

## To Catch a Train

- by Eric Schempp

Well, it looks like the line is a little longer than normal. That's okay. Anything is better than that line at *Leningradsky Voksal*. I like coming to this station to buy my train tickets. It's a lot easier and it saves me a big headache. The ladies are generally very nice. Sometimes they are a little reluctant to sell tickets from this station for a train that leaves from a different station, but they always do it without much trouble. There are about ten people in front of me. This shouldn't take too terribly long.

Luckily, I have my book with me and kill the next twenty minutes reading. When it is my turn to buy my train ticket, I slide my passport through the window and tell the seemingly nice lady that I want a ticket to Lodeynoye Pole. Of course, she doesn't understand me.

"Lodeynoye Pole," I repeat.

She slides a piece of paper through the window and instructs me to write it down. I oblige. This is nothing new for me.

Usually after seeing the written word, the ticket lady says, "Ah, you mean Lodeynoye Pole". But not this lady; she just gives me a baffled look, types a few things in the computer, and announces that I cannot buy the ticket here. I question her, and am told to go to *Leningradsky Voksal* and buy the ticket there.

"But," I complain, "I have bought tickets here before to Lodeynoye Pole and I know that I can."

She concedes, "Okay, you can buy it at this station, but you have to go to a different building."

"Why?" I question.

"Back up and go left," is her answer. She flashes a smile and I notice that she has the biggest lips that I have ever seen. I quickly dub her, "Big Lip Lady." I give up and step out of line. The guy behind me immediately sticks his head into the tiny window as if the only means of receiving oxygen is through this window. I realize my mistake of giving up too easily and know that I will never be able to get my face in front of that window again without standing in line.

I decide to get in another line, give a different lady a whirl, and see if she will give me my ticket. I tackle a few more pages in my book and I'm glad I brought it along. I get lost in it and before I know it, I am second in line. I determine that waiting in line again wasn't so bad after all. I notice that Big Lip Lady has decided to take an unannounced break even though she is still sitting there. Thus, everyone in her line has shifted to other lines, and my line has grown outrageously long. It's a good thing I'm next, I think as I find myself whimpering, Please have mercy on me nice ticket lady, PLEASE.

When I get to the window, I go through the ritual of sliding my passport through it, saying the name of my town, receiving a piece of paper, writing down the name of my town and sliding it back to her. She reads it, and the look on her face tells me this is going to be difficult.

However, I will not back down this time. She asks Big Lip Lady in the next window if she knows where Lodeynoye Pole is.

Big Lip Lady says, "No".

She punches a few things in her computer, and tells me I can't get the ticket. I put up an argument. She says she'll try again, but the computer is slow. She casually counts money and occasionally looks at the computer screen to see if whatever it is that she needs has shown up yet. About five minutes pass. She tells me it is not successful. I am about to give up and go to *Leningradsky Vocksal* when she abruptly stands up and leaves. Just great!

I look back to see how long the line is behind me and then curse myself for doing so. I know better than to make eye contact with Russians standing in line. My accent and communication skills have obviously distinguished me as a stupid American and the glare these Russians give me is making me nervous. Tough, I decide, I'm going to hold my ground.

After five minutes the ticket lady returns. She looks at the computer screen and announces that I can't get my ticket. She mumbles something about the computer not working. Five more minutes pass and the people behind me are getting antsy. Finally, out of nowhere, she asks me if 1:06 in the morning will be okay.

“Yes”, I say, “Just give me my damn ticket.” I pay for it and once I have it in hand I walk away shaking my head so as to give those annoyed people behind me that sense that I am annoyed, too. Although I am frustrated, I am more elated by the fact that I won a little showdown with a Russian. And, it was no ordinary Russian. It was a ticket lady.

It’s 6:30 P.M. That gives me plenty of time to meet Julie, my host sister, and Tanya, my girlfriend, for dinner. We kill a few hours chatting and then it is time to head to the TDY (the hotel where Peace Corps Volunteers stay), get my bag and go to the train station. I say goodbye to Julie at the metro and Tanya and I head to the TDY. We talk to another volunteer a bit, but eventually she makes us leave because she thinks I am going to miss my train. It is set to leave at 1:06 A.M. I confess that anyone who has ever taken me to a train knows, that for some reason, I always end up having to run to it. But thanks to my friend, I should make it in plenty of time.

