

Peter's Burg

Peterburgers

by William Harris

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License. This gives you the right to freely reuse and redistribute it as long as certain conditions are met. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 543 Howard Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Additional copies are available by contacting:

Bill Harris
682 East 5th Street
Azusa, California 91702
(626) 334-6889
ICEshaper-books@yahoo.com

or by visiting our website at:

<http://www.billandrobinharris.com/books/>

1

Peter's Burg

Introduction

What's the point of being rich and powerful if you don't strut your stuff? Russia's tsar, Peter the Great, solved this no-brainer with Saint Petersburg. His city was built with two purposes in mind: First, to establish and guard Russian trade with Europe by sea. Second, to make Europe's elite eat their hearts out.

Realizing Europe was both technologically and militarily far ahead of medieval Russia, Peter knew his empire must trade to survive, but it was not in him to go with hat in hand as a lesser or even as an equal; he wanted to dominate. That was his puzzle: How could he play catch-up through trade with Europe and dominate them while he did it? He recognized that Russia was a laughably backward, barbarous country, landlocked and isolated from Europe by dense forests and few roads. A brilliant innovator, Peter decided to do something about it.

In 1703 his army marched out of Moscow heading north. After driving the Swedish army from a fort along the Neva River, Russian troops turned west along it and headed to the Baltic Sea. Near the

Peter's Burg

mouth of the Neva, they hurriedly built a wooden stockade on a small island teeming with rabbits and surrounded by bogs. This was Saint Petersburg's beginning, an island fort in an icy, windswept wasteland with plenty of potential.

As this was the only part of Russian soil touching an ocean, Peter envisioned that here on this soggy sod he would build Russia's window to Europe. With direct access to the sea, Peter now set out to drive Russia forward five hundred years in one generation. His things to do list:

- ✓ Build one seaport (royal) city
- ✓ Build world-class merchant marine
- ✓ Build Navy to guard merchant marine

The Sticker Price

One of the nice things about being a tsar is that you don't have to clip coupons to afford your imperial upgrades. Tsar Peter hired Europe's best architects to design Saint Petersburg. As this was to be Russia's main point of contact with Europe, Peter's burg was to be European, a culturally enlightened city meant to pull his empire, kicking and screaming, out of the Middle Ages.

Lavishly budgeted, the hired guns designed a city of drop-dead-gorgeous palaces, an intimidating in-your-face triumph of splendor calculated to sag Europe's royal jaws. Be it Buckingham Palace, Versailles, or the Louvre, no architectural standard of glory was safe from Peter's one-upmanship. Even ancient Egyptian sphinxes would soon find

Peterburgers

themselves perching on Saint Petersburg's granite-lined embankments.

Saint Petersburg would be different from Russia's other large cities in that it would not go through a wooden village stage. It would go directly from a mosquito marsh to city-sized imperial showcase.

To enforce his enlightened vision, tsar Peter required all prominent families in Moscow to consult with his architects and then begin building impressive mansions for themselves in Saint Petersburg's reeds, an implausible command causing considerable consternation. Flexing like any good despot, Peter choked off competing projects by forbidding new stone masonry work throughout Russia except in Saint Petersburg, a move calculated to bring the masons flocking.

Next, tens of thousands of peasants were marched from myriad Russian villages to the Neva's banks and put to forced labor building stone bridges, cobblestone streets, canals, shipyards, and palaces. These peasants were gathered with the understanding the tsar was only borrowing them from their families for twenty years. Many Peterburgers did eventually go home, though the weak ones usually died within two years after arrival at the jobsite; they were buried under the canals.

Of course, Saint Petersburg *was* a swamp needing hundreds of thousands of pilings to support the high-rise brick buildings, each with walls three feet thick. When the Neva thawed, massive rafts of logs to be used as pilings were floated in from afar. Since the land was mostly sand and mud, Peter cleverly required all Peterburgers to arrive at the jobsite carrying a large stone, and even taxed tradesmen by demanding they pay in stones. In a world without

Peter's Burg

hydraulic machinery, everything was done by muscle. Every canal was hand dug, every block hand laid.

Over 150,000 Russian peasants were literally worked to death in the inhumanly harsh conditions, but after all, that's what Peterburgers were for. Peter the Great had a nearly limitless supply of disposable peasants to draw from; in just seven years, enough beautiful buildings were in place to move Russia's capital to Saint Petersburg. Once you get over thinking about what this city cost in human lives, it's charming.

Tourmites

Insects are nature's tourists; first they wander all about seeking points of interest, then swarm the good stuff. Taking our cue from bugs, when our family arrived in Saint Petersburg we decided to attack our cultural incompetence head on; we became tourists.

Fresh newcomers have a brief window of time when they're especially ready to meet their neighbors and see the sights. It's tempting to immediately start working, but there's wisdom in first just getting out there and grabbing a big-picture orientation.

Initially we stayed with Mike Kennedy, an affable single gent, while we searched for a place of our own. At first, our kids were a little iffy about the arrangement, probably because Mr. Kennedy would become their Headmaster when school started in a couple of weeks. Our cat, Patches, unwisely went to war with Mike, intent on ruling his roost from the wrong end of the pecking order. Mike tried hard to make us feel welcome, sharing his infinite library of Star Trek videos and cat bowling lore. Check out

Peterburgers

The Great Siberian Rail Adventure for the juicy parts of our domestic life with Mike.

