

The Trans-Siberian Railway Journey 1974

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Chapter 1

Short History of the Trans-Siberian Railway

The omnipresent portrait of Lenin looked sternly over train number two while the ten chimes of the Kremlin pealed electronically over Moscow radio. The dim mid-morning winter light at Petrovsky-Zavod was barely visible through the thick shroud of coal smoke haze produced by the factories and houses of central Siberia. Moscow lay 5,790 kilometers away to the west and Khabarovsk, my destination, another 2,741 kilometers and thirty-six hours to the east.

This trip was made in 1974 during the days of the Soviet Union and individual travel was strictly controlled and monitored by the government agency "Intourist". In particular, railways were considered to be military assets and those foreigners who demonstrated a particular interest in in photographing these installations were often dealt with harshly by the police. I was to find out first – hand the intensity of officials' displeasure with photography in the vicinity of security installations.

When the Trans-Siberian line was built, between 1891 and 1904, construction standards were shoddy as unscrupulous contractors cut corners at every possible opportunity. Foreign railway experts who witnessed the building of the line marveled at the rate of construction; an average of 4 kilometers per day. However, they were appalled at the light weight of the rail, lack of adequate ballast (where it existed at all) and the very wide spacing of sleepers. All of these were inconsistent with safe railway practice. Much of the labor force was made up of political prisoners, who had not the slightest motivation to throw themselves enthusiastically at this project which was only to bring greater glory to the Czar. In many instances, tracks were built directly on the snow or on the surface of frozen rivers. Spring thaw necessitated a complete rebuild. The seemingly solid ground was actually frozen permafrost; springtime thaws could result in the swallowing up of long lengths of track literally overnight. Not surprisingly, derailments were nearly a daily occurrence, but owing to the low speed, fatalities were thankfully low.

The precise route of the line's construction was in the hands of local contractors, who never missed a chance to extort money from government officials in local towns and cities who wanted to ensure that the line would pass through their constituencies. One example of this practice is the city of Omsk, the largest and most important city in Siberia. The city's elders refused to pay the bribes to the contractor and, in fact, the city was by-passed. Moscow did not even notice this obvious omission until the line was complete. An expensive additional loop line had to be constructed, at the contractors' expense, and Omsk was finally on the line.

The Rossiya makes a total of 84 station stops between Yaroslavsky Station and Vladivostok. Below is the timetable taken by the author from the wall of one of the passenger coaches on Train #2.

Chapter 2

My Moscow Arrival and Near Disaster

During the early days of my railroad career, I worked in the offices of the Grand Trunk Western Railroad in Detroit. I had never been overseas up to this point and really had no great urge to “do Europe” or to visit popular tourist sites overseas. However, I had been fascinated with the Trans-Siberian Railway, stretching from Moscow to the Far East port city of Vladivostok and this proved to be tempting foreplay to kindling my desire to ride this train. As my research deepened the promise of a *Trans-Siberian* journey was becoming a stronger motivation. When I discovered that it had become possible for individual tourists to ride the route, I began to make arrangements. The only time available was during Christmas time. In mid-December, I boarded American Airlines from Detroit to Boston, then British Airways for London followed by touchdown on a snowy December evening at Moscow's Sheremetevo Airport. This first overseas trip was to change not only the geographic scope of my future travels, but implanted the irrepressible desire to live and work overseas. Six years later, that desire would become a reality, opening up future trips of a lifetime, and a lifetime of trips.

The journey began with the departure of the “Rossiya”, express train number 2, from Moscow's Yaroslavsky Station, on a grey, snowy December morning. I would continue to travel eastward on this historic line, finally alighting at Khabarovsk, the location where the line turns abruptly south for the port city of Vladivostok. Vladivostok (meaning “lord of the east”) was classified as a “closed city” to foreigners at that time, though transit to Japan was permitted by ship, but without spending the night in Vladivostok.

