

The First Russian Institute Students to Get to the USSR, 1954

By Francis B. Randall

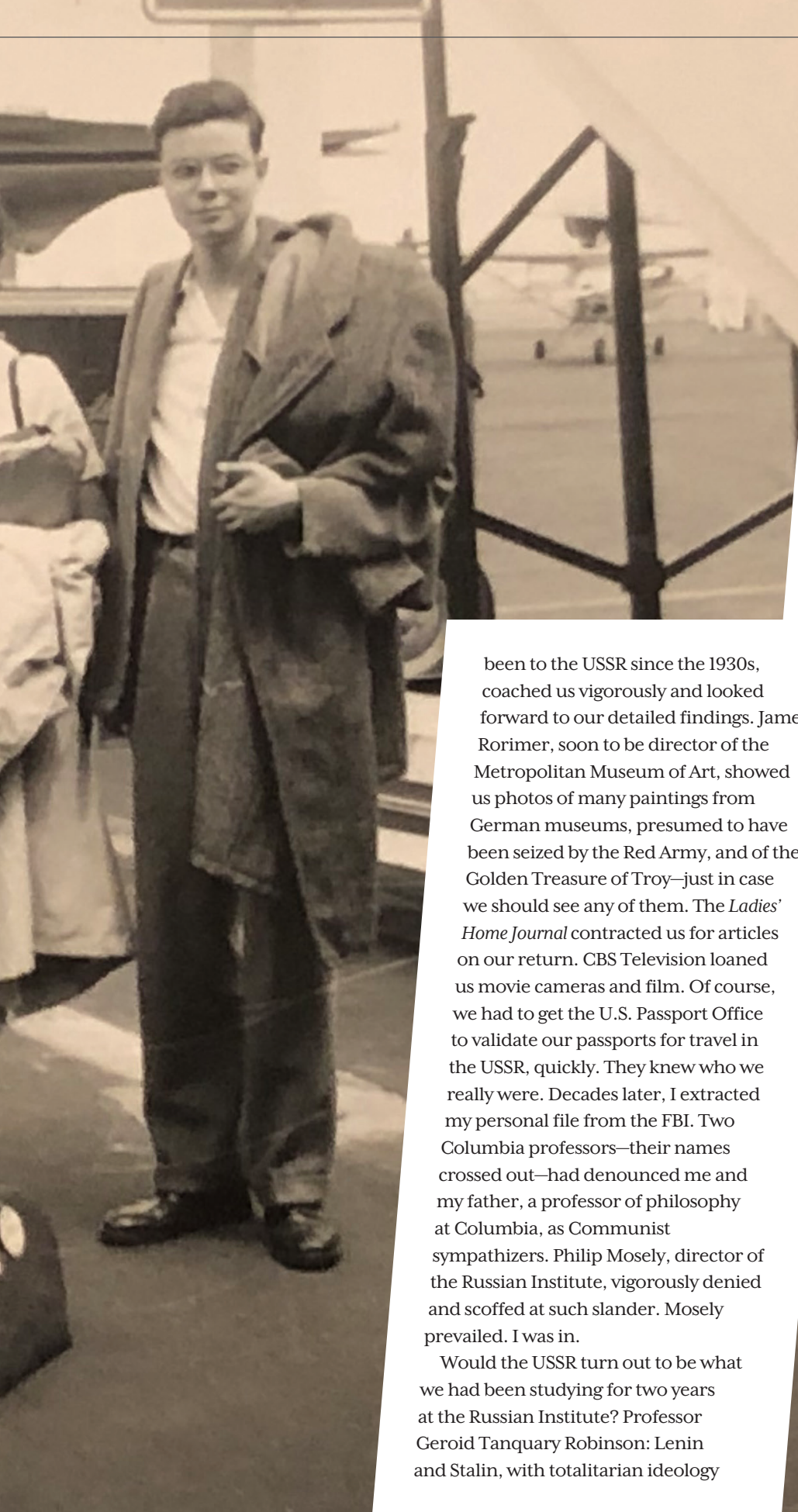
"The past is another country. They do things differently there."

—L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

Sixty-eight years ago, in 1954, four students at the Russian Institute, me included, traveled to the Soviet Union that we had been studying so hard at Columbia. We were the first students to do so. That winter, eight of us, snacking at the Russian Tea Room next to Carnegie Hall, reflected that none of us had been within a thousand miles of magical, baleful Moscow. We resolved to apply for visas to enter the Forbidden Empire. The Soviet Embassy in Washington sent us application forms, on which we confessed to being students at Columbia but never mentioned the Russian Institute or that any of us knew a word of Russian. That would have ended things right there. After six months of silence, four of us received brief notes granting us visas for a month's travel in the USSR!

