

Short Stories, Poetry, Essays, & Travel

Potpourri

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**Profile of
Robert Bly**

**Words
Within
by**

**Rita Welty
Bourke**

**Robert
Cooperman**

**Angelee
Deodhar**

Jim Fairhall

Frank Scozzari

and others



Robert Bly

Douglas Curran

Russian Red Tape

T. P. Hill

Slamming into the ceiling of the Volkswagen van woke me from a deep sleep. The camper came to rest upside down in two feet of snow after rolling over a fifteen foot embankment. I landed on the well-padded inside roof above the rear bed, and gasoline fumes now permeated the small cabin. My travelling companion was suspended upside down in the driver's seat, struggling with her seat belt like a fly caught in a spider's web. Scattered around her were thousands of blunt fragments of glass, remnants of the windshield. I crawled over the jumble of camping gear and shards, forced open her seat belt release, and hauled us both out through the broken windshield away from the van. We heard voices. Up the snow-covered steep incline several heads in thick fur caps peered down at us.

"Vsyo v poryadke?" one yelled. "Nuzná pomoshch?"

My limited Russian was enough to understand these basic questions—Was I okay? Did I need help?

"Da," I answered "Da!"

Suddenly it dawned on me. We were hundreds of miles behind the Iron Curtain, somewhere between Smolensk and Moscow. It was February 1972, and the East-West espionage community was still reeling from England's October eviction of one-hundred and five Soviet agents, the worst spy scandal in its history. In January, U.S. fighter-bombers had just escalated the attacks into North Vietnam with hundreds of sorties against missile sites in the southern panhandle. And now in February, Nixon was making his historical first visit to Russia's ancient enemy China. Great timing. I

was a long-haired hippie, a Fulbright Scholar in a West German university with a background as U.S. Army Captain with top secret clearance. Both sides had warned me not to try a self-guided tour of Russia in my own van.



Tanya Christenko

But the truck drivers who had witnessed the accident were friendly, curious about my long hair and broken Russian. Together five of us righted the van, watching carefully for flames, and attached a cable to the towing hook under the front bumper. One truck positioned itself perpendicular to the road, and winched us slowly up the embankment with its engine-driven front-mounted cable rig. In fifteen minutes the Volkswagen was back on the road, minus a windshield, its roof partially caved in. The engine compartment appeared intact, and I tried the ignition rather

than just abandon the car. To my surprise it started right up. Maybe we could make it to Moscow, the next required checkpoint in our rigid visa schedule. It would mean two hours driving in the dead of a Russian winter with no windshield.

My idea was to see the real Russia, not the standard prepackaged Intourist version. I was just starting my year at the University of Göttingen, Germany's traditional center of mathematics. The German university academic year's semesters were split by a full two-month recess in February-March. I thought this break would be a good chance to penetrate the Iron Curtain and explore the East Bloc in my own van. Rumors said it was theoretically possible to get permission to drive a private car in Russia, but I could not find anyone who

had even heard of such a trip. Moreover, I wanted to camp along the way instead of using the pricey Intourist-approved hotels. And as a Vietnam veteran, I had formally taken up arms against communism. No telling what the Soviet security officials would make of that.

As travelling companion, I had chosen a fellow American Fulbrighter, Cynthia, whose German was excellent and Polish passable, and then mailed off the first inquiry to Intourist. A month later the reply from Intourist was simply a pamphlet folded open to the page concerning camping in Russia. No letter, or even a note. The pamphlet emphasized that camping in Russia is permitted only during the three summer months, and only in restricted areas near Odessa. Other pages detailed the intricate requirements for driving a personal car, including prepurchase of all gasoline coupons, which could only be used at approved gas stations sprinkled sparsely along several approved routes. The usual tourist requirements were also in effect. We must pay for all hotels, meals and guides prior to even getting a visa. Any deviation from the approved schedule was penalized with a heavy surcharge. If a traveller spent three extra nights in Minsk and was scheduled to visit five Soviet cities after Minsk, the surcharge was payment of fifteen full fare nights lodging, for the fifteen hotel-night changes called for in the new itinerary.

