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A MARSHALL ROTARY CLUB NEWSPAPER

Belarus

Marshall Rotary Club's Centennial International Project 2004-2005

By Ron Ducheny
President, Marshall Rotary Club

For many years a republic of the USSR, Belarus suddenly gained independence in 1990 at the end of the cold war. With independence came all the responsibilities of a sovereign state. Its long history is one of domination by one superpower or another, the tragedies of terrible purges in Stalin's era, the genocide of World War II, and the nuclear accident at Chernobyl. But Belarusians have emerged with a steadfastness and a vital culture and sense of nationhood that will help them through the years ahead. Its ethnic groups live peacefully together in a socially tolerant society.

Belarus is a land of rolling countryside, dense virgin forest, and abundant wildlife. It stands at the border of eastern and western Europe and has a choice of futures, as part of a new Russian union, as part of the European Union, or as a center between the two. The official name is the Republic of Belarus and covers a land area of 80,200 square miles. (Approximately the size of Kansas). The population according to the 1994 estimates is 10,494,000 people. The capital is Minsk and the principle language is Belarusian and Russian. The major exports are machinery, chemicals and petrochemicals. The major imports are energy, raw materials, manufactured goods and wheat. The President of Belarus is Alexander Lukashenko.

Over the past decade or so, the lives of the people of Belarus have undergone the most radical changes imaginable. They have taken part in the dismantling of one of the most powerful empires in history; they have suffered the economic upheaval resulting from the changeover from a managed, state-run economy to a free market; they have seen the sureties of their lives such as guaranteed employment for life and free health care, gradually give way to food shortages, closed factories, and rationing; and, worst of all, they have lived, and



A village boy in Divin, Belarus.

continue to live with, the consequences of Chernobyl, the worst nuclear accident ever to happen.

Amid these upheavals, the people of Belarus are getting on with their lives and making decisions about their country's future that may either lead them back to union with Russia or to a future of independence and closer ties with the west.

Belarus has only three Rotary Clubs with two being located in the Capital of Minsk. One of the most difficult programs for the Rotarians has been assisting the children in southern Belarus that were affected by the Chernobyl disaster. The Belarusian government has limited funds to help the residents of the contaminated zones buy fresh produce or get the medical help that they need. Organizations from around the world, with Rotary taking the lead, have stepped in to help these people by donating medical equipment, establishing medical centers for monitoring health in the region, and providing trips abroad for the local children. Children leave the country and travel to other European countries during their summer break to breathe clean air to build up their immune systems so they can tolerate the fall, winter and spring

months breathing the contaminated air.

The Minsk Rotary Club in conjunction with a Rotary Club in Ireland sponsored a Rotary International Foundation matching grant to equip a Children's Sanitarium in Minsk with ophthalmology equipment to assist the children that received eye injuries associated with the disaster.

Like education, health care is free in Belarus, although it has become severely strained because of increased health problems after the nuclear accident. There has been a massive rise in the number of child thyroid cancers, a long-term illness. At least 2,000 children currently suffer from this disorder, which needs continuous observation and treatment even after surgery. One estimate suggests that the number of cases could rise to 10,000 with a possible 1,000 deaths. There has also been a general decline in the health of children. At present, the infant mortality rate in Belarus is twice that of the United States. HIV has also become a serious problem partly due to a homegrown drug that is used with non-sterilized needles.

Education is compulsory in Belarus between the ages of 7 and

17. Preschool education is subsidized by the state. Up to 60 percent of the children attend nursery school. School costs and textbooks are paid for by the state. Teaching is largely in Russian, although Belarusian has been reinstated. The English language is taught until fifth grade then the student can decide whether to continue learning English or not.

At the age of 15, students can continue with their academic studies or change to a vocational or specialist school of some kind. Children with particular aptitudes can attend schools dedicated to music, foreign languages, math, science or sports. The vocational schools include schools of car maintenance, building, teacher training, machine building, radio technology, and many others. Sports schools are very important in Belarus with 64 in Minsk alone. (Belarusian athletes received 13 medals during the 2004 Olympics). There are also specialist schools for athletics, horse riding, fencing, and gymnastics.

You may be wondering at this point what my interest is in Belarus and the rest of the story! See the article "The Egnatuks meet the Ignatuks" on the following pages.

