

7 – LENINGRAD

Friday, 22 June (Midsummer)

A scorching hot summer's day. After a good breakfast we set off for a general sightseeing tour of the city at ten o'clock. Despite the fact that my stomach was out of order and that I really was not interested in the tour, I got over my horror of traipsing around in the heat and decided to go at the very last minute. The tour turned out to be just what I had anticipated: a rushed affair that enabled us to see very little. The scorching heat in the coach proved to be energy-sapping and tiring.

The guide we had this morning proved to be pleasant, though it was difficult to hear her over the amplification system in the noisy vehicle. We drove along Nevsky Prospekt to Arts Square and the Winter Palace at breakneck speed. From here we hurtled over Palace Bridge to Vasilyevski Island (which our guide called 'Bay-zil's Island'). In order to get a good view of the Peter and Paul Fortress we got out and joined other tourists at the *strelka* (arrow or pointer) between two tall and not particularly interesting Rostral Columns. The view was not particularly outstanding.

After about five minutes here, we scrambled aboard and set off, this time driving past the fine old buildings of Vasilyevski Island, such as the Kunstkammer or the Cabinet of Curios. This was a fine blue-and-white Baroque building that had been built by the German architect Georg Johann Mattarnovi in 1718, and which was now used as Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. Other buildings included the large Academy of Sciences built by Quarenghi in 1789; the former Stock Exchange, a building in Doric temple style by Thomas de Thomon in 1810 (now the Naval Museum); a long red-and-white building that had been built in 1722 by Tressini and which had been the Twelve Colleges Complex (now Leningrad State University); the Menshikov Palace of 1714, which had been the first stone palace to be built for a prince; and the Academy of Fine Arts constructed between 1764 and 1788 by Kokorinov and de la Mothe.

Although it was a lovely area, we were driven around it far too quickly. I vowed to return again sometime in order to see the place properly and to take some photographs. These wonderful buildings looked fresh and cheerful in the bright morning sunshine. I particularly liked the former Twelve Colleges Complex, which could be seen behind a row of trees.

We now returned to the *strelka* and crossed another bridge, which brought us over the Malaya (Little) Neva River to Zayachi Island, where we could see the Peter and Paul Fortress. En route we passed a stone building that had been constructed around Peter the Great's first wooden house which, we learned, could still be visited.

At the end of the island, we swung to the left and stopped by the *Aurora* cruiser, a cannon shot from which had begun the 1917 Russian Revolution. On board the vessel a number of sailors, stripped to the waist, were throwing water from a bucket at each other. On the other side of the Bolshaya (Great) Neva River, we could see the huge modern Hotel Leningrad, where my mother had holidayed several years previously. However, what attracted my attention nearby was a rather elegant blue-and-white building across the road: the Nakhimov Naval Training College for young cadets.

This turned out to be a nineteenth-century building that had been designed in the Baroque style.

When we set off again in the coach, I felt hot, exhausted and tired. As nothing around us was of much interest, I paid little attention to what we were being brought to see. We were driven down modern streets, then through the suburbs, where we passed apartment blocks and factories. As in Moscow, some of the areas looked rather run-down. I did notice, however, that the air outside was full of white fluff that was blowing around. This, I was told, was coming from the lime trees that had been planted along the roads.



