

# Cook's Tour to Moscow

F. McN. LIESCHING

I AM NOT particularly gregariously inclined and I do not rush to go on coach tours, but this tour was different. The advertised destination was Moscow. To meet the Russians in their own country would be exciting and to see something en route of Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw, Minsk and Smolensk would be a great experience, just as the steamer trip back all the way from Leningrad itself would be pleasantly relaxing. My mind was made up. I must go.

Many and excellent though the experiences were which Thos. Cook had stored up for this journey, I was eager to add to them. Would it be possible to visit a Russian prison? If so, how should one set about it? I enlisted the help of Mr. Peterson. Very soon he had written and received a reply from Mr. Smirnov, the Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R., who indicated that I would be allowed to see something of the Russian prison regime and who instructed me to telephone a Col. Kozyrev upon my arrival in Moscow. I found it difficult somehow, reading this correspondence at Haldon Camp in the heart of the Devonshire

countryside, to visualize myself nipping smartly into a Moscow call box upon arrival there and telephoning the Colonel, as Mr. Smirnov's letter instructed, when I was unable to speak a single word of the language! However, I had the authority and, though I was scheduled to be in Moscow only two days, I had no intention of missing the opportunity.

Thus it was that one morning several weeks later I tore myself away from the fabulous treasures of the Kremlin museum ("This is the diamond throne of the Czars—there are 800 diamonds on the seat alone.") and half running through the streets of Moscow, arrived breathlessly at the hotel where the interpreter had promised to make the necessary 'phone call on my behalf. Within ten minutes of being 'phoned Col. Kozyrev was at the hotel and only a few minutes later, accompanied by another colonel, an administrator in the prison service and a woman interpreter, I was being swept out of Moscow in a large black limousine en route for Kryukovo Camp about fifty kilometres from the city.

As we drove, (I with pen and notebook in hand), my questions were incessant. Courteously and painstakingly they were answered. Kryukovo was a camp for prisoners who had committed the least serious crimes. There were three or four grades of camp according to the seriousness of the offences. This one was situated hard by the Moscow—Leningrad railway line in the satellite town of Kryukovo.

An excellent account of a visit to this camp has already appeared in the PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL (Vol. I., No. 3-July, 1961) under the title 'Correctional Services in the U.S.S.R.' Mr. Conrad, who wrote the article, gave a detailed description both of the Camp and of the routine. I will not, therefore, cover all the same ground again, but rather write of what struck me particularly and of the distinctive impressions that I received.

Kryukovo had very much the look of a new town still being developed and the Camp was situated in a very unmade-up part of it. The entrance proved to be a wooden gate and the whole was surrounded by a wooden wall. It all looked highly insecure until from the inside one noticed immediately within the wall a clear passage of soil about ten feet wide on the inner side of which was a further barbed wire fence. Commanding the passage between the outer wall and the wire fence were sentry boxes high on the walls at

the corners of the Camp in which guards armed with rifles were plainly visible. The Governor told me that their orders in the event of an attempt to escape were to shoot over the man initially, but if this had no effect, to shoot at him.

Upon arrival I was taken to the Governor's Office, where I met the Governor and his Deputy, and where through the interpreter, I continued to ply my ceaseless questions. I was surprised how similar the Governor's Office looked to any in our own Service. There were the big desk, the safe, the grandfather clock and the cabinet filled with exhibits of the various articles made in the Camp. Also, to one side, was a large table, obviously used by some equivalent committee to the V.C.

I learnt that the Camp, which houses about 1,000 men, and which is subdivided into more manageable units, takes prisoners undergoing sentences from 3 months up to 5 years. There are 200 members of the staff, 50 of whom are guards. Only the wall guards are armed. Escapes are said to be few. There is a system of remission and I was told that fifty men this year had gained full remission, which, so far as I understood, amounted to one half of their sentence.

When finally my questions had dried up I was taken upon a conducted tour of the Camp. It had

been built prior to the war as a prison camp, but I found all the buildings were shabby in the extreme. The grounds too were most ill kept, though this hardly surprised me as I had noticed in the public parks what poor gardeners the Russians appeared to be.

