

13 – LENINGRAD

Friday, 29 June

Our last full day in Leningrad – and in Russia, for that matter.

We rose at eight o'clock to discover that it was yet another gloomy and wet morning. This was a nuisance, for I had planned to take photographs of certain places at this hour of the day, when they would be lit by the sun. I decided that I would have to take them this morning, despite the poor weather.

After breakfast, Walter and I caught the trolleybus to the end of Nevsky Prospekt, watching the milling crowds as we drove along the street. When we got out, we parted company, and I crossed the bridge to Vasilyevsky Island, where I took some photographs of various buildings, such as the Kunstkammer and the Academy of Sciences. Walking down a tree-lined street by the old university, I was stopped by a lady who asked me something, but I could not understand her. A clearing in the trees revealed the entrance to the university. Although the red-and-white building was quite handsome, it was dilapidated and badly in need of renovation. I could see students entering it through another door, which faced the Neva embankment.

From here I walked along by the Neva, which looked wider than ever but not very pretty in the dull light. I was now in search of the Menshikov Palace. I passed many fine old buildings, but was not sure which one was the palace. I stopped to admire the impressive Academy of Fine Arts, which was nearby. Walking back, I came to a building that looked familiar and decided that it must be the palace. After I had taken a look at it, I headed back to our hotel, for I wanted to join a tour of Saint Isaac's Cathedral, which Walter and I had paid for.

I was now able to catch a trolleybus at a stop that I had not noticed before, which was beside the Admiralty. In the bus, I stood beside two large middle-aged women, who were engaged in what seemed to be a very intimate and emotional conversation. It was a pleasure to listen to them speaking. A few stops later, a man and his young son stepped on board. The little boy, who was about three or four years of age and was dressed very neatly, with a cute cap on his head, begged to be let sit down. One of the women, who was about to get off, stood up. The little chap clambered on to the seat and looked out of the window, delighted with himself. The woman beside him – a complete stranger – stroked his head and said comforting words to him while chatting to somebody else. The boy's father looked on approvingly.

When I hopped off the bus near our hotel, I noticed that a woman had set up a stall by the roadside and was selling strawberries. A long queue had formed on the pavement. Doubtless, the availability of the fruit, which was probably in short supply, was very much appreciated by the people.

I arrived back at the hotel just in time to join the tour and we set off for Saint Isaac's Cathedral. Our guide Rita told us about the place and gave us some information about religion in the country. She explained that religious belief was solely up to the individual, but I imagined that in reality it was more complex than that. I had the feeling that the majority of the people were deeply religious, with

atheists and hard-line Communists in the minority, though only elderly people, especially the war widows, were really free to attend religious ceremonies.

We stopped at the large and rather forbidding-looking cathedral and joined the crowds who were queuing at the entrance. Because we were 'official' tourists, we were allowed to skip the queue and go inside immediately.



The interior of Saint Isaac's Cathedral, Leningrad

The interior, which was enormous and dark, reminded me of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. Massive paintings and gold decorations could be seen everywhere. Although we were told that it was an active cathedral, it felt more like a museum. Rita now brought us around the building on a forty-minute tour, covering many points of interest. She firstly showed us some documents in which reconstructions of former churches on the site were depicted, and told us the history of the place. The very first church (which had been built elsewhere) had been made of wood for Peter the Great, and had been dedicated to Isaac, a Greek monk who had become a saint. The second one had been pulled down by Catherine II and a third one was ordered; this was designed by the Italian architect Antonio Rinaldi. However, this one was never completed, and Paul I ordered the marble to be taken away and used for his residence at Pavlovsk. The French architect Auguste de Montferrand was commissioned by Alexander I to build the fourth church, which was begun in 1818. The altar of the third church was incorporated into his design, which was otherwise a flop, for the building was too heavy and the foundations began to sink. Adjustments had to be made, which spoilt the original design, and eventually the building was completed in 1858.

The doors, which were dark in colour and intricately decorated, were then pointed out to us. These, we were told, were the heaviest doors ever made in Russia, and weighed twenty tons. Needless to say, apart from special feast days, they were rarely opened.

We were then shown a bust of Montferrand, the architect, which had been made of all the different marbles that had been used in the construction of the cathedral. Afterwards, we were told that artists had been sent to Italy in order to study the technique of making mosaics. When they returned to Saint Petersburg, they began to make mosaics based on some paintings that had been commissioned. However, only a few were actually copied and put up in place of the original paintings. We were

shown a huge mosaic that was designed to go up in the central dome, but which was never put there; it was on display to one side of the cathedral. The mosaics had been so well made that, when compared with the original paintings and seen from a distance, it was almost impossible to determine which was which. The paintings up in the dome were so large that the arm of one of the saints was nine metres in length!



