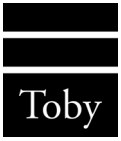
New-Russia
Images from a Journey



I.J. Singer

NEW-RUSSIA
IMAGES FROM A JOURNEY

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Images from a Journey

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Introduction

A Few Words

In late 1926 and early 1927, I traveled on assignment for New York's *Forverts* (*Forward*) through Soviet Russia. I visited numerous cities and towns in the Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Crimean Republics. I journeyed through Jewish colonies and I became acquainted, as much as one can, with the new way of life there.

I do not intend with my book *Nay Rusland* (*New-Russia*) to offer an estimation of the Soviet Union. One cannot over the course of a trip of several months get to know such an immense, complex, and new piece of the world, as contemporary Russia is today. I did, however, see a new society, new ideas, a new way of life. I observed the major differences between old and new Russia, and the Russia of war Communism, between NEP (New Economic Policy), when I left Russia last, and the Russia of today after several years of construction. And what I saw and heard I am transmitting in images and impressions.

I find that it is necessary to be attentive to the fact that the images and impressions are written at a moment, as is always the case with travelers, and are perhaps not sufficiently polished or precise. Please be mindful of them as such.

I. J. S.

1. Across Borders

It's pleasantly warm aboard the train going from Berlin to Moscow via Warsaw. The restaurant car is full. One hears an assortment of languages here: French, German, English, Russian, Chinese, and some Polish. At one table sit several massive blond persons speaking loudly in English. From their loud, carefree speech – sitting in a dining car of a train just in sweaters and not taking etiquette into consideration – one can tell immediately that they have to be Americans. Clearly, they are on their way to Russia looking for concessions, for business.

At a second table sit several Frenchmen, short, thin, brown-complexioned; they are speaking quietly, wearing dark suits and white shirts. I frequently hear the word "Moscow" ("Moscou") spoken. Two Chinese men and one Chinese woman are all wearing glasses, large American-made glasses, and they are dressed in the latest fashions. The stout Chinese woman is even wearing a pink jumper, in which she looks thoroughly comical. She dispenses soup from the amphora for both of her cavaliers, which is not particularly easy for her. Perhaps her hands are better used to working with Chinese chopsticks for eating rice.

The Russians, for the most part white-collar workers in Soviet consulates and embassies, have all the manners of diplomats: elegant, hushed, a bit arrogant, and a little ironical. Simultaneously very delicate, well dressed, and comely are the diplomats' daughters who are smoking thin cigarettes and reading large-sized newspapers in several languages with something less than full confidence.

There's a mixed society in my compartment. There is a young Russian engineer who the Soviets sent abroad to become acquainted with modern technology. He is outspoken, like most Russians, and expresses himself bluntly with delight as the train approaches Russia.

"Everywhere I've been has been very interesting," he says, "but one yearns for home. It's still raining here, and in Moscow we'll have white snow on the ground. Oh, to be back in Moscow!" he ends with the flair of a soldier.

Next to him is seated a Polish diplomat who is on his way to Moscow to deal with a railway agreement. Only the thought that he will soon have an opportunity to eat caviar, Russian roe, fills him with joy.

"I am a great lover of your 'roe,'" he says in Russian to the engineer. "I lived in Russia for twenty-five years."

There is a couple next to me – a young, sympathetic woman, an actress from the Russian theater by the name of Zerkalova, and her husband, a gigantic man, an actor by the name of Korenev.

They are both returning from a trip through Europe where they were familiarizing themselves with the theater. They are both disappointed with Europe.

"We were everywhere," says the actress. "Berlin, Paris, Vienna, and saw not a single interesting performance. Paris was particularly poor, where aside from nudity they had nothing to show for themselves."

On the whole, her husband likes nothing in Europe.

"Feh," he says, "all of Europe is one giant lackey. They're always bowing before you. It's disgusting."

The Polish diplomat makes a joke:

"Nonetheless," he says and points to the packed trunks and suitcases of the artistic couple, "my lords, you seemed to have brought back something from Europe."

"Clothing, yes!" says the actress. "No shortage of nudity or clothing."

