

# ВОЛІТА

2000



A travel diary by Oresta Cybriwsky

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We're now back home from the Volga. Thank God it is still (again?) summer here. As with every trip to a foreign country, there are stories as well as unusual experiences to tell. Lots of you have been asking how it was, so I decided to write some memories down and I've been having a good time doing this. Please bear with my long essay - postcards were very hard to find in Russia, especially nice ones, and I have more room to write in this way.

We flew to the airport in Frankfurt, where I was recognized by Dr. Sternberg, who'd noticed a resemblance to the face on my CD cover. He was the one who asked what planet I was from upon hearing it, and engaged me for this trip upon recommendation from a mutual friend. It was good to see somebody you knew, even if only through eMail, phone & fax. A very decent, cultured and learned person, plays violin as a hobby, has a good sense of humor - Sascha took to him immediately and called him fondly "Sternie" ("Stern" means star), which means a lot, because Sascha is more introverted than Dani and doesn't respond to people he doesn't know so quickly. I am very grateful to Dr. S for having made so much possible on this trip.

I was also able to let off some steam with him, when the notorious Dr. B, who organized this "Wolga 2000", an excellent idea and a difficult feat, was getting to me without really doing anything, but just being Dr. B, and not really doing anything. This guy comes from the literary field, dresses all in black like a preacher, enjoys being on stage reading Brecht poetry or the like, or in the bar partying Russian style till early morning. I'm not quite sure if his mind is politically rooted in Russian/East German mentality or what. I had problems with him and his young sidekick, a tight-jeaned guy from one of the New States of Germany who never smiles. Eventually I was able to let go of the whole situation, ignore them both and just do my own thing. But that took a while.

So, after our great Transit stress consisting of:

- ❖ the flights Munich-Frankfurt, Frankfurt-Moscow: the boys were used to Boeing planes, not an Iljushin. The seats were like old movie seats, you sank into them. But that was very comfortable!! The ceiling of the old plane itself was at least five times higher than our planes. You didn't feel so claustrophobic, but it rattled and shook tremendously upon landing. However, the tables were rusty, the style was simple and not the most modern, and Sascha & Dani said "Oh,

God this is OLD. And no TV? Is this going to continue in this way?" Welcome to Russia. Then they asked when the plane had been built and were told: 1991. Shock.

- ❖ Then, at one of the eight Moscow Airports, loading suitcases into busses for a much too brief sightseeing tour of **Moscow** by night, breathtaking & awesome, with the excitement and brilliance of New York/Hong Kong/Berlin etc.. Sascha oh'ed and ah'ed at the spectacular Kreml and all the gorgeous cathedrals with gold-starred blue or gold onion domes, at the busy avenues (one avenue has eight lanes !!!), lined with brightly lit restaurants, - as well as 40 McDonalds in Moscow alone - neon billboards and shops, and exclaimed: "We must come back!" Our group of some 100 travelers was whisked quickly into a large restaurant, where we got our first meal in Russia, without even losing anybody en route in the street. Some of us would have gladly skipped the meal only to be able to see the lighted Kreml more closely, and the Red Square, where that young German squirt Mathias Rust landed his little private plane many years ago and caused a major uproar. God, how time flies... And here we were being tourists in Moscow.
- ❖ then dragging luggage again to the Moscow train station, up and down curbs and barriers, running with kilos of luggage weight to keep up with the rest. I didn't want to lose my kids, neither my luggage, nor my train. An American in Paris is a different experience than an American in Moscow.
- ❖ schlepping the baggage (I packed too much!!!!!!!) into the old train, (our clever suitcases on wheels almost destroyed the gangways charmingly carpeted with Russian rugs),
- ❖ midnight train Moscow to Nizhnij Novgorod, arrival 7:15 a.m., after sleeping as if having been personally pulled in a wheelbarrow directly on the railroad tracks. There were four people to a compartment plus all our luggage,
- ❖ again into busses, where the luggage compartment under the bus was rusted shut so we loaded the suitcases, which sometimes weighed forty pounds each) onto the bus,
- ❖ drove to the pier, stretching our weary and sweaty little necks right and left to view more beautiful cathedrals and interesting sights,

we arrived at long last in **Nizhnij Novgorod**, at the boat with the same name, **Nizhnij Novgorod**, dragging our luggage from the street all the way down to the ship itself. I was amazed at the older people managing to survive all of this without collapsing. I was on the verge myself (Dr. S. came to the rescue.)

Let's stop here to catch our breaths. The time was two hours ahead of German time. We had left home approximately twenty-four hours earlier.

One shouldn't compare, but one usually does. I do, anyway, I'm human. The boat was a shock, compared to the five-star luxury ship I was used to. (Nothing like bragging.) Guess I was like the boys on the airplane. Of course, this was a Riverboat and not a luxury ocean liner. There is a big difference. The boys were assigned onto the Main Deck in bunk beds. Dani discovered two large dried up fish wrapped in a wool blanket in his closet. Somebody forgot their catch? What a welcome. There was NO swimming pool. The staircase was narrow. It was difficult going up while somebody was coming down, especially with luggage. I had the "luxury" of the Upper Deck, as well as the "luxury" of schlepping my heavy luggage up two flights of stairs. No elevators like on the *Ms Europa*, and nobody to help me.... How do you spell service? S..E..L..F.....This idea hasn't quite arrived there yet. My cabin, with its pumpkin-orange walls, was bigger than what the boys had, but just as simple. I had the luxury of not having to share the cabin with anybody. Thanks to Dr. S?

