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# SUNDAY IN IRKUTSK

## IS NOT AS BAD AS IT SOUNDS . . .

By DONALD KIMELMAN

**I**T WAS NEARLY 6 A.M., 54 HOURS since we set out together from Moscow and only an hour before we were to go our separate ways, when Alek rendered his judgment.

The train was passing through western Siberia's Barabinskaya Steppe, a snow-covered flatland that seemed even colder and emptier than the star-studded night sky that stretched above it. Our two traveling companions — Shurik and Vitya — had succumbed to drink and the late hour and lay sound asleep on the two upper berths of the four-person compartment. It had fallen to us to finish off the tepid white wine and close out the journey, for me the first long leg in a 5,300-mile train trip eastward across the breadth of the Soviet Union.

A big, sloppy-looking man of 31, his easy grin made ragged by the absence of two left front teeth, Alek had been the dominant voice in this trio of Soviets who had spent two days and three nights in the constant company of the first American any of them had ever met. During political arguments, he generally spoke for the others. Whenever the conversation dragged, he brought us back to life with a few selections from a seemingly endless repertoire of off-color jokes.

A Muscovite, he felt he knew more of the world than the two Siberians and constantly drew from his former wife's experience with Westerners, as a guide and translator for Intourist, the huge Soviet tourist agency. At one point, when the others were out of the compartment, he had confided that he had more in common with me than with them.

Now, he had something important and confidential to say to me. We sat face-to-face on the two lower berths of the dimly lighted compartment, the small plastic-covered table jutting out from the wall overflowing with the detritus of the journey — empty bottles and stale slices of bread, crumpled paper, soiled flatware and a fish tin filled with cigarette butts.

Our time together had been interesting and enjoyable, Alek began, leaning forward and fixing me with his pale green eyes. I had proved to be an *khoroшы paren*, a good guy. But he had concluded, beyond a doubt, that I was an undercover operative for the CIA, that, as he put it, "that big salary of yours is coming from Langley."

I looked to see whether he was smiling, but he was dead serious. This man who had been my card partner and bunkmate, who had given me his jackknife as a gift when mine had disappeared, who just seconds before had clicked cups with me for about the 100th time in this besotted voyage, was accusing me of being a spy.

He outlined his case. In political discussions, I had consistently taken a "provocative," anti-Soviet stand, particularly in my criticisms of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and the destruction of the South Korean jetliner. When we were passing through Omsk, one of many cities

closed to foreigners, I had asked Shurik, a marine mechanic from Novosibirsk, what kind of industry they have there. Even my style as a chess player, he said, betrayed a carefully masked cleverness.

"I don't think you work for the CIA," he said in conclusion. "I'm sure of it."

I spluttered out my defense — how journalists in the United States had nothing to do with the CIA, how the CIA has satellite photographs of every square foot of Omsk and does not need me to ask train travelers from other cities about the local industry, how it saddened me that he was too poisoned by his government's propaganda to accept me for what I am. "This is typical Soviet paranoia," I huffed.

"It's not paranoia," he snapped back. "It's realism. All of us, from the time we are children" — here he held out his hand, palm down, to show just how small these children are — "are raised to believe in and support the motherland and to be vigilant against those who would destroy it. This is exactly what makes our country great, the greatest in the world."

At his insistence, I agreed that the Soviet Union was a great country, then asked whether he would agree that the United States was a great country as well. Yes, he said, America was great, but the U.S.S.R. was greater. Taking the schoolyard argument to its conclusion, I proclaimed that the United States was, in fact, greater. Here, he smiled and offered his hand in a kind of truce. He topped off the cups and clicked them once again.

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"I'm telling you this because I like you," he said. "Don't ask those kinds of questions later in your trip. These Siberians don't fool around. They will report you at the first stop, and you'll end up spending eight years in prison. By not reporting you myself, I'm risking five years."

THE IDEA FOR THIS TRIP HAD COME TO ME ON a sleepless night six months before. After more than a year as a correspondent in the Soviet Union, I was feeling frustrated that I had seen so little of the country and had had no more than a half dozen serious conversations with ordinary Soviets. For the Moscow correspondent, who lives and works in special foreigners' complexes under the constant vigilance of uniformed sentries, the Soviets who enter your life tend to be either propagandists or dissidents.

Seen from a distance — uncommunicative faces on the street or in the subway — the Soviet people become an abstraction. They are the compliant masses, the warm-hearted but unquestioning pawns of the elite that runs the country. And a myth is created: good people, bad system — as if one had almost nothing to do with the other. Yet, even the darkest view of KGB intimidation and constant political indoctrination did not sufficiently explain how so many people over so great a territory remained so utterly in line with their unelected rulers.

It also struck me that Americans, in particular, have a hard time being dispassionate about the Soviets. In times of tension, the Soviet Union becomes a caricature of evil. As soon as the threat subsides, we rush to the conclusion that these are people just like us and that there is no sane reason for hostility.

With these muddled thoughts in mind, I decided to ride the world's longest railway — the Trans-Siberian from Moscow across seven time zones to the far eastern city of Khabarovsk. (The train continues on to the Pacific port of Vladivostok, but that is closed to foreigners.) The trip, not counting two overnight stops, would take more than seven days — ample time to talk at length, and in the most relaxed possible atmosphere, with other travelers.

The idea worked. People were forthcoming and curious and grew increasingly relaxed as our time together wore on. They made a good cross section — workers, scientists, teachers, a low-level bureaucrat, two high-level bureaucrats, a factory supervisor. We shared food and drink, played chess and cards, delved into personal problems and family histories.