The Smolny Cathedral, Leningrad

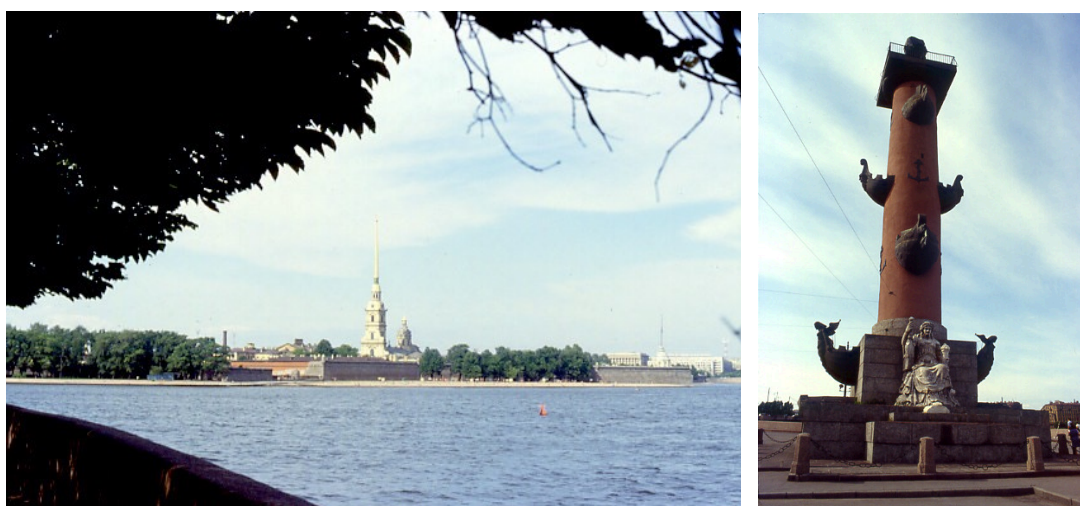
Eventually we made our way back to the hotel, stopping en route at the Piskarevski Cemetery, in which the people who had died during the siege of Leningrad had been lain to rest. I did not bother to get out of the coach, but I did hop out to admire the beautiful Smolny Convent and Cathedral, both of which had been begun by the architect Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli in 1748. This was our last stop before the hotel. Unsurprisingly, our guide referred to these fine buildings as the Smolny Institute, which was what the Bolsheviks had called this place when they had turned it into their headquarters during the 1917 revolution. The blue and white bell tower of the cathedral, which was partially hidden by trees, looked quite stunning. I planned to return in order to see it more thoroughly some time during the next few days.

We arrived back at our hotel feeling hot and weary. After a good lunch, Walter and I paid for some optional tours and bought tickets for Tchaikovsky's opera *The Queen of Spades*, which we would see and hear in the famous Kirov Theatre. We then went up to our room for a wash and a rest, after which I felt greatly refreshed. We then set off to see some more of the city at a more relaxed pace.

At a short distance from our hotel we caught the number one trolleybus and squeezed on board with a group of young Russian teenagers, who spent much of the journey passing money and tickets around, as nobody could move towards the ticket machine. They were quite lively. The air in the bus was hot and stifling, and there was a definite whiff of human sweat as bodies squeezed against one another. It was therefore a relief to elbow our way off at the top of Nevsky Prospekt and step out into the sunshine.

We crossed the busy road at this point and went into the Beriozka shop in search of Fujicolor film, but none was available. Walter realized that he would have to go easy

on film, for he, like me, was beginning to run out of it. We then walked across Palace Square, stopping to admire it once again, and made our way to Palace Bridge, where we took photos of the Winter Palace, looking heavenly in the bright sunshine. We crossed the bridge and stopped at the *strelka*, where we photographed the Peter and Paul Fortress through the trees and I took a shot of one of the curious Rostral Columns, which had been used as beacons in bygone days. We were not able to take any shots of other buildings on Vasilyevski Island as the sun was now in the wrong position; these would have to be left to some other day in the morning.



The Peter and Paul Fortress, and a Rostral Column, Leningrad

We then crossed another bridge and made our way to the fine Peter and Paul Fortress, which looked very impressive in the bright sunshine. The most striking feature was the very tall spire of the cathedral within the fortress. As we walked towards it, we passed a fine old schooner named the Kronverk, which lay anchored by the water's edge and gently rocked in the water that lapped against the embankment.



The Kronverk schooner, Leningrad

We were able to board this fine wooden vessel which, we discovered, had been turned into a bar. Tables and chairs had been placed on deck, where well-dressed lads and young ladies sipped drinks while listening to Western pop music that was being played over loudspeakers. Although it all looked quite exclusive, it was a little vulgar,

for the girls, who were quite shapely and dressed in the most up-to-date skimpy clothing, were ostentatiously trying to attract the attention of the young men. Having had a look around, we left quickly and continued walking.

