

# **ALA 97-98 Final Report-- Michael Neubert**

**Fellowship to Ekaterinburg, Russia**

**September to May, 1998 (eight months)**

**Host Library: Sverdlovsk Oblast Library named after Belinsky**

During this library education fellowship I provided training to librarians in the Urals region related to various aspects of American librarianship, including library management, reference work, fundraising and grantsmanship, searching the Internet, and creating web pages. I was able to provide training to librarians in all different types of libraries in the city of Ekaterinburg: public, academic, school, and special. I traveled extensively in the Sverdlovsk oblast to teach Russian librarians (primarily public) and visited the neighboring regional centers of Cheliabinsk and Project information.

## **About the host institution**

The host library was the Sverdlovsk Oblast Library named after Belinsky. This library is the main research library serving the Sverdlovsk Oblast and the city of Ekaterinburg, a region of 4.7 million people (the city of Ekaterinburg has a population of 1.3 million) . Ekaterinburg is in the middle Ural mountains and is located about 1,000 miles east of Moscow. The library will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 1999.

The library serves the entire region with its collections of more than 2.3 million items. The library focuses specially (as do all libraries at this level) on collecting and indexing materials about Sverdlovsk Oblast and the city of Ekaterinburg. There are typical library departments, including a foreign literature department (with more than 80,000 items in its collection), rare books, interlibrary loan, reference service, periodicals department, and exhibits department. The library employs more than 230 staff with about 170 who have functions related directly to library work. There is an Internet room that has been funded (until May 1998) by IREX with three PCS and a server (where the library\web pages are mounted). Soon the library should receive a more powerful Sun server funded by the Soros Pushkin Mega-Project and begin testing an integrated library system automation package. After a package is chosen by the central Push kin Project team, the library will then acquire a copy and begin to operate with it. In the meantime the library makes use of a limited Russian automation package (not a true ILS) to catalog current acquisitions (retrospective cataloging has been limited and the card catalog continues to be maintained for use by readers--there is no direct access to a computer-based catalog for users at this point).

As noted, the library is soon to be 100 years old. The present building it occupies is a typical Soviet library building dating from the 1950's and is in poor physical condition. Reconstruction has been continuing for a long period of time--while I was there, some areas were painted and worked on, but the pace was rather slow. There is also an extensive addition being built behind the present building, which will more than double the size of the library but this has dragged on, for more than a decade. It continues slowly under a payment system that allows companies to work off a tax debt by agreement with the oblast government and the library by providing goods

and services (this allows projects that otherwise would not progress to continue but is typically a slow way of operating).

The library has a number of different missions and different groups of users. The building was intended to serve between 400 and 500 readers per day but now the growth in use of the collections is such that more like 1,500 users visit every day, which strains the library's resources and physical plant. The greatest growth has been among younger college students since many new programs do not have appropriate library resources. As a result the library took the extremely unusual move of cutting off first and second year college students.

Another significant activity of this library is to provide training for librarians in city public libraries in Sverdlovsk oblast, a loosely organized network of more than 1,000 libraries. It was in this department (in effect a training department) that I was located during my fellowship. I was able to travel several times with members of this department to visit remote cities in the oblast and to assist with lectures on topics ranging from the Internet to fundraising.

### **Original Fellowship Goals**

The proposal as prepared by the USIA post in Ekaterinburg included a great many possible desired activities. There were really, however, two main goals. One was to provide a program of study of different topics related to American librarianship to public, academic and other types of librarians in the city of Ekaterinburg and in the Urals region (reference work, management, basic Internet, etc.} .The second was to establish a training program that would continue after the fellow left.

NOTE: the Sverdlovsk Oblast Library was not the host library described in the proposal. That library, the Municipal Information Library System, joined with the city children's library system, except that the main branch (where the USIA funded American Information Center is located) became the Library Head of the City under the mayor of Ekaterinburg. This Library of the Head of the City was not interested in serving as host library and the Sverdlovsk Oblast Library had the initiative to do so.

