

THE USSR IN THE BEGINNING OF THE 1930- TIES - FESTIVITIES AND WORKDAYS IN THE YEARS OF GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS

You are welcome to read some pages of the book 'Caviar for breakfast'. It was written by an Australian writer Betty Roland (real name Mary Isabel Maclean, 1903-1996). In 1933-34 she lived and worked in the USSR with her friend [Guido Baracchi](#). The book was based on her diary and contains many interesting observations which add to what we already know about that complicated time. There are pages related to the military history.

MAY DAY IN MOSCOW. RED SQUARE



Tomorrow would be May Day. Already the city was throbbing with excitement. Flags and banners fluttered everywhere and every building displayed a gigantic picture of some national hero. Particularly common were Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin, with Molotov and Voroshilov running a bad second.

Soldiers marched along the streets, singing as they went, their strong resonant voices echoing against stone walls and granite paving. The footpaths were thronged with happy people, walking arm-in-arm, laughing and excited, and the booths that sold *kvass* and *pivo* did a brisk trade. In short, the city was *en fete*.

Throughout the night we were disturbed by the sound of marching feet and the rumble of tanks and armoured cars that crossed the bridge below our window, and when we got up and looked outside, an astonishing spectacle met our eyes. Whichever way we looked there was a solid mass of armed men who stood shoulder to shoulder, rank after rank. How many thousands there were was not possible to estimate. They stood in silence, scarcely moving, waiting for the moment when they would march through the Red Square and demonstrate the military might of the workers' fatherland.

We dressed and ate a hurried breakfast, then went to the foyer, where we found the other members of the English party and waited to be told what we should do. One of the many marvels of this 21 tour was the guarantee of a seat in the Red Square that would give us an uninterrupted view of the May Day parade, a privilege that only the upper echelons could share. A rather flustered guide arrived with a list of names and bundle of name-tags. She ticked our names off carefully, making sure that no-one was omitted and no-one included who had no business to be there. Having reassured herself that all of us were bona fide, she gave us each a name-tag and a packet of sandwiches and told us to make a final visit to the lavatory. It was our last chance as, once admitted to the Red Square, we would be there till late in the afternoon.

After a final count of heads and a warning not on any account to lose our name-tags or become separated from the group, we were marshalled into a double file and led across the Moskva River bridge and into the Red Square. I doubt if there was one of us who did not tingle with excitement as we passed through checkpoint after checkpoint. Every face was scrutinised and every name-tag carefully examined. Finally we reached our seats. Unbelievably, they were within a few feet of Lenin's tomb. No head of state or foreign diplomat could have had a better seat and we settled ourselves, as comfortably as possible, to wait till the great spectacle began.

For those who have never seen the Red Square it is difficult to visualise its size, its grandeur, and the beauty of the rose-red bricks of its ancient walls, the white palaces, the towers and gilded cupolas of this most romantic citadel, or St Basil's with its pumpkin domes and onion cupolas, in front of it the execution block where criminals and those who displeased the tsars were put to death in a variety of unpleasant ways.

The square starts at the Moskva River and rises gently past St Basil's, Lenin's tomb, GUM-the enormous glass-roofed marketplace where there is almost nothing to buy-and on and on, ending at a rather unattractive red brick building which is a museum. Guido and I were to discover later that it took a full ten minutes to walk from one end of the Red Square to the other.

On this morning, 1 May 1933, the entire surface had been strewn with yellow sand. There had been no sign of this the night before and the transformation that had been accomplished in so short a time seemed like a miracle. How many men and women had laboured through the night and how many tons of sand had been unloaded on the paving stones one could not calculate, but the result was beautiful. The sand was there to muffle the sound of tanks and armoured cars and, more especially, to prevent the horses from slipping on the stones as the cavalry galloped past. It was Moscow's day of days and nothing, simply nothing, was to be allowed to ruin the great occasion.

