

# Students travel to USSR

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — On her last day in the Soviet Union, Shannon Mullaly was surrounded by a mob of "Gypsies" who attacked her and refused to let go until a Moscow police officer pulled them away.

Fortunately for Mullaly, the "Gypsies" were "little tiny kids," who left her with only a surface bite on the leg — about the only unpleasant souvenir she took home from a three-week tour of the country.

The Aquinas Institute sophomore and 31 other Monroe County students had many lively experiences during their travels through the Soviet Union and Finland July 1-24. The trip was organized by People to People, a Spokane, Washington-based group that promotes goodwill between the United States and Soviet Union by sponsoring citizen exchanges.

Mullaly and two other students represented Aquinas, whose administration recommended the teenagers to People to People. The youngsters attended six monthly two-hour sessions to prepare for the trip, according to Mary Ann Maggio, a history teacher at Greece-Arcadia High School and one of three area educators who chaperoned the students on the journey.

The east-bound travelers started their adventure after touching down in Helsinki, Finland. From there they went to Leningrad, where they spent three days taking in the sights. Later they spent time in six other Soviet cities including Kiev in the Ukraine and Moscow.

Interestingly, the students said that *glasnost* and *perestroika* — terms that have become familiar to U.S. citizens enamored of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev — seem empty and meaningless to the average Soviet citizen.

One Soviet man told recent Aquinas graduate Patrick Plumeri that "it's great I can go to the corner and badmouth the government all I (can), but can we have some food?"

The man's statement points to the depressed economic situation the students found throughout the Soviet Union. Food and other goods were often out of stock or in short supply wherever they went, although the teenagers noted that their Soviet hosts shared what little they had freely with their U.S. guests.

Noting that she thought most of the food she ate was "horrible," Mullaly nonetheless said that when the group stayed in family homes or Soviet hostels, their hosts "were giving us what they could."

The difficult life they saw their friendly hosts leading translated into an indifference to Gorbachev, Mullaly commented, recalling that many people told her, "We

talk, but no action."

Aquinas senior Danielle Michalek said her Soviet hosts perceived Gorbachev's reforms as being more effective outside the country than within. She remembered people telling her "(Gorbachev's efforts) did a lot in foreign policy, but it didn't help them a lot at home except for letting them talk about it."

And talk they did, according to Mullaly, who said she spoke with a former agent of the KGB, the Soviet secret police. "He did not like (the KGB) at all," she said, adding that he told her his bosses "were all on a power trip."

