

11 – PETRODVORETS AND A WHITE NIGHT

Tuesday, 26 June

A glorious sunny morning. We both woke at eight o'clock and had a good breakfast at nine. On today's schedule were optional excursions: a visit to the Ethnographical Museum in the morning, and the Metro in the afternoon. As we had no interest in either of these, and as we had not paid for them, Mark, Walter and I decided to spend the day at Petrodvorets (Петродворец – *Pyitra-dvaryéts*): Peter the Great's splendid palace on the Gulf of Finland, formerly known as Peterhof. As my mother had visited this Russian version of Versailles, I was very interested to see it. I told the two lads that I had found the hydrofoil jetty by the Winter Palace.

Some other people in our group had hit on the same plan. One lady told me how the girl at the hotel's service bureau had told her that tickets for the hydrofoil had been sold out, and so a small group of our companions had decided to travel to the palace by train. I knew that this information was quite incorrect, for I had discovered that anyone could buy a hydrofoil ticket to go to the palace, and that a vessel set off from the little harbour every twenty minutes.

When we set out after breakfast, it began to cloud over as we travelled down Nevsky Prospekt in the number one trolleybus. The bus was an old boneshaker, for it rattled and bumped noisily as we whizzed along. As we moved up towards the front, we could see sparks jumping across electrical terminals beside the driver. It seemed that the old bus might explode in a puff of blue smoke at any moment.

When we got off at the end of the avenue, still in one piece, the sky was grey and it was drizzling rain. We now began to wonder if we were doing the right thing or not. None of us felt like going to such a lovely place in such terrible weather, yet this was the only day when we would be able to spend both the morning and afternoon there. I looked in my notebook to see if there was anywhere else we might go to, but discovered that most places of interest were closed on Tuesdays. At the Winter Palace we hesitated, trying to make up our minds. When trying to walk to the hydrofoil boarding place, we got caught in the large queue that had formed for the museum in the Winter Palace. Eventually we decided to take a chance and go.

We found our way to the boarding place and bought a one-way ticket (the only type that they sold), which cost just 1.20 roubles. We also paid a further 10 kopecks for a ticket into the grounds. When we joined the queue, a hydrofoil arrived and the people began to push and shove in order to get in first and take the front seats. The captain poked his head out of his cockpit and tried to restore some sort of order by shouting at the people through a loudspeaker. However, he was wasting his time. The hydrofoil filled up quickly and the muscular woman who was tearing the tickets stuck out a meaty arm and prevented any more people from boarding. We had missed this one. The engine then roared into life and off went the vessel, skimming across the water.

Fortunately we did not have to wait long for the following one. Once again the people pushed madly and the captain roared more indistinct instructions, all to no avail. We were rapidly propelled to the comfortable seats in the spacious front

section, where there were big windows. The interior was clean and painted white, and there were four large comfortable seats each side of a wide aisle. As far as I could make out, there were no foreign tourists aboard, only locals who were out for the day. There was a definite holiday atmosphere about the journey; we saw many parents and their children. On the jetty we had seen a group of soldiers who had come from some eastern part of the Soviet Union, looking vaguely Mongolian or Tibetan.

After a short wait, the engine roared into life, the hydrofoil reared up out of the water and off we went at 10.50 precisely. As we passed the beautiful old part of Vasilyevsky Island, the sun suddenly came out and shone brightly, and the temperature in the vessel rose dramatically. The clouds disappeared and the water became calm. We had picked the right day after all! By now we were delighted that we had decided to go this morning.

Once we had passed an area of dockland, we were out in the Baltic Sea, which stretched away into a slight mist. The hydrofoil moved very quickly and after twenty minutes we began to approach land. We arrived at the jetty of Petrodvorets at 11.10 a.m.



The Littoral Channel and Great Palace, Petrodvorets

A whiff of seawater and a warm breeze greeted us as we clambered out, walked along the jetty, and stepped on to the mainland. In front of us was a breathtaking view of the Littoral Channel that led to the Great Cascade of fountains and the Great Palace, begun in 1718 by Leblond and enlarged by Rastrelli in 1747–52. I felt a terrific sense of achievement as we walked by the straight channel towards the palace with the Russian people, all of whom were bent on enjoying themselves. Local people who had taken advantage of this popular spot had placed kiosks here and there where souvenirs (*suverniry*) could be bought, as well as fizzy water machines and fridges containing ice cream. Walter and Mark stopped to buy ice cream, but I did not. As we could hear the clicking of cameras everywhere, we did not feel as though we were the odd ones out for a change!

