

WEST MEETS EAST

Imagine a group of teenagers from the USA made a great effort to travel to Afghanistan in order to promote peace with the Taliban – “We’re just the same people down deep. Can’t we all just get along?”

That’s pretty much how a youth group called the Peace Child Foundation was perceived almost 25 years ago in 1988.

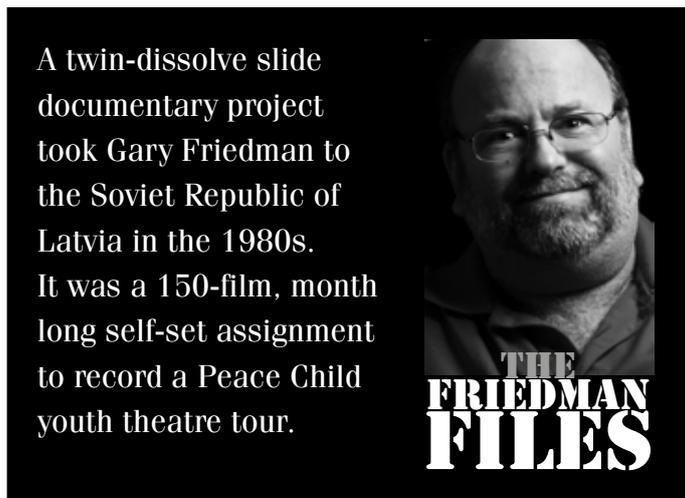
Back in the 1980s, during the height of the cold war between the US and what was then the Soviet Union, a real fear of nuclear war drove this grass-roots organization to sponsor cultural exchanges between Soviet and American high school students.

Through musical theatre, the two groups would work together on a play which dealt with the historic tensions between the two superpowers. Local audiences were moved to tears, and the participants became the best of friends in the process. “When the kids grow up”, the organization’s founder said, “some of those kids will go into politics. And they’re not going to wage war on their friends.”

Naïve or not, I was fascinated by the Peace Child mission and the stories an early participant had told to me. I thought this organization was doing something brave, risky, out-of-the-box, important, and... obscure. Nobody here heard of them. So I decided that this story should be told. I got involved in the organization, learned enough Russian to be dangerous, and two years later became their “embedded photographer” in a subsequent exchange for the sole purpose of documenting one of these cultural collaborations and bringing the story home to American audiences.

The year was 1988 and the country we were going to visit was the Soviet Republic of Latvia.

Just one problem – I was a NASA engineer at the time, and



A twin-dissolve slide documentary project took Gary Friedman to the Soviet Republic of Latvia in the 1980s. It was a 150-film, month long self-set assignment to record a Peace Child youth theatre tour.



Peace Child US and Latvian cast, sunset by the Baltic, and 1980s power SLR versus Russian Zenith

as such you just can’t go to the Soviet Union on your vacation without raising a few eyebrows with the State Department. Okay, two problems – my father AND my brother both worked for a major defense contractor, and my trip to Latvia could have derailed both of their careers had I not handled this carefully.

My father, who historically has always supported my endeavors (even questionable ones like this trip) advised me to be as transparent as possible with the security teams of NASA and the defense contractor. Tell them where you’re going and why; take their traveler’s training which told me what to look out for – “Their supplied translators will all be KGB!”... “KGB members will approach you”; finally come home and be “debriefed”, tell them where you went, who you saw, and who approached you wanting to buy secrets.

The trip would last one month and I couldn’t count on buying any supplies (like film or batteries) once there. I took what seemed like the heaviest camera bag in the world.

It included one Minolta Maxxum 9000 (their “pro” AF camera); a 28-85mm f3.5 lens; an 80-200 f2.8 Apo lens.

Because the Maxxum technology was new and unproven, I needed to have a backup system too. So I took a Minolta XE-7 and three prime lenses. The Maxxum and XE-7 systems had no compatible parts – neither lenses nor batteries could be shared.

I packed 150 rolls of transparency film as this was destined to be a twin-projector slide show, evenly split between Kodachrome 200, Fujichrome 50, 200, and 400. I added 10 rolls of Kodak T-Max P3200, the highest ISO B&W film available at the time. I expected to be able to shoot in the worst possible light with this stuff.

Also included was a Sony Walkman stereo cassette

recorder essential for the audio portion of the story (see the URLs given below to view the video versions on-line). Completing the kit was a tripod and flash.

I will say I was a little smug being an American walking into Russia with the best camera in the world at the time, while seeing what passed for state-of-the-art Soviet cameras used by local photojournalists. The Zenit appeared to me like a German camera from 40 years earlier. I soon realized that their purely mechanical cameras would work in Siberia in the wintertime, a scenario where my high-tech camera would surely fail (batteries and electronics just don't work when it's that cold).

The trip was wonderful and went exactly as expected. The entire tour was coordinated and promoted by "Konsomul", the Soviet equivalent of the American Boy Scouts.

The kids had only ten days to put a show together, and then they went on tour to take their message to the people. The theatres were packed and the audiences reacted with enthusiasm and tears (just as I heard they would!). The teenagers involved became the best of friends, which is always what happens in theatre. At the end of the one-month tour, tears were the order of the day when it was time to depart.

The cultural exchange had achieved its short-term goals. Perhaps it did achieve its long-term goals too, since the Soviet Union has since dissolved, although it's difficult to ascertain whether these cultural exchanges had anything to do with that.