There was a rustle of excitement as the hierarchy of the Soviet state came into view. Stalin and his cohorts, Molotov, Kalinin, Budenny, Litvinov, and the other members of the presidium took their places on the plinth in front of Lenin's tomb. At precisely 11 o'clock the clock in the Spassky Tower began to strike, the iron gates swung open and Marshal Voroshilov, mounted on snow-white horse, rode out to review his men. Massed bands struck up the stirring notes of the *Internationale*, the soldiers who had waited half the night for this moment stiffened to attention, the great show commenced. First came the oath of allegiance. Led by Voroshilov, and answered by a thousand throats, the resonant words rang out at first in the Red Square, then along the streets that fanned in all directions, rolling like a tidal wave until it faded in the distance.

Next came the review. A rolling tide of cheers marked the passing of the marshal and his staff as they rode between the ranks of the soldiers massed along the square, then into the side streets where the cheers rolled on like some great choir. Finally, he returned, riding at the head of the first column of men. Stalin raised his hand in a salute, and the great march past began.

First came the infantry, marching with a precision that a regiment of English guardsmen might have envied. Then came the cavalry, relics of a fading, more romantic past. Then the tanks, the armoured cars, the anti-aircraft weapons - wicked-looking guns pointed towards the sky. Searchlights, field kitchens, ambulances, not in hundreds but in thousands, rank after rank of military might that flowed through the square like a flood of lava while the sky above was dense with aircraft, the roar of their engines mingling with the thunder of the mechanised army below. The crowd went wild, shouting and cheering and waving their arms until they were exhausted, but still the mighty spectacle went on.

When the last tank had rumbled out of sight there came the ordinary people, not in sternly disciplined ranks but in a wild, disorderly mass, shouting, singing, dancing, waving flags and banners, carrying effigies of John Bull and Uncle Sam, twin symbols of the hated bourgeoisie. It is significant to note that at this point the foreign diplomats withdrew to avoid having to take offence at this disrespect shown to the symbols of their countries.

Betty and Guido initially came to USSR for three weeks but decided to stay and found jobs in the Co-Op venture publishing communist literature in foreign languages. Their leisure time was full of cultural events and meeting with interesting people...

14 August. It is not all work and no play at the Co-op Pub. Theatre parties are arranged by Sergeievna; we also see an occasional ballet or an opera, all by favour of the beneficent trade union. Last free day we were the guests of the dreaded Political Police, the OGPU (pronounced O-Gay-Pay-Ou), formerly the Cheka. They are the state's chief instrument of terror but showed another side of their character by inviting us to spend the day at a former monastery some twenty miles down the Moscow River. The monks have long since vanished and it is now a refuge for orphaned or neglected children, known as the 'homeless ones' or *besprizornye*. After the revolution there were many thousands of homeless waifs who formed themselves into gangs and terrorised the 'untryside, thieving, looting, often committing murder in their operate struggle for existence. Few of them remain today, though Arcadi says there is a nest of them camped on the roof his building, which explains the number of bolts and bars on the door of the flat, and why Hilda guards the washing while it is in the yard downstairs, and will not venture out at night.

The OGPU are universally feared, but at the same time envied. In addition to enjoying immense prestige and almost unlimited power they have the smartest uniforms, the best apartments, the best food ration-and the best women! See a woman dressed up like a tart, with peroxide hair, lipstick and silk stockings and you'll know she is the wife or mistress of a man in the OGPU. Nevertheless, it was the OGPU that came to the rescue of the *besprizornye*, or rather, collected them off the streets and out of the forests and did what they could to turn them into honest citizens.

There is a marvelous film called *The Road to Life*, which tells the story of one of these youthful thugs and his rehabilitation by the OGPU. I had seen it in London and eagerly looked forward to visiting the monastery of Lyuberets which, apart from its other interests, was the location of the film.

We were told to assemble at the Lubianka, the mere name of which sends a chill through Russian blood. There was quite a number of us as there were groups from other organisations as well as the Co-Op Pub, and we entered this grim fortress with something approaching awe. We sat for a while in a vast echoing hall, none of us saying very much, and it was a relief when we were ushered out into the street, where there were sunshine and a band to lead us to the river and a double-decker ferry boat waiting to receive us.

