

MOSCOW TWENTY YEARS LATER

By Fernand Tanguay

Has Moscow changed? This is the most frequently asked question to people who have served in Moscow at different periods in the checkered history of the USSR.

On January 7, 1966 we arrived at Sheremetevo Airport, a young couple recently out of university and freshly out of language training. The minus 35 temperature provided a rather inhospitable welcome for us and our two young children. The next day we were invited to lunch at the residence of Robert and Thereza Ford. Our initial transition proved to be somewhat brutal, and the cultural shock difficult.

But that was also an era of hope. We came to the USSR when two "reformers" had taken over power from the unpredictable Nikita Khrushchev. Thus two technocrats, Breshnev, and the too often forgotten Alexei Kosygin, were ruling the country and had launched their economic reform. The USSR was to be self-sufficient in food and agriculture. Millions of living quarters were to be built, there was to be a new constitution, and the world was to live in peace. In comparison to 1962, when the Cuban missile crisis had taken the world to the brink of a major war, these positive developments represented progress. There was hope.

When we arrived in Moscow for the second time in July, 1986, 20 years had elapsed. Few things had time to change, but as in 1966 we felt there was hope. Most of the world wished Mr. Gorbachev success for his three point reform: Glasnost, Perestroika, and Democratization. The challenge of changing the ways of a country of 281 million people spread over 11 time zones, and with 19 million public servants is indeed a formidable one! But as in the mid-sixties, there was hope.

The changes we observed in 1986 were interesting and diverse. For example, many of the buildings surrounding the embassy in the famous Arbat district had been recently restored. The Arbat itself had become a very attractive pedestrian mall with cafes and boutiques, although the shelves and their contents had hardly changed.

Our professional life again started with reading the newspapers. Yet we quickly realized the content was now much different. In particular, Pravda and Izvestia were much more interesting and informative. Letters to the Editors were often critical of the various layers of the government and the bureaucracy. As well, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government organizations we were readily received by open-minded people, which was also a significant change.

The Canadian Club, founded in 1966, was still flourishing. The Friday night hamburger evening had become a Moscow institution. One Friday was very special for us. Otto Jelinek, then Minister of State for Fitness and Amateur Sports, was on an official visit. He launched the idea of competition between major Canadian and Soviet cities under a program of "participation." Minister Jelinek is an old Appleby boy. So when he saw on his official program for Friday evening, "Canadian Club: music provided by the Appleby College Band," he could not believe it! When I witnessed Otto Jelinek and Soviet Minister Gramov signing the protocol agreeing to have Soviet and Canadian cities compete, I again thought that there is hope.

Our conviction that there is hope was firmly established in 1988, a special year in the history of Russia, the millenium of Christianity. Several monasteries were returned to the Church and some 500 churches were reopened. When on Easter Day we saw a major part of the Easter service televised for the first time we celebrated that Hope.



From the left, Fernand Tanguay, Mr. Gramov, and Otto Jelinek celebrate the signing of the protocol to have Soviet and Canadian cities compete under a program of "participation."

Fernand Tanguay, Director General, International Cultural Relations Bureau recently returned from Moscow where he had also served in the mid-1960's. Other assignments abroad included Bonn and Geneva. In Ottawa he occupied various functions in External Affairs as well as in the Privy Council Office and the Department of Communications.