The dome of Saint Isaac's Cathedral, Leningrad

Over the iconostasis we saw the only stained-glass window ever to appear in a Russian Orthodox church; it was made in Germany and was rather plain. Nearby was a wooden model of the cathedral which, we were told, had taken eleven years to make.

Rita now told us that the cathedral had functioned as an active church until 1928, when it had been turned into a museum. We were not told what had happened to the priests. In 1931, a long fulcrum pendulum had been hung from the main dome – a rather unlikely place to put such an object. Our guide now brought us to see the pendulum, and went to great pains in describing its function. We spent quite a long time watching it swing. It was a simple demonstration; as it swung, the earth rotated, causing the floor to move in relation to the pendulum. To prove this, blocks of timber placed on a platform were knocked off by the pendulum as it slowly swung back and forth, its direction changing with successive swings.

We then had a look at the huge iconostasis, which was covered in large paintings. The first row included representations of saints whose names coincided with the Russian rulers who had played a part in the construction of the cathedral: Peter, Nicholas, Isaac, Alexander, Catherine, and Paul. Christ and the Virgin Mary were also depicted in the same row, to the left and right of the elaborate door. We were told that a choir of 150 people had once sung at either end of the iconostasis, inside the balcony.

After this our tour came to an end and we headed for the exit. One could also climb up to the dome of the cathedral, but this had not been included in our tour. Seeing the entrance to the staircase, I found a notice beside it that read, 'No cameras allowed'. I had discovered that the Russian authorities do not like tourists taking any sort of aerial photography, and so nobody is allowed to take shots from, for example, an aeroplane window.

Because of the crowds of people, the massive size of the cathedral, and the shortness of our tour, my impression of our visit was rather mixed. However, I was glad that I had seen the place. The building was certainly quite overwhelming.

We now clambered aboard our coach and drove back to our hotel for a good lunch. I asked Sid and Sue if they knew of a music shop nearby where I might buy a recording of some Ukrainian music for a friend; they recommended the Melodiya shop which, they told us, was in Nevsky Prospekt somewhere.

After lunch, Walter and I took the Metro to the Mayakovskaya station. We then walked along the right side of Nevsky Prospekt towards Gostiny Dvor in search of the music shop, which we finally found. Inside, it was crowded with people queuing at counters, for little or nothing was on display. As they only sold records, I left and set off for the place that I had not managed to see yet: Smolny Cathedral.



Smolny Cathedral, Proletarian Dictatorship Square, Leningrad

I caught the number 10 trolleybus and arrived in Proletarian Dictatorship Square at about half past three. The lovely cathedral building did not look particularly striking now, especially under such a murky sky. I was annoyed to find several state-owned cars and lorries parked in the square, which spoilt the view. The place appeared to be closed but, while I was taking a couple of photographs, a couple of ladies walked up the steps, pushed the door open and walked in.

I then went to the nearby kiosk and bought a ticket for 15 kopecks. Expecting to see a magnificent interior equal to its fine exterior, I stepped inside. However, I was horrified to discover that all the walls had been whitewashed, leaving only a tiny fraction of the original decoration, that everything religious had been removed, and that the once beautiful cathedral was now being used to house an ugly and impersonal exhibition of Soviet achievement and modern technology. The place reeked of propaganda. Annoyed at this unwelcome discovery, I quickly walked around the exhibits and large photographs, paying little attention to them; the displays made no impression on me whatsoever. I only stopped to look at some not very modern-looking hi-fi equipment and a large cinema projector with no lens. The place was almost empty; about six other people were here at the most.

As I walked towards the apse, where the altar had once been, a small group of well-dressed girls with wooden pointers appeared and passed me. I guessed that they were here to conduct guided tours around the building.

In the apse, I glanced through a doorway which, I supposed, had once led to the vestry, and discovered a couple of exhibition rooms. In them, I found an interesting collection of old coloured diagrams, drawings and prints that showed what the cathedral had originally looked like from the outside and inside. A friendly old lady, who had been sitting on a chair and who was probably feeling lonely, came over to me and, bursting with enthusiasm and a desire to help, began to explain things to me in rapid Russian, most of which I could not understand. Not wishing to embarrass her into silence (she may not have realized that I was a tourist), I pretended to understand everything that she said, and made signs of surprise or approval. She took me to the remains of a large gold-plated decoration that was displayed in a case, then escorted me to an old print and pointed to the same decoration, which had been part of the exterior. It was obvious that the old lady had great regard for the former cathedral.