From that time on the mood was one of gaiety, equally shared by ourselves and the green-capped members of the OGPU who, for this one day at least, shed their sinister image and became the smiling peasant lads they once had been and laughed and joked as heartily as everybody else. There was plenty of weak beer and *kvass* and we floated between the low banks of the Moscow River to the music of 'Dark Eyes', '*Stenka Razin*' and the Red Army song. Once, we got stuck on the bottom of a lock, the lock-keeper having apparently lost his head at the sight of the green-capped OGPU and opened the cocks too rapidly. There were loud cheers and orders to abandon ship, which we did by crossing an unsteady plank balanced between the lower deck and the river bank. The band came too and we spent the next half-hour dancing among the poppies and the cornflowers until a couple of loud toots announced the refloating of the ferry and we all trooped on board again.

Arriving at our destination we were greeted by yet another band, this time composed of inmates of the monastery, and were led through fields of lush green corn, picking wildflowers as we went. The usual meal of cutlets and fried potato was waiting in the great refectory, after which we were led on a tour through the vast stone building, its workshops, stables and its barns. The monastery of Lyuberets is in no sense a prison farm; its heavy gates are never closed and the former *besprizornye* are free to come and go as they choose. 'A fair number disappear in the spring but we find that most of them come back when the weather starts to get cold,' we were told by one of the supervisors.

The children help to cultivate the land, and they are also taught to read and write. There are workshops where they are given skills to enable them to earn a living when they finally return to the outside world. Some choose to remain and play a responsible role in teaching the younger

inmates. There was one roguish-looking youth with an irrepressible smile and broad Mongolian cheeks who turned out to be the hero of the film that I had seen in London. This was an added thrill to a memorable day.

It ended with the performance of a play both acted and written by the boys, following which we returned to the boat and slowly drifted back to Moscow. We were more subdued this time, as everyone was tired, but we revived when the band struck up again and led us through the streets till we all disbanded and went our separate ways. Not many can say they have been guests of the OGPU and enjoyed the experience!

LENINGRAD

Betty and Guido settled in a communal house for foreigners.

17 October. Our young friend from Poland brought another English-speaking resident to meet us. His name is Igor. We are now sufficiently alert to recognise his fur-lined jacket and smart black boots as the distinguishing mark of the OGPU but did not hold that against him. He is a counterpart of the two young men we met in the Torgsin shop the day that we arrived. He shares their ready smiles and general *savoirfaire* and we liked him very much. No doubt he had been observing us and found that we were harmless, because he invited us to come and have a vodka in his room a few days afterwards.

The room was something of a revelation. Small wonder he could take his pick of pretty women. Compared to our mean little hovel-infested kennel it was palatial and had probably been reserved for a bishop or some other church dignitary in pre-revolutionary days. There was no luxury, just a few mats on a bare stone floor, long refectory table with a reading lamp and a few uncomfortable chairs, but the proportions were beautiful, with a beamed ceiling and deep embrasures around the windows and the door. In one corner was an immense old-fashioned Russian stove, unlit, of course, as the whole building is warmed by central heating, its sole concession to comfort.

We tossed our vodka down like veterans and answered the carefully chosen questions that our young host plied us with - all about Australia, what had brought us to the USSR, and how long we intended to stay. These questions we had answered many times before and were a little weary of unaware that this is the accepted practice of the OGPU - ask the same questions over and over again and see if the answers are the same: if they vary suspicions are at once aroused. Evidently we survived the test as, not long afterwards, he appeared at our door and tried to persuade Guido to come out on some sort of lark with him. I wished he had included me but it was to be a men-only affair and I was not required. Guido, however, could not be tempted to desert his dictionaries, pointing out the need to finish his quota for the day. Igor was not impressed and seemed to regard this as a joke, at which Guido got annoyed and sternly rebuked him for trying to divert him from his purpose. Remarking that he would undoubtedly end up as a *udarnik* (champion worker) the tempter finally withdrew and left him to his task. We rarely saw him after that, which was a pity. He was nice.

Guido and Betty were horrified of the communal bathroom in their house. There were recommended to try their luck in the 'Europe' hotel. A handsome young man - administration clerk - was astounded by this request but helped them.

20 November. Joe, I might say here, was no ordinary hotel clerk but a very superior citizen indeed. He wore smart leather coat and high black boots that told us he was a member of the elite OGPU, but was a very pleasant fellow for all that. Still highly amused, he soon came back and told us that, for the price of the usual golden English pound, we would have sole occupancy of one of the hotel rooms, bath and everything else included.

