

Two Views of a Meeting

By Gale Warner



An insight into why we do things differently

A MEETING WITH about fourteen students at the Kiev Medical Institute illustrated vividly the importance of really trying to understand how the Soviets view things, even when we don't agree with that view. After several physicians and deans gave welcoming speeches, the Komsomol (Young Communist League) leader for the school, who was running the meeting, called up several of his classmates to give rather similar speeches (all of which had to be translated), and then invited one of us to speak. Rob gave a very short speech emphasizing our desire to break into small groups and get to know one another. Apparently ignoring the hint, the Komsomol leader motioned to another Soviet student to give a speech. Then he asked for another speech from the American side. We began to catch on: his idea of a medical student meeting was trading speeches ad infinitum. We – as well as many of the Soviet students – grew restless, and started introducing ourselves in whispers. Progressive anarchy ensued as the whispering became so loud that the speech-makers could barely be heard. Finally one of us stood up and explained very directly that we wanted to start making friends on a personal level, so the Komsomol leader had no choice but to dissolve the meeting's structure. Pent-up conversations broke out at full volume.

At last we had experienced some infamous Soviet inflexibility. Many of us were angry and frustrated. Why had this Komsomol guy wanted to waste so much time in speechmaking?

The next day we took a bus to the Kiev Medical Institute's sports camp on the edge of town. At last a day to be with students with no agenda! In a sunny meadow about forty of us – half Soviet, half from the West – sat down in a circle and started trading songs. After a few songs, the Komsomol leader joined us and started singing too. Thinking about the meeting the day before, we wondered what he thought of us. We must have made it terribly difficult for him while he stood before his

school's administration, his big chance to make a good impression on them. By this time we had heard that many students had prepared speeches for that meeting. One stayed up half the night translating the speech into English but never got a chance to give it. The Komsomol leader was trying to give his classmates a chance to give the speeches they had prepared.

What had happened? Two utterly different concepts of citizen diplomacy had collided in mid-course. We were completely convinced that the only meaningful way to structure a student meeting was to quickly segue from introductory speeches into individuals meeting individuals, a reflection of our Western society that stresses individual action and power. They, on the other hand, were equally sure that this "student meeting" was a chance to perform a courtship ritual between their student organization and our student organization, where representatives from each group trade speeches to emphasize the group's commitment to better relations – a sensible approach in Soviet society, where individuals acting outside of organizations have little power.

In our dogged pursuit of small group discussions, we were being just as inflexible as they were. We had just as fixed an idea of how the meeting ought to go, and we were as unwilling to relinquish it. It is an ever-tempting trap for Americans in the U.S.S.R. to fall into a competitive mindset where every deviation from the Soviets' planned schedule is perceived as a "victory". Ultimately both sides got what they wanted – they got a total of thirteen speeches, and we got thirty minutes of small group discussions and an hour-and-a-half of walking and talking with the students on the way back to our hotel – but it took some compromising on both sides. Meanwhile, we lost a valuable opportunity to clearly state a Western point of view and ask questions with everyone's attention and a professional translating every word. □