



Rochester, New York, USA

# LINKAGES

SISTER CITIES



Velikiy Novgorod, Russia

## Winter 2021 Newsletter

**President**

***Paul Caccamise***



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## **President's Letter**

I had occasion in the past few months to dig into boxes of Linkages archives from the early years of the organization (1980s) until the early 2000s. I found notebook after notebook and file after file of meticulous records kept by the founders of Linkages and early Board members. In meeting minutes, memos, news articles and letters in English and Russian, I saw evidence of a large number of committed people who devoted their time and resources to growing the sister city relationship and to developing positive relations with residents of Novgorod. There was an impressive record of years of activity to educate the Rochester community about the lives and cultures of a society that was alleged to be our adversary. The creativity and passion Linkages members brought to the task were amazing.

In this newsletter we focus on a contemporary member of Linkages who brings his own creativity and passion to open up a window into Russian culture in his own unique way. Rand Darrow, as you will read, has been creating art and writing poems and stories based on themes and characters in traditional Slavic culture. As Russian society becomes more linked to the global culture through communication via “the cloud,” Rand reminds us of the themes and characters that have populated Russian literature folklore in the traditional culture.

We also update you on Linkages’ efforts to carry on with sister city activities in spite of the obstacles posed by the pandemic. We offer our assessment for projects in the next year and share what little news we have about the Covid situation in Novgorod. Finally, we invite you to join us in the resumption of an in-person Russian Friendship Concert in Kilbourn Hall on January 6.

*Thanks to the support of the Board and members of Linkages like you, we look forward to resuming a full complement of events and activities in the coming year.*

## Update on Covid in Velikiy Novgorod

International news services have given us a glimpse of the current impact of the pandemic in Russia, especially in Moscow, but it is difficult to get a sense of the state of affairs in other localities. Linkages reached out to colleagues in the last month to find out what is going in in our sister city. As reported in the press, the situation in the large cities is not good. Covid-19 has been spreading, putting a strain on the healthcare system. Unvaccinated residents over 60s in the capital have been ordered to lock down for four months starting in November. Authorities in St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city, have declared that Covid-19 restrictions would not be lifted until at least 80% of its population was vaccinated.

Deaths related to Covid-19 have been exceeding 1,000 a day in Russia; however, nationwide, only about a third of the population has been inoculated. As in the US, some citizens are reluctant to get vaccinated (with the Russian-developed Sputnik 5 Covid vaccine.) The reasons are varied, as they are here in the US but skepticism about the vaccine and distrust of the government are main reasons. In reaction to worsening community spread and increasing death rates, the federal government ordered a nationwide “lock down” from October 31 to November 7 to force Russians to limit social contact.

In Novgorod, our friends (who all report they are healthy at this time)

tell us that the governor of the Novgorod oblast extended the “no work” lock down period for another week. Conditions are “not good,” they write, but they try to continue their lives in spite of the situation. Cultural events have resumed and

are open to residents who can show proof of vaccination. This year is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dostoevsky's birth. A ballet based on “The Brothers Karamazov” was performed in Novgorod. The museums are offering many interesting programs too; visitors must wear masks and show their QR-codes as proof of vaccination when visiting theaters or museums.

We were told Novgorod had a beautiful summer this year but now the fall rains have arrived. We all hope that the change in season will also bring a change in fortune for our sister city friends impacted by the pandemic.

## Update on Linkages Activities

The Covid pandemic has interrupted our in-person activities with Russian counterparts but Linkages has attempted to maintain virtual exchanges with Novgorod. It is unlikely in-person sister city exchanges will resume in the near future but it is possible they will in 2022.

Russia has opened its borders to over 60 countries but all international travelers, including those from the US, must present proof of a negative PCR test or proof of antibodies. The Open World group that was scheduled to come to Rochester in spring 2020 is still on hold. Linkages was approved to host a delegation from Velikiy Novgorod to dialogue with American partners about services to protect older adults from abuse, neglect, exploitation and fraud including property fraud. The current hope is that pandemic conditions will ease enough for them to visit in the second half of 2022.



In the meanwhile, Open World in Washington has agreed to organize a virtual meeting with the group in December. They will be meeting with representatives from the Greater Rochester Real

Estate Board to discuss training and credentialing for real estate agents to foster ethical real estate practices and prevent fraud. The Russian group, which includes two physicians, will also meet with Family Medicine residents from URMC to hear about the healthcare system for older adults.

