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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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The Chautauqua Institution has been a part of the American cultural landscape since it was established by the Methodists in the 1870s near Jamestown, New York. This 2006 season is no exception for Chautauqua's goal to be all you can be and know all you can know (paraphrasing the opening page of the Institution's homepage). The first session for 2006 is titled "Russia: A Post Soviet Identity." Seeing this really brought forth the realization that the relationship — political and cultural — between the United States and Russia/USSR has been of long interest at Chautauqua.

This book covers in anecdotal fashion the series of conferences that ran from 1985-1989. It was a period of major transition between the two nations when the Russian words glasnost and perestroika were heard often reflecting in changes occurring particularly in the Soviet Union both in the domestic sense and the diplomatic sense. Each year's conference, a continued experiment in citizen diplomacy, demonstrated in microcosm what often was occurring between the two nations themselves. These weeklong meetings alternated between US and the Soviet Union with the first and third ones in Chautauqua. The Soviets hosted the second and fourth conferences in Jurmala (near Riga, Latvia) and Tbilisi, Georgia. The final one in 1989 was in Pittsburgh. The atmosphere of the first meeting was extremely tense because of the recent arrest of Nicholas Daniloff for alleged spying. Daniloff, who was a reporter for US News & World Report, was accused of spying soon after a Soviet was accused here in the US. But as rapport gradually took place, the atmosphere of succeeding conferences became warmer.

Each conference is given a chapter. Background information, not only of the political situation, but of the actual arrangements is detailed. Even some of the travails of traveling are included. But more importantly, much is given to what both scheduled speakers had to say at that time about the situation as it was. The crux of the conferences, though, was what "ordinary" citizens of both the USSR and the USA thought. It was an unusual opportunity for the Soviets in particular to be able to express what was really on their minds without — it is wished — the fear of retribution. Americans got to see that ordinary Soviet citizens were not the demons often portrayed by the media and the government. The participants became individual citizens of the world rather than a part of a gigantean monolith.

What a different time that was! It was we and they. There was a tangible quality to it all that no longer exists. Twenty years removed, we are in a much different world, a potentially much more unstable world than what existed then. It sort of causes one to long for the "good old days." This is an interesting read.

Other issues include the environment, youth gangs, bioethics, and race.

Even before reading about the coal miners of Zola's Germinal many years ago — talk about a downer — this reviewer read about the meatpacking industry and the plight of Eastern European immigrants in Upton Sinclair's The Jungle. Johnson writes about The Jungle in a 22 page essay nestled between "Bartleby the Scrivener" and The Grapes of Wrath. Johnson not only recreates the story of the Lithuanian family's struggles, but places the story in its proper historical and geographical context. This is done in fairly gripping and graphic detail. Following are individual discussions of the various social and political tiers detailed in the book. In the case of The Jungle, there are descriptions continued on page 51
of the slaughterhouse itself and the different jobs in which people are engaged. Additional sections describe sexual abuse and prostitution, child labor practices, and then the rise of the Socialist Party in the US at that time. What is most amazing, Johnson tells that meat packing practices today, though improved over the last hundred years, still remain suspect from human rights, safety and sanitation points of view. Vegetarianism is sounding better and better.

At the end of each chapter, the reader is provided open-ended questions that could serve as topics for student papers or even for further reflection.

If this volume is any indication, teachers and librarians are given excellent background information to knowledgeably suggest and discuss this genre of literature.