

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Volume 3, Number 5

Living in Moscow

What is it like to live in Moscow, not as a privileged diplomat or guest but as an ordinary Muscovite? That is what Marshall and Colette Shulman learned when they lived in the Soviet capital for three months early this year while Marshall was a visiting scholar at the Institute for USA and Canada. They related their experiences to Harriman Institute students and faculty October 24, 1989.

Both scholars are long-time observers of the Soviet Union. Marshall Shulman was Director of the Harriman Institute and Associate Director of Harvard's Russian Research Center, and was Soviet adviser to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance during the Carter administration. Colette Shulman served as Moscow correspondent for UPI and has for many years been an independent scholar and journalist. Although both had been to the Soviet Union many times over the past few decades, this was the first time either had lived the life of an average Soviet for an extended period of time.

Life With No Phone

Colette Shulman described the experience as a "day-by-day accumulation of impressions that helps turn head-learning into something you can feel in your gut." The couple discovered what it was like to live in a Soviet apartment, shop for produce, and take public transportation every day. And they had to get accustomed to living without something that is considered a necessity in the United States — a telephone.

Without a phone, they found themselves, like the average Muscovite, religiously watching *Vremya*, the evening news show. It was an example of the immense power of Soviet television "plugging people into the political process," she said. "I'll never forget one of the candidates, Alexander Bailinson, a doctor, saying to an audience of millions, 'If anyone had told me a year ago that I would be saying these things to you on television, I would have sent that person to a psychiatrist.'"

Living in Moscow gave them a close-up view of the spring election campaign, which was "a real high to see."

Colette found it exhilarating to hear people asking blunt questions about the Party, the KGB, Afghanistan, increasing poverty and other previously forbidden subjects. She noted that "these questions came not only from educated folk, but also from working folk."

Moving Moments

Colette mentioned several moments as being emblematic: young scientists in the Academy of Sciences explaining why they would vote for Andrei Sakharov for the Congress of People's Deputies; Boris Yeltsin railing, "expressing resentment against the apparatus and radicalizing the debate week by week"; agricultural expert Yuri Chernichenko saying that it is "a scandal and shame that the country cannot feed itself" and is trading non-renewable Soviet resources like oil for renewable American resources like grain; the voice of a woman in a small town voting for a candidate who promised to reduce the number of women working night shift at the factory.

"For me," Colette said, "this election campaign of the spring was an affirmation of the potential for democracy over there." One of the most moving times for her was a Khrushchev memorial attended mostly by people too young to remember him. "I felt a great sense of tragedy" that Khrushchev's reforms were not continued under Brezhnev, she said. Pollution, harm to the infrastructure, the drop in educational standards, and the decline of family stability "are the terrible costs of those twenty years of stagnation." The costs — material and spiritual — were especially great for young people who grew up under Brezhnev. Many of them became cynical. There is an attitude of "we're going to take what we can get now," which has led to an increase in social ills, such as crime and prostitution.

It is not only the young who are cynical, though. On her most recent trip to the USSR, just a few days before the talk, Colette was struck "by the decline in people's mood towards gloom and doom. There is a real sense of hopelessness." When they lived in Moscow, she was surprised at the extent of private criticism of Gorbachev, especially of his



THE W. AVERELL HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY OF THE SOVIET UNION
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY • 420 West 118th Street • 12th Floor • New York, New York 10027

political maneuvering between liberal and conservative positions. Even more, "on the whole there is a very deep sense that it's too complex for any one Gorbachev to handle," a feeling compounded by the general impression that Party bureaucrats are corrupt and connected to organized crime. Thus "people are thinking in terms of alternative structures, alternative parties, alternative trade unions."

Surge of Resentment

When Marshall Shulman took the floor, he began by noting that he had been to the USSR thirty-five to forty times, but always within the "international community, traveling around in official cars, or to a conference, where one is essentially within a cocoon." He said that actually living there made him more conscious of the complexity and volatility of events, and of the ways in which "the developments are cross-cutting."

He told how he figured out some of the tricks of surviving in Moscow. For instance, he was having trouble hailing taxis until he started to clutch a pack of Marlboros in his palm while he held up his hand, "and — wham! — the cars would come screeching to a halt." And he came to understand the bitterness of ordinary Soviets. One day he was riding in a bus when a big limousine pulled up beside it, and as he witnessed the easy life of the privileged bureaucrat, he said, "I felt my gorge rising." He would get the same gut feeling when he could not find something in a food store, although he knew it was hidden under the counter, awaiting the right customer and the right deal. Marshall recalled that once when Colette was in a store while a shipment of goods came in, she overheard a saleswoman calling the store's favored customers to tell them.

The difficulty of living on their 350 ruble a month stipend — which is far more than the average Soviet worker makes — gave them a new appreciation of the hardships of Soviet life. Marshall came to see the sacrifice made by Russian friends who invited them over for dinner. Preparing such a meal meant waiting in lines for hours as well as incurring great cost, since it is possible to spend a whole month's food budget during one trip to an open peasant market. He mentioned that pensioners receive an average of sixty rubles monthly from the state and added, "I don't see how anyone could live on a pensioner's salary."

Despite these difficulties, it was a fascinating time to be in Moscow. The elections were very exciting to witness, especially considering the dynamic and catalytic nature of the floor debates, which were carried live on national television. Marshall explained: "We have many friends there, people at all points on the spectrum, ranging from people who are well within the establishment in positions of responsibility... over to dissidents and refuseniks. What was interesting to me was that this process inflamed not only the liberal reformers but also the people whom we had known over the years as thorough-going conformists. People who I would not have noted had ever entertained an unconventional thought suddenly were shaken by the experience of listening to the floor debates and the kinds of questions that were asked."

For many of the Soviets Marshall knew, the compromises and accommodations that they have made for so long "suddenly came to seem intolerable." To characterize this situation, he quoted author Czeslaw Milosz: "You could swallow a frog. You could probably even swallow two frogs. But sooner or later you'll throw up."

Reported by Paul Lerner

Harriman Institute
Columbia University
420 West 118th Street
New York NY 10027