Also this luxury we later learned of: the higher up you go on the ship, the less your bathroom stinks. Sascha discovered that the bathroom could be transformed into a shower by pulling the faucet (which is a shower hose) out of the sink and hanging it onto a special hook on the wall, then drawing the orange shower curtain around the toilet and entrance door to the bathroom. Bingo! A shower stall. The water trickles out the drain. Actually a very clever idea and space-saving. Takes getting used to. And as one usual does in hotels, I stole a piece of soap to take home as a souvenir, but not because it was particularly lovely. On it was engraved: "svoboda", which means "freedom".

As a matter of fact, within 24-hours I learned, people can get used to anything quickly if they have to. This realization can either be uplifting or depressing. Nations have been built on this. Some things just didn't matter anymore, which is a good learning experience.

And who says you have to have luxury? All we did in the cabins was sleep, go to the bathroom, shower and change clothes. The ship is large enough to keep you occupied, with five decks, a bar, two dance floors, a concert salon.. And with the glorious panorama of the Volga river, sightseeing on land, nice people and the offering of almost too many entertainment & cultural events, one barely spent any time in the cabins. Two different children's circuses, a Neptune's Party on the Sun Deck (Sascha was a pirate, Dani a devil), dance-, photography-, theater- and circus workshops, Russian for Travelers Language Course, concerts, numerous political & cultural discussions and panels with prominent Russian specialists - one could not get bored. Sometimes I even enjoyed just looking out my own window or reading inside (air-conditioning!) to escape heat, wind, sun or whatever. We were extremely lucky with the weather - it was generally warm and

sunny, and got hotter, of course, the further south we got. None of us thought we would get so tanned in Russia!

As a matter of fact, that very first day on board, all I did (and the boys as well) was sleep a couple of hours. We were so exhausted from traveling, my hands ached from dragging suitcases. We didn't bother to do any sightseeing of **Nizhniy Novgorod**, unfortunately, which did certainly interest me, since I remembered the name from my study of Ukrainian History with my mother when I was little. I was too damn tired! So we went to dinner at 20:30 that night, where I discovered that I was performing at 21:45. I didn't even know what the piano was like. It was a major disaster. Even the white grand piano from the *Ms Europa*, where somebody once spilled red wine into it sounded ten times better. (The other grand on that ship was very decent...) The jazz pianist who was also performing tried the piano and said, "Well, it's so bad, it's not even worth practicing." That settled that.

For those first three concerts I was totally furious at this Dr. B. and his sidekick, because I would go to dinner and discover on the plan that I would be performing within an hour or two. He never bothered to tell me personally. Guests turned it into a joke "Are you playing tonight? You better go to dinner and check the schedule." The second time I was performing with Ulrich, the cellist, I wasn't told because he thought it was enough to just inform one half of the Duo. Well, that very first concert on the first night was "only" a presentation of the classical artists on board, and we had to play for ten minutes to introduce ourselves and show the guests what we could do. I played a Rachmaninoff prelude, Schumann's *Of foreign people and countries* and then deFalla's *Ritual Fire Dance*. Thank God I could play all this after carrying all those suitcases etc. We all had a good welcome from the audience.

Ulrich the German cellist was in a Duo with a Russian accordion player (actually, bajan player, which is the Russian accordion), calling themselves *Duo Rondo*. They have incredibly clever musical arrangements, and the combination is very interesting. Ulrich caught my attention early on, not because of his cello case, but because he was carrying a book written by an author that I had once read. Metaphysical stuff. We enjoyed interesting conversations on that level, but as he is "only 40", he hasn't applied the tools of these books to his life yet. People like that preach more than they live the example. I can deal with it, I was like that once, too. He did help me lay my battles with Dr. B to rest, though. I got sympathy and felt heard by Dr. S, and was able to move on after Ulrich talked to me. Guess it was an opportunity for him to put his mental tools to use.

Then there was Patrick, who has won all sorts of prizes as best jazz pianist, whose two partners decided not to come on this trip in the last minute, so he had to perform alone. Just

as well, I heard him with a drummer a few days later, and the drummer only got in the way of Patrick's music. Nothing against drummers, haha....Reminds me of a quote from Arturo Toscanini to a trumpet player: " God tells me how the music should sound, but you stand in the way!" There was also a violin/piano Duo from the Conservatory in St. Petersburg. The violinist was a pudgy looking fellow, the pianist was a tanned, very good-looking blonde guy, but I couldn't establish any contact with these guys at all. They seemed to have a wall around them. I had even brought some four-hand music along, in the hopes of maybe performing a bit of that, but the pianist just gave me the music back on the day he left ship, grinned his movie-star smile and said "Too bad".

This was our cast of musicians, the soul food on board (at the beginning there had also been a small male group of Russian church singers, but they stayed only a short while.) The rest of the artistes added color and fun with circuses and folklore groups.

