
'NOBODY HAS A BABY IN MOSCOW, MY DEAR'

Trish Russ McAvaney

'To Patricia and Bryan – a son. Born in Moscow. All well'. A simple enough announcement, giving no hint of the fascinating, totally different, and at times traumatic, experience surrounding the birth of our second child.

Over the 30 years of our marriage, our ex-pat experiences have been exciting, interesting, often challenging and always enriching. Beginning with six months in Moscow, we went on to later spend one year in Florida, one year in California, and – most recently – a wonderful six months in France. However, it is the Soviet experience which was the most demanding and, certainly, the most unusual.

In 1977 we spent six months in Moscow as part of a scientific exchange agreement between Australia and the then USSR - the first such exchange in the area of atmospheric physics. Whilst I fully supported Bryan's interest in taking his own research to, and learning from, the wider scientific community, perhaps the choice of our first overseas location might have been somewhat optimistic!

We were a family of three – my husband, Bryan, a research scientist, at that time with CSIRO, myself, the 'trailing wife', and our small daughter, Claire, just 14 months old. My pregnancy had only just been confirmed when details of the proposed visit were finally completed, but we decided – with some trepidation and, I have to say, a certain amount of naivety – to plunge into the adventure.

Our arrival in Moscow was an acute cultural shock. We had learned the Cyrillic alphabet and mastered a few key phrases in Russian, but the reality of both the written and spoken language was overwhelming and bewildering. The ill-functioning apartment provided by the Soviet Academy of Science was small and absolutely Spartan. The bath had no plug, neither did the kitchen sink; the toilet teetered precariously in its moorings and periodically collapsed altogether! And there were cockroaches! The living room, furnished with two single settees and a TV set, doubled as our bedroom at night. Claire slept in a small cot in another, very small, otherwise unfurnished, room.

Food was our first big problem – no fresh fruit, hardly any vegetables, no recognisable cuts of meat – and the method of shopping was utterly exhausting and very difficult for a non-Russian-speaking foreigner – e.g. first queue to ascertain the availability of goods and their price, then queue again to pay the cashier for the goods

and receive a receipt, then, finally, queue once more to present the receipt and receive the goods.

However, staff at the Australian Embassy soon came to our rescue and we eventually gained access to the American 'D Coupon' store, where we were able to buy the necessities of life relatively easily. D Coupons were expensive to buy, having to use precious American dollars instead of Roubles, but we were grateful, especially, for the chance to buy fresh milk for Claire. I still liked to shop within the Russian system as much as possible though, so we were often found joining a queue in the street – sometimes before we even knew what we were queuing for – to pick up soap, eggs, sometimes oranges, and, on one memorable day, bananas. One of my fondest memories is of Bryan arriving home one evening – much later than usual, having waited in line for more than an hour – with a garland of toilet rolls festooned around his neck. A much-celebrated discovery.

The Muscovites appeared, initially, as cold, distant, unsmiling people, always in a hurry, always intent on something other than taking time to assist a foreigner; definitely not interested in trying to understand our faltering attempts to speak the language.

We experienced a deep sense of isolation. Twenty-seven years ago, we did not have the luxury of email, nor did we have even the comfort of a phone call to or from family or friends. Local telephone calls were always problematic – international calls virtually impossible. We were not able to receive English language radio, and television programs, when the TV set worked at all, were Russian language only. What we now refer to as 'snail mail' was even more so way back then, and it was more than three weeks before we received our first mail from home. It was a lonely and often frustrating time.

And, in the midst of this strange new world, we were going to have an addition to our family! What seemed – safely in Australia – to be a straightforward and everyday experience, loomed in Moscow as one of the biggest problems we'd faced together, and it seemed a frightening prospect.

Advice from the doctor at the British Embassy that 'nobody has a baby in Moscow, my dear' – and that flying out to Helsinki was the suggested alternative – was an unexpected bombshell. However, after a lot of discussion, and with the knowledge that at least one other Australian woman had successfully delivered in Moscow, we decided that the much more practical course was to use the Soviet medical system.

We weren't able to find an English-speaking doctor, and all my pre-natal checks were muddled through with the assistance of an interpreter from Bryan's Institute. Once I was hospitalised though, I was on my own.

The medical care throughout was excellent. With the emphasis on preventative medicine, the care given to pregnant women was very thorough – blood tests galore, eye tests, hearing tests, cardiograms, dental checks, etc. – all were mandatory for pregnant Soviet women.

My admission to Hospital No 26 in the northwest district of Moscow was one of the more traumatic experiences. I was in labour and nobody spoke English. I was whisked away from Bryan without a chance to say goodbye; my clothes and all personal belongings were removed and I was roughly prepped by a less than sympathetic nurse – my fingernails and toenails were daubed with brilliant yellow ‘paint’ and my nipples emerged a violet green! Antiseptic, I presumed. For one manic moment I wanted to burst into song, ‘If My Friends Could See Me Now’.

Then up to the first stage labour room – in fact an eight-bed ward where seven women lay in varying stages of labour, each one fearfully and loudly protesting her predicament. No privacy whatever – and the din was frightening; doctors yelled encouragement to the girls, who shrieked horrendously; doors banged, trolleys clattered and hurrying feet clicked and pounded over the stone floors.

Amidst all of this, my labour stopped – with shock I’ve always thought! So I was trundled up to a ward – small and overcrowded - where I spent the following seven days waiting for the baby to decide to face the music again. I was not permitted to leave the hospital once admitted and no visitors were allowed. The food was really awful, despite the rather odd extra favours I earned as a foreign patient. I was happy to share my ‘treat’ every morning – one raw egg – with the other girls!