I note that patriotism has sharply evolved among the Russians of late – something that was always for the Russians, a few exceptions notwithstanding, strange. Russians always used to point to everything of their own as bad or crude. The Russians acknowledge this:

"True enough, we've become patriots."

Before long the actor Korenev launches into a discussion with me. It turns out that he knows the Yiddish Chamber Theater of Vofsi

[Shloyme Mikhoels, 1890–1948] well, as well as other Yiddish artists, and that he is himself Jewish.

I begin speaking with him in Yiddish. He understands, but replying proves too difficult for him.

"I regret," he apologizes in Russian, "but I've always used Russian alone."

A Polish Jew in such an instance wouldn't find it necessary to apologize for not knowing Yiddish. In this instance, though, the actor's wife feels a little uncomfortable. Her husband consoles her:

"There's no reason you should understand the language – you're Russian."

"Yes," she replies, "I am Russian and my husband is a Jew."

It is so natural and simple, that even for the Polish diplomat it is scarcely worth noting.

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Negoreloe (Nieharelaje), at the Polish-Soviet border.

The Russian engineer is beaming, and he has a little snow, for which he so waited, to boot. The Polish soldiers in helmets, who escorted us for several kilometers in the "free zone," descend. A group of railway porters comes to help, Russian porters (*nosilshchiki*) wearing white aprons on their fur coats, with felt boots, and with numbers. I don't know which way to go: "Comrade porter" or "Citizen porter"? The Russians help me out of my embarrassment – "Porter!" they call out simply, just like in the past.

At the border hut, an immense room, soldiers are hanging around sporting long, split military greatcoats, as the Russian cavalry used to wear, and green caps.

I do not believe my own eyes. Can one really trust one's travel bags to the "railway porters?" Are these tall men in the green caps Bolshevik soldiers?

I remember them differently from six years ago: in straw sandals, in cotton jackets, with machine guns hanging from all shoulders, with ribbons, and with holstered guns.

One or two of them look through the passports, glance at the suitcases, only a glance, and ask politely if one of us might be bringing something new in.

I wait a little bit longer. I expect to see a young woman in a leather jacket and a giant Mauser at her side, speaking in a basal voice. But, for the life of me, I can't find one. The porter hurries us:

"Faster, citizen, the train to Moscow is ready to go."

And I board the train car promptly – it is clean and tidy. The conductor shows me to my seat. He takes my ticket and says quietly:

"You will get your ticket back while you're sleeping undisturbed."

I lie down for a while on the wide seat, but it's difficult for me to fall asleep.

I made this same trip seven years ago. I had good fortune at that time. I climbed up into an upper bunk, and no one bothered me at all.

Every half hour back then the train stopped.

"Comrade engineer, why are we stopped?"

"We're out of wood for the locomotive; I'm going off to collect some now…"

We departed and then again stopped.

"Comrade engineer, why are we stopped?"

"Comrades, my "grandmother" lives along this line. I'll just go and have a glass of tea with her and be back within half an hour."

He returned three hours later, and there was no indication that he had had any tea to drink. He could barely stand on his feet.

Now the train takes off quickly. I'm in my appointed seat, and the conductor is walking on tiptoe, so as not to wake anyone up.

I am beginning to believe in miracles.

2. Moscow

In Moscow's broad, immense, and truly Russian "Red Square" of wondrous beauty, the Kremlin with all of its gables, turrets, Orthodox churches, crosses, and palaces juts out above the stone, green wall.

The red banner brilliantly lit up by electric lighting and flying over the city at night like a flaming red torch, joins the symbol of red Russia, the rugged, black, two-headed Russian eagle still crying out forcefully to the heights. It is the symbol of Russia's past, of Tsarism and Russian Orthodoxy.

And this is a characteristic now of all of Moscow, of all of Russia.

What a wonderful mishmash of the very newest with the very oldest in one domain, one place, one step!

I arrive in the city on Saturday night.

The innumerable churches in the holy city ring out now on Saturday evening over the entire huge and extensively laid out city. Heavy bells tranquilly echoing, and tiny, minute, rushing bells mix together like a cantor and his choristers, drifting far and wide. And in it one can hear the deep revolutionary songs of the marching Red Army, and they accompany the sonorous, joyous, and shrill voices of promenading children, the "little Octobrists," members of the Communist Youth League, who are escorted by their teacher.