However, my trip near disaster on the first day. Travel to the Soviet Union was possible for an individual traveler however all itineraries had to be approved in advance by *Intourist* prior to the issuance of the visa. *Intourist* was the Soviet government travel service “responsible” for all foreigners in the country, and there was always a guide from this agency to shepherd travelers to and from airplanes and trains. It has been reported by some travelers that many of these agency people were really attached to the KGB in order to spy on foreigners while in the Soviet Union. The *Intourist* representative at the Berlin Hotel (Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin of JFK, was reputed to have slept here) had just dispatched me by taxi to Yaroslavsky Station, where we arrived at 9:30 am and said: “wait here and another *Intourist* representative will arrive to take you to the train and show you to your compartment”. As I stood alone in front of the station on that cold grey Moscow morning, time marched on and as my train departure time of 10:10 approached, I started to become anxious that my Trans-Siberian rail adventure would end before it started. Taking matters into my own hands, I ventured into the massive railway terminal looking for the track number of Train #2 the *Rossiya*. Finding the departure platform, I raced along the snowy platform to the train standing there, waiting to depart within a few minutes. Fortunately, that train was indeed the *Rossiya* and I quickly was ushered into my compartment (two persons, not segregated by sex) in the East German constructed “soft class” coach by the matronly train attendant. Exactly on the advertised, the string of red and green coaches began to

slide slowly through the station interlocking and into the Moscow suburbs, beginning of the longest railway journey in the world.

My initial feelings of anticipation and exhilaration for the long-awaited Trans-Siberian railway journey were more frequently turning to cold chills of regret and isolation as each day brought another long Siberian winter night (sunset just after 4 pm and sunrise at about 9 am) as the train rumbled eastward. I had just arrived in Moscow the previous day and my jet-lag insomnia of the nights and turned the days into a drowsy haze. There were no trans-continental paved roads and in the harsh climatic conditions, the railway is virtually the lifeline of Siberia.

The Russians claim that they have some of the highest traffic densities in the world on this line, with nearly 160 million gross tons per year over some of the double-track Trans-Siberian lines. Certainly the line between Omsk and Irkutsk could very well qualify for carrying these very high volumes, as opposing freight trains were observed nearly every 10 minutes.

The "Rossiya" was composed of hard and soft passenger coaches (equivalent roughly to "first" and "second" class), as well as several more spartan "Platskartny" coaches. Hard class coaches have either four or six bunks in each compartment, while the soft class coaches have only two berths per compartment. While soft class is definitely superior to hard class, it can hardly be described as "luxurious". The "Platzkartny" coaches were open plan, with 48 double deck bunks; the cheapest way to travel and with greatest demand.

If Russian trains are not luxurious, they usually did operate on time. Precisely at 10:10 on a snowy Moscow Sunday morning, the "Rossiya" slid out of Yaroslavsky station with seventeen passenger coaches, a restaurant car and a baggage van. The northeastern suburbs of Moscow were soon left behind as the long string of eastbound coaches dodged the many multiple unit electric commuter train sets along the multiple-track right-of-way and made for the Urals.

East of Danilov, where the line north to Murmansk branches off, the line becomes single track as far as the industrial city of Sverdlovsk on the eastern slopes of the Urals. Sverdlovsk is now known as Yekaterinberg, the old name used during the time of the Czars. This was where American U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was captured and held briefly in 1960, after it was revealed that he was, in fact, a pilot of the CIA – sponsored program of spying on the USSR.

From Moscow, there are actually four routes to the Urals, all meeting at Sverdlovsk. Speed was a consistent 85 - 90 kph, with both freight and passenger trains maintaining the same pace. The riding quality was rather rough, though track conditions improved considerably once the Urals were crossed.

Chapter 3

Crossing the Urals and into Asia

Crossing the Ural Mountains proved to be an anticlimactic event; I had imagined this historic geographic landform as a rugged barrier of snow and ice, reminiscent of scenes from *Dr Zhivago*. In reality, the railway crossing of the Urals was accomplished with easy gradients through a series of low hills, with the railway line gently rolling into and out of river valleys. The railway scenes in the movie were actually shot in Norway, so it is no wonder that the comparison was remote.

Each coach was heated by a coal-fired furnace, stoked constantly by the *provodnik* assigned to each coach. These *provodniks* were women who worked 12-hour shifts, during the entire seven-day run to Vladivostok. Coal supplies were replenished at stations enroute by means of an ancient 2-10-0 steam locomotive, chuffing along on the adjacent track, pushing a wooden gondola loaded with coal for the coaches. Two coal passers on the gondola would quickly exchange empty coal buckets for full ones at each coach doorway, without the necessity for the 2-10-0 to come to a complete stop.

