

Bonny Epstein and Dawn Stuart Weinraub in Moscow and Tula

Sunday, May 12, 2013

Sheremetyevo Airport is new and beautiful and efficient. Other members of the American Council of Teachers of Russian delegation to the conference were there to meet us. Tony helped Bonny and me buy Russian cellphones at the Beeline counter on the upper level, we got rubles from the ATMs, and headed for the AeroExpress shuttle train into the city. The train took us to the metro in Moscow and we took the Green line to Belorusskaia station, changed to the Circle line to our station, Novoslobodskaya. It was a short walk to the Russian State University of the Humanities (RGGU) at #6 Miuskaya Ploshchad' (Square). Ahead of us, inside the gate, is the historic main building with its circular facade in the middle, the dormitory in front of it to the left, and the American Studies Center in a nearby building off another court yard.

Tony then led the 6 of us to a cafeteria near the Tretyakovskiy Gallery for lunch. It was a delight to visit the Tretyakovskiy Gallery in the company of an artist and two Russian language and culture specialists. We all had things to say about the familiar 19th century paintings. Robert specializes in portrait painting and was much interested in the first gallery we entered, full of portraits in the academic tradition. He also appreciated seeing the originals of the well-known genre paintings, portraits of famous writers, historical events, etc. I was glad to see the huge painting by Alexander Ivanov, "Christ Appearing to the People," for which I had seen so many versions in St. Petersburg at the Russian Museum. At the end of our visit it was very interesting to see the very Russian icons after my visit to "Byzantium" last October.

Then we went to the Bolshoi Theater to see if we could get tickets for Romeo and Juliet (Prokofiev). The theater had been under renovation for a few years, hidden under a covering with the facade painted on the surface when I was in Moscow in 2009. At the cassa they said the performance was all sold out, but on the street a procurer negotiated the price with Tony for getting us 6 seats marked "neudobnoye mesto" for about \$40 each. We climbed the stairs to a high side balcony offering a very limited view of the stage and some pillars in front of the seats. It was absolutely necessary to stand to see the performance. I almost fell asleep standing up (we had been up for a rather long time and done a lot of walking, including many stairs,

after all). But it was so very worth it all. The beauty of the music and staging and costumes and choreography kept me awake.

Monday, May 13, 2013

Awoke after 8-9 hours feeling fine, to another gorgeous day. During our entire stay in Moscow it was never necessary to put on a sweater, day or night. The sky remained clear and blue, the sunshine bright, and most days were about 85 degrees. Struggled with the mobile phone, but gained some mastery. Went to КОФЕ ХАУЗ (Coffee House in Cyrillic) on Veskovskij for delicious блинчики с семгой и зеленью (blinchiki with salmon and a soft cheese with herbs). Bonny joined me, we walked back to the university and met Marina Kaul, who administers the American Studies Center. A very impressive and cultured scholar, who speaks beautiful English, she invited us to see the Center in Corpus 6, and took us from the office into the adjacent classroom with a large seminar table. She was able to go register our passports while we talked with her 3 students who showed up about the book they had just read, *The Ebony Tower*, our schools and pedagogy, their teaching experience in giving one-on-one lessons in English, etc. The girl who didn't care for *The Ebony Tower* explained it was because she found the central theme of older vs. newer approaches to art no longer a relevant issue (passé) - if I am paraphrasing correctly (I haven't read the book). We were very impressed with their command of English and their thoughtful discussion.

Bonny and I finally took off for Red Square and decided to eat a late lunch on the terrace of the Bosco's cafe at GUM, with a commanding view of the Lenin Mausoleum directly across the square. Expensive but very pleasant. Then some shopping in GUM in various Bosco stores for Olympic items (Bosco is the major sponsor of the coming Sochi Winter Olympics) and children's toys and books for Bonny's students and youngest child. The Olympic gear was way too expensive. The toy store was one of the nicest I have ever seen, and the saleslady was very knowledgeable and helpful. The Time-Warner Center in NYC is quite glitzy and wonderful, but I think GUM is still more impressive - as well as glitzier and out of sight expensive.

