

PERM NEWS

The newsletter of the Perm Association

October 2005

Northern Moslems

This summer I was a participant in an International voluntary camp held about 165 kms to the South of Perm. The organization of the camp left much to be desired, but for me it was an opportunity to get to know a very special part of the Perm region – the Bardymyskiy district with its central village of Barda. This place is certainly known in some parts of Eastern and Southern Europe, since Europeans (mainly Germans) took part in the building of a gas pipeline here in the 1980s. (And as a result about twenty local girls married German boys and emigrated.) But the main point about this district is that 92% of the local inhabitants are Tatars and a closely related ethnic group, Bashkirs – who form a compact “island” of specific culture surrounded by Russians. The Tatars of Barda are supposed to be the most northern group of Tatars in the world, so foreign researchers call them “Northern Moslems”.



Modern life causes national traditions to be forgotten, but the Bardymyskiy district has rather well preserved native roots. This district is loved by Permian ethnologists, since local old ladies (or simply ‘babushki’) are very good sources of information: they remember more legends, traditions, songs than representatives of other nationalities inhabiting the Perm region.

Travelling on the “Perm-Barda” bus I heard for the first time teenagers speaking Tatar with each other. And it was a kind of “culture shock” for me, because young people usually prefer to use the language that has better prospects (for getting education, a job and so on). Children in the Bardymskii district start learning the Russian language in school; only(!), about 80% of local youth have perfect Tatar and about 30% of them use both languages equally within their families. And it was a second shock for me when one of the camp participants, a 21-year-old Tatar girl, Guzel’, speaking apparently fluent Russian, told me it was every time difficult for her to come back to Perm for studies at college after the summer holidays because of the language barrier. What to say about local old people! Some of them can’t communicate in Russian at all.

There are about 20 mosques in the Bardimskyi district for 16 thousand Bashkirs and 9 thousand Tatars. In addition to the usual services, morning prayer is transmitted on the radio over the whole district every Friday and every day of the holy month of Ramadan. We were invited to the tenth anniversary of a mosque in a village outside Barda. Although this mosque is very small (a simple wooden house with a half-moon on the top), there was quite a big festival and the main mullah of the Perm region attended. The celebration took place in a concert hall of another building, and it was rather strange to watch mullahs preaching and saying prayers from a scene with the old soviet slogan “Art belongs to the people” over it. At the end there was a big meal for all comers: traditionally cooked dishes of ram given by one of the parishioners, special prayers, men and women seating separately – so I was surprised when our group consisting mainly of girls was put at a men’s table.

Actually the local population didn’t seem to me to be very keen on Islam. The older generation is really religious, but some people continue to fulfill Muslim rituals just mechanically and young people know little about these traditions and observe them rarely. However the local authorities and the priesthood are trying to improve the situation: a medrese – a special religious school for learning the Koran, the Arabic language and so on – was opened in the Barda mosque a few years ago. The mullah told us that 40 grown-ups and 15 school-children attended it last year.

Tatar traditions are preserved in Barda in weddings and some other rituals. One of the most vivid examples is Sabantui – a festival devoted to the completion of sowing and celebrated in June. National clothes, horse races, jumping in sacks, traditional Tatar fight on belts named ‘kuresh’ (which got international status not long ago) The aspiration of local people to preserve so many national traditions and their pride in them is seen as very good and makes this place really special.

Olga Kirianova

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Recent events

City Council visit

A group of city councillors from Perm visited Oxford from 4th to 12th July 2005, to shadow the work of their Oxford city counterparts. Their visit, to mark the tenth anniversary of friendship links between the two cities, included the unveiling of the new sign at Thornhill, listing all the twin towns, including Perm. Similar signs have been installed at other city boundaries. The visit included a moving civic service in Christchurch, to celebrate 60 years of peace in Europe.



Fund-raising function

A fund-raising function was held on Friday 8 July 2005, to coincide with the visit by the Perm city councillors. Highlights of the occasion were vodka tasting, a quiz and an auction of promises. The event raised over £1,000 to support initiatives in Perm.

University exchange

The annual exchange visit to Perm State University took place in September. As well as spending time at PSU, participants also visited the Perm-36 labour camp museum, went canoeing, taught students, enjoyed concerts and ballets, and made many friends.

10th anniversary

This year is the 10th anniversary of the Perm link, and there were events in Perm to mark the occasion. May Wylie and Liz Brighthouse visited Perm as guest of honour in September.