In the beginning, I periodically encouraged the conversations to take a political turn. In the end, I tried without success to avoid it. With one exception — a man I met during a stopover in Novosibirsk — the pattern was invariably the same: me against them, each side armed with not only its own set of unshakable opinions but also its own set of facts. When I was ready to call it quits, they often were not. I had to be convinced. I had to see it their way.

In the end, I was convinced — convinced that the gulf between us was unbridgeable, that our best hope, at this stage of history, is a polite standoff. The idealistic notion that if we just got to know each other better it would bring down the barriers of suspicion seemed sadly naive. I was also convinced that the party elite who run this country enjoy stronger support than most Westerners would like to think. It may be that people here are not as passionate about building Communism as they were in the years following the Revolution, but the ones I met had an abiding faith in the rightness of the system and its prospects for the future. It was not surprising, perhaps, that everyone felt obliged to take a strictly orthodox line in conversation with a Western journalist, but the intensity of their arguments went beyond the call of duty.

It struck me that the Party's need to monopolize information and to present a strictly partisan view of the world satisfied the public's most basic need as well. People here do not want to question. They want to believe. And in that shared determination, there is strength.

## M onday, Nov. 12

Trains for Siberia leave from Moscow's Yaroslavl station, about two miles northeast of the Kremlin.

I arrived there an hour before train time on an icy, late fall evening and installed myself in a waiting room with oak benches, marble walls and high, wood-framed, arched windows. The room was crowded with warmly but crudely dressed people. There were more bundles

than suitcases. Mixed with the Russian faces were the faces of the Asian provinces. A soldier, one of several dozen in the room, sat playing a guitar while his companions, in their olive-brown greatcoats, stood round. An old woman kneeled before a pretty child in a fur hat and massaged her tired feet.

The train that would take me the first 2,000 miles to Novosibirsk, where I would make the first overnight break in my journey, was called the *Siberyak*, the Siberian. Its entire crew was made up of Siberians, just as the express train to Estonia is manned by Estonians and the train to Armenia by Armenians, a source here of ethnic pride in a country that considers itself an amalgam of homelands for different national groups.

My second-class ticket entitled me to a vinyl-upholstered bunk in a "hard-class" wagon, made up of nine separate compartments with four berths each. (First-class or "soft-class" wagons are identically laid out but have only two berths per compartment. The third-class, *platskartny* wagons have partitions instead of closed compartments and two additional tiers of bunks running down the aisle, 58 people stacked in one pungent box.)

Living arrangements depend on the harmony within the compartment, as each person has exclusive right to his own bunk. During waking hours, the occupants of the top bunks can sit at ground level only through dispensation from their neighbors below. In our case, these protocol matters never came up. Shurik, Vitya and Alek were all men in their early 30s who established an immediate rapport and then quickly included me in the gang. They were pleased that no old peasant women or babies would ruin the atmosphere in the compartment. Shurik, blond and wiry with a reddish mustache and a shortage of teeth, shut the door and immediately lit up one of his strong *papiros*, cheerfully violating the ironclad rule against smoking in the compartments. The rest of us followed suit, and the conspiracy was sealed.

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Introductions were made, and all expressed amazement that the Russian-speaking foreigner was, in fact, an American. "We now have an international compartment," Shurik said with delight. He reached into a bag stored below the seat and brought out two bottles of Russian beer, which has more than twice the alcohol content of American beer. I produced a loaf of bread and a salami, and Alek dramatically snapped open his Samsonite attache case and pulled out a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka and four plastic cups decorated with cartoon animals. Vitya, who had come with the least provisions, chortled at his good fortune.

Thus began the kind of drunken evening that Soviets treasure as part of their national heritage. The two bottles of beer went first, then 2½ bottles of vodka, gulped down by the cupful amid toasts to our acquaintance and the journey ahead. Small talk prevailed. The two Siberians, showing a Texan-like pride in a region that the state has to pay people extra to populate, bragged about the superb climate of their region, with its dry, cold winters and hot summers, which they professed to find invigorating.

At some point, when both Siberians were out of the compartment, Alek asked me which of them seemed more interesting. Too early to say, I replied. He then gave his analysis, which turned out to be on the money. Vitya, a bearded young man in jeans and a flannel shirt, was typical of his breed throughout the Soviet Union. He worked in a scientific institute in Novosibirsk, Siberia's largest city, studying the noise levels of mining equipment. Shurik, on the other hand, was something special — the true Siberian, rugged and

untamed like the land itself. For Alek, a supply officer in the Moscow-based construction ministry, sharing a compartment with him was akin to a Washington bureaucrat's bunking with a real cowboy.

Shurik's life, in fact, was not on the range but on the river, the mighty Ob, which runs about 2,000 miles from Novosibirsk through Siberia's northern wilds to the Arctic Ocean. In the six months when the river was navigable, he worked as a mechanic on a ship designed to measure the river's depths and currents. When the river froze in October, he was free until the following January, when it was time to begin readying the ship for the spring. During much of his long holiday — he had just spent 10 days with an uncle in Riga — he drank. This was his pleasure, he said, making sure the cups were never empty for long, and he wanted us to share it with him.