We connected with Marina, who had courageously come to Emma Willard School on the Open Door Exchange program when she was barely 16, during the time of the Cold War. We met up in the late afternoon on Manezh Square just in front of the History Museum and walked over to

Ploschad' Revoliutsia to the Boris Godunov restaurant with its thematic appeal. Actually we had a delicious beef stroganoff served in a bowl of dark bread. A gypsy band came in to entertain: violin (excellent), 2 guitars, and beautiful female vocalist with tambourine. Not exactly out of a Dostoevsky tavern (they were too clean and polished), but good entertainment. Marina went with us on the metro to our stop, then left to catch the eletrichka for the rest of her ride home farther out in the vast city of Moscow.

The main building of RSUH (in Russian RGGU) was built in 1908 for the Moscow Public University, the first "free" university, progressive, offering a solid academic foundation. It was founded by Alfons Shanyovsky, and eminent Russian patron of the arts. In 1930 it became the Moscow State Institute for History and Archives, for training archives specialists, and became a center of academic research in history and primary sources, archeology, and palentology. Our dormitory also served as a residence for rising Communist party officials who came from all over the territory of the USSR to Moscow for training in the Institute. In the 1990s it achieved the level of "university," becoming the "structural heart of RSUH," which was founded in 1991.

Tuesday, May 14, 2013

Zverev International Biennial Conference on American Studies:
"Urban Dimension of American Civilization"

It seems Zverev was an exceptional and humane scholar of America civilization, founder of the program here. The conference began at 10:00 in plenary session in a large, beautiful hall on the 6th floor of Corpus 6 (not the central main building, but the American Studies Center. The hall had windows on each side, covered with attractive draperies. There was comfortable seating on raised tiers on three sides of the periphery, and on the floor level there was a huge square of tables with modesty screens, equipped with microphones, comfortable chairs, an excellent sound system, and beautiful chandeliers. We approached the hall by walking through a beautiful sculpture gallery. For the coffee break we went down to the 2nd floor, walked past a paintings gallery, then down either side of a curved grand staircase to a lower gallery with green malachite columns. Lunch at 1:00 was in the cafeteria beyond this room. we went to the professors' serving line into the professors' dining room. It was good food at very low cost. The building is very nice, but awkward to navigate, since halls end with stair cases and other stair cases to access the same floor but further on.

VERY Soviet - the confusion was deliberate to confound the enemy.

The afternoon session divided the conference into two different groups: A Roundtable "Old," "New" and Future Histories of American Literature and a Panel "Culture Through Language." Bonny and I attended the second. We met in a fairly large conference room with a big rectangular table and other seating on the sides. Interesting presentations on the city in language; language changes; images of the street car whizzing, whizzing from the countryside to the city, etc.

Wednesday, May 15, 2013

Breakfast, as always at Kofe Haus because Bonny and I find it a pleasant place to start the day. This time I didn't have my usual blinchiki with salon, but rather mueseli with fruit, honey and yogurt. Delicious. As always beautifully and graciously presented and served. (Attention to style of the dish or plate according to the food; table setting; waitress' care in placing it before the customer). I love the cafes in Russia. (Why can't we do things a little more thoughtfully and tastefully in the U.S.?)

Our "Section 5" was to be subdivided into two sub groups because of the number of presenters, but they decided we would be able to be together since everyone was interested in all the topics. So we piled into the English seminary classroom already familiar to Bonny and me. It was hot the papers in the morning and afternoon sessions were numerous, but interesting enough to keep us all awake and thoroughly engaged. I did my presentation in the morning, and Bonny did hers in the afternoon. People seemed to find them very interesting and worthwhile. **No wonder Bonny is such a successful teacher - she is thoroughly engaging.** This by contrast with the speaking styles of some of the other presenters. **My topic: "Promoting Cross-Cultural Understanding and Appreciation Through Sister-City Sponsored Competitions for Young People. I described three Albany-Tula Alliance initiatives and what we have learned, while the power point Bonny had prepared provided background information, posters, and photos of two contest winners visiting Tula last September. Bonny's topic: "Russian Magic: An Arts-in-Education Program for American Middle School Students." Her power point demonstrated the "magic" those student achieved in story telling and creating a mural to represent Lukomorie, the city in the poem that opens Pushkin's fairy tale Ruslan and Ludmila.**

The afternoon ended with a plenary session in the large hall, and then

a reception in the reception room with the malachite columns. It featured beautifully presented zakuski, excellent wine, champagne and vodka. That was "dinner" for us.

