

Saturday, October 19, 2012

I have fallen so far behind in my journal writing that I will consolidate a few events that have happened in the past week. If you read Woody's notebook, you know that I spent last weekend in the capital city of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar (UB) attending a TESOL conference. I flew to UB on Thursday and returned to Khovd on Monday since a bad snowstorm had closed the airport in Khovd on Sunday (10/14). This is a three-hour flight or about 700 miles by dirt road.

The dirt road bus ride seemed likely on Sunday morning when security at the airport would not allow the airline to issue me a boarding pass to return home. The University staff in Khovd had taken my passport two weeks before in order to extend the visa and issue an alien registration card (in order to work while in Mongolia).

I had been able to board the plane in Khovd on Thursday by the "vouching" of my supervisor, the Dean of the Foreign Languages and Culture, who had come with me to the airport. The copies (both color and notarized) seemed to be enough, although there was the suggestion that I wouldn't be able to fly back without a passport. I think the plan was, although it wasn't clear to me at the time, that I would meet up with the Khovd University representative in UB who was working on the visa extension with the immigration office and retrieve my passport for the flight home.

One of the benefits of being an English Language Fellow is that we have been transported from the airport and back in UB by an embassy driver. These gentlemen have also made sure that I have received my boarding pass and passed through security at the airport. Luckily, Tsengel did this on Sunday. He negotiated with every security officer to try and get me clearance based on my sketchy identification. Finally, when it was clear the plane was delayed (luckily) and he had called his boss at the embassy (some upper level US security officer) the airlines issued me a boarding pass. This came with the unhappy glares from each security officer who passed near us for the remaining four hours that we waited at the airport before it was announced all flights to Khovd were cancelled.

Although I try very hard to not take advantage of my status as an American or foreigner, there are times when this has definitely come in handy. And in this particular case when I wasn't responsible for the lack of a passport, I felt a little righteous to finally get a boarding pass...which ended up being useless!

During this wait and before I had my boarding pass, I made an early morning panic call to the Dean in Khovd where Tsengel could speak with her in Mongolian. Texts messages flew back and forth and finally Tsengel rushed to meet up with the University representative in UB to retrieve my passport. However, because of his "connections" I had my boarding pass before he left the airport and before Mongolian security knew I might get my passport. (The airport is about 35-45 minutes from the city center depending on traffic.) He took off and made it back in plenty of time with my passport, as well as three others I was to deliver to Khovd.

After picking me up at 5 AM on Sunday and then taking care of me until 11 AM when the flight was cancelled, we became friends and the next morning Tsengel was at the hotel doorstep at 4 AM in the embassy Suburban to take me back to the airport for the flight to Khovd. (Usually a different embassy driver has taken me back and forth.) He has three daughters about the same age as Andrew and Isaac and one younger. The oldest is in Seattle working on her Master's degree in Business. The next one is a Junior at a University in UB and plans to graduate with a degree in Finance. Both she and her older sister spent a summer in Alaska working at a fish factory. And the youngest is a sophomore in high school. His English is limited and some of the time at the airport we worked on my Mongolian pronunciation of numbers...He is very concerned with the unregulated and unplanned growth in UB. Needless to say, Seattle is a planned destination for him and we will meet again.



I say this with some certainty as I had enjoyed a lovely lunch on the previous Friday with one of my former (Spring 2011) University of Montana students, Zaya. She is Mongolian and works as a risk manager in Golomt Bank in UB. The world is indeed small!

Later on Sunday, after all this travel excitement, I was walking in UB when a very interesting event happened. The last(?) remaining statue to a Soviet leader was taken down. Mongolia became a democratic nation in 1990 after the fall of communism in the Soviet Union. The people staged a peaceful revolution and became an independent country after 70 years of Soviet control. In the past twenty years Mongolia has been reinventing itself with a capitalist economy and democratic government. Because of the geographic location, Mongolia has often negotiated a balance between China and Russia and continues to do so today.



With this recent history, many of the landmarks and buildings in the two cities I have visited in Mongolia still have a Soviet feel. (This could easily be the result of a Cold War time of upbringing along with the notion that large cement plazas and blocky buildings are the design elements of a Soviet city.) I have yet to visit other places in the former USSR, so how do I know this? Anyway, that's my gut feeling but I haven't done the research to determine the facts. At a dinner this past week with librarians and staff of the US embassy and Khovd's public library, the Mongolian visitor from UB indicated that the green spaces and parks in UB were all a result of the Soviet influence. (These have not been maintained so they are overgrown now or built upon.) So, green spaces should be added to my mindset of Soviet legacies.



