

La Crosse—Dubna: People to People Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This research is about the collapse of the Cold War era, however it is not about war. Instead it describes and analyzes the importance and creation of international relations after major conflict. La Crosse Wisconsin, USA and Dubna, Russia became official sister cities over the last several years of the Cold War, and have been named twice, over the last 25 years, the best and most productive sister city connection by Sister Cities International. Through thousands of cultural and informational exchanges, this organization has fostered friendship and love on a personal level between two counties whose political past has been far from trusting or collaborative. My sources are based in primary research done both here in La Crosse and over the course of a ten-day trip to Dubna Russia this past summer in 2015. Over the course of around twenty oral histories in both English and Russian, ages ranging from the eighties down to the twenties, this project reveals the complex conclusion of the Cold War. Illuminating how ordinary people from both sides of the globe can overcome a psychological conflict based in suspicion and fear, to instead embrace strangers as family even while remaining physically far apart.

INTRODUCTION

The Cold War is frequently defined as a time of “psychological warfare”ⁱ and overall animosity, while others recall it as an era of apprehension sustained by the mistrust and competition of the world’s two dominating governmental powers. From childhood, entire populations were indoctrinated to feel anxiety towards one another based solely on political loyalty. Orthodox historiography of the era perpetuates a blame game asserting, “it was the Soviet Union who started the Cold War,” instead of a combination of rash actions by both the USSR and the United States.ⁱⁱ Modern critics are asking new questions at the forefront of Cold War studies as a consequence of the release of new primary information such as: “secret records, letters, directives, meeting minutes, logs of private conversations from Stalin, Khrushchev... as well as other declassified records from other top communist officials.” The opening of the Soviet archives in the 1990s as well as the Soviet borders allows for a refocusing of Cold War studies on factual events instead of concentrating on “conflicting and irreconcilable ideologies.”ⁱⁱⁱ Recent historians analyze the mentalities of both governmental bodies in control during this era of tension, specifically because “we no longer have to guess at communist actions, goals, and intentions, we can read their secret debates, private ruminations, and their own explanations... about what they did and what they thought they were doing.”^{iv} Even more enthralling is that several years before the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the USSR, international connections were beginning to strengthen regardless of federal disagreement. People, who were once taught to fear foreign affairs, were suddenly realizing they could not hide from them forever, nor did they actually want to. This decade of “of war and peace, of political state and freedom; a contest filled with threats of wars, a race for arms, a faceoff of opposing ways of life,” unexpectedly cultivated a curiosity for the unknown.^v

Moving Forward: Calling for World Peace

Adventurous, ingenious people like David Bell, a Russian-American English teacher, and James Baumgaertner, a local La Crosse physician, formed a long distance relationship based originally around a children’s project calling for world peace. In 1982 James Baumgaertner, a dermatologist from Gunderson Clinic in La Crosse, Wisconsin and an enthusiastic member of the local division of Physicians for Social Responsibility,* became increasingly involved in international projects supporting peace and the prevention of nuclear warfare.^{vi} By 1985 Baumgaertner “conceived a project that would spread the peace lantern idea to the world.” Quickly receiving international television coverage from Tokyo, Japan, which was quite “impressive for a little city in the middle of the United States,” Baumgaertner devised the big idea of taking his project straight to the USSR.^{vii} The International Peace Lantern Exchange Project (IPLEP) was about children inspiring peace through exchanging art and contact information on paper lanterns. These lanterns were mailed around the globe and lit in demonstration as a memorial and warning, protesting against future nuclear turmoil. James and Peggy Baumgaertner created this artistic pen-pal

project, which flourished particularly between the people of La Crosse and Dubna, Russia, to demonstrate how “true peace starts with children, who are born to love, and taught to hate,” and can instead be taught curiosity and empathy even as distant acquaintances.^{viii} La Crosse and Dubna became connected through a small project on peace, while maintaining interaction through a variety of volunteer efforts. Such international involvement then shifted cultures in both cities and countries as a whole. The two cities became officially linked together in 1989 after they received sister city approval from both the local and federal governments.

A sister city relationship is defined as an organization “to bring people together from different countries in an effort to build bridges of understanding and good will.”^{ix} La Crosse, Wisconsin, USA and Dubna, Russia’s bond has become one of the most resounding sister city connections forged in the last twenty-five years, marked by its many accomplishments, including national recognition by Sister Cities International as the best sister city connection on two separate occasions.^x The implications of this international friendship range from cultural exchanges amongst teachers and students, to fundamental information exchanges in a variety of spheres of society including healthcare. The resulting exchange programs not only changed people’s perspectives but also saved, and continue to save, countless lives, not only through the hope of peace but also the influx of practical knowledge across the globe. International exchange of wisdom is initially cultivated through intellectual curiosity, transitioning into basic communication between ordinary people, leading into people to people diplomacy within “grassroots” communities such as La Crosse and Dubna.^{xi} People underestimate how much influence they have as “ordinary citizens rather than professional diplomats.” Individuals can choose to “move away from big bold ideas set forth in dramatic presentations and [instead] towards an experiment in low-key personal diplomacy.”^{xii} The “twinning up” of these two lesser-known communities generated not merely an international charity fund, but something even more monumental, bonds of family and devotion between strangers. By cultivating an emotional attachment rooted in trust, respect, and a common interest in humanity and cultural diversity to build lasting international relationships.^{xiii}