We spent part of each day networking with realtors; the rest of the time we went sightseeing. The tour books told us to tour the Hermitage Museum, stroll through the Peter and Paul fortress, take canal boat tours, and so on. All those places are great, with the exception of the zoo, which (as my tour book put it) is charming if you enjoy pathetically caged beasts in barren cells.

Before moseying through the myriad museums, I wanted to check out some of the outlying palaces most closely connected to Saint Pete—places where the local elite commonly fled to escape the summer heat and swamp sickness. A number of their palaces are quite near Saint Petersburg, the old get-aways of the Great. Our must-see list was topped by Peterhof, about forty-five minutes down the coast. Peter the Great held court there during the sultry summer months. It's a wonder of splendid architecture and fountains well worth the trip.

To The Neva And Beyond!

Determined to see Peterhof while the 144 fountains were still spewing (they're shut off for the winter in early October), Robin, James, Katherine and I sallied forth for a gander at Peter's royal summer digs. We took off to get tickets for the thirty-minute hydrofoil ride that begins at the bank of the Neva River just outside the Winter Palace (a.k.a. the Hermitage).

The price structure we found was consistently played out all day so I'll just describe once the surgery done repeatedly on my wallet. If you were a

foreigner, the posted price for the boat ride was two hundred rubles (\$7.30), if you were Russian, one hundred rubles, and it was half price (fifty rubles) if you were a Russian student. Aware of the city's tendency for guest gouging, we'd taken the precaution of having our school make a formally-stamped document saying we were Americans who were permanent residents of Russia and official students, to boot. Upon reviewing our highly official document, the cashiers would begin to charge us the (four times higher) foreign price, which then caused Robin to go into "*Oh-no-you-don't!*" mode and start (graciously, I assure you) arguing their ears off until they capitulated and gave us the student rate. I think they were impressed enough by her excellent Russian to give us the better price as a gratuity for the show she put on.

Looking out over the river while waiting to board the hydrofoil, I saw to my left two draw bridges framing the Naval Museum, a giant building with tremendous Roman columns supporting its triangular roof. By each bridge were huge pink stone lightowers which in former centuries burned with huge chalices of fire.

From this distance the beacons resembled squat light houses covered with giant thorns. It turned out these thorns were the prows from numerous ships jutting from the sides of each tower. What on earth...?

Here's a charming old world custom: In the good ol' days, a victorious Roman admiral might saw the prows off a few captured ships for prominent display in his city. Destroying perfectly good ships to strut one's success was an enormously wasteful gesture but a real rush. It's a guy thing, like mounting trophy

Peterburgers

moose horns over your outhouse door but on a more naval armada scale.

Peter mounted bronze facsimiles of ship prows all over both Rostra Columns (*rostrum* is Latin for a ship prow). Symbolically, these pruned prows were exactly what Peter's city was all about. They invoked the glory of Rome, success with swagger, and the best kind of bragging—using an ancient custom most European visitors would know nothing of until it was carefully explained to them. As a psychological gambit, Peter used his columns on foreigners to say, “Russia's greater and more cultured than you are.”

They were built just across the water from Peter's palace where he could look at them for inspiration and remind foreign guests they were trading with the strong; no one has ever accused Peter the Great of bashfulness.

Peter the Great was a man truly comfortable with his own enormous thirst for power and achievement--ever willing to fight hard to win big, ready to advance himself and his dreams at the expense of his beleaguered subjects. The ultimate *alpha male*, he brought astounding reform to his backward empire and deserves credit for much. For example, he introduced to Russia the potato.

Once aboard the hydrofoil, I went at once to an open port facing the massive Peter and Paul fortress a few hundred yards across the Neva River. Peter lost his original wooden stockade within months of closing escrow when 1703's autumn floods broomed it away; his Peterburgers rebuilt it with brick walls sixty feet thick.

The Hermitage and fortress face each across the Neva. In the early morning haze the hulking gray

Peter's Burg

walls of the fortress peered over at the elegant green grandeur of the Hermitage/Winter Palace with its three story white pillars, ornately framed windows, and oversized green (copper) human figures standing like sentinels along the roof.

As I examined the fortress from the boat, the most obvious feature was the incredibly tall steeple of the Peter and Paul Cathedral, a narrow golden spire that rises over four hundred feet from within the walls to a needlepoint crowned by a golden angel carrying a cross. As Saint Petersburg's tallest building, the Cathedral was visible from many parts of the city and especially striking from across the water.

The Peter and Paul Fortress (Peter's main power locus) has also served as the imperial mint and an escape-proof prison. The prison's very first guest was locked up in 1718 when tsar Peter imprisoned his own son Alexei. A pensive lad, Alexei was a low achiever in Dad's eyes; his big sin was in running away from the chance to fill his father's boots as the next tsar. This rather peeved Peter who had gone to rather a lot of trouble setting things up for the lad—and Sonny Boy wanted to forgo the hand off?

