

The Scotland-Russia Forum Newsletter

Issue 1, April 2003

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Welcome to the first issue of the Scotland Russia Forum Newsletter. The aim is to produce this newsletter on a quarterly basis, with news of the Forum and its activities and other items of interest to members, such as Tania Konn-Roberts' account of her family connection with the Russian emigration in Egypt and her recent trip there. The editor would welcome other articles of interest, and other items such as reviews of books and films. There is also an advertisements section (see the back page): for rates, contact the editor - details at the foot of this page.

Inaugural meeting

Although the Scotland-Russia Forum was officially launched at its first AGM in Edinburgh on 17 February 2003, the first social meeting was held on Friday 21 March at the German-speaking church at 1 Chalmers Crescent in Edinburgh. The evening was well attended, with a mixture of new and familiar faces. Those attending brought refreshments, most with a Russian flavour. A raffle was held, organised by Meg Luckins (see below).



The evening ended with some impromptu singing, led by Natasha Black (see below).



Russia in Egypt: a family story

The mass emigration of White Russians to the countries of Europe and the USA in the aftermath of the Revolution is well documented. That over 4000 White Russians found their way to Egypt during this period surprises many. Egypt was then a British Protectorate – a crucial fact in my own family history.

My grandfather, a colonel in the Tsarist army, had fought with the White Russians. Defeat brought the family to the port of Novorossiisk in 1920 where they embarked on the ss *Saratov* with no certainty as to their destination. They were never to see Russia again. In the event the voyage brought them to Alexandria. His son Dmitrii, my future father, was ten years old at the time. He remained in Egypt until he was 20, still living an encompassing Russian life based on the assumption that the insanity of the revolution would be reversed and everyone would return to the Russia they knew and loved. As far as was possible the Russian émigrés lived by the customs, language and social attitudes of Imperial Russia. One consequence was that my grandparents' cook for forty years, Mohammed, became highly proficient at preparing Russian dishes, a reputation that spread beyond the immediate family. So much so that when my grandparents died Mohammed was immediately taken into the service of the Soviet Embassy. A testimony to the power of gastronomy over political differences.

There were, of course, profounder consequences. Most of the original male White Russians came from military backgrounds, unsuited by talent or temperament to fit easily into civilian life. My grandfather, Anatolii,

was fortunate to find work in the office of a tram company. Some of his less fortunate friends, with equally glittering military backgrounds, made a living of sorts as tram conductors or truck drivers. Among his varied occupations my grandfather included that of hotel manager. My Uncle Serge went on to become a horse trainer and a noted picture restorer, a development from his talent for painting. Others could not adapt to their new circumstances, falling into a life of dependence. The role of women in sustaining families became increasingly important – as a general rule they were more resourceful than their men folk. Many earned a living as milliners, seamstresses and governesses. My grandmother, Elena, improbable as it now sounds, earned money by her skill at giving injections to patients in their own homes. She eventually became a part time film censor for the Egyptian government.

Most of the refugees never even bothered to learn Arabic. It was taken for granted that the Egyptian episode would soon be over. Inevitably, with the passage of time, movement to economically more promising countries, and the active pursuit of education abroad for young people, the numbers of the community diminished. In Cairo today there is not a single descendant of White Russians. In Alexandria only Tatiana Nikolaevna Monti, daughter of White Russian émigrés, remains to pass on memories of a life now almost wholly consigned to forgotten history.

My father came to adulthood in this milieu. Unlike many of his Russian contemporaries he came to speak fluent Arabic. His parents, worried by his embracing attitude towards life in ‘soft’ Egypt decided, through fortuitous friendship with an expatriate Scot, that a stint of Scottish education would instil ‘character’ and ‘backbone’ into a young man who appeared to be enjoying life in a manner not entirely to the approval of his family. This was common enough advice for the time. Many of the Protectorate administrators had been Scottish, and admired for it. The bemused young man, having little say in the matter, found himself shipped off to Edinburgh University. There he was totally ill equipped for the cold weather, and comically (so he assured me) unprepared for strange northern social customs. Nonetheless he adapted to his new circumstances in some style, made a wide circle of friends, and found romance. In Edinburgh he met my mother and married her ten years later by which time he had obtained British nationality and established himself in his chosen profession of accountancy. However, my father was not yet done with Egypt.