Historiography: Opening of the Unknown, Changing of Approach

To fully comprehend the friendship between La Crosse and Dubna, requires historiographical context to further process how historians have analyzed the Cold War throughout the past. Followed by how these studies have continued to change throughout the present, about 20 years later. Much has been written about the Cold War from the Communist takeover of Russia, which resulted in the country’s leadership by Lenin, followed by his right-hand man Stalin, all the way through the distant political repercussions in America such as the Red Scare and McCarthyism. However, little has been reexamined today to better explain not merely the conflict itself but more importantly what people did after the ‘war’ ended. How did these two societies overcome the unrelenting propaganda propelled at them for decades through “terror, demagoguery, the ‘iron curtain,’ and the enemy image?”^{xiv} As communism collapsed, the Russian Federation opened as a global participant. Instead of being feared, constantly fought against, and ultimately barred from international interaction, this restricting nation needed to learn how to interact with a globalized world for financial stability and other practical modern practices. The crumbling of the Soviet borders allowed fresh international relations to be formed out of necessity, desire, and ultimately curiosity between people kept isolated for the last half century.

To comprehend the importance of the La Crosse—Dubna friendship, one must first grasp basic Russian history. Leading into the modern era, Russia had a strict monarchy of iron-fisted Tsars, until 1917 when Tsar Nicolai Romanov could no longer hold the regime against the massive population of impoverished citizens. This Red Revolution “transformed the culture’s traditional messianism into a much more aggressive and implacable secular faith that Russia’s way would redeem, or at least remake, the world” for the better.^{xv} True Communism was the idealized dream. Unfortunately, the superimposition of Stalin’s personality in the political history of Russia created an atmosphere of “conspiracy, self-righteousness, cruelty, single-mindedness, and contempt for written rules and compromises.”^{xvi} Stalin declared, “those who lag behind get beaten.” Therefore, the USSR, wasting no time, implemented drastic plans to rebuild the industrial sector to cover war losses and catch up with potential competitors. Domestic focus fell on “control of adjacent space and enhanced military-industrial capacity” as key components “to further strength[en] the military-economic might in [the] Motherland,” leaving no room for international growth or diplomatic relations to be formed with the outside world.^{xvii}

Across the globe, the United States had been suspicious of Soviet actions since the Red Revolution and Communist takeover in 1917.^{xviii} Ralph B. Levering and Verena Botzenhart-Viehe, authors of “The American Perspective” portion of *Debating the Origins of the Cold War*, posit that some scholars believe the Cold War began with this initial Red Revolution in 1917. These historians go on to claim that these root tensions between the USSR and the West did not sprout into full conflict until after the resulting victories of WWII. At which point “the American and Soviet leaders had the military power, the economic resources, and the determination to engage in a far-flung and intense ideological, political, military, economic, and cultural struggle for influence.” US-Soviet

relations included international and domestic components, as well as government officials and private citizens.^{xix} After WWII everyone was afraid of future superpowers possessing nuclear weapons. The isolationism that Americans once dreamed of seemed a truly unreachable goal. People, who were taught to fear foreign affairs, began realizing they could no longer hide from them. Therefore America approached foreign relations in two ways “a careful calculation of interests (realism) with a strong appeal to core principles (idealism).”^{xx} Similar to the Soviets, the US focused inward while attempting to expand control outward, “occupying military bases in a circle around [the USSR] and voicing a policy of containment.”^{xxi} Diplomacy motivated by pursuing selfish goals, such as monetary or other material gain, and based in promoting the power of each country individually, breeds a severe lack of information and communication between entire populations. Such negative relations understandably conclude with two distant populations knowing little except the intrigue of fear for one another formed through propaganda. The La Crosse Dubna Friendship Association (LDFA) is not based in material gain. On the contrary, this diplomacy is based “upon mutual understanding through contacts in various spheres of activities...improve[ing international] understanding of science, healthcare, business development, tourism, city management, and... spiritual understanding” and above all continuing “a mutual interest in helping maintain peace” across the globe.^{xxii}

