Letter from Russia

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Sunday February 4th : Moscow

Moscow, night-time. There are the sounds of doors clunking, hurried footsteps, an announcement on a loudspeaker and a low murmur of disembodied voices in neighbouring compartments. Orange lamps glow defiantly outside the window, the snow is hard and grey as stone on the ground. The guard stamps her feet and pulls her fur hat down a little tighter over her head, her breath rising like a pale phantom into the frozen dark.

We are almost ready to leave. I have an eight-hour journey through snowy forests and past grey wintry towns ahead of me one of many over the next ten days in this lecture tour of south-west Russia, in which I'll clock up several thousand miles.



A visit to a Russian classroom

February 5th: Lipetsk

After my lectures on teaching methodology, I am taken to the Principal's office. He is a professorial, softly spoken type, whose fine white hair seems to be wrapped round his head like a cloud. Together we talk for a few minutes, during which I learn of his nostalgia for the old days, when the Soviet Union was mighty, when things were stable, and when at least you knew what to expect. Before, he admits, you had to queue for an hour to get your three weekly bottles of beer. Now you can choose from 20 imported varieties, but can't afford any of them.

February 6th : Rostov

There are two voices in my head above the sound of the turning wheels. One of them is the childlike one that's always accompanied my travels to far-off places. I'm in Russia - unbelievable! Just listen to the language, take in the faces, plunge in to this parallel world. The other, quieter, one is asking: Why on earth am I on my own again, in yet another country? What's the point of this lonely and constant movement, this endless conversation-making with total strangers? What's odd is that this second voice is there at all, a few years back it never made itself heard.

February 7th -9th Volgograd

A lighter mood already, perhaps because of the familiar faces that greeted me as I stepped off the train: I'd spent time with all three people last time I was here. When you meet people for the first time, they are company; next time round they are already your community.

It doesn't take much to make the transition: a little common history, some shards of half-remembered dialogue, an in-joke or two. A sense of community can take root in the shallowest soil. It doesn't demand a common birthplace, or even nationality, still less decades of shared experience: all it requires is the absence of the state of being total strangers. It's the tiny but significant shift from being an outsider to becoming part of the scenery, from exclusivity to inclusion.

My companions are naturally dismissive of the nostalgia I've been hearing about for the USSR. The college principal I spoke to, they say, was probably just regretting his lost youth. Sure, back then there was a certain amount of stability but no-one, they state emphatically, really wants to turn the clock back.

There are opportunities now, especially for the younger generation. There are no more queues to buy butter or eggs. You can travel. What's more, it's no longer dangerous to sit with a foreigner in a restaurant. Tatyana tells of how in the old days she once got talking to an African student on a train. They exchanged addresses and a letter from him arrived a few weeks later. Soon, however, a couple of not-so-discreet enquiries from KGB officials offering money for information to her friends, and dire predictions of future problems from her mother, were