The Egnatuks meet the Ignatuks

By Ron Duchenev
President, Marshall Rotary Club

On November 6th, 2001 an e-mail was received at Albion's web-site, addressed to Frank Passic, Local Historian in Albion from a Sergei Ignatuk, Kobrin, Belarus. "Dear sir Frank Passic, My surname is Ignatuk. I live in Belarus. Last year I was interested in my geneology tree. I collected and kept documents, photos from which I have learned that in the beginning of 20th century my ancestors have left in the USA. My grandfather was born in America. His father Alexander was the oldest son, was sent to Russia, under an order of his mother Helen E (I)gnatuk, with his wife and children, as I assume with purpose to buy the ground there. The years had passed but the family couldn't unite because there was the Revolution, the Civil war, the death of Alexander's wife and so on. His mother, two brothers, and a sister had remained in America."

"On the photos of an family Egnatuk after coming in America, which was published on the site www.albionmich.com, I have come to the conclusion that I am on correct way. (My great-grandfather Alexander Egnatuk is in the right upper corner)."

"Dear Frank Passic, will you please help me search for documents, material, photos of my ancestors stayed on the American

ground and also their descendants living now in USA, of course if they'll agree. Please answer my e-mail. Yours sincerely, Sergei Ignatuk."

This e-mail was passed along to Mike Egnatuk, my wife's uncle, and Mike shared it with all of our family members. After a year and one-half of communicating with Sergei, ten family members planned a three-week trip to Poland, Belarus and Russia to meet my wife's long lost relatives.

The journey began July 17th, 2003 with our first stop in Warsaw, Poland. Jo knew a relative lived in Poland and we thought that would be a good starting point. Upon our arrival and after we checked into our hotel, Jo made contact with the granddaughter of Alexander, Janina Kuriata (Nina). Fortunately, the bartender at the hotel spoke English and was our translator. When Jo identified herself, Nina started crying. We asked her if she could come to our hotel to meet us. She stated she was in ill health and that Warsaw was three hours away from her home. After a brief conversation, Jo said she would call her back if we could find an interpreter and transportation to her village. We called the touring company that met us at the airport to arrange the trip and they said they could not do it. Not enough notice. So we inquired at the hotel desk and they gave us a number of a touring company and we called



Ron Duchenev with two girls that could speak English. They were doing mandatory community service required of their public school.

them. The company assured us they could do the trip and provide an interpreter. So we arranged for a pick-up at 8 a.m. the next morning.

Promptly at 8:00 a.m., the van arrived with the interpreter, Agnes. Agnes was an excellent interpreter and friend. She fit in like one of the family. We gave her the address and the driver departed for Ludwikowice, Poland. After a little trouble locating the flat where Nina lived, we arrived to a joyous welcome by Nina, her daughter Anna, son-in-law Zenon, and grandson Tomak. Of course, we arrived just in time for lunch, which was promptly prepared and served.

Ten visitors in a flat built for two in July made us appreciate our

homes in America. Despite the close quarters and warm temperature, the meal was fantastic and the friendship very humbling. After a three-hour visit and many photos taken and shared, Jo presented Nina with a picture album of all the Egnatuks in America. Jo also received some old photos Nina had of the family. After a tearful departure, we returned to our hotel that evening.

On the morning of the fourth day, we departed via train to Brest, Belarus, just east of the Poland border. Our destination was Kobrin, an hour east of Brest. Since no rail service was available to Kobrin, our travel agency

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District Governor writes to Marshall club

District Governor Gayland L. Tennis sends this message:

"As we approach the fall season of our 100th anniversary of Rotary, it is indeed heartening to see Rotary in action throughout the world. We continue to combat the scourge of polio and are not surprised that the struggle to eradicate this disease is more difficult as we near our goal. We have also embarked on a four part effort under the leadership of Rotary International President Glenn Estess to assist in every way our extended family of Rotary, improve all aspects of health world wide, enhance the cause of literacy and provide potable water to every inhabitant of our planet.

"I am especially moved as I see

spontaneous club to club cooperation ongoing in all areas of our district to accomplish projects in our communities that we had heretofore thought too large for a single club to tackle. The good will and enthusiasm that these joint projects are creating is truly in the spirit of Rotary and entirely appropriate for our 100th birthday.

"Good work, Rotarians of District 6360!"
— Gayland Tennis,
District Governor

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A group of children that live in the same apartment building that Alexander and Ludmilla Ignatuk live in. Ron was seeing how well they spoke English. Standing, in back, Mike Egnatuk.