Knowing Dad was a tad control-prone, Alexei quit Russia altogether, fleeing to Austria with his mistress. He hoped to marry and live an ordinary life far from the halls of grasping power.

When Peter's operative found Alexei, the boy made his father vow "before God and His judgment seat" that Alexei would be safe if he came home to papa. When Peter promised, Alexei suffered a massive judgment malfunction and believed him. Upon arrival in Moscow, Alexei was arrested and imprisoned, then terrorized into implicating his

Peterburgers

friends in imaginary conspiracies against the tsar. All of his friends were forthwith tortured to death (slowly, of course). Alexei was then transferred to Saint Petersburg, a prisoner in the fortress right across the Neva from his childhood palace home.

That inconvenient vow Peter had made needed erasing, so the tsar gathered the top clergy and his government for their opinions. The interview went something like this, “Okay, Peterburgers, you may recall I’ve lately been in Moscow, slaughtering all who oppose me. You may notice I still have that look in my eye, so my traitorous son, Alexei, is next for the chopper unless any body here would care to stick up for him.”

It’s pivotal moments like this that show what we’re really made of. Should these leaders abandon all caution and staunchly defend the innocent young man shivering in his cell? Or, should they urge their tsar to do whatever he wanted to? Wow, what a poser. Tough call. The church and state tied each other, stampeding off the moral high ground with enough speed to create history’s first sonic boom. The Russian Orthodox Church left it up to the tsar’s pleasure. The government advised their leader to ignore his promise and torture the boy to extract more conspirator’s names.

Soldiers then “examined” Alexei in two sessions four days apart under the supervision of his father. Mercifully, the boy didn’t survive long enough for a third go-round. There’s no historical record of Peter ever regretting the matter.

Amazingly, Peter’s personal morality is usually “buried footnotes” in the way Russians talk about him. Generally speaking, Peter the Great is revered for his national achievements—for his successful

wars, his ability to wield power and crush his enemies, and for the glorious architecture he left behind, regardless of the humanity issues. What Russians say about this great man and in what order they do so is an education in itself.

Hydrofoiling To Peterhof

Eighty percent of the world's hydrofoils are Russian-built. They come in fifteen flavors, some of which are military, buzzing along on submerged wings with their hulls completely out of the water at speeds up to sixty-five knots.

The type of hydrofoil we rode to Peterhof is called a *Meteor* not because they tend to burn up while passing through the atmosphere, but because several hydrofoil types got space-themed names. It holds over a hundred people and skims along, hull out of the water at thirty-five knots. Once they get up on step they're pretty noisy, but smooth and *fast!*

Our hydrofoil motored us away from the palace, under one of the bridges and straight down a long, granite-lined canal leading to the Gulf of Finland. Aging cargo ships were tied up to sundry quays; my highlight was spying a freighter-sized air boat rusting up on shore, huge wind propellers and cannibalized engines high in the air.

Once we were out on the open sea we found ourselves sharing a windy day with over a hundred tiny sailboats, racing in unison and heeling way over, chopping their way through the swells.

Gloriously, the weather drifted from overcast to glowing slants of sunlight spotlighting patches of gray sea, eventually giving way to brilliant blue skies tufted with scudding cumulous.

Peterburgers

We cruised up to Peterhof at exactly twelve noon startled by the sound of gunfire and smoke drifting from the palace. Everyone poured off the boat wondering at the excitement, which turned out to be midday fireworks!

As we approached shore from the dock we could see a two hundred-yard long canal leading straight from the sea to a tremendous yellow palace vanishing to left and right behind tall trees. The canal itself was stone lined, flanked on both sides by lawns and a rank of single column fountains. I made a note to order myself a set of them in heaven. The tallest fountain was centered in a pool right in front of the palace, geysering up over forty feet.

Amazingly, it was all nearly three hundred years old. Imagine, Ancient Man had figured out how to build fountains without electric water pumps. It was all done with ingeniously designed reservoirs built in the hills twenty four miles away; the elevation difference pressurized the pipes, making possible a gathering of fountains that overshadowed Versailles.

The fountains were gushing from creatively sculpted gold figures, designed by European artisans who really knew how to shoot water. The biggest mondo spout came from the golden mouth of a golden lion whose golden jaws were being ripped apart by a giant golden Samson.

An historical drama was in progress as we approached the palace. Twin staircases of fountains framing the main gusher rose to the palace itself where a Peter the Great look-a-like was standing at the center of the stone railing overlooking all this glory. He and the wife were hosting a gaggle of costumed nobles and ladies who danced various

prehistoric (before Elvis) dances, involving lots of circling.

As I mentioned earlier, part of Peter's strategy was to bring European culture to his capital and then use it to outshine the Europeans. High government officials were required to dress as Europeans did, learn French (then the language of diplomacy), and in many other ways show themselves to be super civilized.

The dancing ladies' billowy dresses were huge inverted funnels designed to keep men at a distance for a radius of several feet, sort of like three hundred-year-old force fields. Shockingly, the "men" were all wearing lacy white stockings, short little silky knicker pants, plus white long wigs with darling curls all about and frilly kerchiefs peeking from their velvet cuffs. Obviously, the defensive dresses were designed with creatures like these in mind. As they danced, the ladies touched just the fingertips of these almost-male creatures, though occasionally all the dainty dandies would rush in and grab a lady for a quick toss into the air.