Toward the end of the night, Shurik, who had been half-drunken when he got on the train, somehow put his hand through the window of the door at the end of the wagon. He came back waving his bloody hand with the conductor hard behind him. A pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman who looked like she had seen far worse things in her time, the conductor efficiently cleaned and bandaged the wounds without a word of reproach for Shurik or his now obviously drunken pals. Shurik curled up behind Alek and passed out, and the party continued until I lurched down the hall and threw up. The last thing I remembered was Vitya solicitously covering me with a blanket and coaxing me to lie with my head near the window rather than by the door, as the latter position brought bad luck.

## Tuesday, Nov. 13

Everyone was hung over except Shurik, who woke bright and chipper and proceeded to organize our recovery. This involved brown bread and chicken soup for breakfast in the dining car and a curative shot of vodka that Vitya and I firmly refused. An alliance of the lily-livered had been formed.

We spent the day napping and reading and playing cards. Alek produced a deck that was minus all deuces, threes, fours and fives, and I was instructed in the basics of *durak* — the word means "fool" in Russian — a game as widely known here as poker or gin rummy back home.

It was nearly dark by 4 p.m., as we had lost an hour in our passage east. The time change went unmarked, a peculiarity of the Soviet transportation system. All planes and trains operate on Moscow time, and the clocks in the local airports and train stations are set accordingly. Under the czars, all railroads ran on St. Petersburg time.

As we revived, Alek and the others fired a salvo of questions at me about America, measuring my response against the dire reports in the Soviet press. We talked about crime, racism, unemployment, the cost of housing, the cost of education, wages and taxes. I asked them whether they thought that President Reagan was another Hitler, as Soviet propagandists had bitterly suggested last spring. No, said Alek, he was just following the dictates of his political party.

The concept that seemed hardest for them to accept

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was the absolute tolerance of American society for any citizen who decides, for whatever reasons, to pack up the family and move overseas. In the Soviet Union, Shurik said, there is a word to describe those who opt for life in the West: *traitors*.

Shurik then started in on the thorniest topic. Why were Americans so hostile to the Soviet Union? The arms race, he said, was an American invention, with the Soviets always playing catch-up. Now, the Americans had taken the competition into cruise missiles, which were difficult to count and thus hard to limit. The next contest would be in outer space, with each new generation of weapons decreasing response time and increasing the likelihood of an accidental war.

And Shurik proclaimed: "You won't find a single person in this country who will say 'I want war.' Not one. Can that be said of America?"

This refrain, which usually includes an account of the suffering of the last war, comes up so often in conversations between Soviets and Americans that Americans here quickly become hardened to it. Why is it assumed that we are itching for a nuclear showdown? Shurik was utterly sincere, and yet I could not help but wonder: With this political system's ability to justify aggression in the name of higher principles, would Shurik and his like-minded compatriots ever balk at supporting an invasion of Europe done in the name of protecting the motherland and guaranteeing a lasting peace?

Alek closed the discussion with a message for me to pass on to the President: "Tell Ronnie we're not hooligans."

The train had arrived at Perm, an industrial city in the Ural Mountains. It was time to take a walk along the platform, to breathe the frosty air and watch the yard workers, nearly all of them women, move from wagon to wagon, knocking the ice off the undercarriage.

WHEN WE GOT BACK TO THE COMPARTMENT after dinner, I led off with a provocative question: Whose leadership did they prefer, Kostantin Chernenko, or his late predecessor Yuri Andropov?

They avoided the invitation to compare the two men but leaped to praise Andropov as an intelligent and

forceful leader with a clear vision of how to make the country run better. Conversations throughout the trip would echo those sentiments, showing the extent to which Andropov has become a revered figure since his death a year ago. Things had unraveled toward the end of Brezhnev's 18-year rule, everyone agreed. Andropov set things moving in the right direction, and Chernenko is following through on his programs. No great reforms are needed, Alek said, just better organization and discipline.

The conversation moved into the state of the Soviet economy and immediately took a querulous turn. Alek disputed my contention that the high degree of centralization made it impossible to ever efficiently produce the vast and changing array of goods that consumers require. The Soviet system is the most efficient in the world, he argued, with all resources correctly distributed. The lack of coordination in capitalist economies, he said, leads to tremendous waste.

As for the chronic shortages of everything from car parts to toilet paper, that was a function of prosperity; Soviet citizens are better off than they ever were and want things faster than the economy can produce

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them. All three of them took the line that the Soviet Union is still playing catch-up from World War II, that the United States did not have to undergo such massive reconstruction.

As we argued over the state of the Soviet economy, the train had reached the puny 1,345-foot summit of the gently sloping Urals and had begun the gradual downhill slide toward the Siberian steppe. The transition is marked by a white obelisk alongside the track, with *Europe* inscribed on one side and *Asia* on the other.

Somehow, we got back on the subject of crime, and I was relieved to have something positive to say about the Soviet Union. In Moscow, I told them, I allow my 7-year-old son to roam free for hours among the alleys and apartment blocks of my Moscow neighborhood, something I would never do in any big American city. Alek asked whether it were true that in American drugstores, pornography is displayed so that any child can see it. I said that it depended on the community but that the proliferation of pornography had provoked bitter controversy in America.

Now, I was annoyed. "Why is it that I can criticize my country, and you won't say a word against yours?"

Alek looked wounded. "I criticize my country, too," he said. "There is too much speculation [black-market trading] and corruption." Then he added: "But corruption is worse in the West."

Shurik decided that the argument had gone far enough. He poured four glasses of vodka — token amounts for the still-wobbly Vitya and me — and proposed a toast to "mutual understanding." This we all gladly endorsed.

