

The following has been taken from a tape made of
a presentation by John Thomas McGuire III to a
combined meeting of the Sand Lake Historical Society
and the Poestenkill Council on the Arts at Sand
Lake Town Hall on February 13, 1990.

FOCUS ON MOSCOW _ A VISIT WITH FRIENDS

John McGuire opened his presentation with the comment that he is in the fortunate position of being able to combine travel with work and having friends present when he performs - and being paid for it.

He traced the 20 year relationship of two women, his boss at Empire State Institute for the Performing Arts (ESIPA) and Natalia Satz who heads the Moscow Music Theatre for Children. It was this friendship which lead to the cultural exchanges between Moscow and Albany. The two women share an interest in theatre, in children, and in producing musical theatre for them. Madame Satz, now 87 years old, has a colorful and distinguished background. As a young person, she studied acting with Stanislovski and music with Rimsky-Korsakov. Prokofiev composed the music for "Peter and the Wolf" for her. Her father was art and musical director for the Moscow Art Theatre. He wrote "The Bluebird" which was presented at the EGG in 1986. The bluebird has been established as his symbol. Atop the Moscow building which houses the Childrens' Theatre is a 12 feet high harp topped by a bluebird. The main curtain inside this theatre has been embroidered with another gigantic bluebird.

The Moscow company had visited Albany on two occasions. On their first visit, they performed "The Bluebird." Two years later, in 1988, they brought us "Madame Butterfly" which was

performed with children in mind. Mr. McGuire commented, " It was wonderful. I only saw it three times."

During their visits to Albany, the Russian company was paid a per diem by New York State which was intended to provide such necessities as food during their stay. But the ESIPA people took the Russian visitors into their homes providing meals and gifts so that the U.S. money could be used to purchase needed items to carry back to Moscow. Even at home, Russian rubles are worth nothing; there is nothing on the shelves of the stores to buy. Some of the metal containerized shipping crates which carried costumes and scenery for the presentations arrived here half empty and left, full.

At this point, John McGuire said, " This story will be about things you cannot buy there and things you don't need to buy there."

Last summer, 83 members of the ESIPA troupe flew into Moscow. They arrived on a holiday, Childrens' Day. Everything was shut down. As a further complication, their hotel accommodations were not available. A Russian Congress had remained in session for three weeks beyond the scheduled one week and the delegates were occupying all available hotel space. For a while, it appeared that the American group would have to be scattered about the city in whatever housing could be found.

At this point, Madame Satz stepped in. She appealed personally to Mrs. Gorbachev and impressed upon her the importance of the group being kept together. Housing was found for all 83 in the Orionic. It was a sort of youth hostel which some of the Americans jokingly referred to as the "Oinky Doink." It was situated directly across the street from the Presidential home.

The following day, the ESIPA performers were greeted at the Moscow Music Theatre by "old friends." They were Russian people whom they had known for all of 3 to 5 days in their entire lives (during previous exchanges in Moscow and Albany.) These old friends had prepared a feast for the Americans in spite of the food shortages and long lines that are involved in even buying a loaf of bread in Russia. As Madame said, "As soon as they knew you were coming, they planted the cucumber seeds." It was June and such delicacies as strawberries, cherry tomatoes, fresh dill, and cucumbers graced the tables. Traditional Russian specialties such as salami and caviar were provided....from somewhere. And there was a quantity of "champagnski." "I could not empty my cup," said John McGuire. The entire welcoming celebration had been grown, prepared, and presented by the Russian performers. No government funds were involved. Throughout the entire evening, Mr. McGuire emphasized the warmth and generosity of the Russian friends which were valued even more because of the obvious hardships and

shortages in the country.

John called two special friends "En" and "Vilem." These were not their real names but the pronunciations came close to the Russian versions. Together with their 20 year old daughter, Karina, En and Vilem occupy a 3 room apartment. It consists of a combination living-dining-bedroom, one more small bedroom, and a tiny kitchen. En and Vilem are musicians and their daughter studies the bassoon and piano at a music conservatory. When she completes these studies, she will be qualified for a job with a "very classy" concert orchestra.

John was invited to their home for dinner on three occasions. En speaks a little English: Vilem, none. So it was not surprising when a language misunderstanding arose (mistaking "Tuesday" for "Thursday") and John missed out on one of these special evenings. On this second trip to Moscow, John realized that he had picked up enough understanding of Russian to be able to pick up the gist of conversations going on around him. Russian is a difficult language to learn and to speak. John did memorize a 20-minute-long Russian poem to recite for his Russian friends but it took him 4 months to do it.

On his visits with En and Vilem, John made his way to their home by Metro(subway) and by walking. He commented that Russian escalators are the fastest ones in the world.

Outside the apartment house, the view included a derelict car, a steel girder left over from previous construction work, a lovely small lake at which the swans of the area spend their winters, and a former monastery complete with golden turrets which now functions as a museum.

The apartment itself had been scrubbed clean and repainted in honor of the visit of the Americans. Though John went bearing gifts from the United States, he was overwhelmed by those showered upon him....."for your wife"(a tablecloth), "for your children(chocolate candy bars), " for your home." "think of us when you see this."

They drank Champanski" from glasses which had been purchased especially for the occasion. The stickers were still on them. They ate for 3 hours. Russians don't eat salads but they knew Americans do so, somehow, lettuce had been found.