Since neither coupons nor gasoline could be purchased with cash inside Russia, it was necessary to estimate carefully the total gasoline consumption, and then add some for margin of error. The gas coupons were worthless outside Russia and could not be redeemed at the border for cash. Intourist simply pocketed the difference. The Soviets were not encouraging this sort of trip.

I mailed Intourist our photos, visa applications and passports, and another letter explaining that my van was equipped with a catalytic tent-heater for camping in sub-zero temperatures. I even volunteered to park and sleep in front of Soviet village police stations. A month later, Intourist sent back the same pamphlet again with no further explanation.

In my next letter, I said that I would be willing to sleep *in jail* at each overnight stop. That would keep trip costs down and allow the KGB to keep reasonably close tabs on our whereabouts. Intourist never an-

swered that letter, but held our passports so we could not apply for the necessary East German and Polish visas. Time was on their side. Eventually I capitulated and requested the most economical Intourist lodging available. We would pay the hotels, meals and guides in advance, as required.

The week before our trip was to begin, our passports and visas were returned approved for hotel lodg-

ing each night in two single rooms at the most expensive rates. Officially there was no such thing as first or second class, since "the Soviet Union is a classless society," but People's Number One was considerably more expensive than People's Two or Three. The visas were curious—separate official forms affixed with our photos and the required assortment of bureaucratic stamps and signatures. There was not a mark in our passports.

These separate visa forms were later

confiscated at the end of the trip and later our passports showed that we exited Poland and mysteriously reappeared in Rumania several weeks later.

Our entry visa into the Soviet Union was valid only for the morning of February 23 at the Polish border crossing point at Brest, and to make that deadline it was necessary for us first to cross the Berlin Corridor, then East Germany and Poland. We loaded the van with camping and travelling supplies and started east, gambling that our Russian visa would ease the bureaucratic headaches of obtaining permission to drive through the "independent" communist satellites between us and Brest.

Ten days of borderguard and visa hassles and bluffing finally put us at the Brest crossing point right on schedule. After clearing the friendly Polish side of the border, we were met by a special three-man Soviet border team who greeted us by name. They were expecting us. We were the first English-speaking people to cross the border in several months, said the Chief Inspector, a middle-aged man in a cossack fur cap, snug-fitting brown army uniform, high black-leather boots and a thin black mustache. He explained the border-crossing procedure.

One inspector was a soldier-mechanic who would examine the van after Cynthia and I brought all its contents into the inspection shed. Back and forth we trudged through the snow, carrying clothes, sleeping

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bags, tent, catalytic tent heater, benzine stove and pots and pans, first aid kits, car tools, snow chains, water and gasoline canisters, maps and books, fire extinguisher, backpacks and suitcases. When it was empty, the soldier-mechanic inspector put the van on a ramp and probed every cubic centimeter, behind the dash, inside the exhaust system, spare tire mounting and upholstery. He checked nooks and crannies I had no idea even existed.

In the meantime, the Chief Inspector and the third inspector, a propaganda specialist, scrutinized every tiny item we had laid out on the long counter in the unheated building. The propaganda specialist carefully examined all the books and papers we were carrying. *Playboy* and *New Republic* were taboo, and the assortment of German, Polish and Chinese magazines and books in our luggage baffled him. Americans studying Polish and Chinese in Germany?! Yes. Even two long-forgotten German movie ticket stubs were discovered in my Levi jacket pocket. A capitalistic lottery? No.

The Chief Inspector supervised the operation, and then took me outside. The van had been cleared by the soldier-mechanic and was parked behind the border office. Inside the van, he began groping me—luckily it was too cold for a strip search—and fondled me for several long minutes. Swallowing my pride, I told him to just let me know when he was finished, and endured the affair in silence. My lack of reaction, negative or positive, discouraged him and soon he motioned me back to his tiny office.

Our international automobile insurance was valid in every other country in the world, he explained, but was not valid in the Soviet Union. Special Soviet insurance was required. There were two options — a policy covering only liability, and a comprehensive policy also covering collision for twice the cost at thirty-five U.S. dollars. Up until then Cynthia and I had always opted for the cheapest insurance. For some reason we now flipped a coin and purchased full coverage. That was one lucky toss.

