

## Chapter 5 – Birmingham, The Return

(1970 to 1973)

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*(16<sup>th</sup> March 2013 – Penang)*

## Back in Lancashire

By the day we left Cape Coast by bus for Accra for the last time, I was getting not a little anxious. Everyone in Adisadel College expected me to be back the next day, Pete and Mandy, the staff at the school, our cook, the dog, the cat..... but I would be thousands of miles away in London. Pete and Mandy would have to clear up the mess we had left behind and would probably never speak to us again. I was not a happy bunny. And to make my nervous state worse the headmaster, Mr. Povey, passed our bus in his car on the road to the capital. I had visions of this not ending well. We might bump into him on the street in Accra. After spending a day there, dining at the Lebanese restaurant for the last time, we boarded a late evening flight to London and it wasn't until we were flying 7 miles high, well over the Sahara, that I started to relax. Jenny couldn't understand my anxiety, she was not at all by our rushed departure. In fact, she was over the moon that we were finally out of there.

For the journey north to Bolton we hired a car at Heathrow airport, a VW Beetle, the first Beetle I had driven, and I resolved never to drive one ever again. It was uncontrollable in even the slightest back draft from lorries or from any large vehicle come to that. There hadn't been time to let anyone know that we were on the way home. The post took forever from Cape Coast to the UK and we would be arriving back home long before any letter would have reached Bolton. By early afternoon we were back in Queens Avenue in Bromley Cross knocking on the door of 122 which opened to a very surprised Fred. My Mum and Dad were away on holiday at the time, it being June and Darwen's holiday week. We would have to wait a couple of weeks to surprise them, although Mark would do for now.

Annie was clearly very ill. To see the change in her state of health over the last ten months whilst we were away was distressing. Fred, being a very resourceful man, was coping remarkably well but Jenny being back lifted both their spirits. We set up our base at their place although all we had was the contents of the two small suitcases we carried as it had been very much a pack and go departure from Ghana.

We stored the old Ford Pop before our African misadventure in Dad's old garage. Whilst we had been away, Mark had started to restore/repair it as a surprise for our return, which was good of him. Unfortunately, our unexpected early return meant the car wasn't serviceable, it being in a number of pieces on the garage floor, a fact that Jenny did not appreciate one little bit. But in a few days, with Mark's help we got the old girl back together again and Jenny forgave Mark for messing with our machine. We took him to the pub for a beer where Jenny drank him under the table, much to his surprise. I don't know what strength beer we had been drinking in Cape Coast but after ten months of consuming it, English bitter beer seemed like a soft drink.

We needed now to get some income. After a couple of visits to the Labour Exchange, the name for the Job Centre back then, I got a labouring job at the ICI plastics factory in Darwen. It meant working a three-shift system and me spending some nights sleeping at 105 to be able to cover the night shifts. But beggars cannot be choosers and as a sweetener, the money was quite good. Jenny would spend her time helping her Dad care for her Mum.

We soon got to implementing the plan we had devised before leaving Ghana. Jenny applied to the Mathematics Department at Birmingham University, as a research student under her favourite tutor there during her first-degree days, Professor Macbeth. He asked Jenny to stay on after her graduation in 1968 as a researcher. So, we weren't too surprised when he sent Jenny an invitation letter to join his department at the start of the next academic year, together with a grant application form.

That just left me to find some gainful employment in Birmingham to be able to contribute my fair share to our upkeep. Then it occurred to me that I might go for a doctorate too or at least a Masters. What is good for the goose is also good for the gander, right? And did I drop lucky! In the jobs section of the Sunday Times one weekend, the Centre for Russian and East European Studies (CREES) at the University was advertising for a mechanical engineer to join a multi disciplinary research team studying the Soviet's manufacturing industry. The first year would be spent in the Department of Engineering Production on a taught Masters which, if successfully completed, was followed by two years research as a member of the CREES team. Best yet, the UK Research Council fully funded the whole three years. This funding included not only the university fees but also an £880 per year grant to cover living expenses. They accepted my application on to the programme without interview. Sorted.

Soon after our return to the UK, I started, at times, to feel a little unwell. I put it down to some sort of alien bug that I had imported with me from our stay in Africa. The symptoms seemed very similar to those of malaria, which I thought I might have had a couple of bouts of whilst we were in Ghana. I ignored it until one night just before I was to go on a night shift, I collapsed in a heap on the living room floor of 105, much to Mum's consternation. I had been doing the shift system for six or seven weeks and it really wasn't doing me any good. I do need my beauty sleep. After this falling over episode, I decided to pack the job in at ICI and we would move to Birmingham early to set ourselves up for the start of the university's autumn term. We had saved enough money by now to put a deposit down on a flat. With the pure optimism of the young, we were confident of finding some temporary work in Birmingham to tide us over to September when our subsistence grants would appear in our bank account. Annie and Fred were well able to cope on their own by now, with support from family and Social Services. We would be only 90 odd miles south and with the opening of the M6 north bound from Birmingham, we would be able to visit Bromley Cross on a regular basis.