Fate returned him to Egypt when he was offered the position of lecturer in Economics at the University of Cairo. I was three years old at the time and spent the next nine years living in Cairo and Alexandria, mostly with my grandparents settled within the still lively, although by now diminishing, White Russian community. The people and relationships of this impressionable, formative and happy period have remained vivid and emotionally charged in my memory despite the passage of more years than I care to remember.

These memories were recharged when unexpected contacts led to communication with Professor Dr Gennady Goryachkin, Vice Consul of the Russian Federation and Director of the Russian Cultural Centre in Alexandria. His interest in the history of the White Russian community in Alexandria and Cairo had led to the restoration of derelict graves and monuments and to research into individual expatriate lives. I was able to provide needed documents and information to further this work, as well as a detailed personal family history based on a remarkable memoir written by my father, photographs, letters, and poems. My own childhood memories also became a matter for record. As a consequence of these contributions the Vice Consul invited myself and my husband to stay with him in Alexandria. We agreed to visit for a week in March – a few days ahead of the Iraq invasion as it turned out. Cherished and unconsciously idealised memories sometimes fail to withstand the shock of later realities. I wondered whether my visit would result in adult disillusionment. I need not have worried. What I saw and experienced - sounds, smells, sights, people, food, conversations - all reinforced my already strong memories of the happiest of times.

My visit was a curious combination of sightseeing, rediscovering family homes, paying familial respects, historical research, talking to interested individuals and lecturing. Guided by the Vice Consul we spent two days in Cairo doing the usual touristy rounds at a fairly rapid trot. We were accommodated at the villa housing the Itar-Tass News Agency where Khrushchev stayed on his Egyptian visit. Our solicitous host, the Itar-Tass local representative, interviewed me on behalf of the Agency. Descendants of White Russians who have retained their ‘Russianness’, as my father insisted I did, make for curiosity copy it appears. The distributed story was picked up by a Russian journal ‘Ekho planety’ which plans to publish an article and photographs of the visit. We were taken to the Orthodox cemetery in old Cairo where my grandparents and great-grandparents are buried. The Russian Orthodox part of the cemetery, due in large measure to the work of the Vice Consul and his success in obtaining funds to support his programme of restoration, is well cared for. The graves and wall tablets inside the small memorial chapel carried familiar names from a past now known to very few.

With persistence we managed to find my grandparents’ old apartment in central Cairo. Now, and unusually for central Cairo, the area is pedestrianised and softened with trees and shrubbery. My memory found it difficult to accept this new street scene, but it all came back – it was the right place. Being Cairo our activity outside the doorway of the block of apartments attracted interested passers-by. Questions brought all kinds of replies and further questions. Finally it transpired that one of the curious group was the son of the old caretaker of the block. When our mission was explained to him by the Vice Consul, an Arabist of note, he turned to me

and claimed without thought that I reminded him of my grandmother! I was moved, if sceptical. Then a shawled old woman passed by – she got a bit of the story and as she moved away said ‘she’s the image of her grandmother’. Some of the old caretaker’s stories about my grandparents and their family had been passed on to the son. These were retailed to the cluster of people gathering around, including the one where my Uncle Serge tried to persuade the caretaker’s son to enjoy the benefits of whisky. Knowing my uncle this had to be true – certainly the avidly listening group thought the tale hilarious.

In Alexandria we stayed at the Russian Cultural Centre – a large, attractive, villa in the heart of old Alexandria. Here again we had time to act as tourists – museums, the Alexandrine Library, ruins, catacombs, beach walk under a full moon, even some shopping. The class-conscious Orthodox cemetery, with its designated areas for the well off, the middling folk and the rest who often lacked full names on their graves, invoked memories of relations and friends still strong and alive in my memory. Here, too, there was a tiny Russian Orthodox chapel restored, like many of the graves, through the efforts of the Vice Consul.