In the next room I saw old black-and-white photographs that showed how the Bolsheviks had taken over the cathedral and had dismantled everything in order to turn it into their headquarters. I now understood what had happened. Once again the old lady came over to me and explained a few things. I was delighted to have discovered these interesting couple of rooms.

I then wandered back into the main body of the cathedral, admiring what remained of the stucco work and the domes. A couple of small groups were now being shown around by the girls whom I had seen a little earlier; I could hear them rapidly and rather mechanically repeating a remembered speech, which no doubt contained large doses of propaganda. The Russians listened obediently to what they were being told; many of them looked quite bored, even though they had just come in.

I walked past them and headed for the door, anxious to get out of the place. All of a sudden I heard somebody call 'товарищ!' ('*tavárish!*' – 'comrade!'), and a small eccentric English woman from our group ran towards me. Lowering her voice, she talked to me rapidly and not very coherently, as she was wont to do, and followed me to the exit. Outside, she explained what had happened. She had joined a group of Russians on a boat trip along the Neva, and afterwards they had come here. As she was not familiar with the area, she wondered if I knew how she could get back to the hotel. I told her what bus to catch, gave her precise instructions, and quickly got rid of her. Then, looking around and consulting my map, I made my way to my next destination: the Tauride Palace.

Passing some modern and rather impersonal ministerial buildings, I came to a large garden, which was nothing more than a lawn. At one end was a neat little building with nice architectural features, painted red and white. When I approached it, I found that it was closed. Puzzled, I walked around it and discovered a notice that read: 'Kikin Palace... built in 1714.' I double checked this with my little map, which indicated that this was the Tauride Palace. I found another notice nearby, which stated that the building was now the Children's Music School. Slightly mystified, though my curiosity had been satisfied, I moved off.

There were several places that I still had not seen; one of them was the interior of the Summer Palace, but I now realized that I did not have enough time to see it. Eight days had not been enough! I felt that I could happily spend more time here in the future, enjoying the spectacle of so many fine buildings, which were everywhere. There were plenty more museums and art galleries to be seen, and there were other parts of the city that we had not been taken to. One could spend many days in the Hermitage in order to see everything. It seemed that I would have to return sometime; several people in our group had recommended visiting the city in the winter, as it was such a marvellous experience.

Having satisfied myself that I had seen as much as I could on this occasion, I now left and walked to the drab Suvorov Prospekt in order to catch the trolleybus back to Nevsky Prospekt. Passing by a large building, I was in time to see a lower window being opened by two well-built women in white coats, who began to sell chickens to some interested people who immediately formed a queue. The sight struck me as being quite comical. Farther down the street, other people and I discovered that the trolleybus stop signs had been taken away. Where there had been plastic signs on the previous day, one could only see metal stumps protruding from a wall. As a result, nobody knew which stop was which. When the number ten trolleybus eventually arrived, it stopped at the farthest stump, and everyone had to run towards it.

I jumped on the half empty bus and we were off. As I was almost out of small change, I did not pay. In case anybody asked me why I had not paid, I had already rehearsed my answer. However, I guessed that the locals did this themselves when they were out of small change, and probably paid sometime later. I had been constantly amazed at their honesty; one day a woman had got on a bus, had produced some type of season ticket from her bag, and had brandished it before the eyes of all those who were sitting or standing near the ticket machine. When they had nodded their heads in approval, she had put the ticket back in her bag.

On this bus I noticed a small group of well-dressed and motherly-looking women who rapidly chatted in an intimate fashion; when one of them got out, there were emotional good-byes and then a lot of vigorous hand waving from the window. I had enjoyed watching these types of personal scenarios here, and realized how much Socialism and Communism went completely against the grain of ordinary Russian folk. Many of the people I had observed during my stay here seemed to be rather lethargic, quite religious, and probably disillusioned with the Communist system. The young people, however, seemed bent on looking towards the West and America.

During the short journey, the bus passed a fashion shop that displayed exclusive women's dresses. They were priced between 40 to 85 roubles, which must have been far too expensive for most people.

