

9 – THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM AND THE KIROV THEATRE

Sunday, 24 June

Today we were to do something that for many years I had longed to do: visit the Hermitage Museum in the Winter Palace. I was particularly interested in seeing the extensive collection of paintings, for I had read about them and seen reproductions of some of them in a Thames and Hudson book, which I had put into my suitcase before travelling here. I now placed the book in a string bag with a few other odds and ends, including some scraps of food from the breakfast table. We left our room at about nine o'clock in the morning.

Outside, it was a swelteringly hot and sunny day. Rita, who would bring us around the famous museum, was waiting for us at the hotel entrance. She told us about the collections in her pleasant and light-hearted manner as we drove to the Hermitage in the coach. Laughingly, she advised us not touch any of the precious exhibits, 'Otherwise,' she said, 'You may have to visit our beautiful countryside beyond the Urals!' (She was referring, of course, to Siberia.)

Although we were told that the Hermitage would officially open at ten o'clock, we arrived at 9.40 before the crowds arrived, and began queuing. We were quickly conducted to the entrance of the nineteenth-century New Hermitage building that adjoins the Winter Palace facing the Neva river, and entered it from a side street off Palace Square. Walter and I had passed this huge entrance before; on the façade were tall dark statues of muscular men who appeared to be holding up the roof.

Although the interior of this building was rather grim and gloomy because of its rather late style of construction, it was quite magnificent. I realized that we would only see a few of the many rooms that it contained.

We firstly approached the wide Tserebenya staircase and went up it to the first floor, where our tour began. We started with the Antique Gallery, in which some paintings were displayed, but its main attraction was a long line of classical statues. The next few rooms were devoted to mythological and biblical art of the Italian school. Here we saw three fine paintings by the Italian artist Tiepolo, one of which was *Maecenas Presenting the Arts to Augustus*. I found these works a little too fussy for my liking.



Velázquez: The Lunch

Next came the Spanish school, which I liked better. Here there was a portrait of Philip I by Velázquez, and another work by the same artist entitled *The Lunch*. As there was an optical illusion in this painting, Rita decided to test us. Having requested us to stay a distance away from it, she asked us to tell her how many people were in the picture. Most of us said four but, when we were allowed to come closer to the painting, we discovered that what had looked like a fourth person was really a hat and a collar hanging on the wall. We also saw Murillo's exquisite *Boy with a Dog*, which I liked very much, and El Greco's *Saint Peter and Saint Paul*.



Rembrandt: Descent from the Cross

We then moved to rooms containing pictures by the Dutch artists. We were told that the Hermitage contained the second largest collection in the world of paintings by Rembrandt and other Dutch masters. We were shown several works by Rembrandt: *Flora* (quite nice), *Danaë* (essentially a study of a nude), *Descent from the Cross*, which served as a fine example of unusual lighting, a portrait of the artist's father, *David's Farewell to Jonathan*, *The Holy Family* (a more intimate work), *The Old Warrior* (another fine portrait) and, finally, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

Next we examined some of the large collection of small Dutch painters, which intrigued me as I am very fond of this type of genre painting. As we followed the guide, I decided that I would have to return in order to see these properly. One of the works that we stopped to look at was a scene by Jan Steen that depicted a drunken wedding contract. There were many other pictures by this master, all of which were quite delightful.

We then looked at a collection of forty-two paintings by Rubens, most of which I felt were too big and not very much to my taste. Our attention was drawn to one of these paintings, a portrait of a lady-in-waiting, for this type of subject matter was not typical of the great artist. Another huge work depicted an allegorical scene of the union between earth and water. We also stopped to look at *The Descent from the Cross* and a work that depicted the god of wine, Bacchus.

After seeing these pictures, we entered the Winter Palace by walking along a short corridor that overlooked the Hanging Garden, and we entered a suite of rooms in

which early French art, furniture and enamels were on display. At the end of these rooms we climbed a staircase to the next floor, where many examples of French Impressionism were on display in simple, undecorated rooms. The rooms we had passed through previously had been very dimly illuminated by natural light, whereas up here the rooms were brighter. As I had learned that the gallery here contains one of the largest collections of French Impressionism, I was very interested to see these treasured paintings. Hence, my disappointment was great when I discovered that only a small proportion of the collection was on display; the rest were either in storerooms or had been sent to other countries for exhibitions. Because of this, I could not find many of the pictures that were reproduced in my book, save for a handful of them. The examples on display were relatively uninteresting.