While all this poufy prancing was going on, twenty-first century loud speakers were blaring chamber music at decibels that just about had the pots dancing. Fireworks burst from mortars in time with the music, something that made me edgy. Nearly five hundred of us stood watching the cast from the past and enjoying the fountains, which the wind kept shifting to rain down on us along with glowing shards of magnesium.

Comically, during this dance a procession of twenty men in 1700s garb marched out and proudly paraded their skinny Italian dogs. Looking like rats on stilts, the dogs were apparently fabulously

Peterburgers

valuable animals since only snob value could motivate one to own anything so pathetic. I made a note for heaven *not* to order one of those.

Eventually, their majesties ended it all, invoked us to have a nice day and everyone pumped away. It was hard to watch the departing cast without feeling grateful that those days are gone for good.

I climbed the marble stairs to the palace and (as a highbrow lover of sculpture) couldn't help but notice the tsar's magnificent collection of near naked statuary. Of course, life-size, under-draped marble maidens are *not* three-dimensional pornography because when viewing flesh as stone one is incapable of base emotion.

I (rhetorically, I assure you) asked Robin if she felt it might be well for us to sprinkle *our* apartment with saucy statues. She didn't answer, allowing a stony look to suffice. Apparently, the tsar's wife was more broad-minded.

Once we got inside the palace, we saw so much *more* fine art! There were gaggles of golden gals on most gilded door frames and walls, endless scenes up on the ceilings of gossamer goddesses in myriad unlikely fantasycapes; I began to build up a pattern. The tsarina was *really* broad-minded. The weirdest room was the one even my guidebook called "bizarre." It had over one hundred fifty paintings of the same ten maidens coyly peering down at us, apparently painted during their come-hither lessons.

The other painted themes included wooden battle ships blasting the daylights out of each other, shot game birds, and fortresses.

I looked fruitlessly for pictures of Yosemite Falls or maybe a sunset on ocean waves but saw lots of grape eaters up there on the ceilings. Lots of wine,

women, and song, but no starscapes, no weeping willows reflected on moonlit ponds, not even a deserted seashore study. Just endlessly repeated wowie wenches caving in to stud muffins (some with hooves). Chunky cherubs hovered about like snipers shooting lovers full of arrows.

Men, let's get real here. What would happen if you surprised your wife by gluing a wallpaper scene like that onto *your* bedroom ceiling (you know, to give your love lair a more *imperial* look)? Why is it "art" at the tsar's house and porn at yours?

While we're on the subject of the human heart, Jesus had a lot to say about riches and how they show what's really happening inside. How we spend our money is a dead giveaway for showing who we really are and what's most important in our lives.

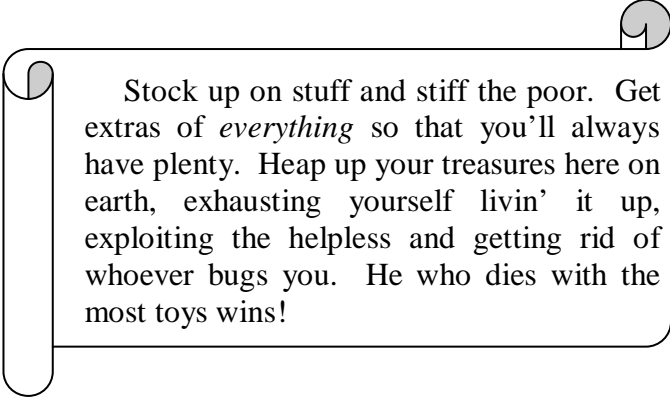
Jesus knew perfectly well that our hearts always follow our stuff. That's why he was so focused about asking people to dump anything that might compete with Him for first place in their hearts. He knew that if people would give Him control of their lives and let Him change them on the inside, moral behavior would take care of itself. He said,

"Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Then come follow me."

Matthew 19:21 & Luke 12:33-34 (NIV)

Peterburgers

Russia's royalty seems to have preferred the credo of the godless rich and powerful, setting up themselves as the final authority on life's choices:



Stock up on stuff and stiff the poor. Get extras of *everything* so that you'll always have plenty. Heap up your treasures here on earth, exhausting yourself livin' it up, exploiting the helpless and getting rid of whoever bugs you. He who dies with the most toys wins!

The Nazis

One downside to trying to set up heaven while still here on earth is the problem of always having to guard your gear. World-class wreckers, the Nazi's visit to Russia confirmed Jesus' words by breaking in and stealing everything they could lay their hands on.

With Peterhof as headquarters, their modest goal was to "destroy every building in Leningrad" (a.k.a. Saint Petersburg). Destroying thousands of buildings with three foot thick walls would have taken some doing.

Once the German army virtually surrounded Leningrad, they began shelling the city daily while starving the population of over four million. During nine hundred days of siege, they caused a million deaths. Think about that. It averages out to over 1,100 civilian deaths every day for nearly three years. Our generation has mass murderers to fight; so did theirs.

