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Paul Barton, B.Com (Russian Studies) (1964-67)

Russian trip

I was at CREES for three years (1964-7). I have to admit that I remember very few of the "50 faces", even among those who were there at the same time as me. Although the names of Ron Amman and Mike Pushkin ring vague bells, I clearly remember only Bob Davies, Mike Jackson, who was in my year, and Paul Lewis, who was in the year above.

What spurred me to write to you was Paul's photo of the ex-Midland Red coach that went to Russia in 1965, as I was one of those "more adventurous CREES members" in the party. I have quite a few slides from that trip, but I've attached the three that show some of the group members and therefore would be of most interest to other alumni of that era.

The first is another picture of the coach. I recognise Paul Lewis (checking the tyre pressure!) and Bob Davies and his son, and I'm fairly certain that the girl with glasses at the back of the group is Geoff Barker's daughter, Ruth, who came on the trip with us.

The other two photos were taken outside our hut at the campsite at Butova, about 40km outside Moscow. We were supposed to be camping in tents, but it was so wet when we arrived that they put us up in the huts "temporarily", which soon became "permanently".

Photo #1 shows me (playing the guitar), Doug Richardson (the guitar's owner) and a girl who, my inner voice is suggesting, was called Jenny. Although I recognised her instantly after all these years, I remember nothing else about her (what she was studying, how she came to be on the trip, etc.).

Photo #2 shows Doug and Jenny again, plus a Norwegian professor called Harald Halleraker (I can't vouch for the spelling) in the Nordic sweater and a delightful Sri Lankan PhD student called Nag (an abbreviation of his typically long Sri Lankan name). Nag had a lovely, gentle manner, and when we were in Poland he was surrounded by a crowd of excited children, who thought he was Jesus Christ!

Paul mentions the clutch problem in Berlin, which I'd forgotten about but may partly explain how we came to arrive at our hotel at 5.00am! Most of us were ready to get some sleep, but Elisabeth Koutaissoff stepped off the coach full of energy and eager to get out and explore! We were taken to Treptow Park, which in light of Paul's recollection was a diversion to keep us occupied while the coach was being fixed. There were other untoward events involving the coach: Julian Birch spun it through 180 degrees on wet cobbles in Lodz (mercifully no damage was done to person or coach) and I'm sure Tom Kronsjo graunched it against something in Moscow (inflicting only cosmetic damage). The Engineering Dept. made an excellent job of the conversion, and it was really quite luxurious with reclining aircraft seats and loads of legroom.

Birmingham

When I arrived in 1964, the Social Sciences buildings were very new. I returned in 1999, when my daughter was visiting potential universities, and it looked very down-at-heel. One of the great advantages of CREES was having our own library, which served as both a study area and a social centre - a common room of sorts - where students from all the years mixed and chatted. In my third year I was friendly with Julian Birch, who by then was a postgraduate, and we regularly headed to the Refectory soon after it opened at 4.15pm for supper. That was something else I noticed in 1999 - how the huge refectory of my day had been much reduced in size to provide space for a load of retail outlets.

Amongst the many people I met my earliest clear recollection is of Bob Davies introducing me to Tom Kronsjo, who bore down on me with a huge grin, grabbed my hand in a crushing grip and shook it enthusiastically. I was thinking "That fits", as I'd misheard his name as Tom Cruncher! In my first year my tutor was a Hungarian (I believe) who was slowly dying of a progressive disease. He used to make Turkish coffee for tutorials but invariably forgot about it, so it always boiled over.

In my third year I was one of three students in what amounted to a tutorial group studying politics under David Lane. Each session one of us would present an essay that we'd prepared and then we'd all discuss it. The others were Julian Birch, a postgraduate in Soviet politics, and Mike Jackson who, as we now know, was destined for great things. By comparison I was the runt of the litter, and my paltry efforts always compared badly with theirs, to the extent that David Lane warned me that, on current showing, I was unlikely to pass my final exam in the subject. In the event some tactically astute and cleverly focused revision enabled me to achieve a 2:1 grade on that paper!

However, my fondest memories are of Elisabeth Koutaisoff, very clever and an absolutely lovely person. She was something of a mother hen fussing over her chicks (us students), and she seemed to single me out for special attention. At the end of my first year I failed a couple of exams - I said I wasn't academically distinguished - and, knowing that I had to resit them on our return from Russia, she made it her mission to take me under her wing and fill me with knowledge, mainly by taking me round museums and other educational establishments. This, of course, was to me like taking medicine, so towards the end of our time in Moscow she sugared the pill by treating me, plus Doug and Jenny, to tea followed by a visit to the circus. And what an experience that was... The highlight was two lights going round the ring in opposite directions in total darkness to the sound of engines; when the lights came up, there were a pair of bears on motorbikes, which touched noses as they passed each other! Bears on motorbikes just can't be topped.

So there you have it - no worthy academic memories, more an irreverent but no less affectionate recollection of my time at Birmingham. I may not have pursued my degree subject thereafter, but I'm sure the experience served me very well in life.

Career

"I started work at Vauxhall Motors as a graduate trainee. In 1968 I was nominated for a scholarship at General Motors Institute, the first non-engineer ever put forward by Vauxhall. GMI rejected my application, it eventually emerged, on the basis of the foreign countries I'd visited - Holland, West Germany, Belgium, East Germany, Poland, USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia - and probably my degree subject too. Clearly the spirit of McCarthy lived on, as they suspected me of being a Communist or at least a sympathiser!

"After three years I wanted a change of direction but was torn between accounting and computing. Computing was probably my preferred option, but I decided to train as an accountant and see where it took me. I qualified as a management accountant and did this for about ten years, picking up a number of computerisation projects along the way. Eventually these projects and general systems management were taking up so much of my time that I became a full-time Data Processing Manager - I had finally completed the circuitous route into computing.

"This brought me into close contact with our suppliers, one of whom invited me to join them to manage a new project in a business area that was new to them (and to me). After a slow start this business took off, and the company I joined with fewer than ten employees grew to over 1,200. It is now an important part of possibly the largest American company in the business, and it all began with me sitting at a desk with nothing but a pencil and a blank pad (and a blank expression) wondering what I'd let myself in for. I worked there for 26 very happy years until I retired in 2011."

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