

Cultural Exchanges: A Personal Reflection

By Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier

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

On sofa, from left: Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, Harriman director Richard Ericson, Ambassador Jack Matlock, and Harriman associate director Alexander Motyl speak to the press about the 1993 crisis over Boris Yeltsin's relations with the Supreme Soviet.

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.

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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—independent 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 enormously 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

Opposite page:
Elizabeth Kridl
Valkenier (Harriman
Photo Archive).

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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.



Opposite page: The first American National Exhibition in Moscow (1959), via Alamy. Below: Harriman director Philip E. Mosely (left) examines an issue of The Current Digest of the Soviet Press with assistant editor Fred Holling (1953). Above: Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier.

