to get my bearings by looking at a map on the window of the carriage, I noted that this was the Mayakovskaya station. Printed at the top of the plan was the official name of the Metro system: 'Leningrad Order of Lenin Metropolitan named after Lenin'. Rather overdone, I thought.

Walter and I got out at the next station: Gostiny Dvor (Shopping Centre), for this was at the far end of Nevsky Prospekt. We now walked to the end of the platform and went up by an escalator. As we went up, I passed the time watching the people and the expressions on their faces as they went down on the escalator beside us. Many young people were lost to the world, reading books; I was quite surprised to see so many young people reading serious books here. Women chatted to each other, one on a lower step, looking up at the other. Young couples chatted and embraced, the man always on the lower step. Men talked earnestly to their wives in this position, as did sailors (no doubt off a ship docked on the River Neva) chatting up good-looking girls who were obviously out for a bit of fun.

We eventually emerged from the depths and found ourselves in another large hall, this time a rectangular one. The fast-moving escalator almost threw us off our feet at the top and we followed a quickly-moving mass of people out of the hall to Nevsky Prospekt.

Near the Gostiny Dvor Metro station, Nevsky Prospekt, Leningrad

We made our way along a short distance of the famous avenue to the eighteenth-century Gostiny Dvor building, and stood in the long covered walk. I had been interested to see this, but was now disappointed to find that it was ugly and quite tatty. In the covered walk were windows and entrances to shoddy shops, none of which looked at all enticing. We stepped out from the building in order to get a better view of our surroundings, passing a row of fizzy-water machines and a queue of people.

Out in the street we were blinded by the sun, which was sinking down towards the horizon at the end of the avenue. From here we could see the Gostiny Dvor building properly. Only two storeys high, it stretched for a huge distance along the avenue, and disappeared down two side streets. I wondered how many shops it must contain. The building of this huge place had begun in 1757 to a design by Bartolomeo Rastrelli, but this was later changed to a less expensive Neoclassical design submitted by the French architect Jean-Baptiste de la Mothe. It was finished twenty-eight years later.

We now turned to our right and looked westwards; at the end of the avenue we could see the golden spire of the famous Admiralty building in silhouette against the setting sun. On the opposite side of the Prospekt was a dark building with a curious-looking dome. This used to be the Singer Sewing Machine building (with the emblem on top of the dome), but now it had been turned into the Dom Knigi or House of

Books. On our side of the street was a tall orange and white tower; this was the Fire Tower, which had been built in 1802.

Across the road from us, directly opposite Gostiny Dvor, was a neat and elegant little church, painted blue and white. I took out a small map that I had stuck into a notebook and got my bearings; this was the former Armenian Church, built in 1780. We crossed the busy road at this point in order to have a look at it, but discovered that it was closed.

We then walked along the crowded pathway towards the Admiralty, which was our ultimate goal. However, I wanted to see some other places first; for instance, another handsome little church, painted a faded yellow, on our side of the street. Formerly this was a Roman Catholic church, the Church of Saint Catherine, which had been built in 1783 by de la Mothe. This rather decayed building looked as though it was permanently locked.

Arts Square, with the Pushkin statue and the Russian Museum, Leningrad

Following my map, we turned right and walked into the beautiful Arts Square with its wooded garden in the centre. In the middle of the garden, where people were sitting on seats, was a tall statue of Russian's greatest poet, playwright and novelist, Alexander Pushkin, which had been made in 1957. Straight ahead was the large and imposing former Mikhailovsky Palace, now the Russian Museum, which I was hoping to visit because of its important collection of Russian art. The classical building looked very impressive in the evening light. At the top of the fine wrought-iron gates was one of the few remaining examples of imperial Russia: the double-eagle standard. To the right, a wing of the buildings housed the Ethnography Museum. The whole structure had been designed and built by the great architect Carlo Rossi (1775–1849) – or Karl Ivanovich Rossi as he was called – in 1825.

We now ambled along by the side of the building and around the square to the left, where we found the Maly (Little) Theatre. Near the entrance to the square, where we had approached it, was the Philharmonic Concert Hall.