At the end of the 1980s, the unexpected “strange death of the Soviet communism” resulted in the collapse of one of the most firmly controlled superpowers of the modern era.^{xxiii} George Kennan, a leading US strategist during the Cold War, “found it hard to think of any event more strange and startling, and at first glance more inexplicable, than the sudden and total disintegration and disappearance” of the Soviet Union.^{xxiv} Leon Aron’s article, “Everything You Think You Know about the Collapse of the Soviet Union Is Wrong: 20 Years After the Fall,” systematically rejects the majority of popular explanations that claim the Soviet Union was defeated by US aggressions or other outside factors. He instead reveals shifts from both bureaucratic policy and public opinion, such as a “hesitant liberalization from the top” of the authoritative government like Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, the eighth and last leader of the Soviet Union.^{xxv} Gorbachev implemented two monumental policies *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring).^{xxvi} Both strategies reinforced a relaxing of authoritative governmental control in the USSR and contributed to the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev himself even gave his personal blessing to James Baumgaertner with his Peace Lantern Project. The story goes that Baumgaertner found himself in “quite a bit of trouble” once he hit Moscow in 1986; he was hauled into the head office of the Soviet Peace Committee, where Yuri Zhukov reprimanded this American for attempting to “tell Russians how to do peace.” Suddenly the lecture was interrupted by a personal note from none other than Gorbachev himself, thanking Baumgaertner for his “children’s lovely peace lantern,” which was indeed safely delivered. And with that the leader of the Soviet Union “wished [him] well on his endeavors towards peace.”^{xxvii} The atmosphere was changing from within the Soviet Union, turning away from the secluded fortress of the past while opening up to a far more progressive future.

Not only was the Soviet government taking diplomatic strides forward; the United States also broached ideas of diplomatic policy changes by an innovative leader’s “lifelong crusade for peace.” In the 1950s President Eisenhower “launched the ‘People to People’ initiative... under the U.S. Information Agency. This program of “personal diplomacy” emphasized “nongovernmental contacts between people,” and is continued today by his granddaughter and many thousands of others who have no idea this initiative formally exists at all, further proving its value and the strength as an effective effort.^{xxviii} Ultimately it is not governments who make peace but dedicated individuals such as David Bell and James Baumgaertner, and all who followed after them. Political policies cannot produce such bonds of true friendship and love as seen between La Crosse and Dubna. Mary Jean Eisenhower, the current chair of her grandfather’s initiative People to People, once claimed that we can all see “the slow impact government [has], [and] realize that world peace ha[s] to come from the soul of human nature and that governments [cannot] dictate the human heart, only reflect it.”^{xxix} Personal interaction, people to people diplomacy is far more effective in producing a “transparent sincerity and an honest desire for peace” than political ploys that ignore the needs of the common citizen.^{xxx} The collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist control is a perfect example of the instability of inner peace in a country where all power fell into the hands of a select few.

By 1989 when the “godfather of glasnost,” Aleksandr Yakovlev returned to the Soviet Union after ten years abroad, he described the general public as crying out with gusto, “Enough! We cannot live like this any longer. Everything must be done in a new way. We must reconsider our concepts, our approaches, our views of the past and our future.... There has come an understanding that it is simply impossible to live as we lived before—intolerably, humiliatingly.” The “Soviet model was defeated not only on the economic and social levels... [but] on a cultural level” as well. Gorbachev claimed much later that in reality Russia’s society, including the most educated intellectuals, rejected the USSR’s culture because its fundamentals did not “respect the man, [but instead] oppressed him spiritually and politically.”^{xxxi} Forty years prior to Gorbachev’s reforms, life under the restrictions of Stalin’s authoritative control was faltering all on its own. The western nations did not defeat a dying nation of passive

sufferers. Reality is that the Russian people became active participants in an “intellectual and moral quest for self-respect and pride” demanding a more free and individualist society than previously possible under strict authoritative communist ideology.^{xxxii} The point being that Russia was not inactive in its most recent revolution and in creating its future. Foreign intervention did not shape nor end the Soviet control; internal powers directed their own nation to shift and change as necessary for survival. International relations certainly played a major role in this transition, but they alone did not shape the modern Russian Federation or its proud population. What did inspire the population to demand change were desires for personal authority and personal freedom separate from governmental control and corruption. “Free and friendly exchange[s] of ideas and people” as witnessed between La Crosse and Dubna in the late 1980s was a “practical means for ending the Cold War.”^{xxxiii}

Concluding Conflict—International Communication

With the conclusion of the Cold War in 1992, Russia almost instantly opened a number of lines of communication and allowed, for the first time in decades, easy travel within and outside the country. To my surprise people from both countries, who were taught from childhood to be apprehensive of one another, raced towards opportunities of international interaction. Some of the first breaches of long detained information passed through the intellectual community of historians, who had long been attempting to better comprehend Soviet actions and decisions through primary sources once kept locked away. Ronn Pineo, Samuel Baron and Cathy Frierson describe the flow of information available from the Soviet side, during the Cold War years, as extremely limited. Historiography of the end of the Soviet Union and Cold War era are difficult to reiterate in a non-bias, fully comprehensive collection, due to a lack of Soviet perspectives available both to American and Russian scholars.