And so it was that we moved into 92 Lightwoods Hill in Smethwick, Birmingham. The flat was on the ground floor, a one bed apartment in a large three-story semi-detached house with the landlord and lady, Mr. and Mrs. Chreswell, living in the upper part of the house. The apartment had its own separate access at the back of the property and was at an easy commuting distance to the University campus in Edgbaston. This was to be our home for the next three years, the longest I had stayed at one address since leaving Darwen, five years before.

*(22nd March 2013 – Penang)*

## The Return to Birmingham

In a matter of just a few days after moving, both Jenny and I had found temporary employment. Jenny with her old employer, IBM, in Haigley Road and me as a supply teacher in Ladywood. Soon after settling ourselves into our new home, I decided that I had better go see a doctor to try and get to the bottom of the bad feelings I was still experiencing. A bad gut and, on occasion, wonky eyesight. But after tests for this that and the other, every test came back negative. In desperation the GP sent me to see a shrink, having ruled out any physical ailments, he concluded that my problem might be psychological, i.e. I was stressed. After two or three visits, he also ruled stress out as a cause for my mysterious symptoms. Well, I knew I wasn't stressed but I went with the flow anyway. By this time, it was well into Autumn and whatever it was that was giving me grief was slowly going away.



92, Lightwoods Hill, Warley. Our home for three years.

Let the body cure itself. And it did. Whatever it was causing the problems finally disappeared. Best medicine, no medicine.

It didn't take Jenny and I long to get back into the student routine of lectures and tutorials, expect in Jenny's case she was helping in the tutorials, and being paid for it, whereas I was the tutee, and paying for it. Well the government was. Although we had only left the university as graduates two years earlier, the undergrads now seemed so young to us. Jenny was very happy to be back in a university environment where she could spend her whole day dedicated to the art she loved so much, the art of pure mathematics. And she did see pure mathematics as an art form in the same way other people see music or sculpting as art. By contrast, my Masters

programme was a purely technical, lectured affair with periodic tests along the way. On the course with me were around fifty other men, no women, most of whom you could say were mature students, i.e. older than I. One of the younger members of the group, Geoff

Granddad Stories.

Southern became a good friend. He had graduated a couple of years earlier from Staffordshire Polytechnic, the place I would be joining fifteen years later as a lecturer.

Now that we were firmly established back in the UK, we picked up our friendship with Ruth again. During the time we had been in Ghana, not to be out done, Ruth had gone on an overland backpacking trip to India. Now she was working in Manchester as a teacher of English to immigrants newly arrived in the UK. Pete and Mandy had returned to the UK during the summer and had set up home in Stalybridge on the outskirts of Manchester. Mandy was pregnant with Sarah who was born in February the following year, 1971. Thankfully, they had forgiven us for leaving them in the lurch by our sudden departure from Cape Coast.

By the spring of 1971 Jenny's Mum's health had deteriorated markedly. Annie had been in and out of hospital a couple of times since we had been back in the UK, but the visits and treatments had little or no effect in slowing down the course of her Parkinson's Disease. It was also becoming apparent that she had a progressive dementia which also added to her woes. In May 1971 she died, aged 65. Jenny was devastated. She was very close with her Mum and she took her death very hard. Annie's ashes are in the St. Ann's Church yard in Turton to the north of Bolton where there is a memorial stone in her name in the remembrance garden.

(24<sup>th</sup> March 2013 – Penang)

## Post Grad Life



CREES, University of Birmingham.

Being on postgraduate programmes meant Jenny and I didn't have the luxury of the long between-term breaks that the undergrads enjoyed. The summer of '71 was given up to writing up and submitting our masters project reports. You have no idea how convoluted, producing four copies of a thesis was back then. With no PC or equivalent to create the original document with, you had to write it out by hand and employ someone to type it up for you on Banda paper (*go Google it!!!*) from which to make multiple copies. Very time consuming. (*I would not ever have*

*contemplated writing these Granddad stories with the processes available back then. I would have needed another lifetime to finish writing about the first!*) My project was to assess the state of the British machine tool industry as a prelude to undertaking a similar study, over the next two years, of the Soviets' industry. Whilst I graduated in November,

adding MSc. to my name, Jenny's award was held as insurance in case she didn't successfully complete and submit a PhD. research thesis.

I had been taking Russian language lessons during the taught masters but that had been my only contact with the CREES. From this second academic year on, I had an allocated desk in one of the CREES post-grad rooms and was expected to 'get on with it'. But the question remained for me, "get on with what?" My contact in CREES during the previous twelve months had been John Greyson and he now took on the roll of my research supervisor. After some thought, it became clear to both of us that attempting to access the whole of the Soviet machine tool industries workings in two years was going to be too tall an order. We decided between us to concentrate on just the sector that manufacture the small tools that the machines used. Small tools include such things as drills, reamers, lathe tools etc. but excluding press tools.

