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## Memorable Train Journeys

### Ukraine: It Started with "What's the Bad News?"

Jim Schreier

In May of 1994, I was scheduled for the first of two years of multiple trips to countries in the former Soviet Union. I would be leading a weeklong experiential workshop for professionals learning about banking concepts and the changes from the Soviet distribution system. The first trip was planned for a 9-day journey to Ukraine. About three weeks before the trip, I received a phone call from the consulting firm hiring me for the project, with "good news and bad news." The good news was that the weeklong training program had been moved from Kyiv to Yalta on the Black Sea. At a former Soviet Union training facility, we would be overlooking the Black Sea and about 100 yards away from the site of the famous Yalta Conference with Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill (February 1945).



That was the "good news." The "bad news" I was told was that "you're going to have to take an overnight train from Kyiv to Yalta." My simple response: "Well, what's the bad news?" That prompted a repeat, "You're going to have to take an overnight train from Kiev to Yalta." I repeated, "What's the bad news?" She tried sharing more bad news (in her mind). "You'll have to take an overnight train from Yalta to Kyiv at the end of the week." I again responded with, "What's the bad news?" The phone call ended but was quickly followed by a second call, which was preceded by the caller talking to her colleague, who had worked with me on multiple projects in the U.S.

and Europe. Her call was to the point: “I just talked with Beth. You’re that guy!” My “train” reputation was spreading.



The trip was spartan, to say the least, but fantastic, enhanced by the company of a former student who was now my business partner. We weren’t traveling “coach,” which probably made a big difference. We had a “private compartment,” with enough space to lie on the wooden benches – no blankets, cushions, or food service. But a journey through the

Ukrainian countryside, acres and acres of farmland and small villages, was fascinating.

The unexpected train journey was a highlight, but not the only one. There were some spectacular moments with the class. It was the first of several programs where I would be teaching with sequential, not simultaneous translation. I spoke a sentence or two, then paused while a translator presented my words in Ukrainian. The same in reverse, when a question was posed by a student or when coaching one of the teams as they made decisions about running in their “bank” in the computer-based simulation.

On the first day of the class, a woman introduced us to her young son. They lived near Chernobyl, the site of the 1986 nuclear disaster. She chose to bring him to this weeklong workshop to get him away from the dangers, even if just for a week, and experience the clean air of the Black Sea. This young boy **sat perfectly still** at the back of the classroom for five days. We had been advised to bring candy and gum in case we met children, so we were able to treat him regularly.

On the final day of these programs, I would learn it was typical for the students to present their teachers with a gift. In



this class, the most special gift came from this small boy. He presented me with a miniature key chain, which I learned was likely to cost his mother the equivalent of about ten cents. If that seems like a minor cost, they likely sacrificed a big part of their lunch



money. This key chain remains the most special of all the presents I received over the next two years.

For most of the trips for these projects, there was a day or two before and after the five-day workshop. For this journey to Ukraine, Brian and I had days before the train to Yalta to explore the city of Kyiv, and a day after the workshop to explore Yalta. A bonus was the discovery of the Swallow's Nest castle, constructed between 1911 and 1912, on top of the 40-metre-high (130 ft) Aurora Cliff. The restaurant at the castle surprised us with excellent pizzas.



The timing of our return trip added another treat. Several hours of the trip included multiple stops, from early evening to late night. People approached the train at each stop, offering hot foods for sale. I remember frequently being offered what I'd learn was "Varenyky," a dumpling stuffed with mashed potatoes or sometimes with potatoes and meat, for the equivalent of about ten cents. There was also a common feature for many rail journeys. At the beginning and end of the journey, there were opportunities to see lots of equipment, engines, and cars parked or maneuvering in the railyards.



This "Memorable Train Journey" featured the unexpected overnight train trips. But there is a more outstanding recurring memory of a little boy gifting me a key chain. And for 30-some years, I've wondered and prayed this boy had survived the effects of the Chernobyl disaster. Those prayers multiplied when the war with Russia erupted in 2022. I'll ask: "What's the good news?"