I hopped out of the bus when we reached Nevsky Prospekt, and walked to the Mayakovskaya Metro station. As I whizzed down the escalator, I witnessed an incident that demonstrated how submissive many people could be here. At the bottom, a huge muscular-looking woman was scolding a young, weedy-looking man who was holding three carnations in his hand. He looked slightly drunk and fed up. She violently grappled with him, twisting his arms, hitting him, and pushing him about. The fellow offered absolutely no resistance to all this. She gave him one final admonition and pushed him on to the escalator, almost knocking him over. She then headed directly to her telephone and began to complain to somebody at the other end of the line. The young man, who was now ascending on the opposite escalator, quickly regained his balance and looked glumly at his flowers, which had become bent and limp in the struggle.

During my stay here, I had often seen people – both men and women – carrying a solitary flower, often wrapped in cellophane. Later I was told that flowers were very hard to come by, and so were bought immediately when seen. The prices paid were relatively high, such as one rouble for one carnation. Russians, I had noticed, often used flowers in order to add a dash of colour to various ceremonies. I had learned that it was a tradition that newly-married couples, having gone through the necessary ceremony at a 'Palace of Marriages', usually placed a wreath of flowers on a war memorial or, if they were married in Moscow, in front of Lenin's mausoleum.

However, I was often surprised to see so many young – or even elderly – men carrying small bunches of expensive flowers, such as the young man who now passed me on the escalator. I jumped off at the bottom and passed the grumpy woman who was busy barking into her telephone, presumably giving out about the fellow. I would have loved to have known what he had done wrong.

Back at Alexander Nevsky Square, I discovered that I had some time to spare. Walter and I would not be having dinner at the hotel this evening, as we had decided to go with a small group of our companions for a good meal in a Caucasian restaurant. Two American young ladies in our group, Diane and Anna, had arranged this, and had asked us to meet at seven o'clock in the foyer of the hotel.

As it was now only six o'clock, I wandered into the quietness of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, where a large flock of pigeons were being fed by a woman. Quite a number of people were coming and going. A soldier was chatting good-humouredly to an elderly lady who was sitting by the entrance to one of the cemeteries. Taking three kopecks out of my pocket, I placed them in the grimy outstretched hand of an old beggar, who was talking loudly to an old beggar woman. The few beggars that we had seen in Russia had not pestered anybody; they had merely beseeched us from a respectful distance.

Once again an old woman wailed at me for money at the entrance to the lovely cathedral. Inside it was darker than ever, for the lights had not been switched on, and so the atmosphere was more mysterious. Passing the old women and young people who were shuffling about, lighting candles, I wandered over to the sarcophagus of the patron saint. Several people approached it and kissed it fervently, including a grimy character who crossed himself three times and rolled his expressive eyes heavenwards in fervent devotion. Heavily bearded, and with long dirty hair, he sported a pepper-and-salt jacket, a colourful check shirt, and dark shiny trousers. His face was both tanned and greasy, and he carried himself with an air of great importance. He reminded me somewhat of Rasputin.

Soon I heard the voice of a priest chanting from somewhere in the darkness; a service had just begun shortly after six o'clock in the side chapel on the right hand side. I made my way over and saw two priests in grey robes officiating. A small choir had assembled beside the iconostasis, and they now sang harmonized responses in their strong, vibrato-free voices. Nearby I noticed a small table on which people had left offerings: small loaves of bread, sweets, and a little money. Beside a collection box were sheets of paper, and various types of scented wax candles.

By now, 'Rasputin' was up at the front, repeatedly crossing himself three times, rolling his eyes, bowing and falling down on his knees in order to knock his head against the floor. He kept the area around himself clear of intruders by ordering people away, indicating that they should stand behind him and come no nearer to the iconostasis. It was a wonder that he had not scolded me, for I had wandered into his sacred territory! When one of the priests dropped some burning incense from the swinging thurible, he ran over, picked it up with his bare hands, and threw it into a nearby bowl.

By now there were three priests in all: two young men with long black hair, and an elderly stout man with a grey beard and spectacles, who stayed behind the iconostasis for most of the ceremony, only emerging now and then to cross himself and follow the texts.

Although the impressive service continued, I reluctantly left at half past six, walked through the peaceful grounds for the last time, then crossed the busy street to

our hotel. Up in our room I joined Walter, and together we got ourselves ready for the dinner in the Caucasian restaurant.

At seven o'clock, ten of us gathered in the foyer: the two young ladies who had organized the event, Anna and Diane, our friends Sid and Sue, an American couple, a good-humoured young Spanish woman named Josephine, Mark (who arrived late), Walter and I.