That was big news among Russianists then. Aside from diplomatic personnel, we were to be Americans 16–19 to get to the USSR legally after the end of World War II. Our professors, who hadn't

From left to right: Theodore Curran, Gay Humphrey (Matthaei), Jeri Lidsky (Laber), and Francis B. Randall.



been to the USSR since the 1930s, coached us vigorously and looked forward to our detailed findings. James Rorimer, soon to be director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, showed us photos of many paintings from German museums, presumed to have been seized by the Red Army, and of the Golden Treasure of Troy—just in case we should see any of them. The *Ladies' Home Journal* contracted us for articles on our return. CBS Television loaned us movie cameras and film. Of course, we had to get the U.S. Passport Office to validate our passports for travel in the USSR, quickly. They knew who we really were. Decades later, I extracted my personal file from the FBI. Two Columbia professors—their names crossed out—had denounced me and my father, a professor of philosophy at Columbia, as Communist sympathizers. Philip Mosely, director of the Russian Institute, vigorously denied and scoffed at such slander. Mosely prevailed. I was in.

Would the USSR turn out to be what we had been studying for two years at the Russian Institute? Professor Geroid Tanquary Robinson: Lenin and Stalin, with totalitarian ideology

dictating totalitarian practice, built a prison house of peoples, who were coerced to proclaim their happiness to be prisoners. Professor John Hazard: These are the intricate ways, from agitation and propaganda to the vast concentration camps, by which Stalin controls every aspect of life and death in the USSR. Professor Philip Mosely: Stalin wants to destroy us by any means possible and ideologically assumes we are equally belligerent and treacherous. Professor Ernest Simmons: Stalin has castrated classic Russian literature and has slaughtered its 20th-century successors. Then on March 5, 1953, Stalin died. All our professors predicted that some modest relaxations and cosmetic concessions might be granted, temporarily, but that nothing of significance would change in Stalin's gigantic, totalitarian, concentration camp.

So off we flew on Finnair to Helsinki: I, future historian of Russia; Theodore Curran, future foreign service officer; Gay Humphrey, future founder of an interior decorating firm; and Jeri Lidsky (Laber), future director of

Human Rights Watch. At the Soviet Embassy in Helsinki officials had not been told about us and were astonished to see our valid visas. They phoned to Moscow and then put just the four of us on a plane to Leningrad. The officials at Leningrad airport had never heard of us, so they fed us a greasy meal, while they phoned ahead to Moscow, and then put us on another empty plane. We were met at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport by "Alex," the manager of Hotel National. On the long, bumpy ride into Moscow, we passed our first Soviet billboards, with their brandless advertising, "Drink champagne"; "Build peace"; "Use soap." Alex put us up in two huge, princely, Victorian rooms in his hotel, with fairy-tale views of the Kremlin across the street. Alex asked who we were—"just students"—and what we wanted to see—well, everything. He worked hard for us, for in the next two days he managed to get for us the necessary Intourist coupons for sightseeing tours and tickets to operas, ballets, and soccer games—and airplane tickets to and reservations in Uzbekistan and Georgia, back to Moscow, and then on to Leningrad.

So, yes, we saw the Kremlin and the Moscow Metro, the Hermitage and tsarist palaces of Leningrad, the snowy peaks of the Caucasus, and the tiled mosques of Central Asia—which no other young American then had ever seen. But now, almost 70 years later, almost every reader of this magazine has seen them all, and much more, so this will not be a travelogue.

We genuinely wanted to find out if our professors had taught us soundly; that is, what were the Russians and other peoples of the USSR really like? How well off? How able and willing to meet and talk to us? How free or constrained? What would

they say about their own country and communism and about their own lives? What did they know about the outside world? I will make use of my journal notes and my publication in the *Amherst Alumni Magazine* for much of what follows.

