

Thai Journal – Volume 30: What A Country!

The Beforemath – Something to Do While Waiting for the Aftermath

Several years before our move to Thailand, we went to Branson, Mo., an entertainment Mecca in the region that draws over seven million visitors each year. One of the acts we saw there was Yakov Smirnoff, a Russian comedian who had made a name for himself in the 80's in appearances on "The Tonight Show" and had his own sitcom called "America: What a Country!" We caught his performance at his theater in Branson. Cindy joined me as a fan of his after seeing that performance. She still remembers some of his jokes. I think that also wetted her appetite to visit Russia some day to see for herself. So, because turnabout is fair play, I'm calling this volume, "Russia: What a Country!"

It was, however, an uphill struggle all the way, this trip to Russia. Did we miss the writing on the wall? A long time friend, the son of a family who has often hosted us at their home in Lat Prao, a suburb in north Bangkok, had invited us several times to visit him in Russia, where he is an official of the Ministry of Commerce in the Thai embassy. As he is due to return from a nearly four year stint there, this was probably our last best chance. We had originally talked about mid September, but there were many obstacles in the way.

The first serious miscalculation was my presumption that I would not need a visa to visit Russia. After all, isn't the US the pre-eminent superpower? Didn't we win the cold war? Apparently none of that counts for much. As it turns out, not only do Americans need a visa, but before one can get a visa, one has to get a letter of invitation from the Russian authorities. The letter is not all that difficult, but it is time consuming. Our friend in Moscow was able to make the request and furnish the required letter.

The visa application was even more daunting. I had looked it up on the Russian embassy site in Washington, D.C. and was chastened by the two page document. In addition to the basic personal and passport information, it wanted to know my last two places of employment, including dates, address, phone number, and supervisor. It also wanted to know my last two educational institutions after high school including major and degree conferred along with the address and telephone number of the institution. If I had served in the military, which I had, it also wanted to know my, branch, rank, specialty, and dates of service. As if that were not enough, I also had to list every country I had visited in the last ten years. After looking at all this, I was beginning to wonder if it was worth all this rigamarole. As if to rub salt in my wounds, imagine my disbelief when I found out that Thais did not need a visa for a visit of 30 days or less. Since Cindy also has a Thai passport, she just smiled. All I could do was grimace.

My second major miscalculation was finding out there was no Russian consulate in Chiang Mai. We have a Bangladesh embassy just down the street, but no Russian consulate. This was made even more bitter by the fact that I had been in Bangkok for nearly a week the last week of August and I could have gotten the visa at that time. Instead my email to the embassy asking if I could send in the necessary paperwork went unanswered and when we finally called we learned that applications had to be made in person. Naturally! The final indignity was that I had to bring along lab results from an HIV test. They didn't say if they were looking for positive or negative results.

One thing that offered some relief was that the Russian embassy in Bangkok had a one page visa application, which didn't require all that other draconian information. I thought maybe I could get away with filling in that form. But then push came to shove and our friend in Moscow said that he

would be returning home in mid October and so if we wanted to come it had to be within the next couple of days. So the afternoon before we were to fly to Bangkok, I asked myself what if we walked into the Russian embassy at 9:00 Friday morning --- they are only open from 9:00 – 12:00 --- and they insisted that I fill out the long form. I was only getting one shot at this and it was going to cost me \$200, twice the usual amount, to get the visa processed the same day, so this was a high risk situation. Would I be able to come up with that information off the top of my head? So I bit my tongue and started filling out only that extraneous detailed information the day before while I had internet access to do the appropriate look-ups.

That proved to be a smart move, because we made sure we were at the embassy almost 30 minutes before it opened. When I asked which form I had to fill out, the clerk looked at my passport and pulled out the long form and passed it to me. As I started to fill it in, I thought it would make more sense to fill in the rest of the information in the form I had already started the day before rather than re-enter all the information on the new form. That worked out quite well and I was able to hand in all the paperwork at 9:40. I thought it would take until noon and as I sat there I was tempted to take out my iPod and listen to some of the podcasts that I had filled it with. But this was the Russian embassy and the presence of an American with an electronic listening device might be misunderstood. I didn't want to give anyone cause to reject my visa application. Fortunately I didn't have to wait long and the visa was finished by 10:30.

You would have thought that would have been it. Hardly! Now it was over to the Aeroflot office to get our tickets. For some reason, their credit card machine was broken, so they would only accept cash. Was this a money laundering operation they were running over there? Was the Russian mafia in the back room? Well, we didn't have cash and as one can only get \$300 a day out of an ATM, the roughly \$2,000 we were going to need wasn't at hand. But the mother of the guy who invited us was with us and she went to the bank and drew out enough to cover us.