Degas: Woman at her Toilette, and Monet: Woman in the Garden



Pissarro: Place du Théâtre Français, Paris

However, there were some works by Degas (including the memorable *Woman at her Toilette*), Corot, Daubigny, Alphonse de Neuville (whose view of a side street I stopped to admire), Rousseau, and Troyon (whose *Landscape with Cattle and Sheep* I also studied). I immediately fell for Monet's marvellous *Woman in the Garden* and also for several of Sisley's fine paintings. Another work that I gazed at for a long time, fascinated, was Pissarro's *Place du Théâtre Français, Paris*, which depicted

Parisian life during the summer. Renoir's fine masterpieces also caught my eye, and I stopped, spellbound, to look at them. Despite not being particularly keen on Van Gogh's work, I did stop to look at some of his paintings that were on display.

In some other rooms where we were not given enough time to see them all, were many paintings by Gauguin, Cézanne, Marquet, Matisse and Picasso. As these works were a little too modern and avant-garde for my taste, I was not too sorry to have just glanced at them.

Having been let loose in these rooms for a while, we all met again at the staircase and, after a delay during which we waited for those who had got lost, we set off once again. We now returned to the second floor and continued our journey through various large and elaborate rooms. We stopped in the huge Alexander Hall, designed in 1839 by Alexander Brullov, where cases of French silver were displayed. I walked by these rather quickly, for my concentration was beginning to wane by now. I found this part of the palace rather fussy and overbearing.

As we moved on, more and more people began to march through the rooms and it became noisier. Many groups, like ours, were being brought around by a guide; I realized that this was the only way of seeing the place for first-time visitors, as it was so vast.

In our wanderings we saw a Boulle student's table, a fine statue of Cupid by Falconet, and the famous and very lifelike statue of the smiling Voltaire by Jean-Antoine Houdon.



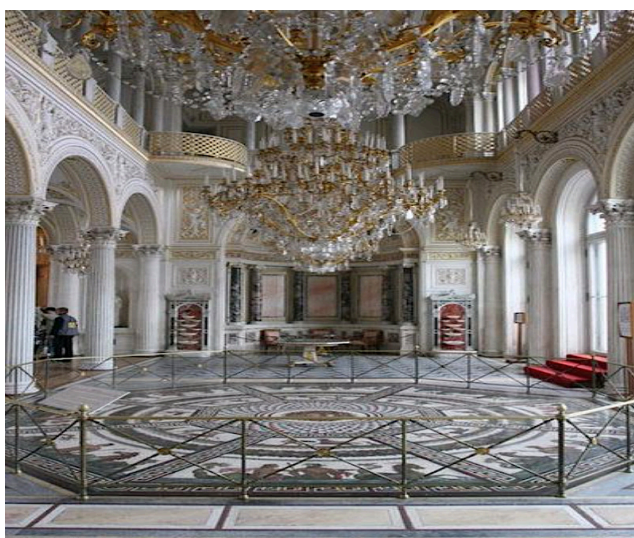
The Rotunda, the Malachite Room (paintings), and the Jordan Staircase, Hermitage

We then entered the Russian department, in which we saw more of the original Imperial rooms of the palace and various types of antiquities; for example, we stopped to look at a collection of tapestries. Walking down a long and dark corridor, we examined tapestries that had been made in Europe and had ended up in the Rotunda, a richly decorated room. Next we were brought into the Malachite Room, which looked out over the River Neva. Nearby we saw a famous bust of Peter the Great, which had been sculpted by Rastrelli the Elder in 1723. Passing down another long corridor, we came out at the top of the famous and very ornate Jordan staircase, which rose from the magnificent main entrance of the palace, on the side overlooking the river. This magnificent staircase, which rose through three storeys, was designed by Rastrelli.

From here we walked to the central suite of rooms, which included the Field Marshal Hall, designed by Vasily Stasov. Here we also saw Peter's Hall (or the Small Throne Room), in which we stopped to admire Peter's throne. After Peter the Great had died in 1725, this had been turned into a memorial hall. We were told that the nearby Emblem Room, which featured Imperial emblems on the chandeliers, was once used as a reception room. This huge hall had four and a half pounds of gold leaf on its many decorations. (Rita had asked us to guess how much gold leaf had been used here, then told us the amount.)