For the next twelve months, my days were very predicable. The day started at 9 am at the 'office' attempting to translate technical articles from Russian into English. From 10 to 11 am I was in the language lab listening to Russian language tapes. Then back to the office for more translating before meeting Jenny for lunch in the post-grad hut. The afternoon was almost a repeat pattern of the morning only broken by a coffee break, until Jenny and I met again to drive home together at the end of the day.

Of other researchers in CREES only two were engineers, one electrical and the other chemical. Their remit was similar to mine but for some strange reason we were not encouraged to collaborate and thereby support each other's efforts. This might have been very useful to us, since a lot of what we were trying to do must have had a good deal of overlap. The other researchers and members of the centre staff included sociologists, economists and political scientists, the main purpose of the centre being to study the Soviet's society. This was loosely based on the communist principles expounded by Karl Marx and Fredric Engels in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, of course, Russia and its Union of Soviets is seen by many as a failed experiment in how to run a country and its economy. But in 1972 the cold war was a reality that could not be ignored. Russia was viewed as a superpower to rival America and it was seen as an imperative to know as much as possible about our potential enemy. The Russians saw the UK as the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the US and therefore not to be trusted. So, were we spying? Well yes, I suppose so, but not in the James Bond sense we weren't. Our job was to collect intelligence and create a profile of the Soviet 'system' that would undoubtedly have been very useful to the government of the day in the case, God forbid, that we had actually gone to war with the Russians.

Any information I was able to glean about the manufacture of small tools in Russia came from open source materials, i.e. books and technical papers, published in Russia and was therefore very historically biased. There was, of course, no internet, it hadn't been invented yet, and therefore no Google. All the material I had to read came via the inter library loan scheme from the main library in Moscow. After I had done my best to translate it and I had

photocopied any interesting looking bits, I had to send it back there. Russian papers on technical subjects weren't accepted in the west at that time, so there was nothing on small tools related research. They were, in fact, busily copying western machine tool technology as I was soon to find out by a firsthand experience. Thinking about it today, how was this ever going to work? A fact finding visit to the factories in Russia was, it goes without saying, a big no no. Russia back then was as isolated as North Korea is today. Everything I could get my hands on to read must have passed through some kind of censoring process before the library in Moscow was allowed to send it, or not, to Birmingham. On top of which, all I was able to read was ancient history.

But back then it didn't cross my mind to question the wisdom of the enterprise to which I had signed up. Besides, there was another, very interesting side to all of this to distract me, Russian society. Because of CREES's reason to be, the research seminars and talks by invited speakers were concerned with the Soviet system of governance and how the Soviets economic system worked. All these gatherings I found very interesting. Also, once a month the head of the centre held a get together at his house where you had a chance to rub shoulders with all sorts of interesting people.

Occupying the desk next to mine in the post grad room was a young woman from Czechoslovakia. She had been on a student exchange to the UK in early 1968 at the time the Russians had invaded her country with tanks to put down a reformist movement. Led by Alexander Dubcek, people were demanding the liberalising of the Czech system of government. The Russians saw this movement as a threat to their influence over the country and took this drastic step to reassert their authority over the Czech people. My roommate's family advised her to stay in the UK, fearing that on her return home she would have been arrested and detained indefinitely as an enemy of the state. In our conversations, she gave me some sense of how it must feel living in an authoritarian state like Russia and its satellites at that time. We became good friends over the year she was in the centre, coming to Manchester with us on one occasion to visit Ruth in her new home there.

Back in the early 1970s computers were still quite primitive, all being main frames living in large air-conditioned rooms and programmes still loaded into the machines from cards or paper tapes. The personal computer was still a decade, the internet more than two decades away. The challenge I had to answer was how to store and be able to access all this information that I was gathering in any kind of useful and usable form. All the time and effort translating these texts would be wasted if I had no way of sorting the data I was accumulating. All I had was pen and paper, not even a typewriter. The other researchers used a card index system which helped to store information under a limited number of headings. Cross referencing them was not easy and had to be thought out very carefully as the card system was set up. From my experience using cards to load a FORTRAN programme on to a mainframe computer, I devised a way of using the same cards to store the 'bits' of information I was gathering from the translations I was doing. In effect, a

relational data base that could be sorted by the computer against any search criteria that I might choose. I must admit to being quietly pleased with the system I devised. In the end, I created thousands of cards but sadly the data base was never used in anger, the reason for which will soon become all too clear.

Meanwhile, Ruth had enrolled on a Masters programme for teaching English as a foreign language. Jenny and I would, on occasion, go visit and stay with her in her Salford flat and she would visit us in Lightwoods Hill every now and then. Peter and Mandy now had little Sarah and visits to stay with them in Stalybridge brought a new experience to both Jenny and me, living with an infant. And so, the academic year passed very quickly.

