

A Trans-Siberian Clown Odyssey

By Bill "Rigoletto" Waters

Bill is a veteran Ambassador Clown having traveled to Russia, China, Afghanistan, Mexico, and Italy. He is a retired professor of Criminal Justice at Northern Michigan University and a regular contributor to this newsletter. Although this trip took place last summer, and he just recently submitted it to me, I thought you'd enjoy reading about some of the other aspects of an Ambassador trip – besides the gleeful photos of smiling children. Bill presently lives in Marquette Michigan.

The Trans-Siberian railroad begins at the Yaroslavl Station in Moscow and ends at the magnificently restored copy of the same Station in Vladivostok by the Pacific Ocean (9,288 kilometers) 6,000 miles and eight days and nights later. In between is a land so immense, so vast in space and diverse in geography that it makes a trip across the US seem almost like a walk around the corner.

On this particular August evening, the train loaded for departure as it does every evening at around midnight amidst chattering throngs of Russians and assorted other international adventurers, all twenty cars filling rapidly with people, packages and supplies. Some of these cars still reflect a certain interior elegance famously associated with long distance train travel everywhere - two person compartments,



Bill Waters "Rigoletto"



air-conditioning, padded seating and catered service. One such car would be ours, #30, at the very end of the 20 car, electrified train. Other cars would reflect a kind of basic, mass transportation synonymous with just getting from here to there, such as the four open dormitory-style sleeping cars which accommodate at least 70 prone people and which would separate us from the dining car ahead. We were to occupy our "luxury" car for the first four days and nights until at the city of Ulan Ude west of Lake Baikal where we would transfer to another public and far less grand, four-to-a-compartment car.

We were 15 clowns (12 Americans, 1 Hollander, 1 Italian and 1 Argentinian) and one MIR Travel Agency guide - Olga, who would be crossing Siberia more or less as representatives of Patch Adams' Gesundheit Institute and the Connect with Humor Credo that it represents. Stopping for a day or more at the major cities along the entire length of the railroad, we were on an odyssey which would put us in touch mainly with children. Most of these children had never interacted intimately with clowns before, maybe never even seen one, much less 15 at once. Clowns who have no agenda other than to spread love, cheer, goodwill, hope and visiting the cities, hospital, orphanages and rehab centers. So many Russian children live tended by dear and dedicated but under- resourced care givers. Such places and people abound in Russia. They are to be found in all the major cities and some of them would be the places where we would spend our time off the train doing our clown "thing." Some days we would visit as many as four separate institutions, taking only a lunch break in between. We wouldn't miss the opportunities either while aboard the train to clown and play with the kids and their families who were making this incredible journey with us.

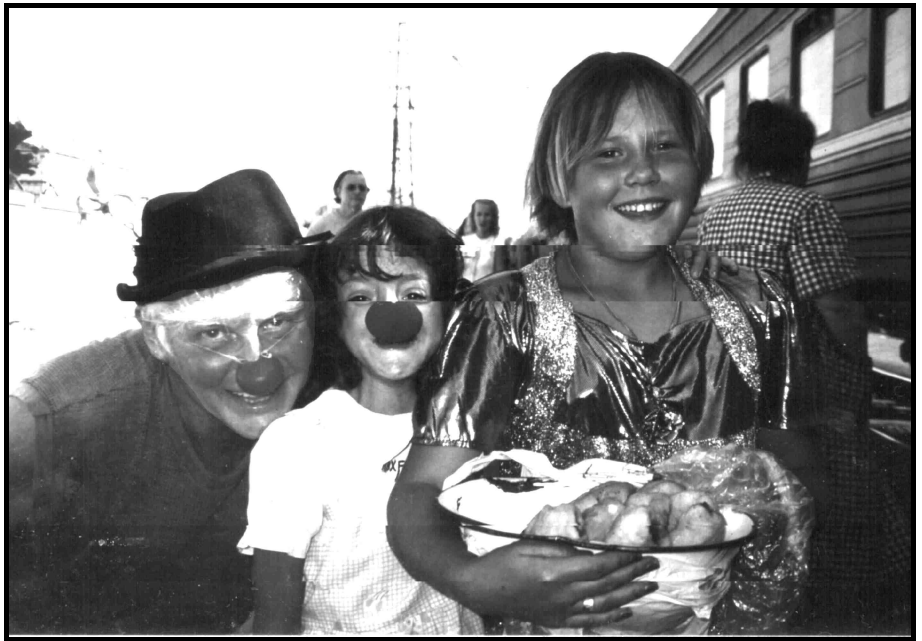
The train pulled out of the station exactly on time and "chika-chaka, chika-chaka'd" slowly out of the city center then picked up speed through the Moscow suburbs and east into the black, black night toward the Ural mountains. Our first stop early in the morning was Ekaterinberg which was named after Katherine by Peter the Great. It was known as Sverdlovsk during Communist times, but renamed because of the Czarist implications in the original name. It is the birthplace of Boris Yeltsin and the death place of the last Czar - Nicholas and his entire immediate family. They were all shot at close range, including the fabled Anastasia, who did not escape as myth (and hope) would have us believe, in a dark, damp basement by Bolsheviks on orders from Lenin during the October Revolution. Their bodies were crudely disposed of and deposited in the ground hereabouts, only to be exhumed decades later after the demise of the Communist State and a much more benign attitude about the Russian Czarist past. Their bones now lie in a ceremonial resting-place in St. Petersburg.

