

TRAINS

by Frances Roberts

I. 1930s—Yakima to Spokane, WA

We lived at that time on a ranch in the Yakima Valley. Unfortunately, the nearest orthodontist was in Spokane, 150 miles or so away. My sister and I needed his services, so, lucky for us, we had to be taken there twice a year. One of the best things about it was the train trip. The dining car was a special treat, with its white linen tablecloths, silver cutlery, waiters with napkins over their sleeves—and the delightful habit they had of “tipping “ children with “all-day suckers”—I always got lemon.

When we arrived at Spokane, we got to stay in the elegant Davenport Hotel. It had a huge lobby, which boasted many caged canaries singing all day, elegant furnishings, palm trees in great pots, and a grand staircase to a mezzanine floor. My sister and I delighted in running up the stairs and all around the perimeter, then down to do it all over again. Meals were also special, with highly polished silver utensils, and when father had paid, the change was in newly-washed bills and polished coins, as the hotel was noted for cleaning all its money.

The dentist showed us how to push our wayward teeth with our thumbs every day, because we lived too far away for frequent brace-changing. They realigned nicely and our trips to Spokane stopped.

II. 1980s—London to Harwich to Sweden to Finland

After a stay in England, we headed to the continent to pursue a trip through Scandinavia to end up in then-Leningrad. The first leg was to take us to Ostend, where we would get trains to go north. Ferries left from Harwich, so we were clickety-clacking along that track when suddenly there was a huge explosion ahead, and train engine parts came hurtling past our windows in great quantity. The engine had totally blown away. We sat on the track thinking “There goes our ferry boat”, until the conductor came along to say they would hold the ferry until we could get hitched to another engine to the terminal.

Successful in getting to Ostend, we leaped on the first train going north, and shortly were barreling along toward our destination. Starving by this time, we asked where the dining car was. “Oh, you are on the wrong train; that one left ahead of this. There is no food car here.”

On the starvation trail, we were delighted to find that the train car we were in would be taken by ferry itself across the strait to Malmo, Sweden. And the ferry had a restaurant! No two people ever ate faster!

Once in Sweden, we were quickly transported to Stockholm where we had hotel reservations where we were to meet a traveling companion joining us for the jaunt to Russia. We also found a restaurant with some of the most delicious meals I ever ate. They were so good that we re-visited the place twice!

From Stockholm we took a Silja Line ferry that went all through the hundreds of islands in the Baltic Sea to get to Turku, Finland, from where we were to take a

train to Helsinki, down the coast. And what a train! Big picture windows, lined by swivel armchairs upholstered with beautiful fabrics designed by Finland's most famous artist, Marimeko (sp.?) Tea or coffee brought to us on trays. Spotless train from front to back. Into Helsinki swiftly and silently. A treat.

III. Finland to Leningrad

We could walk from our waterfront hotel to the train that would take us to the famous Finland Station in Russia. Beside the train was our Russian Intourist representative, checkboard in hand. We gave our names, and were assigned to the nearest train car. Our friend Joan was assigned to the next one. We protested "But we're traveling together!" to no avail. She said curtly, "Change on train." So, nothing to do but climb aboard two separate cars.

What a rude awakening! The seats were the lids of the steel containers for the luggage, with the straight steel wall for backrest. No way would anyone let us change cars, so Joan was in for a solo ride to Russia. Before we could start, a very, very official person came into our compartment with an assistant, who carried a small ladder. The ladder was opened up, the official stepped up on it, and opened the ceiling panel to see if anyone was hiding therein. Once finished with that, he noticed that I had an English language pamphlet in my hand and asked to inspect it. It happened to be one I'd picked up in a train pocket. He looked at it with great curiosity, unable to read it, but decided that for some reason it wasn't subversive. (It was really great tourist literature, as it extolled the merits of the Russian steel industry.) Satisfied, the two of them went on to the next car.

Then the dogs came by. They had already been all along the train looking for people clinging under the rail cars. Again, we checked out as not dangerous.

When we arrived in Leningrad, we were treated to the vision of a work train bringing farm laborers back to the city after a day of labor. They were on the next track beside us, so we could see all their faces passing by. They looked like the most depressed people ever, with nothing but tired, battered faces, and not one smile visible in any car.

In vain we looked to find what they'd done with Joan, as we were rushed off to a bus that would take us to our hotel. No Joan there, either. Several days later, she stepped down from a sightseeing bus that stopped at our hotel, got off and left us a note. A kind English woman persuaded the bus driver to return to pick her up so she wouldn't be in trouble with Intourist. At least we knew where she was.

As it happened, our city tour took us to the seaside square where her hotel was. I told the driver that I was just going over the square to see a friend in that hotel. The answer was, "Nyet!" in no uncertain terms. Later, we saw her from afar at the Hermitage Museum, but she was leaving as we arrived. Finally rejoined her at airport departure.

In the city, our personal guide offered to let us go to the circus by subway if we promised to count the stops when we got on and off and on again and she left us. We enjoyed the circus a great deal, but on our return we did get off at the right stop, Nevsky-Prospekt, but had no idea which street exit we should take. A very nice young man came up to stand near us, and asked in English if we had a problem. We

explained, and he offered to guide us to the right exit on condition that we didn't indicate any connection to him, nor speak to him. Very helpful.

Aside: we had been told by a traveler on our ferry to Finland that our hotel was a very beautiful 19th Century building which had been upgraded. He also told us that if we needed anything, we should talk to the fire sprinkler in the ceiling and wait for results. Actually, our toilet seat was broken and very pinchy, so I went into the living room and spoke to the "water sprayer", which had no pipe but did have a wire, the we needed toilet repairs. They came to fix it right away.

And that was our train trip to Russia.

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