Pineo’s article *Recent Cold War Studies* refers to the recent two-year stint, when the Soviet archives were opened to the public (1992-1993). In this new era of Cold War analysis, “gone are the days when students of the Cold War found the Eastern bloc side completely closed off to historical investigations.”^{xxxiv} Pineo compares the rush of new documentation from the former Eastern bloc to trying to drink from a fire hose: constant and powerfully overwhelming, reshaping historical context that was once only assumed or misrepresented.^{xxxv} So little documentation was exchanged between these two modern superpowers, it is no wonder these people constantly misinterpreted one another. Such mystery incurred awe in both the American and Russian populations at the thought of investigating evidence that had never before been assessed or analyzed.

In their book *Adventures in Russian Historical Research: Reminiscences of American Scholars from the Cold War to the Present*, Baron and Frierson also stress the importance of obtaining direct sources from Russia, and the difficulties that come with conducting personal research within a state that was determined to “withhold the past.”^{xxxvi} This collection of research experiences, produced by an array of historians, provides a “panoramic view of the work accomplished across a multiplicity of areas of Russian life,” quickly broadening the international comprehension of Soviet history.^{xxxvii} Throughout the Cold War years, American researchers have countless stories of Russians helping them obtain information from within Soviet archives. In the attempts to further understanding and relations between these two distant populations, who knew so little truth about one another’s histories.

Mutual Respect—Forging Friendship

As the literal barriers fell away from the Soviet Union, people on both sides of the ocean embraced their intrigue of those they once condemned as enemies.^{xxxviii} David Natanovich Bell, an innovative English teacher in Dubna, helped found a legacy between two tiny towns that lay worlds apart. A Russian—American born in Texas, Bell moved with his family back to the Soviet Union in the hopes of outrunning the Great Depression. Ironically the Bells soon found further misfortune through a system that Michael Wines, a New York Times journalist, sarcastically calls “Josef Stalin’s socialist paradise.”^{xxxix} The Soviet Union’s idealist utopia was believed not only within the confines of the USSR, but also propagated out in the world, winning over the hopes and dreams of countless “naïve” immigrants such as Bell’s father. Wine’s article, “Exiled American Outlives Stalin’s Shadow,” sums up perfectly David Bell’s feelings on his family’s struggles, explaining why he has “been bitter his whole life” at aspects of his nation and its treatment of him and his own. But in the end he relinquished his frustrations and instead of giving up or fleeing, David Bell accomplished “something [he] is proud of,” abandoning the abrasive past and generating a brighter future.^{xl}

In 1938 his father, Nathan Bell, was “exiled to the Kazakhstan desert” as an enemy of the people, eventually perishing from starvation. His family was sent to live on the streets, all due to their father’s refusal to feed a “top Communist bureaucrat’s” greed for more living space when he requested one of the family’s only two rooms.^{xli} And in early March 1938, Nathan Bell, “a loyal Communist” was sent away never to return, condemned as a spy and traitor. Nevertheless, despite David Bell’s harsh childhood, “it never occurred to [him] to leave.” Instead he “built another life...erected on the remains of the first.”^{xlii} Bell established the initial connection with civic

leaders in La Crosse, WI in the midst of the 1980s, thanks to a lucky string of coincidences. When James Baumgaertner first traveled to the USSR in 1986, he managed to make a strong connection with Vladimir (Volodya) Shestakov, a resident of Leningrad (St. Petersburg), whose mother happened to live in Dubna. So the Peace Lanterns served their purpose, flowing from one person to the next clearing the waters of distrust and building bridges across distant gaps. These bridges resulted in the movement of thousands of people, from medical professional and Mayors, to preschoolers.^{xliii} Not only did Bell and Baumgaertner connect distant people sharing experiences; they also bridged a gap between a closed society and emerging international knowledge. Not in the attempts to alter culture or disrespect Russian tradition by overshadowing it with American ideals. On the contrary, this friendship supported Russia as the walls of Soviet isolationism fell away. Leaving an exposed population who needed to regroup and reform as an open, communicative society, participating with the rest of the world, instead of being sheltered away from it.

Today Russia still possesses closed, walled-in cities, fortified by “huge dogs and armed guards.” Dubna, a small city just north of Moscow was once one of these secret cities, originally built around nuclear research and rocket production for the Soviet Union.^{xliiv} Since 1956 Dubna has housed the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research (JINR), a world-renowned international scientific research center.^{xliv} Dubna is logistically very similar to La Crosse; the cities are roughly equal in population, each surrounded by large rivers and other natural phenomena such as forests and bluffs. As the years progressed, the cities only grew more similar with the establishment of Dubna University, based on the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and an emphasis on health and wellbeing inspired by the impact of Gunderson Hospital within both communities. There have been countless exchanges between these two sister cities over the last twenty-five years from police training, summer work for students, journalism, artists, musicians, construction workers, teachers, and missionaries, the list could expand exponentially. Overall, the majority of these programs fall within two broad categories, a cultural exchange of American and Russian teachers and students, and the profound humanitarian aid officiated through the La Crosse—Dubna Friendship Association which revolutionized the Soviet style healthcare system, still in practice by the turn of the century.

