



Siberian Bridges

Spring 2023 Newsletter

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Cover Letter by Tom Dickinson

March, 2023

Dear friends,

Hello! As you are aware, Siberian Bridges has been silent since our last newsletter in Fall 2021. We had a difficult meeting in March a year ago following the Russian Army incursion into Ukraine over the question of what, if anything, Siberian Bridges should say as an organization about that event. The discussion was tabled until the next meeting which finally took place nearly a year later.

The consensus of the Board on this subject is as follows: Siberian Bridges as a registered 501c3 charitable organization with its stated mission cannot make a statement or take a position about political events in the world. The directors are charged with supporting, furthering and protecting the mission of the organization and, therefore, may not act in a way that limits that mission. The mission of Siberian Bridges is “[Promoting] Contact and cooperation between the Trans-Baikal region of Russia and the Upper Midwest of the United States to development and encourage mutual understanding and respect.” Our contacts and partners in Russia do not represent their government or its policies, and we on the American side do not represent our government or its policies. Our work is explicitly about contact between people and organizations of our two nations only as long as those contacts develop and encourage mutual understanding and respect. Our role is a precious and fragile one. Each of us directors is a human with opinions and thoughts, but we limit our expression of those in our directorship roles to create a space where any American and any Russian can feel comfortable approaching us to provide a respectful frame for contact. We are the round table of meeting with no head or foot.

I had an experience that drove home for me the importance of Siberian Bridges, and why it is only valuable if it remains neutral. It was a taxi ride in Chita in 2019. Our dear friends Olga Fleshler and Elena Pishcherskaia arrived in a taxi to pick me up in the city center, and we were then driving out of the city to a birthday party at a big restaurant. They occupied the back seat, so I climbed into the front with the driver. On saying “Hello” in Russian, he immediately knew I was not a native speaker and asked where I was from. I said I was American. He responded rather curtly, “Why are you here?” I told him why in my simple Russian, probably with too much detail: I had been coming for 30 years, I had friends here, and I came as the president of a little NGO that helped with an orphanage in Petrovsk-

Zabaikalsky among other projects. He said, “Well... You’re different.” And that was the extent of the conversation. After we arrived at the restaurant, Olga and Elena told me the rest of the story. On the drive to pick me up, the driver went on passionately about “the Anglos” and how they were the big problem in the world and enumerated various reasons why. When they arrived at my location, he asked who they were waiting for, but they just replied, “You’ll see!” And, what do you know, I turned out to be one of those “Anglos” he despised! However, once he met and learned only a little bit about me, he had to make at least a small revision in his thinking. Siberian Bridges effectively gave him a chance to see things a little differently. I have made it my goal for Siberian Bridges to provide a service recognized by both Russians and Americans to be able to create situations in which any position is welcomed and respected, and gaining the trust of a person like this taxi driver will be evidence of success in achieving this goal.

In these troubled times when passions run high and opinions are often based on not enough information, especially not the vital information received by meeting face to face, an organization that acts as a “bridge between” provides a precious and invaluable service. Many Americans harbor anti-Russian feelings right now, just as many Russians harbor anti-American feelings. Yet, both of our cultures prize hospitality and friendship and open-minded listening, and both of our cultures are proud of our histories and our accomplishments and hope that others will respect what we each cherish.

I hope this, the most difficult moment in its 29 years, can be an opportunity for Siberian Bridges to mature into its best and most consequential role as such a “bridge between” or “round table of meeting.” We’ve begun this work during the past 30 years with friends, but now hope that even that taxi driver might become curious, along with Americans feeling distrust and dislike of Russians, and hope they may choose to use our service to meet and “drink tea together.” In this way, we can find out more about each other than we already know, soften some edges, salve some passions, and build peace between us and around us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Tom Dickinson".

