

# ADMINISTERING AN UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM IN MOSCOW: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE RESIDENT DIRECTOR

HAVING spent the 1978-79 academic year in Moscow, I often find myself at a loss for words when colleagues in the United States ask, "How did you enjoy your year in the Soviet Union?" Compelled by common courtesy to provide some response, I often choose the word "interesting" or the more appropriate, while less specific, Russian *nebez-ynteresno* 'not without interest.' I find that most attempts to describe succinctly the experience in the Soviet Union are doomed to failure. The inadequacy of these explanations is in part due to the false analogies constructed by our colleagues, who are likely to compare a position in Mainz, Madrid, Paris, or Florence with one in Moscow. Those of us who have had the good and bad fortune of serving in the Soviet Union know the differences only too well. When our counterparts in Western European cities say that their years were "pleasant," they mean exactly that; when we call a year "pleasant" we tend to mean only that no *neprijatnost* 'unpleasantness' occurred. When the director of the program in Paris, for example, suggests that his time was "productive," he is probably indicating that he has written a book; our use of the same word refers to some slight progress at the negotiating table. While the uniqueness of the Russian experience is common knowledge for anyone who has spent extensive time in the Soviet Union, we often forget that the major contrasts between Soviet and Western realities are not always perceived in the United States.

As a description of the roles and responsibilities of a resident director in the Soviet Union, this paper provides an overview of the qualities needed for successful job performance. This job summary is intended both for prospective resident directors and for their employers. In addition, this paper can help us reexamine the *raison d'être* of the position of resident director. Such a review is both timely and necessary. The American academic community has accumulated some ten years of experience with semester programs in Leningrad and Moscow. As we enter the 1980s several new programs have been established that will encompass an entire academic year (ten months). A question naturally arises concerning the responsibility of institutions or organizations for participants in their programs. Should selected students be allowed to remain in the Soviet Union without direct American supervision?<sup>1</sup> To

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answer this question we must first characterize the director's contributions to a program.

It may be helpful to explain the roles and responsibilities of a resident director in terms of a structure with which we are all acquainted—that of a college or university. At the same time we must be careful to qualify our statements with a realistic appraisal of the additional burdens imposed by the specific limitations of Soviet society. Which roles in the college does the resident director fill? All of them, of course.

The resident director is the president, or chief representative, of the institution. Expected to participate in a wide variety of discussions, negotiations, and other activities—some substantive, others ceremonial—such an official might be called on, for example, to formulate and articulate college policy or to speak in a public forum held on the sixtieth anniversary of the Komsomol (Young Communist Youth League). He or she meets regularly with Soviet educators and undoubtedly has contact with officers of Soviet ministries and the American Embassy. At appropriate times, the director will answer for the college to members of the Soviet and American press corps. Formidable as the job sounds, the burden of speaking for, and of binding, the institution is frequently increased because of the inability to communicate with the home institution. (During one particularly hectic holiday season, a telephone call to the United States required three days' advance notice.) A peculiarity of the Soviet system is the great reluctance of persons to conduct business by telephone. Countless hours must be spent telephoning simply to *arrange* meetings—and the lack of good and efficient secretarial help almost guarantees that phone calls are never returned.

The resident director is the academic vice-president, or chief academic officer. He or she communicates regularly with academic and administrative officials of the host institution on education-related topics—from the teaching staff to curriculum formulation. An added opportunity, though admittedly

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an awesome responsibility, results from Soviet willingness to permit American visitation and evaluation of classroom teaching. This unique privilege requires great sensitivity, and it also demands that the director spend sufficient time observing classes and instructors to have an informed opinion. While it is presumptuous to try to change the content or form of the Soviet educational process, it has been my experience that the Soviets are willing to implement aspects of constructive criticism when and where they can.