Then Bonny and I took the metro to Tverskaya and walked down to Okhotny Ryad/Manezhnaya Ploshchad, with an extended stop along the way at a book store. Finally, really tired after a long, hot day, we returned to the dormitory for a good night's sleep.

Thursday, May 16, 2013

A last breakfast at Kofe Haus, this time an omelette with sections of a multi-grain roll. A representative from The Tula State Pedagogical University and driver arrived at 11:00, after being held up in traffic jams, but still in good time. We drove through more traffic jams straight through to Tula, not even wishing to make a rest stop. It was just wonderful to see Irina and visit with her on the ride. She found my stories of my early visit to the former Soviet Union, visa denials, adventures in Tbilisi, etc, interesting. She and Bonny think I should put some of this into a book. Maybe.... It does make one realize how very different Russia is from the country I first knew on this same territory.

Arrived at the familiar dormitory; it seemed like coming home. I tried too bravely to haul my two carry-on suitcases behind me toward the steps, but one wobbled and tripped me somehow. I fell flat down on my face. I knew I had hit it hard, but by some miracle nothing was broken: not my nose, not my cheekbone, not my glasses - or my left knee, which did receive a mild scrape and a developing bruise. However, once inside a cut over my right eye started to bleed. Bonny was scared and thought I might need stitches. It so happened that right next to the security desk is the entrance to a dental clinic that shares the building. Someone went and summoned a professional from the clinic, who took me right in, sat me on a chair, applied an antiseptic (colored green) and a discreet little flesh colored bandaid over it. She double checked with a colleague (maybe the dentist), who agreed that stitches would not be necessary. The black eye grew larger over the hours and the next day, and there was small black and blue mark under my lip and on my chin. But no pain whatever. No broken bones. Remembering the student I brought here in 2010 who developed a medical emergency and was well treated in visits to Tula professionals, I said to Irina, "You'll never want to host anyone from Albany again"! She was very

concerned, but certainly, like me, much relieved that I wouldn't have to go to a clinic. That episode was over in 15 minutes! We just had time to get our rooms, leave our bags (they had carried mine up to the suite on the second floor while I was being treated), and it was time to go to the dining room in the food service building for lunch at 3:00.

The table was set with a lovely first course of salad, bread, and a dessert cake. No one appeared and we hoped this was all. We were even ready to leave, but of course this wasn't all. When the dining room lady came by to see if we had appeared, she was chagrined that she hadn't realized that we were there. So of course she brought in a delicious borsch, followed by a lightly breaded chicken and fried potatoes. Of course we could hardly consume either course, again to her chagrin. And then there was a delicious dessert! We did our best, returned to the room for a moment, and then to the trolley stop to take the trolley that would go down Prospekt Leninina to Tula State University, turn left, and at the second stop after the turn put us right in front of the Restaurant "Lemon."

The "Lemon" is beautifully decorated, using the colors and images of the fruit. There we met the woman who manages the International Department of Tula State University, the Fullbright Fellow, Barnard College graduate, who has been in Tula for a year teaching English at TSU. We had absolutely delicious bliny with strawberries and a dollop of vanilla ice cream. We also had a lovely visit and did a bit of business for ATA. Sara has absolutely loved her year here and was trying to prolong her stay a bit past the late May departure. We walked to her dorm so she could lend Bonny a power cord that might fit Bonny's camera charger.

