We use cookies to ensure that we deliver the best user experience of our website. If you would like to, you can change your cookie settings at any time. Continue

Ann Helgeson

I came to CREES in 1979, quite unexpectedly, when Chris Davis (another American) was going on leave for some reason or other and there was a need for someone to teach the Social Work students in Soviet social policy. I had been working with Alastair McAuley at Essex and had just received a second fellowship from the (American) International Research and Exchanges Board to spend the year in the Economics Department at Moscow University. I had packed up all my books and returned to the USA only to find out that my visa had been denied (maybe something to do with Afghanistan.) And then a letter arrived telling me of the hole that Chris Davis had left at CREES and I jumped at it and flew back across the Atlantic for some of my best years in Britain.

Subsequently I was attached to a research project with Nick Lampert having to do with Soviet labor, the geographical movement of which was my abiding preoccupation. Moshe Lewin had earlier encouraged me to fathom the internal passport system and its effects on Soviet labor movement. I am still embarrassed to say that little came from our grant from the SSRC, except a lot of ideas and a short-lived group on Soviet labor with the wonderful acronym of SLESAR.

CREES, then in the Ashley Building, was a rich academic environment. Everyone shared their specialist knowledge and all loved the wide-ranging conversations in the Common Room. There were always interesting visitors. Jenny Brine would lead us through the rich resources of the Baykov Library. Probably the most important thing I learned from the CREES folks, and especially Bob Davies, was the importance of the footnote. It documented conclusions and sometimes it changed them. They had to be explained, even if they messed up your theories. It's not as if he told me this, but it was in the air.

Along the way I became head of the Senior Common Room at Ridge Hall, a position customarily given to retired lady English professors. I greatly enjoyed my time there which allowed some good parties for the CREES folks, using my ability to call up the kitchen and have a buffet for 30 or so whenever I wanted as long as it provided contact between faculty and students at the University.

Eventually I returned to the USA, to Texas where there had been a standing invitation from Sheila Fitzpatrick and others to join the Russian Studies Program at the University of Texas and concurrently the Geography Department. I modified my social policy course into a tripartite course in social geography and distributional principles in the USSR, the UK and the USA, which was very successful, and not something Texas undergraduates were accustomed to. UT was not CREES and I didn't have colleagues that were interested in the kinds of things that I was. This was 1988 or so and Gorbachev was retreating somewhat and the news sounded like it always had and I was a bit bored.

So I found another misunderstood region – the Middle East. As I was teaching Soviet Geography I was simultaneously learning Arabic (brilliantly taught in Texas) and reading my way into the literature of Arab ways. When my contract ended I decided to drive there (long story) and find out what the place was really about. After I arrived in Egypt and settled on the West Bank of the Nile across from Luxor I read in the *Economist* that the Soviets had hauled down the flag. Maybe they were bored too. I then moved on to Tartous, Syria where I lived for a year or so after which I went back to Egypt. Both of those places are now falling apart, but I don't have the energy to find another misunderstood region.

So here I am in a little town in Central Texas, in charge of the archives in the local museum and known as an expert in the history of this tiny place. It's a great job, even if it doesn't pay, and allows me to follow my new interest in hand weaving and traditional ways of life in general.

© University of Birmingham 2014