Next to a large placard reading "Religion is the Poison of Workers and Peasants," there stands a brightly lit Orthodox church festooned in gold with a spherical cap embellished in gold on its head. Hundreds crowd about its doorways, clamoring around an old woman selling candles, and seeking to purchase one to light in honor of the holy Mother Mary.

At Lenin's Mausoleum, an eternal flame burns continually, and religious women pass by and cross themselves dozens of times on

their foreheads and chests, whispering prayers to the accompaniment of countless church bells.

That's how I have always seen it, the great, wondrous, and beautiful city of Moscow, no matter where I turn.

The very new with the very old together.

Moscow, the world's most devoted mother, whose thousands of schools, children's homes, kindergartens, and nurseries fill the streets and alleys, where all manner of model schools, pedagogical institutions, professional schools, and technical schools open their doors to the poorest and most downtrodden, to whom the doors of learning and education previously had always been closed. Moscow, the protector of little babies, the provider for the children of workers, who, in place of leaving them scattered in filthy, dark homes with a rag in their mouths, gives them a bright home with white walls, caring nurses, fresh white milk, beds, and doctors.

And Moscow is the stepmother of thousands, thousands of homeless children, children who run around naked, half-naked, and barefoot over the cold streets, who trudge about every step, in rags and tatters, with filthy heads and sickly eyes, putrefied and debauched, with venereal disease. In place of clothing, they wear sacks and sleep in garbage heaps, in empty barrels, on stairs, in sewer pipes; they snatch at the garments of all passersby for anything they can get their hands on, they roam from place to place in bands like wandering mice, and work with knives like murderers, and they are not even thirteen years of age.

Moscow the protector of women.

This is, is it not, the one and only place in which women actually have full rights, not only on paper but in life itself? For here, and only here, does a woman receive the same wage for her work as her husband; for only here a woman works in the highest institutions and councils and administers the land, just like her husband; only here is a married working woman the same as all men, not to be removed from the factory, as in other countries; only here does a pregnant woman receive a full four months of respite so as not to harm either

her own or her child's health; for only here does a woman have her own "Women's Department" which protects her from every injustice administered by her husband or others.

Moscow is the stepmother of many thousands of young women and girls who tramp about in their lightweight dresses through the streets and alleys and call out to men with their highly made-up eyes, spreading about themselves profligacy, disease, and depravity.

They're everywhere, on the boulevards, the streets, and the alleyways, by the hotels, the bridges, and the train stations – old and young, Russian and Jewish, Caucasian and Armenian, blonde and brunette, beautiful and unattractive – and there are children, twelve years old and even ten, lying around homeless at every step and selling their bodies.

Moscow, the city of wisdom and light.

More than anywhere else, here the gates of wisdom are open before everyone. From the most distant villages, peasant youth, both boys and girls, are drawn here, and they become doctors, engineers, teachers, economists, and professors. From the smallest, most secluded Jewish towns, young men and women come here, children of cobblers and tailors, and absorb themselves in Torah and learning; from the factory, covered in paint and filth, come men and women laborers into the bright halls of workers' faculties, people's universities, and higher courses of study, to acquire wisdom from life and from the world.

And Moscow to this day still has no compulsory education law – while thousands of children, young people, ignorant and boorish, run rampant over the streets with bundles of newspapers in their hands, with various goods and food, making a clamor with their voices and exclamations.

So diverse, rich and poor, broad and narrow, light and dark, new and old, religious and heretical, enlightened and boorish are you, you great, beautiful, and authentically Russian Moscow!

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Until today, I had not fully grasped the true nature of Moscow since I last left it.

The city is full of movement and stir. The tramways are running, automobiles cut through the streets with great electric eyes; the buses crammed full of people rush by hurriedly splashing filth, with which Moscow has always, throughout its existence, been blessed.

From all sides are drawn workers, thousands of workers from the factories, and they pack the boulevards, squares, streets, and alleys. From some squares, one can hear radio concerts and speeches, and thousands standing with ears perked up, listening to uplifting words coming from somewhere both far off and near at hand.

