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# 'Soul Food' In Moscow

## Visit with a 'Brother'

By Charlene Porter

Russia, truthfully, was the last place on my mind. Although it is in the news daily and its policies affect United States' economic and political welfare, only once, while a student at Howard University, had I seriously considered a visit there. But when the travel brochure arrived for Moscow and Leningrad, the idea of faraway intrigue tugged at me until I could not resist. A short time later, I began to anticipate and make plans for this adventure.

Once my place with the theater study group I belonged to was confirmed, I set about gathering any available information on the places I would be visiting. I was especially anxious to verify one story I'd heard about a group of American Blacks who emigrated to Moscow years ago and made it their home.

The story, I soon found out, was true. I had been able to get a copy of *Black Man in Red Russia*, by the late journalist, Homer Smith, who was himself a part of this colony for 14 years. Now I had names, such as Frank Goode, who was Paul Robeson's brother-in-law; agricultural specialist George Tynes; opera singer Coretta Arli-Titz; John Golden, whose granddaughter is now one of Russia's star tennis players, among others—as well as a list of what had attracted, discrimination and racial violence in

these men and women to such a distant land. In Smith's words, the reason was: "To be free, to walk in dignity. For these precious privileges some men will go anywhere, sacrifice anything, in quest for these rights. Immigrants have come from all over the world to America. I yearned to stand taller than I had ever stood, to breathe total freedom in great exhilarating gulps, to avoid all the hurts that were increasingly becoming the lot of men and women of color in the United States. The solution seemed simple to me: Russia was the only place where I could go and escape color discrimination entirely. Moscow seemed the answer."

"Historically," as explained in the book's introduction, "the Russians had never had contact with people of Africa. There was, it is true, a tiny enclave of dark-skinned people long resident in the Caucasus, so-called Russian native Negroes. But few Russians had ever heard of them and not one in ten thousand had seen them. When the first Negroes of contemporary times appeared in the Soviet in the late 1920s and early 1930s they were a curiosity beyond compare. In a land always starved for EXOTICA (as the Russian phrase has it) these pleasant, different-appearing, different-speaking people were a delightful sensation. The fact that they were the object of

America only added to the piquancy of their presence in Russia. Negroes were not the only minorities which had been attracted to Russia in the early 1930s. There were radicals of many hues and lands. There were the oppressed of many tyrannies. There were refugees from Spain and Communist Germans who had escaped Hitler."

Eventually, a good friend helped me gain an introduction to several of the expatriates and their families. But, I was cautioned not to be naive. "While you are in Russia, do not do or say anything that could be misconstrued or embarrassing." My attitude, I was told, was much too casual and not unlike that of other visitors who had unwittingly been duped by the Soviet secret police agency, the KGB.

This advice, I admit, caused me problems with the balance between objectivity and sensibility: Did I really need to maintain a sense of cloak and dagger for such a routine visit? In general, I was warned not to be attracted to bids from Russian youth for American jeans. Black market dealings are an especially serious offense in Russia. An open gate to Western visitors, I was reminded, did not necessarily imply an open mind.

Tucked on board the Soviet Union's government-owned commercial airline,

George Tynes



The Tynes Clan—Son Slava, daughter Emelia and her two children, Nastai and Elizabeth.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLENE PORTER

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Aeroflot, the stark difference between the plane's economy of space and design, with its narrow gray interior, and American luxury lines proved a hint of what lay in store. I began to carve time from my itinerary. Reaching the people whose telephone numbers I had tucked away was a priority. With only a short stop in Paris, the eight hour flight allowed ample time for last-minute planning.

When foreign travellers arrive in Moscow, passports are collected immediately—a practice which is a bit disconcerting at first because explicit instructions are stated before leaving the home country that passports must be on one's person at all times. However, the Soviet Intourist personnel who make all accommodations for foreign visitors, soon assure you all is well during the 24 hours or so until the passport is returned. By now my "someone is watching you" syndrome was well on its way.

Consequently, I was reluctant to make unauthorized travels around the city without my credentials. Although I was free to come and go as I pleased, I decided instead to begin my calls the next day. When the time did come to call, my first two efforts were disappointments: I could get no answers. But with the third try, a deep and blurry Russian hello greeted me.

"Mr. Tynes," I said loudly and quickly, giving him my name and relaying greetings from mutual friends, "I am here for just a few days and would like, if possible, to visit with you for a while." "Yes, yes," he replied, and said he would be happy to meet me and would come tomorrow afternoon at five to my hotel, The Rossia. Could I, he wondered, come to dinner with his family then. My excitement would have to be subdued until then, but in the meantime there was St. Basil's Cathedral, where many wedding parties go to have their pictures taken, just a few blocks from the hotel, the Kremlin, Lenin's tomb and the Circus. That morning our tour guide had pointed out Pushkin Square and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts—named in honor of Aleksandr Pushkin, a Black man who lived and wrote in Moscow during the first part of the 1800s. Catherine Pushkin, his great-granddaughter, lives in a small town not far from Moscow, while throughout Russia, Pushkin remains one of the greatest men of literary history. His, "revolutionary poems and biting epigrams," wrote Smith, "were always directed against dictatorial and tyrannical rule."