Cultural Exchange—Teachers and Students

Originally founded through IPLEP, a demonstration developing “peace by creating friendship,” the La Crosse—Dubna Friendship Association (LDFA) sprouted as a continuation of direct interactions between people. This forged further interconnectivity between nations.^{xlvi} The Baumgaertners’ Peace Lantern Project succeeded in encouraging peaceful camaraderie across the many miles of the globe, crafting and maintaining long-distance relationships in a time before Internet, when letters took around six weeks to potentially arrive at all. “People [had] to be involved [and] invested” to allow IPLEP to be more than mere “lights like a fireworks show.”^{xlvii} Citizens in both La Crosse and Dubna became highly involved with one another, inspiring the official sister city connection and further supporting physical exchanges of people, which broke the limits and comfort of sending merely information and photographs. Keeping Baumgaertner’s theme of starting with the children in mind, the first full-fledged exchanges began with teachers and young students.

Galina Dolya, a Russian teacher in Dubna, instantly became involved with the IPLEP declaring the artistic exchange an “excellent idea... especially to answer the messages of peace that had come from the lanterns from America” continuing a dialogue not dependent on language.^{xlviii} “Because the project was not “inspired by the governors of the town,” others hesitated to participate in the exchange. However, Dolva appreciated the break from empty, lifeless words. She encouraged her students to participate in this “opportunity to work with something tangible” in a movement towards peace.^{xlix} Dolya then became the first exchange teacher to La Crosse in the fall of 1992. While teaching at a local high school she was hosted by fellow teacher Becky Post, who in spring 1993 followed suit and became the first American teacher to travel to Dubna.¹

Post recalls preparing for her first trip abroad by taking a variety of photographs around La Crosse to share with her upcoming Russian students. Little did her Russian audience ever expect her to present a slide of an American grocery store’s produce aisle, overflowing with fresh fruits and vegetables. Post recounts a “collective gasp” from her foreign spectators.^{li} Nothing shocked these children more than our seemingly boundless abundance of food. The culinary culture shock was uncanny at this time for both Americans and Russians. During its end, the Soviet Union suffered from a large economic drop followed by several years of “severe winter,” further impeding stores abilities to provide food.^{lii} The norm in Russia at this time was “crop failures, food shortages, and inadequate food distribution... [as well as] long lines in front of stores that have little to sell or held foods of low nutritional value.”^{liii} These harsh conditions compelled La Crosse citizens to arrange two separate “area-wide food, clothing and medical supply drive[s] to assist the people of Dubna.”^{liiv} This program, *Hands Across the Heartlands*, came to Russia in the “most crucial months of its new history” when the “dissatisfaction of hungry and desperate people” could tip the scales from peace and progress to a retreat back to political upheaval. It was vital that La Crosse

“friends show their solidarity...in these trying times of [Russian] history” revealing true “thoughtfulness [and] generosity” towards the people of Dubna.^{lv} Thanks to such personal connection, kindness comes round full circle.

Becky Post revealed her surprise at how “generous the Russian people were, [compared to] Americans, who [she views] are not as generous,” particularly to strangers.^{lvi} “[People in Dubna] always had a gift to hand somebody,” a simple display of gratitude, friendship, and the support of a caring community.^{lvii} Post recalls people pulling chocolate out of their pockets and instructing their very young children to give gifts to their guests, regardless of how mundane the gift may appear, such as an orange from the bowl of fruit on the table. This cultural practice is not about what the gifts might be; the point is the meaning behind giving to another. Giving is seen as a sign of welcoming, displaying friendship and support. Even the children in Dubna are taught how to clearly vocalize gratitude, especially for their education. Post’s Russian students often thanked her for the “beautiful lesson[s],” an experience far less common back in American schools.^{lviii} By working in the schools of Dubna, Post came into direct contact with “the fresh, curious faces of children, their sweet and honest questions, and their unending optimism and hope for the future and what it holds for their generation and for the world at large.” This to an American teacher “has been the best part” of the sister city connection.^{lix}

Post also recalls one of the most difficult parts of the original exchanges was learning how to teach within the Russian educational system. Another major cultural difference between nations was the format of secondary schooling. The USSR implemented strict curriculum in which Russian children were taught to “follow directions [and] do as [they] were told” unlike in America where children are encouraged to let their creative abilities run wild and free.^{lx} Becky Post and Martha Schwem, music and art teachers from La Crosse, both traveled to teach in Dubna, witnessing the shift from pioneer camps training children to be good communists, to instead summer camps focused on artistic freedom.^{lxi} Both recount the initial difficulty in persuading Russian children to participate in what these “scary American[s]” considered standard art projects.^{lxii} This aversion to creative expression is not an innate error of the Russian people, they are as artistic and innovative as any other culture on this planet. The fault lies with “what their own government did to them.” Soviet children were taught to be talented, but never to stand apart from the group and become too individualistic. Even as children Russians were manipulated as tools of the state; the government “trained their little kids to turn [their own parents] in if they said anything” considered a threatening to the state.^{lxiii} However Soviet education was not simply a form of authoritative control. It was also a productive system producing disciplined students, who became highly skilled workers and professionals maintaining the intellectual battle for power during the Cold War Era.

