

8 – PUSHKIN

Saturday, 23 June

Tsarskoye Selo (*Tsárskayi Syiló*: Tsar's Village) is a place name that crops up frequently when one reads about the history of Russia from the time of Catherine I onwards, for this was the main residence of the various Emperors and Empresses until 1917. After the Revolution it was renamed Detskoye Selo (*Dyétskayi Syiló*: Children's Village) in order that it might not sound so reactionary, but now it is known as Pushkin, Russia's great poet, playwright and novelist, for he had once studied in the village lycée.

The main attraction here is the magnificent Catherine Palace, which was bombed heavily by the Nazis in 1944 during their retreat after the Siege of Leningrad. It had begun as a summer residence for Peter the Great's second wife and successor, Catherine I. The building of the palace, designed by the architects Alexei Kvasov and Savva Chevakinsky, had begun in 1744, but it was completed by the great Italian architect Rastrelli.

In 1779, Princess Dashkov went to England in order to try to coax the architect James Gandon to come to Russia but, as he was not impressed by the country, he went instead to Dublin, Ireland, where he graced the city with some of his fine buildings, including the Custom House by the River Liffey. However, the princess succeeded in securing the services of a Scottish Jacobite who had been born in Rome: Charles Cameron. Between 1783 and 1785, he set to work on the Catherine Palace, designing a suite of Pompeian rooms for Catherine II, and also the Agate Pavilion with its famous Cameron Gallery.

As I had read about this fascinating place and had long wanted to see it for myself, I felt quite elated when we set off for this imperial residence today.

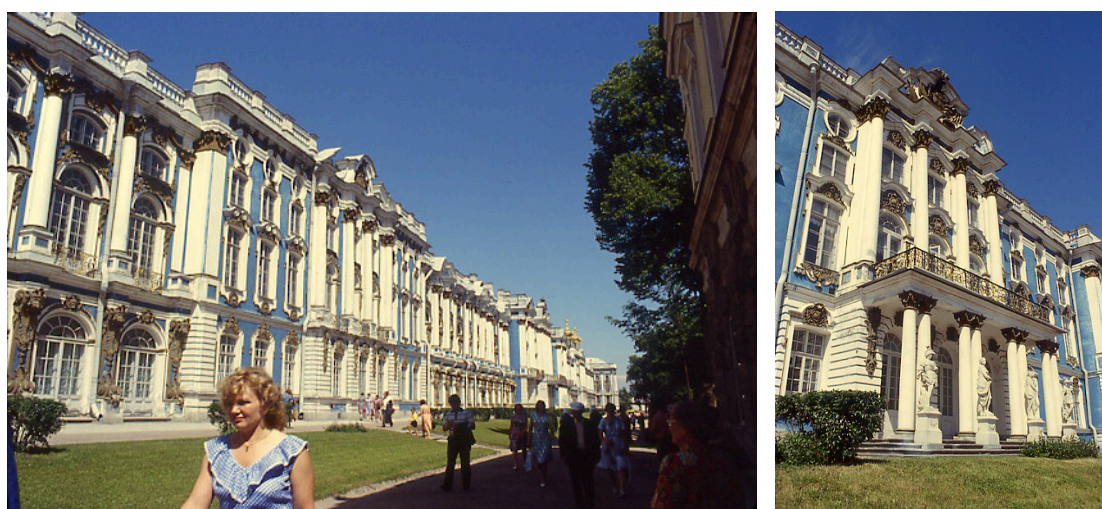
There was no sign of a coach when Walter and I joined the others outside the hotel this morning, but after waiting for about half an hour, an old banger of a bus eventually arrived. We were told that an accident had caused the delay.

At ten o'clock we set off and, driving through the suburbs, headed out to the countryside, passing the airport en route. We then swung eastwards and, for a while, skirted a railway line. This turned out to be the very first line to be built back in the 1850s, and it had led to our destination: Tsarskoye Selo. On our left we were able to look down over some huge fields.

As we travelled, the clouds disappeared and it became hot and sunny; soon we were feeling very warm in the bus. Once again the air was full of the white fluff from the lime trees, and this time it found its way into the bus.