Peter's Burg

Throughout those winters Leningrad had no heat or electricity. First trees and fences, then furniture went into family stoves. Ice was chopped from the river to haul home for drinking water. Rations eventually dropped to one half piece of bread per person per day. With shells raining down while they fetched their daily bread and water, going out and staying home were about equally safe.

The cemeteries were soon overflowing. In the Piskarevskoe Cemetery the dead were shoved into a series of tremendous trenches. With 20-25,000 dead per trench, they eventually buried nearly a half million bodies there. You learn something about Russians when you consider how much they chose suffering over surrender.

Meanwhile, the Nazis at Peterhof were using the palace to stable their horses. Somewhere along the Peterhof palace tour we learned that much of what we were seeing had actually been rebuilt within the past fifty years because the Nazis had demolished this palace during their visit. For two and a half years they laid siege to Leningrad, then blew up Peterhof as they left.

Photographs of Peterhof palace rooms taken just before the Russians abandoned it (retreating into Leningrad for the siege) were displayed alongside photos of what the Russians found after the Nazis left. It positively gave me the creeps to know I was in the very spot Nazis had stalked about, smashing and looting, burning and blasting for the sheer joy of destruction. In the spirit of Calvin and Hobbs, the Nazis even used tanks to destroy many of the fountains just for fun.

Knowing that the coming invaders weren't house broken, the retreating Russians hurriedly stripped

Peterburgers

Peterhof to the walls, carrying everything valuable off to Saint Petersburg and Novosibirsk. They buried their marble maidens on the grounds. Huge paintings were rapidly knifed from their frames, rolled up and scooted off to Petersburg just before the bad guys arrived; the ceiling frescos were left to fend for themselves. Happily, the giant crystal chandeliers, enormous ornate banquet tables, ancient vases and the like were all hastily carted away just in time.

Astonishingly, the Nazis still found plenty to pry off the walls, even stripping the Dutch tiles from numerous fireplaces and removing half of the hand-carved paneling from Peter the Great's study. What wouldn't yield to pry bars or sledge hammers was finished off by explosives.

After the war, almost everything had to be rebuilt from drawings. A tremendous amount of gold leaf had been stripped from Peterhof and is still being replaced. The original chandeliers and furniture are all back in place now for us to enjoy. Remarkably, if you hadn't seen the old photos you'd never know you were touring a rebuilt palace. It all looks fantastically imperial.

I wondered why the Communists didn't mind shooting the tsar but objected to having his house blown up. Why go to the trouble to rebuild Saint Petersburg's outlying imperial palaces? It took unbelievable effort to restore each burned out shell back to imperial glory. The Communist answer was that all those palaces were a memorial to the Russian Worker. If Russian peasants could be forced to do it once, Russian Communist peasants could be forced do it again. Stalin saw these palaces as prime propaganda for demonstrating that the filthy rich deserved extermination. I think it was very nice of

Peter's Burg

the commoners to let themselves be exploited a second time so we could stroll around and admire everything.

Today, there are 144 operational fountains at Peterhof as well as numerous mansions and palaces, nearly all restored to their original glory. The grounds are gorgeous, every trace of war swept away.

The *shootka* (joke) fountains are scattered throughout the grounds; they are charmingly designed to souse the unwary. Like all practical jokes, these funny fountains greatly amuse everyone but the victims.

Peter the Great personally designed them to nail his elite foreign guests, nearly all of whom would be visiting royalty, ambassadors, national heroes, and heads of state. The joke fountains were a light-hearted way to cast guests in the ridiculous role of joke victim, shaming the Great into laughing at themselves. It was a reminder to them that Russia held the dominant position (an inferior state certainly wouldn't have dreamed of pulling such a stunt). What a tease; Peter loved to get a guest blind drunk, then hurl him into a fountain.

He was like a friend of mine in America who booby-trapped his house to play tricks on his guests. I think that practical jokers exist because they are rarely paid back in kind (nobody *ever* threw Peter the Great into a fountain, you can bet on that).

I find practical jokes incompatible to Christianity since betrayal of trust is the essence of any good practical joke. For example, one Halloween I found bananas smeared all over my Volkswagen (which qualified as a pretty good practical joke). Had I discovered my Bug washed and waxed, that wouldn't have been a good practical joke at all—just kindness.

Peterburgers

Tsarskoye Selo

Tsarskoye Selo (the tsar's village) started out as a gift from Peter the Great to his mistress, the future Empress Catherine I. It's in the foothills fifteen miles south of Saint Petersburg. In time, she had a cozy cottage (well, by tsarist standards) built on the land and presented it as a surprise gift back to her husband.

Catherine and Peter arrived at an understanding about double standards in regard to marital fidelity; she wasn't fussy about Peter's mistresses. Catherine herself had played mistress to several Russian officials prior to Peter's discovering her as a servant girl in his best friend's household. The beauty became Peter's consort and was usually faithful after their wedding. I won't tell you what Peter did to one of the guys he caught in bed with Catherine because children might be listening. If you insist on shocking yourself, go to Google.com and type in "Peter the Great" & "William Mons."

