

IFLA, Moscow 1991: A Personal Perspective

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Abstrak: IFLA 1991 tidak senang diluput dari ingatan kerana telah beriring dengan detik-detik percubaan rampasan kuasa terhadap pemerintahan Soviet. Makalah ini mengandungi riwayat pengalaman dan perhatian, ikhtisas maupun persendirian, selama dua minggu di Moscow sepanjang masa Seminar sesi awal dan Persidangan Umum IFLA.

Abstract: IFLA 1991 was an unforgettable experience, coinciding as it did with the attempted coup against the Soviet government. The article describes some experiences and observations, personal and professional, over the two week period of the Pre-Session Seminar and the General Conference.

Every year the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) holds its Council Meeting and annual General Conference in a different capital city of member countries which have successfully bid for the honour. The General Conference comprises open sessions, round tables, section meetings, and poster sessions. Topics range over the whole field of librarianship and information work; in recent years IFLA has attracted some 1500 to 1800 delegates. The 57th Council and Conference this year was particularly poignant; it was held in Moscow between 18-24 August. The first day of the Conference coincided dramatically with the military *coup d'état* which unseated Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

Apart from the main body of delegates, I had been invited to join a small body of librarians representing 18 developing countries in the Pre Conference Seminar of 12-16 August to discuss the role of national bibliographic agencies in information development. We were put up at the Institute of Youth, which we understood was until recently, a KGB training venue. The Institute is set amidst beautiful woods near the Kuskovo Ceramic Museum and is about an hour's journey away from Moscow's Soviet Centre, the venue of the Main Conference. Although some of the facilities such as toilets and bathrooms were rather primitive, our compensation lay in the sessions, which were lively and serious; and in the delegates, who were professional and knowledgeable; and very friendly, warm and caring. Besides information, food, medicines and basic necessities such as soap and detergents were exchanged with much good humour. I was

glad for this week. It allowed us to see a little of Moscow and the Muscovites' way of life, some facets of which fascinated me.

MUSCOVITES

'No people are uninteresting. / Their fate is like the chronicle of planets', wrote the famous Russian poet, Yevtushenko. How true of the Muscovites. There was no figuring out their psyche. Our experiences with people were so different. Our hosts were unfailingly kind. For the general population however, no sooner had we concluded that Muscovites were dour and unfriendly, introverted and inflexible, products of endless queuing in a grey, sober city, than we came across Moscow's bridal parties and flower markets.

We did not know for what reason, perhaps economic, perhaps prompted by a prevailing fad, but on most days, especially on week-ends, small bridal parties can be seen, taking the air. At the Red Square, and at the particularly popular esplanade in front of Moscow University, which affords a panoramic view of the city, the bridal couples or groups would promenade, drinking wine, taking snapshots, sometimes singing and dancing to the music of an accordion or harmonica. The brides and grooms, all in their finery with happy friends and relatives - smiling, talking, laughing, were one of the most uplifting sights we witnessed in Moscow. Just like the ubiquitous flower markets, with fresh cut blooms of vivid hues - roses, gladioli, carnations - which seemed always to attract many customers.

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COSTS (FOR LOCALS)

The cost of many things and services to the general population was incredibly low. Theoretically, I had been prepared for the subsidies existing in a socialist economy, but when experienced, still took me by surprise.

Food costs. At the Institute, for example, a full breakfast consisting of a glass of yoghurt, a porridge, bread and cake, only costs 3 roubles (about M25 cents). After my first week-end, when I'd had some five to six meals, I was presented with a bill for 13 roubles 60 kopeks (about M\$1.15). The food itself was a little stodgy and monotonous, and most of us could not decipher what we were eating, but it was plentiful and cheap.

Transport, in the shape of buses and the underground 'metro', was good, clean and regular. It was incredibly cheap at 15 kopeks (about M1 cent) for every journey, whatever the length. Small wonder that the pay-in machines were largely unsupervised, and quite often, when we didn't have the right change, were waived payments in the buses. Payments for the metro and purchases of the 15-kopek bus tickets seemed to have been largely self-regulatory; and in the two weeks I was in Moscow, during the numerous trips taken, there was only one check, by a guard on a bus.

