



Fall 2020 Newsletter

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Dear friends!

We hope you are healthy and careful during this once-in-a-hundred-years trial of “together action” we all are in right now. Infections from the covid-19 virus are up as I write this, both here in the US and in Zabaikalye, too. Tragically and most painfully, in this second surge of infections we lost **Olga Isaakovna Fleshler** (November 2) one of Siberian Bridges’ oldest and dearest friends and strongest advocates. She has been a primary source of inspiration and energy for me personally, but also became one for SB, mainly through her fierce advocacy for the Children’s Center “Unity” in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky. She is memorialized in this newsletter, but we will have more about her at our website and a fuller appreciation in our next newsletter.

This cover letter is our [unabashed] fund-raising appeal for 2020. We can’t meet to share our stories, can’t have our 3rd annual “Tusovka” party at my house nor our open house at the Mayflower Church in Minneapolis across from The Museum of Russian Art as has been our long-standing tradition. So this letter is it, except there may be some follow-up nudging letters for long-time supporters! Contribute by check through the mail, or by credit card at our website (hit the Donate button).

Despite the difficulties, our projects continue, the desire on both sides for contact and cooperation remains very lively, and the shared yearning burns strongly to meet again as soon as it is safe! We miss them! They miss us!

Read about how we’ve continued through this strange moment that is not without silver linings (topping that list, the Zoom phenomenon has increased our casual contacts with friends on the opposite side of the globe.) Please support our work as generously as you can. And when we can get back to visits, keep in mind our next “Taste of Zabaikalye Tour” (summer of 2022? 2023?).



Tom Dickinson, President

FALL UPDATE

- **SHIPLEYS:** Just received this email update on November 27th, included here in full

Hey Tom,

How are you, your folks and the rest of the SB gang these days?

We're hanging in there, as usual, thank goodness. Just wanted to let you know that Ilya Osinsky celebrated his 18th birthday a couple of weeks ago. He went for a day of horseback riding as a gift, plus, a friend of ours arranged to have him flown for about 15 minutes in a small Cessna plane at the local small airport out in a clearing in the woods. He loved it! We also had some fireworks, balloons, cake, etc., so he was riding high, literally, that weekend. Ilya is right expecting to join the army in the coming month, and is now completing all the medical tests and paperwork to get that going.

Lyosha is just back from the army, but has decided to stay with friends so that he can go to the gym. With us, he'd have to observe a stricter quarantine. He'll probably wind up staying at our place within the next 2-3 weeks, at which point we'll try to get him headed in some concrete direction with his life. Otherwise, he stands the risk of going into permanent "drift mode" like so many of the other boys.



September picnic: Lyuba Dneprovskaya; Yana (Vitya's girlfriend); Anton Yudin; Ilya Postemsky (our nephew); Svetlana Chibizubova (our friend); me (Michael); Vitya Nefyodov; Irina; Ilya Osinsky; Sergei Bondarenko

At the end of January, Anton will fly to Moscow, then take a train to Kazan to attend a "pool" of applicants who will go through a month-long trial period at the special School 21 there for wannabe computer programmers. He is living in his dorm and has only minimal interaction with us lately, but he seems to prefer it that

way. We don't mind, as long as he stays away from the computer games and gets all his classwork done, which he seems to be doing.

Andrey Yashnov calls from the army from time to time. Today he said he



Lyuba's beautiful little painting, a gift for Tom in 2019

plans to take the standardized tests that graduating high school seniors take, the ЕГЭ, so that he can apply to Moscow State University when he gets out of the army. We'll buy some prep books he wants to be able begin preparing for those exams now. He's very focused and hard-working, so I hope that works out for him. It seems like a very good plan he's got.

Lyuba Dneprovskaya, who gave you that little painting she had made, is

studying Chinese at the Ped. University and seems to be managing alright. We speak with her about once a week.

So that's it. As always, we thank you for your support and friendship. It helps a lot.