Peter's daughter, Elizabeth, upgraded Tsarskoye Selo to imperial status, an in-your-face showcase of opulence, aimed specifically at out-strutting France's Versailles palace. She commissioned Bartolomeo Rastrelli, a brilliant European architect, to make Tsarskoye Selo bigger and better in every way than anything anywhere in Europe. It was purely an imperial ego trip with enough gold and jewels slathered into the palace design to slake the most fanciful juices of Europe's best designers.

The result included gold and marble in every extreme; three-story-high ballrooms overlaid in gold, huge chandeliers, as well as towering mirrors everywhere to reflect the thousands of glowing

candles and give elite guests plenty of chances to admire themselves.

The Nazis burned it.

They torched and blasted the gorgeous ceiling art, the delicately carved, modesty-challenged, golden damsels, the marble staircases, the works.

The Amber Room Story

There's one interesting story worth relating about one of the rooms at Tsarskoye Selo called the Amber Room. Amber, as we all know, was tree sap in the dinosaur days but over time has hardened into a yellowish-orange, semi-precious stone. Some of my Russian friends swear by amber jewelry, claiming it wards off sickness.

Amber is rare, especially big pieces of it. Unique in the world, one whole room of Catherine's palace was done in tennis-ball-sized pieces of amber, carefully fitted tightly together to create a very pretty room. We're talking about a room thirty by thirty feet with fifteen-foot high ceilings. That's a lot of amber.

Well, wouldn't you know it, the Nazis really liked the Amber Room a lot, so they decided to take it with them. About twenty German soldiers were ordered to pry everything carefully off the walls and pack the boodle into crates. To conceal the secret, the SS then shot all these soldiers and hid the crates.

I'm sure we can all sympathize with those hapless soldiers who (despite assurances that "the good folks in SS are really a terrific bunch to work for") found themselves lined up against a wall for a group shot.

On the other hand, they'd done their share of house wrecking, so one could argue it was a case of what goes around comes around. They all ended up scuffing their toes a mite before the throne of God.

Peterburgers

Meanwhile back on Earth, the war ended, and the Communists were understandably nonplussed about the smoking ruin of Tsarskoye Selo, wondering aloud where everything could have gone. Germany officially agreed to help Russia find whatever seemed to be missing; a lot has gradually been returned. However, the Amber Room crates are still out there somewhere, waiting to be found.

A few years ago a German realized that the inlaid amber desk his aged father had given him must be war booty from the famous Amber Room. He notified his government and Germany ceremoniously returned it to Russia. Unhappily, Dad had died a couple of years earlier, taking with him the secret (if he knew it) of the missing crates.

The search has followed many false leads, even underwater. The amber is still out there, waiting for some determined treasure hunter, perhaps in carefully buried but forgotten moldering crates or else gorgeously adorning somebody's wine cellar.

Recently, a German gas company donated over three million dollars to restore the Amber Room, so the room is sheathed in amber once again. Considering the current crushing poverty of Russia's millions, one can only wonder at this priority. Still, the original Amber Room was created in tsarist times while Russia's millions lived in crushing poverty, so what else is new?

By the way, all those before/after pictures on display throughout the various restored palaces never talked about "the Germans" but always about "the Fascists."

Without a doubt, the best part of our palace visit was toodling about the surrounding grounds, happily strolling over marble bridges, gazing at peaceful

pools edged with sculpted stone, admiring the carefully trimmed hedges and groves, happy in the knowledge that we didn't have to own it to enjoy it.

If you really must have a peek at all the jazzy interiors, please double your budgeted visiting time to include the surrounding grounds. God's creation has been marvelously shaped by loving human hands for acres in all directions, waiting to give pleasure.

Pushkin

While ogling how royalty used to live it up, we also visited the *Lyceum* (boarding school) that Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin attended, which turned out to be more interesting than it sounds. The boarding school was actually attached to Catherine's palace, so it wasn't out of our way.

Back in the good ol' days when gold was something you dipped your naked statues in and not just a lousy investment, upper-crust Russian kids went to elite boarding schools, the best one being right next to Catherine's place at Tsarskoye Selo. Those extremely lucky few (a student body of thirty) were sent there for six years beginning at about age eleven.

They were taught French and Latin, music, fencing, drawing, poetry, horsemanship, literature, history, warfare strategy, and dance, as well as the sciences of mathematics, geology, physics, and so on.

At the conclusion of those years the eighteen-year-old boys had the equivalent of a college degree and were ready for one of two career choices: (1) the military, (where they would enter as junior officers) or (2) the government, (where they would begin as junior officials in a myriad of paperwork-oriented departments).

Peterburgers

Many Russian aristocrats achieved wealth by being granted estates from the tsar. Estates and their attached villages were a favorite imperial gift for outstanding service (primarily, success in battle). Bravery in battle combined with successful bullet dodging meant land, wealth, and honors. In turn, these endowed families provided troops and materials to help the tsar as needed. In the lulls between wars, the peasant slaves tied to each estate produced goods to grow their masters a tidy pile.

As I said, spared a life of working in the fields, the children of the elite were educated with military or government service in mind. Since this *crème de la crème* had gotten off to a rather favorable start in life, it only remained to choose one's life course and then trundle splendidly along it, grasping for honors along the way. Of course, financially profitable marriages were customarily arranged later on for the children of the rich with romance occasionally entering into the picture. When love was sacrificed on the altar of wealth, extra-marital allegiances were generally available.