People here stare at strangers no more than in provincial cities. Among the thousands of caps and hats, one frequently runs into elegant and, even more often, semi-elegant people whom one will encounter nowhere but in Moscow. One meets such stylish Muscovites often in their starched collars (which are already a bit overly starched, and as if done purposefully), in a worn-out jacket with a cut off hem, as well as a pair of muddy galoshes not fit for walking in.

The hotel in which I am staying is also not so proletarian as in Minsk. An old, dignified servant stands next to the wide doorway with a superb silver beard and stately appearance, such that you could take him for an emperor. He opens the hotel doors with great fanfare.

There is a person circulating in the magnificent hotel restaurant, wearing a frock coat with stiff linen, and he bows before each and every guest.

The waiter accepts tips, and upon reception, he bows just as in the past.

"Many thanks! My compliments!" he says.

The restaurant is not private. The hotel and the restaurant belong to the Moscow "Soviet."

About the prices it is best not to say anything. Someone coming from Poland will be stunned to hear these prices.

It's the same on the international train running from Minsk to Moscow.

On the plates in the splendid dining car on the train, "Proletarians of all lands, unite" is imprinted in red lettering. And the food, there is nothing proletarian whatsoever about the food they serve, because the prices are decidedly not proletarian. Traveling with me is a millionaire Jewish manufacturer from Lodz who is on business in Moscow. He continually summons the server on the train, a Jewish boy, and repeatedly orders him to bring him newspapers, to attend to some telegrams for him, and to buy cigarettes for him.

And even dancing, which people in Minsk look upon with such fear, is no sin in Moscow – in the well-illuminated restaurants and cafes, people dance the fox trot, music plays forth, and it is entirely lively.

There's also no shortage of even casinos, roulette wheels, and gambling dens. I notice a lit-up sign reading "Casino, Lotto." In 1918, when Pavlo Skoropadskyi [1873–1945] ruled in Ukraine, such places used to exist in every city and town. When the Bolsheviks occupied Ukraine, they closed down all of these gaming houses. Now, it would seem, they are back. I could scarcely believe my eyes. Perhaps, it's an old sign still hanging around? I open the door, and before I am even able to look around, the attendant grabs my coat.

"Please, come in! Welcome!"

Hundreds of people with beaming eyes and agitated countenances are standing around tables, tossing their money. One person, an employee of the casino, is shouting and calling things out.

Do you know to whom this gambling den belongs? It isn't private, but is owned by a municipal entity supporting homeless children.

Long lines have formed all the way to the street corner, as in the good old days. Hundreds of women stand there and wait. They're waiting by the manufacturing cooperatives to obtain articles of clothing for themselves or for a child. The lines extend far, very long – and a policeman in a long, black uniform and red cap keeps things in order.

This recalls for me the old days, times of war or civil war – and, strangely, at this same time Moscow is impressively building itself

up. They are erecting a telegraph station, a building occupying three streets: a skyscraper that New York would not be ashamed to have.

And many other squares that at my departure [in 1921] I left behind wrecked, vacant, and bricked up, are now being replaced with new, lovely houses. New monuments have been added as well.

Once again, old and new together.

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Bright and alive is business in Moscow – in the shops, department stores, and cooperatives which occupy entire houses, and in which one could easily get lost.

Everything is on display in the cooperatives, expensive fur coats and beautiful linens, patent leather shoes and perfumes, silk scarfs and diamonds. With money one can have them all, and the prices for everything are very robust, over the top. There are cooperative department stores that are as big as the well-known department store Warenhäuser in Berlin. They're packed everywhere. Some buy things and some stand by with burning, avid eyes and empty pockets. Amid the hundreds of cooperatives, there are numerous private stores and businesses.

Here, in Moscow alone, it appears that cooperativism has not as yet expelled such open private business, as is the case in the provinces.

And, even more than businesses in stores is commerce negotiated on the street, in the squares, and along the sidewalks.

Many merchants, without number or end, blanket the area with their cries, proclaiming their wares. Men and women, young children, boys and girls, Russians, Jews, Chinese, Caucasians, everyone shouting, promoting, yelling. Everything is for sale here! Meat pies and the writings of Mikhail Lermontov [1814–1841], shoestrings, women's underwear, cheap perfume, Lenin's portraits, brass crosses, revolutionary poetry by Demyan Bednyi [1883–1945], needles, roast cutlets, slaughtered chickens, crayfish, fish still alive, grapes, little stuffed puppies, and wax candles.

