

Russia, the thunderegg

by Barbara

Thunderegg, a volcanic geode that looks like a hunk of rock, but when cut open may contain beautiful crystal formations.

Gray uneven, pockmarked, bleak, expressionless, guarded. BUT..., only on the surface. When cracked open, even a wee bit, Russia became a rich magical treasure chest filled with sparkles of light and love.

My first contact with this phenomenon was at the St. Petersburg Airport at the Customs station. I felt as though I had been dropped from the sky into a pre-Perestroika Soviet movie set. I found myself in a gray prison-like room with a gruff customs agent stamping my passport with disdain. What had I gotten myself into? BUT... after about ten minutes of very real fear about my future for the next 27 days, our band of 20 was greeted by warm, smiling St Petersburg Friendship Force members who whisked us off to our hotel.



Wanda, Barbara, and Shirley learned about Russian harvest festivals while they were helping in a Moscow school.

Large, architecturally bland and unmistakably Soviet apartment complexes were my homes in Moscow and Novgorod. I walked through small entrances, up dark, concrete stairways, surrounded by thick walls—well insulated from the sounds of any neighbor, to the two doors, (one right inside the other) of my host's apartment. BUT... that all ended when the doors opened. Inside I was greeted with warmth and light and color and texture and delicious smells and smiles. Home!

School # 1262 in Moscow and School # 26 in Novgorod were much the same on the outside as the apartments. BUT... once I became engaged with students, the rock broke open and the treasure spilled out. Who is my favorite Russian author...composer? I had to really think

about that since my last contact with Russian novelists had been in college. I quickly countered this question by asking about their favorite American writers. They responded unhesitatingly with Jack London, Mark Twain, even Stephen King. Their knowledge of American, British and their own Russian literature and history astounded me.

And what about Pushkin? Embarrassed, I told them that I recognized the name, but had not read him. On the last day of our school visit in Moscow, we were treated to a Pushkin presentation. Sitting in the front row as honored guests with 10th grade interpreters sitting directly behind us, we learned about their beloved poet laureate. Clothed in elaborate nineteenth century costumes, a cast of thirty 9th graders consisting of 10 Pushkins, 10 of his lovers and 10 more musicians and short-story actors, regaled us with the life and works of The Poet

And then came the climax for me. While reciting part of a poem, one of the Pushkins forgot his lines. The entire audience made up of 8th through 11th graders came to his rescue and recited the rest of the poem for him! Culture and literature and the delight of learning exploded before me.

I am convinced that it is the people who are the treasure inside this magnificent Thunder Egg called Russia. Their intelligence, courage, and pride are the sparkles in the grayness. I was profoundly touched by their generosity and inspired by their resourcefulness. From these people, I've learned more about my own history and values, and the vast possibilities of the human spirit. Bolshoi spaceba, dear Russia.