We soon drove under a strange-looking mock Egyptian gateway and at last entered Tsarskoye Selo. We now found ourselves surrounded by peaceful meadows and woods. I wished that the bus would slow down so that we might enjoy the view, but we sped on at a relentless pace. On our right we passed the large yellow Alexander Palace and shortly afterwards drove past some smaller buildings. A modest yellow and white church caught my attention.

All of a sudden we began to see modern road signs and a petrol station (one of very few that we had seen here in Russia), and then we swung to the right, passing a wood. We then turned again and approached a large building, which turned out to be one of the Catherine Palace's outhouses. Approaching the main wrought-iron gates of the palace, we slowed down to have a look at the great building. Unfortunately this view looked disappointing, for the square in front of it had been ripped apart because of renovations that were being done to it. I now began to think that it would have been better for us to come here during the following year, after the Olympic Games.



The Catherine Palace at Pushkin (Tsarskoye Selo), near Leningrad

We eventually came to a halt beside dozens of other coaches in a large square to one side of the palace complex. Our new and pleasant guide, Rita, told us the number of our coach in case we got lost, then asked us to follow her. We then walked around the side of the palace, through some intimate courtyards, and emerged at the back, where the large and very beautiful façade could be seen, its white and gold décor gleaming in the bright morning sunshine. Although I had already seen photographs of this exquisite building, it nonetheless took me by surprise and I gasped in amazement. Unfortunately, however, the once beautiful gardens in front of the palace had now been reduced to piles of clay.

Along the whole length of the palace stretched an enormously long queue. I had seen queues in this country before, but this was one to beat them all. It must have been about fifteen people deep, and the sun was roasting everyone in the queue mercilessly. It struck me that this great mass of people, who in theory were supposed to be good, upright and atheist Soviet citizens, were anything but, for they were obviously determined to rediscover their glorious imperial past. I felt sorry for them having to wait so long in this massive queue while we forcefully elbowed our way through them.

Up at the top of the queue and at the main entrance, Rita talked rapidly to a soldier and some officials; when we were let in, the soldier tried to hold back some Russians who had tacked themselves on to our group, but with little success. Inside the palace it was pleasantly cool. Having donned museum overshoes we set off, following our guide. For a long time we stood in the darkness of a corridor while we waited for another group to move on. Rita apologized for the delay, which had been caused by our late arrival. In the meantime, a pleasant German man who was a member of our

group chatted to me about my note-taking and about the Russian language. I was wondering why the rooms and corridors that we had passed through were so plain and ordinary; the reason, of course, was because they had not been fully restored to their former glory after the almost complete and deliberate destruction of the palace by the retreating Germans in 1944. We were told that only one third of the rooms had been restored so far. Needless to say, a huge amount of work had been necessary to do this.



The State Staircase in the Catherine Palace, Pushkin, near Leningrad

Eventually we were given the go-ahead by an old woman, and so we made our way down some more corridors until we came to a section of the palace that had been renovated. We now stopped at the bottom of the impressive State Staircase with its red carpet. Red curtains hung over the large windows, and the banisters and white walls were tastefully decorated with elaborate stucco work. The decorations had been based on ones in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad.

This was the first of many restored rooms that we were about to see; suffice it to say that all of them were breathtaking, richly decorated and quite magnificent. Through the windows we could see what was left of the fine gardens and the grand square in front of the palace. Rita, whose knowledge of the place was very thorough, drew our attention to a small model that showed what the Golden Suite of rooms had originally looked like.



The Dining Room

Having seen this, we moved into the next room of importance: the dining room for the courtiers in attendance, which was decorated in white and gold.

We then passed through some plain rooms that had been turned into a museum. Here we saw early eighteenth-century chairs decorated in filigree, a portrait of the architect Rastrelli, and several photographs, one of which showed the State Staircase being restored. All that the Germans had left behind were the crumbling remains of brick walls and nothing else; all the reconstructions had been based on original documents, plans and old photographs. Fortunately a certain amount of the antiquities had been saved before the Germans had arrived; we were told that a quarter of the treasures had been taken away and hidden somewhere in Siberia. We were shown one of the boxes that had been used to transport them there.

