

## Barbara Evelyn Forrai BEM, MA (Oxon), BA (Westminster), Dip Ed (Oxon)

(9<sup>th</sup> February 1927 – 4<sup>th</sup> March 2020)

Barbara was for many years a committed and regular member of the Great Britain–Russia Society, delighting in the people she met as well as the events and interesting talks. She was always glad to share the trips she had been fortunate enough to experience when the travel articles which she contributed were accepted for the Society's journal, *East–West Review*, and later, honoured, if slightly daunted, by the opportunity to give a presentation to such a knowledgeable audience.

Barbara was the youngest of three daughters and wrote in her memoirs: 'My first awareness of Russia was when, at the age of three, a visitor exclaimed, "Aha, three sisters!" Afterwards, I asked my father why he should feel this worthy of remark, so Daddy explained about Chekhov, got out the atlas and showed us the vast expanse of the country, the Trans-Siberian Railway, and told us about the links with the Russian Royal Family.'

Her interest in Russia was further kindled when at the age of ten, one rainy day on holiday, she chanced upon an elderly gentleman who, sitting at the hotel fireside, taught her some words of Russian and recounted stories about Grand Duchesses and the Imperial Court, 'like true fairy-tales'. It turned out that he had been dentist to Tsar Nicholas II and his family.

At school she had a brilliant geography teacher, who made the class chant, 'Moscow, Omsk, Tomsk and Vladivostok', tracing the course of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Little did she imagine that later she would be able to persuade fellow students to join her on journeys along that very route. During WWII, of course, everyone followed and sympathized with the situation in Russia, and appreciated the contribution that the Russian people were making. One of her travel accounts recalls a touching incident when, after singing old songs together, a Russian lady exclaimed, 'I remember British chocolate!' She was referring to the food parcels organized for the Russians during the war by Mrs Churchill.

Barbara spoke French, German, Spanish, Portuguese (and on one journey even managed a conversation with a Yugoslav priest in Latin: she was a great believer in the usefulness of studying Latin, certainly a helpful background for Russian grammar) and only took up Russian at local Council Adult Education evening classes when she was preparing to retire from Mathematics and Computer teaching (though she was still coaching and telephone tutoring until she died). Shortly afterwards, the local Council decided not to offer Russian anymore and the class, with its superb teacher, relocated to our dining room, a move which benefitted everyone. The group became close, life-long friends and several of them, inspired by Barbara's 'Moscow, Omsk, Tomsk and Vladivostok', soon set off on the Trans-Siberian Railway to visit Russia together. Barbara eventually progressed to Morley College, the wonderful University of Essex Summer Schools, as well as courses in Russia and the University of Westminster, where her years of diligence and self-discipline (I remember her counting cutlery in



*On 17th June 2017 at The Tower of London, Barbara received her British Empire Medal (Civil Division) from the Lord-Lieutenant of Greater London, Mr Kenneth Olisa OBE.*

Russian as she emptied the dishwasher) resulted in an additional degree in Russian to her earlier Oxford degree in Mathematics.

This was not an end, but really a beginning as the various avenues led to her enthusiastically sharing the pleasure through teaching, coaching, travelling, charity work, 'tour-guiding', hosting and supporting a constant stream of Russian friends in their English studies, assisting visiting medical staff, dance groups at festivals, organizing *Krugli Stols* (КРУГЛЫЙ СТОЛ – 'Round Table' get-togethers) at home, and groups to support performances by visiting Russian choirs, ballet/skating companies, etc. and, most importantly, significant, treasured friendships which still enrich all our lives today. I should also mention that she was able to turn her considerable pattern-making and sewing skills to making Russian sarafans, and her poetry to changing the words of songs for amusing end-of-course

concerts. Numerous Russians were impressed by her ability to sing along with them in Russian (with the correct words!), a talent which helps bring people together. In her teaching, Barbara was particularly skilled at convincing people that Russian was not too difficult for them to learn.

Barbara was an intrepid, world-wide traveller who, despite the challenges of visas, particularly those trips where she would have the chance to practice her Russian, be it with crew or at the destinations. Her travels in Russia and surrounding countries (hard to be accurate in a few words, since borders changed so much during that period, some 20 or so trips, over more than quarter of a century) spanned from 1986-2014, from the northernmost Franz Josef Land, Arkhangelsk to southern Astrakhan, Vladivostok, from Kiev, across Moscow, Yaroslavl, Omsk, Tomsk, Irkutsk, Kamchatka to Anadyr and Nome, along the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Silk Road to Beijing, attending courses and often staying with dear, supportive friends and teachers whose hospitality and organization made such ventures possible and more meaningful.

