

presence in the patient's final days, and that personal relationships remain a primary source of care for people who are terminally ill. The narratives of family members, close friends and informal caregivers reflect strength, wisdom, empathy and active listening, as well as loving support and care. This is a welcome balance against our tendency to professionalize human problems.

In their introduction, the authors ask, "What individual and collective responsibility do we have toward people who are dying, family members, friends, neighbours? What value is there in the last phase of life? Can there be any value in the process of dying?" In striving to provide narrative accounts that extend "beyond the usual categories of facts and figures of death and

dying," *A Few Months to Live* offers a moving, provocative and frank response to these questions.

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#### Lifeworks

## "If the soul is nourished..."

**A**s a child of a Cold War warrior and an adult media junkie I arrived in Moscow with a burden of preconceptions. I anticipated a grey city where most residents lived in poverty, beset by Wild West-style crime and great uncertainty. Unfortunately for Muscovites, I found this was more or less true, but I also discovered something quite extraordinary: the residents' passion for the arts, education and culture. From candy-bar wrappers adorned with replicas of Russian classics, to metro stations that look like palaces, to statues of literary greats seemingly dominating every corner, residents enjoy a daily dose of a rich cultural heritage.

This cultural richness stems, at least in part, from Lenin's law to cherish, pre-

serve and restore the country's heritage (except churches of course, the most magnificent of which, Christ the Redeemer, was literally blown apart). Communist Russia celebrated the existing culture that fit its ideals and fostered its own brand of art. Artists, at least those with the right politics, were revered and were given the choicest apartments and other perks. Of course, art often served the "greater purpose" by glorifying Communist ideals. Thus, peasants, factory workers and heroes of the Revolution were commonly depicted in works of art. Not that state- or church-sponsored art is anything new; indeed, for 600 years (until the 17th century) Russian art was predominately ecclesiastical. And, one could argue, in times of widespread poverty this sort of sponsorship is the only thing that allows art to exist. But in Communist Russia, art was also created for sheer aesthetic pleasure. The Diamond Fund, a repository of the former Soviet Union's biggest and most remarkable gems, for example, contains a three-metre long section of Soviet-era jewellery that includes an exquisitely wrought fireworks-shaped brooch. These pieces have never been worn; they were created to perpetuate the jeweller's craft for the enjoyment of all.



Pushkin gazes at a Martini advertisement in Tverskaya Square

This cultural legacy of Communism endures. A decade after the USSR was dissolved, this sprawling low-rise city of 10 million still features more than 40 museums and galleries, documenting history, art, the metro, architecture, literary heroes and even vandalism. Moscow also has seven large classical music concert halls, plus the world-famous Bolshoi Theatre, and more than 50 big theatrical companies, including the 60-year-old Gypsy Theatre.

The Muscovites I got to know are extremely proud of this cultural richness. "When we were growing up [in the 1960s and 70s], we were told that your personal success wasn't important, your personal development was," says



Barb Stibbald  
**Detail from a depiction of Stalin's Gulag in Moscow's Graveyard of the Fallen Monuments. This "graveyard" contains some of the sculptures removed from around Moscow at the end of the Soviet era — mostly because they were being vandalized — and provides an outdoor atelier for present-day sculptors. Ironically, this work is placed behind a giant, slightly damaged statue of Stalin.**

Larissa Mahotkina, a travel agent who emigrated to Canada in the mid 1990s. Conversation, art, culture, reading and education were prized. "We might have only a loaf of bread, but we'd invite people for dinner and talk until morning."

"We were much more dissident thinkers than you may know," added Marina Pavluk, our multilingual tour guide who has been working in tourism since 1974.

They were also well educated. Half the population has a college diploma or university degree, according to 1989 government statistics. Education was free and highly valued. These women talk about events during their 850-year history, such as the debate over why Ivan the Terrible murdered his son, as though it happened last week. Every September 1, National Knowledge Day, all students go to school to celebrate the start of classes — or so claimed the 15-year-old daughter of a Muscovite friend. During our tour of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, she espoused at length about the innovative artist Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910), whose work was influenced by the Russian Symbolist poets. I couldn't bring myself to admit I'd never heard of the guy.

