

Former Medford Girl Gives Intimate Glimpse of Russia

CONTRAST WITH AMERICAN LIFE TOLD IN LETTER

Helen Schoeni Now in Moscow, Says Patience of People Astounding — All Hope, Work for Future

A moving story of "tremendous contrasts" as they exist only in soviet Russia is told in a letter received here today from Helen Schoeni, former Medford girl, now engaged in motion picture and play production in Moscow.

The niece of Dr. J. D. Rickett and Mr. and Mrs. A. E. Lyman of this city, Miss Schoeni was graduated from the Medford high school and the University of California, and later took graduate work at Yale university under the noted Sam Baker. She was also graduated from the American Laboratory theater in New York and for the past two years, preceding her recent journey to Russia, was director of the community theater at Waterbury, Conn.

Her letter, written on thin, onion-skin paper, rather badly soaked with Russian ink, tells the following story of modern Russia:

Life in Moscow is full of new adventures and 1000 and one things to do in a day. I haven't wanted to take time out to sit writing when there are things to be done.

First of all, let me tell what life is like here because I know you get a great deal of stress on "famine" in the American press. All I can say is if it exists along the Volga or in the Caucasus, it is not so in Moscow to date. I am very fortunate in my arrangements in this regard.

Rooms Are Scarce. Rooms are practically impossible to get here—the overcrowding is unthinkable in our big country. No one person has more than one room to himself and I know of ten people crowded into one large room.

I met a Jewish fellow quite by accident here one day—I knew him in New York. He had been a guide for the "Open Road" tours. Now he wants to stay in Moscow. He told me of a room with a lawyer and his wife. This room is the portion allotted to his father and step-mother, who were in the country.

This lawyer is an Oxford graduate, he said, and asked if I cared to take the room. I went out to see it and was rather shocked. You must realize that the standards of living are quite different here than in America. I could only see the dark walls with blue and brown paper—the crazy quilt patterns—the dust all around and the furniture falling apart. I thought I couldn't put up with that, but then he promised to give it a thorough cleaning.

Hotels Expensive. It wasn't a question of choice at all—it was either paying a prohibitive price of \$3 a day at the hotel or taking this until I could find a better one. So I came when it was dusted and swept and it wasn't half bad, although the bronze and plaster "statues," the plush furniture with tassels about the arms of the chairs were not my idea of beauty.

The worst was yet to come when I found a good dose of "rats" was needed in the bed. Also the bathtub which doesn't work and drains very leisurely and had a drowned mouse floating in it one morning.

This seemed too much, but there were no rooms to be had. They have no bureau or advertisement system here at all. One must hear of a place through acquaintances, so I proceeded to cultivate a whole batch of people, all of whom are looking out for a room for me. I get this "room" for \$10 a month rent.

I can endure it because I am home so little and where I eat it is very pleasant. The food is excellently cooked by an old servant—Anna Oshpova—who has been with them for 25 years. I pay \$4 a week for two meals and feel well nourished. With my American dollars they can buy food in the well-equipped foreign stores which sell only for "valutts" or foreign money, whereas the Russians living on rubles must stand in queue for hours in the rain to get cabbage, potatoes, bread or kerosene.

Delays After Delays. These people can stand in a shorter cue. The merest detail of life is complicated here—it is full of frustration until one learns the ropes and steels oneself to the snail-like pace of Russian activities. It is most exasperating the time-consuming at best. For instance, I go to "Torgsin" to buy a fur hat for winter and a half dozen apples and a box of cookies to have in my room to eat with the perennial tea that the little servant makes for me when I wish it.

With the drop in the dollar this is worth knowing. So back I go to call for the manager. He will come "immediately"—this means anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour in Russia.

I wait for him and finally he yells at the girl and finally boxes with profane courtesy to me. This is followed by signing on the dotted line and profound computations on the head or abacus board. Then it is ground out on a weird looking cash register. At last they know how much is due in American money and I go to the next window to pay it. Then I go back triumphantly to the three different departments to wait in three lines to get my purchases.

