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MOSCOW: BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE COUP D'ETAT

BY WILDA B. NEWMAN

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) was meeting in the Soviet Union for its 57th Council and General Conference, August 19-24, 1991. All of us had read the newspapers and heard daily reports on television and radio about the changes occurring in the USSR. Some colleagues decided to forego this year’s meeting, due to the uncertainty there. Others, like myself, were not easily dissuaded, and besides, the librarians and information specialists there had worked so hard to host this event, it seemed discourteous, at the very least, not to show up.

So, show up we did, although the numbers were half the normal attendance. About 150 delegates, compared to 300 in recent years from the United States, and 1500 total attendees from all over the world, compared to 3000 in Stockholm in 1990 and 3500 in Paris in 1989. Not so for the USSR. They set a record in the number of participants attending (over 500) and making presentations at the week-long conference.

Confer we did, throughout the coup d’etat, and the week of meetings and social events, for the most part, took place as planned, at the Congress Center. (Photo 1) Banners hung high at the Opening Plenary Session at the Rossiya Hotel proclaiming IFLA, Moscow 1991. As has been reported by some of my colleagues (in Specialist, Sci-Tech News, and American Libraries) the week was a week to remember, with unexpected problems, changes, and workarounds all accepted as part of the drama unfolding around us, and swiftly absorbing us into this historical event.

Some things didn’t change, even with a coup d’etat, like over-boiled chicken, served with their natural, live, skintones, and pinfeathers. But, the stock from that process made for some delightful bowls of borscht and cabbage soups, along with hearty bread and butter. But, let me start at the beginning.

One of the first things that strikes you on arrival is a lack of artificial light. We noticed this at the airport. Our welcome to the Soviet Union was to an unimaginative, cold-surfaced, scarcely-lighted room. The light that was there came through canister-like shapes overhead. We had an unusually long time to observe this, since some 36 of the people on the flight, including many of our delegation to the conference, were missing their baggage.

Throughout the two weeks in the Soviet Union, whether in Moscow, Kiev, or Leningrad, lights were either non-existent or very sparse in hotel lobbies,
rooms, shops, and most other buildings, as well as on most streets. In fact, we noted a curious practice of strands of lightbulbs draped from one lightpost to the next, on main thoroughfares in the cities, that were never lighted. The one big exception to a lack of artificial light was at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses reception held Wednesday evening, as scheduled by the IFLA program. By then, the coup was over and the celebration was one of music, dancing, and toasts, with lots of food, talk, and jubilation. (Photo 2)

Lines didn’t change either; we adapted to the local practices. Our first experience with this was also at the airport. (I think this is the training ground for tourists, a sort of acclimation “rite of passage.”) We waited forever and finally determined that the luggage was not going to arrive and that it was nowhere to be found. At least it was nowhere anyone could or would identify to us. The next step was Customs.

Some of us had our luggage and needed a cart. Young Soviet men were renting carts for two rubles. We had no rubles! You cannot exchange dollars for rubles outside the Soviet Union. And, you can’t exchange dollars for rubles until you go through Customs, and you really do need a cart to carry the luggage to get you to Customs, then you can exchange dollars for rubles and get a cart and so forth. You get the idea. I explained this, but to no avail. The refrain was “two rubles!” Two rubles! Later I returned; again I explained. The young man pushed the cart toward me and said, “Here, for you, a gift.” I thanked him and gave him a pack of cigarettes and received a smile in return. So this is how it is in the USSR.

We piled our baggage high on the cart, and marched off toward another line, this time for Customs. We waited again forever, it seemed. My colleagues finally convinced me to leave the line we were in and move to another that seemed to be moving more quickly. We did. And, waited. To our surprise, the Customs clerk announced as we were second in line, “no more work today, that is all.” And, he left. He left a befuddled line of tourists aghast but thinking that a replacement clerk would surely arrive to take his place. That was not to be the case, however, and we carted ourselves back to the line we had left earlier, and from the back waited again. We were never able to figure out why the lines were taking so much time. The clerks simply took the time they pleased, not even checking most people as they passed them (finally) through to the outside world. None of us were checked. They asked one or two questions or said nothing at all, just giving a nod of the head for someone to move through.

We were a party of six from the United States, traveling together for two weeks—first the conference itself, followed by a post conference tour to Kiev, Leningrad, and Prague. (Photo 3) The rest of our party had cleared Customs earlier than we did (no explanation attempted on this since such variations in all things continued to occur throughout our trip). They were about an hour in front of us. My roommate and I departed for the Cosmos Hotel, our home for the week in Moscow.

When we arrived at the hotel, the rest of our party was still waiting at the desk for room arrangements to be communicated to them. As we approached,
they informed the clerks that we were with them and needed to be handled immediately, as part of the party. It worked! It had taken them an hour, and only five minutes for us, thanks to their quick thinking and our fast move into position (a talent we had a lot of practice developing during the next two weeks). It appeared to us that the “service people,” almost anywhere we went, were more willing to handle groups than individuals, so we moved around a lot of the time as a group, even when it wasn’t required.