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arranged for van transfer to Kobrin. Upon our arrival, we were met by Natalia Padalko, our next assigned interpreter. As we gathered in the parking lot, a group of about eight people started smiling. I knew immediately that they were the relatives I so looked forward to meeting. What a great reception. Sergei and Alina Ignatuk and two daughters, Alexandra and Natalia; Ludmilla and Alexandra Ignatuk (Sergei's parents), Irina and Pavel Rovneiko (Sergei's sister- and brother-in-law). Natalia, our interpreter, immediately started earning her money.

I must tell you about Natalia, our interpreter. Natalia was very well spoken in English. She stayed with us from morning until we were tucked in at night. She stayed in our hotel and she attended all the family events, ate meals with us and was a super person. We often thought without Natalia our trip would not have been as meaningful. The Ignatuk family knew very little English and it would have been difficult to communicate. Unfortunately a few months after our return home, Natalia disappeared. We have not been able to locate her via e-mail or regular mail.

We arrived in Kobrin, checked into our hotel, took a brief rest and then our long awaited visit began.

Schools #4 and #8 in Kobrin employed two relatives, Tonya Kulichik and Ludmilla Ignatuk. During conversations with these two great people, I told them I was interested in doing some project for their schools as a memorial to the Egnatuk family in America and the Ignatuk family in Belarus. Tonya contacted Seraphim Syngalevich, Director of School #4 and a meeting was arranged between the three of us. Unfortunately, Natalia was not available to interpret the conversation but between the four of us we had a pretty good understanding of what was said and what was needed in the schools.

I asked Mr. Syngalevich what could Rotary do to help the children in the schools in Kobrin. What

type of project would benefit the children the most? He stated updating the computers would be the biggest improvement. Mr. Syngalevich also enlightened me as to the poor state of the children of Belarus. He also stated many young adults are leaving Belarus because of the state of affairs and lack of opportunities within their country. Also, there is a lack of adequate school supplies and equipment due to the scarce state budget, the economic crisis and the general situation typical of the majority of newly independent states.

Currently, at school #4 (1,000 pupils) there are 12 PCs and at school #8 (1,650 pupils) there are 23 PCs. The number of computers is far from sufficient; moreover all available computers are out of date as local producers manufactured them in the beginning of the 1980s. The computers are actually used only to train printing skills on the keyboard. The teachers are compelled to teach pupils in computer science only "theoretically"

The seed had been planted. This would be our club's international project during my year as president of the Marshall Rotary Club. This would also be a project to celebrate Rotary's centennial. Immediately I began developing my plan and what I would do upon my return to the USA.

While resting on the porch of the hotel, several teenage girls were leaving the hotel for volleyball practice. I spoke to several as they passed by and not one would answer. Natalia, our interpreter, informed me that the children of Belarus don't smile and she gave me the challenge of getting those girls to smile before our visit ended. So every morning and evening I would say "good morning" or "good evening" The third day some of the girls answered but still did not smile. In the morning of our final day of our visit, I said "good morning" and the group of girls answered and smiled. Mission accomplished.

After spending five glorious days in Kobrin meeting and visiting relatives, eating great meals (much

more than we needed), sampling their vodka, again, much more than we needed and sightseeing, we departed via train for Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia. There was not a dry eye in our group as well as our hosts. I guess we all wondered if we would ever meet again.

We were on a train all night to Moscow. Upon our arrival the next day, we were escorted via bus with our interpreter to the hotel. After checking in, we were given a three-hour tour of Moscow and I can tell you this particular tour company was glad to get it over with. The interpreter was all business and showed no friendship whatsoever. Everything was explained very rapidly and no time spent enjoying the sights. Moscow, a city of 15,000,000+, is all big city. We were scheduled to stay five days, and our biggest problem ended up being getting around with ten people. We'd had some miscommunication between the travel agency and us regarding transportation in Moscow.

There was also a relative that lived in Moscow, Polina Kashitsina. Polina is also the granddaughter of Alexander. Polina's daughter, Natasha, met us at the hotel after our whirlwind tour of Moscow. Jo had sent Polina our itinerary before we left the USA so they knew when we would arrive at the hotel. Natasha invited us to Polina's flat for supper. She lived about six miles from the hotel

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Rotary Officers: Ron Duchenev, president;
Lou Giannunzio, vice-president; Julia Schafer, treasurer;
Sue Moore, secretary; Directors: Cherie Riser,
Jim Rzepka, Jay Larson, John Yakimow, Dan Stulberg,
Paul Beardslee, Karin Hayes.

