

The Volga phase of the Volga/Wilseda meeting of 1990, organized by Rolf Neth of Hamburg, Germany and Elena Frolova of Moscow, Russia, is an event that I will never forget.

The meeting commenced on a large river boat on the Volga River before returning to Moscow and then on to Leningrad. After two or three days travelling north through many locks on the Volga we arrived in the ancient village of Uglich. This village is famous for at least two things. It is the location of a large factory producing most of the watches for Soviet citizens and it is the site of a battle where the Russians stopped the advance of Mongol forces intent upon invading Europe after conquering this outpost.

The scientific meetings were held aboard the boat, with no opportunity for skipping out to play the tourist game. As a consequence all sessions were very well attended. During the meetings I met several Russian scientists, some of whom I have kept in contact with and have become close and valued friends over the ensuing years. One individual in particular was especially interested in what I could tell him of life in the U.S.A. He had two or three adolescent children at the time and was particularly interested in hearing about my family and the education and living standards of my children. As the days went by he became more and more unsettled by what he was hearing from me until eventually he avoided me entirely to the extent of turning around in the passage way when he saw me coming towards him. I eventually was able to speak with him again before we arrived back in Moscow. As he related his feelings to me he explained that he realized from hearing of my life in America that he believed that the Soviets had robbed his children of a future. This period in the history of his motherland saw the beginnings of a new openness towards the West with increasing knowledge by its citizens of life beyond what was once called the Iron Curtain. One of my life-long Russian friends, Andrei Malykh, told me some time after he had emigrated to the U.S.A. with his family that he realized eventually that many Soviet citizens were anxious to leave the country, but he never heard of anyone wanting to come there. He also related a popular Russian joke that was circulating at the time that said, "Now all people in Russia are optimists; all the pessimists have left". A bit of black humor, I think.

When we returned to Moscow and visited the city for some time in conjunction with meeting at the Shemyakin Institute of Bioorganic Chemistry, I met many other future colleagues and friends, including Oleg Chertov and Nikolai Voitenok. When we subsequently travelled to Leningrad, Nikolai approached me and requested that I return with him to Moscow to visit his Institute of Hematology, of which he was the Director. I gladly accepted his invitation and asked Andrei Koslov for assistance in extending my visa and getting my airline reservation altered. Andrei had been a visiting scientist in Dr. Robert Gallo's lab in Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A., when I was on staff there in the late 1970's, where we became close friends. Andrei introduced me to one of the members of his institute and asked her to assist me with this task. At the time I had no idea how difficult this would be and by overstaying my visa I was potentially placing myself in a very dangerous position. When Natalia finally was able to pull it off, she nearly collapsed from nervous exhaustion; when I asked her what the problem was, for I could readily see that she was in acute distress, she only said that she did not believe that she would be able to succeed with the task.

When I departed Leningrad, I was standing in the hatchway of the Aeroflot plane taking pictures of Sheremetyevo Airport when a male flight attendant came up to me and said, "It is forbidden to take photos here!" In response, I said that I was trying to capture some memories of my visit to Russia whereupon he facial expression changed instantly from one of reproach to sheer joy and he said, "Take a picture of me!" The flight to Moscow started off with a bank. As we climbed out from the airport into a gigantic thunder storm, the plane was struck by lightning, fortunately with no ill effects. Later in the flight as I was looking from a window at the passing scene the plane climbed abruptly about 500 feet. Shortly after that another plane, travelling in the opposite direction, passed directly under our plane, whereupon I said to myself that the Russian air traffic control system needed some upgrading.

Following a very productive day at the Institute of Hematology with Nikolai Voitenok and his colleagues, we went to dinner at the Hotel Moscow adjacent to Red Square.

Earlier in the day I had tried to visit the Square but it was cordoned off due to a very momentous meeting of the Communist Party members. I learned later that the members threatened to “Put our cards on the table”, meaning that they would resign from the Communist Party if Gorbachov did not slow down with his proposed reforms. Nikolai told me that it would be advisable for me to speak not at all until we were in the hotel restaurant, and to wait for him outside the door on the sixth floor. We got off the elevator and I waited as advised until I saw that he was inside the double doors. These doors were being guarded by a tough looking character who secured the doors with a “U” shaped piece of metal as each person was admitted to the intersanctum. When Nikolai went through, the guard left the doors open so I followed him through. Before I knew what was happening my right arm was pushed up behind my back and the guard was shoving his chunk of iron in my ribs while shoving me against the wall. Nikolai on seeing this rushed over, took a manila envelope from his briefcase and after showing it to the guard I was released and we went on into the restaurant. After engaging in some small talk I finally asked Nikolai what it was that he showed to the guard that worked the miracle of my release and suggested that he must be a very important person. It turned out that he showed official documents that spoke to his position in the “community”.

Following dinner, we walked to the balcony overlooking Red Square. While we were there we saw that a tremendous thunder storm was approaching the city. When the storm had passed and we went back to the balcony there appeared a beautiful rainbow over Red Square, which I thought was very symbolic of the great changes about to occur in the Soviet Union. I snapped several images of the scene and when I returned to the States I had one of them enlarged and framed and it hung outside my office until I retired in 2011.