

IFLA Moscow: A Personal Diary

HAVING recently been elected to the IFLA Standing Committee on Serial Publications I was looking forward with some excitement (and a certain amount of trepidation) to my first IFLA Conference which was to be held in Moscow. The Serials Standing Committee appeared, from the advance documentation, to be a lively and active committee comprising many well known international serial experts: it would be good to renew old acquaintances.

On the other hand, the obligatory pre-conference reading of the guidebooks indicated that Moscow might be a rather depressing place with its queues, food shortages and political upheavals. Moreover, an article in the 'Business Traveller' reviewing Moscow's hotels, said of the Hotel Rossiya where we were to stay ..."even the cockroaches get blisters walking the miles of corridors in this hotel!" They were certainly right about the cockroaches, but somehow their distasteful presence paled into insignificance in the light of other events which were to unfurl during the week of the conference.

Friday August 16th

The flight from Heathrow to Moscow was full of librarians heading for the IFLA Conference. We knew we had arrived in Russia as we joined lengthy queues at passport control and immigration. The Hotel Rossiya lives up to its unenviable reputation. It is a vast, 3000 room, concrete edifice, overlooking the Moscow River, next to the Kremlin and near to Red Square. My room is grim and uninviting. Nevertheless, an early evening visit to the hotel's hard currency bar revives travel-weary spirits.

Saturday August 17th

My first meeting of the Standing Committee begins at 9.00am today. After an early breakfast buses depart

By HAZEL WOODWARD

from the hotel for the three mile journey to the conference centre, which turns out to be very close to the Russian Parliament building (the Russian White House).

Marjorie Bloss — the outgoing Chair of the Committee — welcomes some 13 Committee members and five observers to the meeting; a good turnout I gather for an IFLA Standing Committee. We note that the conference as a whole had attracted some 950 non USSR and almost 700 USSR delegates. The election of new officers saw Suzanne Santiago (ISDS Paris) elected Chair and Elise Hermann (Royal Library Copenhagen) elected Secretary. Projects underway within the committee include a basic serials management manual for developing countries, an international directory of serials experts, library identifiers in union catalogues, and the development of a PC-based software package (OSIRI) for the creation of ISDS records.

As the afternoon is devoted to other Standing Committee meetings we are able, with a clear conscience, to spend some time taking in the sights of Moscow. Saint Basil's cathedral in all its eccentric splendour, Red Square, the Kremlin and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier are all included in our whistle-stop tour. Using bribery (dollar bills do very nicely) we manage to book a table for the evening at a Georgian restaurant reputed to be one of the best in Moscow. For \$10 a head we feast upon caviar and other delicacies unavailable to the average Muscovite, washed down with seemingly unlimited quantities of Russian champagne, Armenian wine and, of course, vodka.

Sunday August 18th

After a useful orientation for IFLA newcomers (very necessary with a printed programme

consisting of 109 closely printed pages) Sunday morning's conference programme is devoted to Open Forums and Reports from the various Sections. These are followed by the main plenary session when a new President of IFLA is elected by over one thousand delegates crowded into one room. With a free afternoon ahead of us we further explore the city. Regrettably, we decide against queuing to visit Lenin's tomb, remarking to one another that we could come back later in the week! An opportunity probably lost forever.

Monday August 19th

Strange rumours began to circulate at breakfast today. During the night Gorbachev has been arrested — there has been a bloodless coup. Hotel and Intourist staff are upset and confused: Russian television devotes its airtime to ballet and old films. Even upon arrival at the conference centre little hard news is available. Despite the rumours and



HAZEL Woodward and friendly tank outside the Russian parliament

uncertainties the main session of papers relating to serials continue as scheduled. Two Russian librarians, visibly shaken, valiantly present a paper on 'The system of union catalogues of serials'. Patricia Harris, Executive Director of the National Information Standards Organisation, gives an informative presentation on the development of international standards, exploring ways in which ISO and IFLA could work in partnership.

The official opening of the conference is scheduled to take place at 2.30 in the Hotel Rossiya Concert Hall. We decide to walk back from the conference centre to the hotel to see what is happening on the streets. Lines of tanks and troops

are assembled around the Kremlin and Red Square and crowds of tense-faced people stand around waiting for news (any news). Back at the hotel international telephone lines are 'unavailable' and rumours circulate that the airport is closed. A distracted Minister of Culture addresses the official opening without knowing whether he is still in



BATTERED trolley buses are turned into a makeshift barricade

office. Even he has little information having been unable to contact his superiors. Officials from the Library Association decide that it would be wise to contact the British Embassy with the names of the UK delegates: the Embassy is unfortunately closed!

In the evening I am persuaded by some of my more adventurous colleagues to venture out in Red Square and adjoining Manezh Square. Crowds of people throng the squares — groups of young men sit on top of hijacked trolley buses which are strewn around the surrounding streets. Gradually we become braver and openly begin to take photographs, joining other tourists having their photographs taken in front of tanks. We are lucky to have with us Peter Hoare, Librarian of Nottingham University, who speaks Russian. Peter tells us that some women in the crowd are saying to the soldiers "We could be your mothers — are you going to shoot us?" He also translates for us the photocopied news sheets which are circulating; these are asking the people to go to the Russian Parliament to protect President Yeltsin.