## Study Trip to Moscow

Every year CREES tried to arrange a visit to Moscow for the centre's research students. Depending on the political climate between the two superpowers, the USSR, and the USA, in a particular year, this may or may not happen. For this reason, the proposed trip for the summer of '72 was not confirmed until just a few weeks before we were scheduled to leave. But leave we did at the end of the summer term, all very exciting after a year with my nose stuck in books, to be out and seeing the subject of so much study up close and personal.

There were around ten of us in the group that left Birmingham by bus for Harwich to take the night ferry to Rotterdam. From there we boarded a Russian train to take us to Moscow via Berlin and Warsaw, a journey of some 60 hours.

Gek and I have recently returned from a two-winter stay in Mongolia which was once a satellite state of the Soviet Union under direct Russian control. I can tell you that the Russian style railway carriages that took us across the Gobi desert in 2008 had not changed much in design since the day I first boarded that Russian train in Rotterdam in 1972. Solid is a good word to describe them. In 1972, at the end of each carriage corridor there was a samovar, a Russian style water heater, fuelled by coal. They still have the samovar although they now use gas to heat the water.

In 1972 the Iron Curtain was very much still in place, dividing the west of Germany from the east of the country. People were being shot trying to move from the East to the West in the no man's land between the two states. Watch towers, a double row of high electrified wire fences with mine fields between, and machine gun emplacements deterred only the brave or fool hardy from making the attempt to 'escape' to the west. The train's border checkpoint on the East German side was manned by heavily armed officials who checked out all our bags looking for anything that could be deemed subversive to the Russian view of the world. We had been forewarned not to take certain known to be banned books or journals with us but still some of our party had their literature confiscated. Not very welcoming, you have to say, the officials all being very grim and po-faced. This was to be

repeated three more times as we crossed into and out of Berlin and finally at the Polish/Russian border.

By the time we were passing through West Berlin, it was late evening. There was no point in turning in for the night until we were across the border check point and back into East Berlin again. I can still clearly remember seeing a large Marks and Spencer's neon sign board high above their store in West Berlin. M&S in Germany struck me as very odd at the time, given that the Second World War was still a very vivid memory for many. It seemed to be a provocation to the Soviet's in the east of the city, shrouded in the dark as they were.

The following morning, we arrived in Warsaw and with much relief, we left the train for a couple of hours to walk around the station and its immediate surroundings. On the journey through the Polish countryside it was obvious that this was a very poor country. Not one tractor did we see working the fields, all the work being done by horses and people. Warsaw itself still had the scars of the war with many buildings pock-marked with shrapnel damage from bomb and shell bursts. At that time, you could still see damage on a few buildings in London from the blitz bombing, but here in Warsaw, every building seemed to be scarred. Pulling our train was a steam engine which had been exchanged from a diesel at the German border and would stay with us until we reached the Russian border where it was replaced by another diesel. All this gave the impression of a repressed state. Read the history of Poland and you can understand why the freedom movement started here in the 1980s, ultimately leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union and all it stood for.

At the Polish/Russian border there was another tour of inspection by another set of grim-faced officials. To our surprise, all the carriages were jacked up and their bogies replaced, as on the Russian side of the border the tracks had a wider gauge than on the European side. Whilst this swop was being effected, soldiers holding automatic weapons across their chests lined both side of the train, at 15 feet intervals. I was now seriously beginning to wonder how our five weeks stay in Moscow would pan out. Were all Russians so damned surly?

*(30<sup>th</sup> March 2013 – Penang)*

I need not have worried. Russians are amongst the most friendly and hospitable people on the planet, just not the ones that wear a uniform. Our group was accommodated by the Moscow State Language Institute in its students' accommodation, the students being away for the summer months vacation. A group of second year students at the Institute had stayed back to look after us and take advantage of meeting and practising their English on us. Any chance that we were going to learn any Russian from these guys soon evaporated. They hadn't met any native English speakers before, and they weren't going to let this opportunity escape them. They were learning English from tapes produced in America and they were not amused when it was pointed out that they all spoke with an American accent.

We were to spend the best part of 5 weeks in Moscow and the Institute had prepared a timetable of language lessons and events to keep us occupied. The mornings were given

over to the language lessons, afternoons to cultural visits and the evenings were our own to socialise with our new Russian friends. It wasn't long before we were all paired up with one or more Russian students, a self selection process that seemed to happen quite naturally. My own friends were Lena and Sergie. Lena was a wistful young woman who was very unhappy that her boyfriend had recently gone into the army for his national service and she hadn't heard from him for weeks. Sergie, in contrast, was a very happy go lucky chap, the sort who is really easy to get along with. He took me to see Moscow Dynamo play Kiev and came to Birmingham later in the year to stay with us in our Lightwoods Hill flat.

