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Gennadi Gerasimov.

Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg *Times*.

A SOVIET VIEW OF ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

by William H. Parsons

If an American wants to learn what life is like in the Soviet Union at the present time, one important source would certainly be the reports sent back from Moscow and other Soviet cities by American journalists. The recent works by correspondents Hedrick Smith and Robert Kaiser are indeed excellent accounts of contemporary Russian reality.¹ In a similar way, if Soviet citizens wished to learn more about America, they might well turn to articles written by their journalists on assignment in the United States. What information would such a reader find in *Pravda* and other leading Soviet newspapers about American life? And how would a Soviet journalist present the city of St. Petersburg, Florida, to his readers after visiting this city named in honor of the former Russian imperial capital. These are two important questions raised by the article "Sunset in St. Petersburg," which appeared in the Soviet newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta*²

Gennadi Gerasimov, a special correspondent for the Novosti Press Agency and a feature writer for *Literaturnaya Gazeta* believes he may be the first Soviet journalist to have visited St. Petersburg, Florida. He came to Florida in December 1974 to write about St. Petersburg and the problems of the elderly in a capitalist society. When asked by St. Petersburg *Times* reporter Timothy Phelps what he intended to write about St. Petersburg, Gerasimov replied: “try to be objective, really. I write all kinds of positive things.”³ What he actually did write included some positive information about the city, but clearly emphasized the negative aspects of American life as seen from the Soviet perspective.

The editors of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* introduce this article as one of many articles in that paper devoted to the problem of meeting social needs. In particular, the experience of St. Petersburg is shown to reflect, “as in a drop of water . . . the dismal aspects of American reality: the inequality, general indifference, and the cruel treatment of old people.” Such an introduction clearly sets the stage for a clearly propagandistic piece of journalism.

In the final section of his article Gerasimov turns his attention to the elderly Russian retirement community in St. Petersburg. He sees a double sadness here, because they are not only suffering the problems of the aged, but they are cut off from their native land. He reports rather accurately that divisions do exist within the Russian community (he even decides to identify these Russian-Americans only by their initials so as not to cause further discord), but he is mistaken if he really believes that homesickness is the main unifying element. Intense anti-Soviet feelings and strong ties to the two Russian orthodox churches are just as important as any nostalgia about old Russia. Soviet readers do not get an objective view of the attitudes of the Russian-Americans in St. Petersburg.

In a recent conversation with a Soviet teacher we were discussing the objectivity of Soviet and the western newspapers. The Soviet teacher assured me that the *New York Times* was anti-Soviet, and that even though Soviet correspondents sometimes slanted American reality, on balance they were more accurate and objective than their American counterparts in Moscow. I do not agree. Soviet readers who relied solely on this view of St. Petersburg and the elderly in America would simply not have an accurate and objective understanding of American reality.

SUNSET IN ST. PETERSBURG

Translated by William H. Parsons

In the recent past *Literaturnaya Gazeta* has on many occasions returned to the problems of “meeting social needs.” By the publication of this article by Gennadi Gerasimov we continue the dialog about social conflicts in bourgeois society. In the life of the small American town of St. Petersburg, as in a drop of water, we see reflected the dismal aspects of American reality: the inequality, general indifference, and the cruel treatment of old people

The American St. Petersburg is spaciouly spread over many islands and the Pinellas peninsula. The landscape here is very similar to that of its prerevolutionary Russian namesake. Life was given to the city by a railroad branch built in 1888 by a Russian engineer and entrepreneur, Peter Alekseyevich Dementief, who came to this land because at his views. The

village growing up around the station was named St. Petersburg after the birthplace of Dementief.

Now the railroad branch has one foot in the grave. On the other hand, the highway system which crosses the bay has opened the city to tourists who now number about 2 million a year. One can also fly here by plane. Incidentally, the local residents are proud of the fact that their city initiated for the first time in the world a regularly scheduled passenger airline service – it happened on January 1, 1914. The distance of 30 kilometres to Tampa was covered by the planes of that day in 23 minutes.

St. Petersburg is also called “the city of sunshine.” The local newspapers *The Times* and *The Evening Independent* have the following rule: no money will be collected for the paper which comes out on a day following a 24-hour period without sunshine. On such a day the newspapers are in fact distributed free of charge to all who want them. But such sunless days usually occur no more than three times a year, so that the loss is more than made up by the advertising of the local climate.

There are many tourist attractions here: tropical gardens with tame birds; a dolphin pool, which is, of course, “the world’s largest;” a wax museum – a branch of Madame Tussaud’s of London; a stern wheeler “The Tom Sawyer” which is an exact replica of the vessels traveling on the Mississippi at the turn of the century; the historical museum, which opens with the obituary from the *New York Times* of Peter Dementief, who died in 1919. But the vacationers prefer to spend time at the beaches, seeking to take as much tan back with them to the gloomy northern states.

As regards the local population, they number 100,000 [sic] with more than a third made up of people over 65. The magazine *Rolling Stone* even once called St. Petersburg the “retirement capital of the world.”

The wrinkled face of the city demonstrates with particular acuity the age-old problem of the social inequality and the cruel treatment of old people.

For a modest retirement by American standards, it is recommended that you have not less than \$100,000 in the bank, and that you live off the interest. An overwhelming majority of the 20 million Americans over 65 do not have that kind of savings.