We now approached the great stone walls of the fortress, which were partially hidden by a small wood. Before we went through the wood, Walter stopped to buy a bottle of Пепси (Pepsi), which he found was quite expensive, even though it was quite popular here.



Naryshkin Bastion Fortress, Leningrad

Once through the wood, we found ourselves on a narrow stretch of beach that ran along the bottom of the stone Naryshkin Bastion Fortress wall. There was a holiday atmosphere about the place, for people were lying in the sun, tanning themselves, the men in swimming trunks and the women (of all sizes) in scanty bikinis. Transistor radios and cassette recorders played pop music, ice cream was being eaten, people were strolling around lazily, and group of young women and muscular young men were throwing a ball to each other. One particularly well-built fellow was ostentatiously flexing his muscles so that everyone (especially the girls) could admire his physique.

We ambled along at an easy pace, taking all of this in. I stopped to admire the main bastion that overlooked the Neva; the buildings at the other side of the river looked a long way away. At the eastern end of the fortress we found the fine 1718 gateway, regarded as the first example of the Palladian style in Saint Petersburg. Inside we were able to observe the place in the shade of some trees, where birds were singing; it was delightfully peaceful here. The wonderful Baroque buildings looked especially fine here; there was a definite old-world atmosphere about the place. It was a marvellous sensation knowing that we were now in one of the earliest-built structures of Saint Petersburg.

Here we now were able to see the handsome yellow cathedral in its full glory, and the tiny chief shipbuilder's house that stood beside it. The tall spire of the cathedral looked most imposing against the clear blue sky. We had read that this spire was of a later date than the cathedral (which had been built in 1714–25), for the original one had been destroyed by fire in 1756. The enormous cathedral square was virtually deserted; only a couple of groups of young people were going into the cathedral. When we walked up to the door and peered in, the woman who checked the tickets (which one bought in a nearby *kassa*) appeared, and I explained that we had not

purchased any. She told us not to worry and waved us in. I had a feeling that this might happen!



The Peter and Paul Cathedral and the chief shipbuilder's house; cathedral interior

The interior was truly breathtaking: gold gleamed from Baroque decorations, and the magnificent pulpit was covered in gold. From the ceiling hung an intricate gold chandelier that gave a certain amount of diffused light. To the right of the decorative iconostasis, on which fine oil paintings were displayed, was a large Imperial canopy that had once covered the Emperor's throne. The Emperor or Tsar had been the only person who was allowed to sit during the services; everybody else had been obliged to stand.

Much to my surprise, I noticed that all this splendid decoration was to be seen only around the iconostasis and the altar beyond it, and that the side and back walls were blank. To the left were several imperial tombs, which I had once seen illustrated in a book. Although the cathedral was magnificent, there was a deadness about the place; it was definitely a museum into which parties of girls were coming with guides, who were showing them around rather quickly. As we left this fine building, Walter commented on the huge number of tourist guides that the state must be employing in this country.

Delighted that we had visited the cathedral free of charge, we then looked around the rest of the buildings in the fortress, which were very beautiful, then left. We walked towards the Kirov bridge, passing through some gardens and a little wood. We stopped for a rest, sitting on the embankment wall; from here we could see the roof and minaret of a mosque in the distance. We then crossed the bridge, returning to the main part of the city near the Winter Palace. We walked along a narrow side street flanked by large old buildings that were lit by the slanting rays of the sun, and stopped at one point to admire and photograph a canal and a bridge. Most of the elegant buildings here had been converted into offices, institutes and museums.

As it was fast approaching dinner time, but as we did not wish to return to our hotel yet, we began to search for some shop in which we could buy something to eat. In a side street not far from the Winter Palace, I espied a bakery. On closer

examination, I noticed a picture of a cup of coffee and a bun on a plate, which had been painted rather crudely on the window. The word Булочная (*búlachnaya* – bakery) was painted over the door. I beckoned to Walter, and we went inside to investigate.

The place was cool, sparse and somewhat gloomy. To our right were shelves containing various different types of bread, ranging from black to white, and from big to small. We selected a couple of small rolls, which cost only seven kopecks each, and presented them to a very old lady at a counter, who took our money and gave us change.