A photograph of the Amber Room taken before it was destroyed was now pointed out to us. Rita explained that Peter the Great had been given a present of some priceless amber panels and had wanted to decorate some of the rooms in the Winter Palace with them. After he had died, the panels had been passed on to Catherine II, who asked Rastrelli to decorate some rooms in this palace with them, which he duly did. When the palace was destroyed, the Germans had taken the amber panels and had hidden them somewhere. Later, when the rooms were being reconstructed, the whole of Europe had been searched for these panels, but they could not be found. We were told that there were various theories as to where they might be, but nobody seemed to know for sure. However, the State had sanctioned the reconstruction of these rooms using imitation amber, for the genuine material was far too expensive.

We spent too much time in these museum rooms listening to our guide telling us about the destruction of the palace by the Germans, instead of visiting the more interesting renovated rooms. Naturally, our German companion was rather embarrassed by so much criticism of his own people.



The Picture Gallery, Catherine Palace, Pushkin, near Leningrad

The next large and important room that we were brought to see was the Picture Gallery, also used as a reception hall. In it was a very tall blue-and-white tiled stove, a magnificent parquet floor, and a fantastic array of paintings from different periods, only four of which had been destroyed.

More museum rooms came next: one contained late export Chinese porcelain, and in another we saw some rather fussy and not very handsome furniture. We were told that a special school of restoration had been founded in 1941, and that the workers, few in number, had been specially chosen.

We were then taken into the study used by Alexander I: a small room that I did not care very much for because of its colour scheme and style. It had been painted in pink and green, and artificial marble (much in vogue during the 1800s) had been used.



The Alexander Study and the Green Dining Room, Catherine Palace

Next we entered a series of smaller rooms that had been designed by Charles Cameron. The first was the Green Dining Room, which I had seen in a photograph, and which I quite liked. After several more rooms, which I found rather over-decorated and overpowering, we entered a little study. This was the Blue Chinese Room, which had very elaborate silk wallpaper on its walls. The restorers had found only black-and-white photographs of this room, and could find no clue as to the colouring. However, one of the workers found a tiny scrap of the silk that had been hiding in a crevice, and so the wallpaper had been recreated on old-fashioned looms, with the colours based on the fragment.

The bedroom of the Emperor Paul was next; this had also been designed by Cameron. It no longer contained a bed, but a collection of French furniture and a 'basket style' Russian chandelier. From this room we passed quickly through two tiny little rooms: the painters' and sculptors' studies. Finally, we ambled through the elaborate Blue Dining Room and then went through some of the rooms that we had already visited (we had gone round in a circle) in order to get to the chapel, the golden roof of which we had seen from the outside.

We now emerged on to a balcony in the very bare-looking chapel. Although decorated in dark blue and gold, the experts had reason to believe that this colour scheme was a later addition, and that the original colours had been different. If the original colour scheme could be found, it would be repainted at some time in the future. The Germans had used the chapel as a garage for their motorbikes.

We were told that there had been a fire in the chapel during the nineteenth century, and that it had been restored by Veronikhin. The decorations had been made in papier mâché and had then been gilded. Although the iconostasis used to have several of the original ninety-eight icons that had once adorned it, only two now survived; they had been found in a village some five miles away.

The last important room that we walked through was the White Hall, which had been used as a waiting area for the chapel. This rather plain though attractive room was now often used as a concert hall. In the middle was a white grand piano, which

looked very much out of place; I mentioned to Walter that a harpsichord would have been the correct instrument to have here. No doubt a concert of classical music would be very pleasant in these magnificent surroundings.

Now back on the ground floor, we quickly made our way back to the entrance, where we took off the museum overshoes. Although the experience had been mind-boggling, I had found it most interesting and rewarding. Of all the rooms that I had seen, the ones that I had liked best were the first and earliest ones, designed by Rastrelli. Although the Cameron rooms had been more intimate, I had found them rather overdone and cluttered by comparison, though very fine.

Outside we discovered that the huge queue had visibly diminished in size. We were now given just a short amount of time to wander around on our own – about twenty minutes or so. Walter and I took some photos and had a proper look at the exterior of the palace. We then wandered back to where our guide was waiting for us. As we stood with her, I happened to turn around and notice the elegant Cameron Gallery, which we had not seen and would not be taken to see. I pleaded with Rita to let me have a look at it, so she gave me five minutes and told me to run. Leaving my bag with Sid and Sue, I did just that and arrived at the steps of the building out of breath. A crowd of people had gathered at the entrance but the famous galleries, on each side of the building, flanking the second storey, could be seen from where I was. As I was determined to take a photograph of one of them, I ran up the steps and, choosing the left-hand colonnade, I climbed up to a narrow stretch of roof, where I stood, balancing precariously, and took a couple of photographs. It was worth the effort, for the colonnades were very elegant indeed. Happy, I clambered down unseen and hurried back to Rita and the others, who were just moving off towards the bus.