The language lessons were real hoot at times. The tutor insisted on peering into my mouth to see what my tongue was doing when I miss-pronounced anything she asked me to say. I found this rather intimidating and not to say alarming. Constantly being asked to put my tongue in the roof of my mouth and then say again whatever it was I was messing up. Given my total none talent at languages she was on a hiding to nothing, but she wouldn't give up on me. My research in Birmingham only required me to be able to read technical Russian, not master conversational Russian.

The afternoons were a relief from the language drill mistress and her very physical approach to getting you to learn, even if she was a very nice lady. One of our first afternoon cultural visits was to the Kremlin, to be shown around the magnificent palace reception rooms and the part taken over by the government apparatus for its offices. The Kremlin is always associated with the seat of the Russian government but, it is much more the old palace of the Tsars deposed by the Soviets in the 1917 revolution. The Tsars' tombs were still there in the palace chapels. On our visit, I noticed an old lady kissing the foot of one of the stone effigies carved a top a sarcophagus. As we were leaving the chapel, I expressed my surprise at what I had just witnessed to Lena and was told I must have been mistaken. No one would dare to do such a thing, not here in the Kremlin. The Soviets, notably under Stalin, had cracked down hard on anything that looked like reverence to the past or religion, notably the Russian Orthodox Church. For them there was only the socialist view with the ideal for Russia to eventually become a truly communist state in some distant future. There is no true record of the deaths caused by the intolerant Soviet Russians since the revolution, but it certainly numbers in the tens of millions. Well, that day in the Kremlin, somebody still did dare to resist the Soviets rhetoric. From then on, I started to look for the cracks in the projected Soviet view of a society united behind its leaders and quite happy with their lot.

## Away from Moscow

Our first trip out of Moscow was also an eye opener. At the city limits we had to produce our passports and the papers showing that we had permission to leave the city. The surprise was that our new Russian friends had to do the same. The government controlled the movement of its own citizens to the extent that you had to get state approval to move between certain parts of their own country. That was and still is a bizarre notion. Imagine

living in Manchester and, after getting a new job in London say, having to ask the government for permission to move there. A block on people moving must have had an impact on the economy and, perhaps more importantly, people's sense of freedom. A definite 1984'ism.

The objective of our escape from the city was to visit Leo Tolstoy's birthplace, the family estate in Yasnaya Polyana. It had been turned into a museum by the state. Although the Tolstoy family was part of the hated aristocracy, Leo's writings distinctly come down on the side of the common man and were tacitly approved by the Soviets. Twentieth century figures, Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King were greatly influenced in their reformist thinking by Leo's literary works. I had read Tolstoy during my undergrad days along with George Orwell's novels and it was good to see that our new Russian friends held Leo in such high esteem too.

Our second trip out of the city was to take us north to Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, which was still, at that time, allowed to train priest for the church. How it managed to survive when thousands of other churches and monasteries had been forcibly closed and destroyed with untold loss of life, is still unclear. I know from our time spent in Mongolia in 2006/8 that the Soviets would buck no truck with any religion. Of the four hundred or more Buddhist structures in the country in 1922, when the Russians marched across the border and took over Mongolia, only four remained seventy years later when they quit the country in 1992. Here came my second inkling that all was not as it seemed. We arrived at the monastery during a service and to my surprise Lena and Sergie were very reluctant to enter the chapel whilst it was in progress. They explained that they felt like intruders and didn't want to disturb or make the congregation feel uncomfortable. So, it seemed that my new friends were not going to be the States next generation of champions for centralised government control of everything and promoters of its propaganda. Interesting.

The visit to a machine tool factory in Moscow's industrial zone was yet another pause for thought moment, particularly for me as an engineer. I don't know if our hosts knew they had engineers in amongst their visitors since this factory visit was clearly meant to impress us with the Soviet's technology. Apart from the main factory's equipment being very old and worn, the so-called research section was clearly anything but, being more like an autopsy room. There were newly imported, modern machine tools from Japan, West Germany, the USA, and even England. They were all being methodically stripped down to reveal their inner workings and no doubt to be copied to make a Russian equivalent. Perhaps the Russians had copied the VC 10 after all and even Concorde, for the Russian supersonic jet had more than a passing resemblance to the French/English plane. We also had the opportunity to meet with some factory workers who expressed their disgust at our British government's actions in Northern Ireland. In 1969 the 'troubles' there started to get out of hand with the shooting of civilians in Belfast by the ill prepared British Para troop

Regiment. The Russians were very much on the side of the IRA and saw in us Brits as ruthless oppressors of the people of Ireland's rights. Humm.

I did manage to get in a few afternoons at the Moscow State Library, going through their catalogue and writing down the titles and codes of books that looked as if they may be of interest in my research work back in Birmingham. The plan was not to try and read them there but to request them to be sent to Birmingham via the inter library loan system after our return to the UK. It was bit of a boring and thankless task to be honest, particularly as Moscow was experiencing a heat wave at the time of our visit, with temperatures in the mid 30s deg C. Very uncomfortable.

