



# PERM NEWS

Oxford Perm Association

Newsletter Oct 2014

## MESH 2014 – Pegasus Festival of International Youth Companies. July 24th – August 1st 2014

This year's MESH was once again a spectacular coming together of young people from Bonn, Leiden, Grenoble, Perm and also Lithuania, Croatia and a group originally from Zimbabwe. The Perm contribution came from "Neposedy", a group probably younger than previous visitors, yet giving a performance that was if anything even more stunning. In an adaptation of "The Little Prince" by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the young performers, particularly the two principals, combined an astonishing level of technical brilliance with an equally astonishing degree of sensitivity, character and sense of drama, a combination with such an emotional impact that surely many in the audience would have found it a struggle to keep their composure.

The finale, in which all the groups combined, was loosely based on the story of "Beowulf and Grendell" and took place in the Town Hall. We were treated to a feast of dance, drama, individual and choral speaking and a very atmospheric and highly original music and sound accompaniment. The show, if a little noisy and incoherent in places, was nevertheless a fitting climax to Pegasus' spectacular achievement in bringing together these young people from so many different countries to share in this amazing cultural experience. Many of the other events in the festival were well worth attending too. In addition to Perm's event, I went to performances from Leiden, Bonn, Vilnius (Lithuania) and Sisak (Croatia). They were all highly individual, taking us from a strangely sinister café full of shady dealings, through a gritty South American "favella" where the women grieve over the "disappeared" victims of a dictatorship, to a



psychiatric hospital where the odds are inexorably stacked against the “patients”, who gape and gasp from behind the locked and dirty windows, and, from Croatia, a play staged with the actors dressed in cardboard-cutout "houses" which come to life, speak and give voice to the dreams and thoughts of their occupants on their various floors, first gossip, then scandal, and then to something more sinister, prejudice, intolerance and, finally, disappearance.

However, the event that made the most impression on me was the Grand Debate. On the theme of how Culture is inter-twined with Story, it took the form of four short speeches from leading thinkers which were then discussed by some hundred young people split into ten groups. I was put into one of the groups and with no regard to age, country or background, was soon enveloped in Pegasus’ warm embrace and felt as if I was, for one magical sunny Sunday afternoon, a part of that great Pegasus family. When MESH comes round again in two years’ time, I do urge you to go to as many of the events as you can manage.

*Robin Carr*

## **Kungur: the Tea Capital of the Russian Empire**

If you’ve been to Perm, you may have been taken to visit the famous ice caves near the small town of Kungur, about 100 km south-east of Perm. There is more to Kungur than the caves, however. By the end of the 18th century Kungur was an important trading and industrial centre, renowned for its leather tanneries and metalworks, thanks to the opening of the main Siberian highway linking European Russia with Siberia and the Far East. In the 19th century the name Kungur became synonymous with tea, and the town was given the epithet ‘the tea capital of the Russian empire’.

My host, Elena, a sociology lecturer at Perm University, grew up in Kungur, and her mother still lives there. On the Saturday of my two-week visit to Perm, Elena, her husband Alexei, and their daughter Sofia took me with them to visit Mum and Granny in Kungur. We managed to fit in some sightseeing as well, including a visit to the museum devoted to the town’s trading history, particularly as regards tea.

Russia’s first encounter with tea took place in the early 17th century. In 1638, an emissary to Mongolia, Vasilii Starkov, was offered two hundred *bakchas*, or packets, of tea (the equivalent of about 65 kg) as a present for Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich Romanov. Starkov was unimpressed, saying that the tsar wouldn’t appreciate the gift as he wouldn’t know what tea was. The beverage received another lukewarm reception in 1654 when, during the first official mission to China, envoy Fedor Baikov refused to taste a bowl of tea he was offered, claiming that he was fasting during Lent (the tea had been prepared using butter and milk). An official delegation to China four years later, led by the diplomat Ivan Perfil’ev, received tea as a gift but sold it for a large sum while still in China, preferring to buy jewels with the proceeds instead. Gradually, however, tea found its way back to Russia and by the 1670s the word was appearing in Russian medical texts. Tea was originally seen as a herbal remedy, to be used for medicinal purposes. At this stage it was still prohibitively expensive.