The real food was not bad, actually even very good. Unfortunately, much too much meat (twice there were weird breakfasts: rice and meatballs and another time butter noodles and fat sausages.) Dani got used to drinking black tea, I got used to drinking instant coffee, Sascha bought big bottles of mineral water or even soda for a change whenever we were on land, because the little bottles offered on ship got empty really quickly. But when they brought that pink jelly-like national drink made out of some kind of berries, well, nobody got used to that. Beer on tap was a welcome drink at night in the bar. The heat and the walking around (or performing) made you quite thirsty.. And it was good beer. Since when do I like drinking beer? Of course the fact that gas was about 50 Pfennig (25 cents) a liter was a shock to my kids, or that our travel guide in Moscow earns \$10 a month as a teacher, but they quickly gave up comparing and thinking mathematically and grasped the differences in earnings and values in a different country. Five scoops of vanilla ice-cream for 5 rubles (33 Pf/15 cts) at the ship bar had Sascha making frequent visits there during the day. It was also a nice cheap date with a nice 14 year-old Russian girl named Olga, to thank her for constantly translating for the Russian and German kids. I myself, for those who are curious, stumbled along speaking Ukrainian, which is very different from Russian. Sometimes the cleaning lady or shop-lady would say "I don't understand what you're trying to say." I generally understood them, though, and I got what I wanted, like more toilet paper to remove my makeup.

Here are some interesting questions that Sascha and Dani posed me, which opened up a whole different world to them: "Who was this Stalin? You mean there was another one as bad as Hitler?"

What does Soviet mean? What's the KGB?" One could hear their brains ticking away with new thoughts and questions.

On the second day, I was relieved to find the boys in a clique of kids - a mixture of Russians and Germans, one Brit - all around the ages of 11 to 16. This group grew and grew, until I recall going up to the Sun Deck on the very last night of our trip, where there was, as usual, the nightly open-air Disco . There, under the light of the full moon, with the Volga landscape as a backdrop, passing through the colorfully and brightly lit docks of the canal, were twenty teenies and a handful of adults doing what looked like the Virginia Reel to the beat of Russian Rap. Yes, Momma went to bed early most nights (early means midnight, for me), and my boys danced every night and went to bed later than I did. I would bring them breakfast most mornings, if the cleaning lady didn't throw them out of their bunkbeds first. Their cabin looked like a hamster cage.

The scenery along the Volga is beautiful. She (the Volga is feminine) starts out very green and hilly (I mean, starting out where we did, at **Nizhnij Novgorod**), and the further south you get, the more she starts to look like Tuscany in Italy, with tall cypresses and pine trees standing in long lines on the horizon. The harbors are each very different, of course, but you know you are hitting a city from far off by the buildings. The river is broad, obviously, since there are many cruise ships, but in many places the Volga is so wide, you absolutely cannot see the other bank, and it's like being on a large lake. Exciting is also going through the docks in a canal. I've seen the Panama Canal, but never been in a ship going through the whole procedure of lowering and then raising the water level to pass. It takes a while, this process, but just as exciting to see the great gates slowly opening up to let us pass through. Later on we were allowed to visit the Technical Bridge of the ship and examine the underwater radar and other instruments of navigation.

**Kazan**, the capital of the Republic Tatarstan, "Russia's Window to Asia", was the first city at which we stopped, beautifully green everywhere. The poor sections of town are where a lot of the Tatars live, in lowly set, two-story wooden homes, with wonderful artistic carvings around the windows and doors, in spite of the poverty. The name sounded so excitingly exotic to me, "Tatarstan". I remembered studying Ukrainian history with my mother as a young girl, learning of the invading Tatars, Turks & Mongols, and always thought Tatars were similar or even identical to the Mongols, meaning they had slanted eyes, which they don't. I was very surprised when we were able to have an audience with the Great Mufti there. I keep laughing at this name - he's like the pope of the Muslims. We entered the Moscheé (mosque), taking our shoes off and storing them

like you do when you go bowling, putting on scarves or whatever to cover our heads, and spent almost an hour with this Mufti. After he talked of his city and told us of the many Muslim believers there, we were allowed to ask any questions we wanted to. Yes, there were women in our group who asked if the women of the Muslim population really enjoyed the sexual equality of which the Great Mufti was trying to convince us. He sort of answered the question. Inspiring is the fact that in this city, in this country, Muslims and Christians not only live side by side in peace and mutual respect, but they consult each other about common problems, they consult about how to spend money for projects and try to be fair to each other in their plans. I looked into the Great Mufti's eyes and saw kind, wise and understanding eyes. One sees eyes like these very seldom among leading figures of nations. It was exciting to be in the presence of a real Tatar!!

Once outside, we walked through the Kazan Kreml, which is different from Moscow's (of course!!) but very beautiful. It's all white stone. A monsoon-type rain burst while we were inside the walls of the Kreml, meaning we were still outside and unprotected, and Sascha and Dani bitched and moaned all the way back to the bus. I had forgotten to bring my umbrella for this city tour, because the sun had been shining. I told them their attitude wouldn't change the rain making us wet, we might as well enjoy the cooler air. They just wanted to complain. Their brains were still working like "normal" German kids. Then we stopped at a catholic cathedral, where a Mass was going on. By Mass going on, in case somebody doesn't know the Slavic Orthodox tradition, I mean, there was glorious singing, frankincense (loved it!) and hundreds of lit candles, a backdrop of walls hung with golden icons, men and women standing firm and straight at a sort of attention, moving only to give me a stern look because I had no scarf to cover my head, so I had to borrow one from somebody. In this church, the voices sang strong and full, and the posture of the worshippers was so unbelievably straight, not bent-over like the ones I see in our churches. We didn't want to leave, the service and the singing were beautiful. We almost left Ulrich behind, but it wouldn't be the last time that happened with him.

