

Soviets pay last respects to Newlin

by Barbara Crane
Tundra Times reporter

NOORVIK — The gray sky matched the solemnity of the occasion as seven Soviet citizens paid their respects to a friend they had known too briefly.

They had met Robert Newlin only recently.

Newlin, chairman of the NANA Regional Corp. board of directors, died July 16 while touring the Soviet Far East as part of an Alaskan delegation seeking closer ties with their neighbors across the Bering Strait.

There he became friends with Yuri Tototto, chairman of the Chukotka District's executive committee.

"Robert Newlin really made an impression on them when he was over there," said Willie Goodwin, mayor of Kotzebue. Goodwin had accompanied Newlin on his trip to the Soviet Union.

Goodwin said that when Tototto's group arrived in Kotzebue Aug. 17, the first thing they requested was that they travel to Noorvik to pay respect to Newlin's memory and meet his family.

Arrangements were made for the Soviets to visit Newlin's home in Noorvik the afternoon of Aug. 22.

They were met at the Noorvik airport by about 70 villagers. After a few welcoming speeches, they headed into town and went directly to the Newlin home.

"When we got to the home and went inside, Maggie Newlin, Robert's widow, was sitting on the couch," recalled Mike Lacey of Maniilaq Association, who was present for their meeting.

"Yuri Tototto went up to her and hugged her. She burst into tears and he held her for a few minutes. They just sat there in silence, holding each other, and then he told her how sorry he was about Robert's death."

Then Tototto met the rest of the family, and the other Soviets introduced themselves and gave their condolences.

Tototto gave Maggie a map of the Magadan Region of the Soviet Union. He traced the route that Newlin and his party had followed on their visit so she could see where he had been.

Then he wrote a short inscription on the map in Russian, which was also translated into English: "To the family of Robert Newlin — To express our respect toward him. We will remember this remarkable man forever."

Each member of the delegation signed his or her name below those words.

The group then traveled upriver to the village graveyard. Family members cleared the old flowers from Newlin's grave, and the Soviets put fresh flowers down.

"They were very careful," Lacey said. "They didn't want to do anything that would not be properly respectful or that would not be observing the customs of the people."

Following an Inupiaq prayer, each of the Soviets spoke a few words.

The group then returned to the Newlin home, where Maggie and the other women had prepared a feast of traditional Native foods for their visitors, including smoked salmon, baked Kobuk River whitefish, black muktuk, dried caribou, berries and Eskimo ice cream.

"Robert was a wonderful man, and everyone in the Soviet Union who met him loved him," Tototto told the family.



Photo by Michael Lacey/Maniilaq

Putting flowers on Robert Newlin's grave in Noorvik are, from left, Lyudmila Tkatchenko, teacher and interpreter, Yuri Tototto, chairman of the Chukotka District's executive committee, and Alimbek Dobriev, representative of a Chukotka elders group. In the background are Francis Ballot, left, and Maggie Newlin.