During Catherine the Great’s reign (1762-96) the tea trade started to develop rapidly. Tea was still expensive but it was becoming a must-have luxury product for the status-conscious gentry. The word *samovar* is first attested in Russian in the 1770s, and by the 1790s the tea-drinking habit had spread to other sectors of the population. Tea imports continued to rise throughout the 19th century, boosted by the increase in the number of sailings between Russian and Chinese ports, a much cheaper method of transporting cargo than via the difficult land route. By the second half of the 19th century tea was being advocated as an alternative to alcoholic drinks, and the burgeoning temperance movement in

Russia advocated that tea should be given to troops instead of spirits. The Russian expression for a tip or (for tea) replaced the old (for vodka) in the 1890s, suggesting that the temperance advocates had had some success.

In 1840 Alexei Semenovich Gubkin established the first tea-selling company in Kungur. Up until then tea had arrived in Russia in the form of large solid 'bricks'. Gubkin was the first business owner to sell tea already weighed out in handy quantities and wrapped in colourful attractive packaging. In 1882 the firm's head office moved to Moscow. After



Gubkin's death his nephew Alexander Grigorievich Kuznetsov took over at the helm. He renamed the company The Successor to Alexei Gubkin, A Kuznetsov & Co. Over a period of fifteen years the company sold 300 million roubles' worth of tea and sugar and had branches not only throughout Russia, but also in China, India, Ceylon and London. By the beginning of the 20th century the firm controlled one third of the entire tea market in the Russian empire. Kuznetsov's successor was Mikhail Ivanovich Gribushin, another canny businessman, who scooped up the small tea leaves and 'dust' that were usually thrown away and turned them into solid 'bricks'. These tea bricks were used not only to produce a beverage, but also served as currency when trading with Eastern countries, one brick being equivalent in value to five tsarist roubles (to get an idea of what this is worth, a letter dated 1891 in Olga Yokoyama's book *Russian Peasant Letters: Life and Times of a 19th-century Family* mentions potatoes being sold at 25 kopecks per pood, a pood being equivalent to just over 16 kg).

All three heads of the tea company were philanthropists and took a keen interest in the activities of their home town. Gubkin founded a technical institute in Kungur in 1877, and persuaded Tsar Alexander III to become its patron. It gained a good reputation and work produced by its students appeared at an exhibition in Paris in 1900. Gubkin also founded a needlework school in 1878, named after his younger daughter Elizabeth, who had died early in life. The tsarina, Maria Fedorovna, was patron of this establishment. Gribushin founded a school for orphans, where they received an education and learned a trade.

My thanks are due to the director of the museum at 38 Gogol Street, who came in specially on her day off to show me round, and kindly gave me a guidebook to the town, from which much of the information in this article was gleaned.

*Susan Purcell*

## **Do the Russians still like us and do we like the Russians?**

So far 2014 has not been a good year for British-Russian relationships despite its being designated the year of celebrating British-and-Russian culture. Political events have overtaken many grand schemes for deeper and friendlier links between our countries. Having spent the last two weeks of September in Perm and the upper Volga region, I have been asked to write about the atmosphere towards Britain in Russia, and whether our twinning-links with Perm have suffered.

This Newsletter is not the place for discussing the crisis in Ukraine, but western media has been shamefully one-sided for months; only in August did doubts and ‘well-there-is-another-point-of-view’ begin to creep into the mainstream reporting in Britain. Of course Russian media, especially television, is one-sided because largely state-controlled, but from what I have seen and heard, the mysterious unanimity and anti-Russian line from our side is no less restrictive than what they are receiving. And, as Russians say, ‘The difference between us and you is that we know we are being brain-washed.’

If this one-sidedness concerns you, I recommend the American-based website, <http://www.russiaotherpointsofview.com/>, especially the contributions of the Canadian specialist, Patrick Armstrong.

At the beginning of the year, Oxford City Councillors sent a letter to the Mayor of Perm, carefully affirming joint concerns about human rights, and then expressing worry about new laws on homosexuality in Russia and how they might be affecting gay people in Perm. Mayor Sapko was puzzled and somewhat affronted. The new law which is more-or-less a copy of ‘Clause 28’ introduced into the UK under Thatcher and abolished only in the late 1990s has not led to campaigns against gays in Perm or any overt trouble. So why write to the Mayor of Perm? Bob Price, leader of the Oxford council, told me that since the anti-gay movement in Russia was very strong, this was a principled but very polite letter, which did not suggest that Perm was a centre of anti-gay activity.

