

Siberians receive red carpet reception

by Dr. Ted Mala
for the Tundra Times

When I think of Kotzebue, I think of homecoming. A certain feeling in me is always connected to Kotzebue since that is where my roots are.

And so the opportunity to bring the Siberians there was too much to resist and what was to follow proved me correct.

Many of you know that when you get to the bush, the best welcoming committee is anyone with any kind of three-wheeler, sled or truck that can give you a ride into town.

Little did I expect our Cape Smythe plane — which Tom Brower Sr. and his wife flew us down on — to be met with a red carpet covered with reindeer skins and the Northern Lights Eskimo Dancers lining each side of the carpet dancing and drumming for us!

Even Tom Brower said he had received several red carpet receptions in his life, but never one like this and never in Kotzebue!

The warm van picked us up and took us to the Senior Center where to our great surprise, we had Eskimo food and were entertained by two Eskimo groups — the Kotzebue Northern Lights Dancers and the Point Hope Dancers, who flew into town just to meet us.

It was an evening none of us will



Shown from left are Drs. Evgeny Starkov, Yuri Nikitin, Ted Mala and Vladimir Davidenko.

ever forget.

Nina Dahl was our coordinator from Maniilaq Association. Along with Mary Schaeffer and Marie Greene, our group met with local people, traditional healers and of course, community leaders.

They put on a memorable banquet with speeches by representatives of NANA, Maniilaq, the elders, Northwest Arctic Borough Mayor Chuck Greene and the Siberians.

"We are not able to put into words

our gratitude and feelings from our trip to Alaska," Dr. Nikitin said. "We never expected the wonderful and heartfelt reception we received from all over Alaska. It is something we will never forget."

"We are here to find ways to work together to help each other in health problems and work together for peace," he said.

At Kotzebue High School, Principal Helen Conwell assembled all the

classes for a question and answer session. The elementary school children sang songs which they had practiced and even said some words in Russian.

Drs. Davidenko, Starkov and Nikitin left letters everywhere from the children of Siberia.

It is hoped that all will write letters to one another and become pen pals and eventually meet one day. In Barrow, Ron Fieger's class at Fred Ipalook School received letters also. Patsy Aamodt, the school principal, promised to get children to write also.

At Kotzebue PHS the staff physicians and nurses spent time discussing local medical concerns. Dr. Ilona Hodson especially helped coordinate our visit there.

What surprised the Siberians most about our hospitals was that there were so few patients.

"In the Soviet Union, all of our hospitals are full all of the time," Davidenko said. "Here you have so many empty beds."

Thank you Kotzebue for the wonderful visit. The Siberians had always heard of Kotzebue and only dreamed of visiting it. That dream has now become real. And the reality is much better than they could ever have imagined in any dream.

Editor's Note: This is the second of a five-part series by Dr. Ted Mala.