Moscow’s "Universal Provider"

Teatralnaya Square in Moscow is dominated by three imposing buildings: the Bolshoi Theatre, the Maly Theatre and TsUM — Central Universal Department Store. All of them have a rich and fascinating history.

The building that has been known for almost 100 years as TsUM was built in 1908 as the famous Muir & Mirrielees Department Store and is celebrating its 110th anniversary this year. Back at the turn of the 20th century, the building was owned by a Scottish family which was very well-known in Moscow.

Archibald Mirrielees was a 25-year-old ambitious Scotsman when he came to St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1822 to gain fame and fortune. Having started as a representative of a British company, in 1843 he founded a business under his own name. In 1852 he was joined by his young brother-in-law Andrew Muir, and so the Muir & Mirrielees company was born.

At first, the company was operating in St. Petersburg as a whole-sale business. Andrew Muir traveled all over Europe choosing the best fabrics, clothes and other fashionable goods which were then imported into Russia and sold to local shops. In 1867 the firm opened its first office in Moscow, which had played second fiddle to St. Petersburg from the time of Peter the Great, but now was rapidly developing its industries. By that time Archibald Mirrielees had already been retired for ten years and lived in England. Now his sons Archie and Fred were helping Andrew Muir to run the company.

In the middle of the 19th century the first Department stores appeared in Europe: first, The Bon Marché in Paris, and then, Whiteley’s in London. At the time when most shops were small, this was an innovation that was characterized by fixed prices, the possibility to exchange goods or get a refund, seasonal sales and daily deliveries to every part of the city. William Whiteley, who was the first to open such a store in London, called his shop a "Universal Provider" and indeed managed to find anything a client could ever fancy to buy.

This was the example that Muir & Mirrielees in Moscow were going to follow. In 1885, they bought a three-storey building in Petrovka, across the street from the Bolshoi. By 1892 the store had 25 departments, and in 1891 Muir & Mirrielees gave up wholesale trading and focused entirely on their Department store — Moscow’s true "Universal Provider".

Nobody knows how the big fire started. Some believe that it was jealous rivals from the smaller shops that set Muir & Mirrielees on fire. In any case, early in the evening on November 24, 1900, while Feodor Shalyapin was singing one of his leading roles across the street, the famous store went up in flames. By midnight, to the audience of both Bolshoi and Maly theatres’s spectators who'd deserted their performances in favour of a more dramatic spectacle, the building burnt down completely.

In 1908, the new Muir & Mirrielees store with 80 departments was erected in the same place, designed by the well-known architect Roman Klein. It was the first building in Russia to use walls of reinforced concrete — a technique invented in America for sky-scrapers. It allowed for thinner walls and bigger windows. Moscow had never seen a building quite like this before. One of the attractions of the new store were two lifts that held 8 passengers each. This was also a novelty in Moscow, and not everyone trusted them.

Among the loyal customers of Muir & Mirrielees were Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy’s wife and daughter, the Tsvetayev family and many more.

According to the 4th paragraph, Andrew Muir...

1. ...was responsible for the quality of imported goods.
2. ...started selling musical instruments in Moscow.
3. ...spent his holidays in different European countries.
4. ...had two grown-up sons who were helping him.