**Samara** was hilly up till the center of town, where we could even see a few skyscrapers. Most cities also had tall artistic monuments towering over the city, usually with a theme of peace. In Samara, for instance, it was a tall silver figure holding silver wings high up. We viewed various churches, there was even a German Lutheran church there, because the Russians ran out of money to make it one of their own. We saw interesting architecture like of the theater, typical red-stone trimmed with white, and the many parks. We were there overnight. On the first evening there was a Gala Concert,



fortunately I found out about that a day earlier and was able to run through my standard, the Chopin Ballade Nr. 4. The bus left the ship with us artists and the other guests who were going to the concert. It was a bit overcast, but after about ten minutes it got darker and darker and then it rained so hard for a half hour straight, the town was flooded, our bus couldn't see a thing. We stopped on a corner right before the concert hall (once called the "Palace of the Revolution of 1905") and watched cars literally swimming across the intersection, women walking barefoot through knee-high water. We understood why a lot of them wear rubber thongs (flip-flops) - you get caught in a rain like this, you get very wet. Everybody was making jokes about how we artists were going to get to the concert hall dry. We decided to use Ulrich's cello case as a boat. Haha. The place was packed. I don't know, probably a thousand people, all loud as if they were at a baseball or soccer game or something. The stage was impressive, lighted in light purple and pink (it's a good thing I chose pink to wear that evening), BUT there was no grand piano, only an old upright that was shoved to the side of the stage, almost as if it were on its way out off stage. They refused to move it. I bet it would fall apart if somebody tried. The list of program participants was a strong competition for Mahler's *Symphony of a Thousand*. There was a women's choir in the large room where I was allowed to change into my evening clothes ("You're Number 4 and on in fifteen minutes!"), in another room there was a small children's orchestra, in a side hall there were two different children's circuses practicing their acts, a family of fourteen adopted kids dressed in Spanish costumes going through a dance with their stage mother, two Russian folklore groups, various musicians and other dubious characters parked in any free corner of backstage. I am sure I forgot somebody. Strangely enough, they started at 7:30 on the dot and ended at 9:30 on the dot. This organization was excellent. The best was the jazz group, playing a mixture of Jazz, Beatles and Classic on original Russian instruments: a balalaika, then a HUGE triangle-shaped balalaika (I don't know what that's called), the bayan (Russian accordion) and some wind instrument or other. They were absolutely phenomenal and tore down the house. The folklore singing and dancing was nice, the Women's choir sang beautifully - even a Ukrainian folk song which they did announce as a Ukrainian national folk song, and not Russian. Some things were not that great. Russian maidens dressed in what was probably supposed to look like German (Bavarian?) dirndls, but resembled bad costumes from an old German "Heimat" Movie. They sang a German folksong - actually quite touching. And then there was me. I decided very quickly, don't even try to "compete" with this marathon. I am not the type to get out there and play a flashy version of *Rhapsody in Blue*. That might have done the trick, but it's not me and I beat the hell out of that dusty old upright, sitting on the

side of the stage almost on the way out, and even got some good applause, naturally from my German boat fans. Well, so what. I did my job. Like Dani says "Ma, there are some things in life you just have to get through." This was one of many on this trip...

Samara is actually a very sunny city, as it does lie south, and the next day the sun was shining so hot, the streets were so completely dry, that we had forgotten the storm the night before. It was fun to finally have some free time before lunch to go into the center of town, check the stores out and CHANGE money. (Nobody had any rubles on them. We had gotten 100 Rubles in Moscow lent to each of us by Dr. B., - now that was another good idea of his, - but our pockets were now empty. 100 rubles may pay somebody's rent in Russia, but it doesn't go a long way for a Western tourist. That made five beers at the bar, (\$2.50 or so?) and it was the fifth tour day already. The old bank itself was so beautiful, with stained-glass windows, high ceilings, a huge clock with astrological symbols (!) and impressive architecture, we almost didn't want to leave.

My boys got up early and signed up avidly for a tour of Stalin's Bunker, the deepest underground bunker in the world at that time - 37 meters under, which impressed all of us. Then we walked through the marketplace - a long street - where we bought fake Hugo Boss T-shirts (Dani forgot to pack enough T-shirts) and a couple of pairs of really cool boxer shorts (Sascha didn't have enough) at dirt cheap prices. All Turkish products, I think. I bought some goodies for them to have in their cabin, like mineral water and a huge bag of what looked and tasted like tiny bagels. Unfortunately, we never found them again in another city. They were great.

For those of you who always wanted to know but were afraid to ask, it is true: Russian women are beautiful. They are so stylishly dressed, in the latest fashion, gold chains on their necks, jewelry, modern haircuts, make-up, accessories, slim, manicured - you can really get an eyeful. Somebody told me that most of the women have rich boyfriends (there a lot of Mafia millionaires in Moscow, next to the starving people.....) I frankly have no idea how else they can keep up with all of this. Patrick, the jazz pianist, told me that Russian women like that are not very appealing to him, because they are not self-made personalities, but sort of bought. Long live the Geisha. (I read *Memoirs of a Geisha* on this trip. Excellent. I couldn't put it down.) Well, our society still encourages that, too. It's just more striking in a country where there are only two classes.

Some people jumped into the Volga at a nearby beach, but I was too tired that day, and didn't trust swimming near the harbor too much. The others who did swim, said the water was so clear you could see to the bottom. Whatever that means.