Sid, who announced that he had a brilliant plan, led us to the number 7 bus stop in Nevsky Prospekt, where we boarded an empty bus. Off we whizzed, then turned off the main road into a maze of side streets, taking a very devious route. It seemed to be a very strange choice, for the Metro would have been so much quicker and far more direct. At one point the bus broke down; the driver put on a pair of dirty gloves, grabbed a spanner, and hopped out to fix the problem. After a short delay, we resumed our crazy journey, bumping along at top speed.

We arrived at the Caucasian restaurant, which was not far from Gostiny Dvor, shortly after 7.30 p.m. We found a queue of Russian people patiently waiting outside but, because the girls had booked in advance and had a special voucher, we were shown in immediately. Once again I was painfully reminded of the unfairness of the way things were done here. The people outside had dressed themselves up for an evening out, but would have to spend most of it queuing and waiting.

After the ladies' coats were taken and placed in a cloakroom, we ascended a small and dark staircase to the restaurant, which was also dark and had a low ceiling. A refrigerator set into a niche in one of the walls looked very much out of place. I learned afterwards that owning a refrigerator in Russia is regarded as being a great status symbol as they are very expensive and hard to come by.

All the tables were occupied except for a large one that had been reserved for us. The place – and other rooms in the restaurant – was packed with people, and downstairs a dance band played so noisily that we could hear it from where we were; in addition to this, the sound of traffic could be heard outside as the windows were open. I was not exactly enchanted by the restaurant, but was determined to make the best of the evening.

Smartly-dressed waiters now fussed around us and sat us down. As we had heard that the service in Russian restaurants can be painfully slow, we wondered what it would be like here this evening. Fortunately, it was quite quick and efficient. Almost immediately we were given plates of *zakuski* (hors d'oeuvres): the typical starter for a Russian meal. We helped ourselves to cheese, hard-boiled eggs, fish, meat, and a little salad. On our side plates was a small loaf of very pleasant bread that was moist and needed no butter. I liked this so much that by the end of the starters I discovered that I had eaten nearly all my loaf! We washed this down with vodka, wine, or some rather weak fruit juice. I just drank some of the juice.

For the main course we had ordered *shashlyk*, a Caucasian version of shish-kebab: pieces of roasted lamb on swords, which looked very impressive when the waiter entered carrying ten of them! He pushed the meat off the swords on to our plates, then left. The roast lamb was served with a small salad of lettuce, cucumber, chives, and nothing else. This quite surprised me. I finished my bread with this main course; although the meat was tasty, I found it a little too tough for my liking.

No tea or coffee was on offer after the main course, and the only dessert was ice cream, which we ordered. It tasted rather strange. Although the food had been reasonably good, it was not much of an improvement on what we had been eating in

the hotels. It certainly was not worth the £10.50 that we had to pay at the end of the meal.

While we were eating, we chatted gaily and then, no doubt under the influence of the drink, we began to sing snatches of songs to ourselves when the band was not playing downstairs. Those of us who knew some Russian sang some Russian songs. A rather official-looking man with epaulettes, stripes and badges, who was sitting with his colleagues at the next table, heard us singing a popular song, and joined in. He sang verse after verse in a very powerful though drunken voice, slowing down the melody and holding on to the top notes. With his eyes rolled up, he was totally oblivious to everyone except us, whom he conducted with his arms and encouraged to sing louder. The waiters were splitting their sides laughing at him, and several others looked on, amused. However, as the manager of the restaurant was clearly *not* amused, he approached the man and reprimanded him. What happened was quite unexpected and astonishing. The man suddenly stopped and, realizing that he was causing a disturbance, immediately sobered up, muttered an apology, and went back to eating and chatting to his colleagues as though nothing untoward had happened. The speed at which all this occurred was quite amazing.

Afterwards, the band began to play again – probably because they were told to do so by the manager! Later, when there was a break during the music, we began to sing the popular Irish song, *It's a long way to Tipperary* and a waiter encouraged us to sing louder by saying, '*Forte! Forte!*' The people sitting nearby gazed at us with a look of surprise, then began to join in with lusty voices for, of course, this was an old marching song of the Russian troops. Then, a large group of people at another table – they may have been Greeks or Yugoslavs – took the initiative and began to sing various songs, harmonized, in throaty and incisive voices. The manager, who clearly did not like the singing, fidgeted about and kept coming and going, but did nothing to stop us or the other group. However, the waiters were enjoying it very much, and continued to encourage us. No doubt it made a great change for them and livened up the place.