**W**ednesday, Nov. 14

My first view of Siberia, on awakening the next morning, was disappointing in its ordinariness — a

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patchwork of woods and fields with an occasional wooden house.

The prosaic landscape reminded me that the greatness of Siberia is not its terrain but its nearly unfathomable size. George Kennan, cousin of the famous diplomat and author of a classic 19th-century work on the Siberian exile system, summed it up for all time. "You could take the United States of America," Kennan wrote in 1891, "... and set it down in the middle of Siberia, without touching anywhere the boundaries of the latter territory. You could then take Alaska and all the states of Europe ... and fit them into the remaining margin like the pieces of a dissected map ... [and even then] you would still have more than 300,000 square miles of Siberian territory to spare."

The cruel genius of exiling people to Siberia stemmed from the territory's size and climate. Prisoners who escaped in the spring could not hope to make it out of Siberia before the following winter. By fall, they had to turn themselves in or freeze to death. The April thaw revealed the preserved corpses of those who failed to heed this natural law. They were known colloquially as "snow flowers." On this late November day, the temperature outside was minus 15 degrees Fahrenheit.

In one field, a tractor seemed to be busily plowing snow. Shurik explained that the driver was redistributing the drifts so that they would evenly irrigate the soil during the spring thaw.

In the dining car, where the tables had red-checked cloths and live potted geraniums, the juice and mineral water was already gone. But the chef had made a tasty borsch, as well as meatballs and gravy with kasha. Back in the wagon, I was impressed by how conditions were not allowed to deteriorate as the hours wore on. The two female conductors, working opposite shifts round the clock, were continually cleaning and vacuuming. The toilets — the great dread of the squeamish traveler — were nearly immaculate. This proved true all the way through the trip.

DUSK BROUGHT DRINK AND MORE SERIOUS talk. Vietnam vs. Afghanistan this time. We all agreed that the United States erred in becoming so deeply involved in Vietnam's internal strife. My three companions could not say the same of the Soviet role in Afghanistan.

First of all, Alek said, it was not a war at all. If it was a real war, the Soviets would have won long ago. He repeated the party line, that Soviet troops had been invited into the country by its government, that they were combating CIA-backed banditry and terrorism. Only the *dushmari* — the guerrilla bandits — were killing civilians.

Instead of the standard Western estimate of Soviet troop strength in Afghanistan, 100,000 men, my traveling companions believed the number to be between 6,000 and 10,000. The Soviet destruction of KAL Flight 007 was another predictable sore point. They rejected all notions of pilot error or unwarranted brutality, arguing that the airliner was unquestionably on a spy mission and that the blood of its victims was on the hands of the CIA.

This well-worn argument was mercifully interrupted by a 20-minute stop in the big industrial city of Omsk, where Shurik, Vitya and I found an open supermarket and bought wine for our final evening together. When we got back into the wagon, the radio was broadcasting news from Moscow. It told of another successful test of the United States' new air-launched anti-satellite missile. "That's it," Shurik exclaimed, punching a fist into

his hand. "The arms race has now moved into space. Previously, it was just talk. Now it's for real."

Vitya, feeling bad for me, noted that the system was still in its testing phase and that real deployment had not yet begun.

We quickly dropped politics and settled down to an all-night drinking bout. Alek, who had the fleshy, expressive face of a young Charles Laughton, was his most uproarious, telling joke after joke. They agreed that it had been a stroke of good fortune to spend these days with a real American. "We can say we not only met an American," Shurik said, "but touched him." Here, he pressed a finger against my knee.

"And he didn't have horns," I replied to laughing affirmation.

"And I hope you will say the same about us," Shurik said, "that we are a peaceful people."

This spirit of brotherhood and good cheer lasted through most of the night, until Shurik and Vitya had nodded off. That's when Alek accused me of being a spy.

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**T**hursday, Nov. 15

For the tourist in search of Siberian color and lore, Novosibirsk is well worth missing. The region's de facto capital is a sprawling, modern city with 1.5 million inhabitants. The general impression is of wide, wind-swept avenues and soulless blocks of drab apartment buildings.

I went directly from the train to the Central Hotel and slept until midafternoon. Shurik and Vitya had given me their phone numbers and offered to show me the town. As my liver was not ready for another bout with Shurik, I phoned and woke up Vitya, who agreed to meet me in front of the hotel at 4 p.m.

He was clearly nervous as we walked down one of the main avenues, trying to figure out a program for the evening. Perhaps he was wondering whether he had taken this relationship with an American correspondent — a dread breed that the Soviet newspapers are forever warning the citizenry to avoid — a step too far. He stopped at a phone booth to call an old friend, Misha, a teacher at a local institute whom Vitya described as intelligent and well-connected. Vitya said the man had phoned him by chance earlier that afternoon and had now agreed to meet us on the street in 10 minutes.

It was my turn to be suspicious. My original phone

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call to Vitya had probably been monitored, and now the KGB, which routinely tails correspondents when they venture out of Moscow, had assigned a watchdog to monopolize my time in Novosibirsk. Meeting Misha only added to my suspicion. A youngish 40, he was tall, well-built, self-assured and strikingly handsome — fitting the up-to-date image of the handpicked elite of the modern KGB. He was wearing a synthetic brown suit, orange shirt and wide, striped tie. When he asked me what kind of people I wanted to meet and, in particular, whether I wanted to meet any women, sirens went off inside my head. A honey trap no less. I told him that women were not the priority and to introduce me to anyone he considered interesting.

