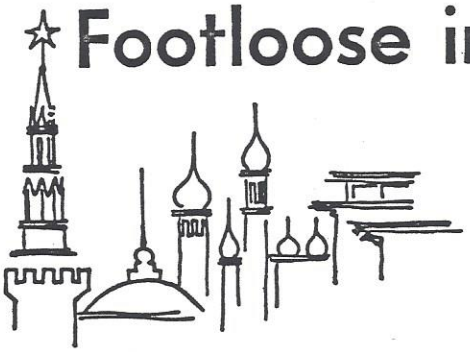
Footloose in Moscow



by ROBERT ALLAN

ALONE AND A stranger in Moscow, the traveler with no special mission but curiosity may face his sojourn with trepidation and half a mind to cut his visit short as soon as he has had enough of restrictions, hostility, or boredom. But after a few days of wandering the town at will, this visitor found his misgivings largely dissolved.

Dressed in plain shirt and trousers and shod in ripple-soled brogans, I set forth daily from my hotel, becoming a less and less conspicuous foreigner as I accustomed myself to the ways of ordering a meal in a *stolovaya,* mastering the routes of the Metro, and making the acquaintance of shy young ladies in Gorki Park.

How did I know my assimilation was progressing? Strangers began asking me not only the way to Novoslobodskaya Street and Leningradsky Railway Station but, "Where is the nearest post office?" and "What time does the state bank close today?" When I squeezed into the crowded buses I became an active link in the chain that passed the four kopecks along to the conductor and passed the paper tickets back. When I rode the ad-less subway, the Metro, I jostled with the best of them, peering over shoulders in search of reading matter. I liked *Izvestia* better than *Pravda*—more pictures. *Krokodil* was best of all—lots of cartoons.

Eating at the *Avtomat,* I would carry my sausages and beer, like an old proletarian, to a stand-up table where my fragmentary Russian and a friendly Muscovite's fractional English often got me into conversations that might deal first with borscht, then with space flights, or Tolstoi, but which always gravitated to war and peace. The Muscovites I met in restaurants, shops, amusement parks, and hotels needed constant reassurance that Uncle Sam was not atomically gunning for the Russian Bear. I reminded them that there were millions of insecure souls in the West, with homes on the range of Moscow's missiles, who were greatly perturbed about Russia's "loading for bear."

Frequently I heard the ingenuous simplification: "Why is it that Americans and Russians like you and me can discuss and even understand each other's view . . . why can't our leaders do the same?"

If it were only that easy.

About 4,500 miles from our Broadway is another "Broadway." The street signs call it "Ulitsa Gorkogo" (Gorki Street), but a lot of Muscovites affectionately call it "Brod-vay." This tree-adorned, commercial, cultural, and residential thoroughfare, the principal spoke street radiating from the Kremlin's hub, is lined with shops, theaters, restaurants, monuments, and a young generation avidly interested in outlanders and things foreign.

On Gorki Street a slender girl and her doting boy friend walk by, holding hands. Around their necks dangle fine silver chains with silver coins as pendants. What are these lavalieres? American dimes. Two smartly coiffured girls, probably French, stroll along while a steady parade of eyes gawks at their fanciful Western hair styles. Near the central post office, a youngster strikes up a conversation with a visitor from abroad. The lad begs a souvenir. Any little item—an emblem, a post card, a pencil—something from the world beyond the borders. Two gentlemen, one unmistakably a foreigner, gaze at shop windows. A young man approaches, covertly asks in halting English if they have any clothing to trade. The foreigner blinks uncomprehendingly, but his companion, a Moscow citizen, scolds the startled young man, who scurries off.

Just off Gorki Street, in GUM, the big emporium in Red Square, I am approached by a man who has been staring at my shoes. They have aroused more than ordinary curiosity in him. Would I be interested in an exchange? He would buy me a sturdy pair of Soviet shoes. It would make him happy to own such fancy footwear as mine. Mindful that a Soviet worker has to toil a week in order to buy a pair of shoes, I think how nice it would be to give him mine, but they are the only pair I have along. I agree to the trade. We ransack the entire shoe department of GUM, but they have no size to fit my narrow foot. We go to two other stores nearby. My particular length just isn't made in such a narrow width. The deal is off, and my brogan-coveting friend stalks sadly away.

Near the department stores, at a bus queue in Sverdlov Square, phlegmatic faces listen with restrained amusement to a hulking man in an open-collared shirt, swaying in his battered boots as he babbles in a drunken monologue. "Who is Khrushchev?" he sputters. "In the old days I had fancy clothes and lots of money. I gave everything up to become a good Communist. I'm a good man, but who is Khrushchev?" The bus arrives and the passengers board. He is left alone and, incredibly, to this observer at least, he stumbles off untouched.

The long lines of people, except for bus queues, are far less frequent in Moscow than they were a few years ago, I am told. The longest queue in town still stoically waits outside the red marble mausoleum in Red Square to view the well-preserved body of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin who died forty years

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