More Than We Bargained For



As we sat at the gate waiting for our flight, the plane rolled up and I got the first inkling for what we were in for. There on the side of what looked like a plump Boeing 707 were the carrier's letters, Aeroflot. It may not look like Aeroflot, but it doesn't take a lot of imagination to put it together. Everything is fine with the "A". Then what looks like a "3" is really an "e". Wait, it gets better. A "p" is not a "p"; It's actually an "r". "o" is "o", but what looks like an "0" with a line through it is an "f". Are you still with me? The upside down "v" is an "l", followed by a very readable "o" and "t".

As we were to learn over the following days, that was just the beginning. A "c" is actually an "s", an "i" looks like a backwards capital "N", and an "n" is a capital "H". This makes for a lot of confusion. It would be difficult enough to read and pronounce Russian if they used the standard Roman alphabet. This is worse, to my way of thinking, because not only are there other letters to contend with, but the letters we all know and love already, don't represent what we think they do. As a result there's a certain unlearning which needs to go on. Our host, who had been in Russia for almost four

years now said, with a wink and a nod, that he had to get out of Russia before it ruined his English.

What really struck me during our short stay, just over a week, is how easily one can become disoriented in another culture. It's bad enough that one couldn't comprehend the words as they are written, but one can't even trust the letters in the words. If we had been in China or Japan, our complete unfamiliarity with the alphabet would have caused us to ignore it altogether. But in Russia, we constantly tried to make sense of the words, only to have to catch ourselves and make the appropriate substitutions. This can be quite taxing. When you pile cultural differences on top of this, things really get difficult. Either that or one just throws up one's hands.



That, in fact, is just what it came to. After fighting this battle for a couple of days, we found ourselves at the world famous Moscow State University. It was cold, it was rainy, it was windy. I just couldn't take this alphabet thing anymore, so I braved the elements and threw open my jacket to expose my Manitowoc, USA sweat shirt and yelled out at the top of my voice, "OK, Russia, read this!" As you can see, Cindy remained calm and and gra-



cious through this entire outburst. Oh, and did I say it was windy and rainy and cold?

Getting There is Not Half the Fun

But I digress. We need to talk some more about Aeroflot. When we decided to fly Aeroflot, we thought, "How bad can it be?" I researched Aeroflot's safety record on the internet and it gets high marks. The comments about service, however, were less than glowing. But only Thai Airways and Aeroflot offer non-stop, or is that non-crash, service between Bangkok and Moscow, and what could they do to us in only ten hours?

The inside of the plane was pretty much the same dimensions as a 747. Seating was 3-4-3, except where we were sitting where, thankfully, it was 2-4-2. We both brought carry-on bags and once we entered the cabin I knew we were not in the friendly skies. Though the cabin was about the size of a 747, there were no overhead compartments for the middle section passengers. The overhead bins were decidedly smaller than those on comparable planes and we couldn't get both our bags in our bin,

so I was about to jam one of the bags into an adjoining bin when this hefty, burly, elderly woman appeared from out of nowhere to excoriate me for having the timidity to take up more than one overhead. “You can't put that up there!” she yelled. “Put it under your seat!” Another lady from across the aisle offered to take her briefcase and put it under her seat, so both of our carry-ons could now fit in one overhead. I guess this flight attendant never saw those commercials of the smiling, helpful, young ladies. Indeed I thought I might have seen a likeness of her in “From Russia with Love”. How appropriate. We would cross swords several times during the flight.

One thing these planes had going for them was plenty of leg room. I could even cross my legs comfortably. Moving the fan from the overhead to the seat back was inspired even if it did not circulate cool air. Seat numbers were on the back of the seats rather than on the overhead and this created a lot of confusion for someone unfamiliar with this arrangement. In fact that must have been an afterthought, because crude gashes had been made into the seat backs and small metal tags appeared to have been forced into place. The reading lights were also in the seat back just above the tray tables. And those tray tables ... they were something else. The only way you could lower them was to push the seat forward, disturbing the person in front of you. I never did figure out what the hook was for on the upper left. Imagine all this excitement and we hadn't even gotten off the ground.



The preflight instructions were a gas. There was only one announcement, in Russian, in which a couple of strategically placed words in English were thrown in now and then. Actually it was quite effective. Whenever the captain would make some kind of announcement, he would say it first in Russian and then in English. After it was over, Cindy and I would look at each other incredulously and implore in unison, “What did he say?” The food was pretty good, most likely because it had been prepared in Thailand. On the return flight, it was barely edible. When any drinks were served there was never any ice. Perhaps this was



one of the repercussions of global warming. Whenever someone went forward to get some water, they came back with what looked like a urine sample until I figured out it was the cup color. They've taken it beyond no frills. They've managed to eliminate a lot of the distractions that one normally finds on a flight, like entertainment. There was no video or audio of any kind. Fortunately I had loaded up my iPod with podcasts, which sustained me through both flights. The final surprise came upon land-

ing, when everyone broke into applause. I did not find this very reassuring, wondering if surviving the flight was cause for celebration. I later learned that this was traditional on international flights.