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Snapshots From Bizarroland

EDWARD COLE

The professor departed with the students at dawn the day after the 1990 Commencement. He took no camera, but nevertheless managed to return some weeks later with a few snapshots.

Helsinki, April 30, 1990

If you were a college student finished with nine months of academic torture, including term papers and final examinations, what would you consider appropriate recreational therapy? How about a combination of Halloween and a university block party so big that the entire police force of a world capital could only look on in bemused resignation? This was exactly the treat in store for the students of the Grand Valley Russian Studies Tour as they woke up from their transatlantic flight to discover that they were in Finland on St. Walpurga's Night.

St. Walpurga, it must be remembered, was the one who effectively drove all the witches and their retinues from northern Europe in the eighth century, and her feast day is May first. Therefore, it only stands to reason that on the eve of this solemn event, the forces of magic should stage one last fling. It also happens that this is the night when, for reasons perhaps best unexplored, the university students must thoroughly suds down a public statue of a certain charming, naked lady. And furthermore, to make certain that these ablutions are properly performed, all the nation's alumni must turn out in force, wearing white caps and fortifying themselves with music and stimulating beverages.

Ordinarily a crowded Finnish street will be so subdued that all one hears is the squeaking of well-maintained shoe leather and the passing hiss of equally well-maintained automobiles. But on this evening, a demonic spirit is abroad, and the esplanade is a sea of hobgoblins and bobbing white hats. At the top of the park Glenn Miller dominates, while at the other end, near the sudsy lady, it is the stronger beat of the latest stuff. Around nine o'clock the bottles begin to fall and the party gets a little rougher. By midnight the bag-lady, whose self-appointed task is to keep the bus terminal clean, sits down in despair. Bit by bit the tour straggles in, apparently little the worse for wear, although one of our number has become engaged to a Finnish student (pony-tail bands have been exchanged). Unfortunately, they forgot about names and addresses.

By dawn, Walpurga is in control and the city is so clean that the events of the previous night seem but a dream. We drive to the embarkation point through crowds of

balloon-peddlers and little families headed for the parks. Beneath the mossy ramparts and antique cannon of Suomenlinna, the water is flocked with sailboats and pleasure craft. To the south lie the grimmer harbors of the Soviet Baltic.

Tallinn, May 2

The medieval fortifications protecting Tallinn gaze past nearby bird-circled steeples, over terraced and twisted streets, out to the wide harbor and a wind-freshened sea unsullied by sailboats or any other pleasure craft. To the east southeast, a new Soviet apartment complex has begun to creep behind the long shoreline hills. Monstrous in scale, seeming to disappear over the horizon, it resembles more a scene of ruin than a construction project. It is said by some that the entire development was conceived in haste in order to further pack the country with ethnic Russians, but it is a sad fact that all Soviet cities are surrounded by similar wastelands.

Battered and begrimed by six years of world war and a half-century of Soviet occupation, the old capital of Estonia seems in the grip of anticipation and hope. As the day ends, bells begin to sound from high church spires gently warmed by lights from the streets below. There is an undeniable sense of peace. Suddenly, far to the east, towards Russia, the last rays of the sun irradiate that other city, and its grim walls flare up, angry with the colors of blood and fire.

Kiev, May 4

On the thickly wooded cliffs above the Dnieper is the true birthplace of civilization among the East Slavs (the common forbears, we are told, of Ukrainians, Russians and Belorussians): the Kievan Pechersky Lavra Monastery, or "Monastery of the Caves." Here learned men from Greece taught the missionaries who departed to establish similar centers throughout the primitive wilderness, here the Russian literary tradition began, and here Nestor compiled his famous Chronicle. Mongols levelled the place in the thirteenth century, and Germans tried again in the twentieth, but here it is, with the horizontal white buildings and green roofs of the Ukrainian baroque style: a great mushroom patch of golden domes rising above the blooming chestnuts.