There is much to be said on this matter including media reporting and typical attitudes to homosexuality outside Moscow (a city which is the source of huge misunderstandings about Russia beyond its ring road); personally I think the Mayor of Perm was right to be taken aback. However both city councils are now preparing for a visit from a delegation of Perm City councillors to Oxford to examine how we deal with ethnic minorities and interethnic tensions. President Putin has asked all Russian cities and regions to prepare innovative policies for the integration of minorities into the community.

Russians, like other peoples across the world, are very unwilling to let politics affect their friendships. Several people – not just in Perm – were worried that we would start feeling resentful towards them when ‘all Russia wants is peace’. They certainly believe that the violence and suffering in Ukraine has been provoked by the USA and NATO rather than the Russian government. I have spoken to dozens of people who see the friendship which comes from the Oxford Perm Association as evidence that ordinary people in Britain are as sane and as shocked as Russians are at the Cold War tensions which have suddenly been imposed on us. Nothing in this newsletter is as moving as the ‘Urals Story’ and Vladimir’s gift.

But one prejudice did reveal itself. Why should the Scottish referendum preoccupy Russians when they have so much else to deal with? Time after time someone would admit longing for a Scottish ‘Yes’ vote. ‘Why is that so desirable?’ I asked, puzzled. ‘Because it would ruin David Cameron!’

*Karen Hewitt*

## A URALS TALE – THE METAL CRAFTSMAN

We are just back from the September 2014 visit to Perm. In a trip filled with wonderful experiences, one small, unexpected event turned out to be quite special. When I filled out my original application for the trip, in answer to the question: “What would you like to do in Perm?”, I wrote that my interests are in Russian art and craft, but I had no idea what might arise from this.

However, my host, Natalya Kistanova, discovered for me a small yard of craft workshops just off Permskaya Ulitsa. One evening after the day’s excursions were over, the two of us went there, along with another member of our group, Alison Watt, to keep a preliminary appointment with one of the craftspeople, a lace-maker called Tatiana. Of course we couldn’t help but linger and chat, and look around her tiny workroom and shop, which overflowed with birch bark vessels, her own exquisite lacework, cloth dolls and much more.

So it was already quite late when we emerged back into the yard. Before we left, we were tempted into another shop, selling hand-crafted jewellery made from the beautiful stones of the Urals. And as we were going back out of the door, the proprietor told us that, before we left, we really should visit the metal workshop at the back of the craft yard. I don’t think we’d have dared if we hadn’t been pushed. But now, curious, we ventured through the rough wooden door into a dark and cavernous space, which reverberated with the ring of hammer on metal.

We were met by a lion. Full-size and magnificent. Beaten out of a single huge sheet of silvery metal. We looked around and one of the metal-workers came over to us. Would it be possible, we asked, to see him at work? It was the end of the day. We didn’t really expect very much. Just a hammer-stroke or two. But our new friend Vladimir gathered up a small flat sheet of metal and quickly sketched a design onto it with a black marker pen. A dove sitting on a branch. We followed him to the end of the workshop, where he placed the metal sheet onto a very large and solid wooden table. He rested it on a long, soft cushion covered with velvet, and began to work.

First he hammered the edges, to outline the design. Then he began to work on the body. As he hammered away, the shape of the dove began to emerge from the silvery metal. It was rather flat at first, but this was just the beginning. He worked painstakingly, beating the metal first from one side, then turning it over to check, and make adjustments. Then back again to the main side to beat it again and again. Imagine a painter applying a base coat to an image, and then adding layer upon layer, achieving more detail and more finesse with each layer. Thus did Vladimir work, always with an artist’s eye to the effect that he was creating, but his tool was a hammer; or, for the silhouette and the finer detail, a blunt-edged chisel.