I enjoyed the unscripted evenings and weekends the most. A small group of us became the bad boys and girls as it were of our party. Our new Russian mates took us on a river cruise and picnic by the river, visits to their dormitory blocks for the inevitable party and doing what students do in any culture, enjoy. I still feel that their friendship with each of us was genuine. On one occasion when we were chatting away on a crowded bus, they advised us to be careful what we said because you never knew who might be listening. This was a clear indication to me that they were ever mindful of the extensive use of informers by the Soviet intelligence services and they were trying to protect us, as well as themselves. Our new friends really knew how to let their hair down too, with lots of beer and vodka drinking, they being the only two alcohol beverages available in the very spartanly stocked stores. We westerners were unused to going to a supermarket and only seeing a choice between two cheeses on offer in the dairy section. There wasn't much of anything to be had and essentially no product choice. Plus, you had to queue for absolutely everything using a payment system I hadn't seen since shopping in the Co-op with my Mum in the 1950s. Moscow did have a State Store which was more akin to the western supermarket but only foreigners and Russians with a special privilege card could shop there. Needless to say, we were asked to get goodies for our partying there, which we did, as far as we could afford. Lena had a liking for Cinzanno, a bottle of which I bought for her as a thank you present before we left Moscow.

And leave we had too. After saying our goodbyes and exchanging addresses we boarded a train for Leningrad, today renamed to its original name of St. Petersburg.

*(2<sup>nd</sup> April 2013 – Penang)*

## **St. Petersburg and the Voyage to London**

St. Petersburg is a beautiful city. It was founded by Tsar Peter the Great in 1703 on the Neva delta where the river flows into the Gulf of Finland. It became the capital of his Russian empire. The Tsar Peter's buildings around the water fronts, create an impression of wealth and power, and are indeed very beautiful.

The first Russian revolution of 1905 against the Tsarist regime was triggered here by striking factory workers, amongst others, who were joined by mutinying sailors on the battleship Potemkin. The revolution was in part successful in that it led to the creation of a constitutional monarchy in Russia, but the workers' and peasants' gains were soon whittled away by successive oppressive governments. This lost opportunity to change the autocratic way Russians were governed led inevitably to the much bigger, bloodier but longer lasting revolution for change in 1917. This time round exiled communists returned from Europe to grab the levers of power and the rest, as they say, is history. But eventually after over 70 years of an even more brutal regime than the Tsars had had, this revolution failed its stated aim to create the ideal communist state and collapsed in 1992.

We visited the Hermitage Museum. What a stunning building. Founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great, it houses one of the largest and oldest museums in the world and has been open to the public since 1852. Its acquisitions, of which only a small part is on permanent display, comprises over three million items, including the largest collection of paintings in the world. You cannot help but be impressed. We also visited battleship *Avrora* moored on the river Neva which fired a series of blank shots, reportedly as a signal that triggered the October 1917 revolution. Britain supported the White Russian's, the revolutionary's opponents, attempts to crush the revolution, sending men and arms. But to no avail.

To have seen and experienced a small part of this vast country and its satellite states only served to whet my appetite for more. Having spent the previous year studying all aspects of the Russian story, this short trip brought the dry text in books to life. I resolved to be back.

But for now, it was home time. Our trip organisers had booked our return trip on a Russian ship which plied between St Petersburg and London, calling in at Helsinki on the way. A very small ship. By today's cruise ships standards, this was a tub. At Helsinki we had the opportunity to land for a couple of hours and visit the local market close by the docks. My, what a sight for sore eyes. Fruit and veggie of all kinds, with foods we hadn't seen for weeks and lots of it, all laid out on long rows of colourful stalls. This is when it hit me how everything in Russia seemed to be so grey, from the buildings to clothes people wore. Grey. This was the one and only stop over on the voyage and I suspect now that this was to give

Granddad Stories.

the ships cooks an opportunity to get their mitts on some decent fresh food of all kinds for our dining tables.

The leisurely cruise down the Baltic Sea was very pleasant indeed, sitting out on the deck sunning ourselves and chatting the days away. The sea was almost flat calm the whole Baltic stretch with hardly a movement of the ship to be noticed. And then we hit the North Sea. Within what seemed minutes the ship went from steady as you go to wildly plunging end to end with the propeller clearing the water on occasions. Sea sickness followed for most of us and stayed with us until we entered the Thames and the Tilbury docks in London. Our Russian tub which had no stabilizers, rocked and rolled all the way across a heavy North Sea swell. The joy we felt at entering the mouth of the river Thames and seeing land, cannot be adequately described in words. Pure relief.

Back to Birmingham and back to a researcher's routine. Jenny had been away with Prof. Macbeth to a math conference in Amsterdam for a week during the time I was away. The only communication we had had during the time I had been out of the country was a telegram I had sent from Moscow just before we left the city to say that we were on our way back and our ETA in Birmingham. We had a lot to catch up on after being six weeks apart.

