

1,850 mile Trans-Siberian railway ride a real experience

Katyusha — Folk Song

Raszuetáli yábloni e groóshi
Paplilí tumáni nad rekóy
Vikhadíla ná Bereg Katyúsha
Ná visókyi Béreg na krutóy

Vikbodíla pésznyu zavodíla
Pra stephnóva sízava orlá
Pra tavó kátórava lyubíla
Pra tavó tshyee písma bereglá

By DELLA AND ARCH BAUMGARTNER

Khabarovsk, Siberia, USSR, Wednesday, Oct. 23 — Our group had a free Saturday night and Sunday before embarking on the greatest train ride of our life — known over the world as the Trans-Siberian Railway.

At dinner in the Intourist Hotel Saturday evening we met Robert T. White of Lafayette, La., a big game hunter whom we had met by chance earlier at the hotel in Ulan Bator, Mongolia.

White appeared to be leading a charmed life, and told his story of big game hunting with an attention-getting flare. He "made a bundle" as a geologist exploring the oil possibilities in Louisiana and Texas, then turning his findings over to prospectors and investors. He told us his three-week hunt in Mongolia cost him a cool \$24,000, once he had gotten himself to Moscow. His entourage included a guide, cook, manager, driver and interpreter.

We had our last dinner that night in Irkutsk at a long table in the dining room of the Intourist Hotel, no different than what it was somewhere in the United States. A band played soft western-style music and many of us danced quite comfortably.

A large wedding party assembled at a long nearby table, and there came a point where they saluted the newlyweds with a vodka toast to the chant of some mysterious Russian word. Nervy, some of our group walked over to their table and toasted the young

couple, obviously chopping the toast up unrecognizably. It was a moment of good Soviet-US relations anyhow.

Visit Russian Church
Our itinerary on Sunday morning called for a visit at a Russian Orthodox Church. Our new guide, Alexei, a self-styled "non-believer," told us there were only four Russian Orthodox churches in Irkutsk. On the bus he told us that the Soviet Union has religious rights guaranteed in its constitution, that there is a complete separation of church and state, and that the state pays nothing toward church support. Much like it is in the United States, we thought — but were we fooled?

Russians don't sit in church; they stand, and frequently cross themselves and kneel to the cold stone floor. A congregation of about 100 kept coming and leaving, as the ritualistic services continue, accompanied by an excellent choir from a neighboring school. In the foyer some old people were begging money from those coming and going.

Almost all those attending church were old women, some men, but very few youngsters. Most of the old churches have

been turned into museums, and we had the feeling the few churches are being kept open for the old folks, that the younger people are being indoctrinated in many subtle ways into a godless society. It was Karl Marx, the German teacher/philosopher who came up with the idea of communism in the first place, who proclaimed for all to hear that "religion is the opiate of the people."

Alexie, the guide, tried to get our small group of Americans to leave the church after 15 minutes, but he didn't get the job done. We remained for about 45 minutes to an hour. After all, we were just going back to the hotel.

Alexie spoke to us how the communist government guaranteed the democratic rights of the Soviet people to the point where we thought he was speaking about America. He said he doesn't talk religion with his old grandmother, who "is a believer."

He also told us how he is working hard to become a member of the communist party, and the non-believer bit is a prerequisite to membership.

An aside to our church visit, is the fact that Bob Work, a Los Angeles and Sacramento, Calif., publisher, had in his possession 173 tugruts (about \$60.55) in Mongolian money he didn't convert when he left that forsaken country. He found it worthless to him in Siberia, so he put it into a collection box at the church. "They'll find a way to convert it," he said. Work said he plans to take it as a tax deduction, adding, "They didn't say what church I have to make the donation to."

One member of our party was anticipating the long upcoming train ride, and knowing no alcohol was served on the train, tried to buy a case of Beck's beer for the trip. The bartender refused him, but said he could sell him 24 cans of beer! Convoluted logic, we thought.

Trans-Siberian Railway
We were all looking forward to the Trans-Siberian Railway ride as the highlight of our month-long visit to the Soviet Union. It was to be an experience, all right. We boarded the 16-car train at Irkutsk just after 8 p.m. Sunday night, Oct. 20, and were to spend three nights and two full days going through the towns, most of them

small villages, and the wilderness, arriving here at Khabarovsk (pronounced HAH-bar-ovsk, the emphasis on the "bar"), Wednesday morning, Oct. 23, at 8 a.m.

Getting on the train at Irkutsk was a circus in itself. The train station was a sea of people coming and going, and there we sat in our bus outside the station — while the train was to pull out in 18 minutes! At this time, our tour director, Nancy Mathews, of Tracy, Calif., had diminishing confidence in the ability of Alexei to get us aboard the train.