I was to spend much of the next 24 hours with Misha. He turned out to be the only person I met on the trip who was willing to forthrightly discuss some of the country's deficiencies. In the end, I decided to accept him at face value but was intrigued by the possibility that the KGB had sent him my way to show that there were a few people out there in the hinterlands who could think for themselves.

We went to a nearby cafe for dinner and then, at Misha's suggestion, to the apartment of a young woman who had a good job with a government agency. That the woman, Vera, had her own well-furnished apartment near the center of the city was proof of special status. Not only did she have a prestigious job, but also her father was a leading scientific figure with influence to spare. Over coffee and cognac, she talked of her two trips to Western Europe, most recently an 18-day summer cruise that had taken her to England, France and Denmark.

Misha, too, had twice been abroad and had hoped in 1984 to finagle his way into the local group that was to have gone to Los Angeles to see the Olympic Games. His dream, he said, was to watch Carl Lewis — "the greatest athlete in the world" — perform.

After Vitya, pleading fatigue, had headed home, Misha turned the subject to politics but unlike the trio on the train was willing to speculate about the strengths and weaknesses of various members of the leadership. Unlike Alek, Misha felt that major economic reforms were needed if the Soviet economy was ever to operate efficiently.

In general, Misha had more questions than answers. He wanted to know details of the case of Andrei Sakharov, the exiled human-rights leader, and of the situation with Jewish refuseniks in Moscow. Did I think the Soviets could ever win in Afghanistan? He said he was disappointed by Reagan's re-election but thought that a Reagan-Chernenko summit was inevitable and that relations would improve. "All this arguing over missiles, on both sides, is mostly a question of prestige," he said.

Vera listened intently through all of this but kept silent. She seemed more comfortable when we went on to the safer subject of life in Siberia. Misha, she said, was a crack hunter, known for his shooting skill. At our urging, he told how he and a few friends went out into the steppe most winter weekends to hunt deer, sleeping in the car with the motor running.

Misha and Vera agreed that Novosibirsk was not the real Siberia and that they admired friends who had taken temporary jobs in more rugged communities farther north and then settled there for good. Vera told of a girlfriend in the isolated oil town of Surgut, who brags that she can hail a passing helicopter the way someone in Novosibirsk might hail a cab.

The evening broke up at 1 a.m., and Misha walked me back toward the hotel along Krasny Prospekt (Red

Avenue), the city's main boulevard. Snow squeaked underfoot, and a half moon was rising in a clear, starry sky. We agreed to meet the following day for a trip to Akademgorodok, the campus-like headquarters of the Soviet academy of sciences' prestigious Siberian branch.

## Friday, Nov. 16

Just before lunchtime, Misha showed up with an affable fellow teacher in a green Soviet jeep they had borrowed from a geology institute. We drove out of the city for about 20 miles, following the route of the frozen Ob much of the way, and turned into the piny confines of Akademgorodok.

The buildings were widely spaced along wide boulevards and their architecture prosaic. But the two men were reverential as they pointed out each center of study in turn — nuclear physics, geology, computers, economics and so on. In those drab-looking buildings, leading scholars and scientists whose names are bandied about in the Soviet Union like home-run kings, lead the effort to unlock and exploit Siberia's elusive natural riches.

Over lunch in a seedy hotel built for visiting scholars, Misha seemed to be having his own second thoughts about befriending me. When his friend told a mildly irreverent political joke, he remarked, "Careful or Donald will write that the intelligentsia in Novosibirsk is anti-Soviet."

But toward the end of the meal, he leaned forward and asked in a low voice how I felt about the very concept of the Soviet Union, the incorporation of a wide array of nationalities under what amounted to Russian sovereignty. Did I think the various ethnic republics should have their independence?

It was not a simple question, I answered. I had been to Armenia and found general satisfaction with Soviet rule. In Estonia and Lithuania, I had found resentment but resigned acceptance. Eastern Europe presented more difficult problems. In Poland, I said, people are outwardly contemptuous of Soviet rule and will probably never reconcile themselves to it. What was his opinion of Soviet domination there?

His voice dropped another notch. Poland, he said, should be neutral and independent: "Not yours and not ours."

I NEEDED SOME SORT OF RESPITE BEFORE boarding the train again late that night and found it at the ballet. Novosibirsk's ballet company is considered to be one of the best in the country, good enough to tour abroad. But on this night, it was performing Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* for the locals — the ornate opera hall filled with the faces of common people who had paid a pittance to view so much highly trained talent and beauty.

It took a revolution to make that scene possible, and sitting there, I understood why people here still believe in their workers' state. I have the same feeling when seeing befuddled-looking laborers boarding an Aeroflot jet for a \$30, thousand-mile ride through the stratosphere.

An hour after the ballet ended, I was aboard the

Rossiya. Named after the motherland itself, this was the premier train on the Trans-Siberian Railway, instantly distinguishable from all the others by its shiny, blood-red wagons. My next destination was Irkutsk, a mere 33 hours and 1,148 miles away.

## Saturday, Nov. 17

In the morning, an elderly couple who had been there when I got on board left our compartment, and I waited, half-asleep in my bunk, to see who would replace them. To my surprise, a handsome young man in a naval officer's uniform came in with another man in street clothes. He gave me a friendly greeting that promised good conversation in the hours ahead.

The feeling was short-lived. The two men had just finished hanging up their coats and stowing their bags when the conductor called them outside. I overheard him telling them that the compartment was reserved for Intourist passengers. They quickly gathered their belongings and moved on. Since the same conductor then assigned the empty berths to two Soviet civilians, I could only presume that somewhere in his instructions was a proviso not to mix military personnel with foreigners.

