

Heart of Leningrad still beating

They don't get many tourists at the Blockade Museum, and of those that come, none are Americans. Even if you know the right subway stop, it's still a good 15-minute walk. And don't expect any language inside but Russian. An English tour requires advance booking.

I'm here with a friend, an American I met the day before. He's the head of the history department at a private school in Boston, and he wanted to see something off the beaten path. What better place for a student of history than the Museum of the Blockade and Defense of Leningrad?

From 1941-1944, the city of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) was besieged by the German army. Electricity was cut off, bombing raids were routine, hundreds of thousands of people died. The Nine Hundred Days, as they are now called, are forever burned into Russia's national memory. Especially here, where it all happened.

I buy our tickets and start translating the exhibits for my friend. A docent looks on curiously. Once it's clear we're Americans (our English is a dead giveaway), she introduces herself as the museum director, and insists on giving us a personal tour. There are some places, I guess, where Americans can't go unnoticed.

We begin with the exhibits on history of the museum. It was only open to the public for a few years before Stalin shut it down and had its director shot. (That part is curiously omitted from the official display.) Only after perestroika was the museum reopened, and then only after appealing to the surviving blokadniks for donations.



OPINION

BARRY FAGIN

COLUMNIST

Upstairs, past larger-than-life portraits of high-ranking Red Army officers during the siege, we come to the heart of the museum. Displays include photographs, captured German uniforms, ration coupons, and children's drawings of how hungry they are.

Hunger is a common theme here. During the siege, bread rations were cut and cut again, what little bread there was mixed with cellulose and dirt. People ate sawdust, leather belts, house pets, birds, and rats — anything that might have at one time contained something resembling organic material.

But at the same time, children went to school, soccer matches were held, and Shostakovich wrote his Seventh Symphony, first performed down the street from my apartment while the bombs were falling.

In all the displays, you can feel the human spirit of goodness, decency, and resistance to evil in the face of overwhelming horror and devastation.

For me and my friend, the most poignant moment comes at an unexpected place. Near the back of the main hall, you'll find a mock-up of a communal apartment, a Soviet communal apartment. It's authentically dark, lit only by a small candle. Water drips from the ceiling, caught in buckets for drinking. You see period furniture, boarded-up windows, a small stove for heat, a tiny bed, and strange looking disk perched on the dining

room table. It's a radio speaker. From it comes a ticking sound like a metronome. Or, as I will shortly learn, a heartbeat.

Our guide goes through each of the items, pausing for me to translate for my friend. Then she comes to the radio. "Hear the ticking? That's the heart of Leningrad. People listened to it 24 hours a day, seven days a week." She waits for me to translate, then continues. I sense what is coming, and start to choke up, but continue haltingly, in between attempts to hold back tears.

"As long as they heard the ticking of the radio ... they knew that the city of Leningrad was still alive ... that the heart ... was still beating ..."

I break down and sob. I can't translate any more, it's obvious that I'm a mess. My friend is crying too, and even our guide, who has given this speech hundreds of times, pauses in reverent silence for the Americans who finally understand.

We finish the tour a half hour or so later, but Stewart and I are still shaken from the experience.

We tell our guide that the world must absolutely know what has happened here. Stewart swears to share it with his students, I with my readers. She gives me a Russian language brochure, begging me to translate it to help them get more U.S. visitors.

She says they get more Germans than Americans.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a research associate at the Independence Institute, currently living and teaching in Russia. The views expressed here are his alone, and not necessarily those of the Independence Institute. Readers can e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.