As I sat down to write this essay, I realized that I am the product of a radical form of cultural exchange—emigration. At times it could be quite painful, especially in the beginning, but the end results were ever so enriching. It was a shock to leave Poland and our secure cultural, social, and economic position. My father, Manfred Kridl, was an esteemed professor of literature as well as a public intellectual (to use Lionel Trilling’s phrase). He took an active role in the defense of democratic institutions and human rights, which in pre–World War II Poland meant minority rights; or, to be more specific, he opposed the imposition of ghetto benches at the university and participated in the formation of a progressive bloc in local elections. We lived in a spacious apartment with servants, and my parents had a large circle of friends. When we arrived in the United States we were “downgraded” to three rooms in a small wooden house, which lacked a dining room, and we were forced to eat in the kitchen. I was so ashamed of our circumstances that I never
invited any of the girls from school to what seemed to me to be an impoverished household.

Not surprisingly, I had no friends at the start, which was compounded by the fact of not being fluent in English. (Before World War II, French was the first foreign language I had learned, beginning at the age of six.) Another constraint was the lack of familiarity with American customs—in our case, baseball games to which we were invited soon after our arrival in fall 1941. I was eager to participate, but it turned out that I had cheered for the wrong team. And to top it all, we were very insecure financially. Smith College was very generous in offering my father a teaching position that enabled him to sail from Spain, where he had been stranded at the outbreak of World War II. The salary, however, was minimal. Fortunately, it was supplemented with a small grant from the London Polish Government in Exile. Eventually, he would make his way to Columbia University, where he held the title of Adam Mickiewicz Professor of Polish Studies and pursued a distinguished career of teaching and publishing.

Looking back, I cannot say that I have any regrets about my displacement, or “deracination” might be a better word, and the various hardships that it involved. While on occasion painful in the beginning, in the long run emigration offered so many advantages. First and foremost, it introduced me to another cultural tradition, making me appreciate and cherish diversity, and instilled in me tolerance or what I would call an “a-systemic” way of looking at what some people would call the “Other” (an attitude that prevailed regarding Russia and the Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War).

My second opportunity to experience the benefits of cultural exchange came in 1957, when I joined a 14-day group tour of the Soviet Union, during which we visited Leningrad, Moscow, and Kyiv for the astonishingly low price of $100. Our group consisted of about 15 participants—retired couples for the most part—pleasant and well meaning but pretty colorless. Fortunately, we had an exceptionally intelligent, well-educated, and competent Intourist guide—a young woman university graduate who never subjected us to Pravda-like lectures. Knowing that I had a Baedeker and spoke Russian, she would let me go on my own explorations during the day. In the evenings, she would take me to literary cafes, the theater, or concerts. One performance, in Kyiv, remains memorable. It was a concert, which, in addition to the customary folk songs and dancing, presented a selection of Western popular music.
This upset some stalwart Communist in the audience who objected to the “decadent” music and demanded to know who had given permission for such a disgraceful performance. The ready and unapologetic response from the conductor was to name article such-and-such of the Soviet constitution, granting freedom of expression—an answer that met with thunderous applause from the audience. So much for the seemingly total and effective control by the Party about which we had read and learned so much.

Serving as a guide at the first American National Exhibition in Moscow during the summer of 1959 offered another eye-opening experience. For about a month we guides faced daily, intense questioning from Soviet citizens, on topics ranging from the cost of food or housing to literature. To our surprise, and relief, most questions were friendly. Occasionally a Party agitator would ask us a provocative question regarding the treatment of Black Americans, unemployment, or labor conditions. Invariably, he or she would be silenced by the irate audience—objections that made it obvious that the Soviet visitors did not want to hear more official propaganda.

Knowing that I had a Baedeker and spoke Russian, our Soviet guide would let me go on my own explorations.
Leading cultural exchange groups to
the USSR for Citizen Exchange Corps
(CEC) was another rewarding and
educational experience. The CEC was
organized by Dan James, a visionary
businessman who believed that a
nuclear confrontation between the
superpowers could be avoided by the
presence and experience of numerous
American visitors in the USSR.

The best part of the trip was a boat
excursion down the Volga, from Kazan
to Rostov. In addition to our own
speaker (usually, one of my colleagues
from Columbia), we had a Soviet
lecturer who would give us the official,
orthodox version of past and present
events. But there were also Soviet
tourists on the boat, and they gave us
another version of Soviet reality.