Postal services. Moscow must have one of the cheapest postal services in the world. In my first week, I sent a couple of post-cards home from Moscow's Central Telegraph Office (CTO). The CTO still provides quaint metal-nib 'quill' pens the likes of which I as a child had used, to practise my writing during penmanship classes some 40 years ago. Such classes are now extinct, as are those 'quill' pens. In the CTO, however, little pots of pale purple ink are also available, for one to dip the pens into. A postcard plus postage home cost 35 kopek (about M3 cents). This has to be a bargain, even if the postcards did take two weeks to arrive. I later posted some parcels of conference papers and library brochures home by surface mail. At 20 roubles per 3 kilogrammes, I only spent 40 roubles (about M\$4) for 2 big parcels (parceling materials and service handling included). These took an incredibly short three weeks to arrive.

Books. Books in English are not found in great abundance. Art books that were located seem generally to be very well-produced and cheap. I bought five extremely well-produced booklets at the State

Museum of Ceramics on the Kuskovo Estate, all beautifully illustrated and in full colour, for the princely sum of 35 roubles (about M\$3). At the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, all visitors were able to take away free copies of the Museum's catalogue, small, but well-printed and with colour illustrations.

Drinking water. The water in Moscow is not potable. Muscovites in Moscow for the day travel with a cup or glass. At various points in the city are banks of steel cabinets each fitted with two taps: one dispensing water to wash one's glasses, and the other, dispensing drinking water. No payment seemed necessary.

COSTS (TO TOURISTS)

However, costs dramatically shot up beyond all relative proportions in every sector that remotely touched tourists. A taxi ride in from the airport to where we stayed (a ride of about 45 minutes) cost about 400-500 roubles (or about US\$15).

I later enquired upon rates for sending a fax home from the International Hotel. I was told that it would cost US\$56, inclusive of service charges!

Going about in groups of 8 to 16, we managed to wine and dine in some of Moscow's good restaurants: the Central and the Bazaar, which had floor shows to boot. Meals, which included all the wines we could drink, vodka (a little raw), fruity Russian champagne, caviar (red and black), eaten with hot, fragrant pancakes, *entrées* of smoked meat (salmon, tuna), main dishes of fish or meat, wonderful ice-creams and coffee, would cost us between 200-250 roubles per head (M\$17-M\$20).

This may still seem very cheap, as indeed it seemed to us. But one has to bear in mind that the minimum monthly wage in the USSR is about 340 roubles per person; and monthly family incomes for an average educated professional (nuclear) family seldom exceed 1000 roubles. The restaurants, however, were fairly full, and diners were not always tourists.

We found from experience that though beef is quite excellent, fish was neither fresh nor well-prepared. My first acquaintance with a fish-dish was disastrous. Had it not been for two very kind friends, Jésus¹ and Lina,² I might not have made it back to the Hostel, as I became very sick and had to be helped off the metro and returned home by taxi.

Money

Money was one of those things that gave us perhaps as much uncertainty as the coup itself. Entering the USSR, one declares everything materialistic that one brings in: cash, travellers' cheques, jewellery, the works. All are recorded in a form. Like all foreign exchange controlled economies, one lives in dread of losing this 'money form': produced to record transactions every time you exchange money; and shown to the authorities upon leaving the country.

Finding a bank is no mean feat - and after locating the one at the Hotel Rossiya hard by the Red Square, the bank guard, for reasons best known to himself, refused to allow us in. Long explanations in Russian to our guides gave us no clue as to our unacceptability. We tried another entrance. The same guard was there to block us - having hoofed it through the building in anticipation of our intrepidity!

But for the friendly intervention of a policeman, we would not have been able to enter to exchange our cash at the (official) rate of 32 roubles to the US\$1. Once in however, the efficiency of the bank had to be seen to be believed. The bank operated long hours, through lunch, and until 10 at night. One could change from one foreign currency to another without going via the rouble; and my 3,197 roubles were counted by the cashier in a matter of seconds with a couple of calm flurries of the fingers and quick riffling of notes. Like an expert card player! Along the streets, in department stores and elsewhere, we were approached to change our dollars for anything between 25 to 50 roubles. We steadfastly refused, - fearing to do anything illegal. At any rate, having changed US\$100, we all felt rich with some 3,000 roubles in hand, we only feared that we might not have the opportunity to spend them with the disturbances of the coup.

