

No 'flag waving'

Bell-McClure to offer features from Soviet

By Don Maley

John Osenenko boarded a Russian Aeroflot airliner at New York's JFK Airport on Election Day and flew to Moscow. "We'd been negotiating," said Osenenko, who heads the Bell-McClure Syndicate and North American Newspaper Alliance, "with Novosti, the Soviet press agency, to use their non-political features and I wanted to see for myself if they were on the level."

Although his wife thought he'd "end up in Siberia," Osenenko journeyed over 3,000 miles throughout the Soviet Union—snapping pictures all the while—and visited every place but Siberia.

"When I went over," he commented, "I told them there would be no flag waving and they fully agreed. Oddly enough they'd never heard the 'no flag waving' expression used before and they were delighted with it. It became a new addition to their idiomatic vocabulary and they would use it every chance they got."

Stipulation

But what of Novosti, the flagless Soviet news-gathering agency?

"It's a public news organization, founded in 1961," explained Osenenko. Actually they're a feature agency, dealing in Soviet Union features—cultural features. Their literary and picture items are circulated in 110 countries and they have contracts with over 6,000 foreign publications, including *Life*, *Look*, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic* and *Saturday Evening Post*. Included in their list of newspaper clients are the *London Daily Mirror*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Milwaukee Journal*.

"I felt that there was a news blackout concerning the Soviet Union. After all, it's a big country but there's so little known about it. If we are to survive in this world we've got to understand each other and I felt that someone should show some editorial initiative and get the ball

rolling. I came back from my trip convinced that they were on the level and sincere in their desire to do business with us."

"We intend," he further explained, "to import features on: science, education, medicine, sports, food, fashion and health, but no political columns. If they do begin injecting politics into their features we'll drop them. The artwork is fine and their non-political cartoons are excellent."

Novosti will work on the same percentage as syndicated authors and cartoonists but before the service is launched in January, Elmer Roessner, Bell-McClure editor, will spend a few weeks at Novosti's Pushkin Square offices where he'll initiate his syndicate's methods. "They'll send some people later to our offices," said Osenenko. "They may use some of our features next year."

Besides finding Soviet agency's features to be of "top quality," Osenenko found Novosti staffers to be "intelligent, patient, frank, well educated and outgoing."

"I found the Soviet journalists to be sharp. They're master psychologists as well as master linguists," he said. "They can speak a half-dozen languages and they 'psyche' you every time they talk to you. I've met stupid journalists in this country but not in Russia."

'They're just like us'

The Soviet people must have looked familiar to Osenenko. "There's galloping capitalism over there," he said, "but the Soviet people themselves are desperately in need of direction. Basically they're just like us. They're vain, selfish, curious, interested and they're getting fed up with the arms race. They feel it drains their taxes. One thing though, they don't crave security as frantically as we do. Their system of government offers them a form of security that ours doesn't."

Soviet newsmen are at the top

of their country's social ladder. "They're on the same social level as educators and writers," said Osenenko. "A Soviet journalist earns about \$220 a month, and this isn't bad when you consider that a Soviet jet pilot earns \$300 a month. And a press card opens a lot of doors to them that wouldn't necessarily open to our newsmen over here."

"The people I met at Novosti—whose motto is 'information for peace and friendship'—

were not afraid of losing their jobs," he added. "They're supported by four of the most powerful and important journalistic fraternities in the Soviet Union."

Osenenko's guide during his two-week stay in the Soviet Union was Alfontil Rhuahdze, an editor in Novosti's American Department. "He was the only Soviet assigned to me," said Osenenko. "I didn't have a 'tail' during my entire trip. I called him 'Ted' and he seemed pleased. He liked jazz and seemed interested in anything American. When I was touring the Soviet Union with him I found the people hungry for news from America. They suffered from the same news blackout concerning our country as we do about theirs."

Interesting observations

During Osenenko's tour he made many observations, among them:

- An airmail subscription to the *New York Times* cost \$600 per year in the U.S.S.R. "It's their favorite American paper, followed by the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Wall Street Journal*."

- Soviet newspapers are the epitome of drabness. "They're six pages of solid type without any ads. Each of the 15 Republics has its own newspaper."

- There is a strong Spanish influence in Russian culture. "I ran into a crew from *National Geographic* in Georgia (a Soviet Republic) and they discovered a strong Spanish influence in the southern part of the country. Especially in the wines."

- The Soviets have the pill. "And the government is concerned because families are getting smaller and smaller."

- Divorce is on the rise. "Many married women are scientists and are in the professions and when they tire of marriage they can easily get a divorce. Their first duty is to the state,

not their husbands. The government is terribly concerned about this and is trying to make marriage more attractive. They've set up a number of 'Wedding Palaces' which incorporate a number of attractive features in the wedding ceremony. We've got an upcoming story on this."

- Drunkenness is widespread. "The price of booze is dirt cheap and they get you bombed drinking toasts to you, your profession, your relatives and most anything they can think of. I found the only way to stay sober over there was to drink only mineral water during meals."

- Flying is cheap in the Soviet Union. "It's one of the biggest bargains over there. They have to travel such great distances to go to market that they're forced to fly, and its costs next to nothing. The planes I flew on resembled Mexican jitney buses with all the pigs, chickens, goats and boxes of vegetables stuffed into the aisles and on the racks above the seats."

- The Soviet Union is the world's number one builder of prefab houses, employing this building method to solve their housing problem.

- Air pollution is under control in the Soviet Union.

- Their cooking is awful. "Because many of their great chefs were killed and lost in the war the great recipes were lost. I found their cuisine ostentatious but their ice cream was good."

In concluding, Osenenko said: "We'll offer a minimum of three features per week and we'll have a 'Man in Moscow' type column for the editor's swipe-file. If our features do catch on I'll be happy. I feel the country's ready for this and that it's long overdue, but it's a gamble as I anticipate a great built-in resistance to everything Soviet from editors around the country. Although we've negotiated for features devoid of 'flag waving' I just hope politics doesn't get into this thing."