### **Changes in Fellowship Goals**

Once I was well into the fellowship, it became clear that it was really only possible to pursue the first goal, that of providing training. Even that did not work out exactly as I anticipated: it was not possible to operate with a fixed menu of mini-courses or lectures--often a library would want a talk that was significantly different than my prepared materials {sometimes completely different). Thus preparing these custom talks took some time which was not anticipated-- however it was of course much more useful to provide to libraries what they wanted rather than to simply talk about whatever I had already prepared.

There were several kinds of training that I provided. One was the training provided to the staff of the Sverdlovsk Oblast Library, which was the most in-depth. Library staff took appropriate mini-courses that I offered, and all the library staff had the basic 3 hour introduction to the Internet. Staff from five departments also had training on how to create web pages that lasted over the course of several months and each of these departments developed pages that are now on the Internet. A second type of training was the training provided to libraries in the city of Ekaterinburg. I was able to train many librarians of the university libraries and the libraries of the

Ekaterinburg branch of the Academy of Sciences, and librarians of the municipal library system. I also providing some training to some special librarians, such as the librarians of the railway system and to school librarians, but this was not a large proportion of the total number of such librarians in the city. Finally I visited other cities where I provided training to limited numbers of librarians {usually public) on limited topics.

While the proposal stated as a goal to establish or assist in establishing a continuing program of librarian education, there was no way to achieve this as part of the fellowship. The host library already had a program of training which I was able to assist with while there but it wasn't realistic to try to create courses that would continue after I left. The one exception is the Internet use and web page authoring program at the Oblast Library--the program developed while I was there will be used with staff for some time.

The proposal stated nothing about a web site, but as part of this project I created a site on the host library's server that contains quite a bit of useful information related to librarianship, all in Russian. The site is at <http://library.uraic.ru/~neubert/>

### **Contribution to Host Institution**

The host institution, the Sverdlovsk Oblast Library, is beginning a period of rapid change-I don't think that the staff themselves at this point appreciate just how much change there will be. Russian libraries of this type almost certainly employ more staff than will be the case ten years from now. Many of the staff do not have the necessary skills to do modern library work. A new generation of librarians is coming in, but it will be a struggle to rebuild this library (as with most Russian libraries). In addition, the library will soon receive (as part of the Soros' mega-project-a modern integrated library system of foreign origin (there is no suitable Russian system). This will include a much larger network of up-to-date PCS and a Sun server. It will become necessary for most of the staff to work for the first time with PCS running Windows and to interact with a wider set of applications (most staff now work with narrow DOS applications).

One of my greatest contributions to this institution was to provide Internet training to every staff member who is involved in library work. This gave them a taste of their future, since the Internet and the software they will soon have for an integrated library system will be similar. I also conducted a long term course of instruction for the staff of five different departments on how to build web pages.

### **Publicity**

Towards the end of my stay I had a visitor, Barbara Morland of the National Reference Service of the Library of Congress. Barbara was funded by USIA specifically to come and present some additional workshops on various topics (I was the interpreter) .In connection with this quite a bit of publicity was generated on radio and TV. This publicity covered a range of issues, including librarianship in the US, librarianship in Russia, the role of public libraries, the role of librarians in society, and others.

### **Experience of living in another country** (Living conditions, neighborhoods, etc.)

Living conditions in Ekaterinburg were interesting. Since I have some experience with Russia, I was not especially surprised by most aspects of day-to-day life, however there were exceptions.

The fact that I took my family along with me meant that I was far more exposed to different kinds of problems (where to buy different kinds of products, how to get my children enrolled in Russian schools, etc.) than otherwise would have been the case. This made for a much fuller and more Russian experience.

The pace of life in Ekaterinburg is much slower than that of Moscow or St. Petersburg. While Ekaterinburg is a city of 1.3 million, it does not have the feel of a large city. The downtown area is reasonably compact and for the most part I traveled on foot or by train (the city is spread out over a large distance, but this is mostly large Soviet-style apartments and even larger heavy industry complexes).

Due to its role in the Soviet military industrial complex, the city of Ekaterinburg is noticeably polluted. Fortunately for us, if not for the local population, many of the worst offending industries have failed or are failing, so their level of production (and pollution) has been greatly reduced. Still, from time to time it was clear from the air quality that the city is a center of heavy industry.