This was the world of Al Pushkin's boyhood. Growing up in such a nice neighborhood gave him plenty of pretty places to wander about after class, doddling along the lakes and enjoying all the marble. Tsarskoye Selo didn't create his genius for poetry but it was certainly encouraged there. Pushkin wrote 130 poems about this place, and trust me, they're all favorable. The town Pushkin grew up in was eventually renamed in his honor.

Pushkin The Poet

Russians are completely nuts about Pushkin. While other poets get criticized for one thing or

another, Pushkin's completely untouchable. It's near sacrilege and positively oafish to opine that Pushkin ever wrote anything that wasn't brimming with genius. Except his grades—Al was lousy in math, a fact that draws affectionate dimples.

Pushkin's great contribution was that he was the first to convince Europe's elite that Russians could write great poetry—and in *Russian* too! Before Pushkin came along the world looked to England, France, Italy and the rest for artistic prowess; Pushkin put Russia on the literary map. It's the world's loss that only Russian readers get to fully appreciate Pushkin's poetry; much of his juice gets lost in translation. I've made a note to read Pushkin in the original language in heaven.

By the way, Russians claim the language of heaven will be Russian, because it takes all eternity to learn it. So, I'll enjoy Pushkin then.

After leaving the *Lyceum*, Alexander Pushkin became Mr. Frisky, a full-blown party animal, reveling in wine, women and song into his early twenties. Too witty for his own good, he wrote poems and tracts attacking the establishment, promoting democracy and atheism, criticizing absolutism, and living on the edge, even seducing two married women in the same year when he was twenty-four. He would have loved Berkeley.

Sad but true, living on the edge is a great way to get cut; the following two years, Pushkin found himself in exile for his writing. Some anti-despot political poems he wrote brought him special scrutiny from the tsar and reduced his freedoms to that of a parolee.

By the time he was twenty-seven Pushkin felt ready to settle down; he spent the next four years

Peterburgers

searching for a worthy wife, declaring he wanted “the most beautiful woman in Russia.” When he was thirty-one he found her at a Moscow ball, Natalia Goncharova, age sixteen.

One of the problems of marrying somebody half your age is that at the moment you’re finally slowing down your spouse is just revving up. Now Mrs. Pushkin, Natalia was vivacious, stunningly gorgeous, and loved to swish her skirts at the court balls, thoroughly enjoying her contrail of smitten dance partners.

It’s hard to repel boarders when they think your hottie wife is yoo-hooing them from the taff rail. It’s also tough to claim much moral high ground when you’ve done your own share of marital breaking and entering. Over the next three years the tittering rumors mounted around Pushkin’s dazzling wife.

One particularly dashing and persistent cad, Baron George d'Anthes de Heckern, went so far as to marry Natalia’s sister just to maneuver in close. Immediately following the wedding, Baron George (figuring himself now to be a family insider) dropped any pretense and began amorously pursuing Natalia in public. To the great amusement of Saint Petersburg’s elite, this put Alexander in the ridiculous role of publicly enraged husband; Alexander challenged George to a duel. As an ill omen of family holiday get-togethers to come, they fought their duel two weeks after George’s wedding to Natalia’s sister. Pushkin took a round in his guts and died at home within days; Baron George was only slightly wounded.

If you ever get to Saint Petersburg you should stop by Pushkin’s apartment for a tour (it’s within walking distance of the Hermitage) and see the room

Russia's greatest poet died in. It'll bring home to you the domestic side of Russia's loss.

Interestingly, the upper-crust sided with George at first, not Alexander. Eventually, the magnitude of the disaster registered, but initially most people felt Pushkin over-reacted to a fairly common domestic drama, one he of all people should have been more understanding about. Be that as it may, as a cruel irony, now that *Natalia* was widowed, *George* was married.

Touring Etiquette

We took the tour of Pushkin's old school (also wrecked by the Nazis, but never mind, it looks fine, now), admiring the gorgeous mirrors, clocks, and hardwood floors. Every room in this museum had its own guard, always a *babushka* (Russian for "grandmother" but commonly used for any Russian older woman). These museum *babushkas* were dedicated to making guests feel as unwelcome as possible and making darn sure nobody touched anything.

Our tour guide was a massively self-possessed woman in her forties who I suspected spent her off duty hours trying to channel Pushkin's ghost. She convinced us she had memorized every line Pushkin ever wrote and everything he ever did. We followed her enchanted lead, gliding through the school for an hour listening to her hushed reverence for this Colossal Expression of Humanity. She delivered it all with awesome poise and half closed eyes, apparently drawing inspiration for each breath from His Hovering Essence. At the conclusion of each exquisite monologue she would velvety intone, "If

Peterburgers

you please..." the signal for us to all nod in unison, and follow her raptly to the next display.

I found our haunted hostess hugely entertaining and edged in close during the tour to check out her feet. Nope. Not levitating. I also decided that if I knew my Bible as well as she knew her Pushkin I'd be a better missionary.

