

# What Time Is It?

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During twenty-one days in Russia, we never knew what time it was. Our inner timepieces were confounded by crisscrossing nine of the eleven time zones in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Too, it was June when nights at latitudes 75 percent above ours at home were a third as long as we were used to. Most of all, centuries were confused—1984 could have been 1894 or 1734: abacus adding in Uzbekistan; log-cabin living around Lake Baikal; immaculate traveling in a subway of mahogany and chandeliers in Moscow; back to the revolution in Leningrad because I forgot to turn my watch three hours ahead, a lone encounter with the KGB, one of my only two times of being afraid in the entire three weeks.

Time was of the essence. A different kind of essence.

In the Hermitage in Leningrad, art museum next in stature only to the Louvre in Paris, is a glass case longer, higher, wider than I am tall. It is a clock of gold and brass commissioned by Catherine the Great: a huge peacock in a tree, birds, animals, snowy grounds, the tree leaved and dazzling. Once a year it strikes and everything is set in motion. But no one can predict when, what time it is. For three weeks as if I were part of that clock, time held me, has since, in the insistent hope that it would not run out, not before we had a chance, those Russians, we Americans, to find each other.

My time with Russia had begun in the summer of 1983 when David Freed, recently retired cellist with the Utah Symphony, called me about a joint evening of Bach and poems to celebrate “kinship among nations,” sponsored by the Utah Arts Council. I liked the idea, began to think if we don’t work for this, why work for anything else?

But mine was a generation that had responded very differently to the dropping of the bomb four decades before. We wanted the war ended, with the loss, of course, of as few of our own as possible. Now, forty years later, I wanted nothing to do with that bomb or the

proliferation of its progeny. But why? When the change? I needed to write the poems "to explain me to myself."

In six "considerations," I wrote about high school biology and watching matter turn to ash in a petri dish, about how jubilant I felt when the bomb dropped on Hiroshima would bring my loved ones home, about what I later learned from college freshmen in my classes concerning the morality of that bombing, about the birth of a grandchild, the right to grow old like an aunt, how Dachau taught a naive American woman not only "Never Again!" but *Never*. Across the decades, what to consider? What to celebrate? And in this moment, How Much for the Earth?

Written to be read aloud, in the next year they were published by Utahns United in a limited edition—a chapbook—and by *Dialogue* in a special issue on war and peace. They were translated at Dartmouth by Walter Arndt and Lev Losev into German and Russian, as our program took the poems and Bach across the state.

As I inscribed a book for Dr. Gary Browning, at a reading in Provo in 1984 as part of BYU's Peace among Nations Week, he said, "You should take your poems to the Soviet Union, Emma Lou. Poetry is a second language there. Poets are heroes. And peace is on their minds in a different way than it's on ours."

Two months later, by every kind of coincidence and good fortune, I left for the USSR with thirty-six others—architect, Spanish teacher, artist, counselors, sheep rancher, fish farmer, homemakers—on an education exchange tour under the guidance of Drs. Kent Robson and Lynn Eliason, professors of philosophy and languages at Utah State University, six-time visitors to the Soviet Union and fluent in its language and history.

My poems went with me in both English and Russian. It was like having a second visa, one that people read aloud from, nodded and smiled at. They eased me through customs in Moscow, were handled and read by scarfled women in a packed church, were part of a reading in a dining car as we spent four-and-a-half days and nights on the Trans-Siberian Railway zooming through the surprising beauties of Siberia and its collectives tucked among the Ural Mountains, the Taiga Forest, the lush fields and meadows along the Volga. They were yet to introduce me to people of various ages and occupations in modern Tashkent near Mongolia, in ancient Samarkand on the border of Afghanistan, and to that woman my own age in a memorial in Leningrad who, like the others, would alter forever my conception of war and allegiance to peace.

I had not known what to expect. My knowledge of Russia was “Peter and the Wolf” and *Dr. Zhivago* naive, the names and fates of emigrés and dissidents gleaned from newspapers and hearsay. Everything had been as surprising as that beauty in Siberia, or seeing only one gas station in Moscow, a city of seven million, a line-up for it like the queuing in the butcher shop for narrow veins of lean in great slabs of fat. We had brushed our teeth in mineral water and Pepsi. We had heard Verdi in the Kremlin. We had breakfasted on reindeer, cucumbers, and caviar. Nothing about the trip had been ordinary. Especially those people I had gone there to meet, did meet, without limit or surveillance, with the group and on my own.

But my most surprising adventure with a Soviet, the poems, and the idea of peace came in Irkutsk, Siberia, a college town of six hundred thousand. Not quite two weeks gone of our three, we sat in a vast mahogany room draped with flags in the city’s House of Friendship. We were going to learn about education. The Soviets had been obviously proud of their system. In Moscow University, thirty thousand, typical of huge complexes of institutes, universities, schools in every city and republic that have turned the 3 percent literacy before the revolution in 1917 to less than 3 percent illiteracy in the 1980s. Our instructor was a member of the Communist party, one of a 5 percent ruling minority, and we were prepared for the party line, something we’d not been given anywhere along the way.