Probably the greatest adjustment for me personally was to living in a place where the winter really does last six months. The winter lasted seemingly without end (in fact the spring of 1998 basically didn't occur--when we left Ekaterinburg on May 11, snow was falling). Although for the first 5 months I didn't find this difficult, I have to admit that during late April I was somewhat unhappy that we would apparently leave Ekaterinburg without having experienced pleasant weather (when we left the Urals via train and entered European Russia, the change was like night and day as we left a region where nothing had yet begun to leaf out or bloom to one where spring was in full progress).

### **Festivals, cultural highlights, other local color**

Much of the period when I was in Ekaterinburg was winter, which began early in November (in my opinion) and hadn't really ended when we left, in May. I certainly have a different appreciation for Russian life having lived through a Russian winter.

Russian life seems much closer to the edge and Russians are apparently much more willing to tolerate things that seem dangerous to me (and I would suspect, most Americans). This became clear several times. One example was during a festival in February called 'Maslenitsa'. The local city government in Ekaterinburg was trying to revive this old traditional festival, so they had a city-sponsored version in a park. This includes a number of events that you would never see in the US, including impromptu wrestling matches in which a number of participants were injured in one way or another (no sign of anyone signing releases of responsibility), and at the end, a mass fist fight (kulachnyi boi). Another example is the attitude towards seat belts, which is basically, "who needs them". I can sympathize with much about the Russian soul, but not this.

### **Travels in region**

I was able to make some trips within the Urals region. I visited the city of Perm (the capital of a neighboring oblast) for three days and provided training for librarians there. I also attended a conference in Cheliabinsk (another neighboring oblast capital) for two days, where I spoke several times at the conference about US library issues to about 75 librarians. Within Sverdlovsk

oblast I traveled to towns such as Kamenskii-Uralsk, Asbest, Novouralsk, and Pervouralsk with a group of librarians from my host institution in order for mini-conferences on specific themes-I would be worked into the program one way or another.

### **Memorable people met or worked with**

There were a number of persons that were critical to the success of my project. The most important was Marina Koptiaeva, the head of the department of innovations at the Sverdlovsk Oblast Library. Given that I was more or less dropped in her lap at the last moment when it became clear that the original host would not work out, she met my arrival (literally, at the train station) with enthusiasm and worked extensively with me to make the fellowship a success.

Another critical supporter was Nadezhda Tsypina, the director of the Sverdlovsk Oblast Library. While I did not have much day-to-day contact with Ms. Tsypina, it was clear to me that her support both within the library and in the library community of Ekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk Oblast was crucial. Valery Kugler, director of the Internet room at the Sverdlovsk Oblast Library, was invariably helpful to me and encouraging. His wife, Valentina Terekhoviah, head of the foreign literature department, was also very supportive.

Elena Alferova of the USIS office in Ekaterinburg was very supportive. Her background in librarianship meant that she had a natural interest in this project.

### **Comments on the Fellowship**

Value of the experience: I think at this point, having just returned, that it is very difficult to make a reasonable assessment or to put this into words. I feel sure that there have been benefits to me professionally and personally and that my family gained much from spending this time in Ekaterinburg as well.

### **Living and working in another country**

This proved both to be simpler and more difficult than I expect. Keeping my affairs in the US in order at a distance proved to be less difficult than I expected, thanks to help from others and thanks to email. Managing my life in Ekaterinburg was often rather complicated, although I expected many of the difficulties, I certainly didn't anticipate all of them. Russian bureaucracy complicated my life from time to time, but less than perhaps would have been the case in Moscow or St Petersburg. Living in a Russian apartment and buying only those goods available to Russians meant that I appreciate much more certain luxuries of everyday American life (the simple task of hauling home in bags several days worth of liquid consumables such as juice, milk, soft drinks, beer, etc for a three day period gives a greater appreciation for one's automobile, for example:

Continuing benefits-Again, it is difficult to quantify these at this point. I should mention that the Library of Congress has extensive contacts with regional libraries in Russia for acquisitions purposes and this fellowship helped in building those relations further. I also made many personal contacts that will help me in the future.

I hope that the training I provided will serve as a basis for the librarians I met to move into the future world of librarianship, one that will be very different than today.

**Acknowledgments**

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