

Extract From ‘Confessions of a Dromomaniac’ – an Introduction to ‘The Bumper Book of Vitali’s Travels’

... As a travel-hungry Soviet boy, I contracted **dromomania** – a peculiar medical condition characterised by an irrepressible itch to travel – at an early age... ‘If you have the doubtful happiness of being born, you must at least see the world’ – these words from Konstantin Paustovsky’s romantic novel *The Black Sea* kept echoing in my soul...

I was gradually going mad (I didn’t know that my madness had a medical name then). I collected maps and train schedules. I treasured a tarred wooden chip that I covertly peeled off a cargo car at a railway station. My parents didn’t mind, only shrugged. I kept the chip in a special box which I would open and sniff from time to time: it smelled of journeys and adventures.

At school they would tease me for carrying this fancy snuff-box with me and nicknamed me Engine Driver. I was secretly proud of that nickname.

In the evenings, before falling asleep on my old-fashioned narrow bed, I would knock its nickel-plated leg gently (so as not to wake up my parents) with my knuckles: Ta-ta, ta-ta; ta-ta, ta-ta; ta-ta, ta-ta – to imitate the rattling of train wheels. I was falling asleep to the sweet music of the railroad.

Trains were so special to me simply because I travelled seldom. Forbidden fruit. I had no idea what freedom of movement was. Without knowing it, by the age of fourteen I had turned into a typical ‘armchair buccaneer,’ a vicarious traveller with no prospect of ever seeing the world.

The city where I lived could not boast any architectural masterpieces or historic monuments, apart from a regulation statue of Lenin with his outstretched hand pointing either to the bright future or, as local wits assured, to the nearest vodka shop. The only monument it could take some fiendish pride in was a huge railway terminal – an ugly, pompously decorated building, dominating the cityscape. Inside, on the walls and even on the ceiling, were frescoes in the best traditions of socialist realism: heroic workers and peasant women with bulging eyes clutching red banners in their sinewy muscular hands. This particular style of architecture and interior design was privately (in whispers) called ‘Stalin Gothic.’

Indeed, the station building had something to do with Stalin. When, in 1951, ‘The great leader and teacher’ was travelling by rail to one of his dachas in the south and was passing through our city (there were usually three identical trains in the procession, and no one, not even Stalin himself perhaps, knew exactly which of them carried the paranoid dictator), he allegedly peeped out of the window and saw the old decrepit building of the terminal. ‘What a disgrace to have a station like this in our socialist country! I don’t want to see it again!’ he remarked angrily to one of his aides in his broken Russian aggravated by a heavy Georgian accent.

A month later, when Stalin was returning to Moscow, the new grandiose station building was already there. The builders in their ardour (or rather fear) must have broken all-time records to

construct the architectural monster which was destined to stand for ages as an impressive monument to totalitarianism.

Despite its ugliness and intimidating proportions, the railway station attracted me like an oversized magnet. Playing truant, I used to go there with my best friend and a fellow-dromomaniac, Sasha. We would stand on a wooden footbridge hanging above the tracks and gape at the moving trains below for hours on end, until our heads started spinning and we had the illusion that it was we who were moving, floating in the air above immobile trains.

It was from there that we ventured on our first real journey one day. 'Real' meant that we travelled on our own, without parents or any other adults to keep an eye on us. Of course, the whole venture was planned and undertaken in utter secrecy, under cover of a normal school day. It was just a forty-minute journey by a shuttle train, but to us it was no less dangerous and revealing than the first round-the-world voyage of Magellan. In line with the forced and all-permeating patriotic zeal, almost all whistle-stops on our way had the word *krasnij* (red) in their names: Red Village, Red Field, Red Corner, Red Excavator, even Red Whitewash, as far as I can recall.

We got off the train in the sleepy suburban town of Lyubotin, bought a couple of elderly, wrinkled meat-pies at the station and headed back. It was an unforgettable feeling – looking through the window of the moving (or rather crawling) train, chewing meat pies and being on our own.

I can still feel the oily smack of those cheap (and not very fresh) meat pies on my lips.

Our small and guilty Earth, in the form of a tattered old globe, stood on the bookshelf in my room. It might just as well have been the Atlas of the Moon. We had to be happy with what we had. Travelling, especially outside the country, was reserved for party functionaries and big shots – not little boys. In the well-oiled mechanism of privilege, the main moving force behind the system, this was one of the main gears. The corruptive value of a trip abroad was on a par with an out-of-town dacha or a personal Volga sedan.

We were all engaged. True, ours was the biggest cage in the world, occupying one sixth of the planet's territory, but it didn't make much of a difference to those who were inside it.

Much later, when already a journalist in Moscow, I was able to travel all over the Soviet Union. I would board a plane in Moscow and fly for ten hours non-stop, with my knees stuck in the back of the seat in front and someone else's sharp knees stuck into my back from behind ('prop my back and I'll prop yours' could be Aeroflot's official logo), only to disembark in precisely the same country, in an almost identical city somewhere in the Soviet Far East, with exactly the same buildings; the same newspapers, full of the same inflated lies; the same never-ending queues; the same downtrodden people with bleak expressionless eyes. It was mind-boggling.

I am lucky, at least luckier than most of my compatriots. Luckier than my father, who died prematurely in 1982 without ever catching a glimpse of the outside world. Luckier than Leonid Prudnikov, my omniscient University professor of English, fluent in eighteen languages, who also died young having never been abroad. Wherever I go, I am looking at the world with their eyes too. Wherever I travel, they travel with me.

Yes. I am lucky: in my thirty-odd years in the West not only have I travelled the world, I have even managed to buy a second-hand Volvo sedan, my very first car. Its colour was bright-yellow, like the toy-truck of my childhood. I happily smashed it against a fire hydrant during one of my first self-driving (ie without an instructor) drives in Melbourne, Australia. But that was not enough to disrupt my travels, which continue – in reality, or in the mind – daily.

I am now proud to report that from a ‘good traveller’ who, according to Lin Yutang, doesn’t know where he is going to, I am slowly but surely turning into a ‘perfect’ one, who forgot where he had come from!

But it is up to you, my dear readers, to judge whether the latest transformation has really taken place. This collection of my travel stories will, hopefully, help you to make such a judgement. Or if not – it will at least offer you a good opportunity for the armchair travels of memory and imagination when – for one reason or another – you are unable to travel properly.

Happy journeys!

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by Vitali Vitaliev

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