Selling as an Extractive Process

It would seem that for the better part, selling is viewed as a means of transferring the necessary goods and services into the hands of the local population as cheaply as possible. On the other hand, *vis-a-vis* the foreign tourist sector, selling is identified as an extractive process. This is evidenced by prices proffered to tourists, ranging from traders in Arbat Street, to street traders, to big hotel establishments. In Arbat Street, prices could range from 500 to 1,000 roubles for the same item from different stalls. We learned, therefore, that to savour the best of Moscow,

one must not remain within the hard currency and the so-called 'golden rouble' sector, as represented by the airport shops, supermarkets and top tourist hotels (which could charge up to US\$250 per night for accommodation). One should attempt to shop in the departmental stores and smaller shops frequented by the locals.

Shopping

Shopping in Moscow, however, does not have the glitz and glitter of other capital cities. Though a fair number of local crafts are available (*matushka* dolls, colourful scarves and little souvenirs), unless one is willing to part with rather large sums of money by any standards, shopping is a little disappointing. Shops are fairly empty of goods, and even in the biggest departmental store in Moscow such as Gum (on one side of the Red Square), shops sell pretty much the same range of rather limited goods. Supermarkets seem much to be dominated by huge jars of pickled fruits. On the whole, we saw too few fresh fruits and vegetables.

The Black Market is a fairly thriving business. On every pavement, one will be asked if one needs perfumes. Apparently these are the real genuine items, and cheap. We passed by Moscow's biggest departmental store for children's clothing. A vast crowd was outside, buying and selling. That, we were told, was the 'black market' in children's clothes, - a fairly open business, it would seem. We had been advised not to participate in any illegal activity. We all stuck by the rules.

DAY ONE OF THE COUP

We had packed much activity and work into those first days.³ At the end of the first week, therefore, the delegates, though separately speaking Spanish, French and English, had forged firm friendships. These friendships were to stand us in good stead in the trying times ahead.

The day of the 19th August dawned cold and rainy: a proper setting for that historic day. As I stepped out into the corridor at 7.30 a.m. to prepare to take the bus which the Organizers had thoughtfully provided to ferry us to and fro the hostel and downtown Moscow, my good friend in the next room, Mlaki,⁴ appeared and announced in shocked tones, that Gorbachev had been deposed. Mlaki had had the foresight to bring along his own radio and had heard the news over BBC.

The news soon spread. It was the only topic at breakfast. Our guides stayed glued to the local radio broadcasts (in Russian). We had never been late for the 8 a.m. bus; that morning we did not even begin to move till 8.30. We agreed with our guides that we should get to the Main Conference Centre to obtain further news. There was another reason why I had wanted to get into Moscow city centre. The previous week, a few of us had arranged with Madame Irina Bagrova and Madame Tuylina, two most knowledgeable librarians and gentle ladies who are attached to the Lenin State Library, to visit their Library.⁵

Among the libraries of the world there are a few that most librarians would give their eyeteeth to visit: the British Library; Library of Congress; Bibliothèque Nationale and Lenin State Library. I had visited all the others; I was looking forward to touring the Lenin State Library with my Asean colleagues, coup or no coup: Mrs. Thara Kanakamani, Director of the National Library of Thailand (who had become a close friend); Ibu Mastini Hardjoprakoso, Head of the National Library of Indonesia and doyen of the Asean group, a friend of many years, and Kalpana Dasgupta, Director of the National Library of India.

The roads downtown were jammed, packed with vehicles, people and tanks. A most unusual phenomenon. In all of our former trips to town, roads had been clear, as there is normally none of the traffic jams in Moscow that are often seen in crowded Southeast Asian cities. Finally, after going up and down different roads, we were told we would have to continue on foot, and by way of the underground.