I decide I will go to the theater. Exchange Is Crooked. I go to the box office and learn they are all sold out to the factory workers from the Gorki plant and the street-car conductors' trust—moreover I cannot pay for a ticket in valutta and I haven't enough rubles. One exchange as little as possible. There are two "exchanges" here—the white and the black. "Intourist" gives you one ruble, about 25 kopecks, now for a dollar, which is nothing in buying power. The black exchange where one finds a Russian eager to have American dollars to buy things in Torgsin which cannot be purchased anywhere else. In this exchange one can get 10 rubles for the dollar at least. Some difference!

Seeing Lenin's Tomb. From the theater I decide to go to "Intourist," the official travel bureau which handles all foreigners. They call up and sure enough no tickets for tonight, but I can get them for another play on the morrow. I don't want to see that play so I order a ticket for a repeat performance of the one I want several days later. For this I pay three dollars. I get more and more disgusted and

decide to visit Lenin's tomb on Red Square as I am in the neighborhood. It is chill and pouring rain. At the tomb stands a long three-deep line, waiting to get in to see their leader. There are three umbrellas only in the line of several hundred persons. Some of them have removed their shoes to protect them and are standing in their bare feet! It is cold enough for my fall coat now. The endurance power of these Russians is amazing to behold. Their life is still unbelievably hard, but they look to the future state and find courage to go on. The old "aristocrats," who are still here are the ones who have the hard time making the adjustment. They cannot leave the country, so they must chew their own tongue and try to adjust.

The guard tells me the tomb won't be open until 4 o'clock, so I decide to come another day and not wait in the rain. The tram cars are packed always and one is hard put to get through intact if you carry bundles. Hereafter I carry my brief case or a satchel shopping bag.

Street Cars Packed. In getting out, the paper cornucopia containing my apples, oranges and I reached the street cursing as I clutched two apples and my hat on one ear. The system on the tram is this: You enter at the rear, pay your fare and start squirming toward the front entrance in order to be able to get out ten steps ahead. When you finally reach halfway through you start asking in Russian, "Vydyes shodityye" (or so it sounds in English) which means "Do you get out here." If no is the answer they try to edge over to let you pass. If "yes" is the answer you wait because they will move with them.

The front of the car is used for entrance only by mothers with children, pregnant women, officials and old people. There is a special seat reserved for them to sit down—no one else can occupy them if there are enough of these people to use them. They relay their fares back to the woman conductor and she relays back the change and ticket, which shows you paid.

Her Watch Is Stolen. These are kept because often an inspector comes on the car and if one hasn't the slip you are fined a ruble. The usual car fare is only 10 kopecks or one-tenth the amount of the fine. Stealing is carried on in the tram. I lost my watch already which Uncle Just (Dr. J. D. Rickett) gave me when I graduated. I registered it with the police, but nothing will come of it. Paper is so precious here I must conserve my American supply, so when you come to the end, go back to the first page. It makes it hard to read through this thin paper, but I have too much news to go in this letter, unless I write double.

Theater. I "met" key people in two of the most famous theaters so far and have free passes to seven plays. I have met with the most marvelous generosity among the Russians. They are finely courteous and generous to a fault. They are so without foolish pride in their own magnificence. I have met internationally famous distributors, designers and actors and they are all as simple and naive and gracious as can be. What strikes me is how accessible these people are. While I was at the Karmery theater I was introduced to the famous director, Tairov. He was so charming, talking through an interpreter to me for 20 minutes about my work and how I like Russia and then shaking my hand warmly, he wished me well in my work. Any old time an American director would stop long enough for such simple courtesy! The Russians love to hear about America—particularly the conditions of the working men intrigue them.

Great Interest in U. S. A. Their curiosity about our life is child-like. America is some fairly tale land to them. I gave some fairly tale pencils away and you would think I had presented a \$100 check. Pencils are rare and beautiful things to them. The young engineer of the family where I eat went into ecstasies over the "zipper" on my suede shopping bag and when I appeared in my London brown rubber boots the whole family gathered round to see them and admire the shiny beauty of them.

The simple peasants often stroke the cloth of one's clothes. I came well-stocked with soap, clothes, tooth paste, stationery, pencils and leads, as all such things are scarce here. I presented the poet Brusov's widow with a tea strainer and a can of condensed milk and she was so delighted and grateful she gave me an illustrated copy of Lermontov's poems.