Russian education held such high standards, La Crosse and Dubna expanded far beyond merely comparing the educational systems, to eventually merging them together and creating the first public university in Russia: Dubna University. By taking aspects of Moscow University and the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL), with some advice from past chancellor of UWL, Judith Kuipers, Dubna constructed their very own ‘state’ university. Kuipers traveled to Dubna and commended the sister city connection, as well as all of Russia for its “brilliant people.”^{lxiv} Russia, since the collapse of the USSR, began to incorporate certain aspects of the American educational structure into their classrooms. These adaptations have both inspired student growth as well as stunted productivity of the once highly efficient Russian curriculum. An esteemed Russian English teacher for 45 years, Nadezhda Anisimova, stresses the pros of the “more fundamental ...serious” regiment of the Soviet system, not the lack of creative motivation, but the intensive studies practiced by the dedicated students.^{lxv} Anisimova administered simple Russian and American historical questions to both Dubna and La Crosse university students. The Russian students scored around 85%, while the American students could hardly answer geographical questions about their homeland let alone a foreign country.^{lxvi} The point being that Russian children were no less intelligent than American children, or vice versa, the curriculum of each country varied drastically with different strengths and weaknesses. Which is exactly why such cultural exchanges are so instrumental in shaping a better world as a whole. Through the exchange of information fundamental systems like education can collaborate towards a global improvement instead of constant competition.

It is important to recognize La Crosse delegates did not teach Dubna citizens how to be intellectuals; these students and professionals were well educated and innovative all on their own in their own way. Healthcare initiative director from Gunderson Hospital, Sandra McCormick claims the definition of “leadership in Russia, (especially the old Soviet Union), meant taking orders, and not a lot of creativity and not a lot of problem-solving skills” that are common in America both for children and adults.^{lxvii} Olga Vasyutina a prominent Russian participant in both local sister city relations and modernizing aid to alcohol abuse in all of Russia, spoke of the accomplishments of Russian paramedics abilities and effectiveness “without [new age technology such as] AEGs (Automatic Electric Guns)”.^{lxviii} Amazingly Dubna first responders held the “same amount of deaths” per year, “or even less” than La Crosse paramedics.^{lxix} Vasyutina credits this accomplishment not to technology, but instead the simple necessity that initial lifesaving procedures had to occur immediately “at home,” unlike in America when first responders often must wait

for “physicians decisions.”^{lxx} Contradicting McCormick’s claim to a degree, yes Russians in the Soviet educational system were not taught certain types of artistic thought, however they certainly learned both through school and purely through life how to be resourceful and highly inventive.

Information Exchange—Healthcare

In 1992 Jack Schwem, president of Gunderson Hospital, asked Vice President Sandra McCormick, if she would be willing to take on the challenging project of organizing the funding and mechanics of reshaping the healthcare system of Dubna, Russia. McCormick accepted the position as Project Director of the La Crosse-Dubna Health Partnership, “not [because it was] part of her job description, [but] because [she] was committed and wanted it done, and that was the kind of commitment there was” from La Crosse citizens for Dubna.^{lxxi} McCormick quickly got the clear vocal message of the “true depth of [Dubna’s society’s] pride” in their own communities’ and their own professionals’ skills. Russians raised in the Soviet Era were not unintelligent, “[Dubna did not] need Americans telling [their] doctors about health care... [they] had their own talented physicians.”^{lxxii} What they needed was equipment and training in new western techniques that had not been shared during the Cold War. In the post-Soviet era, Dubna and Russia as a whole lacked the funds to obtain such expensive modern medical supplies and equipment. Back in the 1950s when Eisenhower originally created the *People to People* initiative “a lack of stable funding kept the program fragmented,” creating tension and suspicion from groups involved who became worried they would become financially responsible for these international interactions.^{lxxiii} A practical problem many years later in La Crosse, which McCormick easily solved, beginning with a \$300,000 grant from the American International Health Alliance. Accumulating within the first 10 years to over a million US dollars in grants for various health related projects between La Crosse and Dubna, as well as spreading to the surrounding areas of the Moscow region of Russia.^{lxxiv}

These projects have ranged from equipment donations of dialysis machines and wheelchairs, to bandages and other medical supplies, including actual medicines such as insulin. McCormick and others like Dr. Walter Vallejo, organized a program with one of the leading insulin producers in the United States to support an entire years worth of insulin supplies for several new diabetic centers opened in Dubna and the surrounding area.^{lxxv} Ten years later Sandra McCormick still speaks with tears in her eyes as she recounts the most memorable testimonial she had the honor of witnessing. A Russian mother stood up and said, “when my son was diagnosed with diabetes, I though it was a death sentence, and you changed that.”^{lxxvi} The sister city connection between La Crosse and Dubna not only cultivated a cultural bond, this international relationship allowed for the sharing of instrumental medical supplies considered common on one side of the globe, while a miracle on the other. It is important to realize these projects did not include Americans coming to Russia and taking over the healthcare business, they were not designed to supply an American workforce or industry. On the contrary they were and still are a route of communication sharing knowledge and material with Dubna professionals allowing them to prosper through their own efforts and actions. As active participants and program directors, the Russian population embraced this information exchange, continuing further developments apart from the aid of La Crosse.