The Moscow metro is a complicated structure. With some half a dozen different lines superimposed upon a circular line, and all directions written in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, it was a system I could not manage to overcome. I always felt I should be able to read the words, if only I could remember that though an E is an E and a T is a T that, however, a C is an S and a P is an R, never mind the other Greek alphabets of an inverted V (Λ) which is in fact an N and the upside-down L's (gamma); together with the seeming juxtaposition of upper and lower cases together in the same word. At the end of my stay, I just about managed to recognize the configuration for 'Exit' and that obviously did not get me very far. I was not the only confused passenger. We always therefore travelled in groups. With the guides' help, however, we emerged, safe and sound, after jostling with massive crowds in metro stations, and finally trudging through a park in the rain and cold, to the Conference centre.

There were many rumours. Gorbachev was abroad; he was in his *dacha* in the Crimea; he was under house arrest; he was ill, or worse; his fate was unknown. The delegates gathered in uncertain little groups. At the Conference centre, long queues formed at the two public telephones as delegates desperately tried to contact friends and embassies.

Apart from the uncertainty, however, we felt ourselves to be in no danger; so at 10 or so we left with our guide for the Lenin State Library by bus to meet Ibu Mastini to keep our 11 a.m. appointment. For me, it was an unforgettable experience. Unbelievably, after all these years of reading about this famous Library, to be able to ascend those wide marble steps, with decorative lamps on either side, to the catalogue hall, to enter the Lenin State Library, 130 years old, whose millions of volumes have educated *savants* from the whole of Europe, and indeed the world. I had deposited with Madame Bagrova my personal offering to the Lenin State Library, the latest book on Malaysia: *Malaysia: Heart of Southeast Asia*, and my Library publication by Professor Khoo Kay Kim, *Malay Papers and Periodicals as Historical Sources*, satisfied to know that they too will join sister volumes on the shelf.

It was not a good time to visit. The staff were not sure what to do with us; but eventually the Library's Asian languages expert was located and he kindly consented to guide us. We did not manage to see the bookstacks, but walked around the old building. At the catalogues our library guide explained that in the Lenin State Library, foreign language materials are fully catalogued with author and titles recorded in the original script; transliterated and again translated into Russian; a triple job few libraries would attempt. We were very impressed.

At noon, we decided we should return to the Soviet Centre in order to go with the others to the Rossiya Hotel for the Official Opening Ceremony,⁶ scheduled for 2 p.m. We were still unworried. After a while, however, we found that no taxis would stop for us. Our kind host finally in desperation flagged down private cars and vans, and eventually one driver agreed to drive us back - for 10 roubles. At our quick acquiescence, he asked for 15 roubles. Again we agreed.

Thus began my longest journey in Moscow.

With my non-existent geography of Moscow, I had not realized that the straightest way from the Lenin State Library to the Conference Centre was past

the Russian Federation Council of Ministers building; in which Russian President Yeltsin was ensconced and from which he was appealing to the Russians to go on strike; take to the streets; and use people power to topple the military. The junta had despatched tanks to surround the building; at that point of time the machine guns were pointing inwards towards the building. They were later to point outwards, protecting Yeltsin.

The traffic jam was unbelievable. We were stopped for long minutes, not knowing what was causing the problem. As we got near to the Russian Federation building, tanks were everywhere. Some forty to fifty tanks were seen near the building. Several rather large Russian ladies, with paper placards pinned to their chest, had courageously plastered themselves against the sides of the tanks, wailing and calling out their distress. I was very moved, and for the first time felt the meaning of a revolution. As we passed the building, the driver pointed at it and threw a quick word at us, 'Yeltsin'!

The driver locked us in; he constantly changed lanes; and weaved in and out of the tanks to get through. I became very anxious - we had great difficulty navigating and getting anywhere. We spoke no Russian. We did not know the way. What would become of us should he decide that he'd had enough, and ask us to get out? Fortunately, he was more responsible than I had feared - and fetched us finally to the steps of the Hotel International, right against the now familiar statue of Mercury. I was so relieved I gave him 30 roubles (much to his gratitude and mine).

That first day of the coup was riddled with anxiety and uncertainty. I watched the CNN news in the room of one of the interpreters - the news looked grimmer than we felt. It was also a bit weird, to see the tanks amassed; and to know that we had just ploughed through them, and to be able to see the scene by poking one's head out of the window: to literally see one's environment 'live' on TV.