The landscape was getting hillier and more wooded as we were entering the lower reaches of the taiga. It could have been Vermont or New Hampshire. A man was climbing a snow-covered hill in a horse-drawn sledge, the lowered ears of his fur hat flapping like a puppy's ears. At various points along the way, the train ran parallel to an ice-covered two-lane road that I took to be the still-primitive heir to the notorious Siberian Trakt. Until the railroad was built, the only way to cross Siberia was a brutal journey by horse-drawn sled or wagon over this frontier trail. The mud was two-feet deep in spring, the dust nearly that thick in summer.

Crossing Siberia in the summer of 1885, George Kennan gave this description of the Trakt: "Even where the road was comparatively hard, it had been cut into deep ruts by thousands of freight wagons; the attempts that had been made here and there to improve it by throwing tree trunks helter-skelter into the sloughs and quagmires had only rendered it worse, and the swaying, banging, and plunging of the *tarantass* [a primitive carriage] were something frightful. An American stagecoach would have gone to pieces on such a road before it made a single station."

Over lunch in the Rossiya's dining car, I was reading of the woolly adventures of earlier travelers, when an acrimonious scene brought me back to Soviet-era reality. At some point in the middle of the lunch hour, the waitress in charge started turning people away and began setting up the emptying tables for a still-absent tourist group. Most people wordlessly accepted this verdict, but four strapping young men sat themselves down at one of the tables and demanded to be served.

The waitress shrieked at them that this was a prestige dining car where tourists had precedence.

"We're Siberians," one of the men shouted back. "Isn't that good enough?"

"There's another restaurant for workers," she replied, "and you are workers."

I toyed with my coffee in the hope of getting a look at this pack of tourists who were so blithely unaware of the battle being waged to give them an empty dining car. I imagined a wagonload of big-spending Japanese secreted away at the far end of the train.

To the contrary, the tourists turned out to be a group of young workers who were building the new Baikal-Amur railroad through the frozen wilderness of eastern Siberia, the kind of passengers you might expect to find packed like sardines in the lowly *platskartny* wagon. But they were returning from a package tour of East Germany and, until they were delivered safely to their bleak settlements, they retained their status as tourists, privileged customers of the special dining car.

THE TWO MEN WHO joined me in my compartment boarded at a town called Tayshet. They were confident, prosperous-looking men in their early 40s, administrators with the Ministry of Railroad Construction. They had arrived in Tayshet that morning for a few hours of consultation followed by a four-hour dinner that had both of them reeling from the farewell toasts.

Sasha, a sandy-haired man with an outsize belly, explained that a number of years ago, he had lived for a year in Nizhneudinsk — a town a few hours up the line from Tayshet — supervising construction of a factory that built modular housing for the new towns going up along the Baikal-Amur railway line. This trip amounted to a follow-up, and he moaned that life on the road was not as much fun as it had been in his youth. While he was still welcomed as a returning son in Nizhneudinsk, all the women he had wooed had gotten married.

Volodya, his traveling companion, had a full head of gray hair and a face that could have ridden with the golden horde of Genghis Khan. He was born in Astrakhan, at the mouth of the Volga, and said he had no idea just where his "eastern" features had come from. He considered himself Russian and believed that Russia (he never referred to the Soviet Union) was the "greatest country in the world."

Both men considered themselves successful. They had city apartments and country dachas and had enrolled their grown children in institutes that virtually guaranteed them comfortable professional jobs in the same ministry where their fathers worked. Volodya, who had a pretty second wife and a new baby (he showed photographs of both), was brimming with self-satisfaction, while Sasha was mourning his passing into sedentary middle age. He told wist-

ful tales from his days as a merchant sailor in his early 20s.

We moved into the corridor as the train passed through Nizhneudinsk, so Sasha could point out the factory he had helped to build. Then we trundled into bed.

## Sunday, Nov. 18

Sunday in Irkutsk was not as bad as it sounds. The town has a colorful, albeit violent, history — reminiscent of America's frontier outposts.

Founded in 1661 as a transit hub for the east-west overland trade, Irkutsk came into its full glory after the east Siberia gold discovery in the first half of the 19th century. Its bars and brothels were patronized by Russian gold miners and Chinese gold smugglers, along with fur traders, tea merchants, exiles, former convicts and other less classifiable fortune seekers. Rich merchants and successful prospectors built mansions along pitted, unpaved streets. Wooden sidewalks were laid over open sewers.

Travelers at the end of the century said the town was averaging a murder a day, mostly by robbers who would garrote their victims under cover of night. Bolder thieves in horse-drawn sledges took advantage of daytime blizzards to lasso lone pedestrians and drag them into deserted alleys.

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The narrow streets in the center of town are paved now and safe to walk on, but the sense of old Irkutsk is still there in the elaborately trimmed wooden houses along the side streets and in the turn-of-the-century mansions that have been reborn as government buildings. On this sunny Sunday, hundreds of people of all ages, snugly dressed in bulky woolen coats and fur hats, were promenading along the banks of the swift-flowing Angara River, talking and laughing among themselves. The only frenetic activity was a fierce, schoolboy hockey game on an iced-over street in the middle of town.