The resident director is the comptroller, or chief financial officer. I was personally responsible for disbursing, and accounting for, almost \$40,000. The task was complicated by the intricacies of the Soviet economic system. Take, for example, a transaction at Vneshtorgbank (the Bank for Foreign Trade): an account is maintained in dollars, but withdrawals can be made only in rubles (unless one can document imminent departure from the country). Some items must be paid for in dollars, necessitating that the director have an adequate supply of cash or traveler's checks, mostly in small denominations, because it is nowhere possible to cash a check. Anyone who does not have the exact amount for a purchase is likely to be given in change a handful of German marks, French francs, or Japanese yen. To maintain some semblance of order and to avoid holding several thousand rubles in a dormitory room, one must be prepared to spend several days per month just on financial matters.

The resident director is the dean of students, an administrative officer with ties both to the Soviet institution and to the American students. He or she must represent the students' interests and desires to the Soviets and communicate the Soviets' standards of attendance, performance, and so on, to the students. While this role always involves being many things to many people—disciplinarian, adviser, counselor—it assumes added significance in Moscow. Soviet theory and practice hold the leader of a delegation directly and personally responsible for any and all actions of each member of the group. The director, not the student, is liable to be summoned to explain or justify a student's absence from class or to encourage participation in everything from poetry readings to *Leninskij subbotnik* 'a day of volunteer labor in honor of Lenin.' The director's own presence at such events—though another drain on his or her time—helps ensure student attendance.

The resident director is the information officer—or, for that matter, a walking *spravočnoje bjuro* 'information bureau,' expected to answer queries on everything from bars and bathhouses to tipping and tickets. The director's room, which students

assume is open around the clock, is normally the library and clearinghouse for items of interest. Because of the distinctive culture of the Soviet Union, the director is frequently required to offer an ongoing orientation to life in that country and to provide informed and reliable answers. While pranks in most Western European countries may serve only to aggravate the image of the "ugly American," in the Soviet Union the consequences of seemingly harmless actions can be grave. The defacing of a Lenin poster, in one instance, resulted in the immediate expulsion of the student artist from the Soviet Union. We must protect our students from inadvertent transgressions of Soviet law by ensuring that they have complete and accurate information.

The resident director is an educator, ideally a teacher of the Russian language. The American teacher of Russian can often rely on contrastive linguistics to clarify points made in class. He or she can also lessen the frustrations of students who are unable to express sophisticated questions of grammar and usage in Russian. As a teacher, the director can relate as a colleague and an equal to Soviet instructors.

The resident director is the school nurse, ministering to the physical ailments of the students. Though unlikely to be a trained physician, the director is almost certain to be the person students will turn to when they need assistance with a simple health problem. An American doctor is available at our embassy, but students often fall ill in places other than Moscow. Soviet medicine is excellent and even exemplary in medical emergencies, when a quick response is involved. In dealing with minor complaints, however, Soviet doctors tend to be overcautious, imposing a two-week hospital stay for stomach disorders, or unconventional, prescribing X-ray treatments for a head cold. Faced with the reluctance of students to consult Soviet doctors except in emergencies, the director may find it necessary to dispense cough syrup and Coricidin. I see here the potential for great harm and costly litigation. This is just one more reason why the director must be a person of reliable judgment.

The resident director is the college psychologist, or the director of the counseling service. Living in a foreign country and an alien environment can often be a source of mental strain. In the Soviet Union students encounter not only harsh physical conditions but also an ideological climate that is officially anticapitalist and antiimperialist, characteristics that in practice often translate as anti-American. Students are especially vulnerable in this situation, and they sometimes need a shoulder to lean on. This factor may also account for the rather firm and precipitative emotional commitments that our students make.

The resident director is the consular officer, fulfilling for students the duties normally performed by an embassy official for tourists and for those in the country on business. The director normally defines the limits of travel and boundaries for students; failure to do this has resulted more than once in the apprehension of a student by the Soviet militia. Normally the director becomes involved in these episodes and in other confrontations with the authorities—for example, when items are confiscated by customs officials. I do not advocate that a director operate without the assistance of a consular officer; indeed, in official matters I strongly recommend close contact with the embassy. Realistically speaking, however, occasions often do arise when it is impractical if not impossible to obtain professional advice or assistance.