To our left we noticed some tables and chairs, and another counter where a lady was selling cakes and cups of coffee. Passing by a small display of tea and sweets, we made our way over and joined a short queue. We pointed to the cakes that we wanted, and when the lady produced them she asked us something that I did not understand. Seeing my look of incomprehension, she turned around, produced a sheet of coarse brown paper and quickly began to wrap up the cakes. When I then asked for two cups of coffee, she uttered a sigh of exasperation, whipped off the paper (which had now become stained), then cursed us while she turned around again to replace the paper. She now selected two respectable mugs from an assortment of cracked cups, mugs and glasses that were on a tray, and poured coffee (complete with milk and sugar) into our mugs from what looked like a large samovar. She then dumped the two mugs in front of us, took our money, and placed our change on a little plate. This was the way change was given to customers here; it was rarely handed directly to them.

We now sat down at one of the tables, among the Russian people, and relaxed as we chewed our bread, which was sweet and tasty, ate our buns, which were also quite nice, and drank our coffee, which was very sweet. It was very pleasant to be with the local people here in this curious shop, which looked so bare and poorly stocked. The place, like the buses, seemed to be designed primarily for standing and queuing, for the wares displayed on the shelves only lined two of the walls, and the rest of the floor space was empty, save for the area where we were seated. The walls were painted white, and the advertising and displaying of the goods on sale was very basic.

A constant stream of large, big-bosomed women and little old wrinkled ladies trooped in and out of the bakery; most of them looked weary from carrying bags, string bags and parcels that were full to bursting point. Also to be seen were drably-dressed men and some younger women. As they selected their bread and bought cakes, sweets, biscuits, packets of tea, and milk, they all chatted noisily and animatedly, though few of them laughed. Most of the people were not supplied with wrapping paper or bags – the goods went unwrapped straight into the people's own bags. It was obvious that the Russians, through hard experience, had learned to be thrifty and not to waste anything.

After a much-needed rest, we wandered back outside. As the evening drew on, it began to get a little cooler. While Walter made his way to public loo nearby (I discovered that I had accidentally directed him to the ladies' entrance when I heard a man shouting at him), I waited on the pavement, looking at a soldier who was peering out of a window of the small wooden box in which he sat. I had no idea why he had been stationed here of all places.

Together again, we ambled back to Palace Square, now almost empty of people, and took some photographs of the buildings in the soft evening light (see previous chapter). Afterwards we walked past the Admiralty building and the fine fountain in front of the elegant entrance, then wandered through the wooded Maksim Gorky Garden into the large Decembrist Square. This had originally been called Senate

Square as the Senate and Synod building was located here; the long yellow structure had been built in the 1830s by Rossi. In the middle of the square stood the famous Bronze Horseman or equestrian statue of Peter the Great, which had been made by Étienne-Maurice Falconet in 1766–68 for Catherine the Great. Catherine herself had chosen the rock on which the fine statue stood; it had been found in the Gulf of Finland. Peter, on his rearing horse, gazed intently across the Neva River.