Then, at Sarah's advice, we took a marshrutka (a van) to a stop near the bottom of Prospekt Lenina. We went to the gift shop she suggested, but it was closed already (8:00PM), then on to the Kremlin to have a look through the gate, and the adjacent garden. We started back up Lenina, peeking into the Paradise shopping mall, and then continued our return journey. We walked and walked, and stopped at a cafe for something cold - ice cream and water. At 10:00 PM it was just starting to get dark. I thought we were fairly far along the street, since it was no longer a pronounced incline - and taking the trolley (finding the stop) was more of a bother than not. So on we walked. And walked. Stopped at a SPAR market to buy water - big bottles, and heavy. And walked. It may have been 11:00 when we finally arrived at the dorm, and midnight when I turned out the light after a bit of reading.

This turned out to be my usual bed time here.

Also the same pattern of waking up in the morning, a little after 6:00 a.m. Habit? (But this was not Albany time!) Maybe the sun. Anyway, for our precious few days in Russia 6-7 hours of sleep seemed fine and I remained full of energy until the dreadful departure day, when I had to awaken at 3:00 a.m. after only 3 hours of sleep. Funny, at home I seem to require 8 hours of sleep - at least in the dark and cold days of winter.

Friday, May 17, 2013

Breakfast (fish with melted cheese!), then **TSPU for Alliance business followed by a meeting with the combined English students.** It seems we were to conduct the 90-minute class. Никчего! We're pro's. Bonny used her energizing American style pedagogy to engage them by throwing out a discussion question and having them spend a minute discussing it in small neighboring groups. Then I called on different groups and asked some one to give an answer. We circulated among them, made eye contact, and wouldn't let them off the hook! The topics were mostly on culture, stereotypes, and history. Bonny had spoken of Samantha Smith, but these young people, born after the break-up of the Soviet Union, had no idea who she was. The one faculty member there, my friend from 2009, Nelli, was able to tell them how significant Samantha Smith was to her generation. Since Irina had suggested it, I gave them a few vignettes from my first visit in 1962, light years from their experience, a "different country" with a different name. There were some probing questions about "PC" (political correctness) in the U.S, especially feminism. One of the few young men, all in the back of the classroom, asked me if it was true that a man opening a door for a woman would be excoriated by the object of his courtesy. (I paraphrase!) I recalled that some of the scholars at the RSUH conference had spoken of demeaning or patronizing depictions of men in contemporary American literature. "To see ourselves as others see us"

After the class, as we walked down the hall, **Yanna Shalimova, one of the first Olympiad winners who came to Albany in 2011** called my name, and we joyfully embraced one another. She has one more year to go in the university.

In just a few minutes we departed with a car and driver for **School 3**. A warm, affectionate greeting from the Principal, Tamara Yurischeva, whom

our group had met in September. Lunch in the cafeteria was very noisy because of all the children, but they were well behaved. The baked goods, including piroshky, are made right there and everything was delicious: salad, soup, chicken, pasta, dessert, fruit. "We feed the children very well here," Tamara proudly declared. When the children left, a team of boys did the clean-up under the direction of cafeteria staff. Different groups have this assignment every day.

Then a tour, with student guides, appearing when summoned, poised, natural, comfortable, and all English speaking. One boy turned out to be Tamara's grandson. As Tamara says, she is the only one in the building who doesn't speak English! Every time I come I am impressed with what a loving, friendly, relaxed, welcoming place it is. A good meeting about possible future homestays for Albany young people, Skype class-to-class contact, website projects for Bonny's schools, etc. School 3 is very "like a private school," as some Tulans told me. It is located rather far from the center, however.

Next the driver took us to **Lyceum 4**. The principal is a wonderful young man whom I had met briefly in September when the Open World delegation met with Mary Emerson and me to talk about their October visit to Albany. I, of course, was away to Greece during that visit. He and his students and teachers in each level and department we visited were very welcoming and articulate. This school is state-of-the-art in sciences, arts, humanities, laboratories and creative studies, interdisciplinary studies. In the professional t.v. studio we each had to sit for a brief interview. We saw amazing equipment for robotics, physics, astronomy, etc., on both the lower and upper school levels. I could only wish my children had attended such a school. They are devoted to ecology and the environment. It turns out they are already studying their River Opa in much the same way as suggested by **Tech Valley High**, which is collecting and analyzing data on the Hudson.