The most outspoken lesson
took place during an election day
(obligatory—Soviet ID papers would
be stamped), when many of the Soviet
passengers, usually sober, got drunk
in the middle of the day in order to
go through what one of them called a
"farce." In addition, these trips gave
the American tourists a chance to
observe ordinary, everyday Soviet
life—how Soviet citizens relaxed and
amused themselves in ways that were
not that different from ours. They had
a chance to see for themselves that
many of the Cold War verities about
totalitarian controls seemed hollow—

they did not plague Soviet citizens
every minute and hour of the day.

My own research in the Soviet
Union, first on Soviet relations with
the Third World, and later on the
history of Russian art, demonstrated
graphically that solid, honest
research—indepedent scholarship—
could and did exist. Some scholars
toed the Party line, while others tried
to pursue a neutral course, and still
others put impartial scholarship
first. I had the good fortune to meet
with all three positions. Even in the
politically charged field of foreign
policy studies, a number of scholars
questioned both in their publications
and in personal interviews the
wisdom of Soviet economic aid
largesse to the developing countries—
its enormous cost and few rewards,
with the former colonies taking
advantage of Soviet-American
competition for their supposed
allegiance, while basically advancing
their own interests. I was told that I
was among the few Western scholars
who brought up this fact in my
publications. But I should point out
here that this judgment was not my
original discovery—I heard it first
from Soviet academic specialists and
later discerned it in their writings.

It may sound surprising, but at the
risk of repeating myself, it was the
Soviet specialists who first drew my
attention to this lack of success—the
failure of the USSR to gain genuine
allegiance from the Third World—
something that very few Western
scholars had noticed at the time.
The Cold War outlook and Soviet-
American competition clouded their
vision, to put it politely. My own,
nonsystemic approach saved me from
falling into that trap.

Studying and working for Philip
E. Mosely, one of the founders of
Columbia’s Russian Institute and
Soviet studies as a whole, contributed
everlasting to my appreciation of
the role of culture not only in the
history of individual countries but
in international relations as well.

Mosely taught Russian and Soviet
foreign policy, but his knowledge
and appreciation of the history and
literature of Russia and Eastern
Europe was profound. I have not
met any other Russian foreign policy

Serving as guide at the American
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Opposite page:
Elizabeth Kridl
Valkenier (Harriman
Photo Archive).
specialist who had that broad a background, spoke Russian that well (that is, during the 1950s to '70s), and had such a multifaceted appreciation of that country. To give one example, it was Mosely who introduced me to the writings of Vsevolod Garshin, a writer who was not even mentioned in the course on Russian literature taught by Ernest Simmons at Columbia. Mosely’s lectures did not echo the Cold War slogans that prevailed in those days but were a sober assessment of the realpolitik practiced by a great power.

Even more important for my own career, Mosely suggested a culture-related topic for the seminar I was taking with him—Soviet and Communist pressures on Polish scholars to rewrite history to legitimate the post–World War II regime change. Moreover, he urged me to publish the paper and arranged for its appearance in the *Journal of Central European Affairs*.

Mosely’s profound and wide-ranging knowledge of things Russian earned him deep respect in the Soviet Union. So much so that when I went to Moscow in 1957 on my first research trip, his recommendations opened the doors at all the specialized institutes at the Academy of Sciences—even dinner invitations to the homes of some directors. Mosely’s firm stance in defense of U.S. interests, combined as it was with his evident knowledge and appreciation of things Russian, earned him a very high regard among Soviet academics. And it might be added that the Soviets
did not have much respect for those American scholars who believed that we could win Soviet cooperation by being accommodating.

What can one say in conclusion that is not obvious or banal? In my own experience, the extreme form of cultural exchange—emigration—was enormously enriching and gratifying. Fortunately, there are ever so many easier, less demanding ways to gain the same insight. One option is to read; another is to entertain foreign guests in your city; still another is to go to foreign movies or art exhibits or even to a different section of town. They all allow one to have a peek at another way of doing things, another reminder that in the final analysis we all live in a single world with ever so much in common.

Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier ( Resident Scholar, Harriman Institute) is the author of Valentin Serov: Portraits of Russia’s Silver Age (2002); Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art (1990); Russian Realist Art: The State and Society (1977); and The Soviet Union and the Third World: An Economic Bind (1983)—all published in Studies of the Harriman Institute. She earned her Ph.D. in Columbia’s History Department (1973) and holds a certificate from the Russian Institute (1951). For many years she taught courses in political science and art history at Columbia.