Ekaterinberg is a big industrial city, mostly undistinguished physically from other Russian cities of equal size and economy. But here, our first major clowning stops in an apartment courtyard and a rehab center were distinguished by gleeful children whose wide smiles and spontaneous enthusiasm for our gifts of balloons, play and magic foretold of other happy encounters for us to come "down the road."

We returned in the afternoon to the station yard where our rail car was waiting for us. It was about to be made part of the next Trans-Siberian coming through. This was the operational mode all the way across Siberia - detach, attach, detach, and attach - on its way eastward. On the train we are greeted by our two male car attendants, Aleksander and . . . Aleksander. "Would you like coffee or tea?" "With milk or sugar?" These questions would constitute a large part of each clown's conversation with these two gentlemen who would be there for us day and night straight through to the city of Ulan Ude serving us hot drinks in classy, silver filigree glass holders, sweeping the car with straw brooms, making up our beds each night, and struggling to keep the shower/bathroom dry.

After departing Ekaterinberg and *chika-chaka-ing* eastward into the bright, blue afternoon of the Urals, we stand by the open windows of our car. Oddly the windows on the corridor side go down about halfway but those on the compartment side don't open at all, which makes for unpleasant stillness on warm afternoons and evenings in the compartments. Yes, it does get warm in Siberia! It gets HOT in Siberia! At the window we watch in fascination as Europe arbitrarily becomes Asia and Russia becomes Siberia with little noticeable change in color, climate, or geography. Just very low hills called the Ural Mountains. Trees are birch, larch and poplar

Robert Morse with Siberian Children selling fruit at RR Stop.



and assorted evergreens and they cover all the landscape which isn't otherwise open fields and seas of grain.

We begin to pass through villages along the tracks which are characterized most by weather-beaten, unpainted, single floor, wooden houses, almost all of which have the decoratively carved window frames painted blue or green and white. Larch is a dense, strong wood, which doesn't easily rot so it doesn't require painting. Garden plots surround many of these houses and they are green and lush with cabbage, potatoes and whatever other hardy vegetables grow in this place with only about 100 days or less of growing time each summer. All kinds of berries do well though, and they are everywhere, including in little buckets stacked neatly on folding tables on the platforms of all the stations where we stop briefly. Private vendors selling all sorts of edibles including smoked fish and the Siberian version of Ravioli called *Pelmenii*, warm beer, melons and all sorts of home-baked pastries. Local folks depend upon the train and its passengers for supplemental income.

The popular mode of transport within and between the villages seems to be the motorcycle with a sidecar. We see them on the two-lane road that follows the tracks and we wave at the drivers and their passenger. They always wave back! These are vintage, utilitarian bikes, many painted olive drab suggesting perhaps soviet army surplus or discard. They're everywhere! We stare, transfixed, three, four of us, staring out the window at the numbers on the kilometer signs affixed to the electricity poles along the railroad. It is electrified, the entire distance now and the numbers begin to increase 536, 537, 538... Every kilometer marker, every spike holding every rail to every tie, is testimony to late 19th century Russian doggedness to traverse this formidable wilderness called Siberia. And we're going in, deeper and deeper.

The *chik-a, chak-a* of the bolted rails of the Urals and West becomes the *ch, ch, ch, ch*, of welded rails East of the Urals. We are on a much faster train now moving through limitless, terrestrial space. But even here, along this thin corridor of technology and public transport, which is the RR right-of-way in a wilderness - that ubiquitous trademark of the modern mobile human being - the plastic water bottle litters the embankments. Tens of thousands of them discarded from the open windows of the rail cars by passengers who can't find refuse space in their cars. Or maybe it's just simply ecological apathy. It's just easier to toss it!

It's 7:35 a.m. of day three and this is the oldest settlement in Siberia - Tyumen - dating back to the 1500's. The day is already hot and the sun shines brightly in a clear, blue sky. Lovely, old, typically Siberian decorated buildings of wood and concrete but, as with so much of Russian's non-wooden infrastructure, the buildings show large swatches of plaster fallen away, concrete with cracks and great missing chunks.



