trip. Hours before leaving, in addition to receiving donations of last-minute cash and clothing in the mail, I was given the name and phone number of Georgi Arbatov from the head of the Peace Section of the Mennonite Central Committee. Arbatov is known worldwide as the director of the Institute for U.S.A. and Canadian Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. No one I knew thought I could have a private meeting with him but I managed to do so. See more on that later.

A few days before the trip, we had a call from Kathy Brown about a party we were to hold to celebrate International Forgiveness Week (Jan. 26-Feb.1), and we felt so good about one another that she moved in to stay with Judy and the kids for the length of the trip. Kathy also graciously volunteered to drive me to JFK Airport in New York.She is still living with us, as is her friend, Kate.

When I write about the Soviet Union in a positive way, some of you who don't know me well may think that I've been "duped" but I assure you that I was perfectly free to go where I pleased without being escorted or followed and I saw both good and bad. I also had the advantage of 82 others with whom to compare notes; people I already trusted.

NO COMMUNISM IN SOVIET UNION

If anyone thinks I was visiting a communist country, they are sadly mistaken. Soviet communists would be the first to declare that communism is an ideal of the future,not a present reality.

In the Soviet Union there is a strong central government and much bureaucracy. In a communist country there would be no government at all, but each would "give according to his ability and receive according to his need" There is, therefore, no such thing as a "communist threat" We are threatened by our own attempt to keep the world's poor oppressed and the poor are revolting against us. I'll write more of our talks with communists later in this newsletter.

NOT A TOURIST BUT A GUEST ?

About a month earlier, I had decided that before joining the tour, Id like to go to the Soviet Union as a guest of my poet friend, Igor, in Moscow with whom I had worked on letters to Reagan and Gorbachov.When I applied for a guest visa I was told that it would take three months to get that, so I wrote a letter to Gorbachov for special assistance.

I then went to see the consul in Washington who repeated the rules - but after I told

Samantha Smith and parents in USSR. All photos on newsletter pages 2,4 & 6 are from **Samantha** Smith's book. Others not here are in color and the book has lots of great pictures.

him who I was and what I was doing, he said, "If you can get an invitation from any official Soviet organization like the Peace Committee or Writer's Council, I'll give you the visa in 2 days !" . In the time allowed that turned out to be impossible, and in fact it seemed that there might even be problems getting my tourist visa because I had left things so long.

Three days before we were to leave one visa came from Washington by special delivery and a second one came by express mail from San Francisco ! They really wanted me to come.

NEW YORK TO HELSINKI

Rama Vernon who had made some eight previous trips to the Soviet Union to prepare our group's contacts was at JFK in N.Y.C. to travel with our group of 18. The rest of 82 "Citizen Diplomats" were coming to Helsinki from California the following day.

Most of the flight was by night, exceedingly smooth with only one malfunction for which we were grateful- the video screens did not show us "The Jagged Edge" because the plane's VCR wouldn't work !

In the morning, I was, as a private pilot, invited up to the cockpit as we flew into Scandinavia, and I stayed with the pilots until shortly before the landing in light snow.

That day was free in the luxurious health resort hotel where we were to spend two full days getting to know each other and preparing for our mission as spiritual citizen diplomats. I was able to videotape the best part of our meetings there, but I was quite concerned with how I would get the video machine through the Soviet customs and leave it on loan with Igor in Moscow.

MORE GOOD LUCK

Soviet customs came aboard our Helsinki to Leningrad train in the night and none of them spoke English.They asked if any of us spoke German so I volunteered. After telling the official who we were, I asked where he'd learned German and then I told him about my twelve years of communal life in Paraguay. Then the customs said goodbye and left. None of our luggage was inspected. No problems.

JOY AMIDST THE SOVIET TRAGEDY

During our week in Leningrad we went to visit the Pioneer Palace which I will never forget. This was actually the huge palace of the Czar in all its original splendor; now it belongs to the children ! Children from 10 to 16 all belong to the same clubs divided only by interest, not age. We visited the Club October (singing in Russian, German, English, French & Spanish). American children may write Club October, Pioneer Palace, Nevsky pr. 39, C. Leningrad 191011, U.S.S.R.

We also visited the dancing club, a geology club, etc. Many of the children spoke English well and expressed great interest in contact with Americans. Hobby clubs were open from 2p.m. to 7. Children were joyful and confident, with young and old working harmoniously together. I was moved to tears.

But we saw the real need of the Soviet people when our guide took us to the memorial park outside the city where over 500,000 children and old people were buried in unmarked mass graves. This was the result of the 900 day siege of Leningrad during World War II. So many died of starvation that there was no way to bury them in individual graves or even record the names of the dead; only the number of bodies on a truck and what area the truck came from could be indicated.

Our guide did not say this, but from another source I learned that the starvation was so terrible that some of the dead were eaten to sustain the living.

The horror of those times is difficult for an American to imagine. Hitler stated that in war there is no 'good' or 'evil'; all that mattered was victory. That's how Nazis treated the Soviets and they cannot forget it. When I raised the suggestion of an "International Decade of Forgiveness" almost everyone, including Prof. Georgi Arbatov responded the same: "You mean you want us to forgive the Nazis for what they did ?"

After a while I thought I was beginning to understand and I said:

"We Americans should be so grateful for the struggle you undertook to resist Hitler. You could have capitulated like the French to save your land and your people. Then Hitler could have conquered England, built his atom bombs and come after us." Silence followed.

Then they responded: "We could not surrender. Hitler hated our race so much that he would have killed every last one of us. We couldn't surrender."

The Soviets burned and destroyed their own towns and fields in front of the advancing panzers. They evacuated all they could and others were left to starve or shift for themselves. We may never understand the horror through which they lost 20,000,000 people. The older Soviet population are like a traumatized nation.

We wondered at first why they dwelt so much on World War II. Some thought they spoke so much of that because they were afraid to talk of what Stalin had done to perhaps 30 million of his own people. But I asked and was told: "Stalin was also terrible but he was a Russian; Stalin saved us from the Nazis !" Stalin enslaved millions and killed his opponents but he never wantonly murdered men, women and children:"We never invited the Nazis to come here", one said.

A NATION IN SEARCH OF PEACE

The Soviet Union has been invaded time and again. We don't remember when American forces invaded in 1918 but they do. They live in fear of foreign attack. Therefore they feel justified in occupying an area outside their borders which causes us to see them as "expansionist" while forgetting our own time of expansion when we took lands from Mexico, Spain, the Phillipines, and of course, the Indians. The Soviets live in the memory of the horror of the Nazi attack and are determined that if we or the Germans ever invade again, they will be stopped before they reach the homeland and the people who have suffered so much already.

Seen from that point of view it is easy to understand how Soviets all see their government's actions as nothing but defensive in nature. They are totally convinced that they are a country dedicated to peace.