At one end of town stood a memorial to the war dead, a marble platform with an eternal flame in its center. Four sentries stood at stiff attention at each side of the flame, all of them schoolchildren just entering their teens. Boys and girls alike were dressed as soldiers in heavy suede overcoats with white belts and black boots, although the girls had big white bows under their blue fur hats. Each carried a scaled-down model of an automatic weapon. Every 15 minutes, a new team would appear from around the corner, marching in a slow, ceremonial goosestep and, with pomp and precision, would assume the places of the retiring detachment.

## Monday, Nov. 19

The last leg of the journey was the longest, nearly three full days of travel along the Mongolian and Chinese borders to Khabarovsk. At 9:30 a.m., I boarded wagon number one of the next day's Rossiya, feeling refreshed and ready for new encounters. But my most immediate interest was touristic.

Two hours out of Irkutsk, the train descended to the southwest shore of Lake Baikal. The lake, which occupies a mountain crevasse, is 395 miles long and, at its broadest point, 50 miles wide. But most impressive is its depth, more than a mile at the maximum point. It is the deepest lake in the world, a reservoir for roughly one-sixth of the world's fresh water.

The terrain surrounding it was so rough that the railroad engineers originally decided to cross it by ferry rather than to circumvent it. A 290-foot ice-breaking marvel, called the Baikal, was constructed in Britain, disassembled and shipped east to be reassembled on the lake shore. It proved a spectacular failure. Storms with waves as high as 16 feet, impenetrable

fog and winter ice up to six feet thick made the ferry and a smaller sister ship virtually useless most of the year.

Lake Baikal was in a benign mood when we edged alongside it just outside the mica-mining village of Shudyanka. The lake's water is known throughout the country for its clarity and pure taste — they say you can drop in a coin and watch it fall to a depth of 130 feet — and when we made an unscheduled stop 100 feet from its shore, a half dozen young men slid down a snowy embankment to fill up empty bottles. Valentin, the day-shift conductor in our wagon, ran down to the lake for my benefit and came back with a glassful of Baikal's finest. It tasted, alas, like water.

AT THIS POINT IN THE trip, I had only one bunkmate, a 31-year-old geologist, named Volodya. He had brought his own tasty, home-cooked lunch of boiled potatoes, beets, and cabbage and carrot salad that he gladly shared with me, pushing potatoes the way Shurik the boatman had pushed cups full of vodka. Volodya was slim and handsome to the point of prettiness.

In the course of the afternoon, we were joined by Valery, also 31, a teacher at an institute in Irkutsk that trains professionals to work with automated electric urban mass transportation. A slim, fair-haired man with a mustache and high brow, Valery had packed along a huge chess set and was in search of a game. He was wearing the

standard-issue blue jogging suit. A number of people, upon boarding the train, had donned pajamas and bathrobes and would stay that way until getting off. A more stylish alternative was the jogging suit. Roughly one-fifth of the men aboard were wearing nearly identical royal-blue jogging outfits with white stripes down the pantlegs and sleeves.

Valentin the conductor popped his head in at one point — we had given up chess for chatter — and decreed that Valery should move from the neighboring compartment to ours. He said he did such rearranging all the time to create more compatible groups, and the three of us seemed to have formed a nice "club."

By nightfall, the train had passed Ulan-Ude, capital city for Siberia's once-nomadic Buryat tribes. I was now closer to the Chinese capital than to my final Soviet destination. Nearly half the passengers on this last border-hugging stretch were fresh-faced soldiers, part of the one-million-strong contingent of Soviet troops stationed along the Chinese border. Nearly all were healthy-looking young men in their late teens who had abandoned their uniforms for trousers and T-shirts or sweat-suits. There was much drinking but no rowdiness.

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**T**uesday, Nov. 20

Volodya and Valery were al-

ready at the chessboard when I woke up.

Details of Valery's life tumbled out in the course of the morning. He was Jewish, his parents and grandparents having escaped extermination in the Ukraine by fleeing east before the war broke out. Against his parents' advice, he had married a non-Jewish woman of Tartar ancestry. She had eventually abandoned him and their daughter and had moved to Petropavlovsk, a port city on the remote Kauchatka peninsula, where she literally ran away to sea. She was now a cook on a freighter.

He had recently remarried, to a research assistant at a chemical institute, and his second wife, carefully chosen for her domesticity, had baked him a bag of delicious cookies for the journey. She also was not Jewish, and Valery said he did not care whether his daughter, who is 12, chose upon reaching adulthood to declare her nationality as Russian or Jewish. He said that he personally had no desire to emigrate and felt no particular affinity for Israel. And Volodya, an ethnic Russian, noted that his departed wife was Jewish, so there was a certain symmetry in his and Valery's domestic histories.

The Jewish question having thus been broached, both wanted to know the extent of anti-Semitism in America and the fate there of Soviet Jewish emigres. Their impressions were colored by stories in the Soviet press of Ku Klux Klan cross-burnings on Jewish lawns, but

they seemed more interested in hearing my version than arguing their own.

Dusk brought a new member to our club. Lena, a refugee from the boredom prevailing in the neighboring compartment, was a short, stout woman with tiny dark eyes and bleached blond hair. She had been raised

on the plains of northern Kazakhstan, where her father had moved in 1954 in the first wave of volunteers for Nikita Khrushchev's "virgin lands" program. (Lena said that when her brother, then 3, had gotten off the train and seen the absolute emptiness of the surrounding steppe, he had taken off on a dead run toward his native Ukraine, almost 3,000 miles to the west). Her widowed mother still lived there with most of her family, but Lena had moved with an older sister to a new settlement in the far east, where she worked in a giant new coal-burning power plant.