All the best,
Michael

- **RUSSIA- US MOVIE CLUB:** Here's a list of the 19 movies we've discussed so far in the US-Russia Movie Club—a Zoom meetup about every two weeks (that anyone can join!), alternating Russian and US films:

RUSSIAN (available online for free streaming with English subtitles):

- Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears (1980),
- The Fool (2014)
- The Irony of Fate or Enjoy Your Bath! (1976)
- Autumn Marathon (1979)
- A Simple Story (1960)
- Locusts (2014)
- The Very Same Munchhausen (1979)
- Office Romance (1977)
- Officers (1971).

AMERICAN:

- A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1945)
- Steel Magnolias (1989)
- Nine to Five (1980)
- The Manchurian Candidate (1962)
- Get Low (2008)
- Last Picture Show/Texasville (1971 & 1990)
- Do the Right Thing (1989)
- Stranger Than Fiction (2006)
- Judgment at Nuremberg (1961)

Every one of them highly recommended!! —*Tom reporting*

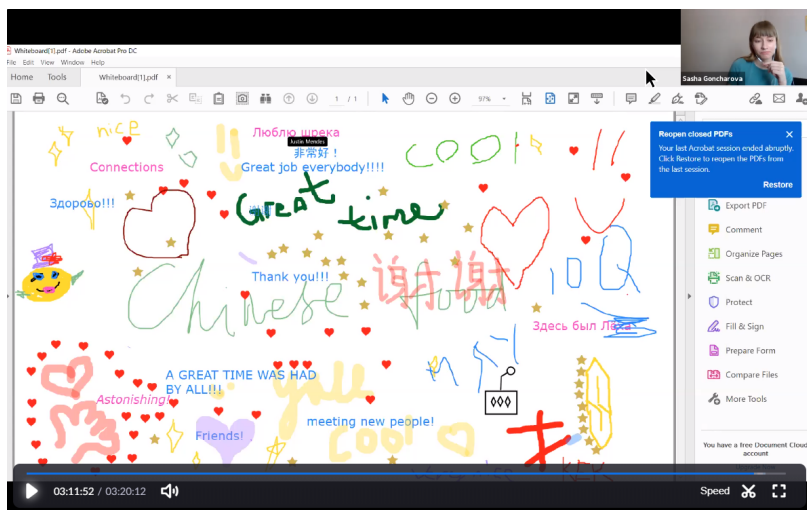
• 4th INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DAY TRI-COUNTRY CONFERENCE:

We again commemorated International Students Day (Nov. 17) with undergraduates from the Chita Institute of Baikal State University, RU; Shenyang Institute of Technology, CN and the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA in a three-hour video conference. It was held on November 18th in Russia and China and the 17th here in Minnesota due to the 14- and 15-hour time differences. This collaboration began in 2014 in discussions between Tom Dickinson, Elena Pishcherskaia, and Irene Duranczyk to devise a plan to engage students from multiple countries using the Internet. This plan has grown year by year. The Chinese partners changed at first, but for the two most recent conferences, the Shenyang Institute of Technology joined us thanks to the efforts of Chuhan Wang (Estella). This has added stability to our program.

Our goal has remained the same: “to continue international conversations that will help undergraduate students see their place in the world and envision their future as individuals, inventors, workers, and/or leaders in this globalized world”.

Given the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference needed to include individual participation from multiple sites, not just three as in past years. The students and faculty from Chita could only attend from home; students and faculty from Shenyang were able to attend together in a classroom. The group in Minneapolis was partly in a conference room, spaced and masked, and some were offsite in their homes, including guests, Chuck Ritchie and Tom Dickinson from Siberian Bridges. All told there were more than 32 individual conference participants!

So we made some changes: student videos were shared in advance, as were papers sharing perceptions on various topics (free time activities, travel experiences and wishes, adjusting to the pandemic, family roles in one’s life and personal decision-making, etc.)