*(3<sup>rd</sup> April 2013 – Penang)*

## **Sergie's Visit**

Soon after my return from Russia, I got a letter from Sergie to let me know he was now in Cambridge on a short summer language course at the university there. Of course, I made good on the offer I had made in Moscow for him to come stay with us in Birmingham if he was ever in the UK. Only he couldn't come on his own. He had to bring a minder with him. So it was that we had two guests in our flat over that late summer weekend, Sergie and his KGB (Russian Secret Service) minder. It wasn't unusual for the activities of Russian nationals travelling abroad to be monitored by the KGB. Sergie after all could expect to be posted to a Russian embassy anywhere on the planet as a translator of English. This was the intended career path for most of the students we had befriended at the Moscow Language Institute, highfliers all. So, he had to be seen to keep his nose clean.

The minder had an interesting story of his own to tell. He was a little older than Sergie and me and had been a navigator in the Russian air force before joining the KGB. He told us of his experiences testing the response times of the RAF to suspected hostile Russian aircraft approaching the UK from across the North Sea. The game was to take off in a fighter bomber from his base in Eastern Europe and head towards the UK to see how far they could get before being intercepted by RAF fighters sent to check out their intentions. I am guessing but the RAF was probably using the Lightning fighter for these interceptions at that time, of the type being developed by BAC during my year with the company. It did

become a bit of a game in the end according to our KGB man. After the Russian and RAF planes had met somewhere over the North Sea, the Russian and British pilots would wave to one another, aka Top Gun style, before breaking off the contact and heading back to their respective bases. A potentially deadly game of cat and mouse.

Knowing Sergie's passion for the beautiful game, I tried to find a football match for us to go watch, but it being still summer the only games, that I could find were between women's teams. Sergie was keen to go and watch one of these matches but the KGB man, he said "nyet". Women playing football was clearly too subverting for Sergie to see. Go figure. It was a little strange having to get the permission of the KGB every time I wanted to take Sergie somewhere but that was the Russian way back then. One thing he didn't object to was a visit to an English pub. I don't know what Sergie had been doing over the previous weeks in Cambridge but on this trip out to stay with us he had his first English beer in an English pub. And loved it. So different to the drinking bars you found in Moscow. Heavy drinking in Russia was and might still be a very real social problem. One of our group members had been picked up by the drinks wagon in Moscow after he had spent an evening with some drunken Siberian miners. The drinks wagons toured the Moscow streets in the night, picking up drunks who were incapable of standing unaided due to their binge drinking. Lying in the gutter comatosed by alcohol in the middle of a Russian winter is not good for your health. Sergie really appreciated the social atmosphere of the pub.....and the beer of course.

The last I heard of Sergie was that after graduating from the Moscow Language Institute, he had been posted to a factory somewhere in central Russia. I took this to mean that his open-minded world view was out of sync with his masters inward looking navel gazing. This was their way of side lining Sergie because he might cause trouble for the State if let loose abroad. A very real shame. Sergie had what it took to be a brilliant ambassador for his country and the narrow-minded Soviets lost the potential to capitalize on his very real talents. I will always remember him with great affection.

## Gathering Clouds

Another surprise was the arrival in Birmingham of my brother Mark. I had been encouraging him to apply for the same MSc. in Engineering Production that I had done in 1970/1, and much to my surprise he did. During his apprenticeship at Hargreaves in Bolton, Mark had been studying for a Higher National Diploma (HND) on the company's day release scheme, on completion of which he undertook a further year of study to reach degree level. This allowed him to apply successfully for a place on the Masters course. A very different route to his Masters from mine, his being via the vocational route and mine via the academic route. He was fortunate and managed to get a room for himself and his future wife Gail in the University's Postgraduate House. There was only one hall of residence specifically for postgraduates, and competition for a room there was very intense.

The university academic year started again in October, but I was already beavering away at my Russian translations. By interlibrary loan, I had managed to get a few the books I saw in the Moscow library during our summer trip. I also investigated the possibility of returning to Moscow the following year with a view to staying there for upwards of twelve months to further the work I had already done in CREES. My tentative plan was to go back in October 1973 after having spent the intervening months getting myself up to speed on how the Soviet's industry was organised. But all good plans of mice and men, etc.

By the end of the Autumn term I was beginning to feel distinctly unwell. It was difficult to define at first, a general feeling of unwellness but then I suddenly was unable to see. My eyes would become like a kaleidoscope, a dynamic one at that. This would happen completely out of the blue for no apparent reason and would last for several hours. After a couple of attacks, I sought the help of a doctor and following a series of inconclusive investigations as to their cause, I was hospitalised for a lumbar puncture. This procedure entails siphoning off fluid from your spinal cord for analysis in the lab, through a hollow needle inserted between two vertebrae in your lower back. Not at all a nice experience.