We left Samara in a flourish. I had never experienced this on a boat cruise before: farewell music at the reeling as we all waved good-bye. I just stepped out onto a side-deck to check out what's happening as we leave the pier, when I heard wonderful Russian folksongs coming from there. The gangway was packed with singing, dancing and waving people. One of the ship's accordionists, a little Russian version of Woody Allen, was entertaining with folksongs, and a new group of Russian folklore singers who had just boarded were singing and encouraging everybody else to sing, dance clap or both. What an atmosphere that was!! And in that moment I grasped the gift of the Russian people: joy of life, which began to seep into all the corners of the ship and infest a lot of the serious Germans with merriment and gaiety, which one doesn't normally associate with the people here. I overheard a conversation at my lunch table one day. An older woman was saying " I am beginning to feel so lighthearted and joyous now. It must be coming from the Russians", to which another lady said "Yes, you certainly are opening up, you're normally so uptight." And the former one defended herself with: "Well, I am from North Germany, you know, but this is doing me good." It is true. I loved being on that deck and being part of that farewell party. It was so loud, full of life, boisterous and merry and fun!

We neared **Volgograd/Stalingrad**. By this time we were quite far south along the Volga, and it was damn hot, but no one complained. The scenery was changing, getting drier, the Volga wider. (A little while further, and one could enter the Caspian Sea...) One could see some tall buildings, some weird monument in the distance, cranes and factories, smokestacks, industry. As we left the ship to do some sight-seeing, the weather was sunny, but grew quickly overcast. What else could it be? The memory of war loomed everywhere, even if the pier was trying to be cheerful, lined with large sun umbrellas advertising Coca-Cola (USA) and West cigarettes (Germany), and stands selling drinks & pastries, tents with billiard tables, a small Aqua Park for the kids (consisting of three round standup swimming pools, remember those?)- a sad sort of boardwalk of entertainment. On the sightseeing tour we saw the bombed remains of a building where, towards the end of WW2, the Germans had wanted to reach to cross the Volga to get to the other bank, (left bank) but never made it. It was a strategically important twist. The war museum was exactly what it sounds like, a war museum, with photos and machine guns, giant floodlights for bombers, artillery and, to me the only interesting thing, a huge round wall mural-painting, sort of like a diorama, of the Battle of Stalingrad that went around a space as big as the Guggenheim Museum in NYC. After this we rode to the Mamaj Hill, where many earlier battles with the Mongols had once taken place, but the Battle of Stalingrad during WW2 was the one that made this place

brutally infamous. We didn't count the steps going up this huge hill, I would have forgotten in which hundreds I was counting. It was a major excursion. Flowers were being sold cheaply (of course) at the bottom of the hill to lay at the monument at the top. This monument is so huge, we saw it from afar on the Volga and I photographed it from all sides and distances, without knowing that I would be standing at it's feet. It is the statue of "Mother Russia" wielding a completely bronze (or was it steel?) sword into the sky with a face full of fury and defiance. The face could probably scare Medusa, and the Russians say that this Mother is taller than the Statue of Liberty - but that's only because the sword is so huge and she's holding it high. It's terrifying to look at, and although it's supposed to be a reminder of the horrors of war, one is left with a completely different impression. Before you even get up that far, there's another monumental statue greeting you - a huge soldier, and when you stand in front of him, you can't see the lady with the sword. That's supposed to be symbolic, a reminder that the soldier is protecting Mother Russia, and you know she's lurking back there on top of that hill. An unfinished building site (fountains? more statues? an artificial lake?) makes us wonder why, and not only in Russia, SO MUCH MONEY is invested into monuments like this, while so many people are hungry and poor. Then we entered a large, round building with a gigantic stone hand in the middle, holding a burning torch of peace. Two soldiers stood at strict attention not batting an eyelash. To our surprise, a choral arrangement (recording) of Robert Schumann's *Träumerei* was being repeatedly played. It was a bit eerie. Sascha said he liked the music, it would be nice to fall asleep to at night. I told him it was by a German composer, but was reminded yesterday, that Schumann had been born in what used to be East Germany. So we thought the Russians considered him to be an "East" German composer, even if he did spend the rest of his life in the Rhineland. The other day, as we watched part of the memorial ceremony for the Russian submarine accident victims on TV, they also played *Träumerei*, so I guess that's a standard over there. Incidentally, at most major monuments and places like mass graves and tombs of unknown soldiers, music is often played loudly over the loudspeaker. It is pretty sentimental, sounds like bad film music, and upon my asking when it was composed, they say in the 1950's. Guess you can call it "Monument Muzak"..... Anyway, then we finally make it up to Mother Russia. And after standing under her skirts, feeling the winds high up, heavy with the overwhelming energies & memories of war, and gazing far, far down to the bottom of this Mamaj Hill, the gray horizon of the Volga in the distance, we walked to our waiting busses nearby. So this is where the Battle of Stalingrad had taken place.

I had heard that there was another Gala Evening taking place that evening, but nobody had said anything to me about

performing. Just in case, I decided to make sure. I had already been surprised twice, better check to make sure. Of course, I was told, it had been assumed that I knew I was performing because it was information that had been faxed to me in March (April?) Again I was furious, which was interpreted as "Oh, you don't want to play?" We do have the freedom of choice in how we react to events. It was 6:00 p.m. back at the pier, and the busses were leaving at 6:30 for the concert. So I decided to play Myra Hess' arrangement of Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*. I was in no mood to play anything flashy after this day's excursion.