Final whiteboard from the conference

These were then discussed during the live conference in a series of simultaneous small groups in “breakout rooms” with three students from Russia, two from the US and one from China in each room. After each round, they shared with the full

conference what they learned in the groups showing summaries using Zoom’s “whiteboard” function. The use of Zoom and its features for these small groups made this year’s conference more collaborative than previous ones.

As in previous conferences, each campus tried to create a more engaging “Tea Time” cultural quiz challenging the others to explore new aspects of their native world. This year’s “Tea Times” were again great fun.

Videos, papers, and Tea Times were translated, but student conversations were generally in English this year as our web-based translation tool, Streamer.center, took more time than expected for participants to become familiar with it. We will continue to work on translation services to more readily include easy self-expression in one’s native speech, which also better respects and elevates home languages.



Sample panel from the Russian students' Tea Time quiz, this year's was on Russian folk beliefs.

A special shout out to Siberian Bridges for its support of this unique conference. We are working on a follow up with our undergraduates in May 2021 to further our goal of world peace built through person-to-person understanding. —Irene reporting

- **COVID-19:** As is true now in the US, the rate of infection in the Zabaikalye region has sharply increased. Elena Pishcherskaia told us a few weeks ago that the daily infection tallies are double the peak rate in the spring. Schools opened September 1 only to be abruptly closed in many cases due to infections. And among our closest friends listed here those we know to have had the virus. Olga Fleshler most tragically succumbed to it (see memorial below). Victor Kulakovsky and his wife, Elena, had it, and Victor was very ill and in the hospital, but has recovered. Elena's case was relatively mild. And the following also have had relatively mild cases: Vova Kulakovsky, Vitaly Pishchersky, Raisa Lukashenko and her husband Andrey, Nadezhka Kosarenko, Natalia Kosikina and also Natalia Skliarova, director of the Children's Center "Unity" in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky as well as a few others there. — *Tom reporting*

CHILDREN'S CENTER "UNITY"

— Chuck Ritchie reporting

These have been trying times at the Children's Center "Unity." Opening the summer camp in June was delayed. It was vandalized after much time and money had been spent refurbishing it. Then the inspector would not let them open because of



poor water quality. (More about that later.) Camp finally opened at the end of July but only for a month, and they then moved back for school that started as usual on September 1, celebrating the Day of Knowledge.

It is almost impossible to keep up with the happenings at the Center, but we can

Children's Center event with Olga Fleshler and Natalia Skliarova participating with the children.

share a few. Harvesting is always a big event. The Center grows much of its own food, and the children help with each stage.

The Day of Health this year produced something quite unique. Around the town of Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky big billboards appeared titled Value your Life! (Цени свою жизнь!) The billboards were filled with pictures and words of wisdom by the children of

the Center: “Yes to sports! No to drugs!”, “All life is in your hands”, “I choose life” etc. What a gift to their community.

There have been some cases of the virus and in fact they had to keep the children home from school for two weeks. This added to the challenge of keeping the kids constructively busy. The nursery had a session in the Center’s museum on “How a grain of wheat grows in the field.”

The children are seen here



In the Children’s Center museum

examining a grain of wheat. Another activity was a “Kapustnik!” (“Cabbage Event!”) in which the children made figures out of various vegetables, inspiring their creative juices. Another activity was run by a former graduate, Alexei Kapotov, now a cook and baker at the Center. He conducted a class in sushi as part of “Japanese Evening,” during what they call “The Weekend Club.” There seems to be a well-spring of creative ideas to engage the children!

Natalia Nikolaevna Skliarova, the director, was really feeling the weight of this stressful time. Back when their summer camp’s opening was up in the air, Siberian Bridges rushed our annual grant to them—lately delivered in person by Tom on his summer visits, but not this year. It quickly provided the funds to replace the water filter so desperately needed to solve the water quality issue at the camp. After the funds arrived, we received an email from Natalya Nikolaevna. In part, it read:

“I am tired, and many have talked to me and tried to inspire me to continue working, but only your letters and financial support inspired me and gave me strength. I am ready for new barriers, of which there are more and more! I am very grateful to all of you, real FRIENDS. I RESPECT, APPRECIATE, THANK AND MISS YOU!!!! Natalia.”