Another program, which continues to flourish today, is the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program initiated in Dubna by Olga Vasyutina. A truly inspiring woman who fearlessly approached these Americans and declared, “I don’t care what you do in this town but you have to do something about the alcoholism.”^{lxxvii} Vasyutina worked as a nurse in Dubna with four diplomas from Moscow University in medicine, psychiatry, necrology, and medical management.^{lxxviii} She took particular notice of the links between neurological dysfunction and alcoholism, specifically the reoccurrence of “convulsions after alcohol usage.”^{lxxix} Which was not a commonly accepted fact at the time in Russia; for a matter of fact initially Vasyutina’s superiors told her “it’s wrong, it’s not true” and dismissed her worries without much thought.^{lxxx} Vasyutina came to La Crosse to study programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and other drug abuse therapy to better comprehend and manage addiction back in Dubna. She then returned to Russia to implement similar programs independently, which inspired further health developments such as Dubna Health Days. This annual event takes place in the local parks of Dubna, where medical professionals offer free blood testing and blood pressure checks, while distributing information on the affects of alcohol as well as alternative forms of “stress management.”^{lxxxi} Vasyutina’s programs quickly spread around the Moscow region as the first alcohol and drug addiction initiative in all of Russia.

After just a decade of work “the exchange [between La Crosse and Dubna] literally transformed medical care, draw[ing] the attention of several Russian cities hoping to restore their own health”.^{lxxxii} Sandra McCormick through her connections in Dubna arranged to meet with the head of the healthcare system in Russia, and within a minute of attempting to introduce herself to this important man, “he held up his hand meaning stop.” He calmly said in the little English he knew, “no need to introduce yourself, everyone in Russia knows who you are.”^{lxxxiii} Though an exaggeration, the point is that McCormick and her work in Dubna was spreading far beyond one tiny town to the

entire Russian Federation; this uncanny sister city connection inspired a vast domino effect of change in Russian healthcare. Various other cities and individuals within Russia began to approach the Dubna—La Crosse program leaders requesting assistance, information, and most of all training; in the hopes that they too could impact their social spheres in such a positive manner. McCormick recollected an example of an outsider who valiantly asked for help from complete foreign strangers. This mother approached McCormick about 10 years ago, knowing the Americans could not implement the drug abuse program in her specific town. However she begged to be allowed to be involved, for her son had perished due to alcohol and she was grieving and in need of action.^{lxxxiv} So, the association made it happen. This woman travelled to La Crosse, trained with American professionals, and returned back to Russia to implement changes on an individual basis. Now in 2015, McCormick visited a minor hospital in a tiny village in Russia, and walked straight into this very woman, still working, managing to apply everything she learned all on her own, no further support from La Crosse or the US in anyway, and certainly no need for it.^{lxxxv}

By the year 2000 Russia appeared to be an “almost incurably ill place.” Through the 1990’s the newly collapsed USSR witnessed “soaring mortality rates and low fertility, [excessive] alcoholism, and rampant heart disease.” The health system simply could not keep up with the common trauma plaguing the population. Clearly these unfortunate conditions have begun to change in and around Dubna. Michael Wines, who later wrote an article specifically on David Bell, original published an article in the *New York Times* on Dubna titled: “A Fit City Offers Russia a Self-Help Health Model,” appreciating how impressive these investments from La Crosse have “streamline[d] medical procedures.” The combination of “some extraordinary people on both sides of the Atlantic” managed to eliminate almost one third of Dubna’s hospital beds by taking advantage of small clinic and home care. Even more remarkable was the fivefold drop in patients going into diabetic comas, as well as a conception center minimizing the abortion rate to two-thirds the national level, when it was once the most common form of birth control. All together these changes amounted to “a dramatic rise in residents’ satisfaction with medical care,” allowing Dubna citizens once more to trust their medical system.^{lxxxvi}

Sandra McCormick commending Dubna for their “homemade” laundry list of successes claims, “change [cannot begin] without an environment that [first] permits change.” The leaders of Dubna were determined to make progress not “just as long as the money was there, but until it actually made life better for the people of Dubna.”^{lxxxvii} McCormick recalls Mayor Valery Prokh meeting her on every visit she made to his city and asking the same question, “what do my people need to be doing that they are not?”^{lxxxviii} It was not easy for her to make corrections to their work habits, but she found the courage to be honest and open without feeling insulting, for the betterment of the people of Dubna as a whole. “This remarkably successful partnership” was not based in money, but instead a series of exchanges that emphasized “up-to-date methods and techniques,” giving Dubna’s leadership the means to refuse “succumb[ing] to the passivity that paralyzes efforts to revitalize Russia’s healthcare system elsewhere.”^{lxxxix}

CONCLUSION

A Lasting Impact—World Services of La Crosse Inc.