The Cameron Gallery at the Catherine Palace, Pushkin

I realized that we had not seen the acres of beautiful grounds here, the Alexander Palace, the Chinese Village in the Alexander Park, the Lycée building, and a host of other places nearby. Earlier I had suggested to Walter that we stay here and catch a train back to Leningrad. However, as he was tired and wanted to go back now, I contented myself with the thought that I had seen enough for one day, and decided to go back with him rather than be awkward. I could always return another time.

I therefore climbed back into the bus and, after a short delay while we waited for a couple who had got lost, we sped off to Leningrad, going the same way as we had come. As we drove along, I realized that Walter was right when he had pointed out

that, as it was a Saturday, there would be crowds of people at the other places of interest in Tsarskoye Selo.

We were supposed to be back at the hotel by one o'clock for lunch, but by the time we reached the hotel, it was twenty to two, and so we had to make do with a cold platter.

At a quarter past two we set off for the History of Leningrad Museum which, according to Walter's little Berlitz guide book, traced the history of the city since its founding in 1703 up to the present day, including a section devoted to the terrible siege of Leningrad. We had decided to go at the last minute, during lunch, though I was not entirely happy about the plan.

The coach left us at a former palace on the banks of the River Neva near the Senate and Synod building, and we walked into a magnificent hallway that led to an elegant staircase. However, a painted portrait of Lenin at the top of the staircase confirmed my suspicions about the place.

Downstairs, in the hall, we waited while our guide went into an anteroom to make enquiries. From where I was standing, I could see what was happening inside. On a chair sat an attractive, though sour-faced girl, who was staring listlessly into space as though she was fed up with life. She was wearing a pretty dress and had a suntan. Eventually she managed to pull herself together, rise to her feet and join us. Our guide introduced her to us, explained that she spoke English, and that she would show us around the museum. The girl's eyes momentarily brightened as she welcomed us, but dulled again as she began to rattle off a memorized speech, which was solely about the siege of Leningrad and was laden with propaganda. I could feel everyone in our party suddenly stiffening; their smiles and good humour immediately vanished. The girl, acting and speaking like a zombie, invited us to follow her up the staircase. Walter and I exchanged glances, and Mark made a face at us. It was obvious that we were not going to enjoy this, and indeed we did not.

What followed turned out to be a dull exhibition of wartime objects, photographs and maps, which the girl pointed out and described for us. She gave very short and reluctant answers to any queries that were put to her, then continued with her listless commentary, which was delivered as quickly as possible, without any trace of enthusiasm. Walter, Mark and I registered our protest by wandering away and looking at other things, or at nothing at all. The only thing that caught my attention was an unfortunate little girl's diary, in which she had recorded, day by day, the deaths of all the members of her family. This was pathetic, as was the whole siege of Leningrad. Our German friend was now very embarrassed, and wandered around muttering objections to himself and to us. We were not told about the misery that Stalin – or Lenin, for that matter – had inflicted upon the ordinary people in the country, or about the famines and shortages that the Soviet Union had suffered from long after the historic siege.

As if this was not enough, we were treated to blaring patriotic music played over loudspeakers and wartime sound effects, both of which had to be turned off by the old women who minded the various rooms in the museum. Manoeuvres of the German and Russian armies were pointed out to us on maps, which lit up to illustrate the points being made. As everything was so monotonous and boring, we were glad when it eventually came to an end about an hour later. When the girl finished speaking, she said goodbye to us and we wandered outside. I had noticed that we had met almost nobody else in the museum – it had been quite deserted.

Walter, Mark and I muttered our opinions to each other outside; I concluded that it had not been too bad, considering that this was the first bit of official propaganda that we had been exposed to since the beginning of our trip.

When we returned to our hotel, Walter and I had a rest, for we both felt tired by now.

