

Memories of the Beginning Years of our Russian Sister City Project

by Susan Zach

In 1983 the Soviet Union and the United States were in the middle of a Cold War. Long-range nuclear missiles were aimed at each other, and many of us were very worried and feeling helpless. To me it seemed so fruitless to think of destroying each other when we didn't even know each other! In my heart I felt certain that like us, in Russia there were people who would get up in the morning, brush their teeth, eat breakfast, get their children ready for school, and head to work. All the simple, routine activities that we take for granted but which are essential to our lives and which could be gone in the press of a button! Decisions for us on both sides of the Atlantic would be made for us by politicians and ideologues and we seemed so powerless.

Then in the fall of 1983 I encountered Ray Stroik while walking across the UW – Stevens Point campus. Ray told me about a project he had learned about where citizens of cities all across the United States and the Soviet Union would be paired in order to achieve one essential task – to get to know each other. This project was called the Ground Zero Pairing Project, and two brothers, Earl and Roger Molander, were pairing cities in the two countries on the basis of similar geography, population, and industry. The purpose was simple – we would travel to each other's cities and learn about each other. We would experience each other's lives, our simple routines, our work and professions, our ideas on raising children, our customs, music and celebrations. We would stay away from the political issues of the day, and we agreed we would never attempt to change a person's political ideology or religion. In essence, our purpose was to make new friends across our national borders.

Ray belonged to a group called the Peace Coalition of Portage County, and this group decided to take on the Ground Zero Pairing Project. I immediately became a member of this group because it appealed to my basic beliefs that in order to have peace in our world, we need to learn what we have in common and at the same time to understand and to respect differences in our cultures.

In May 1983 we mailed off a community portrait to the mayor of Rostov Veliky, the city to which the Ground Zero Pairing Project had connected us. This community portrait consisted of two boxes of information about our city, and most important, letters of friendship from our Mayor Mike Haberman, our UW Chancellor Marshall, our School Superintendent, Dwight Stevens, and other community leaders. We sent information on our hospitals, our parks, our schools, our businesses. We included mementoes such as fishing lures to symbolize our citizen's love of fishing on our Wisconsin River and tourist items such as souvenirs from our Point Brewery, one of the oldest breweries in the country.

I always wondered what the reaction was in Rostov Veliky when they received and opened this unexpected "gift" from the people of Stevens Point, Wisconsin! What we were most offering was friendship, and in December of that same year, our Mayor Haberman received a letter in response to our city profile. He called several of us from the Peace Coalition to go down to his office to open and read the letter from Rostov. The letter contained a willingness and openness to embark on this journey of friendship. We were elated, and we saw it as a hopeful and positive Christmas message of peace.

Citizens of our city got together and decided to make a peace quilt to send to the citizens of Rostov Veliky. A quilt is made up of many pieces of cloth and is a very traditional form of folk art in the United States. In 1985 we began each year in April to celebrate a Sister City Day, a day of hopes for peace between our two countries. At one of these celebrations in our downtown mall, we had children draw with crayons messages of peace on squares of cloth. Over the year these were sewn together into one large piece, and at the next Sister City Day. Citizens stopped by to look and to help “quilt” or stitch together the top and back of the quilt. This was truly a community project!

In 1985 Bob Price, the Russian language professor at UW – Stevens Point, took a group of students to visit Rostov Veliky. In 1988 Bob delivered the peace quilt to a group of citizens who traveled from Rostov Veliky to Moscow meet him. For many years the quilt was displayed in the Youth Hostel in Rostov’s kremlin. In 1989 Arlene Meyerhofer chaperoned a group of Stevens Point high school students on a “Friendship Train” trip to Russia, which included a stop in Rostov Veliky.

In 1989, Mayor Scott Schultz talked to us about his wish to invite a group from Rostov Veliky to visit us in Stevens Point. He wrote a letter of invitation to the Mayor of Rostov Veliky, and Tom Detwyler, Professor of Geography at UW – Stevens Point, and I carried that letter to Mayor Sergey Lebedev in November of that year. We joined a group from the Link Friendship House in Madison which was going to visit cities in the Soviet Union, and we talked them into stops in Yaroslavl and Rostov Veliky.

When we got to Moscow, we learned that the Peace Committee there did not recognize the Ground Zero Pairing Project, but only Sister Cities International, begun by U. S. President Dwight Eisenhower as People to People in the 1950s. We were determined to ask Sister Cities International to pair us with Rostov Veliky when we returned home, which is what happened.

Mayor Lebedev was out of town the November 1989 morning when we visited Rostov with our Madison tour group, and we begged the official tour guide to let us stay through the afternoon to wait for Rostov’s Mayor so that we could deliver our Mayor Schultz’s invitation. The guide agreed, and he even gave us one of his interpreters to help us throughout the afternoon. While waiting we went to the Gymnasium to see if we could find the English teacher, Valentina, who had welcomed Bob and Arlene in years past. While we were observing Valentina’s class, our guide went off to find Sveta, my pen pal in Rostov for 3 or 4 years. Sveta, who was a tourist guide in Rostov for French-speaking tourists, had requested a pen friend who could correspond with her in French. I had studied French for many years and gladly agreed to correspond with her. I was thrilled when the tour guide led Sveta into Valentina’s classroom and we could meet in person for the first time.

After the class visit, we returned to the city administration building, and there we were shown into Mayor Lebedev’s office. He read Mayor Scott Schultz’ letter and immediately replied that he would lead a delegation to visit us in Stevens Point in April of 1990. We were moved by the Mayor’s willingness to extend an arm of friendship to us.

The group from Rostov Veliky consisted of the Mayor; Dr. Diana Kasourova, a medical doctor; two teachers, Sasha Vyrupev and Anna Semyonushkova; a high school student, Alexander Shulepov; a journalist, Sergey Malay; and a tourism director, Gennady Smirnov.

To cement our sister city relationship, citizens from Stevens Point returned the visit by traveling to Rostov Veliky a few months later in the summer of 1990. This group was led by Mayor Scott Schultz, and included an optometrist, Dr. Steve Rollins; a medical doctor, Dr. Jim Zach; a teacher, Anton Anday; a journalist, Debbie Bradley; businessmen, Vern Holmes and John Noel; a UWSP business professor, Dick Judy; a psychologist, Clara Cleve; an interpreter, Natalia Detwyler. This group carried invitations and proposals to begin medical and educational exchanges.

Doctors in Stevens Point had contributed money to a fund to invite a primary care doctor from Rostov Veliky to come to Stevens Point to observe medical practices in our city and in Marshfield. The doctor chosen for this was Dr. Gennady Gainullin.

Our school district sent a letter, inviting the Rostov school administration to send a teacher to teach Russian in our city's high school. The district also invited one or two students to attend our high school as guests of our district. These projects continued for many years until it became very difficult for small projects like the Russian Sister City Project to obtain J-1 visas for teachers and students.

On this same occasion in the summer of 1990, Mr. Anton Anday, with the cooperation of the school administration of Rostov Veliky and the full support of the principal of the Gymnasium, Alexei Gavrilov, created the Summer English Language Institute. We believed that in our sister city relationship, as much as possible, all efforts should be reciprocal, so in exchange for Rostov Veliky sending us a Russian language teacher and students to study at our high school, we proposed to send two or three teachers each June to teach English for three weeks in Rostov Veliky. The first two teachers taught at the Gymnasium in 1992, and teachers continued to travel to Rostov to teach every summer through 2003. Since then, the teachers' visits have continued on a biennial basis until the present time.