Today many worry the Friendship Associations of La Crosse and Dubna appear to be fading away, however this does not mean the international friendship has dwindled in even a fraction of its distant devotion. American interest in Russia has plummeted since the oddity of the communist Soviet Union has dissipated over the years. Regardless, the connection between La Crosse and Dubna maintains through the continued meeting of the La Crosse—Dubna Friendship Association Board, growing healthcare reforms supported through a non-profit organization founded by Sandra McCormick after her retirement from Gunderson Hospital in 2002.^{xc} Despite being told she could remain a volunteer for the La Crosse-Dubna healthcare program by Gunderson, hospital officials suddenly told her she could “no longer make purchase orders [for Dubna because] she no longer worked [for Gunderson],” regardless of all her years of volunteer services, not to mention professional career with the hospital. Therefor that very night McCormick created the non-profit organization World Services of La Crosse Inc. This organization partners with the sister city association to continue international exchanges both sending people to Dubna and bringing people back to La Crosse. As well as maintaining the “healthcare reform [declared by the Russian secretary of health] the best in all of Russia,” through the launching of new projects such as the improvement of nursing care for cancer patients.^{xc1} Still today the international connection is receiving recognition as a “Center of Excellence,” awarding them funding for the above new health projects until 2018 indefinitely.

There was a time not that long ago that Russian doctors felt they had no choice but to tell their patients little about their true conditions. All because the most honest reply they could give was simply, “you got something and are going to die, and I don’t have anything to do for you.”^{xcii} This is the gruesome reality that the La Crosse—Dubna relationship has miraculously transformed over the last 25 years of interaction. World Services of La Crosse

recently assisted four Russian cities to open new nursing centers. Now these “four cities will start to teach [five new cities]” how to create and maintain such nursing centers allowing Russian citizens to propel the projects into the future, sustaining their own healthcare system independent of American aid.^{xciii} One can see how Eisenhower and Khrushchev’s attempts at waging peace grew through the years, indirectly affecting individuals such as Bell and Baumgaertner. Without people like these two citizen diplomats, Eisenhower’s words “would have remained mere words,” promises of peace must have a means “to live... to act them out” or else they remain as disappointments and lies.^{xciv} Clearly this have not been the case, people to people diplomacy has flourished through organization such as Sister City International, also founded by President Eisenhower. Today there are 77 Russian—US sister cities.^{xcv} Each has its own dynamics and relations, “each city makes [their relationship] work according to the strengths that are there.”^{xcvi} For example Duluth, Minnesota also has a Russian sister city; their two key programs derive from domestic abuse prevention programs, and shipbuilding since both cities are on large bodies of water.^{xcvii} The reason La Crosse and Dubna stand apart from these other highly productive friendships, is due to the all encompassing relationship these two communities build in almost every sphere of life, not merely one or two. La Crosse and Dubna’s relations have always been “extremely fluid,” with a need to adjust to conflict at a moments notice because “everything [has been] subject to change, except the fact that [these two communities were] going to do [their] best to do whatever [they could] with whatever [they had].”^{xcviii}

Martha Schwem, a participant in the sister city association since its beginning recalls David Bell, the Russian-American founder of the La Crosse-Dubna relationship, stating that “friends [are] absolutely important.” Now at the time when he said this he was referencing the Cold War Era and that fact that people “didn’t have many friends because [people] were afraid.”^{xcix} Today much of the fear has ebbed away, although the current surge in political tension between the Western powers and Russia’s government brings back old qualms of a detrimental global standoff. Still Dubna remains loyal to their friendship with La Crosse and vice versa. Both cities continue to strive towards maintaining cultural and practical exchanges of people and knowledge despite federal restrictions placed on travel between the two nations in question. Similarly profound was the Mayor of Dubna, Mayor Prokh’s reaction to Russian outcries to cut connections with La Crosse over the US bombing of Yugoslavia back in the 1990s. Prokh responded to these anti-La Crosse and anti-American sentiments with a “diplomatically worded reply which can be summarized in a word: No.”^c Valery Prokh clearly agreed with Bell, friends are absolutely important, and the people of La Crosse have proven themselves true friends and family of Dubna. This relationship from its beginning was about connecting people to people to create peace and understanding outside of the pull of politics; “emphasizing moralistic, middle ground concepts, combining a belief in reason and faith... [and allowing] progress and basic human goodness [to] prevail.”^{ci}

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