We settled in and began to acquaint ourselves with the country, more of its customs, and the people. Sunday was a day of exploring and greeting our specified locations for meetings, social events, and meeting colleagues and renewing friendships made at earlier IFLA conferences. This suddenly changed with the coup, from the standpoint that additional activities were superimposed on the usual conference activities. We tried to go about our business as usual, as the United States Embassy in Moscow had advised us to do.

Since I was sure that the people back home must be worried, I tried telephoning every chance I could. First, there was the wait in line for one of the international pay telephones. There were five of these in the Cosmos Hotel, serving as many as 1500 foreign travelers. Another few could be found in the Congress Center, site of the conference. You couldn’t assume that the telephone you found available was working however, as often they were not. Call after call produced busy international lines. At times the call would make it further through but without final connection. Finally, I got through to my son who in turn contacted my boss. All that managed, the real surprise came when I returned home and saw the telephone bill. Two telephone calls and five “almost through telephone calls” cost almost four hundred dollars. The rate was based on a two to one exchange rate for rubles to dollars. We were legally receiving 32 rubles to the dollar all over the Soviet Union, with the exception of the Metropole Hotel, which had a rate similar to the telephone services.

The clerks at the hotel were also the same before, during, and after the coup. I frequently checked to see if I had received any messages—a telex or TWX or a telephone call, feeling very sure that my employer, the Johns Hopkins University, would be trying to contact me. We learned quickly, too, that whatever question we asked should be re-asked of another person. The answer was almost always different. One answer that was the same, however, was the response to, “Any messages for me?” I was presented with a wooden box about two feet deep and three feet wide. It had compartments that ran lengthwise, with raised levels from front to back, like vertical file holders for pamphlets or brochures. It contained ALL the messages (not very many, considering the hotel could accommodate 1500 people) and I simply searched through everyone else’s messages to find my own. I found nothing.

When I returned home, I discovered that JHU/APL had spent a great deal of effort trying to reach me. I was wanted back in the United States. They thought that they had managed to get a telex to me, since it was supposedly received at the Cosmos Hotel. I never found the message, however, even though I had
been searching daily through the portable files at the front desk. Even when I checked the files several more times, on my return to the Cosmos Hotel, after the post-conference tour, I found nothing.

Similarly, public file boxes were kept of passports. Passports were collected when we checked into the hotel. I left my passport there and came back the next day to retrieve it from another area at the hotel desk. On requesting my passport, the clerk put a box in front of me. I searched through all of them to find my own. Some papers were mis-filed in mine. I called this to the clerk’s attention, after I found my papers in another passport. All of this was done with essentially no surveillance of what I was doing. I still don’t know for what purpose passports are taken.

One of the most memorable events occurred on Tuesday evening during a walk to the Metropole Hotel for dinner, after the short-lived reception held at the Pushkin Museum. A number of us were making our way through the area and stopped to talk with the young Soviet soldiers, with their tanks surrounding Red Square. I was struck by how young they were and how friendly. I felt no threat from these young people, and in fact I had the impression that they were not at all glad to be there. They talked, posed for pictures, and I gave those that spoke with us cigarettes and American flag pins, that I had brought with me. The gifts were accepted with thanks and appreciation. It made me wonder how this strange combination of events could be taking place, tanks and guns and Americans distributing gifts. (Photo 4)

At dinner that evening a colleague, Natasha Kutovenko, Assistant Director in International Affairs, Library, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Leningrad, explained that “... this coup is a badly staged play, with poor actors, and no director, and it can not last long, not longer than two weeks at most.” She also said, “...they have guns but no bullets ... it cannot last.” We wanted to believe her, but this was Tuesday evening and shortly after these comments our waiter came to the table to advise us that there was a curfew at 11:00 p.m. I was stranded, for it was already past 10:30 p.m., and I was at least a half hour from my hotel, and that was assuming I could get there without any delays or roadblocks, or that I would get there at all. I spent the night at the Metropole Hotel with a colleague, resuming conference activities the next morning. I am an elected member to the Standing Committee on Information Technology, and this day I was to moderate a panel, sponsored by this group, on retrospective conversion, at the National Library of Science and Technology of the USSR.

On Thursday evening, after the day’s conference activities, we attended a grand reception at the Lenin Library. Again we were treated to lots of entertainment, food, and wine. Much of the entertainment theme was in preparation for next year’s IFLA conference, scheduled for New Delhi, India. Kalpana Dasgupta, National Library of Calcutta, India, explained that the dancers were quite good, especially since none of the dancers was native to India.

Several of us left the library reception with flowers and proceeded to the downtown area where the deaths had occurred. We wanted to pay tribute to the loss of life in the name of freedom. We
placed the flowers on the sites of the three men killed on the night of August 20. (Photo 5) You could not walk through this area and not be tremendously moved. It was like being in a church. Voices were hushed, except for the occasional loud lament from the scene of the vigil kept by friends of the three victims.