At the end of the meal, there was time to talk. John's wife had studied Russian for a year and had composed a letter she sent to En andVilem. Karina performed on her bassoon. Then, she sat down at the piano and played numbers that everyone joined in singing...."Hello, Dolly", and "If It Takes Forever" from "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg."

The hosts escorted their guests all the way back to the hostel, a trip which included a car ride(Vilem paid for it with a pack of cigarettes), more time on the Metro, more walking.

En and Vilem are fortunate enough to own a summer camp, a dacha, though this is kept a secret even from their fellow musicians. They have worked with the concert orchestra for 22 and 20 years and have saved up enough money to buy a car. But no cars have become available in the 7 years they have been waiting. When En returned to Moscow from her first visit in the United States, she was so angry at the lack of merchandise on the shelves of Russian stores that she refused to shop for 6 weeks. She had experienced the abundance of consumer goods in Albany and questioned, " Where is our food?"

Moscow in June is devoid of teenagers. School is closed and all young people in their teens are sent to Pioneer Camps in the Black Sea area. But the younger children attended performances of "Peter Pan" put on by the ESIPA group. The actors were gratified to received 10 minute ovations and gifts of flowers(from which John has saved the ribbons). He played the parts of the dog and the crocodile in the play and was given what turned out to be a collection of small dogs made of china.....and a few crocodiles. The troupe put on 19 performances while they were in Moscow.

In the Albany area, Mr. McGuire visits schools and performs "word pictures" from which the children write poetry. When he learned he would be going to Moscow, he made two visits to grades 2 and 3 in a school in Guilderland. During the first

the poems were written. On his second visit, he photographed each of the 50 children so that, along with a name and address, he could attach a picture of the author to each poem. The following are several of the poems:

Together, we have made peace
And the population has made an increase.

I'm special because, you see,
I have a friend across the sea.
I don't know them and they don't know me
But we're two good friends, as good as can be.

What is it like in Russia? I wonder.
Is there ever lightning and thunder?
What is the weather?
Is there a place where you and your family get together?
Is the earth sweet like over here?
Does the wind blow on the valleys down low?
Is there grass and trees?
Are there any bees?
Do you get any snow?
Gee, how am I supposed to know?
Well, I've gotta go.

I'll be you and you'll be me.

It's not true; it can't be.

We each have a feeling.

We've got to share them.

I'll bet then they'll heal

And friends we will become.

Mr. McGuire distributed these poems to Russian children during two performances given by ESIPA in Moscow's Pearl Room. This is a special place in which the walls are covered with lacquered enamel panels said to be worth \$2,000,000 to \$3,000,000 each. Mr. McGuire met with 50 children, seated on floor cushions, who were students from a performing arts school. Then, with the help of a translator, he went on to present poems such as "How to eat a poem" and "When Tillie ate the chili." It seems that the interpreter had some difficulty making the translation into Russian but the children were politely pleased. The comment was interjected that Russians and Americans don't share the same kind of verbal humor.

Then, the Russian children were asked to write poems to be brought back to the United States. Most wrote messages; a few, poetry. The father of one shy boy asked if his son could be allowed to read the poem he had written. The boy's

name was Alexi and his poem read as follows:

Our planet is very good
 And we will become good friends.
 Earlier, we have not understood
 Each other but now understand.
 We are together today
 But tomorrow you'll go away.
 And , so, at home we'll remain
 And be waiting for you again.

The Russian children then sang several numbers, complete with harmony. They danced. And more gifts were exchanged.

All of the above events took place the first week in Moscow.

After two weeks, the Congress had come to an end and the ESIPA troupe was able to move to their hotel accommodations, a 4000 room structure. It seems that the city of Moscow is all things....falling down and coming together; old and new. It was with considerable relief that the Americans left the Orione for, there, they couldn't set foot outside of their rooms without being accosted by youths asking that they exchange dollars for rubles. They would offer 10 rubles in exchange for one U.S. dollar though the official exchange rate is considerably lower.

En had no use for Gorbachev. She said that conditions have

grown worse during the four years he has been in power. Stores are even more devoid of such necessities as shoes, bread and meat. Russian musical instruments are of inferior quality and En and Vilem had to trade to obtain supplies such as Rosin for the bow of the violin. John's roommate was a "sporty dresser" who returned home to Albany with almost-empty suitcases. He had given away most of his travelling wardrobe! Knowledge of the existence of these shortages made their gifts to the Americans even that more appreciated. One friend named Victor gave John a book of Russian poetry. Victor borrowed John's walkman and taped the entire book. That was Victor's gift. John takes children's books wherever he goes. He has been told that entire families have learned English through these books.

A performance of the Moscow Circus at home was quite different from the one we recently enjoyed in Albany. We were shown slides of some of the acts. There were such unusual offerings as camels, a hippo balancing act, a magician who changed her costume 8 times in 6 minutes, along with superb clowns and high-wire performers.

Russians love their animals. Particularly pet dogs. At 8:30 PM, it was still light out and large numbers of people met in the park while out for the nightly "run."

At a performance of the ballet "Cinderella," John photographed

the lobby of the theatre along with shots of the stage itself. In the lobby, there were huge bird cages filled with many colorful, singing birds. There were goldfish ponds. And tables at which paper and crayons were provided so that the children could draw pictures of their favorite character in the ballet. At the end of this performances, the Americans went on stage and, this time, gave flowers to the Russians.

When the day of departure arrived, Russian friends gathered at the airport to bid farewell to the American. As always had been the case with these warm people, there was much kissing, some tears shed, and more gifts were exchanged.