Tom Dickinson

President and Founder

February 2023 Update

- We were able to deliver our 2022 grant to the **Unity Children's Center in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky** even though visits this past summer were not possible. We hear from them very regularly when they celebrate the many holidays of Russia. In the fall, there was September 1, "Knowledge Day" and always the first day of school in Russia, Teacher's Day, the Center's 60th Anniversary Celebration and the town's Decembrist Festival. We learned about their New Year's celebrations and the arrival at the Center of "Father Frost" (much like our Santa Claus) and more recently annual commemorations of seminal events of World War II, the Siege of Leningrad and the Battle of Stalingrad from which point the tide turned toward the defeat of the Nazis. In 2022, our favorite, **Natalia Skliarova**, retired after a long and transformative tenure as Director of the Children's Center. Not long after that, she was back at the Center, now as a special education teacher. Her interim replacement is **Lyubov Kuznetsova**, drawn from the staff that Natalia developed as Director.
- The project by **Irina and Michael Shipley** to support and mentor residents of Chita area orphanages and those leaving those orphanages, continued across 2022 and Siberian Bridges continued to support that effort financially. The project's future is not clear as we have learned that Irina and Michael are moving to California in the next months to be near their two grown married children living there and to help raise their grandchild! They continue to support the (mostly) young men with whom they've made connections through mentoring and help across the past 10 years and more. We'll learn in the coming months how we can continue to support their wonderful hands-on straight-from-the-heart effort of the past years.
- **Irene Duranczyk** and **Elena Pishcherskaia** again led the annual International Students Day Video Get-Together for college students on November 16, 2022. This was its sixth year, its biggest turnout, and technically, the smoothest yet. Congratulations! Irene's group at the **University of Minnesota**, Elena's group drawn from her institution, the **Chita Institute of Baikal University**, were joined again by students at **Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China** and a new addition, students from **Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda**! Over 150 students participated in this social and online friendship developing event. For the first time, the Legislative Assembly of Zabaikalsky Krai in Chita officially supported this friendship conference and the Head of the Assembly came to the conference room in Chita to greet the participants personally. Siberian Bridges is happy and proud to say it actually played no part in the organization or the yearly maintaining of this wonderful tradition! Our connection to it represents an ideal of ours: we helped get the thing started, came up with ideas, did some hands-on work when asked, and happily showed up to the events, but it is all theirs! It is a beautiful example of Siberian Bridges acting essentially as the forum where such contact can be made. We are very proud of Irene, Elena and the leadership in Changchun and Kampala as well as their students for the 2022 conference!
- It has been a year of changes at Siberian Bridges. Three Board members departed, Judy Boudreau retired as Secretary and Treasurer and we acquired a new Board member:

- **Irene Duranczyk** had been a longtime Ex-Officio member of the Board. She is a Professor at the University of Minnesota, She was on the first tour by Siberian Bridges in 2014 during which she worked to establish institutional relationships with Zabaikalsky State University and the Chita Institute of Baikal State University. She and her partner, Tom Lonergan, joined the 2018 Siberian Bridges tour as well. Along with Elena Pishcherskaia at the Chita Institute, they developed, and continue to maintain and expand the International Students Day Video Conference (November 16) that occurred for the sixth consecutive year in November 2022. This lively academic relationship also includes student interactions in late winter on study topics typically relating to economics and country studies. Professor Duranczyk hosted Olga Flesher and Elena Pishcherskaia in her home on their 2019 visit to the US.



Departed Board members JANET STEWART, left, KEVIN BRONDUM, next to her, IRENE DURANCZYK, on the right. (Former volunteer, Isabella Saldana Haworth is to the left of Irene).

- **Janet Stewart** left the SB Board. A Russian major who'd spent several months teaching English in the western part of Russia, we met Janet when she volunteered to be an English teacher at a summer English camp outside Chita in 2016. While it proved not to be an ideal teaching situation (to put it mildly), Janet's positivity and intrepid nature made the most of it. On returning to the US she joined our Board for her "Russian fix."
- *Irene and Janet left the Board during and following our March 2022 meeting when the Board did not find consensus on a statement regarding the situation in Ukraine. We are grateful for their support and enthusiasm for the Siberian Bridges mission and projects and for their tenures on the Board. Their energy, intelligence and devotion are missed!*
- **Kevin Brondum** has also left the Board. A Russian major with a graduate degree in Political Science, Kevin also taught English in Russia for several months. He joined the Board because of his interest in Russia. He worked hard to secure a Eurasia Foundation grant for research on healthcare for native populations. While his efforts did not result in a grant, the project was a great addition to the kind of projects Siberian Bridges can be working on. Kevin left the Board a few months ago when he moved to Myanmar with his girlfriend as she followed a job opportunity. All best to you, Kevin, and thank you for your work with Siberian Bridges!

