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## International Dateline-An American in Moscow: Discovering Today's Libraries in Russia

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# International Dateline — An American in Moscow: Discovering Today's Libraries in Russia

by Shelley Neville (Library Systems Analyst, Ameritech Library Services)

Last May, I was invited to visit Russia and Hungary in October of this year as a participant in a delegation of professionals specializing in library information technology. Our purpose was to engender close, productive relationships with colleagues in other countries. The program was developed by the **Citizen Ambassador Program of People-to-People International** and put together through the **Library and Information Technology Association (LITA)**. With generous sponsorship from **Ameritech Library Services**, I was able to take advantage of this incredible opportunity to visit libraries in St. Petersburg and Moscow and to do a little site-seeing in-between.

There were six other delegates; by happy coincidence, my roommate was **Linda Porter**, head of the acquisitions department at the Burlington Co. Library in New Jersey — a Dynix site. She was very positive about Dynix acquisitions, and I don't think she was just being nice in hopes I wouldn't short-sheet her bed at the various hotels where we stayed.

If I had to describe Russia in a word, it would be "big."

Everything is big — the country is big, our hotels were big (the rooms, small), the monuments and museums were big, the libraries we visited were big, and the collections in the libraries were big. The only small things (besides our rooms) were the minivan that carted us all over St. Petersburg; the beds in the hotels, and the size of the library budgets.

We started in beautiful St. Petersburg. The city consists of many eighteenth and nineteenth century palaces built for royalty, including the most impressive winter home I've ever seen: the Winter Palace, or the Hermitage of Catherine the Great. Along the banks of the Neva River, which runs through the city, were additional palaces that were all nationalized after the 1917 revolution. One of the things I loved most about the city were the many bridges that crossed the River. They were works of art, but I could never keep the names of all the bridges straight.

One thing I have to mention is the driving. In St. Petersburg. The roads were terrible and the drivers worse — actually I decided the drivers must have very high self-preservation instincts, because we never saw any accidents. The concept of lanes was pretty sketch, and I once saw a madman cross three very crowded "lanes" of traffic to make a left hand turn.

During our visits to the libraries, I discovered that there were many similarities to the libraries I'm used to. The first was no money. The second was the fierce pride the people had in their libraries and collections and their commitment to the sharing of information and the creative ways they were able to do a lot with very little. Something else I noticed was their unfailing hospitality to visitors (lots of tea and coffee, very black and very thick, cookies, and mineral water) and their eagerness to tell us all about themselves and their institutions.

The cry of no money was the

most common one we heard; however, I found it amazing that when they said "no money," they truly meant no money. When I hear from libraries in the States that there's no money, it generally means that there hasn't been an increase in the budget. No money to a Russian librarian means no budget for new materials, no money for automation or retrospective conversion, no money for Internet access and the hardware necessary to access the World Wide Web, and no money for building maintenance. The school library we visited in Moscow had one modem and four or five PCs. This is considered a very progressive school. Yet, they had no budget for new books; their collection for over one thousand students was one thousand two hundred books. Students use the public library to supplement the collection. The Scientific Library of Moscow State University had a budget of only \$160,000 for Russian journals and nothing for foreign subscriptions.

Acquisitions was also a bit different. I asked the school librarian how she selects new materials for the library, and she told me she didn't; all materials were centrally selected by the school district so each school library has essentially the exact same collection.

Despite the collections at the school library with barely more books than students, the collections at the other libraries we visited

were amazing. Our introduction into Russian libraries began with the **National Library of Russia**. What a place to start. It was — you guessed it — big. And since only a small part of their millions and millions of titles were on a computer, there were rows and rows of card catalogs. Voltaire's personal collection purchased by Catherine the Great was housed in this library as were original documents from Mozart, Rousseau, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Most of the people we met with probably spoke some English, but weren't comfortable speaking, so we worked through our translator and guide Natasha which was a very interesting experience. Thirty seconds of English seemed to condense into five words of Russian. The phrase "something was lost in the translation" took on new meaning.

One of my favorite places was the **Central State Historical Archives**. The Archives are housed in a nineteenth century palace that appears to be crumbling down around your ears, yet the elegance that must have existed surrounds the building like a tattered silk scarf. The Archive collection is well over nine million items and every single one is documented, some better than others. I asked them how they found anything since none of the information is indexed online. I was

told that there was a reference index, guide books, and a register of descriptions, but the most helpful tools were the librarians.

None of the libraries we visited were fully automated and only one was going with an outside vendor. **The Library of the St. Petersburg Technical University** and the **National Pub-**

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*The school library we visited in Moscow had one modem and four or five PCs. This is considered a very progressive school.*



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lic Library for Science and Technology of Russia and the Scientific Library of Moscow State University were developing their own in-house systems, but none of these libraries were working on cooperative projects with each other and had definite opinions (usually poor) about each other's systems. One thing that appears to be universal is ego. It is very difficult to find common ground among all the development being done by individual institutions. However, most libraries were consistent about their opinions regarding a vendor from outside Russia — too expensive and not enough experience.