Thank God for polyester. I mentally chose to wear this black and silver evening dress only because I didn't have to iron it. Time was quite scarce, of course, I had a half hour. Due to my extensive touring experience, I managed to shower, do my make-up, transform my hair from "Hot & Sweaty Tourist" to "On-stage Diva" with sparkling butterflies (these bags of hair jewelry that I have do wonders in such situations..) and be in front of the ship on time. Together with cello and circus props, we performers got carted away in a big modern van, the kind almost every Western housewife absolutely has to have but can neither park nor drive.

The concert hall was packed. It seemed to me, that the young population of the city had emigrated (I would have, too), because the first half hour or so was a performance by a vocal sextet of ladies, the youngest of which was about 47-48, which is not a problem, nor that they really looked middle-aged, (well, so am I) but the pastel robes and headdresses looked like something out of *Star Trek*, and each lady had her own microphone, singing some hits out of what I thought to be from the 1950's. Maybe the time stood more still after the war in "Stalingrad" than in other cities in Russia. They were relieved by another middle-aged lady, this time in a velvet evening gown (in this heat????), accompanying herself on the guitar. More of the same style. Then the *Star Trek* ladies came out again, and I said to the jazz pianist "Oh, no!", and they were wearing flower-print dresses, cinched at the waist (if they had one), with little white collars and straw hats. Doris Day times six. Then came our German and Russian circuses from the ship. The German kids: lots of fun, low performance level, the Russian circus kids: high performance level, no fun. Then came the classic group at the end. What lousy planning. I accompanied Ulrich, who sang Schumann's *The Grenadiers*, which raised so much controversy among the guests over breakfast lunch and dinner the next two days on the ship: how could we sing a song about war, especially France against Russia, and "long live the Kaiser" etc. etc. etc. Strangely enough, it was the generation born between 1950 and 1960 that reacted so strongly. I told them to get over their guilt trip over a war they didn't even fight, and that after such an intense encounter that day with what I still must call Stalingrad, - although the name has been changed back since - ,

we artists felt we had to pick the people up where they were in their spirit and then work our way out. Anyway, the poem is full of irony, one just has to be a good enough singer to get that across or at least understand that irony was intended. After the Schumann, I played the Bach. I don't consider myself a Bach specialist, but as I began playing I had this fleeting thought: "My God, I am playing Bach in Stalingrad" and wondered if Bach had ever been played there. (The violinist Nathan Milstein has a wonderful story about once having had to play Bach in front of a mass of Russian workers who kept yelling for him to go home.) Then Ulrich grabbed his cello and we played a David Popper piece which had been dedicated to Popper's parents. We rounded off this little group with an Argentinean *Tango* which Ulrich sang, one of his many women in mind. He had never sung in front of such a large audience before, as he is really a cellist, (but he got a marriage proposal from one of the Russian girls out of this and almost stayed behind in Russia). The Russians loved all this, including the *Grenadiers* - they can even sing the song in Russian. It was the Germans who'd reacted. Sometimes Art has the tendency to provoke, and why not? Patrick finished off the evening with twenty minutes of jazz on "the old grand on two wheels" as he called it. We had finally gotten a decent instrument - I could have played all night on it, even considered doing Schubert because it sounded "beautifully" on this thing. So what if it had only two wheels under the legs, we were able to get it out onto center stage after all.

I wondered if the sun ever shines there at all. Yes, it did, on the following day, it was scorching. I left ship to go hunting , to buy the boys something to nibble on in their cabin whenever they skip breakfast, or when dinner was as late as 9:30 p.m. We ate in two shifts, first the Germans and then the Russians, as the restaurant only seated 200. On the boardwalk here in Volgograd, there were stands and stands of pastry, so I bought some. The woman advised me what to buy. She said "Don't buy this one, they won't eat it." It looked good, but maybe she was right. And I got a few small bags of Lays' potato chips, chicken-flavored, which I didn't know existed. Sascha & Dani liked that. And huge bottles of mineral water. I wanted to get some souvenirs, but couldn't find anything that didn't resemble flea-market wares.

We pulled out around noon. The boat started the trip back up the Volga, back to **Nizhniy Novgorod**, this time on the other side of it, so we could get other scenic impressions. I think it's maybe like on the highway, you always stay in the right lane while traveling. As we passed the area where Mamaj Hill could be seen in the distance, we threw flowers and more flowers into the Volga as a last memorial gesture. I, however, chose not to. I felt as if it would have taken away from my experience of playing Bach in Stalin-Volgograd.

That night I was to have a solo concert, my first full length one. I had been told about this about three or four days' prior, but saw nothing written on the day's activities plan which always hung in front of our restaurant starting at breakfast, and I heard no PR on the radio all day long. I had been told it would be at 3:30, but at lunchtime, there was still no sign of PR, written or radio. I went to Dr. B. and asked if the concert was taking place and he said "Ja, ja" so I said, "Well why don't you inform my audience for a change, since I was lucky enough to be informed this time, I would certainly like to have an audience sitting there when I play." The concert was spontaneously moved up to 4:30, and at 4:00 I finally heard an announcement on the radio. That was a bit too late.