Somehow, from these harsh materials, the dove emerged plump and soft, with sleek back and feather-tipped wings. For forty minutes we stood transfixed, watching this artist in metal at his work. Then, our ears still ringing with the hammer blows, we listened in surprise as he said that he would like to give us the dove as a gift. We felt rather undeserving. We had kept him late at work and he’d already given us a free demonstration. But then he said something which changed everything. Natalya translated as he explained in Russian that he was from the Ukraine, and he wanted to give us the dove in the spirit of friendship between our countries. He knew how to say the rest of it in English for himself: “Not guns,” he said. “Not guns, but peace.”

We accepted his gift of the dove, feeling very moved by this gesture of friendship, but

also by the sadness in Vladimir's eyes as he spoke, reflecting thoughts of his homeland and the terrible uncertainty over its future. I will always remember this special moment, and hope that our dove of peace will be a forerunner of a peaceful solution to the problems of Vladimir's troubled homeland.



In order to honour the spirit in which it was given to us, a spirit of peace and friendship between people of different nations, we have decided that the most appropriate home for Vladimir's dove would be as part of the Oxford Perm Association's permanent collection, so that now it can be on display at Oxford Perm Association events for everyone to see.

*Carole Richardson*

### **Forthcoming Events**

**On Wednesday, 29th October** at 6.30 at 6 Rawlinson Road (Karen's house), David Gowan will be giving an informal but very informed talk about the Russian Booker Prize.

David has been involved in various ways in Russia throughout his career in the Foreign Office and as an advisor to senior politicians. He is now the British representative on the Russian Booker Prize committee. The prize has been awarded annually for about 20 years. His talk will introduce us to contemporary Russian literature, ideas, responses by readers and translations for us. He is also happy to reflect on Russia in other ways once we have explored the Booker Prize.

Do come and bring your friends. Wine and nibbles. And let Karen know if you are coming. Parking is easy around this area in the evening.

**On Wednesday, 12th November** at 7.30 at Rewley House, the Association will be hosting its annual party for the Perm Teachers. This is always a very lively and popular event. Members are welcome to invite two or three teachers to a meal, or to an excursion on Friday afternoon or at the weekend. Wine and other drinks will be provided and we ask members who feel so inclined to contribute some finger food to the party.

*Karen Hewitt*

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### **Mining Experiences in Russia**

We are two of fourteen Oxford University students who spent eight weeks carrying out science internships at Perm State University this summer. Perm was a great place to live for a couple of months, and we really appreciated the opportunity to get to know people there and experience life in a different country.

As geologists, whilst based in Perm, we had many excursions out of the city. The highlight of these was a two week trip through Siberia; we visited mines and panned for gold in several locations, while staying in tents at some beautiful sites. Gold and other precious minerals were the products of many of the mines, but we also had the opportunity to explore how coal, clay, marble and asbestos were obtained.

Most of these were huge open pit mines, and, given a very Russian approach to health and safety, we were able to get up close to the mining machinery and view cross-sections that would usually be considered confidential in other countries and therefore off limits (the latter is very interesting if you're a geologist, honest!). Our favourite mine moment involved travelling 800m below ground to explore an active magnetite mine, for which we had to dress the part (see photo!).

Our main gripe about Perm was the tendency for the water to be shut off without warning (well, if you couldn't speak Russian and didn't watch the news it was without warning). Our last seven days included two without electricity and no running water at all, needless to say we were glad to be heading to Moscow and St Petersburg for a week of sight-seeing on the way home!

However, a highlight did come in the last week of our stay in the form of an afternoon of traditional Russian pancakes, made generously for us by Lyudmila Kadzhaya, who organised the internship; this was followed by a trip to watch Swan Lake performed by the Perm State ballet



In a Siberian marble mine



Near an active digger in an open pit molybdenum mine

company. Even the less-cultured among us appreciated the skill on display! Russian hospitality was again shown the next day by the Head of the Geology Faculty, who invited us to his ‘dacha,’ at which we were treated to a barbeue, water fight, and banya. Banyas are a Russian custom we took a while to adjust to, but a marvellous way of washing we now feel the UK really lacks!



All Oxford students enjoying Perm Krai’s scenery

Our lasting impressions are of incredibly friendly people who were very willing to help us however they could and however bad our attempts at Russian, a wistful longing for our days of 13 rouble trams, and a lingering taste of buckwheat. We know that if we ever return to Perm, we will be warmly welcomed back.

*Sarah Payne and Bethan Gregory*