The next day several IFLA delegates traveled by bus 70 kilometers north of Moscow to see the Trinity-St. Sergiy Lavra in Zagorsk. The monastery was founded in the 14th Century and is considered a national treasure of the Soviet Union.

I entered a church on the grounds, with other delegates, to the most melodic sounds I had ever heard. I was reminded of my son’s first visit to Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. He heard the beautiful sounds of a boy’s choir as he entered. To his great disappointment, he discovered a tape player with a cassette, instead of live singers.

In this case, to our right there were a few worshipers gathered, maybe 10, mostly women, singing without musical accompaniment. Their clothing was simple and drab and had a very worn appearance. All of them, the women with covered heads, had their faces turned toward the Iconostasis, where a priest offered his blessing to people that filed through. The Russian Church does not have benches or chairs, so you are required to stand for entire services. A few old, single-seat pews were available in the back of this area, where a pregnant woman sat, along with several babushkas.

Whether before, during, or after the coup, we were continuously struck by the number of churches, many of them active now, and the contrast between these buildings and others, especially since religion was not recognized in the USSR. These are undoubtedly the best restored, maintained, and most beautiful structures throughout the Soviet Union.

We continued our tour after the conference with IFLA delegates from several other countries. It was a time to enjoy more of the country and to get to know each other better. We observed additional protests in Kiev and in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). The people in these cities were interested in democracy but uncertain of their future and the problems confronting all of the Soviet Union.

Colleague, Natasha Kutovenko, met our post-conference tour group at the airport in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and boarded the bus with us. She gave a running historical account of the city along the route to our hotel. Natasha invited me to visit a family in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) one evening, including a friend of hers. He was the equivalent of an American CEO of a meat/sausage packing firm and was celebrating his 50th birthday. I was introduced and greeted by a dozen or so gathering of family and friends in a small, simply furnished apartment, then seated at a long table that took most of the living room. A large slice of bread lathered with black caviar had been prepared for me. Soon we were toasting the host and his birthday, and I was taught how to drink vodka, Russian style, and sampling Russian foods and participating in lively discussions. The evening was memorable and the people were some of the most warm and open I have ever met anywhere.

Another highlight for many of us was the visit to the State Public Library in Leningrad and the tour conducted by a
spirited little woman, with a perfect American accent, Fanny Barnoński. We were never able to get her to tell us much about how she came to have that accent, which left us free for speculation. She did, however, tell us how she had been a part of the defense of the library’s treasures and its protection from the German Nazis during World War II and the siege of Leningrad (St. Petersburg).

At the end of our tour we returned to Moscow and found remnants of the barricade in front of the White House still there two weeks later. (Photo 6) The women were still working at numerous tasks that seemed curious to us. (Photo 7) Wedding celebrations, Soviet style, were still part of the normal weekend scene.

Our group of six took a last look at the city, changed so dramatically, and in such a short period of time. And, our return trip to the city provided us with the memory of one of the best meals we had during the entire trip. Aragvi, a Georgian Restaurant, said to be Stalin’s favorite, offered what turned out to be a banquet. The cost, including wine and champagne, was under ten dollars per person. The walnut chicken will long be remembered by those of us that made a pig of ourselves on that dish alone.

There were mix-ups in food, appointments with the tourist guides, changes in sightseeing—for which we paid extra, overcharges and undercharges, as we bought from government stores and the man and woman on the street, and so forth. None of it mattered. The idea that we were there, experienced the changes in the Soviet Union, made new friends and exchanged our views on all sorts of subjects, survived the coup d’etat, and arrived safely home, made the trip all the more meaningful. As Americans we learned a lot of lessons as well, for example, not to take freedom and democracy for granted, and perhaps equally important the REAL value of information, after not having it when we wanted and needed it so badly.

The symbol of the IFLA conference in Moscow was the statue of Ivan Fyodorov. (Photo 8) He was the first Russian printer, and considered to be as important to that part of the world as Guggenheim was to Western Europe. This statue remained in place, no paint splatters, no graffiti, not broken. Perhaps that says it best. In the end, perhaps that is all that needs to be said.

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IFLA 1991, Congress Center, Moscow, USSR.


Party of six in back of St. Basil's Cathedral. (left to right) Leonard Kniffel, Managing Editor, American Libraries; Wilda Newman, Johns Hopkins Univ., Applied Physics Laboratory; Carlon Walker, Esq., Ameritech; Betty Owsley, Indianapolis Public Schools; John Page, Deputy Director, Learning Resources Division, Univ. of The District of Columbia; Joe Boise, Librarian, Univ. of Calif., Santa Barbara.
Floral tribute to the three young protestors killed at the median strip. Chaikovsky Street underpass, August 20, 1991. IFLA delegate Jan Ahman, Göteborgs Universitetsbibliotek, Sweden, far left.


Russian woman repairing the lines of a streetcar in downtown Moscow, next to wedding cars.