I was somewhat glad that none of my own colleagues were witnessing my tour of the Camp as I felt sure, if they had seen it, they would have been vastly amused. The party consisted of the two colonels, the Governor and the Deputy Governor (both in uniform), the interpreter and myself. Wherever we went we were dogged by a flash-lamp photographer, who took many snapshots. As we proceeded in solemn procession from workshop to workshop I felt just as though, by the waving of some magic wand, that I had become royalty and was performing one of my public functions, an inappropriate thought, it must be conceded, in this country! As we moved from building to building, various persons in charge of different sections were introduced and through the interpreter I asked the appropriate questions. Every few minutes the light would flash again and one further picture would be taken of the day Liesching was shown Kryukovo!

The tour of the camp was most fascinating. The workshops were very poor buildings, but were filled with expensive and excellent

machinery and everywhere there was an air of industry. The men, who clearly were working very hard, were carrying out a normal day's work and the workshops were open for two shifts daily to enable all the men to work normal hours. Table spoons, saucepans, car and motor cycle parts were being made and I at once became immensely envious of their full working day, of the excellent machinery with which the shops were equipped and of the general hive of industry which was obvious even to a visitor. The knife was turned in the wound even further when I spotted that some of the machinery was English.

One innovation, which, if I understood the interpreter correctly, might have appealed to the more mercenary minded of our Governors, was that a rise in the production of the Camp was reflected in the size of the Governor's salary!

I was shown the Camp Library of 8,000 volumes. All the books looked exceedingly well thumbed and with pride they showed me some by Dickens and Galsworthy. I asked if there were any Bibles. They replied that there were none, nor were any religious services held in the Camp.

The dining room and kitchen were small but clean, and I was taken into two dormitories. Each slept about sixty men in two-tier bunks which were packed very

closely together. The springs of these bunks were boards.

The Visiting Room was a very long and narrow room down the centre of which about three feet apart were two lower walls about three feet high. Against these on the outsides were forms. As far as I understood it, the prisoner sat on the form one side talking to his visitor who would be sitting opposite him.

Off the Visiting Room were several small side rooms. On the door of one of these the Governor knocked and we entered. Inside a prisoner was being visited by his wife and small son. The use of this room, it was explained to me, was a special privilege for the very best behaved. As the room was equipped with a bed and the Governor took the trouble to knock on the door, I assumed (it not being easy to put it to the interpreter for confirmation) that these rooms were provided for conjugal visits.

As we walked round the Camp I was given several opportunities to speak to prisoners. All their heads were shorn so that one was not immediately impressed by their looks, but as far as one could tell the relationship between staff and men seemed to be a reasonably friendly one. I asked one man if he would care to come and serve his time at Haldon Camp and he very diplomatically replied that he could not answer, as he

did not know what conditions there were like.

Finally I was taken to the Punishment Block, which was situated in the corner of the Camp immediately beneath one of the sentry towers. Two men were under punishment, though I saw only one of them, the other being elsewhere at work. The cells were exceedingly primitive, furnished merely with a wooden plank bed which hinged to the wall and a central block of concrete in the middle of the floor topped with wood to act as a seat. It appears that the worst punishment for a man in such a Camp is to be returned to a prison.

At the end of my tour I was invited to join my hosts in a meal in the Officers' Mess. This was astonishingly similar to one of our own messes. The meal opened with one or two toasts in the most powerful cognac and it was not at all long before my Russian hosts were becoming exceedingly sociable.

I had asked them previously whether any other Englishmen had visited the Camp and they had assured me that the Lord Mayor of London had visited when he had been in Moscow. I now asked whether they had entertained him similarly and was assured that they had. I could not resist one further question. "How was the Lord Mayor when he left?" The question was solemnly put to the Governor by the inter-

preter and duly the reply was translated to me, "The Lord Mayor was 'gay' when he left!" I well understood why. I was having the utmost difficulty in controlling my own gaiety!