George Tynes, now in his sixties, is a tall hulking man, whose stature would be

imposing if not bent from age. His brown face has somehow taken on the look of a native Muscovite—old and worn before its time. I saw him immediately, dressed in a green all-weather coat and a black fur hat, and walked toward him through the crowd of otherwise white faces. Touched by unspoken understanding and circumstances, we dispensed with nervousness and fell into quick and friendly conversation, repeating many of the introductions and greetings from friends at home that we had exchanged earlier. Our excitement stood out, while the people around us seemed subdued and cold, which was—with the exception of the ballet where there was ice cream topped with cherries served during intermission and the delicate balalaika music—to be my lasting and general impression of Moscow.

Like many average working Russian citizens, although he is retired, Tynes is unable to afford the large cash payment required for a car and makes his way on public transportation—this time a taxi. I would have to wait until later to ride the splendid Moscow subway, with its stations decorated by ornate gold and marble fixtures, and which like the trams (I am told) are often crowded, and on which



20 passengers pay their fares by an honor system.

I was eager to talk with him and to ask questions, such as his opinions on detente, and the U.S.-Russian wheat sales. But I sensed that conversation about anything more than general observations would not be welcome. On the main streets, I noticed, were newspapers posted for public reading. Since all Russian stores are government-owned and regulated, there is no need for advertising I am told. Although new and unfamiliar, the passing landscape seems dull and monotonous, laden with large clay colored apartment buildings. Everything is big and bleak, with not even a feeling of neighborhood to relieve the intensity of the concrete surroundings. The only degree and human measure I see are flowers laid at the base of statues along the way.

Since his 1931 move to Russia, from Wilberforce, Ohio, where he graduated from college with a class of eleven, Tynes has become fluent in the Russian language. On the other hand, his English is heavily brushed with Russian accent, sometimes too difficult for an unfamiliar ear to comprehend. It was a long ride to his home, and along the way we joked about his living in the "suburbs." His apartment building, not significantly different from the many others in Moscow, is 14 miles from the center of the city.

It is dusk when we arrive. Inside the main door there is no furnished or tiled lobby like the ones often seen in America, only a dingy but clean hallway where two old women in scarfs and heavy woolens sit on a bench.

They stare blankly at us without a change in their wrinkled glares. They bring to mind images of old seamstresses I learned of during a museum tour, who, before the revolution, often embroidered so many pearls onto the robes of priests that they usually went blind.

Just around the corner, in a cold, semi-dark corridor, two small elevators face each other. The one we took creaked to

the fourth floor and jerked to a stop. Its door opened slowly onto another dim hallway. The building is not unlike many American low rent housing projects. In another apartment I visited, my passport was required to enter.

Tynes' apartment is probably considered above average because of the kitchen, which is not included in most Moscow apartments. In the bathroom, stacks of old newspapers serve as tissue paper. For Moscow living, it is comfortable quarters and thoroughly neat. Although housing is at a premium in Moscow, I could see that much effort and money was put toward reconstruction of the beautiful and elaborate palaces and cathedrals left by the tzars.

The family size dinner table, covered and graciously set with silverware and wine glasses, dominates the room. Taking off my coat I look around and become acquainted as inconspicuously as possible . . . searching for clues as to why Tynes is in this country. Quickly, I catch the African details on every wall, from carved wooden statues to panels of printed cloth. As is Russian custom, a bottle of vodka is opened for a welcome toast. It is (I discovered in the previous days) too strong for me, but I try anyway. My host laughs at my difficult attempt.

A Hugh Masekela album plays loudly on the small stereo set. When I look around, Tynes' daughter, Emelia Mason, and her two daughters, Nastai and Elizabeth, have arrived. Tall and statuesque like her father, Emelia is a handsome woman with nappy brown hair brushed back into the afro style. Emelia, whose mother is Ukranian, is a mathematics teacher. Her husband, she tells me, is a nuclear scientist from Liberia, West Africa. The little girls, who look no different from little brown beauties in the United States, speak broken English. I must look again and again just to remind myself they are not visitors to this country like me. Emelia, shy at first, sits quietly to my right, between her father and me. The girls are to my left, staring curiously

and giggling when I try to talk with them. Do I, Tynes asks, perhaps have any chewing gum for the children. Regretfully, I have already given what I did have away to the many other youngsters who approached me with small medals in exchange for, "Chewing gum, chewing gum, please."