Forthcoming events

University exchange

A group of teachers from Perm State University will visit Oxford from 15 November to 2 December 2005. The traditional party to welcome the group will be held at Rewley House at 7.30pm on Wednesday 16 November. Drinks and nibbles will be available. This is a good opportunity to meet Russian academics, and any invitations – for meals or sightseeing – will be much appreciated.

Bernstein Mass

See item under "OIL", below.

Russian films

There is a plan to start showing a series of Russian films at the Magdalen College auditorium, which is the new building directly behind the college's Longwall Street entrance.. The first one will be shown on Sunday 15 January 2006. This exciting new venture - arranged in collaboration with North Oxford Labour Party Film Club - kicks off with "Farewell", one of the finest Russian films of the 1980s, set in a Siberian village, where the authorities plan to build a dam. Admission - only £5 (£3 for students) – includes drinks from 7.30pm, and the film starts at 8.00pm.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Perm Association will be held at 6.15pm on Wednesday 22 February 2006, in the Buttery at Wolfson College. In addition to the standard AGM agenda, John Harwood will give a talk. In his former role as Chief Executive of Oxfordshire County Council, John played a key role during the first part of the ten-year link between Perm Region and Oxfordshire. He will be sharing his many anecdotes and amusing personal experiences as well as more serious assessments of the past and future of the link. Wolfson College is situated in Linton Road (off Banbury Road); ample parking is available in the college (turn right at college entrance), or there is plenty of parking space on Linton Road).

Oxford International Links

An international performance of Bernstein's Mass will be held on 28 & 29 October 2005, at 7.30pm in Oxford Town Hall. This will involve the East Oxford Community Choir, singers and musicians from all Oxford's European twin towns and 24 dancers - 8 from Perm and 16 from Oxford. Tickets at £10 (£8 concessions) are available from May Wylie, tel. 01865 252537.

A Fete des Rois will take place on January 6th in the Town Hall – more details to follow.

There are plans for a Young Women's hockey festival in 2006, with the participation of 20 players from each of the twin towns.

Youth bands from the twin towns may be invited to take part in the Cowley Road Carnival in June 2006.

On Saturday 2 December 2006 there will be a multicultural Christmas Market in Broad Street.

News of other links

Bonn

Plans are being made for Oxford week in Bonn 2007 which will be the 60th anniversary of the link.

Grenoble

A new Grenoble link committee has been formed.

The ARK T project in Cowley sent a rock band to Grenoble to take part in a music festival in June.

Leiden

A delegation from Leiden will visit Oxford in November for the annual Remembrance Day commemoration.

2006 will be the 60th anniversary of the Oxford-Leiden link.

Leon

On 16 September, Quentin Hayes' recital in aid of the Leon link raised over £2000 to support projects in Leon.

With Permians to the Altai Mountains

This year in August I joined a team of six university teachers and graduates from Perm, and a couple from Krasnoyarsk, on a camping expedition in the Altai Mountains. To the south, Russia, Kazakhstan, China and Mongolia meet.

From Barnaul Airport we travelled 250 miles by bus to Aktybash, a village at the northern end of Lake Teletskoye. Teletskoye is 50 miles long and surrounded by Scottish-sized mountains which get higher as you go south, revealing bare tops above the great pine forest that covers their slopes. We were taken by speedboat 20 miles southwards up the lake, to a smallish, clean beach, with the mountains behind us. And we were left.

Russian camping begins with an axe. All real Russian men can use an axe; their grannies begin to teach them when they are about five years old, because village grannies need their woodpiles kept well-stocked. ('Of course,' said Ilya, 'she gave me a little axe to start with.')

They cut down trees and split up the wood. They also construct fireplaces and all sorts of little refinements (pegs and handles, fine tinder, seats for weary bottoms.)

The first night was our first and last meat-cooking night; we tucked into huge pork kebabs marinated with garlic and vinegar. The Russians carried all the food for 9 of us for a week: bags of wheat, rice, pasta, buckwheat, about a dozen loaves of bread, a few tins of meat, several tins of fish, tins of condensed milk, plenty of fresh onions, peppers, cucumbers and tomatoes, dried mushrooms, pickled cucumbers, and kilos of potatoes. Also sugar, tea, biscuits, and some chocolate, but no cheese. I thought my contribution (lots of dried fruit) was an important addition, and the Russians eventually agreed, although dried fruit is not part of their tradition.