Other duties of the *provodniks* included keeping the huge brass samovar going at full boil, providing a constant supply of tea for passengers. Served in glasses that were housed in silver frames with a handle this tea proved to be a refreshing interlude throughout the long journey. The *provodniks* also supervised the broadcasting of Moscow radio throughout the coach, as well as the occasional cassette tape. While the classical music was, at times, relaxing, the frequent news broadcasts, robust march music, along with occasional Russian comedy skits, proved to be an annoyance. While the volume could be slightly controlled within each compartment, there was no way to switch it off. In spite of the annoyance factor, I found that listening to the classical music was to become indelibly imprinted in my brain. After I returned home, to my surprise, I found that I had gained a love and appreciation for classical music. Ever since that time, my love for classical music only grew more intense and I began to enjoy classical music in the form of records, cassette tapes and later CD's as well as attending live performances. None of this would have happened without my involuntary "immersion" in classical music during that ride of the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1974.

After crossing the Urals, the next 24 hours were spent trundling across the great Siberian lowland, which is a large flat expanse of snow stretching to the horizon. The monotony was occasionally broken by groups of silver birch trees and log-house villages huddled close to the railway line as if for protection. Throughout the Soviet Union, the railway was the primary mode of transport. Across the lonely route through Siberia it is literally the lifeline of the vast region which lies east of the Urals, stretching all the way to the Mongolian and Chinese borders.

Novosibirsk is the most important traffic generating station on the Trans-Siberian line, located 3,300 kilometers east of Moscow. It is a major rail junction, with lines linking Tashkent and the Soviet Central Asian region meeting the main Trans-Siberian line. Upon closer inspection of the city, I found a museum, an opera house and an isolated

research institute called *Akademgorodok*, or Science City, located in the snowy hills beside the Ob River, some ten kilometers from the city, along the main rail link to Tashkent. During my subsequent years working in Central Asia, I met several engineers and scientists who were trained at *Akademgorodok* during the time I made my mid – winter journey.

Further eastward, towards Novosibirsk and Irkutsk, the *Rossiya* moved through areas of heavy snowfall, in fact, the heaviest seen during the entire trip. At no time, however, did the snow impede the operations of the railway. Armies of railway workers swept switch points with brooms and blasted the snow with high pressure air hoses; however, no switch heating devices of any kind were seen in operation. Throughout the Soviet Union, nearly all of the track maintenance workers seen were women.

Irkutsk to Khabarovsk and the Soviet Far East

The 3,347 lonely kilometers between Irkutsk and Khabarovsk generally follow a track north of but parallel to, the eastward-flowing Amur River which marks the boundary with China. Foreigners must make the 42-hour journey without stopovers, as there were no "open" *Intourist* towns along this route. This region is technically not Siberia but is known as the Soviet Far East. The largest town is Ulan Ude, close to the northern border of Mongolia, and the location where the line to Ulan Bator and Beijing branches off to the south. Further eastward at Karimskaya, another line diverts to Beijing via Harbin through what used to be Manchuria. This was the old route of the Chinese Eastern Railway, built by the Russians as a short cut through Chinese territory to the port of Vladivostok. Actually, it was more of an adventure in Russian imperialism that eventually led to an occupation of much of Manchuria. There are two direct trains between Moscow and Beijing, one via Mongolia and the other via Manchuria, with the Manchuria route taking one day longer.

Only a few months after its opening in 1903, the Chinese Eastern Railway came under threat from Japan, as that nation also had territorial designs on this region of northeast China. Czar Nicholas promptly began construction of the longer but strategically safe "Chinese avoiding line" north of the Amur River, eventually reaching Vladivostok entirely through Russian territory. This is the present Trans-Siberian line and is the most important and strategic rail line in the country. A few hundred kilometers to the north of this route lies the recently-completed Baikal Amur Magistral, or "BAM", which branches from the main Trans-Siberian route at Taishet, some 660 kilometers west of Irkutsk, and drives eastward to Khabarovsk. This new line generally runs about 500 kilometers north of the existing Trans-Siberian line. Its construction proved to be a long and difficult job, with permafrost as a base for track laying and temperatures hovering near minus 50 degrees centigrade in the winter, and summer heat brought humidity and armies of biting blackflies.

The Soviet government proclaimed the BAM as a crowning achievement of the communist regime. However, the project had been more than fifty years in development. The original BAM was proposed in the national five year plan in 1937, but the Second World War delayed its implementation. The project was never begun again in earnest until the decade of the 1970's. One of the problems was recruiting a

work force. Even with the incentive of five times the usual Russian wages and the much-publicized romantic notion of promoting the pioneering spirit in building the new Siberia among communist youth groups, construction workers were scarce. Most young Russians would rather be content with the limited comforts available in Moscow or Leningrad, and were not eager to subject themselves to the harsh environment of eastern Russia.