In the impressive 1812 room, which had been designed by Rossi, we saw fine portraits of Alexander I, Mikhail Kutuzov (the commander-in-chief who had taken over the army when Napoleon had invaded Russia), and the Duke of Wellington. These had been painted by the British artist George Dow. On the walls were many more portraits of important generals who had taken part in the battle of 1812.

After we had seen the Saint George Hall (also known as the Great Throne Room), in which there was a huge map of the former Russian Empire, we entered the Small Hermitage, which was situated between the Winter Palace and the New Hermitage, where we had started our tour.



The Pavilion Hall, the Small Hermitage, Leningrad

Passing through the Apollo Hall, we entered the Pavilion Hall, which was much larger. As this had been designed by the court artist of Nicholas II, it was late in architectural style, and had been restored recently. Decorated in the sumptuous Venetian style, in white and gold, it looked very beautiful. Hanging from the ceiling were elaborate chandeliers, and the mosaic floor was decorated in the ancient Roman

style. Built into one wall was a novel fountain, which had been named after the fountain of Bakhchysarai in Crimea. We could see water dropping slowly from a number of shells; the drops were supposed to represent the tears of women in a harem. Here we saw a large English clock that had been given as a present to Catherine II by her lover, Grigory Potemkin, who was one of the most powerful men in Russia at the time.



Fra Angelico: The Virgin and Child with Saint Dominic and Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Leonardo da Vinci (?): Madonna Litta

From here we entered the Old Hermitage, a part of the New Hermitage that looked out over the Neva. Built at the end of the eighteenth century, the rooms here contained many paintings of the Italian school. Here we saw works by Fra Angelico, which included *The Virgin and Child with Saint Dominic and Saint Thomas Aquinas* – a pleasant work painted in light and restrained colours. After we had seen some fine paintings by Botticelli, we stopped to look at eight pictures painted by Titian. They included the very fine *Portrait of a Young Woman*, *Danaë* (another study of a nude), and *Saint Sebastian*: a dramatic work that depicted the saint being pierced by arrows. After this we saw the magnificent and serene *Madonna Litta*, believed to be by Leonardo da Vinci: a delightful portrayal of the Madonna and Child. I was enchanted by the little picture.

We then saw another Madonna and Child – this time the *Madonna Conestabile* by Raphael, in a room where his paintings were displayed. This was another fine work that I liked. The next room, which looked out over the Hermitage Theatre, contained a magnificent statue by Michelangelo, *The Crouching Boy*, which was very realistically carved in white stone.

We now continued down a long gallery, the decoration of which had been based on a similar gallery in the Vatican, to which artists had been sent to study the design. It was very elaborate, and everything had been painted on to large canvases. At the end of this gallery we returned to the New Hermitage, where we stopped to look at some paintings by van Dyck. We saw a fine painting of his teacher Rubens and his son Albert, an excellent self-portrait that I greatly admired, a portrait of Charles I, and finally one of his queen, Henrietta Maria of France.

Exhausted by now, we now returned to the staircase and the entrance. However, as I had by now got my bearings in this huge gallery and palace, I decided to stay here longer so that I could see some of the paintings that I liked at my own pace. When my companions left at 12.30, I told Rita that I would like to stay here longer. After everyone had gone, I wandered upstairs and bought a more detailed plan of the building, then collapsed on to one of the chairs and had a good rest, which I was very much in need of by now. My plan was to see more of the Dutch school and the French Impressionists.

I finally summoned enough energy to get on my feet and start ambling around. I stopped to look at a few paintings of the Italian school, which we had seen when we had arrived, for I had decided to follow our original route. I had thought of eating something here but, because of where I was and the ever-present strict lady wardens, I decided to eat later elsewhere.

