

MEETING ALEXANDRE I. KUBYSHKIN

I do not remember when exactly I first met AIK (as we old Chevchenkevites ended up calling Sasha). The events that led to our first encounter are rather simple, but complicated to retrace. I arrived in Leningrad in September, 1975, after a protracted process of applying, being rejected, re-applying, and finally getting a ten-month grant to study and do research at the University of Leningrad in the Soviet Union. Going to Russia to study had been my dream and my goal since the late 1960s, when I took a quick tourist-like trip organized by the France – URSS friendship society with a group of math teachers and their families. Russia (the Soviet Union) had been on my mind for a while, but that trip confirmed my deep attraction to the country, its language, and its people, and it solidified my resolution to study there (in Moscow preferably, at the university, in this fancy massive building looking down on the city from the Lenin mountains, the former Vorobjevskije gori). In these years, spending long periods of time in the Soviet Union was not easy for foreigners, and the paths were narrow. But I felt that I had to do this. So I studied Russian, first in evening classes, then at the

university in Toulouse, where I completed a Russian degree. My diploma in hand, I could finally take advantage of the remarkable Franco-Soviet cultural agreements that had followed Charles De Gaulle's official visit to the Soviet Union in 1966. Following the reiterated desire to reinforce collaboration that came out of this visit, France and the Soviet Union expanded the yearly exchange of scholars, teachers (lecturers), and students (a few dozens of each). In the fall of 1975, I was one of the happy ones who took the Paris – Moscow “express” (a figure of speech, since it took about 48 hours to complete the trip, with the exhilarating Brest – Litovsk experience of having the train lifted up and the wheels realigned to fit the Russian rails), and arrived in Moscow in great spirits. The only sad part of this glorious adventure was that I was assigned to the university of Leningrad, and not the University Lomonossov that had kept my dreams, and my actions, moving toward making this year in Russia a possibility.

This disappointment proved soon to be ill placed, because Leningrad turned into a place of wonder, and the year I spent in this magic city became one of the most important of my life. The group of French students that sat joyfully on the train in Paris had been divided, some staying in Moscow, some going to Leningrad, but in different *obshezhitje*. With my friend Frédérique, we ended up being the two French students placed in the *Obshezhitje* nomer 2, ulitsa Chevchenko, on Vasilevskij island. We learned later that this place was indeed very special, because it was the residence where the (few) American students and scholars funded by the IREX program were housed. We unmarried students, somewhat happy to be away from home, were impressed to hear that some of the Americans came with their families. It sounded odd to us at the time. But fortunately we were spread around on various floors (from first to third), with a number of roommates from the Soviet Union and visiting students from other Western European countries. Besides France, there were students from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the UK, all of us graduate students at some point in our studies and armed with a research project that involved spending hours in all possible libraries deciphering books, articles, and various archives. We were historians, specialists of linguistics or literature, economists, and other students working in the humanities.

When did I first meet AIK? It is hard to tell. The *obshezhitje* organized periodically get-togethers, either meals or dancing evenings, and most of us foreigners would gather, and sometimes some of our Russian roommates would appear. We understood that these young men and women were graduate students (*aspiranty*) who were pursuing various advanced degrees in the humanities or the sciences and that some of them were looking at perfecting their knowledge of “us” Westerners. I did not really understand at the time how extraordinary this opportunity to live in close quarters with “real” Soviet citizens was, and how uncommon an experience we were all sharing. But we got to know some of our local hosts, and they certainly were a wonderful group of individuals. Among them, Alexander Ivanovich Kubyshkin – Sasha, the tall, talkative, and joyful aspiring historian from Ivanovo – became rapidly one of the most welcoming for us. The “French girls” in particular quickly became very good friends with the large group of students from the UK, and Sasha was the roommate of Paul Barker, a sensitive connoisseur of Russian poetry, literature, and music, then absorbed by the study of Afanasy Afanasievich Fet. So Sasha became a frequent companion and an unending source of information, both on the Russian language, our *lingua franca* at the time, and on this puzzling (for us Westerners) and fascinating Russian Soviet society. What I remember best of AIK at the time is his amazing capacity to talk about films, spending long minutes describing in minutiae all the details of the plot, the frame composition, the expressions of the actors, in such a way that after listening to him, you feel that you had actually seen the film. To this day, I do not know of anyone else who can do such a thing.

One lasting memory of these Leningrad days took place sometime toward Spring, maybe when the wild cherry trees (*cherjomukha*) were blooming and the ice from the Ladoga was passing through the Neva – a gloriously sunny day, with a splendid endless blue sky, but extremely cold. That particular day, I had forgotten one of the peculiarities of the Leningrad weather patterns, the occurrence of wild variations in temperature from morning to evening. Tricked by the beautiful weather and a comparatively mild temperature early in the morning, I had dressed rather lightly. That proved to be a bad mistake, when sometimes after

midday I started crossing the Palace Bridge between the Strelka on Vasilevsky Ostrov and the Winter Palace. Most of us (Westerners and Soviet aspiranty alike) were working occasionally in the library of the Academy of Sciences (BAN), on Vasilevsky Ostrov, not far from the Leningrad State University main building on the Neva Embankment. That day, we had agreed with Sasha to leave the library early and go on to an exposition and have a drink afterwards in a coffee shop. That project nearly never materialized, because, as we were progressing on the bridge, up in the air on this extraordinary construction and fully exposed to the bitter cold winds coming from the Neva, I really felt that I would never reach the other side, that I would just die of cold right there on that bridge in the middle of the river. And next to me walked Sasha, hatless, his jacket open, gesticulating happily, and talking non-stop about some very important historical point of the October revolution, or, maybe, telling me of another exceptional film, and paying no attention to the fact that I was going to collapse from the cold. I think I was saved by the acute feeling of how ridiculous and funny this situation was.