While there was a dining car on the *Rossiya*, with a lengthy menu, written in six languages, customers quickly find that only one or two dishes are available, usually small portion of dry beef or scrawny chicken with cold peas and thick black bread. Alcoholic drinks were usually only sweet wine and Russian beer. Vodka was actually not sold in the *Rossiya's* dining car in an attempt to reduce drunkenness on the railways. Public drunkenness was, and still is, a serious problem in Russia.

Many passengers, like me, soon found the long, cold walk through the icy blasts of winter air and blowing snow between the coaches for a small portion of disagreeable food could be avoided. The same disagreeable food could be brought directly to each compartment by food vendors who regularly pass through the coaches. This also provided opportunities for some amusing contacts with the vendors (who were all female), and were very interested in striking up a conversation with foreigners. These "conversations" must either be in Russian or sign language, as they spoke no English, although some German is understood by older generations. It was in such circumstances, I met Tanya Semenova.

Tanya would pass my open compartment door several times during each mealtime, and linger with typical curiosity in front of this foreigner traveling alone. Breaking the ice, I purchased some tasteless gruel from her and she immediately sat down in my compartment, without the benefit of an invitation. Our first stilted conversation lasted about 30 minutes, with the help of my phrase book, which we both regularly consulted. These visits were repeated during the course of the trip, to satisfy her curiosity about me as much as an excuse for her to temporarily abandon her job. This was at some risk to her personally, as even casual relationships between Soviet citizens and foreigners were officially forbidden and transgressions could be harshly punished. As the train approached Khabarovsk, the station where I would get off, I told her the date I would be in Moscow and she calculated that her return trip would be one day before I would arrive. We agreed to meet in Red Square at 2pm on that day. As the days went by, I would have my doubts as to whether this meeting would take place, but after many long lonely days and weeks traveling, I did eagerly anticipate some female companionship. However, from 2 to 4pm on the appointed date, I stood freezing in Red Square, accompanied only by my dull headache as a reminder of yesterday's champagne celebrating my last night on the train. Tanya never arrived.

Despite the six time zones in the Soviet Union, the railway was operated throughout the country in accordance with clocks set to Moscow time, creating quite a disparity between railway time and local time. According to the timetable, our arrival in Khabarovsk was at 3:53 in the afternoon (Moscow time); in reality, the local time in Khabarovsk would be nearly 10 pm.

Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the SZD (Sovietski Zhelosno Doroge), or Soviet Railways, was composed of 28 separate railway administrations, each with its own locomotives and rolling stock and produced nearly half of the world's railway ton kilometers. While these separate railways were administered independently, wagons, coaches and occasionally locomotives, are interchanged, retaining identification of the owning administration.

Chapter 4

Innocent Photography and Political Intrigues

My trip was made during the “cold war” between the Soviet Union and the West; missile tests and sites of nuclear weapons were particularly sensitive issues on both side of the “iron curtain”. I had several conversations with Misha, one of my traveling companions on the train (I spoke English and he spoke Russian). Misha was a military enthusiast of some sort, as he proffered maps and photographs of American missile installations across the United States in a Russian military magazine. Misha gleefully shouted “*America, America*” as he pointed out the many sensitive locations revealed in pages of maps and photographs in this “authentic” publication.

Officially, photography from the trains is forbidden, and I had to be extremely careful when I did so. All bridges and tunnels are heavily guarded. I did find some opportunities for photography from the safety of a private compartment, but the short winter days and low sun angle made good quality photography difficult from the train. Actually, many of these technically subversive photographs did not make it out of the country, as I was forced to hand them over to the KGB in Moscow.

This brush with the Soviet security system happened while I was making a close-up inspection of the *Lubyanka* in Moscow (the headquarters of the notorious KGB), a building described in my guide book as one of the highlights on a walking tour of Moscow. However, a plain-clothes KGB officer, who happened to be observing my activities, took exception to my photographing the big black iron gates through which countless Russian political prisoners were frog-marched on their one-way journeys to Siberia. I explained that this building was described in my guidebook and that photography of buildings in Moscow was permitted for tourists. I pleaded total ignorance, while he kept screaming: “*this building – army*”. Delaying the inevitable for only a few minutes, I was finally obliged to turn over the film in my offending camera to that officer for my transgression of Soviet protocol. But, not to worry, said the KGB official; I could easily buy a replacement film at a local department store. In fact, he wrote down the name of the film for me to hand to the department store attendant, and I was soon in possession of a new roll of 35 mm film. However, upon returning to my hotel room and opening the package, the new roll was immediately exposed to the light, as it was not connected to a metal spool and just fell onto the floor, unrolling itself.