When our son finally made his move, my false labour of a week earlier had at least prepared me for the pandemonium of the delivery suite and I was able to concentrate on keeping myself calm for what was – fortunately – a quick and easy delivery. Any thoughts of instant bonding, however, were dashed, when my baby was briefly held up for me to see, amid cries of ‘*eta malchick*’ – it’s a boy, and then quickly whisked away by the attending obstetrician and paediatrician for the usual barrage of tests.

Thomas John was exactly 49 hours old when I held him for the first time. He was, and remained so until we left the hospital, tightly swaddled, so that I could not make the usual check on fingers, toes, etc. Breastfeeding was taken for granted, though I questioned some of the methods used to establish lactation. I was roundly admonished when I attempted to feed from both breasts – one breast only at each feed was the practice. Consequently, despite my best efforts to express my excess milk supply, my breasts soon became engorged, and I spent a couple of extremely uncomfortable days until a nurse took it upon herself to do a proper job – my milk shooting high into the air, splashing all over me and the wall next to my bed. A repeat

performance the next day fixed me up, but that remains one of the more painful experiences of my life!

The lying-in period of one week was exactly that – absolutely nothing allowed or provided to make the post-natal hospitalisation enjoyable. No reading matter permitted, no writing materials either and – by far the greatest deprivation for me – no visitors. The only means of communication between Bryan and I during my entire confinement was by house phone, or by waving from my fourth floor window. Bryan saw his son for the first time via closed circuit TV – quite a different situation from the shared experience of Claire’s birth the year before in Melbourne.

Thomas received first-rate medical care, daily checks being standard practice, followed by a verbal report to each mother in the ward. However, I was surprised to discover that no practical baby-care education – not even a bath demonstration – was given to mothers, apart from a rather long ‘general lecture’ on the morning of discharge.

My Western baby clothes caused some consternation to the nurse who dressed Thomas on the day we left the hospital. His pilchers were used, in desperation, to tie his little legs together in order to comply with the swaddling regulation.

With two very small children now, our outings were the source of much comment – most Russians still encouraged, at that time, towards the one child family - and my practice of carrying Thomas in a *meh tai* was certainly frowned upon! The *babushkas* (grandmothers) loved the children and I eventually decided to turn a blind eye when Claire was offered a cube of sugar from the depths of a voluminous handbag every time we travelled on public transport!

My memories of that time in Moscow have faded somewhat, of course, and the good times are more clearly remembered than the bad. I remember the first time we stood in Red Square, and the first time we walked through a beautiful Russian forest. I remember collecting wild strawberries in the forest and eating them with delicious *smetana* (sour cream) – the very best I’ve ever tasted. I enjoyed the opportunity to eventually meet and exchange ideas with Russian friends; we are still in contact with some of them. And I’ve always been grateful for an experience that strengthened and deepened our relationship as we struggled together to cope with the isolation and loneliness of such an uncertain environment.

We returned to Australia when Thomas was twelve weeks old, with memories of a truly unique experience and the reality of a birth certificate in Russian to hand on later to our son.

In 1981, with three small children now, (our third child, Luke, was one year old at the time), we spent one year in Tallahassee, where Bryan continued his research with American colleagues at Florida State University. The two older children

attended Creative Preschool – a wonderfully stimulating kindergarten experience for them both. They picked up decidedly Southern accents, and learned about living in a very different, racially mixed, culture. My favourite story of this time is when two men came to repair our television set. When they left, Tom – now all of four years old – remarked, ‘that was a very nice man’. ‘Which one?’ I asked. Tom rushed to the window as the men walked to their van. ‘The one in the blue shirt’ was the reply. I am still warmed by Tom’s choice to describe the colour of the man’s shirt and not the colour of his skin.

In 1986, Bryan, now with the Bureau of Meteorology, accepted the opportunity to travel again to work with colleagues at the Naval Environmental Prediction Research Facility in Monterey. We lived in Carmel Valley, California, for a year, an experience which left us with wonderful family memories – challenging and enjoyable school days for all three children, camping in the snow at the Grand Canyon; riding ponies in the high country of Tuoleme Meadows at Yosemite National Park; even the occasional (painful) brush with poison oak is recalled from time to time. One day never to be forgotten was when Luke and his young friend, Krister, became lost in dense bushland in our beautiful valley. After searching in vain, we called in the Sheriff who organised a search party from the village. The boys, only seven years old, and having been missing for four hours, were eventually found, just as dusk descended. Luckily the large black and white dog they had taken with them was spotted from the air. A very scary experience for us, but the boys seemed unperturbed and were in the process of building a shelter for the night. They’d decided to stay in one place because, as Luke confidently explained to his young friend ‘my dad will come and find us’!

During the 1990s, Bryan continued to travel extensively, especially to Europe, where he continued his research into global warming and climate change with the international scientific community. However, our decision not to disrupt the children’s secondary and tertiary education meant that, as a family unit, we remained for those years settled in Australia.

The three children are fine young adults now, all living full, happy, independent lives with loving partners. So – late last year, Bryan and I ran away together to Paris, for six marvellous months. But, perhaps, that’s a story for another time...



Trish McAvaney was born in Moscow and (mostly) bred in Melbourne.

Copyright © 2003 Trish Russ McAvaney, All Rights Reserved