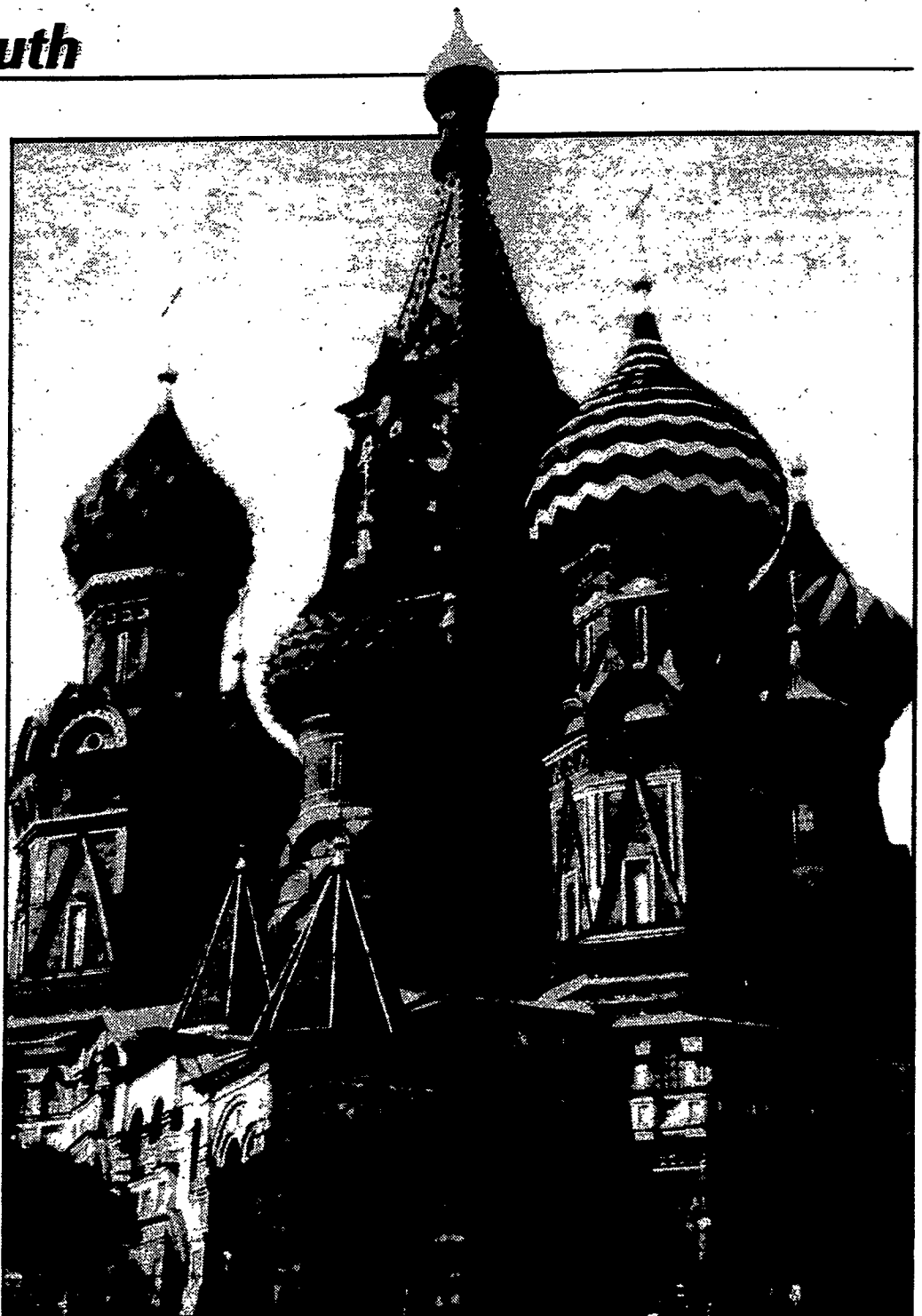
Plumeri almost found out just what kind of trip the KGB was on when he and two companions were lured by an undercover KGB agent posing as a black marketeer in one city park they visited.

"They're supposed to be undercover, but they could be a mile away and you could tell who they are," Plumeri said, explaining that the KGB agents always dressed well and offered the best black-market items, unlike the real black marketeers who looked more like average citizens.

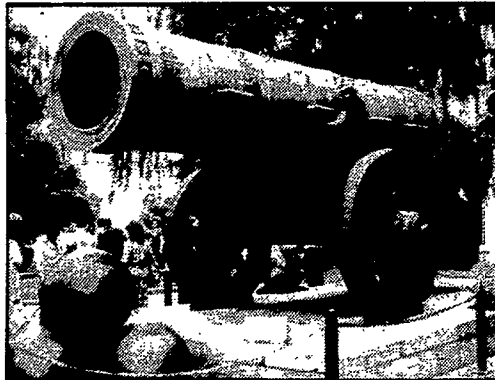
After the supposed KGB agent offered to sell them a Soviet military commander's watch for \$500, the trio decided to literally



A Russian sailor was part of a battleship tour in Leningrad.



St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow's Red Square is an ever-popular tourist attraction.



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Photos by  
Patrick Plumeri

slip through the bushes, leaving the agent in the park with his tainted goods.

Political despair and black-market intrigue, however, were but a minor aspect of the students' trip, which included visits to several museums and historical sites. Mullaly said they also visited a children's camp in the Ukraine where they were greeted by enthusiastic campers.

"They saluted us when we came," she said of the children, adding the campers entertained their U.S. visitors with singing and dancing. The students responded by belting out such American cultural gems as "The Hokey Pokey," and "The Chicken Dance."

All in all, after staying in cramped apartments, eating bland food, and seeing Soviet citizens stand in lines for consumer goods, the trip left the students with a greater appreciation for their homeland.

"I love the United States," Plumeri said. "(The Soviet Union) is a lot worse off than I thought it was. Those citizens have next to nothing."

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