Having achieved success in Cairo I determined to find where I had lived in Alexandria. Wholesale street name changes, renumbering, rebuilding projects and the lack of an authoritative street map came to undermine my confidence. A break came when I received assistance from the daughter of White Russian émigrés who had known my grandparents. She was the last and only link with the past I was interested in and, by marvellous chance, she had inherited and kept her parents’ old address book. The information there enabled us to establish reasonable coordinates for our search. We finally arrived at a quarter that set off memory bells, and there stood the villa, set amidst the upward growing new Alexandria. Another trigger for tear-blurring emotion.

Business consisted of lengthy discussions of historical issues and sources, informal talks with members of the Consulate staff and a lecture to 30 or so selected individuals in Russian. The lecture started as a lecture, but soon transformed into a one and a half hour question session – How was it that I still spoke Russian? What were my experiences in St. Petersburg and Moscow? What was White Russian life like in Alexandria? What did I remember of my childhood? What exactly did my work entail? Where did my grandparents come from? What was their status? How did my father manage to cope with life in the west? The oddness of being in Egypt talking to Russians about aspects of the Russian past that was only now being uncovered in a sympathetic manner never once intruded. At the end of the session I was presented with an enlarged photograph of my Uncle Serge in full dress uniform of the Cossack Guards supplied by the owner of the informative address book! This splendid military outfit is now in the possession of an American Museum.

The time to return home came all too quickly – but I am still reliving a range of experiences that were moving, uplifting and stimulating.

Tania Konn-Roberts, April 2003

The Forum's First Annual General Meeting

The first AGM of the Scotland-Russia Forum was held in the European Room at City Chambers, in the High Street, courtesy of the City of Edinburgh Council, on 17 February 2003. It was very well attended, and after discussion, constitution was adopted, subscription rates set and the first officers and committee elected. It was also agreed to invite Tam Dalyell, MP, to be Honorary President of the Forum, and Baroness Smith of Gilmorehill and Lt Commander Diarmid Gunn to be Honorary Vice-Presidents. The committee for 2003-2004 is:

Honorary Chairman:	Meg Luckins
Honorary Secretary:	Jenny Carr
Honorary Treasurer:	Ian McGowan
Members:	Peter Harvey, Tania Konn-Roberts, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, Helen Williams

Future Forum events

For more details of all events, contact Jenny Carr: 0131 662 9149, scotrussforum@blueyonder.co.uk.

- Sunday 27 April

Visit to the Fabergé exhibition at Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, on the Russian Easter Sunday, followed by lunch. This is fully booked. However, the exhibition is at the Queen's Gallery until October 12.

- Thursday 15 May, 7pm

Explosive stuff: Kamchatka and its prehistoric links with Scotland.

Faculty Room South, ground floor, David Hume Tower, Edinburgh University, George Square. A lecture by Dr Geoffrey Harper, botanist, ecologist, natural historian. Entrance £1 including wine.

- Sunday 25 May, 7.30pm

Russian spectacular.

Queen's Hall, Edinburgh. Musicians from the Belarus Army Band with guest artists from the Minsk Bolshoi Theatre and the Belarus National Folk Dance Academy. The Scotland-Russia Forum has invited the performers

to a reception in the Hope Scott Room at the Queen's Hall after the performance. Please book by Thursday 1 May.

- *Video evenings.*

A number of members have expressed an interest in these. Details will be advised later.

- *Kruzhok.*

Twenty members have expressed an interest in joining an informal *kruzhok* and a meeting was held on 15 April to discuss how best to start. Initially there will be a single group, with members taking it in turn to suggest a topic of interest and to introduce it. The language of discussion will vary between Russian and English, and all participants are encouraged to give the topic some thought before the session. The initial programme is:

Monday 12 May 'Organised crime' led by Vadim Goloubev (English); Monday 9 June 'Pop music' led by Chris Brandie (Russian); in the autumn, Monday 8 September 'Chekhov's stories' led by Neville Long (English).