Then Valentina—Valya to her friends—appeared. Stylish in a summer print, poised on slim high heels, she had the bearing of a model, was blonde-coiffed and vibrant. In her late thirties, she spoke with a clipped British accent and an ingenuous warmth that disarmed and surprised us.

She introduced herself as a teacher in the Academy of Sciences. She taught English to scientists, businessmen, artists, government leaders. In 1978 she had been in the United States for two months as an exchange teacher in Baltimore on the AFS (American Field Service) program and afterwards had traveled extensively within the Soviet Union lecturing on her American experience. Had anyone here been associated with the AFS? I said that we’d had a daughter study in Haddonfield, New Jersey, her junior year in high school, had all been enriched by it. Valentina’s time had been anything but enriching—to her or to the Soviets who had heard in the years since of how the family she stayed with were cold, talked always of what they owned, paid children for the least effort, never asked her a question about her life or reasons for being there.

She told of teaching in the high school in Baltimore about the Russian people. But someone had complained that she was teaching communism, and her subject was changed. For the rest of her time as an exchange teacher, she taught the American Constitution and the American Civil War out of American textbooks to American children! Whose loss? During the next two hours, we asked our questions. Pinned her to the wall with some, like what about the shooting down of the Korean airliner? Why can't Soviet citizens travel as we're doing now? How would an exchange teacher from the United States be treated in the Soviet Union? Why don't we have exchanges?

Valentina remained informative, charming except when asked "Can you people criticize your government?" She answered, "Yes, in letters in the paper, to get government answers on TV." And then in a voice from which the warmth had disappeared, "But let's face it, we do not like criticism."

Then when we asked again about education, she responded as if a page had been turned. Winning and obviously wanting to talk about what she was so good at, she described teaching by games. "You know Russian roulette?" she asked, grinning. "We play it with phrases."

She told too of growing up in a home where her mother was Christian, her father Communist.

"Who won out?" we asked.

"You see here the mixture," she said, pointing to herself. She told of how hard it is to get into the party, how much work it takes to stay there, that religion is never taught in school, only in homes where an older generation might still have a Bible.

"What about peace? Do you have any ways of working for peace?"

She told of committees who met in that very House of Friendship, of children's groups started by similar groups in San Francisco who were influencing thinking between generations. Suddenly she said, "If I had three wishes, you know what the first would be?" She held up one finger, her voice softening. "For peace."

"And the other two wishes?"

She put her other two fingers up one at a time. "For peace. For peace." No one spoke for a moment.

Many other questions were asked, answered. With the bus waiting to take us to our hotel and lunch and then to our plane for Tashkent, I talked to Valentina, told of peace groups I was part of as a nonpolitical person: Utahns United against the Nuclear Arms Race, Women Concerned about Nuclear War, of people at home who felt exactly as she did about wishes one, two, and three.

By now everyone was in the bus, as usual, I'm afraid, waiting for me. Was there a way she could come to our hotel for lunch, to talk further? No, but why didn't I ride with her in her car? Valentina slid into the black state car, took hold of the top of the steering wheel with both hands, flung her head down on it and said, "I was so nervous!"

We laughed. "I have done this only twice," she confided, "answered these questions by non-Soviets. I am a teacher of English."

We laughed again. An hour-and-a-half later we were still talking. About the party, yes, and about our governments, nuclear arming, the Olympics. But more about our daughters, my five, her two.

"What does your husband do?" she asked.

"He's a real estate broker," I tried, then laughed again trying to explain the exchange of land and property for a fee—as impossible as a credit card or an aisleful of frozen TV dinners.

She invited me to dinner across the river in her apartment. Was it better than it might have been because she was a Communist party official? No, she smiled.

Out of my journal fell a picture of my whole family—all seventeen of us—at our last daughter's wedding. "All yours?" she asked, astonished. I nodded, pointed out daughters and husbands, grandchildren. "Do they all dress alike?" she asked.

"Only for that night—the wedding party, you know," I explained, then, embarrassed at the apparent extravagance, "These two daughters—they sewed the dresses. They will wear them again."

She looked long at the picture, then asked, "Could I keep it?"

"Of course," I said. "The family will be yours in America."

We exchanged addresses, hers in my journal in her exotic hand with a dozen others, backwards we would say: USSR, republic, city, street, her phone number, fifteen digits long; mine in the book I inscribed to her, along with a tape of the poems in English and the Russian version, an article on Russia by Gary Browning from *BYU Today* that I had stashed in my suitcase and circulated among our group.

By now others had come into the lobby from lunch. Could she come to Utah under the sponsorship of a university and be our exchange? She might but would need a formal invitation. We promised to write. One of the group gave her *Utah* in gorgeous color, another a copy of *Network* about women in business in Utah, all buzzing with camaraderie and the same sense of life that had erupted when Valentina had first walked into the House of Friendship.