I soon found out how to get to the

I have met such a galaxy of interesting people: Playwrights, the head of the news reel bureau here. He gave me a private showing of his films and gave me some fine "stills" of Moscow and events I cannot buy or take with my camera. One isn't permitted to photograph certain things, such as Lenin's tomb, red army militiamen or ports, railroad stations, etc.

This Russian ink is very thick. I have just one bottle more of American ink and that is packed away for future use.

A Gala Dinner. Last night at supper we had a gala time. Ordinarily they eat from oil-cloth, because they can't get enough good soap to wash their fine linens left over from the pre-revolutionary days. This evening a distinguished visitor is due—the head of the equivalent of the "Red Cross" in Tashkent. He turned out to be a very handsome Tartar with warm brown skin, fine sculptured nose, gleaming black eyes, with a merry twinkle, high cheek bones and strong chin. He cut a romantic figure. He was quite taken with an "American woman" and invited me to go to Tashkent with him! When I left he asked that his address and name be written for me so I could visit him in Tashkent, where their civilization resembles the Moslem. It is one of the Soviet minorities now. He sang us Tartar love songs in a strange scale with a falling inflection.

It sounded more like a funeral dirge than a love song. Then Alexandrovitch, the doctor who brought him, gave us a sample of the prayer calling on "Allah" in the minaret. The Tartar language is not understandable to a Russian, but this Tartar speaks very good Russian also. When I left he stood in the corridor and bowed, his left hand over his heart and his right to shake my hand.

The Tartars were one of the wildest and most romantic tribes of all Russia. Now they are under Soviet regime with their own government. They used to have many wives, now they have only one—the good Soviet! Great Singers and Dancers. Afterwards we all sang lovely Russian folk songs. I am so eager to learn the Russian language, more quickly to be able to learn all these songs. I want also to learn the peasant mass dances that are taught in the "park of culture and rest." They are so vital and have fine rhythm. I saw tiny children dancing them before a play began one afternoon last week. "Between the acts" the children are lead in games and mass dances to rest them from sitting quietly. The children are so eager at the plays they move into the aisles and edge toward the stage to see the play. The Russian child is a serious little fellow and full of charm.

Race of Dreamers. The family life is still very strong in spite of what one hears to the contrary. The Russian today is a hard-working, eager-minded person with great self-sacrificing attitudes—a race of kindly dreamers it seems to me. They crave nice things, too, and some day they, too, will have a form of luxury—THEN will be the test for their ideology of communism. The amount of privation and bodily discomfort they can put up with is amazing to a softened westerner wrapped round with cotton wool of American easy life.

Their eagerness to learn would put the American graduate to shame. One sees workers late at night poring over books on English, engineering and all forms of learning. The amount of magazines and books printed is amazing. You must remember that in Russia there are 150 nationalities! It is without doubt the most interesting, alive nation in the world today. They have a plan and they know where they are going and why. This has an amazing effect on the atmosphere of the people in the trams. The New York subways are full of nervous, weary people, bored with their existence. One never sees tired or sleepy people here. Of course, one sees plenty of squalor and meanness of life, but always there is a look of hope in their faces.

A Wonderful Spirit. They are all made to feel that this is THEIR country and every man's good work helps the whole tone to rise. There are still distinctions, of course. The "officials" dress well, warmly in the uniforms provided by the state. They live better than the common worker. In the "factory kitchens" or dining rooms of various establishments one finds the "common worker" and the "white collar class" do not eat together, but in separate places. Right now it is an "honorable thing" to be a "shock brigadier" in completing the Moscow subway on schedule. Several thousand young workers between 16 and 20 enlisted last week for work—women, girls, as well as men are busy with it. One sees women as bricklayers, cement mixers, street cleaners, streetcar conductors, motormen and inspectors. There is an easy camaraderie between them.

No Flirtation in U. S. One sees little or no "flirtation" as we know it going on in public here. Men and women are first of all comrades and after that of two different sexes. It doesn't mean the Russian men are not aware of women, but they are more gallant and subtle and not so "open" about their feelings before a formal proposal is made. They like America women because we can dress better and are mysterious to them. I have not lacked a great deal of attention. I haven't had contact with boorish peasants—the better class Russians have a charm and social grace that American men might emulate very well. I am eager for the snow to come. This fall has been unusually rainy.

(continued on page nine)

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