The resident director is the tour organizer. During each semester there are several day excursions, a couple of weekend trips, and a longer tour. One of the advantages of the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) program in Leningrad is the close coordination of these nonacademic activities by Sputnik (Bureau for International Youth Travel).<sup>2</sup> At the Pushkin Institute those who arrange tours have neither professional training nor extensive experience with travel organizations. Consequently, the director should be closely involved with the preparation and execution of travel plans. Anyone about to lead a tour through the Soviet Union for the first time should be forewarned that any- and everything can, and frequently does, go wrong. The only real training for this role is experience, either as an assistant director or as a tour guide for an American travel organization. A clear understanding of how things operate can mean the difference between success and failure in this substantial part of the semester abroad.

The nature and function of the position of resident director dictate the necessary qualifications for job applicants. The foremost requirement is a high degree of oral proficiency in Russian. The ability to communicate and comprehend precise information is essential for the performance of the director's duties.<sup>3</sup> A second requirement is an understanding of the peculiarities of Soviet society and life. A director is expected to observe procedures and protocol and to know how to accomplish a given task within the confines of the Soviet system. To be considered an equal by Soviet colleagues and to be respected and obeyed by students, the director should be someone with academic standing, preferably a full-time faculty member with a Ph.D. On the basis of these qualifications it seems logical and expedient to select as resident directors those professors of Russian who have spent time in the Soviet Union. All members of the teaching profession will

not automatically qualify for the position. The variety and sensitivity of job responsibilities call for a person with administrative ability, sound judgment, and extraordinary maturity.

In hiring a director the institution must consider two other factors. First, there must be clear recognition on both sides that the position is a full-time job. The director must know that all other professional activities will have to be subordinated to the administration of the program and that there will be little or no opportunity for sustained scholarly research in the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> Institutions, for their part, must be prepared to provide both adequate monetary compensation and professional recognition if they wish to obtain the services of a highly qualified professional. Any costs will seem minor when weighed against the risk of having the college or university sued for damages because its representative has made an error in judgment.

Do we need resident directors in Moscow and Leningrad who are with our students at all times? Yes! If there is no director, students will fill the vacuum and confront situations for which they have no preparation or training. At best such inexperienced students will commit regrettable faux pas; at worst, through carelessness or thoughtlessness, they will endanger themselves and the very existence of the program. Few college presidents would like to have their institutions represented in the Soviet Union by students, no matter how qualified.

How did I enjoy my year in the Soviet Union? It was fascinating and rewarding, frustrating and exhausting. The frustration came from working in a system that discourages initiative and individual action; the exhaustion was the result of the harsh climate and the trying living conditions. The fascination arose from the opportunity to live like a Soviet citizen, in a way that no foreign diplomat or business executive ever experiences: to take advantage of cultural events, holiday rituals, and so on, to do everything I ever wanted in the Soviet Union. The year was rewarding for two reasons: the satisfaction that comes from a job well done and the pleasure of reexperiencing through my students my own youthful enthusiasm for, and enchantment with, the Russian people, language, and culture.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Canadian delegation at the Pushkin Institute, for example, is accompanied to Moscow by a professor who returns to Canada after the first few weeks. Thereafter, one of the students speaks for the group.

<sup>2</sup> At least one former resident director recommends less involvement with Sputnik in favor of closer cooperation with the Soviet educational institution. See Gerald

E. Mikkelsen, "Russian Language Study in Leningrad: The CIEE Semester Program," *Russian Language Journal*, 31, No. 108 (1977), 203-10.

<sup>3</sup> Russian language competency is necessary for most operations, but one should not hesitate to use English when appropriate. Diplomats and business executives, many of them fluent in Russian, rely on English both to ensure accuracy and to convey their own point of

view. The very act of speaking Russian forces one into certain mental categories, a way of thinking that should sometimes be avoided.

<sup>4</sup> Even if time were not a critical factor, research is hampered by the inaccessibility of archives and by the prohibition on importing books in Russian printed outside the Soviet Union.

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