The group trickled toward the bus. Valentina pulled my little stuffed roller bag through the lobby, across the asphalt parking, seeming

as reluctant as I was to let go. At the door of the bus we hugged familial as old friends longing for time, kissed cheeks like sisters.

In my seat I thought, "This has to be what I came for. This hope."

A retired chemical engineer leaned toward where I sat. In the Bolshoi ten days before, he had lent me his opera glasses, and asked during the reading on the train, "Why don't poems rhyme anymore?" All along he had been a man on whom nothing was lost, a man going home to report to his high priests' quorum what he had seen. He said, "Isn't she amazing? But so much like us in the Church—unique and genuine until we start spouting the party line."

I knew he was right. She had changed dramatically when we had asked questions she had only secondhand answers for. I knew too that we Americans had the right to be different, could use our God-given agency, protected by a constitution and tradition that said so. But I thought too how we limit ourselves, victimized by the same stereotyping, acquiescence to conformity, suspicion of difference.

That encounter with Valentina and her country convinced me that the possibility for peace among any of us—within our cozy Utah boundaries or across the skitterish globe—is in ourselves. Our being determined that it is not only the top priority of our tenuous time, but a distinct possibility. *If we work at making it happen.*

Since coming home full of time after time with the Valentinas and the Sergeis of the Soviet Union, I have heard over and over, "But you can't trust your experience. The people are not the government."

I know. But they are. Just as we are. And every even small exchange can make a difference. And however we can find to exercise our agency and free ourselves of cliché either in speech or expectation through personal enlightenment, the closer we can come to freeing the world from suspicion and ultimate destruction.

Back home over four months, by Halloween I had wondered why I had not heard from Valentina. Three of us had written to her, asked if she could come, had even set dates as the USIA had suggested we do. Had there been reprisals for her being so friendly with us?

I decided to call her in her Irkutsk, Siberia, where my attempt at an outgoing call had been aborted, no, had not even placed for want of an operator that Sunday morning 145 days before. The phone number she gave me went through Moscow, would involve a delay of three to four hours. I left three phone numbers where I might be reached. "That's not bad," said the overseas operator in Pittsburgh, later placing my call; "it's usually fourteen to fifteen hours."

Three times the operator called me back, trying, each time at a different number. By then we were friends, him determined. "Siberia! We'll get her." Then, "Hey, we've got Valentina on the line!"

She sounded no farther away than Provo. "Are you really calling from Utah? What a treat! What a surprise!"

I had an echo, could ask questions only slowly without overlapping what she was saying. "Did you get my letter? I wrote August seventh. Can you come? I even talked to the people in Washington in charge of exchanges, the USIA, through my senator, found out how to ask."

"No letter yet. But I did hear from two others at the university."

"Well, mine was bigger than normal, in a manila envelope with other things, like the letter I wrote to our senators about reinstating exchanges—and the introduction to my book—some about you."

"I have been on vacation, then up to my eyebrows in work."

Between every remark, "Such a treat! Such a surprise—from Utah!"

"But I start a new class November 15. And you must know—every student reads your poems aloud in English. Then I tell them to hear the tape to see how they should sound."

My poems? Read by those businessmen, government officials, artists, scientists—people who just might have a say about something?

"And your family," she said, "tell them I love them. That they are seen everywhere."

Of course I loved her, loved what she was telling me, felt my conceptions totally validated. "Has it changed what you say about America, Americans, as you travel around speaking and teaching, having met all of us?" I asked. "You can't imagine how meeting you has changed everything for me—for all of us on our tour."

"Oh, yes," she said. "In fact, I'm so glad you called today. Did you have Halloween yesterday?"

"No," I said. "It's today."

"What time is it there?" She was smiling across the thousands of miles.

"Twenty to one in the afternoon."

She laughed. "It's twenty minutes before four in the morning here."

"I will tell all my students, my family of your call," she said. "You would be happy to know that on your Halloween I took a program about America to my fifteen-year-old daughter's class. I carved a jack-o'-lantern from a pumpkin and told them all about all of you. Could you come again?"

We talked for eighteen minutes—thirty-seven dollars on my AT&T bill a month later. What value in Russian—United States currency that connection? I hung up aglow.

Yes, I'll continue to write my Congress people, talk to my family and friends, join where I can to hold hands with others of hope and more than intention. I will encourage exchange, formal and otherwise, root for the reinstigation of programs cancelled by unwitting political punishment of the wrong people.

I will declare my certainty that human beings deserve more credit than we give ourselves. That only through hope and the willingness to find out about each other can the earth and all it is worth be saved.

I will love my country as I never could have, its buoyancy, brashness, entrepreneurship. I will get teary at the "Star Spangled Banner" and do what I can to let my grandchildren know why. Better because I have been to the Soviet Union, seen its repression, its lines, its burial places, its adoration of Mother Russia.

Beyond any of what I will *do*, I will cherish in a grateful heart having been forever altered, enriched, blessed by that twenty-one days of wondering "What time is it?"