Robert Lamb and Bill Water on train

There's a kind of gray, industrial dust here, which quickly fills corners, all holes and probably nostrils and lungs too. It's on cars, in gutters, on windows and windowsills. It's everywhere! But under it is an unmistakable elegance and allure about this city, which counterbalances the pervasive crumbling infrastructure and dust. Nowadays the city is the economic center of the enormous gas and oil fields located in this region of Siberia.

We are solidly in Siberia now. We cannot walk around the city without learning about the history of the River, which flows through it. It was the main transport route for prison barges holding huge numbers of Siberian exiles in the 19th century. We visit a nursing home here and clown with the Ancient Ones who live in it. Old men with Soviet medals on their jackets and nicotine stains on their fingers. Old Partisans perhaps? Heroes in the defense of the Motherland against Hitler? Or just tired, old railroad and factory workers finishing up their desperate lives in this nondescript house? Women with lots of gold teeth and cautious smiles. Classic Babushkas! All of them, men and women, with deep, long furrows in their faces. Very few soft faces here. Most are hardened reflections of tough, rough, lean times and bitter experiences. We dance with them while



On the Platform, this "Nana" greets the clowns

Bill wearing his "Commedia" nose, gets ready to make balloons in a Siberian prison



one oldster plays a folk tune on a squeeze box. They smile more easily when we leave than when we arrived and they thank us with their eyes and some with a faint "spasiba" for the small gifts, brightly colored shopping bags and trinkets, that we leave for them. The larger gift - affirmation from strangers - is acknowledged silently in their tears as we depart.

From here we visit a summer camp for teenagers. Lovely young, contemporary ladies with traditional names like Olga, Natasha, Titania and Katrina which clash dramatically with the Calvin Klein T-shirts and Levi jeans they wear so well. Handsome young Alexies, Sashas and Nikolais wearing Nikes and looking healthy and vigorous. This is the post-Glasnost version of a Young Communist Pioneer's Camp where in times past youngsters like these learned to be good Communist comrades and wore red bandanas around their necks. Today they wear ball caps turned backwards and they learn as much as they can from each other about negotiating this changed and changing society for their personal, not necessarily collective good. This is all happening deep in a forest primeval, which appears misty and large as the sun filters through the tall trees. Forests are magnificent in this place, even forests within the grimy city, like this one.

We return to our train, which leaves for Novosibirsk in minutes. Dinner is Cabbage soup, black bread and warm beer in the stifling hot dinning car which reeks of fish oil. A lovely waitress named Olga does her best to serve us efficiently, while never quite letting down her guard among this curious group of boisterous clowns.

We arrive at 9:30 a.m. at Novosibirsk, the largest city in Siberia and immediately depart the RR station for a full day of clowning around town. Local folks look at us with astonishment but most smile, laugh and wave at the slightest invitation. It's hard not to love these friendly, welcoming Siberians! At 4:00 p.m. after clowning in a children's hospital we leave on time for our next stop down the road, Krasnoyarsk.

Krasnoyarsk is on the North-flowing Yenisei River. It is another big, industrial city with plenty of institutions for us to visit and kids to excite. It's a rather attractive city, yet typically replete with crumbling, Communist era infrastructures. It has parks galore, but unkempt with weeds and refuse which characterizes so much outdoor public space in this land. It has wide, tree-lined boulevards and an expansive river front promenade which is open to the public and comes alive each summer evening with music, dancing, drinking and cruising by thousands of young Russians who look just like young Americans and increasingly just like young people everywhere else on the globe.

The Siberian Clown Group



We expect to leave this city at midnight, but are delayed because the train we are to attach to is late coming from the west. It's much too hot in the car to sleep this night, so many of us just sit outside on the platform, drink warm beer and vodka, eat chocolate and get to know each other a little better. We depart at 3:30 a.m.. Irkutsk, the Paris of Siberia, is our next stop but we'll arrive much later than scheduled.

After a Russian banya (bath) on the shore of Lake Baikal we'll sleep in the rail car at the station. The Russian banya is almost identical with the Finnish Sauna in that it involves stripping down, then entering what is virtually an oven to be baked in heat so intense that under any other circumstance it would doubtlessly be considered cruel and unusual punishment. As if that isn't enough, the torture is intensified by being beaten with birch branches either by a fellow bather or oneself. So there one sits, struggling to breathe in the heat, watching the sweat roll down one's limbs and torso, beating or being beaten until that singular moment when the body screams out and, almost by instinct, runs for the nearest relief, which, in our case was deep, icy cold Lake Baikal.

Incredibly, after the initial shock and still on the way up from the deep plunge, with the first gasp of cold, crisp Siberian air the thought is to do it over again, which we all did at least three times. When it ended, we were mellow, liquid and indomitable, not to mention clean! I could have walked among hordes of sword-brandishing, raging Mongolians with a giddy smile on my face. There were none, so I "bobbed and wove" my way to the dinner board laden heavy with fresh vegetables, roasted potatoes, cabbage soup, fried chicken, and of course vodka, and cold beer! We were transported out of this surreal glade in the forest

at 2:30 a.m. and expected to be "in clown" for a full day of jesting in Irkutsk in just five hours!