Back in Nevsky Prospekt, we decided to cross the road, and so we went down the steps of a *perekhod* or underground passage. Under the street we found an unusual sight: rows of advertisements and posters. Along one wall were posters displaying what performances would be on in the Philharmonic Concert Hall. I began to decipher some familiar names, which looked rather strange in the Cyrillic script, especially as they were spelt phonetically. 'Betkhoven' was their version of Beethoven; Mozart

was spelt the same, though ‘Shopen’ was Chopin and ‘Bakh’ was Bach. It was obvious that a lot of good music was being performed here. When I checked the dates of the concerts, I discovered that they had already taken place.

A woman sitting at a table down here was selling something, maybe tickets to some event, and was hailing everybody through a portable battery-operated amplifier and loudspeaker.

Back on the Prospekt, we continued walking along the left-hand side of the avenue, keeping our eyes open for interesting buildings. Across the road was another handsome yellow church which was in better condition than the last one we had seen. This turned out to be a former Lutheran church.

Next we found the very wide and low-lying Kazan Cathedral, now referred to as the Museum of Religion and Atheism. This rather inelegant building made of dark red-brown stone had been designed for Tsar Paul I by the architect Voronikhin in the Russian Classical style, and had been built between 1801 to 1811. I was quite disappointed when I saw it. Two prominent semi-circular wings, in which there were hundreds of Roman columns, spread out from the central building. We walked up to the cathedral, passing through a large public garden. Sitting on the steps were some young people who looked like drop-outs or hippies; they stared blankly into space, wore scruffy clothes, and looked as though they were in need of a good wash. We guessed that they may have been high on drugs. One group of youngsters was playing with a toy plastic flying saucer, which they flung through the air to each other. They had left some rubbish on the steps; it looked so much out of place in such an otherwise clean city. Disturbed by this, we hastened to leave and retraced our steps to the avenue, where we felt safer. Despite this observation, we both concluded that we felt much safer walking through the streets here or in Moscow than in Dublin or London; so far we had seen no violence, hooliganism, or thugs.

The Moika River, Leningrad

We now crossed the peaceful waters of the lovely, yet narrow, Moika River, which was flanked on both sides by beautiful old buildings. These included the Stroganov Palace, which had been built for Count Stroganov by another very important architect of the eighteenth century, Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli, in 1752–54.

The next stretch of Nevsky Prospekt, the last, contained some rather uninteresting buildings and shops. A dark grey building contained Aeroflot offices and a Beriozka shop.

The spire of the Admiralty building

We now emerged from the end of the Prospekt at a T-junction and at an angle to the elegant spire of the Admiralty building, in front of which was a fountain. The original tiny Admiralty building had been constructed in 1704 by the architect Ivan Korobov; it was then enlarged by Andreyan Zakharov in 1806. It was finally completed shortly afterwards by Andrey Voronikhin. This large yellow and white complex now housed a naval college and was closed to the public. Its gold spire shone in the sunshine.

The Palace Square, with the Alexander Column and the General Staff Building

Taking a right-hand turn, we saw a familiar sight: the magnificent blue and white Winter Palace on our left, and the huge empty Palace Square with its tall Alexander Column in the centre. At the opposite end of the square was the gently curving and very long General Staff building with an archway in the middle. It was a magnificent sight. The yellow stonework of the General Staff Building glowed in the evening light. I felt a great sense of achievement on walking into this beautiful though austere square which, until now, I had only seen in photographs.

The Winter Palace, Leningrad

The Winter Palace has had a long and varied history. It had begun life as a modest palace in 1711 on the banks of the Neva, opposite the Peter and Paul Fortress, and had been subsequently rebuilt several times; for example, Rastrelli redesigned it 1732–36. In 1755 the fifth and final version was begun by Rastrelli, employing some 80,000 workmen. It was completed by two Russian architects, Velten and Chevakinski. The Hermitage Theatre was added in 1783–85 by Giacomo Quarenghi (an important Italian architect) and the Russian Starov. In 1808 and 1817, Rossi had added rooms, including one that was named 'the 1812 Room'.

When the whole palace caught fire in 1837, Tsar Nicholas I left a ballet performance in order to personally supervise the firefighting. He then ordered the palace to be rebuilt to Rastrelli's original plans, and demanded that the work be completed within one year. This impossible demand was made possible by the use of special heaters that roasted the rooms to dry the plaster, killing many of the workers in the process. The exterior repairs were supervised by Vasily Petrovich Stasov, and the interior by Alexander Pavlovich Bryullov. Only the Hermitage had survived the fire.

