Peri on McAuley, 'Remembering Leningrad: The Story of a Generation'

Review published on Thursday, November 4, 2021


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Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=56808

Fifty Years of Friendship

Over several decades, sociologist Mary McAuley has made critical contributions to the study of Russia and the Soviet Union. Her numerous publications, including three monographs, analyze politics, human rights, and children in the criminal justice system. Her latest offering is much more personal. It is a memoir of her many visits to St. Petersburg and the deep connections she forged there. Remembering Leningrad: The Story of a Generation begins with the Englishwoman’s first trip in 1959, before she had begun studying Russian, and it ends with her visit in 2015 when she took her daughter-in-law, an art curator, to see the treasures of the Hermitage. But McAuley does not focus the text on herself. This is the story of her dear friends—their experiences, struggles, and triumphs over the course of several turbulent decades in Petersburg’s history, 1941-2017. Rich in insight, humor, and imagery, Remembering Leningrad reads like a collective memoir. McAuley’s friends emerge vividly from the text. She captures their voices not only by consulting her memory, but by incorporating the letters and conversations they exchanged as well as their own archives and ephemera.

There is El’mar, one of McAuley’s oldest friends in the city, who had an apartment in the Botanical Garden. El’mar’s superb intelligence—he was a scholar of both chemistry and philosophy—was surpassed only by his wit and ability to find humor at trying times. For him, the Soviet system was a gated stronghold with a big “do not enter” sign on it. But sidle along the fence long enough and eventually you will find a hole, he told McAuley. El’mar accompanies the reader through most of the memoir until his death in 2003. But McAuley’s more transient friendships also captivate. I found myself taken with Lilya, one of McAuley’s roommates during the 1960s. McAuley describes Lilya’s humble background, her hardworking, illiterate mother, but also her uncanny abilities to sleep with the lights blazing and to fashion her hair into an impressive beehive. Lilya was an archeology student who, in those days, spent her much of her time making up rather than attending lectures. McAuley also recounts friends she made during the heady Gorbachev years, such as fellow sociologist Andrei. He urged her to participate in the movement for democracy, not just to observe it as a scholar. “Perestroika only happens if people like you and me make it happen,” he said (p. 85). Andrei died in 2017, just weeks after McAuley’s last visit with him.

McAuley brings her friends’ stories to life, writing with sensitivity and insight about their quirky
habits, evolving political views, and resourcefulness as they survived regime change, poverty, and expansive bureaucracy. The reader grows in affection for them as they help McAuley buy an apartment, navigate KGB handlers, and shop smart in a world of shortages. Her attempt to procure a working telephone is a highlight, a classic comedy of errors. *Remembering Leningrad* is a testament to the Russian proverb that our true friends reveal themselves in moments of adversity (*druž’ia poznaïutsia v bede*).

Tucked into these vignettes and tributes is the city itself. McAuley’s love for her friends and for Petersburg are inseparable. She writes of each embankment and crumbling palace with fondness, and she demonstrates how major events—the siege, the communist collapse, the rise of Putin—became inscribed on the landscape. At the same time, McAuley captures what is timeless and constant. Petersburg, she writes, is a “jumble of grandeur and poverty with a kind of carelessness about it that [is] part of its charm” (p. 82).

To my surprise, the city does not take center stage until the final chapter, “Farwell to St. Petersburg,” which gives readers a tour of the city. “Let me take you by the hand, and we’ll walk or take a trolleybus, we shall look at the sights and visit old friends” (p. 219). At first, this struck me as odd. Isn’t a tour a better way to start a book rather than end it? Then I realized: this is a not a guided tour meant to introduce readers to the city. It is a stroll down memory lane for those who, having been on this journey with McAuley, already know the personal and historic significance of each corner and boulevard.

Indeed, at many junctures, this book treats its readers as insiders, addressing and including them as “you” throughout the text. *Remembering Leningrad* is often allusive and self-referential, perhaps like the letters and conversations upon which it is based. This makes the text hard to follow at times. Memories and associations stream in an order shaped by the city’s landscape and legacy, but that logic is not always apparent to the uninitiated. McAuley states at the beginning that she is writing for three audiences. First, she is writing “primarily for younger readers, for those who are studying or interested in Russia” and second, for the “curious traveler” (p. 5). However, these audiences may struggle at times for orientation. Again, the tour of the city comes at the end. Though McAuley provides historical context in places, events like the siege or phenomena like perestroika are not explained with any degree of fullness.

But that is not the point of this book. Nor should it be. *Remembering Leningrad* is not a piece of travel literature or historiographical analysis. Rather, McAuley explains, it is a “history of everyday life” (p. 5) reconstructed from intimate human connections. There is no conventional opening about the Peter the Great and the city’s creation. No Petersburg myth. Nikolai Gogol, Alexander Pushkin, and Anna Akhmatova appear but do not dominate the narrative. The shifts between historical eras are not grounded in the socioeconomic data or political events about which McAuley has expert knowledge. Instead, she distinguishes between periods by using personal measures, such as what her friends could afford to buy or what she packed for them in her suitcase. In the 1960s she brought forbidden books; in the late 1980s, she brought food.

McAuley’s third target audience, readers who are already familiar with the city through prior travels and studies (p. 5), will delight in this unconventional foray through it. They will immerse themselves in the pathways that McAuley plots. They will appreciate the subtle hues with which she paints life in
the Soviet Union and in Putin’s Russia. They will value the complexity she brings to Leningraders’/Petersburgers’ attitudes regarding the leaders and ideologies that have ruled their city. At a time when Soviet nostalgia is growing, when Russian nationalism is on the rise, and the challenges of East-West understanding are as formidable as ever, Remembering Leningrad is a necessary and welcome work of history, memory, and empathy.


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