Throughout my visit to the Camp the Russian Officials were excellent hosts and courteous in the extreme. By the time this meal had come to an end, the local wine also having been sampled, one could not but gain the impression that these prison officials regarded their work in a very similar way to ourselves. Indeed the Governor expressed it rather charmingly himself, "We liked having the Lord Mayor," he said, "but we love you best of all, because you are one of us."

The next morning Col. Kozyrev met me again with the interpreter and we were driven to Buterskaya Prison in Moscow. This building, which was originally constructed in the late eighteenth century, is reserved for prisoners awaiting trial and included both men and women. Prisoners are normally moved elsewhere within ten days after sentence though two hundred or so are retained for maintenance purposes. It was a political prison during the Czarist regime and such famous prisoners as Gorky have been imprisoned there.

At the time of my visit the population was 2,600 with a staff of 300, 170-180 of whom were guards. Mostly the prisoners were sleeping in dormitories, where I

found the beds for the most part were packed very closely together.

Upon arrival I was introduced to the Governor and I was able to ask him a great many questions in his office before going round the prison. He told me the Supreme Soviet had issued new instructions recently about the administration of prisons and I was shown a large printed paper, which later I saw hanging up in cells, which were clearly the rules referring to prisoners.

Stressing to the interpreter that I would fully understand if the Governor did not wish to answer my question, I asked whether his work had changed at all since the cessation of the Stalin regime. He replied that under Stalin the Supreme Soviet had never interfered with the prison administration. This I regarded as a most significant and interesting reply.

Buterskaya Prison struck me as being in many ways very similar to our own large local prisons. The buildings were very much the same and the whole place was exceptionally clean. I was shown the reception, the hospital, which was comfortable and well equipped, and I was introduced to the doctor, who was a woman. The hospital included a small operating theatre, a dental department with American equipment and a small laboratory. The doctor showed me an exhibit of a large quantity of straw, which had been removed from the stomach of a

man who had been trying to simulate the symptoms of cancer.

The kitchen was spacious. Prior to entering both the hospital and the kitchen I was required to don a white coat. Kitchen equipment looked very old fashioned. I was shown four diet sheets—for remands, for convicted men, for hospital patients and for diabetics. All the food weights were given on the sheets.

One of the most interesting aspects of my visit was being allowed to talk to various women prisoners. In one room there were about fifteen women and the Governor required them to tell me what offence had brought them to prison. This information was translated to me by the interpreter, but I could not help but feel somewhat sorry for these women (who incidentally were allowed to wear their hair normally). So, when I said goodbye to them I shook them all by the hand. This immediately brought a delighted reaction and I asked the interpreter what they were all saying. "Oh!" she said, "they are saying, 'Good luck' and 'Come again soon.'"

The Visiting Rooms were, strangely enough, altogether more pleasant than at the Camp. Here prisoners are allowed to sit at tables with their visitors, which are even beclothed.

Though the Governor spoke of cells, it seems that most of these slept ten or twenty prisoners. At

one moment we were walking down one of the halls, when the Governor suddenly stopped, unlocked a cell door and said, "We will look in here. There are three murderers in here." Inside were three young men in their early twenties. They too were required to recite their offences to me.

Finally we returned to the Governor's Office where I was entertained to very extensive 'elevenses,' before being driven back to my hotel in the centre of Moscow.

Apart from visiting these two penal establishments, I saw something of Brussels, much of Berlin (particularly East Berlin) and Warsaw. We spent a night at Minsk, passed through Smolensk and toured the chief sites of Moscow. Leningrad, the city of three hundred bridges and palatial buildings, was unforgettable, and as we sailed the Baltic we were even allowed a glimpse of Helsinki.

For me, both the Prison Camp and the Prison in Moscow, like everything else I saw in Russia, proved to be quite fascinating, but I did not return from my holiday any more a Communist than when I went away, though much that I had seen was undeniably impressive. Rather I returned, frightened by the Communists' atheism, but struck by the impression of how much like ourselves the Russian people really were and how little they too wanted war.