Never in my life have I seen such street commerce. Everything is on the street. The entire area around my hotel, from Revolution Square to the stunning Kitay-Gorod, is one immense, boisterous, shouting, and colorful fair.

Beggars, cripples, the blind, the homeless, children, and women begging with children in hand cry out and chase after:

"A kopeck, citizen!"

A Chinese man with a lame foot, and to be sure with raw flesh for all the world to see, shows everyone his possessions and sings a sad melody which suggests Jewish laments, so that people give him alms. A Jew with curly black hair and shiny eyes is selling polish for shoes, and he's making a racket, hawking his wares with such an interminable melody that he could use it as a mourning prayer, or he could be a preacher among religious moralists.

Bootblacks – Armenians, Tatars, and Syrians – with dark lustrous eyes just like the footwear they polish call out in their distinctive Russian. Chinese women with short feet bustle about from place to place and sell paper snakes and birds – and wagon drivers, true Muscovites, carters with red belts, green pleated frock coats, and quadrangular fur-trimmed hats on their heads won't allow you through:

"Come, citizen, let's take a ride?" they beckon in Russian.

There are no rates on wagoners. You have to bargain with them. They'll demand three rubles and will subsequently go for a ruble or half a ruble.

In spite of the fact that the city is combating private commerce, all that business with all its bargaining, fantasies, boisterousness, and howling is being done on the street openly and freely.

The movie theaters are wildly illuminated, calling out in lit-up letters and colorful marquees. The wine merchants and liquor businesses are brightly illumined. Everywhere, even in all the cooperatives, colorful bottles of wine and vodka are lined up and making their appeal.

It is Saturday evening. Workers have claimed their wages, and from every nook and cranny they trudge about drunk, tottering on their feet, cursing, singing, and falling down.

When I left Moscow six years ago, there was no trace of liquor at the time. People did, in fact, drink, but covertly and their own product, *Samagon* (home-distilled vodka), which the peasants would make from grains. Now, vodka is for sale everywhere. They observed that the public was nonetheless drinking alcohol. The peasants were playing havoc with the grain, and meanwhile the government was getting nothing from all this. And, return on the sale of liquor is quick.

People are now drinking freely and brazenly.

"Let me be, fool," cries a drunkard at his wife trying to get him home: "Leave me alone! Or I'll smack you in the mouth."

This makes a bizarre impression together with the revolutionary songs of marching units of youth militia.

And he even offers her a Russky "blessing": "up your mother's," and a torrent of abuse not likely to enthuse her.

The true Russian has to inhibit himself all week long from screaming "dirty Jew," but no one now dares enunciate such an expression. One could end up in the hands of the G.P.U. [secret police], which everyone fears; however, with cup in hand, he forgets the law and the G.P.U. and goes on an uncontrolled spree.

And even cabarets, cafés chantants, and nightspots are to be found in the city.

Almost all of them belong to the city, to help support homeless children. To all appearance, though, they seem just like those that one finds abroad, but with the difference that here they're a little sad.

It is interesting for me to see how contemporary Russia enjoys itself. Together with several acquaintances, I set out for Arbat, a street in Moscow, and we visit several sites there.

The people by their little tables are in an uplifting mood, somewhat intoxicated. Men, women, several military personnel, a young group in boots and blouses – they sit closely together around their tables and eat and drink. Servers force their way through the throng with fresh beverages. One person wearing glasses sits with a woman dead drunk, doing outrageous things, quarreling with the servers.

The prices are terrifying. The least trifle is extremely expensive, but people are unsparing, paying fifty or even one hundred rubles

at one table. On a small stage sit musicians, all dressed up in black outfits, of course, playing joyous songs.

Soon there appears a Gypsy choir, an old and well-known Russian Gypsy choir with Gypsy women. They're dressed unremarkably, incapable of affording silk, but they manage with reasonably inexpensive colorful materials.

One of the Gypsies in a fantastic red suit and with a repugnant, fierce face leads the choir; the Gypsy women sing their songs, old Russian songs about love, about wild journeys on a sleigh with three horses, about black eyes, and about similar things of this sort.