We had to make our way slowly through bad rush hour traffic jams on our way to Elena Simonova's for dinner. **Elena is dean of the history and law departments at Tula Ped, and stayed with me for two weeks on 2011 when the Open World delegation was here** in Albany as well as the two winners of the first Olympiad, Yanna Shamilova and Zhenia Istomina. There they were at the door waiting for us, Elena, her friend Tatiana, and - big surprise - Sergey Pukhanov of TSU. He had expected to be in Moscow during our visit. Elena prepared a truly delicious meal: a cold shrimp dish,

various salads, including a Greek salad, then choice of baked chicken or pork from the oven and new potatoes. Sergey's mother had sent a marvelous chicken in aspic dish ("no one can make it like Sergey's mom") and mushrooms. The conversation was warm, animated, and funny - of course, with Sergey there.

Zhenia Istomina came to pick us up and drive to Prospekt Lenina, where we met Lena . We went on to our dorm for Bonny to change to her clothes for a bit of star gazing with Lena and their boss, who is an accomplished astronomer. (Lena is taking an on-line course in astronomy from Duke!). I opted for an 11:30 -12:00 bed time instead!

Saturday, May 18, 2013

Met Irina at the gate for the short taxi ride to the Travelers Cafe along Prospekt Lenina. We had a lovely breakfast, then walked down Lenina a bit, turned left and soon reached an entrance to Central Park that I hadn't know about. It is just past the **Albany Kino**, which I have seen from a different street side, but not from this angle. I gather it is a complex that includes nightclubs and other entertainment venues as well as the cinema. It was lovely to walk through the park with Irina till we met up with Lena, and to continue on with her. It was a big day in the park: the local site for the national "Green Marathon" as well as a volunteer clean-up day. I have noticed signs and billboards for a healthy life style and clean environment and ecology, reminders to be "green." I have even noticed some advertisements for nicotine patches, When I mentioned these new (to me) developments to Irina, she disagreed, saying the majority of Russians do not care about the environment or health and continue to smoke. Later Lena expressed a different point of view and finds a growing consciousness of these issues in the society,

We took a trolley to the new Museum of Arms and together with Zhenia, who arrived there when we did, made a short tour of all three floors. We most appreciated the art exhibit on the third floor! We also appreciated the shape of the building in the form of a traditional Russian medieval helmet. Tula, after all, has supplied Moscow with arms since the time of the Tatars, and its metallurgy was founded by Peter the Great.

Next stop: Yasnaya Polyana, the estate of Leo Tolstoy. Our walk through the grounds was an absolute delight to all our senses. The young

leaves on the apple trees and tall stately birches and lindens. The lilac bushes, giving off a beautiful fragrance. Near the house, the gardens with tulips and dusty millers and other flowers planted in artful patterns. In the woods the textures and patterns of leafy trees in varying shades of green, filtering and bathing in the afternoon sun. And, most wonderfully, the song of the nightingales - solovyei - heard for the first time in my life. They are heard only in early spring, the male singing to the female while she is sitting on her eggs. It is always moving to come to Tolstoy's grave site, but we didn't stay long because the mosquitos were ferocious. Afterwards we stopped at the railroad station where they brought Tolstoy's body home to its final resting place. It now houses a small museum.

Lena's mom was waiting for us with the table laid for "obed" (lunch) at 4:00. Lena brought some of the dishes, including grechnevaya (buckwheat) kasha. There was a vegetarian borsch, vinaigrette (minced beets and other vegetables), followed, of course, by tea and cookies and candies. Lena's father stopped by and joined us. He drew a map to show the best route to our next stop, Lena's dacha, and told us a couple of anecdotes about Tolstoy, whom he greatly admires.

Tanya and Lera were already at the dacha. It was so wonderful to see them.

The two "Katyas, mother and daughter, were there as well, both excellent English speakers. Young Katya, at her mother's urging, spoke French with me. She speaks well, and Zhenia, who joined in the conversation, older and more experienced with the language, speaks really beautifully. Katya prepared a Greek yogurt,grated cucumber and garlic dip for a delicious bread and sliced cucumbers. Lena had brought the wine bottles from lunch, so we had wine and soft drinks. while Tanya started the grill for her chicken pieces. Misha and his girl friend Zhenia arrived with shashlik for him to grill.

