

Vintage

Eastern Bloc 1964

By Hope Herman Wurmfeld

“Curiosity is insubordination in its purest form.”

—Vladimir Nabokov

Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka—I read these literary gems with Vladimir Nabokov, who was then teaching at Cornell. In another class, with a professor from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, we were reading the *Communist Manifesto*. The manifesto had been assigned with the caveat: report to class the following week, even if we had to be carried in on a stretcher. The instructor intended to dissect the arguments one by one to show us why the system wouldn’t work. Such was my introduction to the depths of the Russian soul. The Soviet Union was a mystery and a fascination, so when the opportunity to visit presented itself, I was eager to travel.

At the time I was living in Rome, and as the Roman summer began to descend with hot winds blowing off the African continent, two young Americans decided to go as far north as they could. Thus our travels began.

Michael and I had just been married in Rome. He, an architect, and I, a photographer with an MA from Columbia in art history. So in the early summer of 1964, with visas in hand, we set off in a white Alfa Romeo convertible with a tiny USA sticker on the back fender, five 5-gallon tanks of high-octane fuel, a tent, sleeping

The white Alfa Romeo that took the author and her husband on their 1964 journey from Rome, through Eastern Europe and the USSR, to their final destination in Finland. All photos courtesy of Hope Herman Wurmfeld.





bags, a small Coleman stove, and a 1914 Baedeker as there were no contemporary maps or guidebooks of the USSR.

Driving north through the Simplon Pass from Italy to Switzerland and on to Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, we entered the USSR at the Polish/Russian border, which at that time required a customs check. We arrived in the early evening, but as our visas didn't allow entry until the next morning, we were told to go back at least 10 kilometers from the border for the night.

There were no hotels or amenities of any kind—just rolling countryside with an occasional farmhouse. Somewhat nervous about finding ourselves in a remote and seemingly isolated place, we set up our tent in a fairly flat field with a line of oak trees offering some shelter. We were making sandwiches when we noticed two little heads peeping up from a small hillock about 50 feet in front of us. The next thing we knew, two young children came over with bowls of fresh strawberries and then dashed off.

After a while, we noticed a line of people walking toward us. Somehow the word was out that there were strangers in the field. The townspeople had come to see us; mostly to look at us, as we had no language in common. Thus, lots of smiles, small candies, and maps of Europe became the mediums of exchange.

First came the young girls, then the older women and teenage girls, and last, the men, who were particularly interested in the mechanics of the car. They stayed near the tent talking and laughing far into the night. Although we knew no Polish, I did know the word *schmata*, which my Polish grandmother used to describe her old dresses. I don't know if it was intuition or wishful thinking, but I gathered that the boys were interested in rags to clean the exterior of the car. I handed them a roll of paper towels, and it was exactly the right thing. They were gleeful as they sang and talked among themselves while they worked, and we were thrilled at this unexpected understanding.

Early the next morning, as we were packing up and getting ready to drive the 10 kilometers to the border, an old man came toward us in a horse-drawn wagon. He insisted that we take two bottles of milk fresh from his cows. He spoke a little English and said he had heard about the two young Americans, and he eagerly asked if

Top to bottom: Workers in Red Square, Moscow, USSR, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 16 x 10 in.; Moscow, USSR, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 16 x 10 in.





we knew a cousin of his who had gone to the United States and whom he hadn't seen in many years. We regretted disappointing him but managed to communicate that the United States was a huge country and that we didn't know his cousin Szymon.

These many years later, the recollection of our impromptu exchange with the farm families at the Polish/Russian border, one of our few interactions with local people, is with me still; a memory of people who embraced us with warmth and kindness, and whose passionate quest was to know more about the outside world.

When we finally arrived at the Moscow campground and began to set up our tent, we became aware of a similar phenomenon: young people slowly gathering around us. There wasn't the same sense of family and community that we'd experienced at the Polish border. Here, we were told, were workers who had earned a "little vacation" as a reward for excellence in the workplace.

Again, as we didn't have the language, but wanted to relate in some way, we took out maps of Europe and opened the hood of the car. The young men and boys hung around inspecting the engine until late into the night, exactly as they had in Poland. When Michael and I decided that we needed to get some rest, we weren't sure how best to communicate this. Finally, we decided to crawl into our tent and close the flaps. We managed to sleep despite loud voices, bright lights, and music blaring the entire night on loudspeakers.

We loved the campground and felt it was a wonderful opportunity to interact with the people, but early the next morning we were informed we had to leave. We could only surmise that interest in the car and in our maps presented too great a risk, and that the authorities wanted to have greater control over our activity.

We were given the names of several hotels in the city. When we explained that we hadn't much money, it was established that the hotel would charge the same amount we'd expected to pay at the campsite. And so two rubles it was. For the price of the campground we settled into a substantial hotel, either the National or the Metropol, I don't recall which.

An elevator brought us to our floor, where a stern-looking woman at a small desk further questioned us. When she appeared to be satisfied with our answers, she gave us the key. Our room was spacious with two twin beds, a full bathroom, and a large object that looked like a radio except there was no reception. We decided it was a listening device and, crazy Americans that we were, sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" before we went to sleep each night.