CITY under siege ... Hazel standing beside another sprawling barricade

Tuesday August 20th

We still have no contact with the outside world. Wisely, it turns out, we decide once again to walk the three miles to the conference centre: this takes about half an hour. (We discover later that some buses took up to three hours to make the same journey through the barricades of trolley buses and tanks.) The walk takes us past the Russian White House where we have our first view of the barricades around the building and the tanks and tank crews that have declared for Yeltsin — now defending the building. A barrage balloon carrying the Russian flag now flies over the White House.

Arriving at the conference centre we find the conference beginning to disintegrate somewhat. Certain papers and poster sessions have been cancelled as speakers have left on hastily rearranged flights. Even a paper on disaster control planning does not draw a large audience! IFLA Executive Board meets in an emergency



CHILDREN hitch a ride on one of the tanks defending Yeltsin

session to decide whether to continue with the conference. After a long debate it is decided to continue — if only because we are safer together as conference delegates rather than as individuals.

With so much happening, so close to the conference centre we feel compelled to accept our Russian colleagues' invitation to join them at the White House rally. Climbing the barricades we mingle with a vast crowd of some 100,000 people gathered behind the building. Without our translator it is difficult to understand the speeches but there was no mistaking the mood of the people. Chants of Rossiya (Russia) and Svoboda (freedom)

rise from the crowd and roars of enthusiasm greet the various speeches from a succession of politicians, actors and academics.

We learn from CNN (The American television news channel), discovered in the Intercontinental Hotel, that George Bush refuses to recognise the coup leaders and calls on them to restore Mr Gorbachev to power. We also get to see, for the first time, television coverage of the events of the last two days and we wonder how our families at home are feeling, watching the same news reel.

Wednesday August 21st

The situation has worsened overnight. We hear at breakfast that several of Yeltsin's supporters were killed on the ringroad outside the Russian Parliament as tanks smashed through the barricades of trolley buses. We walk the now familiar route to the White House. Still deprived by the censors of any objective news, Muscovites huddle at makeshift shrines covered in gladioli and roses, among the debris of tangled metal and shattered glass. The sky is grey and overcast and it begins to rain. This is the most moving and depressing scene

we have experienced; it is worsened by the rumours that further attacks are expected. The situation looks exceedingly grim and it is at this moment that we take the decision to leave Moscow. Tickets are changed from Sunday to Thursday with relative ease and we return to the hotel to pack.

Some time mid-afternoon my room telephone rings. The news is sensational: the coup has apparently collapsed. Yeltsin has announced that the coup leaders are trying to leave Moscow by plane and has called on the crowds outside his barricaded building to try and blockade the airport. But events are moving too fast. We quickly learn

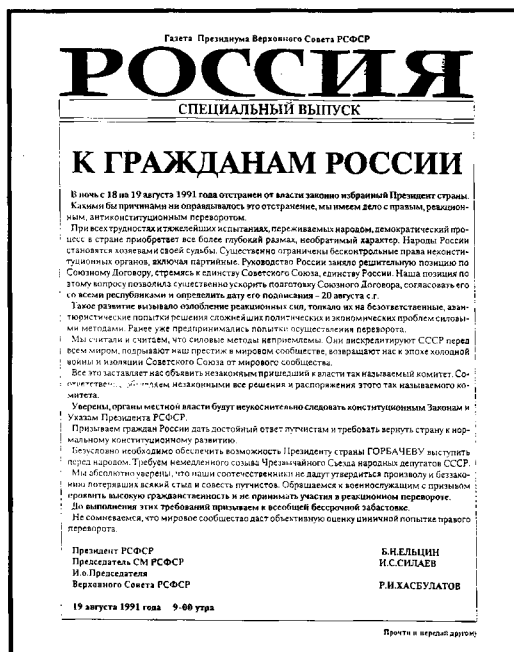
that Yeltsin has taken over as chief of the Soviet armed forces and has ordered the withdrawal of all troops from Moscow. Before long, columns of tanks can be seen pulling out of the streets accompanied by the cheers of bystanders. To facilitate the celebrations the 11pm to 5am curfew is lifted.

We too celebrate in style. The official IFLA reception in the Kremlin (which understandably we have assumed to be cancelled) was to take place after all. The short walk to the Kremlin in the early evening takes us

past crowds of rejoicing Muscovites. Inside the Kremlin we find tables laden with a wonderful array of Russian cuisine.

Emotional speeches from IFLA officers are followed by a splendid cabaret comprising traditional musicians and dancers and very soon the Russians are literally dancing in the aisles. Swept along by the atmosphere we join in, scarcely believing that we are where we are.

Tomorrow we must unfortunately depart — but we will never ever forget the events and emotions of the last few days. We hug our tearful Russian colleagues, hoping against hope that today will mark a turning point in their history. □



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