Tanya and I board the metro and head towards *Leningradsky Vocksal*. We will make it in plenty of time. We get to the *Komsomolskaya* metro station at 12:35 A.M. This gives Tanya plenty of time to walk me to my wagon, say goodbye, get back on the metro before it closes at one o’clock and head home. We mosey around a little bit looking at the CD’s and videos here and there and eventually make it to the front of all the platforms where the train numbers are listed.

“What train number is it?” Tanya asks.

“140,” I respond. However, when we look for train 140, it’s not listed.

I pull out my ticket. “Damn,” I say, “It leaves from a different train station.” Tanya sighs. Oh boy, here we go again.

I look at my watch. It’s 12:45 A.M. We have 21 minutes to get there. There are only three letters on the ticket and somehow you are supposed to know from which station the train leaves.

Good thing Tanya is here, I think as I turn to her and ask, “What’s the name of the station it leaves from, and where the hell is it?” “It’s *Kurskaya Vocksal*,” she says, “But I have never been there.” She needs my metro map to find out exactly where it is. I

quickly dig it out and show her. "It's only one metro station over, but we'll never make it," she says.

"Well, we have to try," I respond.

Off we go running. We run through the train station and into the metro. I stop to buy a metro pass. The ticket lady doesn't like it when I tell her *bweestro (quickly)*. We run through the gates, down the escalator, through the long hallway, down more steps and onto the platform where the metros go whizzing by. Of course, at this time of night, they only come every so often.

"Every seven minutes," Tanya tells me.

According to the clock above the metro, that means we have to wait three minutes. We board the metro at 12:56 and at 12:58 we are at *Kurskaya* metro station. The doors open and we go flying out. We don't know whether to go left or right because the sign says we can go either way. We choose left and take off running. We run up the escalator, stopping every now and again, to catch our breaths for a few seconds. I want to kill that guy who decided to make these things so long. What was his name? Stalin?

When we get to the top of the escalator we can once again go to the left or to the right. We stop, read the signs, and take off left. There is a lone guard standing in the hallway. I ask where the train station is.

"Go out the door and turn right," he instructs.

We do just that. We run up more stairs and into the midst of the station. It's 1:00 A.M. Six minutes to spare.

I quickly determine that the train right next to us must be my train. Now we just have to find wagon sixteen. Do we go left or right? Let's see. The numbers get bigger as we go to the right. Wagon sixteen is going to be way down there. Let's hurry!

Dang! How come I can't find any of those conductor ladies that usually stand outside their wagons to see if I can just get on the train on her wagon? Oh, look. There's one quite a ways ahead! We run up to her completely out of breath.

"This is train 140 isn't it?" I ask her quickly.

"No" she says.

"No? Where in God's name is my train!"

There must be a train behind this one, but I can't see through the stupid thing. How do we get over there? We might as well run to the end of this train and see if we can go around. But wait, there are trains over there to the right. Maybe one of those is my train. We quickly run over to them. Where are the numbers? There they are! Damn it. These are just the *electichka's* (local trains).

Shoot! It's 1:02! An announcement comes over the loud speaker announcing my train is about to leave. Tanya yells to me that I have four minutes to board the train and we run back to the original train we initially thought was my train. We run along side it until we reach the end of it. At that point we can look around it.

"Hey! Over there! I see a train! That must be it," I yell.

The trouble is, it's four or five tracks away and must be quite a few cars shorter because now we are going to have to run a good distance in the opposite direction to get to the first wagon (or perhaps the last wagon).

I jump down the embankment and onto the tracks and start to head over to the train I see in the distance.

Tanya yells, "No, Eric! There is a train coming! You'll get electrocuted."

I don't believe it, but she scares me enough to run back. I try to hop back on the platform on which she is standing. But, it is as high as my shoulders, and I end up hanging there and kicking like a child trying to kick his way out of the water at the side of a pool instead of using the ladder.

"We won't get electrocuted," I say.

Tanya realizes it's true and agrees to hop down. We run across the tracks and up to the platform, stumbling as we go.

As we approach the train I yell to the lady, "Is this train 140?"

She says, "Yes."

I can't believe it. I am sweating and tired and my bag feels like it weighs a hundred pounds by now. I need wagon 16, but there is no time to get to it. I have about one minute to spare. The conductor lady allows me to get into her car. I say goodbye to Tanya and step onto the train. I honestly don't believe that I made it.

I am in wagon number one. The conductor lady has already told me that I am going to have to walk through sixteen wagons to get to where I need to be. I get halfway through the first wagon when the train starts moving. That means I made it with about twenty seconds to spare. I make it to the end of the second wagon and look past another conductor standing in the doorway. We slowly start to pass Tanya as she walks up the platform. She lovingly chastises me.