Emelia's two brothers live nearby, but only Slava, the oldest son arrives. Reuben, a bus driver, is at work. Both are married to Russian women and have families of their own. "Hello, it is good to meet you," Slava says to me in very good English. A 35-year-old freelance journalist, formerly with the Novosty Press Agency, Slava is now in school working for an advanced degree on "The Black Movement in America." Somehow, I never get an exact answer from him about why, or how, he chose the subject. I felt that I was a curiosity to him also.

Before dinner, we talked about the huge GUM department store, which I found depressing for its poor selection of items, and prices almost three times as high as those in the special foreign currency shops, where the Russians are not allowed to shop. Although I felt ill at ease in a city where so many soldiers are always about, I remark how kind the people can be.

Once, I tell Slava, when I was trying to locate the right street for my bus stop on my return from the House of Books, which all book stores in Russia are called, I stopped several passersby to ask if they spoke English until one young man in a group of teenagers was able to help me. Before leaving, he replied to my thank you in his best English: "Don't mention it." And twice, when I needed change for a ruble, strangers handed me what I wanted, but refused to accept the money I owed them in return.

George Tynes, originally from Roanoke, Va., now considers the U.S.S.R. his home. Although he was able to attend college, which was unusual at the time for most Black people in America, he



quickly informed me, "My father was a preacher, and perhaps because of that we were a little luckier than most Blacks of that period. We didn't suffer so much as some families." Somehow though, he is too quick to criticize U.S. race relations and his perception of his situation too pat and rehearsed, though what he said cannot be denied. For instance, in 1930, the year before he left America, 20 Black men had been lynched, and racial discrimination against Blacks was quite rampant.

For years, Tynes worked as the chief zoologist on a vast collective farm outside the Crimean capital city of Simferopol. Eventually, he became technical director of a game preserve on the outskirts of Moscow, and is still considered one of the leading authorities on fish and fowl in the Soviet Union. He shows the medals he received over the years for "agricultural achievement" and fondly reminisces his life as a farmer—playfully boasting of the good health he enjoys today because of it. Curiously, none of the pictures in his photo album portrays any of those proud years.

He is no less prepared to point out the virtues of the Soviet system, which according to his interpretation, "does not allow racism." People of color, however, although no longer an oddity in Russia, such as African university students, often say they live with the knowledge of a distinct dislike for them. In 1964, for example, several hundred African students marched through Red Square declaring, "Moscow is another Alabama." With the offer of free education in Soviet colleges, including the Patrice Lumumba Friendship University, the Third World population has risen from 134 in 1957 to about 20,000 this year, according to news reports.

Dinner with the Tynes family is as near to "soul food" as anything I have tasted in days. Like the other tables I've dined at in Moscow, there is a stack of white and a stack of dark brown bread, and the

We have spinach souffle from a frozen food package (which is a surprise to me because refrigeration is said to be a problem in Russia), flavored rice and fresh fish. Dessert is cake and tea.

Because the room is small and intimate, we make all the sounds and chatter of a family at a Sunday dinner. Elizabeth and Nastai clear the table and, just like children in millions of American homes, rush to watch the children's television program. The government-controlled Russian television is of better technical quality than America's, but lacks in program selection. Its programming includes, sports, films, concerts, plays and public affairs presentations.

The food was delicious and the company gracious. Reluctantly, I realize that it is getting late and time to return to my hotel. Now I talk in earnest, asking more direct questions, but still receiving few exact answers—a habit I have grown accustomed to since arriving in Moscow. Evasion, it would appear, is an art with the Russians. We talk for a time about other Blacks who visited Moscow, such as the late Langston Hughes, who was hired to write a script for a Russian film about Black-white race relations in the United States, but which was never produced. I told them about Denver, where I was raised; about Washington, D.C. where I attended school and now live; and about New Orleans, where my brother is in school. We also discussed California, where most of my relatives have moved to, and New York City, where I taught school for a time.

When finally I said goodnight, so many questions remained unanswered and more questions unasked. If I could, I would have talked with Slava about writing, what it actually meant to each of us and how we came to be writers. I would ask Emelia about family and raising children in Russia, the little girls and Tynes I would ask about their dreams. I would have asked about the whereabouts of Mr. Tynes' wife, whom the family avoided mentioning. I felt a kinship with the Tynes which I can only hope they share

with me. Just a year ago, Tynes visited the United States, but his family was unable to accompany him, as is the usual practice in Russia. Yet, should there ever be an opportunity for any of them to visit America, I hope they know the first place they can come for some good "soul food." □

*Charlene Porter is a Howard alumna and a freelance television scriptwriter. She visited Moscow and Leningrad last year for two weeks with a Theater Study Tour group sponsored by the American Theater Association.*