Pensioners who have resettled in St. Petersburg, by the very fact of their relocation, belong in the category of the “relatively prosperous.” After all, the funds were found to leave the home they had occupied for many years. After arriving some buy a small home and live out their lives in quiet solitude, while others rent a room in a home for the elderly. “I simply cannot look at these poor bent over figures,” grieved the reporter Timothy Phelps.

In the city one meets many, too many people with a blank look, not noticing anything around them, thinking about something of their own; people filling the park benches, or spending the whole day sitting in easy chairs in the hotel lobbies. Perhaps they have worked all their lives and have never learned how to relax. Perhaps they have finally run out of energy. Or perhaps, they simply have no place to find the six dollars for the yearly dues for the Senior Citizens Center.

Children in America live separately from their elderly parents and frequently do not help them. Many elderly people end up in nursing homes or in homes for the elderly. A year ago the *St. Petersburg Times* published a series of articles about the deplorable situations in homes for the elderly, after which the municipal authorities carried out a systematic inspection without prior warning. But even these inspectors did not help. Here is the conclusion offered recently by newspaper woman Jane Doberty: "There has been no change for the better. The elderly continue to live in filth, among roaches and rats, without the required care because of economizing on the service personnel."

There is nothing sensational in this. Simply in St. Petersburg, just as in a drop of water, one sees the reflection of the general situation for homes for the elderly throughout the country. A special subcommittee of the Senate recently made public the following scandalous fact: half of all homes for the elderly do not meet the basic requirements.

The reason is found in the fact that these homes "work" on the principle of profit, which appears to be beyond the financial resources of the majority of pensioners. The approach is seen already in the very term "nursing home industry." Millionaires live out their old age in villas or in private estates, and have no need for nursing homes. Those, however, who put away money for a rainy day from their regular wages, do not constitute an "adequate market" from the business point of view. Not long ago another of these homes closed. Its owner Brady Justice explained: "We closed it because it was not profitable."

Savings, accumulated with such difficulty over the course of an entire lifetime, are now eaten up by inflation. And now this prospect frightens the elderly: which will end first, my savings or my life? "I have been living here since 1947," says Russel Miller. "Then one could get by on several dollars a week. But now no one can live anywhere on just the pension from Social Security. I would so much like to find tranquility at the end of my life, to live and not worry about where I would eat next, or where I would spend the night." "I pay \$85 a week for my room," says 73-year-old Gladys Bekky. "I have only two dollars a day left for food. Therefore I eat only once a day. But I am worried about something else: from day to day I am becoming more deaf. But how am I to buy a hearing aid? My money is disappearing. Soon I will find myself out on the street. I will have to go to the park with a tin cup in my hand."

There are also Russians in St. Petersburg . . . elderly emigrants. About 1500 of them have gathered here. One of them explained why a Russian retirement community had grown up here. "First of all," he said, "the sun here does a good job of warming old bones. In the second place, life here is also a little cheaper than in the north. In the third place, there are many Russians here. Personally, the Russian name of the city attracted me."

The emigrants do not live in harmony; they continually argue and quarrel about problems of bygone days. (Not wanting to introduce into St. Petersburg society additional discord, I will now use only initials.)

"We have here 25 parties," reports I.V. who left Kiev while still a young boy in 1917. "But I do not participate in any party. I want to live out the rest of my life peacefully. I only subscribe

to the magazine *Health*.” Here you see if an illness occurs, there will be little protection for those who are not insured.

The emigrants group themselves around two competing churches and they participate in choirs – really, it is just a pretext for seeing each other. Not long ago they gathered in the Russian-American Club to observe the anniversary of A. S. Pushkin's birth.

The life of these people living so far from their motherland in St. Petersburg, Florida, has turned out in different ways. Some people have prospered and live out their lives in good circumstances. The majority suffer. The following announcements in a Russian newspaper belong to this latter group: “An old man is looking for a room and good people,” “An elderly couple wants to move in with a Russian family, so that they will not have to go to a home for the elderly.”

A homesickness or nostalgia is one thing that unites all of them.

A certain M.D. opened a little store: two shelves of Soviet books, records of Liudmila Zykina, bottles of “Borzhom” water, and cans of imported “sheat-fish in tomato sauce.” They know about the store in far-off St. Paul, they ask friends to take with them “something Russian.”

K.I. is 75 years old. For the birthday celebration friends were invited. They drank in the American style, separately from any appetizers, but the hostess prepared the food after looking into a pre-revolutionary cookbook. After eating they sang – and not only “Evening Bells” *Vecherny Zvon*, an old Russian romance, but also “Moscow Nights” *Podmoskovnye Vechera*, a popular Soviet song.

Yes, it is indeed sad

¹ Hedrick Smith, *The Russians* (New York: New York Times Book Company, 1975); Robert Kaiser, *Russia, the People and the Power* (New York: Anthem, 1975).

² Gennadi Gerasimov, “Zakat v Sankt-Peterburge [Sunset in St. Petersburg],” *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (February 5, 1975).

³ Timothy M. Phelps, “A Curious Kind of Sister City Attracts a Russian Journalist,” *St. Petersburg Times* (December 31, 1974).