- **Judy Boudreau** is retiring as Secretary and as Treasurer. Judy joined Siberian Bridges around 2003 when it consisted of only Tom and Tanya Puchkova, the last Executive Director of the organization's first phase. Tanya left in 2005. If Judy were not helping him, Tom would have quit the project altogether at that time. With her moral support, and being the only other person in the organization at the time, Tom made "one last trip" to Chita in 2007 to get support and possible leadership from the Russian side to help Siberian Bridges survive. After that trip, Siberian Bridges was renewed through the expertise of Jack Rendler, longtime human rights professional located in Minneapolis, who volunteered to try to revive SB. His effort was



JUDY BOUDREAU with her sons Remi and Croy

- successful, and the long, and short it was that in 2009, Siberian Bridges was re-launched with a revamped mission statement and a new Board with Chuck Ritchie as Chair. Through all these changes Judy was enthusiastic and steadfast as Board Member, Secretary and Treasurer. She travelled to Chita in 2012 with Chuck and again in 2018 on the second SB tourist trip. Heartfelt thanks to you, Judy!

- **Joe Huebsch** joins the Siberian Bridges Board this month. A resident of Golden Valley, he is a friend of Tom's through exercise, sharing the same personal trainer with whose group they work outdoors throughout the year. His background is in Engineering and Law and he is a partner in a Minneapolis law firm focussing on intellectual property law. He teaches Sunday School to 5th graders. He's married to Katy and they have two daughters, Amelia, at Iowa State, and Gretchen, graduating high school this June, as well as two bulldogs and two cats. Besides his character, intelligence and good nature, Joe's curiosity about Siberian Bridges and his desire to travel to Siberia on one of SB's tours led to his being invited to join the Board. He hopes to go to Chita in summer 2024.



JOE HUEBSCH

Some Celebrations at the Unity Children's Center in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky

Over the seasons the staff at the Children's Center remembers us and sends photo collections and descriptions of the many national and social holidays celebrated at the Center. (Russia loves its holidays!) Here are photos from a sampling of such events from the past year.



New Year's. Celebrated much like the secular part of American Christmas with Father Frost, gift giving, cookies, etc. They also dress in costumes and there are additional characters, importantly the Snow Maiden who joins Father Frost.



Children's Day, June 1st (last day of school is traditionally May 31)



March 8, International Women's Day



“Wide” Maslenitsa February 27th, last day of the week-long celebration, a Pre-Christian festival welcoming spring. Stravinsky’s landmark ballets, *The Rite of Spring* and *Petrushka*, both have story lines based on aspects of this ancient festival. Above, the children dance around the bonfire that burns the butter queen effigy. From <https://russiapedia.rt.com/of-russian-origin/maslenitsa/> webpage:

“On the pagan side, Maslenitsa was celebrated on the vernal equinox day. It marked the welcoming of spring, and was all about the enlivening of nature and bounty of sunny warmth.

On the Christian side, Maslenitsa was the last week before the onset of Lent....” Below, the children are eating a LOT of blini—pancakes—an important tradition on this play-filled day.



Remembrance Day, February 15. Like our Veteran's Day, for remembering veterans. The girls are in their school best for this solemn occasion.

Donors May 2020 – December 2022 *Many Thanks!*

NOTE: Normally we acknowledge our donors annually in our Spring newsletter. This list, however, covers two and a half years of donors. This is because our Spring 2020 newsletter was devoted to remembering Olga Fleshler. Since then, with the covid difficulties and then the international turmoil that has affected Siberian Bridges, we have not put out a newsletter where donors are mentioned until now. You'll see the names of donors repeatedly. This means they contributed in 2020, 2021 and/or 2022.

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

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