At one point I made the heinous blunder (okay, a sin) of actually *touching* one of the displays. It was Pushkin's school desk and chair where The Poet had sat doing his lessons, daydreaming and doodling. Of course, the solid wooden desk was protected by a quarter inch of plexi-glass; nothing was likely to get hurt. It's not like I was chain-sawing it. Still, while peering at a page mashed flat under the glass I did desecrate the Great One's desk with the edge of my nasty thumb.

The old gal guarding the room swooped on me within two heartbeats and watched me like a hawk as a sure troublemaker from then on. I could feel her eyes probing my clothes, searching for sledgehammers.

Later on, I watched my Russian friend, Nadia, get nailed by another fussy room guard for leaning very lightly against a gigantic gold door. I'm pretty sure her coat didn't do much damage, but it was plain the guard wanted vandals like her to keep moving.

Every museum I've visited in Saint Petersburg follows this pattern; there are usually polished guides leading quietly attentive herds and circling *babushkas* hunting Huns.

Another constant in touring is the special protective footwear everyone's issued, presumably to save the hardwood and marble floors. Sometimes they are blue baggies worn over our dust defiled

street shoes. Occasionally, they're giant flannel sandals, also meant to be slipped on *over* our shoes; I won't admit to trying to don these sandals wearing just socks because what happened is still too embarrassing.

Usually, I go on Russian-speaking tours; it isn't easy to find English-speaking guides. The one English-speaking guide I trooped around behind concluded her tour by boldly asking her flock of Americans to pay a second time for her lecture (we'd already paid for entry to the palace). I've never seen a Russian-speaking tour guide dare try this, but the English-speaking guide named her fee of ten dollars; we all in some embarrassment fished out the cash and thanked her profusely for letting us pay again.

Epilogue

Every culture quite rightly celebrates its high achievers. Russia has its share of people and places worth bragging about; a tactful guest makes the appropriate impressed noises. Try to avoid trumping your hosts with achievements from back home. Every country should get a turn to bask in praise.

Acknowledging the achievements of your host culture, whether admirable or ludicrous, wins open hearts, broadens your common ground, and allows you access for future discussion. Take the time to learn the history of the culture you've come to live in.

While admiring the beauty, note that no culture (including our own) is without cruelty and guilty memories. Those stories are worth knowing, too. Watch especially for what tends to get emphasized (or not) and in what order the things most underscored come up. That will tell you a lot about the values of the people you're listening to.

Peterburgers

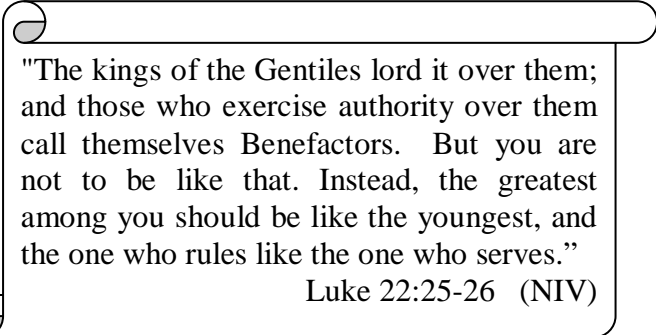
Over time, you can develop a broad enough base to be able to recognize spin. The deeper you go, the more you'll be rewarded with an expanded understanding of the world, and become a more cultured person.

We show love to local people by caring about what they care about and knowing them as they are (not just as they wish to be known). Touring isn't only about art and history, it's also about love.

Russians have a saying: "If you want to know a man, give him money or power." It's been my observation that many novice leaders when given power automatically use it oppressively. New husbands are especially chronic abusers of power (to the sorrow of their brides).

Peterburgers have a strong tendency to see people in charge as self-serving oppressors, yet if a Peterburger is given authority, often he (at least initially) becomes an oppressor, too. Cynically, but hopefully, the powerless wish for a better life, but from experience know to expect little but mistreatment from above.

In contrast, Jesus taught His disciples,



"The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves."

Luke 22:25-26 (NIV)

It isn't easy to find a genuine servant-leader, nor is it easy to create one, but that's the standard Jesus

set. This is especially challenging for missionaries in Russia.

Because Russia's history is remarkably rich in examples of leaders who treated their subjects as Peterburgers, there is a strong tendency in the new churches springing up to see despotic leaders surface. The personal example a missionary sets as a husband and father is often a role model completely outside the experience of the men in the church.

In those early "silent" years when you're language learning, your family relationships *are* your sermon. Don't be in a rush to begin preaching through translators. Focus on language study and let your life speak for you. This living testimony speaks loud and clear and can have a life-changing influence that you should not underestimate.

When a translator is present, explain how you make family decisions (how you consult those whom your decisions affect). Let them see your courtesy for one another. Be willing to talk about how your authority as parents translates into ways you serve the needs of your children. When your wife is ill, don't hide the fact you cover for her by shopping and cooking. Russians strongly assign such tasks to women, so your doing them changes the biblical principle of "laying down your life for your wife" from theory into concrete practice.

If you can help the men in your church become servant leaders at home, you will enormously strengthen the quality of their servant-leadership at church. You may well set an example Peterburgers cannot find anywhere else.