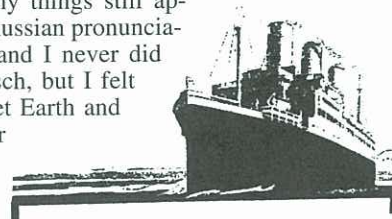
Moscow seemed to be a little more affluent than St. Petersburg; the roads were better; unfortunately the traffic was worse. I aged a great deal in Moscow just by driving through the city. Our first day, we went to Red Square and it was there I immediately fell in love with the city. St. Basil's Cathedral was to one side with Lenin's tomb on the other and Kremlin Square in the background. I fell in love with the onion-shaped domed cathedrals which were ubiquitous throughout the city. New cathedrals have been built since the fall of the communist government, but they don't have the soul of the cathedrals built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Most of these cathedrals were undergoing restoration since they were used for storage and left in disrepair during the communist period. Our guide, Tonia, pointed out a beautiful little church in downtown Moscow that she remembers visiting as a child when it was an exotic fish museum.

We had the chance to talk to professors at the **Moscow State University of Culture** which is where librarians are trained. Students enter the University right after secondary school and

the library program takes five years. I don't know if it was comforting or depressing to learn that the library profession worldwide seems to be a low-paying profession. Librarians in Russia don't make much money and many of the graduating students are working in commercial arenas because the money is much better.

I think one of the most humbling things I noticed there was the graciousness with which we were received. We were a motley crew of librarians — none of us were particularly well-known in the library community or from prestigious institutions, yet they took us through some of the oldest and largest libraries in Russia. At each library we were met by the Deputy Director or the assistant director. We met the heads of departments responsible for collections of millions and millions of items and every person we met was very kind and was genuinely happy to have us there.

Upon arrival in Russia, I felt like I'd landed on a different planet. Part of this could be blamed on that dopey feeling that comes from jet-lag, but everything appeared so different — the language, the street signs, the food, and even the libraries. By the end of the trip, many things still appeared different — my Russian pronunciation was still dreadful, and I never did acquire a liking for borsch, but I felt like I was back on planet Earth and the way people enjoy their work I suppose many things are pretty much the same wherever you go.



*NB: This article will also appear in the Ameritech Library Services Newsletter. — KS*

## Innovations

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time. After the set time period, the guest pass expires and the visitor must log in again.

Web designers are interested in how visitors navigate around their sites, which pages they visit most frequently, how they enter those pages, and whether navigation can be made more efficient. Cookies can track this kind of information on a user-by-user basis, in addition to providing information for shopping carts and site personalization.

Sites like *The New York Times* <www.nytimes.com> use cookies to replace site login which forces users to enter a user name and a password every time they log on to the site. That data is stored in a cookie instead.

### Filling the Cookie Jar

There are only two ways to store client data. Either the server provides it or the user provides it by taking some action, such as clicking a link or button or filling out a form. Marketers and site managers gather demographic information in this way to build user profiles. Magazine publishers, among many other businesses, create cookie files based on such user profiles. Proponents of using cookies in this manner argue that it isn't much different from what many supermarkets do with discount cards or what sales and marketing departments do with responses to telephone solicitations or direct mail campaigns.

The same information stored in a cookie can be stored just as easily on a server by using a simple server-side application that stores user information in a database. However, many people

consider this practice of gathering personal information for use in corporate databases or for cookies an invasion of their privacy. After all, every time a searcher downloads a Web page, the browser sends the Web server information about what Web browser and operating system the client uses, the URL of the last page visited, and the computer's IP address. That's a lot of personal information; and every browser sends it every time one clicks on a link.

The controversy about cookies comes from the fact that they place information on the hard disk and that they function in the background, mostly without our knowledge. We're all wary of somebody tampering with our hard drives; and how many of us even know we have a "cookie jar" there? Cookie information can travel to databases via CGI scripts, enabling server owners to use that information any way they choose. As cookies pass information back and forth with each visit, they eventually build detailed user profiles, which are often used by third parties to deliver targeted advertisements to Web site visitors. Many people fear that if servers can send a cookie to a visitor's computer, what else can they send? A virus, bug, or other type of application?

### Putting a Lid on the Cookie Jar

Web browser producers are working on improving their browsers to alert users when their computer is receiving a cookie. **Netscape's Network Preferences** option (under the Protocols tab) lets users select whether or not to show an alert before accepting a cookie. Tighter security features are also under development; but what can individuals do to protect themselves in the meantime?

Although it's difficult to avoid cookies altogether, it's not

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