Although there was a fair amount of heat blasting down from the sun high above us, a gentle coolness began to waft its way towards us as we approached the splendid tiers of gold fountains and their fine spray. Water cascaded noisily from a series of

pools in which the water was forced upwards in thin vertical columns; beside these stood glistening gold statues of gods, goddesses, mermaids, and other mythological beings. These either graced the scene or acted as elaborate classical fountains. At the top of the tiered pools, hiding in the slight mist caused by the spray, stretched the long, low-lying Great Palace, which was decorated in yellow, white and gold. Such splendour!



The Great Cascade and Palace, Petrodvorets

The atmosphere here was quite magical, thanks to the cheerfulness of everyone around us and the excitement of being in this wonderful place. We fought through a crowd that had gathered to take photographs from a good angle, then took some shots ourselves. Afterwards, we slowly climbed up the steps to the palace, pausing now and then to admire the various statues and fountains, and to take more photographs. At one spot an area had been cordoned off and a professional photographer, jumping about with nervous energy, was busily posing people in front of the elaborate fountains and taking their photos.

We soon reached the palace at the top, where we were disappointed to discover that the main section was closed today. Here we joined the crowds on a long balcony and gazed down at the wonderful vista of sparkling fountains beneath us and the Littoral Channel that led to the sea. Beyond could be seen the blue waters of the Gulf of Finland, and to the left and right stretched the extensive grounds of Petrodvorets. It was difficult to believe that this place had been reduced to rubble by the Nazis, and that for years the palace had been nothing more than a façade. By now the place had been fully restored, except for certain parts of the interior of the palace. We now turned round to examine this fine building, which was quite exquisite, especially at both ends, for the wings terminated in small buildings topped with unusual decorative roofs and attractive gold domes. It was quite out of the ordinary.

Beside the main section at the centre was a small museum. At the entrance, a small queue of people had gathered to buy tickets. I decided to have a look at this later, after we had taken a look round the grounds. I was disgusted to find that other parts of the palace had been converted into a cloakroom, a café, offices, and even an amusement arcade in which we could see young people operating slot machines.

When we had satisfied our curiosity up here, we descended some steps at the other side, turned to the left, and headed for the Marli Palace. On the way, however, we sat down on a bench under the trees, near a pleasant lake. Here we noticed a *bufyet* or

small café nearby and so, after we had rested, we ambled over to see what was available. I had taken some bread and a couple of buns from the breakfast table, and somebody had given Mark an unwanted packed lunch. At the counter, Walter bought a bottle of Pepsi and a bun. I merely asked the lady to open the bottle of mineral water that Mark had brought. This she did without any fuss.

At 12.40 we sat down at one of the rickety tables for a slap-up lunch of bits and pieces. From his bag, Mark extracted bread, cheese, meat, cucumber, two small apples, and a hard-boiled egg, which we somehow managed to divide up and share. We tucked in and had quite enough to eat. If we needed more, there was a good selection of food that could be bought in the café. As we ate, some tame birds flew in and out, alighting on the tables and chirruping. One of them appeared soaked through and looked like a drowned rat – the bird must have had a good wash under one of the fountains!

After lunch we set off again, feeling refreshed. We were disgusted to find that the Marli Palace had been fenced off, was closed to the public, and was hidden behind scaffolding. Guided by sign posts, we then made our way towards the sea and found the delightful little Hermitage pavilion, designed by the architect Johann Braunstein and begun in 1721. I immediately fell in love with this unpretentious yellow and white building, which looked absolutely beautiful in the bright sunshine. The entrance was approached by a little bridge over a narrow moat.



The Hermitage pavilion, exterior and interior, Petrodvorets

We bought tickets at a nearby kiosk and entered the cool interior, which was very tidy and intimate. Downstairs we found a mixture of whitewashed walls and old wooden panelling; here we were able to see an old-world kitchen with antique utensils and blue-and-white Dutch plates hanging on the walls. We then climbed the narrow staircase to the one large room upstairs, which was very bright and airy. This was a very tastefully-designed dining room; in the middle of the intricate parquet floor stood a circular table covered by a white cloth, on which had been placed a dinner set. The deep plates were actually sunk into the table, which was very unusual, and at every place was a large assortment of glasses. Around the table was a set of fine mahogany chairs. The walls were almost completely covered with a large collection of important paintings, separated from each other by narrow gold edgings.

I was enchanted by the place and would have stayed here for the rest of the day, contented. However, Walter and Mark, who were anxious to see more of the grounds, left shortly afterwards. I stayed put, then met them outside, sitting on some rocks by the calm sea. We then returned to the Littoral Channel and headed eastwards for the Palace of Mon Plaisir, which was situated by the sea. This had been designed by Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond, and had been built between 1714 to 1726.



