

## NEWSLETTER

Greetings to all our Sydney Balalaika Orchestra supporters !

### *The Far Eastern Russia and China Tour by the SBO – July 2005*

*A quote from Timofei Shevtsov who wrote in the "Telemir" newspaper, (Sakhalin).*

*"I never cease to be amazed by our Russian nature. First we sell everything that we don't need to foreigners, and then we buy these same things back from them. Last week we again had an opportunity to be moved by the West's ability to make money from us. We applauded an orchestra of Russian folk musicians from ..... Australia."*

(Note: The above is a literal translation - the SBO did not receive any performance fees on the tour)

Here is our story.

The Sydney Balalaika Orchestra returned from the Far East trip filled with vivid memories of exotic places, wonderfully hospitable people and successful concerts. The highlight for all of us was a standing ovation from a critical Russian audience. Our group traveled together as a family, looking after one another in an atmosphere of comradeship and fun. We were particularly happy to have amongst our group Vladimir Mikhailovich Savitsky who founded the SBO almost forty years ago.

Cultural differences abounded and were greatly enjoyed – like the hotel toilets in Seoul that contain at least half a dozen buttons for performing many interesting functions unknown in Australia ! Or the hot and cold taps back the front in Russian hotels. But we enjoyed the challenge !

We've been playing Russian music for so many years in Australia that the feelings we experienced when we actually touched down on Sakhalin in the motherland were both intense and emotional. The island was so green, the buildings grand and the language so very familiar to many. Hotel accommodation, banquets and hospitality were fantastic. Our tour organizer, Igor Savitsky and his wife Alla had spent months organizing this tour which involved transporting twenty-seven people including all their instruments, costumes and sound equipment. The result was a very successful trip packed with activities, performances, sightseeing, eating and lots of fun. This was quite an achievement when you realise the members and orchestra had to finance all airfares and other travel costs from their own resources.

Our first tour concert, in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, received a standing ovation. The Regional Philharmonic website wrote of our performance, *"They can play Russian folk instruments like virtuosi and do it because Russian culture is close to them in spirit... The delight of the listeners (amongst them some very young ones) was such as I had not seen for a long time. The public would not let the musicians go, and asked many questions from the floor.*

*"Our Post" newspaper wrote, "It's a long time since the Chekhov Centre has heard such applause. "Balalaika" managed to captivate its listeners ... Surely, what impressed in this performance was not technical perfection, but the passion," the 'Soviet Sakhalin' paper wrote, "but there are also real professionals in the team, such as Ludmila Voronov ... one of the best cimbalom players from Byelorussia, winner of international and all-Union competitions, who has blended very successfully into the Australian Orchestra. And you should have seen her happy eyes when the grateful inhabitants of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk marked her performance with roses...."*

The three Markovtzev sisters and our baritone Valentin Starnovsky, in their colourful traditional costumes, sang well known folksongs and were very enthusiastically received.

At Khabarovsk airport we were greeted by a beautiful young girl dressed in traditional Russian costume bearing traditional bread and salt for us to partake in.

We performed at “Our Motherland Russia” concert held at the Khabarovsk Drama Theatre together with a number of well-known groups of the region. It was a unique chance to participate in such an important event with other groups and experience the warm welcome of the critical audience. Playing at the World War II Veterans’ Home was a memorable and emotional occasion for the orchestra and the audience was moved to the point of tears.

The atmosphere at the “Ivana Kupala” festival on the bank of Amur River was quite different with lots of people, activities, stalls and other performers. There we enjoyed our dinner with spectacular sunset over the Amur River. Having played the waltz “Amur Waves” many times, we could now truly appreciate the might of this river.

We visited the national Nanaian settlement Sikachi Alian located 75 km from Khabarovsk to see the basalt boulders adorned with ancient petroglyphs dated 600 to 700 BC. Nanaian people entertained us in their traditional costumes performing ancient rituals, song and dance.

Our farewell to Russia was celebrated by a feast at the Vatel Restaurant, Zarya Hotel, where our sextet provided evening entertainment. Good food, beautiful music, wine and laughter were a befitting end to our memorable stay in Russia.

Harbin, China, was our last stop where we performed two concerts in the Harbin Music Hall. Lina, our bayan player sang in Chinese a specially prepared song “Welcome to Our City,” This drew instant applause and brought an abundance of flowers from the public.

The “Heilongjiang Morning News” reported on Igor Savitsky’s comments about Harbin *“My parents and grandparents were all born in Harbin ... my parents are of Chinese-Russian mixed blood and met in Harbin ... my father’s family circle has over twenty people who have connections to Harbin.....”* Victor & Millie Serghie, Igor & Alla Savitsky and Vladimir Savitsky all remembered what was then the small town of Harbin where they were born over fifty years ago. There were only few cars then, mainly trams and rickshaws. They recall that if temperatures dropped below 30 degrees they were allowed to go ice skating instead of attending school. Even then, Harbin was noted for its music, architecture, high standard of education and cultural development.

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Altogether this was a fabulously successful experience for each and every one of us and we thank you all for your continued support which has been absolutely invaluable in enabling us to turn this dream into a reality.