

**THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW THE ROTARY CLUB OF EUGENE HELPED FORM THE
IRKUTSK, SIBERIA ROTARY CLUB IN 1990.
BY RONALD GIETTER (PAST PRESIDENT 2000-2001).**

In 1988, the City of Eugene Oregon and the City of Irkutsk, Siberia officially established a Sister City relationship. In the Fall of that year, the mayor of Irkutsk announced that he was coming to Eugene for a visit. This was a period in time when Mikhail Gorbachev announced an easing in the Soviet Union known as Glasnost and Perestroika. A small group of members from the Rotary Club of Eugene thought this might be an opportunity to discuss with the mayor the possibilities of starting a Rotary club in his city, the first since Rotary was kicked out of Russia 70 years prior when the Communists took control. The objective was to promote peace and a better understanding of each other.

In the Fall of 1988, a meeting was scheduled with the mayor and the following Rotarians:

John Alltucker, Rick Cleveland, Dick McClintik, Ralph Lafferty, Chuck Wiper and Ronald Gietter.

At the meeting we explained (through interpreters) to the mayor what we would like to do. He was very skeptical and kept asking us what we really wanted? We kept repeating that all we wanted to do was establish a Rotary Club in his City. We had to explain to him what Rotary was all about. We left the meeting with the mayor saying he would think about it.

During the following several months a number of delegations from Irkutsk came to Eugene for a visit. We discussed the same idea with them. Soon the idea started to catch hold in Irkutsk. In the Fall of 1989, the Irkutsk mayor returned for a visit and we asked for meeting. This time he was more receptive. We talked about setting up a Business Persons Club to resemble a Rotary Club made up of prominent men and women in Irkutsk. We had to get all the policies and bylaws of Rotary translated into Russian. Since I was the Chairperson of the Youth Exchange Committee from our Club, I asked the mayor if he would be interested in a High School Exchange between our two cities. He asked me to explain the process. When I told him that it was for one year, he said Nyet, I suggested six months, again Nyet, I suggested three months, he said Nyet. When I suggested six

weeks, he agreed as long as the students were accompanied by a chaperone. We arranged for four students to come here in the Spring of 1990 and attend South Eugene High School. In return, we would then send four students, with a chaperone to Irkutsk in the Fall of 1990.

We were very excited that we had a plan in place. We called Rotary International to give them the good news. To our surprise, they said that they would not go back into the Soviet Union without a personal invitation from Mikhail Gorbachev and by the way, you are on your own to get that invitation. To say the least, we were disappointed. We conveyed this news to our friends in Irkutsk. In the first week of November, 1989, we got a message from Irkutsk saying they had set up an appointment for us in the Kremlin (the week of our Thanksgiving) to ask Gorbachev for the invitation. We could not believe it. We then had to figure out how to get to Moscow in two weeks without each of us spending thousands of dollars.

Rick Cleveland's wife, Stephanie was a travel agent and she had an idea. She called SAS Airlines (the main western carrier to Moscow) and explained what had just transpired. She was told to wait a day and they would get back to us. The next day, SAS called Stephanie and said that SAS convened a special Board meeting regarding our issue and decided that what we were doing was of such international importance, they would fly each of us to Moscow and back for \$400.

The morning after we arrived, John Alltucker, Rick Cleveland, Dick McClintik, Ralph Lafferty and myself were walking through Red Square towards the Kremlin. We knew that not many American citizens had made this journey to the Kremlin we knew that we were walking through a crack in the door of history and did not know how long it might be open. When we got to the Kremlin, we were escorted upstairs into Mikhail Gorbachev's offices. A man by the name of Genrick Borovik greeted us. He spoke perfect English. He apologized that President Gorbachev was unable to meet with us. He said President Gorbachev knew why we were there and he was going to invite Rotary back into the Soviet Union. We spent some time going over how and where to send the invitation.

After we left the Kremlin, we flew to Irkutsk, which is four time zones east of Moscow. Getting on an Aeroflot plane with bald tires and very little safety in mind, was quite an experience. After two refueling stops, we arrived in Irkutsk at

3:00 A.M. We were whisked away to what we were hoping was a hotel, but instead we went to a large banquet dinner with prominent citizens of Irkutsk. After many rounds of toasting with Vodka and eating, we finally got a few hours of sleep. The next few days were spent meeting with future Rotary members of the Club and setting up the Club.

One of my visits was to a school where I met the four students and their chaperone who were coming to Eugene in the Spring of 1990. I met their parents and assured them that their children would be well taken care of in Eugene.

One of the items we needed to discuss with the Club members was to pick a volunteer project. Volunteerism was forbidden in the Soviet Union, so this idea was very foreign to them. Everything was supposed to be done by the Government, or should I say, not done by the Government. They decided that their first project would be to paint an old age home.

After arriving back in Eugene, we took a break for the holidays. After the first of the year, we started planning for the first ever Russian/US private student exchange. We asked the club for host families and quickly filled the spots. The exchange was only for six weeks, rather than our regular one-year exchange like we were used to. The students would not only go to South Eugene High School, but we would also be showing them the many beautiful sights in our area. Also, during the exchange, we would continue to work with Irkutsk in forming their club.

In April, 1990, the students and their chaperone arrived. One of the female students stayed with my family. My daughter, Lindsay and Yana became very close even though neither one could speak each other's language. We took the students to the coast and to the mountains. There were many dinners at Rotary member's homes.

After the students left, we started the process of interviewing students to go to Irkutsk in October, 1990. Ed King, a longtime member of our club, volunteered to be the chaperone. We got in touch with all the High schools in the area and quickly developed a list of interested students to interview. In the meantime, my daughter Lindsay said that she wanted to be interviewed. I told her that she was too young (12 years old) and that she was not in High School. She insisted on

being interviewed. My wife and I agreed knowing that there was no way she would be picked. I took myself off the interview committee so that there would not be a conflict of interest. I told the other interviewers to placate her and tell her she was too young. After the interviews, I got a call from a committee member that Lindsay was one of the best students interviewed and they wanted her to go. My wife and I were shocked.

Mikhail Gorbachev did invite Rotary into the now Russia as the Berlin wall had fallen in the Fall of 1989 and the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Our committee continued to plan for the chartering of the Irkutsk club which was scheduled to happen November 23, 1990. We let it be known to our club that anyone in the club wishing to go to Russia and be a part of the historic event were welcome, of course, at their own expense. We planned to tour St. Petersburg and Moscow before heading to Irkutsk. 18 Rotarians, spouses and friends went on the trip. We planned to meet with our students in Irkutsk, charter the Rotary Club and then all travel home together.

Our group flew to Russia in mid-November, 1990, toured St. Petersburg and Moscow with some of our new Irkutsk friends as tour guides. In Irkutsk, we had a charter party at a Chinese restaurant and the Irkutsk Rotary club was born. As of May 16, 2022 (when this story was written) there are 127 Rotary Clubs in Russia and the old Soviet Block.

The following newspaper headlines and stories were written during our efforts:

The Eugene Register Guard – “Group hopeful of exchanges with U.S.S.R”

Wall Street Journal – “The Eugene Oregon Rotary knows of 20 community leaders in its sister city, Irkutsk, Siberia, U.S.S.R who are hot to get a Rotary club going”.

The Oregonian – “Rotarians found club in former U.S.S.R”

I wrote this story because I am the only living person from our original group who was part of this historic event and I do not want it to be forgotten. There were many side stories that took place that would be too long to describe. I also have a scrap book of pictures, official letters and newspaper articles of this event.