I don't know how many people came, but they were my "fans" and friends. I bet there would have been more, had they known about it. On the other hand, the trip to Stalingrad had overwhelmed so many people, that might also have been a reason why they didn't want to go to a classical concert. They missed a hell of a lot of fun. I did my presentation of the *prelude* CD program, complete with anecdotes, and talking about Scriabin's colors and explaining his use of the Tritone (called the Devil's Interval in German) in a Prelude written in 1914, and how Ravel told Gershwin to go back home and continue composing the way he had up till then, he was richer than Ravel doing it, anyway, and talked about the inanity of newspaper critics etc. etc. etc. I even improvised a stick to prop the piano lid open -the bottom half of a sun umbrella I'd found on the sun deck. Everybody found that clever, and it improved the sound a bit, only because there was more sound. Unfortunately, I had to cut way back on the concert program and my comments, as I was only allowed one hour: there was a list of events scheduled all the way up to dinner after me. My newly found dear friends Ruth & Wilfried, a retired banker, (we'd been enjoying deep philosophical conversations at the reeling during the course of this trip,) dubbed me "an artist you can get your hands on", meaning "get close to". I had a great time with this program and I let the audience make comments in between. They loved this, as they always do.

After Stalingrad/Volgograd, it was a relief, then, for the soul to visit beautiful **Saratow** (Dani's favorite city) on the way back. This city was built in three levels, the level by the river was all park and green to protect the city from rising tides and storms, then came the city part. We were greeted by a brass band of young kids playing Russian, German and Big Band tunes. Dani was fascinated, and was thrilled to be given their CD as a gift from Wilfried. This city was so beautiful and interesting, so aesthetically pretty, it reminded me of Geneva, or any wealthy resort town. If anybody has seen the old movie *Indochina* with Catherine Deneuve,

Saratow looks like Geneva in the last scene where she stands with her grandson by the lake. Russians are very proud of the green areas in their cities. Well, why shouldn't they be, green is a sign of renewal. Green areas were always pointed out to us on the bus-tours, next to constant referrals to some monument, war memorial or other. We visited many churches, caught a Mass going on in one (Dani lit some beeswax candles), and saw a church that looked like something out of Disneyworld, white with all sorts of wild pastel colors, but, of course, the ones with the golden onion domes were also beautiful. Dani changed money to give all the beggars a few coins. Sascha was sleeping in that morning. After all, the boys were on vacation, and I wanted them to feel free to go sight-seeing or not.

Any city that has a shopping strip is exciting for people like me who love to spend money and window-shop in strange cities, and Saratow has a wonderful one. Hustle and bustle, shops, posh restaurants, cafés, pubs, the Market Hall with fruits and vegetables, cookies, candies, flowers, breads, meats, honey, etc. I went there with Dani and bought tons of fruit for us. They let you try a piece before you buy, which impressed Dani. I saw the Music Conservatory where Scriabin and others studied - it reminded me of Nürnberg, and this because the building was in a fake Gothic style with pointy towers. It was originally a building meant for War Consultation or something, and the Russians decided to later rename it and establish an institution for Harmony instead. I found that a good idea.

The next day was spent en route and our ship finally made a stop at what they called a "Green Stop", where we were allowed off the boat in the middle of nature and a sand beach to swim! We were greeted by peasant ladies selling grilled fish, apples and there was even a little shack with beer on tap. Maybe there was even Vodka, actually I'm sure there was (one drinks Vodka with everything, especially fish), but all I wanted was to get in the water. I felt like a dog being allowed to go do his thing - we were so thrilled at being able to jump into the river after all this heat. The water was great, the feeling was great: swimming in the Volga! Like swimming in the Nile or in the Amazon River. It's not an everyday thing. The water was indeed clear, refreshing, some were seen jumping from the ship - I couldn't believe how close to shore our ship was, but the Volga is deep enough there. I suppose. The Russian woman who was in charge of entertainment events for the Russians on board, organized all the young kids (aged 4-18) and played all sorts of games with them. That was so wonderful to watch. Russian kids, German kids, even an English guy, of all ages, playing all these fun games and races together, running into the Volga, lying in a long row on the beach and all. My boys were so happy to be able to swim, they enjoyed doing the old "Let's drag the blonde into the water and if she won't go, we'll take the other one". Yes, they are at that age. I didn't



even feel old, I was just happy that my sons were being themselves, having fun and mixing so easily with another culture .

The next day we made another stop - a technical one which they should have really called the "Green Stop" - I looked down off the reeling as we were pulling onto shore and the water was shocking green with God-knows-what. It didn't stop some people from swimming (the algae disappeared in some places), others explored a little village further off that they said was straight out of a storybook. We only had two hours, I walked along the beach a bit, as I had my Sonata Program scheduled that evening. I felt very challenged, trying to produce some magic with that beat up old piano, and was pleasantly surprised (at the piano? at myself?), when I performed Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* (it was full moon on the Volga and I made them open the drapes surrounding the concert salon so that the audience could watch the moon while we glided back up the river.) I had dressed in a white satin evening cape, which my cosmetician friend Barbara had given me before I left for Russia. A client of hers wanted to sell it because she never wore it, (she's blonde - this is not a joke, only an explanation: Blondes don't usually wear white very well). So I decided to wear it since I had schlepped it all the way to Russia, I might as well. I think I was a bit overdressed for this ship, but who cares. People were in awe of this piece of clothing and with me being tanned by now: another dear, new friend from Berlin, Marie, told me to wait before I started the concert so that she could go get her camera real quick. This does not happen in normal concert life! I followed the Beethoven with Schubert's *G Major Sonata*, which is so long, my hour was up after that. I did a bit of talking before the two sonatas, Beethoven's deafness making him turn inward to listen, and I read excerpts from Schubert's own prose, where he mentions searching for and mistaking love for pain and pain for love. The full audience was wonderful - even Russians came this time - and came up to me just to say "Thank you", they were very moved. This is another wonderful part about the way I am performing these days. There is no more wall between the audience, and they are free to say what they feel. I ended with Schumann's original version of *Träumerei*. Dr. S. lifted Dani upside down in acknowledgment for turning pages for me - everybody applauded him - also something one doesn't normally experience.