Irkutsk has earned the title of Paris of Siberia because of its wide boulevards, sidewalk cafes and history of culture and sophistication. It was the place of exile for a group of liberally minded noblemen and officers who in the early 1800's after attempting to overthrow the Czar, were sentenced to labor camps in this region. Their wives often elected to follow even though they would not be with their imprisoned men but wanted to be near them anyway.

They were known as the Decembrists. Some of them were eventually released from their sentence and settled here to establish a cultured community of Intelligentsia. This is a colorful city with a long, rich Siberian history as a crossroad for trade in tea, silk, furs and other goods between Russia and China. The architectural style of the city is a mixture of typical wooden houses, neoclassical and crumbling Communist classic. After a full day of clowning with children and pensioners and a pleasant afternoon drive to the south shore of Lake Baikal where we encounter vendors and vacationers eager to talk, we dine in a handsome rathskellar restaurant then depart this worn but noble city for Ulan Ude on the other side of Lake Baikal.

In Ulan Ude we are met by "Goldan" an articulate young Buryat who is a MIR representative in that city, and Pavl, our bus driver. I had ball caps for both. One with an FBI logo for Pavel and the other with a Milwaukee Brewers logo for Goldan. They put them on immediately and wear them for the next two days of our visit. They like the caps! Already, in the early morning, it's hot and before the day is ended we will all be drained by the merciless heat of this place as we visit hospitals and orphanages and play with the overjoyed children and their long-suffering caretakers.

Before leaving Ulan Ude we are hosted by a group of Old Believers who meet and greet us with customary singing on a high bluff near their village overlooking the Ude River. Then we visit the only Buddhist monastery still functioning in Siberia and dine at an Armenian restaurant.

For the next three days we basked and stewed our way across the Russian Far East - somewhere after Ulan Ude Siberia becomes technically/politically The Russian Far East - passing huge fields of wheat next to huge fields of massed, rusting Soviet-era military equipment, we followed along the incredible Amur River and we trundled through the Beobizhan Autonomous Jewish Republic where few Jews live anymore but where the train station is still identified by large Hebrew letters. We clowned with the children on the train who, thanks to our antics, couldn't care less about the smothering heat, and their parents and family who endure and swelter with such a quiet, admirable dignity.

At a twenty-minute stop in Chita I left the train to buy a beer on the platform. As I leaned against a wall pondering the coming and going around me I was suddenly accompanied by two teenagers who pegged me as an obvious American and right to the point ask me, "What do you think of Russian Culture?" We engaged in a fascinating but all too brief conversation about Onegin, Chekhov, Evtushenko and Mayaovski until I was beckoned back aboard the hot, stuffy railroad car which, blessedly early in the cool morning of the third day out of Ulan Ude would enter Vladivostok through the gritty, smokey, polluted, industrial, suburbs but come to a halt in the newly renovated, gorgeous smaller scale reproduction of the Yaroslavl Station we departed from in Moscow 8 days earlier.

For the next two days and nights we would celebrate the successful completion of our fantastic trans-Siberian clown journey by visiting more orphanages - 5 in one day - a children's "sanatorium" and a pediatric cancer ward. It is amazing to travel about this city as a clown and know that only a few years ago it was tightly closed even to Russian citizens because of Soviet secretiveness and the city's militarily strategic designation as the home port of the Soviet Pacific fleet. Vladivostok reminds one easily of San Francisco, with its steep, narrow streets, its embarcadero, busy wharves and evening fog. 90% of the vehicles on the crowded streets are Japanese cars more easily acquired from that country just across the Sea of Japan than from European Russia days and thousands of miles away in the other direction. A must see in Vladivostok is the home of actor Yul Brynner. We saw it.

The 8-hour flight from Vladivostok back to Moscow and home via Stockholm was anticlimactic. We were back in the world but 35 thousand feet above the very mystical land we had just taken eight sweaty, sweltering matchless days to cross and to experience by taste, sound, and smell and to fall deeply, madly, excruciatingly in love with. Not one of us would ever be the same. But that sure didn't mean that we wouldn't all start anticipating our next big clown adventure and follow our big red noses to wherever they would take us.

Trip Leaders were Kathleen Crewes "Beach Clown" and Robert Adams "Wildman" from the Gesundheit Institute. Others on the trip were William Waters (author of this article) and: Evelyn Citroen, George Cromwell III, Rebecca Dix, Lynnette Hofler, Robert Lamb, Kathleen McLaughlin, William Miller-Coulter, Richard Morse, Laura Popham, Ginevra Sanguigno, Sara White, Ilan Weisberg.