We got the green light to go, and we did. We formed a relay — something like a Notre Dame "flying wedge" — to get our many bags and ourselves aboard. We were indoctrinated on the precise schedule the train kept, Americans or no Americans.

A little about the Trans-Siberian Railway. It has a daily train running from Moscow to this western city near the Sea of Japan. Its final stop, however, is the Soviet Union military base at Vladivostok. Total miles from Moscow to Vladivostok: 5,778 miles, or 9,172 kilometers. It is the longest such line in the world. Inasmuch as the line runs so close to the Chinese border, another northern line, known as the Baikal-Amur-Mainline (known as BAM) Railway, has been opened, supposedly to open up northern mineral and oil and gas deposits, but also making it less vulnerable to Chinese attack.

A travel guide book several in our party had, called the Trans-Siberian Railway ride "the greatest travel experience a tourist can have." It is certainly that. As it leaves the city of Irkutsk, where we boarded, it traveled through ever smaller cities and towns, until it reached the remotest of the remote. The train goes through upland forests, crosses lakes and goes along rivers, and through forests of the ubiquitous silver birch trees. At each stop the little kiosks, or vending stations, are manned by one man or woman who sells cigarettes, souvenirs or several month-old newspapers. We found ourselves completely shut off from news of the outside world.

When we were to reach Khabarovsk, someone calculated we had traveled on the railway for 3,000 kilometers or some 1,875 miles. The trains were all electric, and the roadbed for the most part was in excellent condition.

The Trans-Siberian Railway is a magnificent engineering feat. The Soviet government pays workers in this forbidden land 20 percent bonus, and for railway workers as much as 75 percent extra. Railway workers are among the highest paid workers in the Soviet Union.

Our compartment was called "soft class," meaning we had a compartment for two people, and that we had comfortable sleeping accommodations. There were ten such compartments on our coach, with a small but adequate lavatory facility at each end. As Maynard Buck, of Cadiz, Ohio, put it: "My dad once told me a person could get used to hanging, if he hung long enough!" But it really wasn't that bad.

As our train lumbered through the wilderness at some 50 miles per hour, it took on its share of dust and dirt. And, inasmuch as most everyone in our group had a camera to record the passing scenes on film, clean windows were a must. At the earliest convenience, at a stop of as much as four to eight minutes, we got out and made use of whatever tissue we could find to clean the windows. We finally got smart enough to get the little step ladders out of our compartments, the better to clean the windows.

If this seemed like a menial task to us, imagine what it looked like to the gathering east Russians. It's possible they had never seen anything like it before.

Meet Doris Knop
Early in our trip by rail we met a tall, pretty and extremely unusual girl named Doris Knop, a native of Bremen Germany, who was making the same trip we were. The 30-year-old photographer/journalist has one travel book to her credit — "Reisen (Travel) in China." She has a brother, Gunter, in New York who helped her get the book published.

Doris spoke several languages, and told us she sparked her interest in travel when she became an exchange student near Chicago when she was just 16 years of age. She was a fountain of information on the many countries of the world she had already visited, and is now planning a travel book on the Soviet Union. Meeting our group and probing us with a barrage of questions seemed to be a part of her research.

The interesting young lady seemed to slip into and out of groups on the train with relative ease. She promised to send us a copy of her book on travels in China.

There were several other young Germans on the train whom we met and enjoyed talking to. My, how this younger generation gets around — using English, of course, as their com-

mon language!
When asked about this, the young travelers told us how inexpensive it was to travel the Trans-Siberian Railway: From Berlin to Beijing, China, 700 Deutschmarks (or about \$230), and from Moscow to Khabarovsk, 105 rubles (or about \$140). This, of course, is second class, but they also told us, if there are plenty of extra seats on the train, they could upgrade to a better class for a very small fee.

We've already written about the shortage of foods and of the lines waiting for commodities. This is one thing the Soviet Union has not solved as yet, and it may plague them for years. With only one percent of this vast confederation of republics arable, and with the extremely short growing season due to its high latitude on the globe, they just simply haven't been able to grow enough food for their people.

The food shortages are throughout the countryside, and we found this as our train passed from station to station. Small bands of people quickly spotted the diner car, and after considerable haggling, purchased whatever they could get from the diner attendants. At one point we saw them sell large quantities of butter, then at dinner that night we had no butter! No big hassle. But it shows that, like larceny, there's a little capitalism in all of us!