I hear her say, "I'm going to kill you." I blow her a kiss.

Walking to my wagon is no easy feat. The hallways are only wide enough for one person, and the guy who designed them forgot to take into account that most people who travel tend to have luggage. On top of that, he was obsessed with doors. A person must walk through six doors before he is fully into another wagon. There is one to enter the bathroom section and another one to leave it. Then there are two doors where cars connect. This is the scary section. I can literally see the railroad tracks whizzing by beneath me as I cross a five foot long metal plank that moves back and forth. After walking through two more doors guarding the next bathroom, I am free to walk down the narrow hallway. The only way to successfully do this is to hold the luggage in front of me, walk like a penguin, and knee it with every step.

There is a conductor lady for every two cars. Each time I pass one of them, they give me quizzical looks. But that's not all they do. Each one feels compelled to stop me and ask me where I am going.

I respond, "Wagon sixteen." And even that isn't good enough. They ask for my ticket and I can't help but think, the sweat pouring down my brow warrant enough sympathy to allow me to just walk by." Apparently not. After they look at my ticket they nod and point me in the right direction with a big "Too-da" (That way). Well, no kidding. Thanks for pointing that out.

I walk through 16 cars. Sixteen cars for God's sake! That's sixteen cars with six doors between each of them. I have to open each door with one hand, waddle my way through, sometimes set my luggage down, turn around and shut the door.

Eventually I reach my wagon and my conductor lady. Thankfully she's very nice. She looks at my ticket, gives me sheets and takes me to my *coupe*. It's locked from the inside. She takes her special conductor lady key and opens it. We surprise an old man

sitting on the edge of his bed reading a book. Thank God that's all he was doing, I think. He has no shirt on and a towel is draped over his shoulders. He acknowledges me with a, "Stratuvuyetse," (Hello) and goes back to his book. I shut the door behind me and sit down to rest and cool off. My shirt is stuck to my back and my arm is as sore as can be from carrying my stupid bag.

The old man asks me where I am going. I tell him Lodeynoye Pole. He looks confused and obviously doesn't know the small village I call home. I ask him where he is going.

He responds, "I don't know".

I start to make up my bed and relax. Now that the panic has died down, I realize that I really have to go to the bathroom. I step out of my *coupe* and head to the bathroom. It's locked. That's okay. I'll just have to ask the conductor lady to open it. I knock on her door. No answer. She is not there and I know I will have to go and find her. I contemplate just trying to sleep through my pain, but realize that I have to go so badly that this would be impossible. She must be in the next car, I think and start walking through the first few doors on my way to find her.

I walk through doors numbered three and four where the two train cars are connected. This is where I can see the train tracks flying beneath my feet. To the left and right of the platform, there are wide gaps in which I feel that if I stuck my hand through, I could essentially touch the tracks. I contemplate going to the bathroom in one of those holes, but decide against it. It would be bad news if I got caught.

I continue my way through the rest of the doors. I find my conductor lady in the next car. I explain to her that I need to go to the bathroom and want the bathroom opened. She simply points to a sign. Damn! I forgot about the 30-minute rule. The bathrooms are never opened until 30 minutes after the trains leave Moscow. I don't really care to wait that long. I guess I will have to sleep through the pain.

I head back to my *coupe* and start to undress. All of a sudden the conductor lady knocks on my door and tells me the bathrooms are now open. Perfect timing. The only thing I don't understand is why she didn't tell me they'd be open in a matter of a couple of minutes the first time I asked her. I put my shoes back on and make my way down the hall to the bathroom. I am incredibly relieved.

When I make it back to my *coupe* the old man is finished reading and ready for bed. I hit the lights and lay down. I roll over and try to go to sleep. However, I start to think. I can't believe I actually made it on the train. This is one time I wasn't sure I'd succeed. I sprinted between two different stations and boarded a train in a matter of twenty-one minutes. I surprised myself. I wonder why I always end up running to trains.

Tomorrow at 1:13 P.M., I should be in the Pole. Thank goodness. I hope Tanya has money for a cab now that she can't take the metro home. It's a good thing I paid for dinner at *Rosticks*. She will be fine. I am sure she'll make it home.

The old man starts to snore. It doesn't bother me very much as I am used to riding trains and experiencing this kind of stuff. However, his farts are a little too much for me. They reek beyond belief. But, I guess there is nothing much I can do about it. He's an old man and I've experienced worse. I can't help but laugh to myself. If only I can get to sleep, everything will be all right.