By our fifth day in the USSR, we knew that although nothing important had changed since Stalin's death, there had been many trivial modifications. To us, the most important was letting the U.S. in and letting us travel all over the country, whereas earlier U.S. diplomats and reporters were mostly confined to Moscow and Leningrad. We were astonished at how easily—how wholesale—Russians, Georgians, and Uzbeks flocked in the streets to talk to us. Some meetings were bizarre, as when airplane pilots came out of their cockpits to meet the Americans. They said they had never seen any, except the pilots they had shot down in Korea. But from the first day to the last, once we hit the streets, first one, then three, then a crowd would gather around us. They were simply goggle-eyed when staring at our two ladies—young, pretty, slim, taller than most Soviet men—dressed in elegant American clothes. At operas and ballets, the operators of spotlights, skilled at finding German airplanes in the clouds, would zoom in on the women of our group.

Someone, usually a university student, would tap me or Mr. Curran on the shoulder and ask, "Where are you from?" We would ask them to guess. "Estonian? Polish? Czech? Egyptian?" And sometimes, "Chinese?" When we answered, "No, American," the crowd shrank back 10 or 20 feet and looked to see if there were any policemen about. But then one or more students would return to talk to us.

On an excursion to Trinity Monastery (Zagorsk). Randall and Curran flank their excursion guide and a priest from the monastery.



The people were really interested in learning about America. First of all, they would ask about American Blacks. Can Blacks go to universities in America? Do they ride in separate subway cars in New York City? Would I marry a Black woman? Does Chiang Kai-shek have an estate in the South with Black slaves? And, three times, was I Black? This last revealed that the Communists had not bothered to tell the masses anything other than that Blacks are an oppressed class of workers in America.

There were a lot of questions about politics. Why did we start the Korean War? Why do we build air bases to threaten the Soviet Union? Why do we use atomic energy only for war and never for peace? Many women wanted to know about the status of women in America. Children wanted to know about jazz, and about Tarzan, the hero of the only American movies they had ever seen....

Our conclusions? First of all, the USSR struck me as a very poor country. There were long lines at meat and dairy stores; and fruits and vegetables were small, hard, scarce, and expensive. And Soviet housing IS wretched!

Second, we quickly discovered that the USSR is a police state, for we suffered 16 arrests in that one month. We would be taking pictures of something, when a policeman would step out from behind some passing truck and march us off to a nearby police station for illegal photography. Photography was newly legalized for foreigners, but not of "military installations," which could be nothing more than a soldier in a crowd. Sometimes the samovar was already boiling when we were brought in, and our places set for tea. The police captains were usually polite. We came to suspect that this was the only dignified way a police captain could meet the exotic Americans in town. They, too, asked us about America.

After pleasant tea and conversations, they might take our film and present us with confessions of espionage for us to sign. We always declined, as we had been strongly advised to do. "The secretary has gone to SUCH trouble to draw up the document."

We remained hard-hearted and rude. One police captain, in Samarkand, had the arresting officer take the film out of the camera to see if there were any illegal photographs in it. Both were comically puzzled to see only a black strip. They had no idea what a camera and film were like. The captain yelled at the arresting officer. We defended the poor fellow. This captain and others eventually wrote "refuses to sign" on the confessions, wished us a happy stay, and had us driven back to the place of the arrest. Our first arrests were alarming, the middle ones were comical, the later ones were annoying.

Finally, I understood that the Iron Curtain really works. The Soviets we met had false ideas about the outside world that the regime wanted them to

have. Enjoying an ignorance so total, they were proud of what the great socialist future has in store for them. Communist agitation and propaganda have succeeded completely. "*Pravda* can't tell lies," a Soviet told us, "because the word, *pravda*, means truth (*istina*)."

Back in Finland, we felt the constant watchfulness and oppressive weight of the atmosphere melt away. We gorged on drinkable water, milk, and Coca-Cola. Back in New York, distinguished experts on the USSR, not only from Columbia but also from Harvard to California, picked our brains. The *Ladies' Home Journal* printed our article. CBS Television aired an excerpt from our movies. (They are now all in the Matthaei-Randall Archive in Butler Library.) We enjoyed the lecture circuit for some months. The FBI called us in to see if we had seen any wanted fugitives. We were (mildly) famous for more than 15 minutes and then returned to our doctoral research at Columbia. ■

Francis B. Randall (Russian Institute, 1954) is a historian, retired from Sarah Lawrence College.

Editor's note: Professor Francis Randall, inspired by reading Elizabeth Valkenier's account of her first trips to the Soviet Union, which appeared in the Fall 2021 issue of Harriman Magazine, sent Director Alexander Cooley his own reminiscences of a monthlong stay in the USSR that he undertook with three other Russian Institute students in 1954. It was the first such trip by any member of the Institute since the end of World War II.