The Palace of Mon Plaisir, Petrodvorets

The palace was a one-storeyed building surrounded by trees. In front of it was a pleasant garden with a fountain in the middle and gold-coloured statues on either side. Although it seemed to be open to the public, we did not bother to go inside. Instead, we watched some of the locals experimenting with a trick fountain in the garden. A few small rocks were scattered on the ground. The young people took it in turn to walk on these, but every so often water would spurt upwards from the ground, and if they were not quick enough, they would be drenched. The trick was to try to predict when the water would spring up, and jump off quickly to avoid it. The crowd roared with laughter every time the young people were caught out. It was wonderful to see the Russians enjoying themselves so much. The unfortunate victims took it all in good fun, especially the girls, who squealed with delight and laughed.

From here we wandered slowly around the beautiful and extensive gardens, every so often coming across some type of unusual fountain, usually surrounded by trees. We stopped to look at the 'sun' fountain, which consisted of a golden disc that revolved and sprayed out rays of water; in another spot we found the 'Roman' fountains. Here and there we ambled past little pavilions that blended perfectly with

their surroundings. In another part of the grounds we found another trick fountain that looked vaguely like a fairground roundabout. Made of wood and colourfully decorated, it was shaped like a large mushroom. Water rained down from the edge of the roof, though it eased off every so often. Within the shelter of the roof stood a group of laughing and screaming children, who dashed in and out whenever the water stopped pouring down, but it would suddenly come on again and soak them if they were not quick enough. One little girl in a white dress, and with her fair hair tied in red ribbons, stood terrified behind the sheet of water pouring down and, with her finger in her mouth, she began to cry. However, she eventually got a chance to dash out, whereupon she ran to her mother and hugged her, laughing happily.



A fountain at Petrodvorets

It was obvious that the Russians loved coming here on excursions and greatly enjoyed being here; all of them were dressed colourfully. The place attracted young and old alike, for we had noticed plenty of elderly grannies. The price of transport, including the hydrofoil (although dearer), was obviously not prohibitive.

Eventually we came to a small bandstand and some seats, where Mark and Walter sat down. I decided to investigate the Palace Cottage, which I had not known about before but now saw marked on a signpost. I wandered off and left the other two where they were, for they were tired of going in and out of buildings. Entering through a gateway, I now found myself in an almost deserted part of the grounds, walking down a long and rough avenue, surrounded by nothing more than trees, songbirds and nature. Quiet and peaceful, it felt as though I was wandering through some nobleman's estate in the heart of Russia.

I walked on and on in the heat, but found nothing. The avenue divided, became narrower, and twisted round in a circle. After a good half mile I eventually came across a tumbledown little building of little or no architectural merit, which I guessed must have been the cottage. Annoyed, though with my curiosity now satisfied, I returned, meeting a lady from our group and a Russian soldier with his wife and child. The lady asked me something, but I could not understand what she said. A tractor with a trailer full of hay passed by, then a young fellow on a powerful motorbike.

When I arrived back and met the lads, I felt rather worn out after my long walk. We now climbed up a grassy bank near the Golden Hill Cascade along some steps. The cascade was a rather unusual-looking one, with white statues on either side. Near

the Great Palace, which we approached once again, we looked down over a handsome orange and yellow building, which I later discovered was a hothouse. Up at the palace, where we overlooked the Great Cascade, I told the lads that I wanted to visit the museum. As my companions had seen enough by now, they said that they would travel back to Leningrad. We said goodbye and they left at 3.15 p.m.

I now joined a small queue at the entrance of the museum, and bought a 20 kopeck ticket. As usual, there were no perforations on the tickets, and so the woman at the door had to tear a section off using a State-provided wooden ruler. Inside the building it was blissfully cool. Everyone had to don museum overshoes, which caused the usual consternation when it came to finding the right size to put on.

This little museum contained a collection of items that I gathered had once belonged to the Imperial family. The first room contained various antiques, such as late Chinese enamel ware, French clocks, various costumes (which included one that had belonged to Peter the Great), a dress belonging to Catherine II, and also some paintings. I could hear girls gasping while admiring the dresses.

As I gazed at the treasures on display, I became aware of a little boy, who undoubtedly had become bored by the exhibits, swishing his covered shoes on the parquet floor. He was immediately stopped by an elderly caretaker woman who wagged a fat finger at him, saying, 'Stop sliding around! Stop sliding around! This isn't a skating rink!'