Others work their way amid the tables, joining their guests, ordering up some wine to honor the performers, taking it all in, and even kneeling.

After the Gypsies come women singers and clowns. People are dancing, leaping, telling dubious jokes. One older clown is particularly excellent, quite stout and with a sly mien. He kisses the women's hands on stage, calls the audience's attention to their beautiful little feet, and gesticulates comically.

And mixed in among everyone there remains a good deal of gloom and melancholy.

Something in all this gaiety is incomplete, is imperfect. The people are in a somewhat agitated, forlorn, and rather belligerent mood. Sitting by my table, for example, are several young Russians looking constantly for an opportunity to get into an argument. Regarding me, they're attentive to the fact that my chair is close to their table, and as they walk by, they make a point of bumping into our table, as they want to start some trouble.

"Why do people behave so maliciously?" I ask my friends.

"You can't take offense at them," they reply. "They're sitting on tenterhooks. It's all being recorded."

It turns out that there are "eyes" in the restaurants and night clubs, which peer out, which notice everything, record everything, and keep a watch on it.

There is no longer a great bourgeoisie left in Moscow. Even those who are earning money by running silent businesses rarely show

themselves now in public. The speculator, the Nep-man (businessman during NEP), is intimidated. Just a year ago, many hundreds of them were arrested and sent to distant Narim (Siberia). It turned out at the time that the G.P.U. had known about their whole lives. Every bottle of wine consumed in a restaurant was recorded; every pound of caviar was immortalized.

The Nep-man is now trembling, wanting fewer to notice him and less attention drawn his way. He is even fearful of wearing the fine clothing that he purchased. He's better off in a cap so as to appear more proletarian.

Those who go to restaurants now are mostly state employees, "specialists," workers in the cooperatives, and only God knows how they're able to get into restaurants and night clubs and toss money around at the tables.

Eyes are watching and warning, and people never know from which side or which table the "eyes" are upon them.

Tomorrow or the day after, all of a sudden one can be taken to task and ordered to account for oneself:

"Comrade, where did you get that money to drink wine?"

The public is agitated, not calm, and ready to quarrel out of anger.

Restaurants of this sort are many: no lack of music, songs, Gypsies, choirs, recitations, men and women singers, jokesters, women dancers, clowns, humorists, and pranksters.

The waiters near the doors stand ready to snatch your coat.

"Please, come in! Welcome!"

Numerous people, Nep-men, military men, specialists, employees of the state, cooperative employees, and clerks pour out of the night clubs partly or completely drunk.

It's 2:00 a.m. and the clubs are closing for the night. People must be heading home! The coach drivers attack like a swarm of bees. Mixed together with the public are others on their way from clubs, meetings, and informal groups who now fill up the streets.

Something of a scandal ensues between streetwalkers and policemen. They're not supposed to be out on the streets after 1:00 a.m. A policeman detains one of them. She's drunk and has no desire to go

with him. The officer grabs her, and she smacks him. He can't hit her back. They aren't supposed to hit arrested parties, be it a thief or a streetwalker.

Beggars are still hanging around.

"A piece of bread, citizen, for poor children."

A ragged youngster refuses to leave me alone. He calls after me, even employing an old title:

"Sir," he says, "give me a few kopecks. I must pay for lodging in a shelter for the night."

I am afraid to give him anything, because I would soon be surrounded by several dozen beggars who could relieve me of my hat and coat and beat me up.

Sellers, male and female, have rolls, meat pies, apples, and cookies for sale, drenched as they are in rain and mist, ceaselessly calling out with drowsy voices:

"Get the last one, cheap!"

And from the Kremlin, two slow peals from the clock tower reach us, a sign that it's already 2:00 a.m. The echoes reverberate in the damp, cold air. Lenin's portrait, on paper, on stone, bronze, marble, and plaster of Paris, looks out from all corners, squares, streets, and windows. Over the city red banners flutter from the Kremlin, illumined with fire, like a fluttering torch – and the beggars and street dealers stand out more than anything with their muffled voices in the night.

How wonderful you are, Moscow, with your extraordinary hodgepodge, the old and the new all together.