When I left Leningrad, I had few occasions to meet with AIK again. We saw each other a few times when I was teaching in Riga some years later. But then his aspirantura was over, and he left to go back to Ivanovo and then on to Volgograd to start the new adventure of building the university.

After Riga, I taught in Poland for three years, a Poland that was placed under martial law in 1981, and trips to the Soviet Union were not easy. In Poland I met Bernie Koloski, a Fulbright professor from the USA. We decided to get married and I ended up in the States, a move that I had not originally planned. It looked like our paths with Sasha were not going to cross again. However, somehow, we both remained in touch with Paul Barker, and that's how Sasha got hold of me when he came to Kent in 1990 with a group of students from Volgograd State University. We talked on the phone a few times, and Sasha found a way to come and visit Mansfield. It was a wonderful thing to see him again after all those years. We both had changed. Sasha was at the time one of the "founding" faculty members of VolSU and part of the cabinet assisting the "old rector," Maxim Matveevich

Zagorulko. As such, he had the authority to meet with Mansfield's Provost George Mullen and establish the basis for the exchange program between Mansfield and VolSU.

This was a new beginning for us. We had the pleasure to work together on a new network of friendships and academic collaboration between the two universities, along with the satisfaction of seeing many accomplishments derive from that. Many students and faculty from both universities had a chance to discover their partner's facilities and way of living and teaching. Sasha came to Mansfield as a Fulbright scholar in 1996–1997 and stayed a year with his wife Tanya and their son Maxim. I remember again many exalted discussions about history, but this time they did not happen in the middle of crossing a freezing bridge. Preparing to teach a course in French history that semester, I had many fascinating discussions with Professor Kubyshekin, the historian retelling me with many details the final days of the Paris Commune, with the exact location of Eugene Varlin (a press worker, socialist militant, and union activist, member of the Commune) at every hour during the street fighting of the “bloody week”, and a moving description of his terrible death. We also talked at length about the Second World War, and how Sasha had used in his teaching the *Memoirs* of Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie (head of the Resistance movement Libération).

Sasha's stay in Mansfield created the impetus for a glorious reunion of the “Chevchenko elders” on the Mansfield campus in 1997, reigniting our passionate discussions of yesteryears and reasserting the unending friendship that united us then. AIK was invited back as a visiting professor for a year and later made many short visits to our campus. Bernie Koloski and I had the pleasure of visiting Volgograd several times since then.

Sasha and the VolSU/Mansfield Exchange Program by Bernie Koloski

On a hill overlooking the Mansfield University campus, the town of Mansfield, and the rolling mountains that stretch as far as you can

see, Sasha put his hand on my shoulder and said, “I didn’t know a place like this existed – a university in a little village. It feels like a health resort.”

That was in 1990, during Sasha’s first weekend here. Today he would see a bigger, though still small, campus and a growing, though still tiny, village. He would see, too, on the horizon, gas wells and giant wind turbines. The air and water in Mansfield remain free from pollution, but the region is going through a burgeoning industrial development. Northern Pennsylvania is becoming a major producer of energy.

The student and faculty exchange program that grew out of Sasha’s first visit to Mansfield had its roots in energy – in nuclear energy – in the atomic bomb and the Cold War. Mansfield University’s provost at the time was George Mullen, a physicist, and George’s close friend was John Dowling, also a physicist. John was known around the world in the libraries of American embassies and consulates for his articles about films in *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*. Librarians used John’s articles to select films for their collections.

John had become deeply concerned about the dangers of atomic weapons and was determined to do what he could to lessen tensions between the States and what had been until 1991 the USSR. He jumped at the chance to meet a visitor from Volgograd. He invited Sasha, George Mullen, and Monique for dinner, and, around a table, plans for a Russian/American exchange program were worked out.

VolSU’s first faculty visitor was Elena Inshakova – wife of now Rector Inshakov. Mansfield’s first was Larry Uffelman, chair of the English Department. For twenty years the movement of students and faculty has continued, producing the predictable ups and downs – and an impossible-to-count number of joint projects and enduring friendships. Today’s economic crisis in the States has put unprecedented pressure on academic finances, but the enormous energy that set the exchange in motion and sustained it for two decades will surely push it through rough times and take it in new directions.

John Dowling died some years ago, and George Mullen retired. Monique and Sasha continue their work. They can look with great satisfaction at what they helped create.