But we must say, for our part we had excellent food on the Trans-Siberian Railway. We usually had an 8:30 or 9 a.m. breakfast, walking through two sleepers and a Soviet diner, to get to our own diner. Lunch was usually at 1:30 p.m. and was considered the big meal of the day. One course of the lunch was borsch, the heavy soup laced with cabbage. We found it very good. And then there was dinner in the evening, served at about 8:30. It was usually lighter.

None of us found anything to complain about insofar as the food in the Soviet Union was concerned. What might have helped a little is the fact that we had an aperitif each night in one of the compartments or another. None of us became addicted to their native "vodka," however. Not really.

Frolic In The Diner
During our two evening meals on the train, it must have been the levity and gay spirit of the Americans that prompted "Sergei," a food vendor on the train, to break out his accordion and favor us with some Russian folk music.

One song, prepared earlier on individual slips of paper, was Katyusha, and our rendition of it must have sent a new low in lousy music. (Note: See song's lyrics at top of this column.) It was all fun, and Sergei got into the spirit of things as he chug-a-lugged his ample portions of vodka. By now the levity of the occasion brought on some onlookers, two of them being food vendors. They were portly women of great good humor, and it took Sergei's music to get them into the spirit of things.

One got up, doing a native twirl that was half recognizable, and soon she coaxed Bob Work, the California publisher we spoke of earlier, to join her. Bob's girth matched the Russian lady's, and she set them try to dance to Sergei's wild tunes in a two and one-half foot aisle was something to behold.

The second night, after dinner, it was more of the same. Work had little success getting his fellow journalists to join him, although Maynard Buck, the "Ohio boy," said, "How's come I



THE BETTER TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS — Members of our party, traveling across Siberia on the Trans-Siberian Railway, found the dirty train windows a hindrance to taking countryside photographs. At one stop, several made use of the small berth ladders to wash the outside of the windows, the better to take photographs.



SIBERIAN APARTMENT LIVING — Huge apartment buildings are prevalent throughout the Soviet Union, mostly in the urban areas. Individual houses are in smaller communities and dot the countryside.

always get the fat one?"
Three fitful nights on the Trans-Siberian Railway was quite enough, everyone seemed to agree. And when we awakened early Wednesday morning, Oct. 23, knowing we were to arrive in Khabarovsk at 8 a.m. we were ready to disembark. At 5 a.m. in the morning we passed through heavy snows, but at Khabarovsk at 8 a.m. it was cold but clear.

City By The Amur
Khabarovsk, located on the left bank of the Amur River, one of the largest rivers of the world and flowing northward into the Arctic Ocean, was founded just 127 years ago by Yerofel Khabarovsk, and today has just a half million people. It is an important western outlet, via the Amur River, to the Sea of Japan. Our guide, Svetlana ("just call me Lana," she asked) told us of the 2½- to 3-month summer season, and of how cold it gets here. "We have to keep good relations with our neighbors, China, Japan and Korea," she said. She said so many fruits and vegetables come from these neighboring countries. China is just 47 kilometers (28 miles) from Khabarovsk, she noted.

Khabarovsk figured prominently in the October 1917 Revolution from 1918 to 1922 when 20,000 people died here in the battle against the Czar.

Workers here receive from 20 to 70 percent more money than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, as already noted. Svetlana said as a guide she makes 200 rubles a month, her husband, an electrical engineer, receives 300 rubles per month. On 500 rubles per month (or \$625) they raised two children and can travel abroad. "We get along very nicely," she said, adding, "You forget the state provides us with free medical care and education, and so many other things. The average wage in Khabarovsk is 241 rubles per month.

When one graduates from an

all-expense-paid college in the USSR, he is assigned a post for three years, then may go where he wishes to work, Svetlana told us. She also said 85 percent of the doctors in the USSR are women, 15 percent men, and that is a low paying profession.

A final stop before lunch was at the Beriozka, or \$1 Store, and estimates of what was spent by our group ran from \$1,000 to \$2,000.

Inasmuch as our next stop is Tokyo, Japan, it looked like this \$1 Store could be more appropriately named the "Last Chance Store."



NOT ALL ICE AND SNOW — Siberia is not all ice and snow, as one would suspect, but has modern, up-to-date buildings.



WILLING PHOTO SUBJECTS — Youngsters are always willing to have their pictures taken. These three boys didn't speak or understand English, but they knew the word "gum" and "thank you."



SIBERIANS FUN LOVERS, TOO — After dinner on the Trans-Siberian Railway it was fun time. A gay kitchen worker regaled our party with a native dance to the accompaniment of an accordionist, also a member of the kitchen staff. See the lyrics to Katyusha, a native ballad taught to us during the evening entertainment, at the head of this column.

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