After Perestroika, it became possible to follow language courses in Russia, staying with a Russian family. The first time she applied to do this, she was billeted with a lady in St Petersburg whose neighbour had been an oboist in the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra at the time of the first performance of Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony. This lady lived alone and was very happy to come round in the evening if Barbara's hostess was busy elsewhere, and talk Russian to an interested audience! She told her stories of the orchestra's trips around the Soviet Union and showed Barbara her photo albums, but most importantly she talked about the war. In this way Barbara was touched to have an original insight into the Siege of Leningrad from an eye-witness survivor of the Blockade as well as being invited to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert which moved them all to tears. Barbara wrote:

"The oboist was an amazing character, it goes without saying. Any survivor had to be. But she was kindly and patient with my poor comprehension, explaining things in different ways, waiting while I searched the dictionary, always anxious to get her point across. When she realised that I was genuinely interested, she

went to enormous trouble to help my understanding. She wanted to know about my experiences in the war and I was ashamed to admit that, however scared I was in the air-raids, I was never hungry. This thought has haunted me for many years. We did not suffer in the same way as the Russians did.

"It so happened that on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1992 there was to be a performance of the 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony to remember the victims of the Siege on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the encirclement of the city. She provided us with tickets and so we were present on that extraordinary evening. All the

surviving members of the orchestra who had played at the premiere were presented with flowers and seated in the equivalent of the Royal Box. Mayor Sobchak gave a dynamic speech (most of which I understood!), a famous actress recited poetry by Akhmatova, and finally the Academic Orchestra, conducted by Alexander Dmitriev, played the 7<sup>th</sup>. Of course the performance went out on Russian TV. It was a deeply moving experience to be part of such a momentous tribute to the victims of the Siege, equalled only by a visit to the Piskarëvskoye Cemetery to see the massed graves, and a lonely visit to Lake Ladoga (I couldn't find anyone who wanted to make the trek) to see "The Road of Life" which proved the salvation of the city, where supplies were



*Above: Barbara in Franz Josef Land, 'probably' Rudolph Island, the most northerly land in Eurasia.*

*Below: Spot the Polar Bear! The party was scheduled to land here, but the presence of the Polar Bear dictated a change of plan.*



brought across the frozen lake in spite of great loss of life when the Spring thaw started and the melting ice plunged many lorry drivers to their deaths.'

Perhaps this brief account explains why she listened with respect to music by Shostakovich and the photos and programmes from that evening were among her most treasured possessions.

Aside from her many charitable UK activities, Barbara included in her life of service and long-term commitment to helping others a month-long trip to assist a charity looking after street-children in Chita, Eastern Siberia. This arose out of researches to find people she could help with their Russian language skills during which a comment was made that they only sent 'younger people' to Russia! This was like a red rag to a bull! Sure enough, 75-year-old Barbara's arguments regarding the advantages of experience and Russian language skills won through and she was soon on her way. As with all her endeavours, this was not a one-off, but a continuous commitment and she was still supporting the work there until she died 18 years later, in her nineties, by giving slide talks, updating to PowerPoint presentations, about her travels, for donations. Amongst other awards of appreciation, in 2017 she received the British Empire Medal (Civil Division), in The Queen's Birthday Honours List, for services to charity in the UK and Russia.

On the subject of medals; during one of our trips to stay with friends in Russia we had, of course, to register at the town offices. Sometime later, around the time of the 60th Anniversary of Victory Day, a lady official called our friends to say that Barbara qualified for a Veteran's Medal and would she come to collect it! Needless to say, our friends clarified the situation, but Barbara was respectfully tickled by the news and impressed that so much care goes into ensuring that all those who are entitled actually receive their medals.

In addition to all of this, Barbara was a wonderful sister, wife, mother, aunt, Godparent, friend, etc.; using the words of others, much admired for her genuineness, integrity, understanding, warm kindness, enthusiasm, generous support and inspiration, so giving many hope for a positive future.

Barbara died at home aged 93 years from Pulmonary Fibrosis which had worsened over the last year and a half. Fortunately, in the present circumstances, Barbara had requested that her body go to medical research (she is now at rest in the Cardiff School of Biosciences), so there was no funeral. However, we and many others across the world will surely *always* be remembering her in a wide variety of ways. If anyone wishes, she would have liked donations to The British Heart Foundation in her memory.

Liz Forrai