As I studied the paintings, I produced my Thames and Hudson book in order to find some more information about them, which attracted a certain amount of attention from the nearby Russian people. As I stood back to admire El Greco's *Saint Peter and Saint Paul*, a young Russian couple approached me and, as far as I could make out, the lady asked me where they could buy my book. I replied, 'Только в Англии' ('*Tólka v Ánglii*' – 'Only in England'). She muttered 'Ah' understandingly, nodded her head and looked sad. Both she and her tall curly-haired husband were obviously very impressed by the book; when I offered it to them, they flicked through it quickly and returned it to me. Both of them were very well dressed. They now began to chat to me, asking me where I lived, and so on. Unfortunately, as I was tired, though intent on examining the pictures, my mind went blank and I found it extremely difficult to communicate with them as they knew no language other than Russian. Yet, despite my inadequate knowledge of their language, I very much wanted to converse with these kind people, and they with me, and so we had to make do with phrases in broken Russian, shrugs, and smiles. They wanted to know if I lived in the North of Ireland; when I told them that I lived in Dublin, they knew where that was. They then asked me if I had travelled to any other countries. I did my best at remembering the names of various countries in Russian, helped by them. As I could not remember the word for China (Китай – *Kitái*), I decided to leave that one out. They were quite astonished by my information and their next questions were: where did I work and did I have much money? When I casually explained that I did not have very much, they were more amazed than ever. Smiling, the husband told me that he did have money, but could never travel to the countries that I had mentioned. They asked me if I was an art student; I said no – just a tourist who had a love of fine art. They were not from Leningrad, but from some other town that I had never heard of.

After this rather hit-and-miss, yet interesting conversation, we said goodbye. The husband had mentioned that they would be going to the Russian Museum on the following day and hoped to see me there. Unfortunately, I could not remember when we would be taken to see this museum, though I knew that a visit had been scheduled. When I left them and returned to the paintings, I cursed my poor knowledge of the Russian language and my nervousness when trying to speak it. I really wished that I had studied it more thoroughly and had learned to speak it fluently.

I now had another look at the Rembrandt paintings, and then my favourites: the small but fascinating Dutch genre works. Among many others, I stopped to admire Jan Steen's *The Doctor's Visit* and *The Drinkers*, Jan van Goyen's winter landscapes, van Ostade's *Village Musicians*, Gabriel Metsu's *The Doctor's Visit* (obviously a popular subject) and *Breakfast*, Gerard Ter Borch's *The Messenger* and *The Glass of*

Lemonade, pictures by Jacob van Ruisdael, and the beautiful *Lady with her Cook* by Pieter de Hooch. There were also some fine paintings by Frans Hals, such as *Man with a Glove*, which quite fascinated me. I also loved the small winter landscapes of several painters because of their marvellous photographic details.



Jacob van Ruisdael: Lady with her Cook, and Rogier van der Weyden: Saint Luke Painting the Virgin (cropped)

From here I walked along the corridor that led to the Winter Palace, once again passing the Hanging Garden. In another corridor nearby I discovered examples of early Flemish painting. These also greatly interested me, for I had only seen such early works in printed reproductions, and never in reality. Here I saw Lucas Cranach the Elder's striking and colourful *Portrait of a Woman*, the Master of Flemalle's *Madonna by the Fireside*, which was very small and intimate, Rogier van der Weyden's *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin* (which I found fascinating as I had never seen a real van der Weyden masterpiece before), another intimate and very interesting work entitled *Three Musicians* by the Master of the Female Half-Lengths, and *The Deposition* by Hugo van der Goes. There were other pictures to be studied, but the one that made the greatest impression on me was the van der Weyden masterpiece. I concluded that just seeing that one work would have satisfied me; it had certainly made my day for some strange reason. I eventually left the room feeling very happy.

In the first few small rooms of the Winter Palace I stopped to study some of the earlier French paintings that we had quickly passed earlier. As I did so, I was aware of a number of Russians, including some young people, approaching me cautiously to look at my book. Here I saw some delightful paintings by Louis Le Nain, such as an intimate genre work entitled *Visiting Grandmother* and a dramatic country scene called *The Milkmaid's Family*. There were some paintings by Poussin, which were darker and more mysterious: *The Deposition*, *Tancred and Erminia*, and *The Rest on the Flight to Egypt*. I admired Claude Lorrain's *Morning (Evening) at the Port* and the works of the famous artist Watteau: *The Savoyard* (which was delightfully fresh) and *Caprice*. I also saw some works by Nicolas Lancret, Chardin (*The Attributes of the*

Arts, Grace before Dinner and The Washerwoman), Fragonard (*The Stolen Kiss*) and Delacroix.



Claude Lorrain: Morning (Evening) at the Port, Winter Palace

Once again I climbed the staircase and had another look at the collection of French Impressionists, which I was now able to savour at a slower pace. Here a lady approached me and asked me where I had bought my book, and I met the young Russian couple once again. After we had exchanged friendly smiles, they looked through my book afresh and pointed out the French paintings that were on show at present. They were very interested to see reproductions of the paintings that were not on show, and were also fascinated to compare the originals to the reproductions. They seemed to be art connoisseurs, for they obviously knew a lot about European art in general. As they leafed through the pages, I could sense an interested crowd gathering around us to take a look at my book, though when I eventually turned around, they quickly dispersed. The young couple once again tried to get me to remember when I would be in the Russian Museum, but I still could not remember. The fact that I could not remember the days of the week in Russian certainly did not help! We eventually departed and wished each other goodbye.