As we emerge, somewhat dazzled by the glories of Byzantine art and the solemn experience of viewing the mummified saints in their rich vestments, a dog lapping water at a gateside puddle topples over from exhaustion. His little body is horribly distorted. Someone in the crowd murmurs "Chernobyl." What to do? But a little pilgrim soul, a tiny woman right out of Dostoevsky, a little survivor with no more to her name than the tiny dog, hobbles over to the poor beast and gently carries him to some shade. We leave her cooing old words of comfort and affection. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*

Tblisi, May 7

The exotic sights and Byzantine splendors of Georgia are almost behind us as we gather for our last lunch in the faded glory of our hotel, built in 1914. Its classical decor and oriental carpets lend it a certain sense of unfinished history. An unseen Sword of Damocles seems poised above, and there are some among us more than ready for departure.

But first, it is Wayne's birthday, and the hotel staff has prepared a spectacular cake. We brought the trick candles all the way from the States, and they certainly attract attention! A jolly group of Georgian gentlemen and their toastmaster, already deep into the delicious spiced dishes and hearty wines of the region, send us a half-dozen bottles of their finest. We send them pieces of the cake. Wayne is wished a long life and good fortune in the most flowery and eloquent language.

Then, as we are scraping back our chairs and organizing our departure to the airport, the toastmaster stands, suddenly serious. All sounds of lunch cease, and every Georgian in the restaurant raises a glass. Very carefully pronounced in beautiful English comes the toast: "Goodbye to the free Americans, from the soon-to-be-free Georgians!" A spirited clash of glass resounds. There is not a dry eye in the house as we murmur our thanks and file out, waving and exchanging farewells with our new friends.

Moscow, May 8

Morning comes with the roar of tanks, troop carriers and motorized Katusha rocket launchers in the streets below! I spring from my bed to see what is the matter, throw open the sash and . . . there are the Russians, preparing for tomorrow's VE Day (Day of Victory) parade. The vehicles are all vintage models with racy decals and names like "Kursk Baby" and "Mother of the Fatherland." The streets are swarming with gents of a certain age, chests covered with service medals. Whew! In this part of the world one never knows what is signified by the arrival of tank battalions.

I'm fairly tall by Muscovite standards. One old geezer in tall boots, baggy trousers and moustaches to match even called me "Longman." I can live with it. But this room overlooking Red Square must have been built for Peter the Great, its ceilings are so high. And built about that long ago too, from the look of it. The Rooskies think I'm the group leader, so of course I have a deluxe suite. They're wrong, of course, but they also think my group is Canadian (our flight toward the Socialist Paradise originated in Toronto). They are tucked up under the eaves somewhere, but I hope they're happy knowing that their "Group Leader" enjoys parquet floors, oriental carpets, antique furniture, oil paintings, and two refrigerators. I had to unplug them, they made so much noise at night.

But the real showplace is the bathroom. It always is, in the Soviet Union, if you know what I mean. This one is the ritz. It's done in tiles, and the plumbing actually works. The wee red plastic footstool had me puzzled though. Did the little Mus-

covites have to use it to scale the sides of the enormous bathtub? (I think of it as the Tsar-Tub, the hygienic equivalent of that big cannon over in the Kremlin. The one that was so big even the Russians have never dared to fire it off.) Then it came to me. The shaving sink was installed at about knee-height. But the mirror was fastened so high even I had to make jumps to catch a bit of my reflection. I tried the little red stool, but it broke.

Leningrad, May 12

Leningrad is somewhat like the rich attorney's elderly ugly daughter who could "very well pass for forty-three, in the dusk, with the light behind her." There is magic in the long, peach-colored evenings of the northern spring: the chips, rust and dust of neglect vanish, and she is St. Petersburg once again, "the city of gold on a platter of silver."

Our last hours have this enchanted quality, and as the tour bus rolls over the bridges past the silhouetted grandeur, Inge, who has been with us since Tallinn, asks us to sing some of our American songs. An awkward silence is followed by a few off-key attempts at "America, the Beautiful," and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," but nobody is sure of the words. Despair, and embarrassment. Then some genius at the back of the bus comes up with a song everyone knows and can sing with gusto.

And so, as the tour bus passes the Winter Palace on its way to intersect the mysterious, invisible line that runs from the golden needle of the Peter and Paul to that of the Admiralty, old St. Petersburg echoes to the rollicking "Theme of The Brady Bunch." And what could be a more American finale to a Vacation in Bizarroland?