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The Rotary Club of Moscow. . .

Rotary's breakthrough in the U.S.S.R.

You don't have to tell me what Rotary is. I know all about it, and I'm impressed," said Vladimir Petrovsky, the amiable, English-speaking deputy foreign minister of the Soviet Union. Then he looked across the conference table in his Moscow office and, point-blank, asked R.I. President Hugh Archer, "Why do you want to start a Rotary club in the Soviet Union?"

"I tried to answer as clearly and concisely as possible," says President Hugh, recalling his response at that important meeting of 24 March. "We want to start Rotary clubs here to extend the hand of friendship and increase communications ties between the citizens of the U.S.S.R. and the rest of the world—in particular, within the professional and business society that is around the world in 167 countries."

"Very well. Are you willing to operate within the structure of our Committee for Youth Organizations?" countered Mr. Petrovsky, second-in-command to Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnaze.

"We can't do that," replied President Hugh, glancing at the chairman of the CYO, another participant in the meeting. "Rotary works by itself. Our constitution doesn't allow any interference from government bodies. We are totally nonpolitical."

Deputy Minister Petrovsky smiled. "Yes, I know," he said, easily dismissing one of the conditions that could have prevented Rotary's entrance to the Soviet Union. "Tell me, where will the first club be?"

Certain now that Rotary was welcome in the Soviet Union, President Hugh was happy to answer this query. "There's only one place—right here in Moscow. It will be a visible and real signal of Rotary's acceptance in your country."

"A very good idea," Mr. Petrovsky replied.

"In that short meeting—only 30 minutes or so—came the culmination of many months of hard work," President Hugh recalls. The Soviet Union, erstwhile "evil empire" and bastion of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, agreed to allow Rotary clubs to form, meet, and carry out projects—without any government interference.

Rotary's entry into its 168th—and largest—country came at a time of substantial changes in the political wind over eastern Europe. In June 1989, Rotary clubs, banned since World War II, were reestablished in Poland and Hungary, vivid proofs of the changes



ROLF KLÄRICH

Standing in front of the Kremlin, President Hugh doffs his hat in symbolic welcome to the Moscow Rotary Club.

wrought by Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika.

Says President Hugh: "The Soviet Union's opening up to Rotary is a monument to the desire of people to communicate and get together with other people. Wars have run their course. Given the slightest opportunity, people of goodwill will create an international web of communication and trust that will have important effects on peace. We are delighted that Rotary is playing such an important role."

On the night of the milestone meeting, at a hastily called dinner at one of Moscow's new private restaurants, President Hugh and R.I. Past President Rolf "Rolle" Klärich (1980-81) of Finland met with 11 of the 25 charter members of the provisional club. "It was a happy, cheerful occasion," says Hugh. "A time of fellowship and joy."

Four months earlier, the prospect for such an event was far gloomier. In early December, President Hugh and Rolle traveled to Moscow to make Rotary's case



Past President Klärich (front row, left) makes a lighthearted "toast" to the new club. President Archer sits beside him. Moscow Rotarian Alexander Tarnavski sits at Hugh's left. Other charter members of the club stand behind them.

with another Communist official. En route they had also visited a group of hopeful "Rotarians" in Tallinn, Estonia. "Our scheduled meeting with the Soviet vice-president was cancelled at the last minute," says Hugh. "Rolle and I were crestfallen, to have come so far—and to have failed in our mission. It was very depressing."

Still, there was some hope remaining. "One of our escorts to the airport told me this before we left: 'Don't worry. In 60 or 90 days, you will be asked to come back.'" At the time, that promise was cold comfort to Hugh and Rolle. "But sure enough," says Hugh, "at the end of February I was invited by the CYO to come back to Moscow. This time it was the real thing."

Newspaper and TV reporters cluster around President Hugh at O'Hare airport upon his return from Moscow.



President Hugh is quick to credit Rotarians from the nearby countries of Sweden and Finland—under Rolle Klärich's guidance—for helping lay the groundwork for the Moscow club. The R.I. Secretariat assisted by supplying Rotary information and coordinating the various efforts for establishing a club in the U.S.S.R. "It was important that Rotary spoke with one voice," he explains.

What about the new club? For several months, a group of Moscow professionals had been meeting as the "Moscow Rotary Club," enjoying fellowship and studying Rotary's history and programs. "Alexander Tarnavski, the attorney who organized the Moscow group, did his work well," says Hugh. "In a country where people are accustomed to socialize or work only with others in their group, he brought together 25 Muscovites from a variety of occupations—men who didn't know each other before. There is a doctor, several lawyers of different types, a restaurateur, a translator, a theater manager, several businessmen. There are no women members yet, but there will be, I'm sure. The first club president is Victor Mozolin, a professor of business law."

"They have done their homework," says Rolle, a member of the Rotary Club of Helsinki-Helsingfors, which will be the Moscow club's sponsor. "I wish every other new club around the world would be as well prepared. President Hugh has given me the task to see that this group is ready for its charter as soon as possible. There will be no problem. The men in this group are outstanding; they have a burning interest in Rotary."

President Archer and Past President Klärich say the Moscow club will be chartered in ceremonies on 5 June. It is possible that some Moscow Rotarians will attend the 1990 R.I. Convention in Portland.

Does the chartering of the Moscow club portend an explosion of Rotary club growth in the Soviet Union? President Hugh is cautious. "Within the context of the vast changes in Soviet society, politics, and the economy," he says, "I think Rotary growth there will be slow. It will take several years. The Moscow club, the appropriate father club to other clubs, must first gather its own strength and become a participant in all Rotary programs. Then extension can begin."

What about the Baltic republics? "I think unrest in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will slow down the establishment of Rotary there," says Hugh. "Although I know there is a group in Tallinn, Estonia, ready and able to become a Rotary club tomorrow, I think it's wise for R.I. to wait for a few months before expanding into the Baltic area."

The forecast of slow growth in the Soviet Union doesn't dampen President Hugh's or Rolle Klärich's enthusiasm. "After all," says Rolle, a wounded veteran of the 1939-40 Russo-Finnish war, "six months ago, a club in Moscow would have been unthinkable. A year ago, clubs in Poland or Hungary would have been out of the question."

"We could not have made a more successful, happy journey to Moscow," summarizes Rolle. "We had everything 'in the bag' when we came home, everything we wished for. We knocked on the door, and the door was opened wide for us."