The Opening Ceremony

There was no official announcement, but from what we could learn, the Opening Ceremony was on.⁷ We walked through the park behind our guides and struggled through massive crowds in the underground tunnels, who were silently reading defiant notices put up by young resisters to the military regime. We anxiously looked out for each other to see that none

was left behind, as we got in and out of trains;⁸ and finally reached the Rossiya.

Mr. Nikolai Gubenko, the Minister for Culture of the USSR, and Chairman of IFLA 1991, an urbane, soft-spoken person, who is a well-known playwright and novelist, and a man of many talents, to our admiration opened the Conference. His speech was understandably shorter than the planned original which was in fulsome praise of *perestroika*, but it was short and dignified. Apparently he resigned later, but after the unsuccessful putsch, was, of course, reinstated.

Romeo and Juliet

The Opening Ceremony was to be followed by a reception and a ballet, Romeo and Juliet. The Bolshoi was on tour. Another ballet corps, the Moscow Classical, did us the honour. The auditorium, however, was immediately used for a long drawn-out press conference and the ballet was delayed by over 2 hours. Many of us decided to stay on; and we did not regret it. The young dancers danced their hearts out, some say they had tears in their eyes, and we in standing ovations applauded their spirited and talented performance. It was past eleven when it was finished, the bus could not be located; and we again took to the metro and public bus to get home.

THE SECOND DAY

The second day was no less uncertain. Talk of splits in the army fuelled fears of civil war. By then, many delegates had spent hours in front of the TV. TV Moscow was quite serene, screening endless football matches, ballet and light music! CNN, however, available throughout the coup, brought home to many the gravity of the situation. Some delegates whose flights had been confirmed by Aeroflot, became 'unconfirmed'. The closure of all domestic airports, and the Moscow International Airport for a day (or was it only a few hours?) added to the rumours and the uncertainty and made people jittery. After President George Bush's open support for President Gorbachev, many of the American delegates felt that they should vacate an area that might be potentially uncomfortable for them. All of us had by then spent much time trudging in the rain, wind and cold, getting to various receptions. We had skirted past barricades and watched endless tanks roll past. To add to the discomfort, many in our pre-conference group were falling victim to coughs, colds, stomach disorders and other ailments.

The Malaysians: Mariam Kadir, Director-General of the National Library; Adeline Leong, Director of the Sabah State Library; and I had contacted our Embassy. It was a relief to hear the friendly voices. Mariam, particularly, had stayed in close and concerned contact with the officers and us - she saw to our welfare; fed us TV news, and even bought us fruits - a complete luxury in Moscow!

To prepare for IFLA, the host nation goes through much trouble and preparations. To bring some 1500 persons, many of whom were fetched and sent to and from the airport, is an incredible achievement. Mobilization of hundreds of local librarians must be done, to act as local guides. A full programme of cultural activities, library receptions and conference tours must be arranged, simultaneous translations provided, together with the hundreds of nitty-gritty details of preparing for an international professional conference and post-conference tours. Our Russian colleagues had spent more than 2 years preparing for IFLA 1991. We felt their sadness in seeing the sessions getting frayed at the edges as audience at sessions became thinner and thinner and often dwindled to nothing. The delegates were watching the news; waiting at the phones; waiting for their embassy personnel, or preparing to leave. We decided to stay on as long as possible. We were determined that Malaysians should not be seen to decamp at the slightest hint of trouble, but we would participate as best we can. In the event, Adeline completed all her duties; Mariam and I stayed till the end of the Conference.

THE KREMLIN RECEPTION

Those of us who were at IFLA Moscow will never forget the night of Wednesday the 21st August. Towards the afternoon, as I straggled out of a session, we had the extraordinary news that the coup was over - Gorbachev was back! The news was amazingly uplifting - smiles replaced anxious frowns; lilts in voices and laughter replaced low whispered tones and rumours of ill-tidings. We rode in a state of euphoria to the Kremlin banquet hall to an immense reception for over 1,000 people. That night, red and white wine, Russian champagne was drunk in little less than moderation. Hundreds of Russian colleagues from all over the Soviet republics were there. To the gay abandon of strong rhythmic gypsy music sung and played, we joined hands, stomped our feet and danced, clapped and sang, and hugged each other in happiness for the Russian people. The phrase:

'to the soul of Russia' floated in the air; and dispelled fears that Russia would be pulled back to another age of isolationism again.

