

Anne Hutchinson:

In early summer 1988 I was asked if I had a passport by a member of the Mission and Action Committee. When, I affirmed that I had, I was asked if I would like to represent the church and much more broadly my country on a citizen exchange to Ukraine (then a member of the USSR)

The concept for US-USSR Bridges for Peace was proposed by two UCC Vermonters in 1981 “with the goal of breaking the atmosphere of animosity and fear that pervaded the US-USSR relationship” Clint Gardner, “How Vermont Won the Cold War.” It was at a time of heightened nuclear escalation and posturing between Reagan and Brezhnev.

The citizen exchange visits were endorsed by the New England UCC church conferences pretty quickly and by 1988, Massachusetts joined as a partner with Ukraine. Berkshire County made up a large part of the contingent with delegates from Williamstown, Pittsfield and Stockbridge UCC’s. Our group of twelve were nominated and supported by their churches and several Rotary groups. Our expenses in Moscow and Ukraine were funded by “Peace Committees”.

The Soviet citizens were just as worried as westerners were about mutual animosity and nuclear threat. Probably more so. They could contribute to their committees by payroll deductions. The committee members could use the funds to support peace efforts such as our citizens exchange.

Our group was met at the Moscow airport by a local committee member and our “minder”. We were put up in a hotel and soon experienced the fast subways with very, very deep stations that doubled as air raid shelters. We were amazed at the lack of coffee shops or corner kiosks. Meals had to be eaten at the hotel. Food was institutional with nothing passing for service. It felt like a poor house. We had names and contact information for some Jewish dissidents hoping for permission to leave. They were already identified as such so were not at any more risk by talking to us. We had messages of hope and shabbat candles from Pittsfield Jewish Family Services.

Then we began the slow train ride to Kiev. The trains are single track requiring the passenger trains to pull over on sidings frequently. We never moved very fast, the countryside in October was beautiful, hot tea was served by babushkas. Our group had plenty of time to talk, play chess and wonder what our “minders” were most concerned about. The villages appeared poor, we saw women using ancient pole sweep wells.

Kiev was a large, beautiful city. It bore no resemblance to the cold stark architecture of Moscow. Of course, we saw the best as our local committee took us to churches, hospitals, schools, heritage sites. We were asked what we wanted to see based on our professions and interests and it was arranged. We talked with many people who would only speak with us outside away from buildings in very quiet voices about their lives and concerns. We were taken to apartments where a family would live with one child in a one bedroom. The outside of the structures were Soviet cinder block, the hallways were filthy. But inside the apartments were beautiful. Hand finished wood and sewn draperies. Excellent food with wonderful aperitifs made from the fruits grown on the small family dacha. And conversation for hours about our shared concerns and the common wants of family and safety.



Moscow subway station. Anne is on the right.

Our volunteer system that provides student sports teams, choruses, orchestras, sidewalk planters, etc. was unknown and unimaginable. That we were all volunteers with no official “peace” positions and had not been vetted by our government was a new concept. The state provided training for sports and orchestras, but it was highly competitive and only open at the lowest, youngest levels to beginners

Most people under the Soviets knew only what they learned from state media. The government wanted them to believe that the US was a warmongering bully ready to attack with little provocation. Most of the propaganda was to keep the USSR supporting a large war machine while people had minimal independence (you could not move without official permission) and little access to goods and services. There was a two-tier system for access to schools, goods, housing with the party officials above the rest.

They were surprised that we did not see ourselves as needing to refight WW II with the USSR on the other side. WW II was very “close” in the sense that students knew the history, had school events based on the extreme losses by the Soviet people, visited memorials and took part in memorializing events.

In Ukraine we also heard about the Great Famine from students also. They bristled that they were taught in Russian not Ukrainian. On a collective farm we were treated to Ukrainian traditional music and dancing by a professional troupe. The large auditorium was packed.

The people were warm and welcoming, eager to share their homeland with us.

We visited tiny Ukrainian orthodox churches that still celebrated mass. The worshippers also were tiny, old and female. They had been starved as children, the men had died in the war, and young people did not follow the church.

The land was beautiful, acres upon acres of wheat. We traveled to the far west, Lviv, and east to Poltava. It was fall, markets were full of gorgeous flowers.

When we returned, we immediately started planning for a return visit by our Ukrainian counterparts in the spring. Thank goodness for us, Massachusetts is small compared to Ukraine. The delegation came to the Berkshires and stayed with church families; the Plant’s, the Henderson’s. We visited our Norman Rockwell Museum and held special church services. In Boston we met with the governor, Michael Dukakis.

Our pastor went on the next trip along with Terry Wise. The following year, Melissa Roy went.

Our entire congregation learned a great deal about Ukraine in those years. The Iron Curtain fell in 1991 and Ukraine became an independent country and began to move strongly but slowly toward democracy while Russia took a different path.



US-USSR Bridges for Peace group, 1988.