Anyway, back to the statue...Lenin was responsible for helping the Mongolians fight for independence in 1921 so many older Mongolians have wanted to keep the statue. However, the mayor of UB who was one of the "original 13 Democrats" who helped overthrow communism in

1990 wanted it down, according to *The UB Post* on 10/12/12. And it will be auctioned to the highest bidder.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Mongolia is complicated and I hope to unravel an understanding of it over the next year. The country has been involved in any number of controversies and land exchanges between Chinese warlords, Japanese rulers, and Russian Reds (Bolsheviks) and Whites (pro-Tsar) revolutionaries. By 1921, the Whites had pushed out the Chinese, but Russia (Moscow) wasn't about to allow pro-Tsarist factions to run Mongolia, so the Bolshevik Red Army crossed into Mongolia to rid the country of the Whites and joined with Mongolian forces who were hoping for independence. The result was control by the Bolsheviks and the end to plans for independence for 70 years.

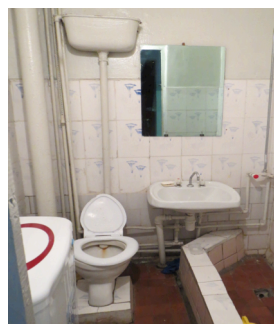
What isn't clear to me yet, is why with what followed in the next few years, were Mongolians happy about the Bolshevik rule and erected a statue to Lenin. The statue was put up in 1954. Clearly, I have a lot to learn. Could the Russian rule have been less overbearing and dangerous than the Chinese? During the 70 years of Soviet control, did the Mongolians have essential independence? There were purges in Mongolia during Stalin's reign (1930s) but overall, it may have been a progressive and peaceful time. For an interesting summary of Mongolia (history, culture, and geography) read *Mongolia: Nomad Empire of Eternal Blue Sky* by Carl Robinson. Thanks, Dad!

I've been asked about our living quarters. We are on the fourth floor of an apartment complex that has about 6 apartments per floor. There are five floors. Our apartment building is called 30. If anyone asks where we live, we just say 30 (oche) in Mongolian and they immediately know. When we walked into the building for the first time, my heart sank, as the stairs and the hallway to our apartment are decrepit. However, the apartment interior is very nice with bright orange painted wood floors in the living room and bedroom and linoleum in the kitchen and hall. There are nice big windows in all three main rooms and these let in lots of light and so far, sunshine. They are single pane windows but there are two on each window with a three-inch gap between.



Our apartment is furnished with a 6 foot table in the living room, a small fold-out loveseat/couch, a bookshelf and a TV. There are also two desk chairs in the living room so we use the table for both eating and as our desk. The bedroom has a bed, and a wardrobe for clothing. The kitchen has an electric stove, refrigerator, small shelf for food storage and now two tables that serve as counters. There is a sink and stool in the kitchen as well, and I usually sit by the window using the ledge for my computer in the early morning when I'm working.

The bathroom is the most challenging room for me. It has a wall-hung tank with chain for the toilet, a tile floor that is uneven tile grout, and worn-in dirt. The inch wall that surrounds the floor on for the shower water. There is a bathroom for the washer which is a



and covered with paint drips, shower is open with an 8-10 two sides to form a barrier enough room in the long narrow device with two

tanks which I will describe shortly. The bathroom walls are tiled with large white tiles with a blue floral decoration. There is a sink and mirror which make it quite useable and efficient. Perhaps if the toilet didn't run constantly and didn't leak, I might be able to feel more comfortable about it...oh well!

The apartment is heated by radiators and so far has been very toasty. We have intermittent power outages and regular water stoppages. In fact on Thursday 10/18, the power was off all day and the water was on again, off again. We always keep extra bottles of water and a teapot full of water on the stove. We have a sterilizing pen that we use for the water as we've been advised to not drink it as is.



The following is an account from my journal of washing day. Oct. 4: Laundry day: In the morning I hauled the washer which isn't very heavy from the bathroom into the kitchen where there is an electric plug. The washer has two small tubs; one for washing and rinsing and one for spinning. This is really convenient compared to hand washing everything. You load the left hand tub and add water and detergent and then it rotates and agitates the clothes back and forth. Then you move the clothes to the spin side and spin the water out. There is a small hose that allows you to add water to the washtub from the sink and then a larger hose that allows you to drain it out into a tub that you can dump in the sink or the shower.

Since the electricity is in the kitchen I am draining the tubs into a small basin/tub and then dumping that into the sink. I have boiled hot water on the stove and added that to the cold water from the sink. I brought a small Ziploc bag from home with detergent and I used that for a load of Woody's clothes – mostly dark colors. I can't seem to drain the washing tub so I have to bail out the water when I'm finished washing/rinsing each load. I use a cup and then mop up the rest out of the tub for each load. (Since writing this, Woody has figured out how to drain both sides of the washer so I don't have to bail anymore. That makes it even more convenient.)

I rinsed Woody's clothes twice after washing with a spin cycle in between. (It is a bit more physical than our washing process but the end result seems pretty good.) The washer appears to be made in China with a sticker on the front to indicate energy usage. "China Energy Label." This one is yellow (in the middle) as is the refrigerator. To dry our clothes, I was able to string some rope that we bought at the open market out on the balcony to hang clothes. The weather cooperated so most were dry by the early afternoon.

Next time



I will write about my classes and the Mongolian students I work with.