We began each day with hot porridge of buckwheat, semolina or rice enriched with condensed milk. Lunch always included a mixed salad of fresh vegetables; a soup - say potato and mushroom; something sweet - biscuits, chocolate, and tea. Supper often included reheated soup, and then a big dish of pasta with tinned meat and ketchup, or rice with fish and spices and pickled cucumbers. At every meal we had lots of tea, and the chance to nibble increasingly mouldy bread. We added freshly picked berries: bilberries, wild raspberries, cranberries (the Russian tiny variety), and others, and searched for mushrooms and pine nuts. One day we were given a dozen fresh perch by a local hunter.

Cooking is done in pots with a flattish oval base, designed to get the most heat from a fire. Apart from our first day, there was no frying, grilling or baking - a mistake, I thought. And we did not toast our mouldy bread. Food was prepared using long-bladed clasp knives, finely sharpened. But my pocket Swiss Army knife worked as well. We washed ourselves and our implements in the pure waters of the lake from which we took water for drinking.

After camping that night beside the lake, we trudged uphill for about 15 kilometres; the young men were carrying more than 30 kilos on their backs. This was when Training counted. The single-file track wandered through beautiful light-filled forest, where we were constantly stopped by the trunks of huge pines that had fallen across the track. Sometimes you could step over them; more often you had to clamber, sit, slide over them, and on one or two occasions when the bark had been cleaned off by some thoughtful local, you could get across by skimming on your tummy. Balance was difficult - at least it was for me - and I fell off, spectacularly on one occasion and less noticeably on one or two more. But the forest floor is not hard. We had to ford large streams and at one place to walk high above a river on a log. It was a large log. There should have been no difficulty. Most of the party trod lightly across despite their huge rucksacks, but I walked slowly, thinking about my shifting rucksack and the fact that You Mustn't Wobble- which of course encourages a cer-

tain hesitancy in the feet. Eventually I crossed four times without falling, which was as well, because in this case I could easily have broken a couple of limbs.

After three days high up beside a smaller lake we turned back. Carrying 15 kilos was almost a doddle when the walk was mostly downhill on a particularly beautiful day. As soon as we arrived at the lakeside, the men set about building a banya. They collected large stones and arranged them in a circle. On top they arranged another layer leaning inwards and then another, until they had constructed a dome with an entrance as if it were a bread oven. Inside they lit a fire which was fed for the next four-and-a-half hours.

Meanwhile they cut down and shaped poles about 6ft tall to construct a square cage - four uprights and four connecting horizontal poles at the top, properly braced and pegged. On this they hung heavy-duty plastic sheeting which was carefully tied down at all points, with the bottom of the sheeting buried in sand. The stove of course burnt steadily in the middle of this structure. A narrow slit allowed us to get in and rapidly close the sheeting. At 9 p.m. our men were ready, with bundles of birch twigs and of pine needles, and a couple of saucepans of water inside the banya. You tip water onto the savagely hot stones and steam pours off. As you sweat, you beat each other with the birch and the pine. Then you run out, all of five yards, into the lake, and swim.

First the men, then the women steamed out their dirt, but then we all got mixed up together; so my most wonderful experience of the whole holiday was beating a naked young man in a pine-scented steam-filled tent and then rushing with him into the lake and splashing crazily. Over and over again we sweated ourselves out - and then just lay under the stars, all of us, too exhausted to move.

On our way back to civilisation we commandeered a minibus to take us the 250 miles to Barnaul. There was plenty of room for nine of us plus our huge rucksacks but the bus driver had taken in another nine locals and their luggage. So for the first three hours everyone sat in, on and under everyone else. But who cared? These Permians were adaptable, cheerful, well-organised, and ready to take along someone more than twice their age to explore one of the most beautiful parts of their country.

Karen Hewitt

Note from the Membership Secretary

It would be appreciated if all members with email could send their email address to me at: djrrouls@aol.com This will help in maintaining communications about events where it is not always possible or convenient to use the post. All paid up members should have already received a membership card. If you have not received one and have paid your £8 subscription, please contact me at 01993 813215 so that our records can be corrected.

