

Keeping House in Russia

A Topsy-turvy Land Where Eggs are \$2.65 a Dozen and Where Eggs Take Their Mistresses on Two-weeks' Trial



THE Soviet Russia is an enigma to most Americans. We hear vaguely of the "five-year-plan," rationing and what not, but it remains for a woman—an American at that—to give us an intimate glimpse of what life is really like in the land of the bolsheviks. As the wife of an American engineer employed on a Soviet mining project, Mrs. Mary F. Starr lived in the land of the sickle and hammer from 1928 until 1931.

Writing in the July Woman's Home Companion, Mrs. Starr recounts that when she crossed the Soviet border she found that while the government permits outsiders to bring in clothes free of duty all money must be registered. She found Russian railroads subject to many delays and soon learned to carry twice as much food as might ordinarily be expected. Russian trains carry few dining cars. Their cars are wider than ours but third-class travel is so crowded that "whole families wait for days in the station to get a place on the train."

It was in Kharkov that she lived. They let her have an apartment of two bedrooms, a combination living and dining room, a kitchen and a bath. Ordinarily the latter two rooms are shared by three families. The kitchen had a sink with hot and cold water, a wood stove and an oil stove. The Starrs brought with them the only electric refrigerator in this city of half a million souls. "As far as I know," she says, "it was the only one in the entire Ukraine, and there were only four or five in all Russia. It was an object of great interest to the Russians. When it was first installed and my maid saw that the water in the freezing pans had really turned to ice, she stood spell-bound, threw up her hands and said, "Oh! America!" It was subsequently put to good use to treat a woman patient of a large hospital which had no ice and could obtain none.

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But for that matter, says Mrs. Starr, carpet sweepers, soap, toothpaste, face powder, kitchen utensils and even sewing machines are luxuries in Russia. She tells of a local tailor who kissed her hand in gratification because she allowed him to take home a needle with which he had done some sewing in her apartment. In Kharkov it was impossible to have a pair of shoes half-soled and absorbent cotton was sold only on a doctor's prescription, one ounce to a person.

The "bezprizornie" or homeless children of Russia she reports diminishing in number but says she always took along her maid when she went to market to keep the gamins from snatching her pocketbook or packages. Incidentally, the servant problem in Russia is a trial affair. While the mistress is trying out the domestic the latter is giving her employer a trial.

At the end of two weeks, if both are satisfied, the domestic can only be discharged for murder or theft. Mrs. Starr paid her servant \$15 a month, which is about twice the normal sum. In addition, the law provides that each maid must be supplied with two cotton dresses, one pair of shoes and a kerchief each year.

The Starrs tired of Russian diet and ordered some canned goods from the States. The second shipment was held up because of disagreement over duty. The customs officials said that if the Starrs could prove that little sugar had been used in canning the fruit, the duty would be ONLY 100 per cent. Mrs. Starr accordingly selected a can of grapefruit, thinking the sourness would satisfy. But they sent it to a laboratory for testing and the verdict was not in the Starrs' favor. The duty would have been \$5 a can so they reluctantly abandoned the shipment. Likewise they turned back 10-cent cakes of American soap on which the Soviet wanted to collect \$5 a cake duty.

Food was scarce and many people were willing to work just for meals. There were stores for foreigners only, in which no Russians were allowed. But, explains Mrs. Starr:

We made it a rule to dress inconspicuously though we were expected to be well dressed and we learned that the Russians resent the idea that "anything is good enough to wear in Russia." For two reasons we did not care to attract attention by our clothes; one was that we felt it was in better taste to dress inconspicuously in a country where the people had so little; and another was that the Russians had no hesitation about asking where we got our clothes, how much they cost, how long we had had them, were they the latest New York fashion, and were they new when we got them or did someone give them to us.

The Starrs experienced much annoyance from lost and delayed letters and telegrams, due to Russian inefficiency or censorship, or both. On the whole, though, they found the people inclined to be polite and kindly and, contrary to the general impression, possessed of a keen sense of humor.

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Mrs. Starr speaks of winter temperatures of 40 degrees below zero and the ability to read at midnight in hot summer without need for artificial light. She deplored the lack of amusements but found pleasure at cards and in dancing, skating and swimming. "The new operas and ballets," she writes, "are all Communistic propaganda, but they are beautifully done. The old ballets are marvelous but, unfortunately, a law has been passed forbidding the music of Tschaikowsky and Rachmaninoff." Mrs. Starr concludes:

When you have lived in Russia for three years the greatest thrill of all is the realization that you are slipping through the barbed-wire fence on the way out. The minute the fence is behind you, you feel that you are in a different world and a feeling of tremendous relief comes over you. No one who has not experienced it can appreciate what it means to leave all that behind and return to the land of the free.

SOVIET PRICES

Courtesy Woman's Home Companion

- Butter, \$5.50 a pound
- One dried fish, \$1.25
- Goose fat, \$3.00 a kilo (2 1/5 pounds)
- Sunflower seed oil, which they use a great deal for frying, \$6.00 a liter (about a quart)
- Soap, if available at all, \$6.00 a pound
- A small package of baking soda, \$1.25
- Meat, when available, \$1.50 a pound
- One chicken, \$7.50
- One goose, \$20.00
- One cucumber pickle, 20 cents
- One bottle milk, 75 cents
- Potatoes, 50 cents a kilo
- Salt pork, \$4.00 a pound
- Flour, \$2.00 a kilo
- Ten eggs, \$2.25