As for the difficulties of living under Communism, Pavluk's comments are wry and oblique. "People were cultured and well-educated," she says, "but miserable." She quotes a former minister of natural resources who, after the failure of a business scheme in the 1980s, famously said, "We did our best but it turned out as usual."

Despite the hardships wrought by Communist dictatorship, what appears to weigh on her mind are the psychological effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is a feeling of humiliation, she remarks, not only because of

the failure of the political experiment, but also because of the severe loss of financial security during the past decade, particularly in the early 1990s when some 50 million Russians lost their savings in pyramid schemes.

But Pavluk hopes this respect for art and culture, which predates Communism, will endure under capitalism. "There is a Russian belief that art is immortal and a reflection of what is going on." That is, art helps people make sense of their world, past and present.

Preserving this respect will be a challenge. Moscow's culture is rapidly being undermined on the fast track to democratic capitalism. Support of the arts and sciences has been reduced, and the country's best composers, mathematicians,

physicists, musicians and scientists are leaving in an unprecedented — but largely undocumented — brain drain. Advertisements (unheard of three years ago) now blight the urban landscape. Magnificent art deco buildings are ruined by an excess of promotions for Coca Cola and McDonald's; an imposing statue of Pushkin gazes into a billboard for Martini. (Whatever would he think?) The Muscovites I encountered — albeit a handful and hardly a scientific sampling — were dismayed, to say the least,

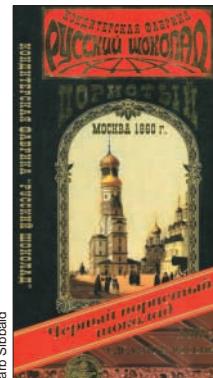
by this visual assault. Museums and galleries are still inexpensive — free to students and seniors — and impressively crowded even in the middle of the week (perhaps with the unemployed, also a new phenomenon). The house museums, where Tolstoy, Chekhov and Dostoevsky once lived, are crowded with Russians. The Pushkin Museum of Fine

Arts offers Egyptian treasures, a half-dozen Rembrandts, and Impressionist masterpieces. In June the museum held an Andy Warhol retrospective. Across the Moskva River, the State Tretyakov Gallery houses the world's foremost collection of Russian art, 100 000 works ranging from 12th-century icons, such as the famous *Trinity* by Andrei Rublev, to Alexander Ivanov's 19th-century masterpiece, *The Appearance of Christ to the People*, which took him 20 years to complete, to the Russian Avant-Garde of the 1910s with works by Marc Chagall and Wassily

Kandinsky. But accessibility is being threatened. A third of the tickets to the Bolshoi used to be held for students and pensioners; now many of these are scalped. One would be lucky to get a ticket for US\$30, far beyond the reach of many people in a city where the average income is about US\$100 a month. Cinema is popular, but where documentaries and art films were once shown, today 80% of the films are American and, as Pavluk puts it, "not the best." State-approved television has given way to unregulated broadcasting and the influx of dozens of channels from all over Europe. *Who wants to be a millionaire?* is the most popular show. Books, until recently the entertainment, are still incredibly cheap, but, for the first time in 70 years, illiteracy is an emerging problem, says Pavluk.

Perhaps there will be a revival of support for the arts, education and culture, but with 36% of the people living at the subsistence level of US\$1 a day, Russia has more pressing concerns. For the first time, the country plans to spend more on social services than on the military. But that announcement was made before the events of September 11 preoccupied the world.

"If the soul is nourished... ." Mahotkina leaves the sentence incomplete, hinting at dreams unfulfilled.



An elegant chocolate bar



Vincent Pierpont

**Our Moscow correspondent with one of the many Lenin look-alikes who, for a fee, pose for photographs such as this.**

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