You can see the finished story on my website:

<http://tinyurl.com/8ugqexj>

This also brought American audiences to tears when I brought the story home. There are two different versions of the presentation – the "superior quality" view which requires a PC (not a Mac) and a plug-in for your browser. There's a lower-quality video version here:

<http://tinyurl.com/8rybm93>
(but the impact of the story is the same).



For some of the teenage actors, the final parting meant tears.



This is a picture of the famous Ferris wheel in Gorky Park. Impressive until you get in and have a really close look at one of the welds that held the wheel together...



Behind the Scenes

Back then the Soviet Union was a closed economy – the Ruble wasn't being traded on the open market, and so it was nearly impossible to import or export goods.



The Pepsi Cola company found a way around that – they bartered for Russian Vodka, which is why Pepsi was all over the Soviet Union in 1988 but Coke had no presence at all.



Baskin Robbins, the famous American Ice Cream store, also found a way to "import" a store into Moscow (this is before McDonald's managed to do it), but something inside the store got some of the kids quite upset. On a small piece of torn-off corrugated cardboard was a handwritten sign that said *Hard Currency Only – No Rubles*.

"How dare they offer this great product in Moscow but deny it to their own citizens!" exclaimed one participant, who then left in a huff. I stayed and watched a citizen of Moscow walk in, order in Russian, pay in rubles, and walk out.

What was going on? Simple: the Moscow citizen couldn't read the sign. It was in English. The handwritten sign was a symptom of the black market for "hard" (exchangeable) currency which was in huge demand and they didn't mind harassing all of the tourists in order to get it. Similar stories were heard everywhere. Normally tickets to the ballet were a few kopeks, the equivalent of about 80 US cents. But if you ordered your ticket in broken Russian the price jumped to ten dollars.

Soviet Shopping was a unique experience too. You had to stand in THREE different lines to buy anything: first you tell the clerk what you want to buy, and she hands you a paper which you take to the cashier. Then you take your paid receipt back to the original counter to collect your item. Abacuses replaced cash registers so business could continue during a power failure. And you don't really appreciate western grocery stores until you visit a country where everything - both animal and vegetable - is nearly dead by the time it hits store shelves.

X-rayed response

I never really had any trouble with any KGB or security folks on the trip at all until I returned to the US. Having all of my exposed but undeveloped film in my possession at the airport security screening, I opted for a hand inspection of my film so it wouldn't go through X-Ray.

Don't forget I had ISO 3200 film with me, which I had used to capture the reactions of audience members using only the light from the stage. Difficult shots to get!

So, they hand inspected my film bag... and then dutifully ran it through X-Ray afterward when I wasn't looking.

I was livid! I was so angry I started journaling every step of what happened because I was certain I was going to be suing somebody (the airline, the airport, and the lowest bidder who provided the monkeys in red jackets providing "security" at that time). I was



Repairing an XE-7 on location – try that with a DSLR! Below, why ISO 3200 was needed, and black and white. Audience attention and a young standing ovation, clapping too fast for the shutter speed.



so engrossed in writing and so focused that I ended up missing my connecting flight home.

Turns out the monkeys in red coats were right – the X-ray really was "film-safe" – even for high ISO films...

Running repairs

It's a bad day when your backup fails, but that's what happened on this trip – my XE-7 had an internal mirror knock loose (the Judas-window one which lets you see what *f*-stop you're using in the viewfinder). Fortunately, being an engineer, I had tools, glue, and duct tape with me. I took my camera apart at one of the rehearsal halls. I took care not to touch anything else and put the camera back together. Back home, while waiting for my slides to come back from development, I drove my camera bodies down to the local Minolta service center, just because I believe in preventative maintenance.

"Whoa! This exposure meter is WAY OFF!" said the service technician with a southern drawl. My heart sank. My backup camera (which I still used occasionally) was overexposing everything about two stops. It's easy to forget how stress inducing this kind of an event can be in the age of digital. But back in the days of film, you were shooting blind, and I had NO IDEA if the intense emotional trip I had just documented would come out at all. Were any critical shots ruined? Yes – but it was only about five rolls, a small percentage. I got over it. Minolta fixed it and also replaced the shutter of my Maxxum 9000 and gave me the old unit as souvenir. It's just amazing how intricate those mechanisms are.

In 1988 "multi-media" meant two slide projectors and synchronized music. I kept the narration live just to give the show a sense of presence. I designed and built a slide projector dissolve unit from scratch, including hardware and assembly language programming, to present the show to my specifications.

You can read about how I did it in my 1987 book, *Control the World with HP-IL*, available here:

<http://tinyurl.com/8hv8p5j>

I've since returned to Latvia and will no doubt do so again.

– GF



FROM THE
FRIEDMAN
ARCHIVES



Shortly after the First Gulf War (1990 – 1991), there was a “Welcome Home Desert Storm Troops” parade down Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. I remember the Hollywood hopefuls that lined the streets of that parade – I could just imagine what was going through the soldiers’ minds as they marched down the route: “I went through hell and risked my life to protect THIS?”. Minolta 700si, 28-85mm lens, Fujicolor 100 negative film. The joy of shooting negatives in a high-dynamic-range situation like this is that I wasn’t too concerned with exact metering – I just shot in program mode, scanned the negative and placed the whites and blacks where I wanted them in Photoshop. The entire flag was supported and bordered by soldiers on all sides as they were carrying it down the street.

It must have been uncomfortable, to walk hunched under the flag for the entire parade route. But they had been through far worse.