At the dinner table this evening, Walter began to express his opinion about the museum that we had just visited, and said that he thought that the Russians dwelt too much on their past. I felt that he was acting foolishly and that he would put his foot in it – and indeed he did. He was immediately attacked by the Socialist-minded English people seated at our table, and was given a verbose admonition by two of the men and one of the women. As the argument raged and a heated discussion took place, I concentrated on my dinner and took no part in it. Walter, stunned by what had happened, eventually steered himself out of trouble by saying that he did not want to spend his holidays arguing about politics, but one of the men triumphantly reminded him that it was he who had started the argument.

However, a man named Sam had not finished; he spoke for a long time afterwards, quoting snatches of Shakespeare and other literary giants. From then on we kept well away from him, for he was inclined to pounce on anybody at will. He was an ardent Socialist and, as far as we could make out, one of the leaders of a trade union somewhere in the UK.

After dinner, which finished with a bowl of oranges, Walter and I went out for a stroll with Mark. We hopped on the metro and travelled to Gostiny Dvor, where we had to be told how to exit the station by a young pregnant woman, whose husband tried in vain to get her to leave us alone. Although the tone of her voice was friendly, she looked right through us with her large eyes. She asked us where we came from, and wanted to know if we had any jeans to sell or dollars to change into local currency. We said that we did not, and her husband eventually managed to drag her away.

Out on Nevsky Prospekt, we ambled towards the Admiralty, chatting and cracking jokes. Mark, a student from Cambridge University, continually spoke in a stage Irish accent for the fun of it, and we did likewise. When we stopped to look at the dark Kazan Cathedral, a drunk Russian lad in his twenties approached us and spoke to us in good English. As he was being rather over-friendly, we guessed why he had stopped us: he asked us if we could sell him dollars, sterling, jeans, our shirts, our socks or our shoes. He invited us to have a drink with him, then burst into song. We tried to reason with him, explaining why we could not or did not want to sell him anything. He explained that Russian money and goods were of no use to him or his friends. We could readily understand his predicament and felt sorry for the fellow, but he was proving to be a nuisance and we had to get rid of him. We eventually did and quickly crossed the busy street. We then chatted about him and the system under which he lived; none of us envied him.

Together we crossed Palace Square, passed the Winter Palace, and ended up in the Summer Garden, which we had not visited until now. Inside was a shady wood and some fine marble statues ranged along a pathway. The wrought-iron gates and railings were particularly beautiful. It was a place for relaxing, for the garden was full of young people and lovers who were ambling around in a leisurely manner. In the middle was a fine statue of the great fabulist Ivan Krylov, which had been created in the nineteenth century by the sculptor Pyotr Karlovich Klodt.



The Summer Palace, Leningrad

We sat down here for a few minutes and then went off in search of Peter the Great's first stone dwelling: the Summer Palace. We soon found it. It was a fine little building that had a lot of Dutch influence. Peeping through the windows, I could see old paintings, Dutch plates hanging on the walls, and a tall colourful stove. The yellow building was now lit with blotches of evening sunlight that filtered through the trees, and on the ground stretched long shadows.

We now walked down the side of the garden by the banks of the Fontanka canal, which at this point flowed into the Neva river. As a courting couple were lost to the world and were engaged in a lengthy kiss that never seemed to end, we were forced to stop and gaze at the slow-moving water of the canal. Eventually the young couple came to their senses and, realizing that they were being watched, moved off.



The Anichkov Bridge over the Fontanka Canal, Leningrad

We passed a small pavilion in the garden and eventually reached the end, where the canal took an abrupt turn to the right. A picturesque bridge crossed it here. In front of us stood a large red and not particularly handsome building, which I discovered was called the Engineer's Castle. Our curiosity satisfied, we then moved on.

We now passed the not particularly interesting Field of Mars: a grassy clearing with some benches beside the Moika river. Nearing the ugly Church of the Precious Blood, where Alexander II was buried, we continued walking by the Moika,

following its twists and turns as we made our way back to Nevsky Prospekt. There was a lovely peaceful atmosphere about this area and its charming old buildings; it reminded me very much of Amsterdam.

As the sun sank, it became cool, and so we began to walk quicker. Back on Nevsky Prospekt, we walked to the Metro station, caught a train to our hotel, and arrived back by about ten o'clock. I had enjoyed the day, despite the wasted afternoon; it could have been put to better use.