Afterwards I wandered around for a little longer, examining other French paintings, and then went downstairs and found my way to the 1812 Room, where once again I studied the various portraits. By this stage I had had enough, and so I began to walk back to the entrance, passing through the magnificent rooms with their priceless paintings for the last time. Exhausted by now and my legs weak from so much standing, I went out into the sunshine, still clutching my string bag, at four o'clock. What an experience!

Making my way down the shady street at the back of the Hermitage, I emerged at the Neva embankment. I clambered down some steps and, sitting by the cool water's edge, I took out the bread and bun that I had taken at breakfast time, and began to nibble at them. Here it was quiet and relaxing, with the water gurgling at my feet and the sun shining on the spire of the Saint Peter and Paul Cathedral. Every so often a river cruise boat would pass by and a guide's amplified voice could be heard.

When I had finished eating and had taken a good rest, I got to my feet and slowly made my way back to Nevsky Prospekt, passing a jetty in front of the Winter Palace. A notice in Russian and English stated that this was the boarding place for the

hydrofoil that went to Petrodvorets – a place that we intended to visit. I was glad to have found this.

On reaching Nevsky Prospekt, busy as ever, I popped into the Beriozka shop and bought two books: *Places of Interest in the Environs of Leningrad* for 9.75 roubles, and a small booklet that contained excellent reproductions of the paintings in the Russian Museum, which was not too expensive. Both of these books contained good-quality photographs in contrast to most other books here, for the standard of locally-printed books was normally very shoddy. In my opinion, these were the only things worth buying, for the shop contained so many touristy gimmicks and knick-knacks.

When I left, I discovered that I was rapidly running out of money. I set off and arrived back at the hotel by 5.30 p.m. As we would be going to the Kirov Theatre for Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*, I quickly washed and changed into better clothes. We went down for dinner at six o'clock. The starter this evening consisted of a sprinkling of caviar on halved hard-boiled eggs. I found the caviar quite tasteless.

We arrived at the large Kirov theatre shortly after seven o'clock. Like the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow, we entered a large foyer and found our way to the theatre proper via a small door. We were delighted to discover that we had an excellent box near the centre. The theatre was large and sumptuous, and was filling up quickly with well-dressed people who looked as though they were engaged in polite conversation. There was a distinct air of imperial luxury and refinement about the place; not very far away from us was the large and impressive Tsar's box, which was filled with VIPs. Members of the audience included wealthy tourists and high-class Russians; we noticed that opera glasses were being passed around from one person to another. Hanging from the ceiling were glittering glass chandeliers with electric candles. The walls were painted white, and blue drapes had been hung here and there; the stage curtain was very elaborate and featured a lot of intricate golden decorations. As in Moscow, the individual chairs, with their blue cushions, were extra wide to accommodate the ample Russian anatomy.

Looking around at all this splendour, Walter and I were once again reminded of scenes from Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*. We both asked the same question, 'Where are Natasha and Prince Andrei?' This would have been just the right place for such people, we thought.

At 7.30 p.m. the orchestra and conductor appeared and, when the Overture began, everyone coughed and shuffled about. This somewhat irritated me for, as I mentioned to Walter, the best of the music was usually contained in the Overture.

When the curtains opened, we found ourselves in the Summer Garden, looking through the railings out to the Neva – just what we had seen during the previous day. The stage was full of people, all dressed in eighteenth-century costumes, who were singing and making merry. When two gamblers, Tsurin and Chekalinsky, appeared, the people all went away. Herman, their friend, then came along and told them of his burning love of a girl whom he had met. Prince Yeletsky then arrived, telling his friends of his coming marriage. A girl named Liza and her mother, the old Countess, then appeared; Yeletsky pointed to the girl and announced that she was his fiancée. Horrified, Herman recognized her as the girl who had captivated him.

The others then left and Herman's friends told him a story of the Countess and how she had a secret trick of winning games with three cards in succession, a secret that she would never disclose for fear of death. The others then left, leaving Herman brooding on these tidings as a storm gathered. This was very well done indeed, for a dark cloud slowly came into view somehow or other, it became dark, lightning

flashed, and then we were treated to a clever optical illusion of rain. Thus, the first scene came to a dramatic end.