Moments later, the woman who was checking the tickets ran in, shouting at a young man who had obviously not bought a ticket. He defensively muttered, 'Я... я...' ('ya... ya...' – 'I... I...'), and was stopped in his tracks by the woman who said the equivalent of, 'None of your if's and but's...' and dragged him back outside.

I assumed that there were very few foreign tourists here, for most of the people seemed to be Russian. In the museum I also became very much aware of the pretty teenage girls present. Most of them were dressed very well, and their figures were slim and shapely. What struck me most were the many pairs of dark brown and very expressive eyes, which had been made to look more captivating by the help of black mascara generously applied to their eyelashes. As in Moscow, the girls here rather overdid the makeup. Their elegant faces were finely sculpted, and their cheekbones were high and pronounced. I had got the impression that the girls here remained pretty during their teens, then soon became plump and lost their beauty after marriage.

As I strolled along, a strange apparition passed me: a large woman, perhaps in her fifties, who had grown a slight moustache but who sported a great dollop of bright red lipstick on her lips!

In the next room we approached an old caretaker woman, who directed us to turn to our left so that we could walk around a large glass case that ran down the middle of the long room. This case displayed a large selection of ceramics: Chinese, German, Russian, and others. Also on display was a service of Meissen ware, and a large Russian *Guryevsky Serviz* of thirty-two pieces, which had originally been made for fifty people. From the back windows of the room there was a view of the Upper Park, which was rather flat and uninteresting compared to what we had seen in the Lower Park, though it too was very large.

At the other end of the room sat an old and cantankerous caretaker lady. This one was furiously directing the movement of people, who submissively obeyed her directions. Some of the young men dared to contradict her, but eventually fell into line. One was inclined to head directly for the door at the end of the long glass cabinet, thus missing a short stretch at the other side. The woman insisted that everyone should take a look at this stretch before leaving, arguing that everyone had

paid money to see everything on view here. As she was fixing her eyes on everyone, it was impossible to slip out of her clutches. However, when some people openly defied her and walked past, she threw up her hands in exasperation.

In the last small room, the third, were large fussy tapestries, some more costumes, including religious ones, crowns, and a large austere wooden wardrobe that had been made in 1740.

Although the visit to part of the interior of this fine palace had been something of an anticlimax, I was glad that I had taken the trouble to see it. Satisfied, I wandered outside to the balcony and took a deep breath of the fresh sea air. Stopping here and there as I ambled down the steps, I surveyed everything around me for the last time, enjoying the festive atmosphere. Although there were still plenty of people here, it was now quieter than before.

I sat down for a few minutes, then joined the mob that was making its way to the jetty for the return journey. I looked at my watch; it was a quarter past four. Near the jetty I joined the queue for the tickets, standing behind three lovely teenage girls in mini-length summer dresses. I had previously noticed that miniskirts were still being worn here, though they had gone out of fashion at home.

I had timed it perfectly, because as I walked on to the jetty, the wind had sprung up, the sun had disappeared behind a bank of grey cloud, and it had turned cool. I joined the queue for the hydrofoil, which set off across the choppy sea at five o'clock. As I was tired, I dozed off and woke half an hour later to find that we were approaching Decembrist Square.

From here I walked to the top of Nevsky Prospekt and waited for the number one trolleybus. Several passed, but they were full up. Fed up with waiting, I walked to Gostiny Dvor, joined the rush-hour crowds, and descended to the bowels of the earth on the escalator. Down on the platform, I was pushed into a carriage and nearly lost my lens cap in the scramble. Squeezed against sweaty bodies, I was stared at, and so I stared back. Although these hard-working people often appeared to be taciturn and uncommunicative, I had begun to love them for some unknown reason, especially at rush hour, which was the best time to observe them.

As I was late arriving back at the hotel, I was lucky to get my evening meal, which was always served very punctually and quickly; the second course would often arrive before we had finished the first. Once again, we chatted to Sid and Sue. Sue told us that she had been on a bus recently, and had seen a little boy of about two years of age in his mother's arms. He had spent the whole journey, oblivious to everything else, practising his grammar by saying over and over again, '*Moya mama, moy papa; moya mama, moy papa; moya mama, moy papa...*' ('My mummy, my daddy; my mummy, my daddy; my mummy, my daddy...'). She explained that the possessive adjective *moy*, meaning 'my', must change to *moya* (pronounced *mayá*) when it is used with a feminine noun ending in *-a*. Because *papa* ends with an *-a*, many children tend to say *moya papa*. Sue was amazed that the child had got it right all the time.

A young lady in our group, an Australian named Anna, was celebrating her twenty-sixth birthday today, and so a birthday cake was presented to her by somebody. After the meal, she set about distributing slices of the cake, champagne – and kisses. Afterwards, Walter and I returned to our room, where we spent the evening resting and writing our diaries.