28 February. Guido and Betty returned home from work and found that their room had been forced in and all their possessions been stolen. Several days after Betty got permission to go to London

and bring to Leningrad some of the things they would not be able to live without. On the day of her departure Joe arrived to their place in a smart Lincoln. He was not hiding his belonging to OGPU anymore and arrived to give Betty a lift to the train station. But for the beginning he drove the Australians to a grim-looking building to let them identify their previously stolen stuff found by police and, if possible, the thieves. They did not recognise the thieves but identified some of the few remaining items.

IN LONDON

Before the departure to London Betty was asked to take a letter in order to pass it to an addressee in London. It turned out to be a group of the leading British communists. Betty met [Harry Pollitt](#), General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain and [Radzhani Palm Dutt](#) - member of its Central Committee. After a long and strict questioning, she was let to go but requested to pay another visit before returning to the USSR.

Betty went to the London office of '[Intourist](#)' for the return ticket and permission to enter the USSR. She was to undergo another interrogation.

I was ushered into the inner room to be confronted by a cold-eyed man who told me to sit down, examined my face then compared it with the photo in the passport which, I must admit, bore very little resemblance to the original. Next, he proceeded to question me about my reasons for wanting to return to the Soviet Union so soon after I had left it. Also, how had it happened that I had gone there on the understanding I would stay for twenty-one days, but had remained for the greater part of a year? What had I been doing all that time? What did I mean by saying I had worked? Was I not aware that tourists must on no account whatever attempt to get a job in the USSR?

Betty explained the reasons for her longer stay in the USSR but her story did not impress anybody. She was stripped of her passport and requested to come again in two days. When she came back she was advised that her visa had not been renewed. Harry Pollitt recommended her to refer to the Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maisky and then let him know the results of the visit. Perhaps, female tears softened the Soviet Ambassador and finally Betty received the permission to return to the USSR.

When Betty visited Pollitt again he gave her a letter to despatch to the USSR and a pack of books. On the way back in Germany her luggage was rummaged but everything went smoothly.

BACK IN USSR

And now the first train station on the Soviet soil...

I had barely stepped onto the platform when a man in the familiar uniform of the OGPU appeared beside me. 'You have something you have brought from London?' he enquired. This took me by surprise, as I had not expected such efficiency. The parcel of books was in my hand. 'Is it this?' I asked him. He shook his head. 'No. Something else, I think.' We went to the customs shed, where I unlocked the trunk and handed him the envelope. He glanced at it, nodded his head, then thanked me and went away.

There was one final incident. Aware that I would now be traveling to Moscow on a Soviet train and that meals were not to be relied upon, I took a cake of chocolate from the trunk and slipped it into the pocket of my coat. Walking back along the platform, I heard footsteps running after me. It was my friend from the OGPU, to whom I had given the envelope. 'Would you show me what you have in your pocket?' He was no longer as friendly as he had been. With my brightest and most obliging smile I produced the cake of chocolate. 'Your pardon, comrade. It was my mistake,' said an embarrassed young man.

A few more hours, then Moscow, Guido waiting on the station and myself triumphant. Member of the despised petty bourgeoisie though I might be, no party member could have carried out the mission more successfully. I felt that I had won my spurs and was entitled to respect.

In July 1934 Guido and Betty set on their way back to Australia. They were to go down the Volga River to Stalingrad, then by train to Rostov and via Georgia to Batum, then by a sea ship to Odessa and from there to Great Britain. They chanced to see a lot of poor little towns in which the only feature to stop one's eye on were church domes, crowds of hungry people on moorings, beautiful and modern Saratov, after that dilapidated but still nice and exotic Tbilisi, elegant Yalta and well-off Odessa. They came across a few interesting people on the way home, in particular, - [Joe Kennedy](#) - then a student of the London School of Economics being on his summer vacation and travelling throughout USSR. In Odessa they encountered an Australian couple which had come to the USSR from Sydney to help the Soviets build socialism and settled in Odessa. In the end of August 1934 Guido and Betty left USSR.