The following evening, our last, I played a half-hour after dinner concert with Ulrich on the cello, with pieces we'd run through only once, except for the last piece, when he announced David Popper's *Hungarian Rhapsody*, which I hadn't seen since I performed it over thirty years ago with my brother! Adventure and daring belong in music sometimes, and we both had a good time doing this. Then I packed and was ready for the return Transit.

The next morning at 8:00, instead of the scheduled 7:00 due to night fog, we glided towards an awesome-looking white stone Cloister from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (with even much older frescoes) which some of us could tour for an hour. The gardens were absolutely beautiful. Unfortunately, **Makarjewo** is slowly sinking into the Volga. And then we were back in **Nizhnij Novgorod**, and I made it a point to see this place, as I had missed it the first time around. Although the boys were tired, they agreed to go with me, all alone on foot. We walked and walked uphill to the Nizhnij "Kreml" (the enclosed fortress-like part of an old city) because we were told that this was where the center of town was with all the shops ("We've got to buy Papa some vodka!!") It was a long trek in the heat - there had been a streetcar going up but I didn't know which one. Halfway up Sascha said "I hope you're right about the city being up there." We took pictures with the backdrop of one of the Kreml towers and the Volga unwinding below. Up at the top, I never saw so many brides in my life. A wonderful day for a wedding and pictures under the birch trees overlooking the Volga below. Good, good. We just followed our instincts, that is, I let Sascha guide us through what looked like the Green in a New England city and follow his own instinct. He found the center of the city, and how bustling it was, with streetcars and subways and banks (we changed money again) and shops and restaurants and stands. Sascha bought two huge portions of cotton candy, which he loves. The young boy had to pick the swarming bees off the candy while making it, -mmm, delicious. At first Dani had to stand in a corner and cry over the animals which were in cages along the side of the main drag. He just couldn't deal with it. But I said it was good that they were here, where there are so many people walking around, the animals are more likely to get sold. Then he asked what a beautiful puppy cost (fifty Rubles, about three Marks, or \$1.50), but I had to tell Dani we were not allowed to export an animal. I am also not yet ready to get tied down to a dog. So Dani spent his small change donating it to various cat & dog vendors to support their animal shelters. Then they bought ice-cream (Russians have delicious kinds that we don't have in Germany), then drinks, then popcorn, then Döner, which is meat & vegetable-stuffed pita with sour-cream and hot sauce, Turkish style. Sascha bought one, it looked good, Dani had never tried one, although all his friends buy them for lunch at school. So he also bought a - what was it called? -, and was so thrilled with the taste, I had to improvise some the other day. Sascha said the Russian Döner are better than the Turkish ones... We bought little souvenirs, window-shopped, darted in and out of shops, hunting for vodka or computer games. It was a lot of fun, also meeting friends from the ship on the street. We took the scenic streetcar down the hill to the harbor. It was a wonderful and perfect completion of our sight-seeing escapades in Russia.

That night we disembarked from the ship (sailors had been organized to help us carry the luggage up the hill to the busses!) We gave them 50 rubles each and they darted up with the heavy luggage pieces in the blink of an eye. Our destination was **the Nizhnyj Novgorod** train station, where our midnight train would take us back to Moscow. Same procedure as in the beginning, only backwards. I had a lot of sympathy for the people who were still suffering from stomach disorders. The bathrooms in the train were so horrible, the floor was a sea of..... and I myself peed on my leg twice from the bumpiness of the ride. Again, thank God for polyester, rayon or whatever my pants were. It dries very quickly. I slept worse than on the way there.

In Moscow early in the morning, we all got separated into groups: those transferring to Hamburg, Düsseldorf, Munich, Berlin, or Frankfurt (we were in the Frankfurt group), so we were all saying goodbye to our friends. The trip had been wonderful, unforgettable as most trips like this are, and we were left with so many impressions. But it was time to go home, and we were looking forward to enjoying the luxury (at last) of home.

We arrived safely, although a bit stressfully, because I had forgotten to check in our luggage further on to Munich (due to two different tickets, one Munich-Frankfurt, the other Frankfurt-Moscow) returned to the check-in desk within ten minutes and, using my Ukrainian as usual, managed to describe the five pieces of luggage to the lady who told the luggage guy to go down and retrieve the pieces that had already rolled downwards, and change the destination sticker. All the pieces arrived in Munich, except my big suitcase - so Lufthansa did not manage to get twenty suitcases delivered to the right place, but Moscow did! Thank God - my lilac suitcase, the largest and heaviest of my luggage, was delivered to my door the next morning (8:00 a.m. they called!!) - I live in a third floor walk-up with no elevator, and the guy was huffing and puffing. Perhaps I should always think up a scheme like this, so that my luggage gets carried up the stairs! HAHHAHA.

The next trip planned is to the Ukraine, on the Dnepr/Dnipro River. The boys have announced their interest, although their beloved Italy keeps getting put on the back burner. Maybe I'll do Italy with them during Easter vacation. I am certainly interested, and if anybody else wants to come along, I highly recommend this unusual cultural experience. White sandy beaches and palm trees you can find elsewhere all-year round...