Finally, we were released and on the road to Minsk. It was sunny and cold with two feet of snow along the road, but the traffic was light and we made good time. Our visas stated exactly which roads were

permitted, and which day we could use them. Even stopping on an approved road was forbidden as we soon found out. I pulled to the shoulder of a road outside a small village so Cynthia could attend a Russian Orthodox church service. Both left wheels were still on the approved pavement as I waited in the car. Within

minutes the village commissar appeared on foot. We were not allowed to stop on this road, but only permitted to use it to go from Point A to Point B on the prescribed day. He had the authority to throw us in jail for this violation. While I waited in the car, he barged into the church and brusquely escorted Cynthia back to the van. But he did not press charges, and we learned a valuable lesson about how rigidly the visas were interpreted. These Soviet officials were serious bureaucrats.

Two days later, heading for Moscow seventy miles to the east, I stopped to let Cynthia drive.

A nap in the camper bed was just what I needed before reaching our major objective in Russia. The weather was still cold and clear, the countryside covered in snow, and the road mostly dry and clean.

"Except for occasional patches of ice," I warned Cynthia. "Don't drive too fast and try to anticipate icy spots like bridges or shadows."

I pulled a sleeping bag over me and was soon fast asleep. Then came the crash.

After thawing out in our spartan Intourist Hotel room following the bone-chilling drive into Moscow, I called the Soviet Insurance Agency who sent two engineers to assess the damage to the van. They assured me the repair costs would be covered, but added that the repairs could not be done in Russia, since no Volkswagen or any other capitalist car company was permitted to operate there. Instead, I was to find a way to have the necessary temporary repairs done which would allow me to leave Russia as scheduled.

They offered no suggestions on finding such a solution, and only after days of detective work did I manage to locate a Russian mechanic who worked at the German embassy and sometimes moonlighted for foreigners in distress. He knew of a VW dealership in Helsinki that could send the new windshield in by air

MAYBE NEXT YEAR

they won the championship
but nothing changed much
for their biggest fan
driving home over the bridge
he remembered
his own status
no silver cup no new contract
no crowd waiting
to parade him around
like a conqueror of the cosmos

Walt Phillips

freight, since the overland route took three weeks and the resulting visa delay penalties would cost us a fortune we did not have. At literally the last hour of our Moscow visa, the replacement windshield was finally hammered into place in the dented frame, thanks to our mechanic's industrial-strength rubber hammer and massive biceps. We were on the road again within minutes, headed for the next required checkpoint.

We also experienced many pleasant surprises along the way. At one gas station café our waitress brought the two cups of tea we had ordered and also a large bar of expensive but barely edible chocolate. She pointed to a tall Cossack across the room. He jumped to attention, clicked his heels, bellowed out a thickly accented "To Friendship" in English, and marched out the door.

In one tiny museum with very few foreign tourists, an older man came up to me and started a friendly monologue. My Russian was good enough to tell he was asking about my long hair. What kind of job did I have that the authorities allowed it? He was curious about the loophole in the system. As soon as he heard my heavily-accented Russian reply, he immediately understood and returned my smile. There was no loophole after all—I was a foreigner.

In the scenic port city of Odessa, I was even invited to another hotel guest's room to share a bottle of wine. A gynecologist from the republic of Moldavia, he took great care to point out that his country was not really a part of the Soviet Union, at least not voluntarily. That evening he took me to a Russian war movie, an action-packed epic of the battle of Stalingrad, detailing how the Russians had singlehandedly won World War II. But during the entire trip no Muscovites or other true Russians invited either of us to their apartments, or even to join them at a café table.

On schedule, we exited the Soviet Union into Rumania at a tiny border outpost on the Danube delta near the village of Albita. The Soviet-side inspection of our luggage and the car was surprisingly informal, but our visas were confiscated, and our remaining Russian money was laid out on the counter. Keeping coins for souvenirs

was forbidden. Neither the money nor the remaining gas coupons could be converted back into hard currency, but the border office did have a small food counter. A thin slice of cheese worth exactly the value of our remaining pocket change was cut. The cheese could leave the Soviet Union with us.