Lena's arrival revealed Volodya's rakish side, and the two of them were soon exchanging clever toasts with the remaining cognac. At some point, Lena turned serious and asked me what Americans thought of Andropov. I said they probably thought highly of him because correspondents had generally described him as an intelligent man with strong notions of how the nation could be better run. This pleased her. She said that many people now had portraits of Andropov in their homes (both Andropov and Stalin hung in hers) or had preserved the newspapers announcing his death. All three agreed that he would have been a great leader if he had lived longer.

I asked them how they felt when Chernenko was chosen, another ailing old man who could not even raise his arm in a full salute at Andropov's funeral. Lena smiled knowingly at this description and offered no defense. Volodya argued that older men are wiser and make fewer mistakes. I pointed out that Lenin was 47 at the time of the revolution and died when he was younger than all but one member of the existing Politburo. Lenin was a genius, Valery retorted. In any case, Chernenko was just one voice in a largely collective leadership.

The conversation, carried through dinner in the dining car, grew increasingly partisan and heated. Somehow, we got onto the subject of the three Baltic republics — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — that the Red army occupied in 1939. My companions insisted that Baltic nations voluntarily agreed to become part of the Soviet Union. Likewise, they

said that the eastern European allies all freely chose to pattern their governments after the Soviet Union and to join the bloc. So why were Soviet tanks needed to restore order in Berlin in 1953, Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968? To assist in combatting Western-inspired outlaws, they said, much as troops are now doing in Afghanistan.

I said I could understand the argument that the Soviet Union paid for its eastern European possessions with blood and valor in the last war or that it needed to control them for its security. But I just could not accept the outrageous contention that it all happened by popular choice. They heatedly disagreed and, as proof, pointed out that the Soviets had also occupied parts of Finland and Austria after the war and voluntarily withdrew.

Late in the evening, after I had explained my own personal differences with the Reagan administration on Central American policy and some other issues, I asked whether there was a single Soviet policy or action that they disagreed with. There was a longish silence, finally broken by Valery. He said that decisions were made collectively, not by individuals, so there was less chance of error.

I told them that the hardest thing for me to understand, when talking with people of obvious intelligence, was this complete lack of dissent. Valery said that I needed to have a better understanding of Marxist-Leninist theory.

Volodya had a more personal explanation. He said his grandfather had been an impoverished cobbler, who earned 30 rubles a month after the revolution, but believed fervently in Soviet rule. His children had all completed university and had easier lives. Volodya himself was a professional with an interesting job, his own apartment and frequent opportunities to travel. He did not have a car yet, but he had a motorcycle. In short, the revolution had succeeded, and there was no reason for him to be any less devoted than his grandfather.

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Now Lena, who had told us earlier of her sickly childhood, weighed in, her words charged with emotional intensity. "What I have is a guarantee," she said. "That's most important. If I get sick, the hospital will be paid for, and my job will be held until I return. Can everyone in America say that?"

We agreed that no one was being won over, and Valery said that three against one was unfair. Our good cheer revived, we called it a night.

## W Wednesday, Nov. 21

During the night, we had rounded the top of Manchuria. This final day would be spent in the broad, flat valley of the Amur River. Over lunch, Lena asked me a series of direct, probing questions about my life. Where was I raised? What did my father do? Did my mother work? If my father had sold his business, how did he live now? How did I choose my profession? How did I get my job? When the interview was over, she simply shook her head. So many options, so much movement. "It's an entirely different kind of life," she said. "Impossible to imagine."

We whiled away the day with chess, cards and aimless conversation. Volodya and Lena sang a few duets, which inspired Volodya to recite some poems by Aleksandr Blok.

After dinner, the arguing began anew. Someone — not me — brought up Sakharov, the exiled human-rights leader. Volodya repeated the official lie that Sakharov had publicly called for a nuclear attack against the Soviet Union, and all agreed that he should count himself lucky that he is not in jail. "What right should anyone have to tear down and weaken his country?" said Lena.

We took up where we had left off with the Baltics, then moved on to Vietnam, Afghanistan, Poland, Grenada, Nicaragua, missiles and space weapons. At one point, I asked whether anyone would acknowledge that, in this global arena, the Soviet Union occasionally acts as a great power trying to strengthen its political influence and not merely in the selfless pursuit of world peace and human betterment. No one would.

While still outwardly friendly, there was an edge to the conversation. Volodya and Lena bore down hard, determined to convince me and disturbed by my stubbornness. Volodya's voice grew louder and louder, and a nervous cough became increasingly pronounced.

Around midnight, just after I had proclaimed that Soviet newspapers gave a distorted and one-sided view of the world, Lena calmly announced that my remarks were insulting to her country and that she could endure no more. She excused herself and returned to her compartment.

A truce followed soon after. Volodya proposed a toast to mutual understanding, then amended it to say, "It is more important that our leaders understand each other, that Chernenko and Reagan have a better understanding." I proposed a few hands of *durak*.

AT 5 A.M., RIGHT ON SCHEDULE, THE Rossiya crossed the frozen Amur on the outskirts of Khabarovsk, the river nearly a mile wide at that point. The ice, glowing in the starlight, looked as if it had been attacked by an ax-wielding giant. Ten minutes later, Volodya, Valery and I were standing on the platform saying warm farewells.

The Intourist representative spotted me immediately, as they always do. "Good morning," she said in English. "Are there any other passengers in the wagon?" It took me a moment to understand that she meant foreign passengers. "No," I replied, also in English. "I'm the only one."

She led me off to the waiting car that would take me back to my separate life. □