

From Chapter 3 – Moscow, 1958-1961

The New York Philharmonic in Russia

The first major American performing arts presentation under the U.S.-Soviet Cultural Agreement of 1958 was the New York Philharmonic, which came to the Soviet Union in August 1959. Directed by Leonard Bernstein, alternating with guest conductor Thomas Shippers, the Philharmonic played eight concerts in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev. The programs were a mixture of standard classical and contemporary American compositions. Seymour Lipkin was the piano soloist in some of the concerts.

Cheers and rhythmic clapping acclaimed the orchestra wherever they played, and Bernstein quickly rose to the position of “Mr. American Music.” Lenny, as he became known to everyone who met him, performed on and off the stage with enthusiasm and personal generosity. Mimi and I accompanied the orchestra on their tour of the three cities and were immediately embraced into Lenny’s and his wife Felicia’s family of friends and fellow travelers. There was never a dull moment while we were traveling, at dinners after the concerts, or during intermission in his dressing room, where instead of resting he welcomed anyone who came to greet him.

Somehow, Thomas Shippers, the brilliant, young upcoming conductor, was not included in Lenny’s embrace of intimates. There was certainly no enmity but perhaps a bit of envy on Lenny’s part in seeing the 28-year-old Shippers’s success as a mirror of his own budding career thirteen years earlier. That was

pure conjecture on my part and in no way did I see any effect on their artistic association.

The orchestra's tour in the Soviet Union coincided with the mammoth American National Exhibition in Moscow, another principal element of the U.S.-Soviet Cultural Agreement. The exhibition, spread over several pavilions in Moscow's Sokolniki Park, drew tens of thousands of visitors every day. When Bernstein visited the show, he was immediately surrounded by a throng of well-wishers, clamoring for his autograph. He did better than that: he distributed LPs of the Philharmonic that he had brought along for the occasion. The commotion thereby created called forth the Soviet police, who were only too eager to interfere in the smooth operation of the exhibition by claiming crowd-control responsibilities.

Mimi and I organized a birthday party for Lenny—his forty-first, although he claimed it was his fortieth—in the dining room of the Ukraina Hotel, where the orchestra was staying. We invited a number of our American friends, including *Life* correspondent Carl Mydans and his wife Shelly. As Carl never went anywhere without his camera, the result some weeks later was a feature in *Life* magazine, "*Life* Goes to a Birthday Party in Moscow."

The last day of the Philharmonic's visit turned out to be a triumph for Lenny and the orchestra with far greater impact than anyone had anticipated. What happened is recorded in a *New York Times* op-ed piece of March 14, 1987, authored by me and reprinted here:

"A 'Nonperson' Named Boris Pasternak

Bethesda, Md. —The Soviet Government's rehabilitation of Boris Pasternak recalls an event involving the great Russian writer that turned out to be a dramatic and deeply moving moment for those who witnessed it in Moscow in September 1959.

It occurred at a time when Mr. Pasternak was in total official disgrace. He had become a nonperson in the eyes of the Soviet leadership, even as Nikita S. Khrushchev was creating the first thaw in the winter of Communist orthodoxy.

Mr. Pasternak had not been permitted to accept the Nobel Prize; he was isolated in his country home in Peredelkino, a writers' colony near Moscow, and he had not been seen in public in about six months. The only evidence that he was still on people's minds and continued to be admired was the whispered requests for *Doctor Zhivago*, his banned novel, copies of which were in the hands of some Westerners who shared them with their eager Russian friends.

The New York Philharmonic, under the direction of Leonard Bernstein, had been performing that year in Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev— the first major visit by a musical organization after the signing of the United States-Soviet Cultural Exchange Agreement in 1958. The orchestra had been enthusiastically, even emotionally, received everywhere it appeared, and it returned to Moscow to perform a final gala concert.

Mr. Bernstein had said the one thing he wanted to do before leaving the Soviet Union was to visit Mr. Pasternak's dacha in Peredelkino, which he did the day before the concert. It was reportedly a gracious and warm meeting, and at the end Mr. Bernstein invited Mr. Pasternak and his wife to his concert the next evening, not expecting, however, that they would be able to attend such a public event.

The day of the concert was hectic. It began with a filming of one of Mr. Bernstein's Omnibus television programs at Moscow's Conservatory Hall, with the New York Philharmonic on stage and an invited audience of enthusiastic music students and musicians.

By 7:45 p.m., the sold-out Conservatory was jammed—this time with an elite audience that had managed somehow to get tickets for this final concert. Suddenly, as if on a single cue, every eye in the hall appeared to focus on two people sitting in the center of the auditorium. Boris Pasternak was easily recognizable with his white hair and sharply lined facial features. Everyone in the concert hall, from orchestra to second balcony, zeroed in on Mr. Pasternak and his wife.

It was as if there was no one else there—and certainly no one that mattered—only the two Pasternaks sitting quietly as if it were the most natural thing for the two political exiles to attend a concert in Moscow. There was a subdued buzzing in the hall as people motioned to one another and stared.

The tension, almost unbearable in its intensity, was broken suddenly when Mr. Bernstein appeared on stage, followed by a tremendous cheer. Some of those present, perhaps including Mr. Bernstein, were sure that at least part of the enthusiastic greeting was meant to be shared by Mr. Pasternak.

During intermission, Mr. Pasternak went backstage, and he and Mr. Bernstein talked for about 10 minutes, Mr. Pasternak coming out of his shell of reserve and, speaking animatedly, apologizing for his 'rusty' English, which turned out to be fluent if stylistically antiquated. Mr. Bernstein was excited and effusive as ever, full of embraces and grateful for the writer's compliments. A photo of Mr. Pasternak today serves as record of the event.

The second half of the program was to be the climax of the entire tour. At the conclusion of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, the composer came onto the stage to share the rhythmic applause of the audience that continued for some 30 minutes. During the ovation, Mr. Pasternak and his wife slipped quietly and practically unnoticed out of the hall, never, to my knowledge, to be publicly seen again.

To at least one member of the audience that evening, what stands out today as the Soviet leaders rehabilitate the great writer, is the memory of Mr. Pasternak being momentarily recognized in Conservatory Hall as simply a warm, welcome and appreciative guest.

I rarely carry a camera, but I had brought one with me intending to take a few pictures of Lenny from backstage as he conducted the orchestra. When I asked Mr. Pasternak to come backstage during the intermission to greet Lenny, he at first demurred, suggesting that he did not wish to disturb him. I told him that Lenny would appreciate a short visit from him, and while they chatted, I snapped photos, one of which (included in this book) I thought quite representative of Pasternak.