

Our view of Soviets may depend on impressions

by Alexandra McClanahan

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I recently had a striking lesson in international misunderstandings. Oddly, this lesson took place after I returned to Alaska and not while I was in the Soviet Union, a nation where relatively few people speak English.

I traveled to Moscow, Leningrad and the Murmansk region in the Far North last November at the invitation of the Novosti Press Agency. I was one of about a dozen Northern journalists who attended a conference in Leningrad and one of two from Alaska. Also attending from this state was Howard Weaver, editor of the *Anchorage Daily News*.

The Soviets invited people from throughout the world's North to their country in the hope that we would agree to the formation of the Northern News Service. We were simply asked whether we would submit articles to Novosti to be translated and then disseminated. We were also asked to consider articles we receive from Novosti for publication.

I can only say that the Soviets were quite successful in winning our goodwill and in obtaining our blessing in the start up of the news service. Not only were we impressed by the hospitality shown toward us, but what we were being asked to do was not all that much trouble for any of us. In fact, we all agreed that Northern residents have much in common and could probably gain a great deal by learning more about people in other Northern lands.

I have written several articles about all that for this newspaper, so I won't go into a great deal of detail. What I really want to talk about is my perception and Howard's perception of one woman, Luba Sechko.

After the conference in Leningrad, we were flown above the Arctic Circle to Murmansk. We spent the night there, then we were taken on a three-hour bus trip to the small and isolated community of Lovosero, a place somewhat similar in size to Kotzebue or Bethel and the service area for Saami reindeer herders who live out on the tundra.

Lovosero is probably a mainly non-Native community, but a number of Saami intellectuals were gathered together in a school library to talk to us about their Native heritage, culture and language.

Luba caught my eye because she

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looked to be about my age, because she was attractive and because she seemed to be very bright. We were told that she was the local Soviet government official.

Howard recently wrote an article about his trip to the Soviet Union and he singled Luba out, saying he felt she was particularly conservative and seemed reluctant to admit any of the Soviets' problems. He indicated she represented the hard-line reactionary opposed to the many drastic changes being advocated by Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev.

Neither Howard nor I spoke directly to Luba because she does not speak English. Oddly, however, my impression of her is quite different.

First, I must admit that the Soviets in this small community were reluctant to talk about their problems. In their defense, however, I must explain that I was raised in a small town of 1,760 people and I am certain the people in my Midwestern hometown would not feel at all comfortable discussing their problems with foreigners.

But to be brief, I found Luba to be intelligent and generous. In fact, as I

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prepared to get into a helicopter to fly out to a reindeer herders' settlement, she insisted that we trade coats so that I could wear hers on the tundra.

After I got out to the windswept, bitterly cold interior of the Kola Peninsula, I was grateful that Luba had allowed me to wear her sheepskin coat. My coat is wool, and although it's quite warm, hers was warmer. She also was very concerned about my feet, but I assured her my boots were adequate.

What struck me most about Luba, however, was her smile and her ability to laugh at silly jokes a few of us made on the back of the bus as we waited

for the helicopter.

I honestly don't know where Luba stands politically. The thing is, I don't believe Howard does, either. What troubles me is that he has one impression of her, and I have another. Although we may never know which one of us is correct, thousands of people have read his article about her and may think this woman who was so kind to me is one of those "cold Russians."

I hope I see Luba again someday. I would like to find out where she stands politically. I would like to be able to talk to her.

Mostly, though, I'd like to tell her I will never forget her warm sheepskin coat.



photo by Alexandra McCleanhan

Luba Sechko, middle, lives in Lovosero on the Kola Peninsula, above the Arctic Circle in the Soviet Union.