Rotary Extra Committee: Article chair – Doug Webb;
Advertising chairs – Dan Stulberg, Joanna Johnson;
Sales chair – Kevin Hershock.

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and we had to take the subway. Now, Moscow has one of the most beautiful subways in the world. Located deep underground (the Russians build the subways to be used as air raid shelters), all the walls and ceilings are painted murals. Very busy and very clean. Upon our arrival at Polina's, we were served an excellent meal. I always felt a little guilty because I knew these people could not afford to feed us but they always went all out. Polina had purchased one of the most beautiful decorated cakes I've ever seen and it tasted wonderful as well.

After supper, the family took us on a walking tour of their neighborhood and City Park. One of the biggest parks I've ever seen. Beautiful waterfalls, monuments and even carnival rides inside this magnificent park. I was quite surprised by the number of teens

drinking beer all over the park and the police looking the other way. After a couple hours sightseeing, we returned to the subway for our return trip to the hotel. Day one in Moscow was long and exciting.

This was the only time we saw Polina and her family. Polina and her daughter worked during the day and it was just too difficult to travel that far in the evening. They came to the train station the day we departed Moscow to see us off but they arrived after we departed for St. Petersburg. Once again, we all felt guilty we were not able to spend more time with them.

We spent a total of five days in Moscow and visited Red Square, the Kremlin and most of the interesting sights around central Moscow. Of course we got our share of souvenirs during our many shopping trips. Russian artifacts are beautiful and very reasonably priced.

We arrived in St. Petersburg July 31st for a five-day visit. We were very fortunate to land in a newly built hotel with air conditioning. Our tour guide and driver were much more accommodating than in Moscow. They did an excellent job bussing us around to all the unique sights in St. Petersburg. Apparently the government spent \$300,000,000 beautifying the city for its 300-year anniversary. It was one of the most beautiful cities I've ever been to. After our visit, we left for Helsinki, Finland for a one-day visit before we returned home.

Upon returning home, I immediately began researching ways to fund my plan for the schools in Kobrin. I contacted Rotary International for literature on their matching grants. After reviewing the information, I found one requirement for a Humanitarian grant in another country was getting a host Rotary Club in the receiving country to sponsor the project. With the help of Rotarian Peggy Day, Assistant Governor of District 6360 and member of the Marshall Rotary Club, I located the Minsk Rotary Club in Belarus via the Internet. I contacted the president of the club, Sergey Filippov via e-mail with an outline of my proposed program. Rotarian Filippov reviewed the information, presented it to his Board of Directors and it was approved in January 2004. The incoming president in July, Vladimir Rubezhansky, promptly sent a letter of endorsement for the program.

In President Rubezhansky's letter of endorsement he stated, "A team of two Minsk Rotarians (Igor Velichansky and Petr Shulga) went to Kobrin (300 km from Minsk) to learn the site of the probable project on the spot in the beginning of May. They visited both schools and examined the buildings, classrooms, and facilities for studies, sports and extra class activities of children. The Rotarians had talks with the Directors Seraphim Syngalevich (School #4) and Grigory Kondratenya (School #8)

and teaching staff."

He continues, "There are nine schools in Kobrin and the two above mentioned schools are recognized among the best ones, their pupils demonstrate a wide scope of knowledge in science and humanities. In compliance with the curricula of the Belarusian Ministry for Education, pupils beginning from the 8th Form (14 years) study computer science and get practical PC skills."

In conclusion, President Rubezhansky writes, "It is noteworthy to mention that the Rotary Club of Minsk members were strongly impressed by a warm atmosphere of friendship and understanding among children created by the teaching staff of both schools. In their opinion, the Rotary Foundation project could be well managed and successfully accomplished."

The total cost for this program is \$42,000. A matching grant was submitted in July to Rotary International for \$14,000 with the remaining \$28,000 to be raised within the Rotary Club and the Egnatuk family. Fund raising will begin as soon as the grant is approved if we are so fortunate.

Since this project will take us well into 2005, I will submit the results in next year's Rotary Extra. Thank you for supporting the Marshall Rotary Club through your advertising and contributions October 29th and 30th during our annual sale of the Rotary Extra.