Walter and I were very impressed so far. We had both read the original story by Pushkin in an English translation, and I had previously heard the opera on the radio, so both of us knew what to expect. We had also bought a programme and an English translation for just 20 kopecks, which also helped. We both agreed that the performance was superbly presented and acted. Although the music was not very tuneful, it was suitably intense. We also benefitted from a whispered translation from behind, for a member of our group was translating for his wife.

The second scene of Act 1 took place in Liza's room, where she and her friends were having a musical evening. When her friends left her, Herman appeared and declared his love for her, only to be interrupted by the arrival of the Countess. He hid and, after she had left, once again sang amorously to Liza, who declared her love for him. Herman now resolved to acquire the secret of the three cards (*Tri Karti* – the common name of the opera in Russian) from the Countess.

As this was the end of the first act, we followed the crowd outside. Finding a little booth that sold apple juice and sweets, I bought a glass of juice as it was very hot in the theatre. At the curtain call, we returned to our seats. The elderly Russian lady in our group, who was sitting beside us, told me that she was enjoying the performance very much, though she found it too hot in the theatre. I rolled up my sleeves as the orchestra struck up once again.

We now found ourselves at an elaborate fancy-dress ball held in a large ballroom, to which Herman and his friends had been invited. Herman's friends played a trick on him: they left a note for him supposedly from Liza. The Countess also played a trick on Herman, which drove him to distraction. Finally Liza appeared and gave him the key to the Countess's bedroom, through which he would have to pass in order to reach hers. In this first scene of Act 2, scores of actors had been on the stage.

The next scene took place in the dark and mysterious bedroom of the Countess, into which Herman made his way through a secret door. The lighting here was very dramatic, for there was barely enough light to see what was happening. Eventually the Countess arrived, attended to by her maids, and put to bed. When the maids had left, Herman appeared and demanded the secret of the three cards. The shock of his appearance, his pistol and his request was too much for the old lady and she died of fright, bringing her secret to the grave.

Thus ended the second act, and so we strolled out of the theatre once again. Boiled by the heat by now, we bought more apple juice and treated ourselves to one or two sweets, which were quite expensive. Refreshed, we returned to our seats for Act 3.

The next scene was also very impressive and dramatic. We were now in a dark and dingy barracks; a storm was raging outside and the distraught Herman was reading a note from Liza. Suddenly, the ghost of the Countess appeared and told Herman the secret of the three cards. The singer, who was standing on a raised platform behind a black curtain, was slowly illuminated by pale blue light after the curtain had been opened; when she had finished singing, the light was slowly faded down. I only saw the curtain closing, which gave the game away, for when the light went out, there seemed to be nobody there. Walter and I were fascinated by this.

Scene two began with a winter's night on the bank of the Neva, where Liza was waiting for Herman. At the stroke of midnight he appeared, going through the motions of telling her how much he loved her and babbling wildly about the Countess and her secret. Trying unsuccessfully to persuade her to go with him to a gambling

house, he escaped from her, leaving her by the river. Distraught, she threw herself into the water.

The final scene took place in a gambling house, which was full of men in period costume. Excited, Herman entered and won on his first two cards. Then, staking everything on his last card, the Ace of Spades, he lost, for it turned out to be the Queen of Spades which, to Herman, resembled the old Countess. In a frenzy of madness, he stabbed himself, dying with the name of Liza on his lips.

With this the opera ended. The audience applauded the singers and musicians long and loud, clapping rhythmically in the Russian manner. The musicians and singers had to acknowledge the applause many times, and the leading singers and conductor were presented with wreaths. It had been a wonderful performance, and Walter and I had enjoyed it enormously. It had certainly been a great treat to sit in a box in the world-famous Kirov Theatre.

Outside we found our bus, which had been parked nearby, and set off for our hotel. However, the driver decided to bring us all over the place, providing us with a free trip of the city by night. We gave him a cheer when he did an extra (though unnecessary) loop near our hotel, and he laughed heartedly. He had a good sense of humour and grinned at us when we left and thanked him.

We eventually arrived back in our room by about 11.30 p.m. I collapsed on to the bed, feeling quite exhausted. Walter and I hastily wrote our diaries and then quickly fell asleep. It had been a wonderful day.