Our first day in Moscow we planned an early visit to the Grand Kremlin Palace to see the Celadon collection

and whatever other objects were on display. There was a guided tour, which we joined, but basically we were on our own. Once inside the grounds, I was photographing as usual with my Leica and a light meter around my neck. As I worked, concentrating on light and angle, I became aware of a shrill whistle to which I paid no mind. Next thing I knew, someone was at my elbow letting me know through body language and stern sounds that I would have to leave. I wasn't told what I had done wrong but realized that the guard's whistle-blowing must have had something to do with me, as I had stepped briefly outside the painted white lines for a better vantage point of the domes. Michael was also led to the gate and pushed outside the Kremlin wall. We realized that we had to be more careful, as we hadn't come this far to be barred from the treasures of the city.

That afternoon we went to Intourist and asked for help touring the city. Intourist provided the perfect person: a lovely young woman whose English was excellent. With her guidance we were allowed to return to the Kremlin Palace. She was with us for several days, and in a discussion on art, we talked about modern painting and why much of contemporary Soviet art, though well executed, was propaganda.

In our room that night we were excited that she seemed to understand our perspective on art, but when she didn't appear the next day and another person came to take her place, we were heartbroken and realized the extent to which we were being monitored.

Of great interest to me was the role of women who worked alongside men on construction, in gas stations, and in the fields. In the United States this would certainly have been the exception.

Religion, considered the "opiate of the masses," was officially banned; however, there were priests in Red Square, and many older people, particularly women, seemed to have been permitted to attend church services.

We did foolish things never fully realizing the inherent danger of some of our escapades. For example, one day in Red Square at the Kremlin wall several young men drove by and asked if we had anything to sell. Their English was good, and we had brought some things in our backpacks—blue jeans and nylon clothing, that we were willing to part with—thinking that we'd buy caviar to take back to Rome. Michael went off with two of the boys and left me with the third to wander for a while in Red Square. When I asked what they planned to do with the things they were buying from us, he said that they were going to resell them to raise money to come to the West—that they were writers who were not able to publish in the Soviet Union.

We never did find out who these young men were; perhaps they were fronting for Solzhenitsyn, or maybe their work was found by one of the human rights organizations and was brought to the West. We never knew. We just knew they seemed like decent, intelligent guys, and we were gullible and eager to talk to young people.

On the highway from Moscow to Leningrad there was only an occasional bicycle or bus and almost no cars. We were the sole travelers. Every 40 or 50 kilometers, there would be a kiosk at the edge of the road. As we drove past, someone inside would follow us for a few seconds with a pair of what looked like industrial-strength binoculars and then pick up the phone. The first time this happened we didn't think much about it, but for the entire 400 kilometers to Leningrad, as we kept passing kiosks, the same thing would occur. We were being tracked.

In Leningrad our goal was the Hermitage—but also Alexandre Leblond's Peterhof, the Admiralty, and other architectural wonders. At the Hermitage we discovered to our dismay that if you left the museum at lunchtime, you weren't allowed to reenter, and so we brought a few crusts of bread from our breakfast and ate them covertly, or so we thought, as we walked in the long gallery in the center of the building.

We had heard about the Shchukin collection of modern painting and were told, although it was considered decadent and therefore out-of-bounds, we should try to see it. As we wandered through the maze of dark corners and empty corridors, we discovered a remote part of the museum where we found a woman guard who spoke some English and a bit of Italian. We told her what we were looking for, and though, at first, she was extremely adamant, insisting that no one was allowed to enter that space, she finally relented and allowed us access to the sequestered paintings.

It's not possible to describe what we felt when we first saw the Matisse "Dancers." We were told it existed but nothing had prepared us for the intensity, the emotional

Clockwise from top: Prague, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 16 x 10 in.; USSR, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 10 x 16 in.; Vlatva River, Prague, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 10 x 16 in.



magnitude of the work. There were other painters who were considered subversive, like Malevich and Picasso, whose work was known in the West, but the discovery of the “Dancers” was a surprise and a gift and one of the highlights of our journey.

We drove from Leningrad to Vyborg, then part of Finland. As we arrived at the border crossing, I leaped out of the Alpha, hugged the embarrassed customs official, and actually kissed the ground—well, pretended to. I hadn’t realized until it was over how stressed I had been.

Once in Finland, before heading to Turku and the ferry, we found the unmarked Viipuri library built by Alvar Aalto in the late ’20s. As it was not open to the public and was in a state of disrepair, we were only able to look through the windows, but still it was a marvel to behold the free-flowing plan and pared-down modernist exterior.

It was an epic journey, and as uncomfortable and downright frightening as it sometimes was, I will always remember the beautiful young people who gathered around us at the campgrounds, the miraculous Matisse “Dancers,” and the old farmer at the Polish border. As unlikely as it may seem, I’m still keeping an eye out for his cousin Szymon. ■

Hope Herman Wurmfeld is a photographer and author who lives and works in New York City. Throughout her career, she has exhibited her photographs internationally, published several books, and taught photography at Hunter College in NYC for over twenty years. Her work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in NYC; the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; the Archives of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.; the New York Public Library, the Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany; and the Princeton University Library Graphics Collection, among others. "Vintage: Eastern Bloc 1964" was on view at the Harriman Institute, January–March 2020. Visit Wurmfeld's website at hopewurmfeld.com.

Clockwise from top left: Moscow, USSR, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 16 x 10 in.; Moscow, USSR, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 10 x 16 in.; Moscow, USSR, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 10 x 16 in.; Moscow, USSR, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 10 x 16 in.; Poland, 1964. Archival inkjet print, 10 x 16 in.