The equestrian statue of Peter the Great in Decembrist Square, Leningrad

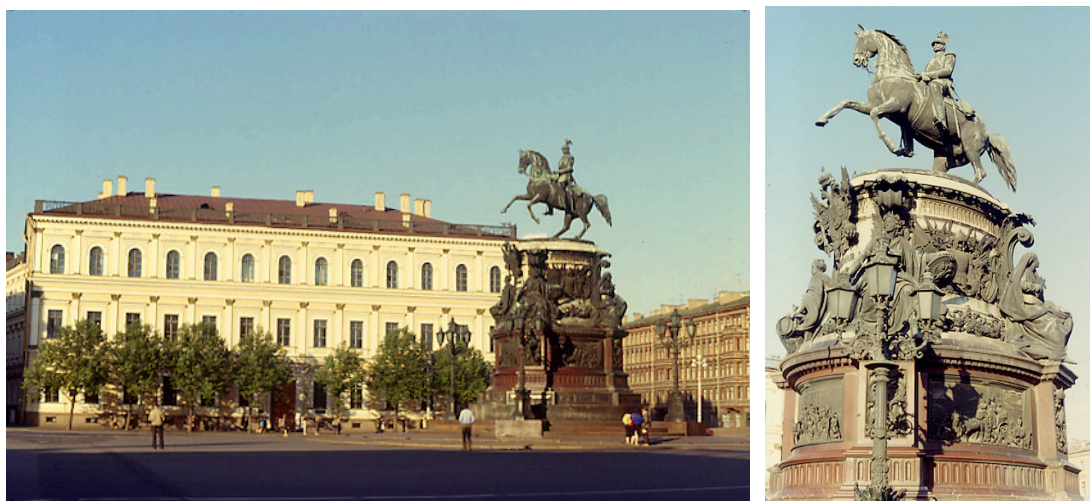
Facing the Neva from the other end of the square was the large Saint Isaac Cathedral. This had taken forty years to build, between 1818 and 1858, and it had been designed by Auguste de Montferrand. A massive gold-coloured dome gleamed on top.



Saint Isaac's Cathedral, Leningrad

Afterwards we walked around the back of the cathedral to Saint Isaac's Square, which was quite large and flanked by many fine nineteenth-century buildings. In the centre of the square was an imposing equestrian statue of the Emperor Nicholas I. Because of the presence of a policeman with a whistle, we were a little wary of crossing the square to photograph the statue. However, as other people were taking

pictures of it, we joined them and followed their example. The policeman paid no attention to us, but continued walking up and down, swinging his baton in a bored and listless manner. There was very little traffic for him to direct, and very few disobedient citizens for him to blow his whistle at.



Saint Isaac's Square and the equestrian statue of Nicholas I, Leningrad

At the opposite end of the square we walked over a bridge that crossed the Moika River and wandered down an uninteresting street that I thought would bring us back to Nevsky Prospekt. As it did not, I pulled out my map and realized that we were going the wrong way. We eventually found our way back to the familiar avenue via some narrow and quaint side streets, passing by various shops. At one stage I thought that we were peering into the shops of the Gostiny Dvor complex, but discovered that we seemed to be in another complex near the famous shopping mall. In one window we saw some rather ancient wireless sets and gramophone players; either this was a second-hand shop or else it was a special display. Most of the windows were almost empty and only displayed a handful of goods.

When we eventually arrived at the familiar front of Gostiny Dvor, we descended to the Metro and caught a train back to our hotel. Although we were tired by the time we returned to our room, we were satisfied that we had taken a good number of photographs of some of the famous landmarks. I went to the buffet on our floor, where I bought a bottle of mineral water and a couple of nutty cakes that Walter had recommended, then returned to our room to eat them. We also used the mineral water to wash our teeth, for Sid and Sue had advised us that on no account should we drink or use the tap water here in Leningrad, for it was badly polluted. The mineral water had a rather nasty taste and left a rust-coloured deposit in our glasses. However, it was preferable to becoming sick from the tap water, which was visibly brown and dirty.

We now relaxed for a while in the quietness of our room, writing our diaries and washing some clothing. At about eleven o'clock we set off again, turning left outside the hotel and walking along the Neva embankment and docklands towards Smolny Cathedral. Although we could see the cathedral in the distance, we did not go that far. Here, on this quiet street, flanked on our left by old apartment buildings and small factories, it was quieter than ever. The dull grey water lapped against the embankment, and several pairs of lovers strolled along or sat on the wall, gazing at the river. From an open window nearby, the rather unmusical sound of a guitar being strummed reached our ears; when we looked up, we saw a lad sitting on a windowsill

with the instrument. As lights were still on, we could see the interiors of some rooms in the apartment block; they looked rather grim and badly furnished.

Once or twice a firework was set off and a red flare soared up into the sky. Apart from a couple of boats floating down the river, nothing else seemed to be happening here.

We finally returned to our hotel room at 12.45 a.m., feeling very tired and ready for a good night's sleep.