While the grilling was going on, we had a chance to look around outside. The gardens are already planted, many flowering, and the grounds looked lovely, thanks to Lena's mother, who still works at her job as well. We walked around the "block" to see the neighboring dachas, breathing in the peace and serenity, listening to the nightingales still singing in the late afternoon/early evening sunlight (it was past 7:00), breathing in the country fragrance. Back at the dacha, I could see the renovations they have made since my last visit in 2010. The walls and ceiling are knotty pine. There are

new curtains and other nice touches.

For dinner we crowded around the table on the enclosed porch. Lots of funny stories and lively conversation. I followed much of it better than in the past. But Katya really gave me a huge boost when she remarked on how much more fluent my spoken Russian has become than in 2010. That visit I was at the stage of language development where you take a couple of steps backward in disgust at your deficiencies - a sure sign of being on the threshold of the next level.

It was a wonderful visit with good friends, and we hated to bring it to an end. Dear Lena has gone out of her way to fulfill our every wish and make our one day together seem like a week's vacation.

But tomorrow was to be an early day and a long one. The driver said we must leave at 3:00 AM for Sheremetyevo, at the far end of Moscow from Tula. Katya, who is a medical intern in Moscow and knows the situation, said there would be no traffic jams early on a Sunday morning. She even called her father, who confirmed that and roared at the notion of such an early departure. They suggested 6:00 AM. Lena suggested 5:00. We called the driver and I negotiated a bit and got him to settle on 4:00.

Sunday, May 19, 2013

So 4:00 it was. We got up at 3:00 to be good and ready. No traffic. Easy ride. But as we approached the airport at about 7:00, the driver asked us which terminal, 1 or 2. Nothing in our documents gave any indication. We told hi we had taken the Aeroexpress train from the terminal into Moscow, so we headed for the building that had the Aeroexpress sign on the roof. It was the right one. Of course there was no one behind the Delta counter at 7:00, nor at 8:00. They finally opened up a little after 8:30.

This flight, like all the others on the trip, arrived at our destination on tim. But the old Delta terminal at JFK is a dirty, dingy, dilapidated, disgusting zoo. It was the same immense arrivals hall as on my return from Haiti. Enormous. Cattle lines. They gave us with connecting flights orange strips of paper ("one per party") saying "Quick Connect. Unfortunately the Passport Control booths were barely staffed, most of them empty, and our line did not move at all. Didn't they know there were incoming flights? The Delta personnel were worried, said they had called in more passport control officers. When they arrived they took their time opening up while we stood

in our "Quick Connect" line that didn't move. "Passive aggressive for being called in on a Sunday" one wag suggested. Or was this an effect of Congress' budget sequestration? Eventually we got through, and once through customs, we had to go to a different terminal. Used the inadequate, tiny elevator to go to the lower level, and found we were at an exit onto the street. An employee pushing a wheel chair told us we just needed to cross the street and go to the building on the other side. It was rainy and cold and we hadn't expected to have to put on outer wear, but we made it, and even made our connecting flight on time.

Off to Detroit, where the airport is clean and modern and efficient. Caught the connecting flight for Albany. Arrived on time at about 9:45 PM, and there was Jerry by the baggage carousel to meet me. But an ominous announcement stated that people whose baggage hadn't arrived should see the baggage claim people. The carousel was virtually empty. The baggage claim people figured it was because the flight from Detroit was on a new, earlier schedule, and the handlers there hadn't caught on. Well, our suitcases were delivered to our homes the next day, and all's well that ends well.

Now if only Delta at JFK could approach Sheremetyevo in Russia for beauty, convenience, and efficiency, the end of a perfect trip could be perfect as well. (I subsequently learned that they have opened a new terminal. Hope the old one will be razed.)

The afterglow from Yasnaya Polyana and the beloved company at the dacha will remain much more vivid memories than the Delta glitch.