The six-hundred-ton Alexander Column designed by Montferrand in 1830 to commemorate the victory of Alexander I over Napoleon in 1812 had been placed in the middle of this great square by Rossi after he had built the General Staff Building behind it in 1811–29. He also commemorated the 1812 victory over Napoleon by placing figures representing Glory on the top of the fine archway that breaks the continuity of the wide building.

As we looked around, a group of brown-uniformed soldiers did the goose-step as they marched by the General Staff Building, and stopped at a doorway. They then relaxed and entered like ordinary citizens.

After we had taken a good look at the square and the marvels of its architecture, we approached the Winter Palace and walked around the side of it in the direction of the Neva embankment and Palace Bridge – an extension to Nevsky Prospekt that led to Vasilyevsky Island on the other side of the Neva.

We now passed through a little park with trees, where we found a number of fizzy water machines and kiosks that looked rather out of place. We were stopped by a lad who wanted to know if we would like him to change British sterling into roubles 'at a good rate'. With a little bit of difficulty we managed to get rid of him.

We emerged at the embankment with its fine vista of Palace Bridge and also of Vasilyevsky Island with its interesting old buildings on the other side of the river. In

the distance, opposite the Winter Palace, we could see the strong grey walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress and, glinting in the sunshine, the tall golden spire of the island's Cathedral. On the River Neva, little wavelets chased across the water and lapped against the stone embankment. The atmosphere here was magical.

The Winter Palace as seen from the River Neva, Leningrad

We walked on towards the busy bridge in order to have a better view of the Winter Palace, for this side overlooked the river. Unfortunately the street in front of it was cordoned off with unsightly wooden barriers, and the ground was being dug up. I felt a great sense of satisfaction at having seen so much of the city already; I had been reading about this marvellous city for several months previously, and had been so much looking forward to seeing it all for real. And now, here it was before me like a dream come true.

As it was now approaching dinner time, we headed back the way we had come, stopping to drink some fizzy water, which was reasonably refreshing. Back at Gostiny Dvor, we caught the metro train and arrived back at our huge hotel.

We entered it just in time for an excellent meal. At our table, Sid and Sue presented me with a big book, a guide to the Soviet Union, which they had told me about. I found it very helpful, as the times when all the places of interest were open were listed.

At our table, two pleasant English women began to tell us about how a lift in the hotel in Moscow had stopped in between floors and had become jammed. They were amazed when the elderly female operator had panicked, and had instinctively begun to cross herself furiously and pray loudly. When the lights then went out, the lady panicked again. However, she quickly regained her confidence, uttered comforting words to them all, and handed round some chocolate. Eventually the power was restored and the lift was able to move once again. The story effectively illustrated that these normally cranky old ladies were, in fact, kind at heart.

After dinner we joined Sid and Sue with some others in the 'soft currency' bar of the hotel. We sat with an English man named Peter, who spoke in a very deep voice, and also with a marvellous, though rather talkative, seventy-two-year-old American lady, who declared that she was a Socialist. She told us that she had lost her husband, and that she had been travelling all over the world, living in every conceivable city. About thirteen years previously she had turned her hand to journalism, and had made her living by reporting for American magazines on uprisings and conditions in various

third-world or socialist countries. Named Lin, she was the archetypal elderly American woman, with upturned spectacles and a permed hairdo. However, she did not act like what Walter described as a ‘professional tourist’, and was able to laugh at that sort of person. She knew everybody, including the Irish dramatist Seán O’Casey, for he had stayed in her house when he had first visited the United States.

Although she was quite fascinating to listen to, she talked rather too much about herself, and I soon realized that I could not agree with some of her views and opinions. As she and the people around us tended towards Socialism, I gradually withdrew from the conversation and concentrated on the book that Sid and Sue had lent me, taking notes as I flicked through it.

By the time we returned to our bedroom, it was still bright outside, even though it was quite late by now; we were experiencing one of the famous White Nights. I eventually drifted off to sleep at 2.30 a.m.