

In Moscow, a Hunger to Know America

By Susan Sherer Osnos

I thought I knew, from the three years I spent in Moscow in the mid-1970's, how curious most Russians are about the United States. But my previous experience hardly prepared me for what I saw this month at the Moscow Book Fair, where an exhibit of American books was overrun with people 10 hours a day. I was stunned by the Russians' voracious hunger for information about America, and I began to rethink my ideas about when and where it makes sense to boycott contacts with the Soviet Union.

"America Through American Eyes" was an exhibit of recent books about America by American authors, sponsored by the Association of American Publishers. The association had refused to participate in the annual fair for the past six years — it

Susan Sherer Osnos is on the staff of the Fund for Free Expression, a human rights organization.

was protesting the persecution of Andrei D. Sakharov and other Soviet writers — and our return was surrounded by controversy.

Much of it concerned the selection of the 313 books in the exhibit by a committee of writers, critics and librarians. The National Endowment for Democracy, which had provided some of the funding for the exhibit, insisted on a politically "balanced" list. The publishers' association returned its money rather than submit to censorship. Others found the list "frivolous" because it included picture books on the great houses of Los Angeles and the history of rock-and-roll.

But none of this made the slightest difference to the thousands of Russians who filed by our exhibit, most of them after waiting in line for hours. These people were starving to find out whatever they could about America.

The crowd in front of the booth was often five or six people deep. We distributed some 35,000 catalogues of the exhibit, in both Russian and English.

They are well made, and I expect they will pass from hand to hand for years to come.

By the fourth day, our presence was causing a traffic problem in the pavilion. By the fifth day, two uniformed police officers were trying to control the mayhem. But no number of officers — and there were several in plain clothes stationed right in the booth with us — could dampen the enthusiasm of the Russians waiting to see our exhibit.

They had a chance, many for the first time, to look at uncensored photographs of American life. They plied the staff in the booth with questions about America. They pored over the Sears catalogue until someone stole it. Jane Fonda's aerobic workout was a major draw, and books about American films and theater were very much in demand.

Some of these Russians were officials, but many were people in work clothes with calluses on their hands. Most of them had never had access to information that wasn't strictly con-

Report from the Book Fair

trolled by the Soviet Government. The authorities did deny visas to several Americans and they confiscated a handful of books, but for the most part they were unable to circumscribe what went on at the fair.

On the whole, Moscow is a far more oppressive place than it was eight years ago, when I was last there, or even six years ago when the publishers' association last took an exhibit to the Book Fair. In 1979, the association organized a dinner, in a downtown restaurant, with some 40 Soviet authors, hosted by Mr. Sakharov. Such an evening is unimaginable now. Mr. Sakharov is in isolation in Gorky in

precarious health. Of those who attended the dinner, almost all are in prison or exile, or have left the Soviet Union.

It is hard these days to find Russian authors who are interested in meeting with American publishers. Many writers are lying low to avoid the kind of persecution that has been meted out to so many of their colleagues.

Some people argue that we should express our disapproval of this repression by refusing to attend the Book Fair. Sometimes and in some places, boycotts may well be justified, as in the case of the Olympic boycott that denied the Soviet Union international glory after its invasion of Afghanistan. I am convinced, however, after a week at the Moscow Book Fair, that our most powerful weapon is information — and any opportunity to provide it should be seized. By staying home, we would only have made things simpler for the organizers of the fair and left a great many security officers with nothing to do. □