Other news and events

Please send news of events, especially any outside Edinburgh, to the Editor (contact details at the foot of page 1).

- 2 April-22 June 2003

Gainsborough at the National Gallery, Edinburgh: the Russian connection. A current exhibition, Gainsborough's 'The Honourable Mrs Graham', explores the picture's personal, social and historical content. Mrs Graham's brother was Sir William Cathcart, a Scottish landowner and British ambassador at the Russian court. The exhibition includes medals presented to Sir William by Alexander I in 1813.

- Friday 25 April (Edinburgh)/Saturday 26 April (Glasgow)

The final concerts in the Prokofiev Series. The RSNO and Chorus, conducted by Alexander Lazarev will perform Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Russian Easter Overture', Mozart's 'Sinfonia Concertante' for violin and viola and Prokofiev's 'Alexander Nevsky'. Soloists: Mihaela Martin (violin), Nobuko Imai (viola), Jane Irwin (mezzo-soprano).

- Tuesday 6 May, 7.30pm.

Piano recital at Winton House, Pencaitland, East Lothian

Victor Ryabchikov will play music by Glinka and Chopin: he was born in Tashkent, studied at the Tashkent and Moscow Conservatories, and was voted Pianist of the Year by music critics of the Russian Press Organisation in 1992. Tickets £20, including programmes and interval refreshments, from Robert Steadman, Winton House, Pencaitland, EH34 5AT, Tel: 01875 340223, Fax: 01875 342042, email: rob@wintonhouse.co.uk.

- Edinburgh Festival

There are a number of events with Russian connections. More details in the next issue.

Notices/Advertisements

APPEAL FOR HELP There are two groups of families in SE Scotland, and probably others elsewhere, who give hospitality to children from Belarus whose health has suffered from the after-effects of Chernobyl. Some of these families would be grateful for help translating letters to and from the children and the children's families. If any Forum members would like to offer such occasional translating services, it would be much appreciated by these Scots and Belarus families. Contact: Jenny Carr (0131 662 9149, jennifercarr@blueyonder.co.uk)

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS OF RUSSIAN A new publication from the excellent Ruslan stable to accompany their award winning textbook and CD-Rom. Ruslan have just published a Russian songbook with CD. The Forum secretary has an inspection copy. Recommended. Further details: Ruslan, 0121 449 1578.

ARCTURUS EXPEDITIONS Camping, dog sledging and skiing tours to the Russian Arctic including Kamchatka, Taymyr, Kolyma and the Solovetski Islands, to appreciate the wildlife, archaeology and native people of these areas. Contact: Arcturus Expeditions Ltd, PO Box 850, Gartochan, Alexandria, Dunbartonshire, G83 8RL. Tel/Fax: 01389 830204, email: arcturus@btinternet.com, website: www.arcturusexpeditions.co.uk

THE PORT ROYAL HOTEL RUSSIAN TAVERN at Port Bannatyne, Isle of Bute. Waterfront Highland Inn with stunning views, golf course to rear and beach to front. Fine food and drink and socialising in a true recreation of a Russian Tavern according to literature and hard research in the Tsarist kitchen archives. Real ales and cider: CAMRA Pub of the Year 2003. 5 guest rooms. What more could you ask?! Tel 01700 505073.

300 CLUB: a project associated with the celebrations of the 300th anniversary of the founding of St Petersburg, involving designing and building a new public space there in discussion with the local community For details contact: The Manifesto Foundation for Architecture Ltd, Napier University, 18 Blantyre Terrace, Edinburgh, EH10 5AE. Tel: 0131 455 2808; Fax: 0131 455 2431; email: manifesto@napier.ac.uk

SPECIAL OFFER TO FORUM MEMBERS!

Scotland-Russia badge £1.50 (normal price £1.85).

Available from: Badgeshop, 5 High Street,
Edinburgh EH1 1SR 0131-226-4909