Linkages' Education Committee has also reached out to Irina Melinkova, Curriculum Lead, Department of Education, Regional Institute of Professional Development, in Novgorod. The committee has invited her to arrange for virtual visit by Rochester teachers with teachers of English in Novgorod or to set up an exchange via YouTube. The committee is also looking for ways to support a continuation of peer-to-peer communication which has frequently followed visits to Novgorod by Rochester-based teachers.

## Rand Darrow's Creative World of Slavic Art and Russian Myths

If you have attended the annual Russian Friendship concerts in Kilbourn Hall each January (until the pandemic forced the event into an online format this year), you probably noticed the colorful banners depicting Russian mythical figures on the stage. They float in the background, reminiscent of Marc Chagall paintings, as the musicians perform beautiful works from the Russian repertoire. They recall the style of Chagall because, as their artist creator told me, Chagall is his favorite painter.

Rand Darrow, long time Linkages member and retired art teacher in the Manchester-Shortsville School District, is responsible for the banners as well as other art works on display at the annual concerts. In the lobby of Kilbourn Hall, you may have passed life-size paper maché sculptures of Tzar Nickolas II and his wife, Tzarina Alexandria, or you may have checked out the displays of his puppets and other

artistic creations representing figures from Russian folklore and some that emerged from his fertile imagination.

While he taught art to students from kindergarten to 7<sup>th</sup> grade, he told them that they were all artistic and that they all had innate ability as artists. Since his retirement from teaching, Rand has been developing his own artistic talents by creating a colorful and well populated universe of mythical characters based on traditional Slavic folklore. He began by composing simple melodies on a piano and then a keyboard which to him sounded Slavic. At the same time, his son introduced him to Russian mythology. He began to write his own folktales and started pairing the music with characters he created. The result was the beginning of an imaginative world of Slavic heroes and monsters.

In his research into Russian folklore, he learned about Velikiy Novgorod and its unique place in Russian history. In the late 2000s, an acquaintance told him about the sister city connection between Rochester and Novgorod and about Linkages. That was the beginning of his association with Linkages. Rand began making "song paintings" to pair with the songs he was composing. He then brought his characters to life through paper maché puppets or figures.



In 2009 he assembled his poems, songs and paintings in a book and sent a copy to Novgorod via a delegation from Rochester visiting the city in honor of the 1150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Novgorod. The work found its way to Irina Shirina, English teacher at Gymnasium School #1 and head of the

Russian American Friendship Society in Novgorod, and into the central library in the kremlin in the city.

He and Irina developed a connection via Skype and Rand was introduced to her English class. He says it was the thrill of a lifetime to hear the

students read the stories and poems in his book to him in English.

In 2013 Rand assembled all his paintings and poems in a book, *Witches, Wolves and Water Spirits – Slavic Poems of Novgorod*. That was followed by four others: *Northern Winds* (2018); *Vasilina and the Wolves* (2019); *Sava's Ring* (2020) and *Koschei's Dream*, published this year. (Rand's books are available on Amazon.) He also met Howard Spindler, piano instructor at the Eastman



Community Music School, in 2013. Howard invited him to display his artistic creations at the annual Russian Friendship Concert and arranged to have one of his songs about Novgorod performed at the concert.

Although he has never visited Velikiy Novgorod and has never set foot in Russia at all, he has a passion for Russian folklore and Slavic culture and mythology and may be more knowledgeable

about Russian folk literature than many Russians. He explains about one of his epic stories:

“The story *NORTHERN WINDS* is a *bylina* which is a Slavic epic. It is usually an oral narrative poem often sung and loosely based on historical fact. It has a *Bogatyr* (hero) or *Polyanitsa* (heroine) and is divided into three parts: creation of *Bogatyr*, mission, and moral or goal. I have combined puppet figures with my paintings to help narrate the story, using Christmas lights, shower curtains and whatever to create a mood. I wanted to create my own world and enjoy taking found materials and transforming it into something else.”

In addition to the displays at the annual ECMS-Linkages concerts, he has put on shows and has had exhibits locally, principally at the Penfield library. He said he is surprised that a simple song composed on a piano has blossomed into an artistic adventure for him. “It’s been a lot of fun,” he added.

We have just learned that an in-person Russian Friendship concert will resume in January at Kilbourn (see *Save the Date* announcement in the newsletter) so you may have another chance to meet Rand and see a sample of his imaginative and beautiful world of Russian folklore at that event.

## Russian Friendship Concert

In-Person Performance of Music by Russian Composers

Co-sponsored by the Eastman Community Music School & Linkages

**Thursday, January 6, 2022**  
**7:30 pm**

**Kilbourn Hall**  
**26 Gibbs St.**  
**Rochester, NY**

*Note: All patrons are required to wear masks in Eastman's performance venues at all times.*