David Roulston, Membership Secretary

Perm Autistic Society

If you have read the recent popular and amazingly insightful book about an autistic boy: *'The curious incident of the dog in the night'* by Mark Haddon (Jonathan Cape 2003), and/or have had experience of autism in some other way, you may be interested to hear about the Perm Autistic Society, which some of us were privileged to meet on our recent visit to Perm this September. For those who are unclear about the definition of autism, I understand the National Autistic Society's definition is as follows: *'Autism (including Asperger syndrome) is a lifelong developmental disability occurring in varying degrees of severity. It is characterised by a triad of impairments which involve difficulties in forming social relationships, problems with verbal and non-verbal communication, and lack of imagination.'*

In fact we were led into our contact with this Society in Perm by Esther Pallot, an ex-VSO volunteer from Jersey, who went to Perm in 2000 to work as a special needs teacher. VSO withdrew its work in Russia in March 2003, but Esther was enabled to continue this new work (for by then she was in full swing) by her home church setting up charitable funds to continue her support. This has enabled her to develop the work over a longer period. In April 2003, Esther, together with a group of parents of children with autism, set up the Perm Autistic Society, which was registered there as a charity. Financially PAS relies entirely on parent subscriptions, donations and winning grants within the Russian system.

During our visit we learned that Esther had in fact built on work which she discovered had already been initiated by one very devoted and exceptional local Headmaster, Viktor Zhdanov, whose vision and energy had inspired an initial 'home-teaching' enterprise for a few particularly autistically impaired children in and round Perm who were excluded from normal schooling. In Russia, as here, children with disabilities of any kind should be included in normal schooling wherever possible, and those whose autism is not severe may indeed often be included. However, diagnosing along the wide spectrum of autism is notoriously difficult even in a country like the UK where it is becoming better understood, but this is not the case in the overall vastness of Russia. We met some of the parents and grandparents of the autistic children now being helped in the special classes at the Zhdanov school and they all spoke of the enormous relief they felt when this special educational facility was opened for them. They had all become desperate to find a developmental opportunity for their autistic children after having been refused so many times at normal schools because of their children's behaviour. A severely autistic child can be a very heavy emotional burden for parents, siblings and wider family members, and can prove socially isolating to a painful degree. Parents are still frequently criticized for having 'brought up their child badly', or they may be accused of substance abuse. It is not such an obviously 'visible' disability as some. Whilst there is still some one-to-one home teaching in Perm for the few who are unable to travel to the school, clearly there are advantages for most autistic children to be helped to develop socially by interacting with others within an appropriately structured educational ambience and under the guidance of specially trained and skilled teachers. We were enormously impressed with the six specially trained teachers, parents and children that we met at the Zhdanov school where at present they gather twice a week – some of the 37 families now able to benefit from all that is being provided, thanks to all that Esther has been able to invest there from her own skills, training and undoubted empathy and understanding of the current context. The mutual support felt by the parents (who may not have discovered each other otherwise) is clearly one of its greatest benefits. They know they are only touching the top of the iceberg, since it is difficult for some families to own up to having autistic children, but as ever such assistance being available may gradually uncover more. The Society has also built up an impressive library under a specially devoted librarian.

In some ways the ‘movement’ generally is as yet still a tender ‘plant’, since there is still much to be done to raise the awareness and understanding of autism with those in local government and the wider public, and it is not a priority for doctors, psychologists and educators. However, the Perm Autistic Society appears to be a very committed band of parents and teachers who are determined to build on the strong foundation they have made together. Esther has now handed over as Director of the Perm Autistic Society to Julia Korelina, the impressive mother of one of the children, who has had to sacrifice her job as an engineer because the work of Director is so demanding. According to the Constitution, no member of the Board may receive a salary, so it is a very special sacrifice on her part. Esther is playing a more facilitative role, even as she now spends more time in UK.



As we returned on the plane from Moscow, Esther was bringing some of the parents, teachers, a member of the Education Department, and a Russian journalist, for a week’s programme round facilities for autistic children and parents in the UK, under the auspices of the National Autistic Society here. She already has made contact with a Moscow-based NGO for families of children with autism, and has discovered that, after Moscow, St. Peterburg, Tomsk, Novosibirsk, Khabarovsk, Izhevsk and Pskov, Perm was actually the eighth city in Russia to be taking an interest in autism, and they are keen to operate as part of this greater ‘whole’. The Perm group’s democratic ‘people power’ has already been used to good effect in some recent local and national television coverage in Russia about the importance of their programme of work. As a voluntary NGO, Esther feels certain that the Perm Autistic Society should seek its funding by making applications like any other, and we have assured her that, if they have need to contact our Oxford Perm Association for support, we shall wholeheartedly recommend that we do so, as it is a promising ‘new shoot’ of development for the benefit of autistic children and their families in Perm.

Beryl Knotts