When we left at 10.30 or so, we witnessed the tanks begin a pull out from the city. This was to be the scene for the next day or so. Suddenly, they did not seem threatening at all and the grim militiaire of a day or so ago were seen as they were: some of them, as Mariam had observed, were 'mere boys', - 'kesiannya!' - it was the most unusual feeling.

LAST DAYS

We finished the Conference as best we could.⁹ Entire national delegations had left. Sessions were a little ragged, at times lacking chairmen, translators, speakers or audience. Many cancelled post-conference tours. I cancelled my own long-desired visits to the ancient cities of Bukhara and Samarkand.¹⁰ Some groups remained strongly to the end - I understand the art librarians attended sessions in full numbers; the university librarians held their dinner, though it was interrupted by the curfew; while the women's interests session had an unexpectedly high number of attendees and was even able to forge ahead with the programme for IFLA 1992 at Delhi and at Barcelona in 1993. I was very pleased to note that our IFLA Map Workshop¹¹ was fully reported, and all the Resolutions adopted.¹² The Closing Ceremony on the 24th was packed, and though the reception served only white wine and mineral water, we were grateful that our Soviet colleagues had not planned entirely in vain for Moscow 1991.

During that week, I was to visit the Lenin State Library once more, in an evening reception on Thursday the 22nd. Traditional dances and music set a happy mood. But the whiffs of a new order were already weaving into the evening, and an odd sense of times past prevented my giving myself up to gay abandon as we had done on the previous night at the Kremlin. I posed with my friend Esther¹³ next to the philosophical and academic statue of Lenin, book in hand, presiding over the Library's main reading hall. His other busts and statues were beginning to be removed the next day; we were not sure how long more this statue of a man revered as a hero for over 70 years, would now remain. Winds of change, perhaps more instability were being ushered in. My thoughts turned inevitably to Tolstoy and Gorky; and vague memories of what the Russian peoples have undergone these last many years. Suddenly I felt very tired. I was glad to be going home.

Notes

- ¹ Jésus Lau, Senior Researcher, Instituto Tecnológico de Durango, Centro De Graduados E. Investigacion Mexico.
- ² Lina Ernesta, Directrice Adjointe, Bibliothèque Nationale des Seychelles.
- ³ The Seminar was held under the benevolent but watchful guidance and supervision of Winston Roberts, IFLA's Coordinator for Professional Activities; and Marta Terry of Cuba's National Library.
- ⁴ Theophilus Mlaki, Director, Commission for Science and Technology, National Central Library, Tanzania.
- ⁵ The Library, also called the State Lenin Library of the USSR, was established in 1862.
- ⁶ IFLA sessions and meetings of the IFLA Council had commenced from Sunday, 18 August.
- ⁷ Though IFLA began on 18 August, the Official Opening Ceremony was held on the afternoon of 19 August.
- ⁸ Mlaki and Rama (R. Ramachandran, Deputy Director of the Singapore National Library), being the tallest in our group, and the most concerned, were our beacons!
- ⁹ Finally, Dr. Hans-Peter Geh, the outgoing President of IFLA, issued the following statement: Events of the past several days have made it impossible for the 57th IFLA Council and General Conference to proceed normally. Uncertainties about personal security, limitations on access to information, and disruptions of transportation to and from the conference site have become major obstacles to the work of IFLA in Moscow and have prompted the early departure of a number of participants. We regret that despite and the prodigious efforts of our Soviet colleagues to host a splendid conference, the current situation has forced us to modify the remaining conference schedule. The President, on behalf of the Executive Board made the following statement at the reception in the Kremlin.... (IFLA Express No.6, p.1)
- ¹⁰ In September, I returned to the USSR to visit Tashkent, Bokhara, and Samarkand, as Kedah, a state in Northern Malaysia, had just established cultural and commercial ties with Uzbekistan.
- ¹¹ See report by Thami Munisah, *Kekal Abadi*, Vol.10 No.2 (June 1991), p.29-30.
- ¹² IFLA Express no.4, and report by Hope E. Clements at Closing Ceremony.
- ¹³ Esther Batiri-Williams, Librarian of the University of the South Pacific, Fiji.