Natalya Nikolaevna is literally the heart of the Center, and all of us at Siberian Bridges feel privileged to be able to support her herculean efforts to bring some sense of hope and normalcy to the lives of these children. And we thank you, our supporters, who make it possible for us to be so involved. THANK YOU!



Children's Center event in September 2019, Natalia Skliarova is with Olga Flesher on the far left.

PROFILE: A Conversation with ANNE, JEAN & CHARLIE DICKINSON

by Chuck Ritchie

Siberian Bridges has its roots in the Dickinson family. A recent conversation with Tom's father Charlie, his mother Jean (both vital at 97 and 95 respectively!) and his sister Anne brought this fact to light.

All three played crucial roles in the early stages of the organization when it was known as Musical Bridges. In 1993 the 501(c)3 was formed with Anne as the President, Tom as Chair, and Charlie and Jean on the sidelines cheering enthusiastically. In 1996, Charlie joined the Board and a couple of years later, Jean became Secretary-Treasurer.

Charlie accompanied Tom in 1991 on his second concert tour to Chita that also included four other eastern cities, Khabarovsk, Irkutsk, Ulan Ude and Angarsk. In 1995, Anne, her brother Joe and his family, and Tom's girlfriend Eileen visited Chita and Lake Baikal and also China. Then in 2000, Charlie and Jean visited Chita for a month when Charlie lectured on US business and Jean shared her volunteering experience.

From the very beginning they supported Tom's initiative to form the organization, and in fact a large percentage of the early financial support came from the family.

As they reminisced several themes emerged. Charlie noted a couple of times that his preconceptions about the Russians did not coincide with the reality he experienced. There was open access to anything they wanted to do or see: there



were lively discussions with college students on a variety of subjects; there was a mutual respect and desire to understand each other.

Jean added that there seemed to be little understanding of the concept of volunteerism in 2000, but at the same time many were receptive to suggestions for how they can help others in grassroots ways. In fact, Olga Fleshler told us later that Jean was a big inspiration for her own volunteering, leading eventually to her work with Children's Center "Unity" and then drawing us into it!

Anne, as well as Charlie and Jean, affirmed the importance of the personal contact and the ensuing realization that we have much in common, despite the fact we come from different cultures.

The overriding message to me was that the personal relationships matter, and it is precisely those personal relationships that lie at the heart of what Siberian Bridges is about. By the end of the conversation I felt that I had been touched by the heartbeat of this organization.



OLGA ISAAKOVNA FLESHLER

February 23, 1940 - November 2, 2020

Our hearts are so deeply saddened by the passing of Olga Isaakovna, such a wonderful diplomat for the human race. Hers was the gift of compassion, concern, and respect for others, particularly those in need. Olga seemed to be able to access your soul, and then so rejoice at the goodness she would find there. Her love of learning, her energy, her pixie smile and wonderful sense of humor were both contagious and inspiring. To have known Olga Isaakovna is to have been caressed by the touch of what is best in the human spirit. How we shall miss her!

And may flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

Chuck Ritchie

Chairperson

Siberian Bridges

(words from friends and colleagues and many photos at the website's page about her, Remembering Olga Fleshler)



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FROM PAPER TO ONLINE:

Switching to email newsletters and announcements results in significant savings. And the email version of the newsletter contains more information as well as color imagery. Let us know if we can change delivery to you.

DONATION INFORMATION:

- **CREDIT CARD**, go to www.siberianbridges.org and click **ABOUT US: DONATE.**
- **CHECKS** to “Siberian Bridges” & mail to address here.
- Siberian Bridges is a 501c3 non-profit registered in Minnesota. Donations are 100% tax-deductible.