When the sky cleared later and we noticed a magnificent sunset, Walter and I decided to experience a White Night down by the River Neva near the Winter Palace, and observe the bridges opening at 2 a.m. in order to let ships in and out. They would close again at 5 a.m. but we would not stay to see that!

At midnight we set off with our cameras and some warm clothing, for it had turned quite cool. Despite the lateness of the hour, the sky was still quite bright. We travelled in an almost empty Metro train to Gostiny Dvor; sitting opposite was a girl whose hair had been dyed blonde and whose face had been plastered with far too much makeup. She spent her time pouting her lips and making faces.

Out on the street we were nearly swept off our feet by droves of young people who were making their way quickly towards the Admiralty; most of them carried transistor radios or cassette machines. Several of them strummed chords on out-of-tune guitars, leading groups who sang songs at the top of their voices. Bottles of vodka were being passed around; although most of the young people were drunk or rather tipsy, we were surprised to discover that they were not disorderly. Most of the teenage fellows were wearing decadent Western gear: jeans and either denim or leather jackets. Some of them were skinheads, and many of them were constantly scrounging for matches for their cigarettes. The farther we went, the more young people we encountered. When we crossed Palace Square in order to get to the bridge near the Admiralty, we began to see some policemen here and there. They were keeping a low profile.

We discovered that hundreds of people had gathered at the Palace Bridge and the embankment. Although the majority of them were teenagers, people from all walks of life were here: small children, grannies, soldiers, sailors with their girlfriends, and courting couples. Here we found more groups singing loudly, once again accompanied on out-of-tune guitars. Although we could hear laughter, we felt that it was a little forced. Many pretty girls clad in long flowing summer dresses passed by, singing or chatting, while others were locked in tight embraces with their boyfriends. Occasionally we saw girls embracing each other, and fellows throwing their arms around each other in a comradely fashion.

At the bridge, a drunken skinhead approached us and rather incoherently asked us for a match. We said nothing, and his companions steered him away. Despite the widespread drunkenness, there were no fights to be seen; all we witnessed were a few battles of words. The victims offered no resistance and so nothing came of these petty squabbles; no doubt everyone was aware of the police nearby.



2 a.m.: a White Night on the River Neva, Leningrad

While people wandered up and down the embankment, others propped themselves up against the wall, as we did now, gazing at the bridge and the sky. We had carefully positioned ourselves so that we could frame the shots that we had in mind. Although

our cameras were frequently stared at, I was surprised that nobody approached us and asked us for jeans or anything that they needed.

As we listened to the noise around us, time slowly dragged on and it became cooler. Although one could still see the time or even read in the dim light, it was at its darkest at about 1 a.m. After this it began to get brighter. At two o'clock, when the lights began to flash on the bridge and the traffic stopped, the bridge in front of us and some others nearby were raised noiselessly. We took our photographs, the ships began to sail through, and then everybody began to drift away.

We now walked briskly along the four-mile length of Nevsky Prospekt towards our hotel, for at this hour of the day there was no public transport. We could have hailed one of the many taxis that sped up and down the avenue, but we did not bother to do so. As we continued on our way, my legs began to tire, and we both felt a little dizzy. It was a rather uncanny experience seeing so many people walking the streets at such an early hour of the morning. Some workers had already begun their jobs: a young lady with a scarf tied around her head was busy polishing the entrance of one of the passages used for crossing under the road, street cleaners could be seen here and there, and a lorry that sprayed the streets with water in order to clean them was trundling along one of the wide pavements, soaking the people who walked too close to it.

On the way, we discovered that the glasses in the fizzy water machines had been removed, probably by the nearby shopkeepers. Here and there we saw some broken vodka bottles and, in an alleyway, some lads who were helping themselves to kvass from a tanker that they had managed to break open. Although many people staggered about, they seemed to know where they were going. Otherwise, everything looked very orderly, which both impressed and surprised us.

On nearing our hotel, we peeped into the hallways of apartment blocks, which looked very scruffy and dingy. Despite all the wonderful things that we had seen so far, I was once again reminded that I would not like to live here under any circumstances. Although we had discovered that the historic parts of Leningrad were very pretty, it was clear that the suburbs were quite run down and dreary.

We finally arrived back at our hotel by 3.15 a.m., exhausted. On our landing, a rather sexy-looking *dezhurnaya* (concierge) appeared from a room, looking very sleepy and, giving us a dirty look, unlocked the drawer of her desk and handed us our keys. We tumbled into our beds by 3.30 and fell asleep immediately.