Khabarovsk Arrival and Return to Moscow

I welcomed my arrival at Khabarovsk late in the evening (local time), and looked forward to the prospect of spending some days on stable ground. Khabarovsk was the most easterly city in Russia that foreigners were permitted to visit, unless traveling directly in transit to Japan. This transit travel to Japan could be accomplished by boarding an overnight train from Khabarovsk to the port city of Nakhodka (located some 50 kilometers east of the closed city of Vladivostok) with the connecting ship meeting the train, taking passengers to Yokahama and Hong Kong. A tempting idea, but this had to be saved for a later journey.

An interesting diversion during my few days' at Khabarovsk was a traditional troika ride through the heavy snow one morning, capped off with several paper cups' full of vodka drunk straight, as we enjoyed the brisk temperatures and heavy snowfall. By lunchtime my brain was drowned in the spirits and I was comatose for the remainder of the day.

After a few days in Khabarovsk, I returned to Irkutsk by plane, staying one night, then boarding the return journey of the *Rossiya* to Moscow. The flight to Irkutsk was by an ageing Aeroflot aircraft, operating several hours behind schedule. As a foreigner traveling at that time, I had a private waiting room at Khabarovsk airport where I sat in solitary confinement while awaiting the delayed departure of the Irkutsk – bound aircraft. Finally a large female appeared in the doorway of my waiting room and shouted: “boarding”! This female was to be my “guide” in showing me to my seat on the plane. My guide and I were then ushered into a private bus to the aircraft and then joined the rest of the Russian passengers who were boarding at the same time. As a foreigner I was granted the privilege of flying in the front row of seats, and this was accomplished by my “guide” literally shoving me to the front of the crowd waiting to board. Sitting uncomfortably in my cramped seat, I endured the three hour flight to Irkutsk. After a quick night's stay in Irkutsk I once again was boarding the *Rossiya* to Moscow.

My return rail journey to Moscow was uneventful, and on the last night out I decided to celebrate with a bottle of Russian champagne (Russians generally consider their own wines to be inferior to those from other countries - Bulgarian or Yugoslavian wines are preferred). As the bottle became empty, I switched out the compartment light and watched with a sense of increasing inebriation and elation, the dimly lit wooden houses on the icy, flat Siberian plain drifting slowly past the westward-rolling "Rossiya". I sank into a drunken oblivion.

As expected, the next morning my demon-filled head glared at the grey morning winter sky and the snowfields drifting past my window just east of Moscow. The sight of the snowy platforms at Yaroslavsky station was welcome after three weeks, mostly on the railway. The streets and buildings of Moscow, which were once new, strange and slightly frightening, were now a familiar and somehow comforting homecoming.

Chapter 5

My Final Days in Moscow

I spent my final couple of days in Moscow waiting for Tanya in Red Square (she never appeared) and exploring the city, including the incident while photographing the *Lubyanka*. Until I was safely on a plane out of Sheremetyevo Airport, I was in constant fear of another tap on my shoulder, asking me to explain why I took so many “illegal” photographs of railways. But that never happened either.

In retrospect, it was not a totally pleasant or comfortable trip. At times it became boring and occasionally with twinges of regret that I had not chosen a more conventional “holiday”. But even now, I still relish many of the sights and sensations felt during that, my first overseas venture. But, my 8,500 kilometer journey to Khabarovsk paled into insignificance compared with the trip made by a North Vietnamese whom I met during a tour of the Kremlin in Moscow. He was looking forward to boarding train number 8 from Yaroslavsky Station, to travel all the way to Hanoi, by way of Peking. According to my reading of the Russian railway timetable, which showed all of the international connections, my Vietnamese comrade would finally drag himself out of his hard class bunk in Hanoi (11,000 kilometers) at 9:35 pm on the 11th night after leaving Moscow. Russian trains have no shower facilities.

But still, the idea to make a similar journey has intrigued me ever since; in time, peace would come to Viet Nam and individual travel in that region would become a possibility. The seed was now planted indelibly in my mind to make that journey – someday – or maybe to just repeat the Trans-Siberian adventure and compare with my journey so many years ago.