The waiters then obliged the girls by taking photographs of us at the table. More vodka was ordered, and at last I sampled a drop, which I discovered was quite powerful. We drank several toasts.

Meanwhile, the people queuing outside continued to wait. Most of the people in the restaurant ate fairly quickly and left immediately, leaving room for those outside, but a group of four Russian girls spent the whole evening eating. I felt rather guilty sitting at the table for so long, whiling away the time talking and singing, though I was assured that we had booked the table for the evening.

After the meal, the American couple left. The two girls dragged Walter and Mark downstairs twice for dances, and returned both times breathless and exhausted. The restaurant was like an oven, as it was so hot and airless.

We eventually decided to leave at 11.30 and so got up, collected our coats, and stumbled outside to the bus stop. Guided by Sid, we hopped on to a number 22 bus and travelled back to the hotel, singing and laughing all the way; the passengers looked on, amused. They probably thought that we were mad! The good clothes that some of us were wearing contrasted sharply with theirs; our appearance and manners would have indicated that we came from quite a different part of the world.

I had enjoyed the evening; it had been pleasant to eat with the Russians, away from all the trappings of official tourism and hotels. The meal had served as an appropriate ending to a most interesting and enjoyable stay in Russia; it seemed that we had all

enjoyed the experience. I was sorry that we were due to leave on the following morning.

Back in the hotel, we decided to head for the buffet and drink some coffee. However, Sid and Sue offered to share a bottle of champagne with us. When the eccentric English woman finished watching a performance of ballet on the television, which she was trying to photograph, we fell to chatting and finished the champagne. When the party finally broke up, Walter and I returned to our room at midnight.

Saturday, 20 June

After sleeping soundly, Walter woke me at about 5.30 a.m. Our very last morning in Russia looked very murky and wet from our window. We had our suitcases ready outside the door of our room by six o'clock, and by 6.15 we had gathered all our belongings (except for the sink plug which Walter had taken from the hotel in Heathrow). We then left our room for the last time, and handed our key to the surly *dezhurnaya*.

Down in the spacious foyer, we collapsed on to a sofa and sleepily chatted to each other. Some of our companions were feeling under the weather as they now had hangovers after yesterday evening's feasting and drinking. Just before seven o'clock we went into the dining room, where we were served a good breakfast.

After a generous helping of bread, meat, eggs, tea, and buns, we returned to the foyer to check if our luggage had been brought down from our rooms and, when satisfied that it had, we walked out into the cool morning air to the waiting coach and clambered aboard. Once everyone was present, the engine was started and off we went, bumping and rattling along Nevsky Prospekt. By now the avenue was already alive with cleaners and people setting off for work. Even at this hour of the morning we saw queues forming outside shops before they had opened. This looked quite pathetic, especially in the dull morning light. Somebody had told us that the prices of certain goods were to go up from the following day.

We then turned off the familiar Prospekt and travelled through the grim suburbs until we reached the long and straight Moscow Avenue, once again passing the ugly triumphal arch and, at the end, the huge impersonal memorial dedicated to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad.

Then all of a sudden we were back out in the countryside, speeding towards the airport near Pulkovo. We arrived at the airport shortly afterwards, and waited for our flight, which was due to take off at ten o'clock. The airport was almost deserted; as far as I could see, there was only one other group of tourists. They were about to depart for Helsinki.

As it began to brighten up and the sun began to shine, Walter, Mark and I went outside and sat on a wall in the fresh air. We whiled away the time by making jokes about some of the people in our group, such as one young American lady who prefaced nearly everything she said with, 'Oh, my God!' For the fun of it, Walter waved to her but had to do so again as she did not seem to notice him. Eventually she pulled a face that we assumed was a smile of recognition, then turned to her companion. The three of us burst out laughing.

Eventually we moved indoors and joined the queues for passport control and customs, then walked to the departure area. As our flight was delayed for a while, we eventually clambered aboard at 10.30 a.m. As we three were last, we had to make do with the back seats close to the engines, which of course were rather noisy.

Outside, the sun peeped out from the gaps in the clouds, and the rows of white aeroplanes gleamed brightly. In the distance, the forest stretched away to the horizon. Following the instructions from a disembodied voice over the loudspeaker system, we fastened our seat belts. The engines roared into life and we taxied down the runway. Then, looking around for the last time as the engines screamed louder, we took off, soaring up into the heavens, leaving behind us the vast expanse of forest and the beautiful city of Saint Petersburg, as I preferred to call it.