The verdict was that I had a very aggressive form of Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and the prognosis was not good. I was likely to die within the next nine months. Bugger, that's going to screw my plans up just a little.

But lying in my hospital bed in Birmingham nobody told me directly that I had MS never mind that I had only a few months to live. The houseman who was assigned by the consultant to follow up on the ward rounds to explain to me my diagnosed condition in more detail, mentioned in passing that perhaps I should keep my MS condition to myself. He thought it might upset the other patients on the ward who had similar symptoms to myself. I did not bat an eyelid. He had no idea that this was the first I had heard of the diagnosis. It was only later that Jenny told me the consultant had bottled telling me the bad news on the ward rounds. I had asked if my condition would improve enough by October so that I could still go to Russia as planned. He could hardly have said that there was no chance of that since I would likely be dead and buried by then. The nine-month part, I only learned about years later when Jenny and I were talking about old times. It certainly explains people's behaviour around me when I met them after I left the hospital. Well they do say ignorance is bliss. Bad enough to have MS, why add the bonus of 9 months to live to the mix?

This, of course, was a major game changer. What were we to do now? Both Jenny's and my interest in our research all but disappeared as we tried to come to terms with this new reality. Harder for Jenny, in that she had to deal with my possible early death on top of everything else. Our friends were very supportive particularly Geoff, who was still a regular visitor to our home, and of course Peter and Mandy. At that time, Peter and Mandy were in the middle of relocating to Wales where Peter had got a job as a computer engineer in the newly set up DVLA (Drivers and Vehicle Licensing Centre) in Moriston just outside Swansea.

When they heard our news, Peter took special leave to come to Birmingham and Mandy came down from Manchester where she was still living.

But time is the only page turner in this sort of situation. We had no idea how this would play out and for a couple of months we could only take each day as it came.

### **Memory Litter Bin.**

1. **Advertisement in Moscow cinema** - Whilst we were in Moscow, our hosts, the Russian language students, took us to a local cinema to see a Russian film which was completely lost on me, of course. Before the main feature, there was an advertisement extolling the virtues of drinking milk, as supplied by the Russian equivalent of the British Milk Marketing Board. I commented to our hosts that the advertisement used the same visual tricks and smooth dialogue as a 'western' advertisement extolling you to buy a particular brand of car or washing machine. Well, did I touch a raw nerve. I was told in no uncertain terms that the Russian milk advertisement was produced for the good of the 'masses' health and not to line the pockets of some fat cat capitalist. 'Oh yeah?' I was thinking, but kept my mouth shut.

## Notes

Since I clearly didn't die in 1973 and am still creating a wake 40 years later in 2013, I perhaps have a little explaining to do.

It is only relatively recently that I have learnt the most probable cause of the symptoms I had back in 1973 that were misread as those of MS. The bleak prognosis for my condition back then was based on the level of contamination the lumbar puncture test had shown in my spinal fluid, this being the only diagnostic for MS available at the time. Very cloudy is how the consultant described it at the time.

Searching the internet a few years ago now, for I cannot remember what, completely by accident I came upon a report on the adverse side effects of a drug marketed under the name of **Enterovioform**. This struck a chord with me as this had been the drug of choice we had used in Ghana to counter diarrhoea. Despite all our efforts in the food hygiene department, we all suffered from upset tummies on a regular basis, a bad case at least once in every month we were staying there. I had also taken the same drug to Russia with me, where the problem of food hygiene wasn't quite as bad as Africa but still not very good.

**Clioquinol**, the active component drug in the branded **Enterovioform** had been linked to a mysterious affliction that had affected more than 30,000 people in Japan beginning in 1953. 7% of these people had died. The reported symptoms in the article for the affliction were a very close match to those I suffered back in 1973. The condition was even given a name, SMON (subacute myelo-optic neuropathy). As a direct consequence of these nasty side effects, **Enterovioform** had been banned as an over-the-counter drug in Japan and the USA since 1970. **SO WHY NOT IN THE REST OF THE WORLD, Dumb, Dumb??????**

SMON was first observed and diagnosed in Sweden 1966, by the paediatrician and neurologist Olle Hansson. Clioquinol was marketed as a prophylaxis to tourist diarrhoea. Dr. Olle Hansson was in the front line, fighting for a ban on clioquinol. Doctors in many countries boycotted Ciba-Geigy for many years. Not until 1985 was the pharmaceutical withdrawn. Dr Hansson died a few months later. The day of his death, May 23, is observed as the Anti-Hazardous Drug Day in several parts of the world. (Wikipedia)

From 1973 for the next 17 years I was to have some serious side effects from taking a few pills. Today, whilst the effects of the drug still linger, they are nowhere near as debilitating as they were back in the 70's and 80's.

These days I take only Aspirin!!!! But always looking on the bright side of life, I am still alive and kicking

## Notes