

Inside:

Snow Week...See Page 9

Frost...See Page 11

Gymnasts win...See Page 1B

Swift County Monitor-News

Benson, MN 56215 • Vol. CVII/No. 33 • Local Edition, 8 Parts • Area Edition, 4 Parts • Non-Local Edition, 2 Parts • Wednesday, February 10, 1993



Skotnikov breaking new ground for Tyler Limited Partnership in Belarus

by Allison K. Whiting

Tyler Limited Partnership's current intern is not your average college student intern.

Andrey Skotnikov has a doctorate, a wife and two teen-age children and is a university teacher. But he still feels there is much for him to learn here and take back to his home - Minsk, Belarus.

With his stylish hair cut and fashionable denim jeans and shirt, you'd never know the 38-year-old Skotnikov from his American co-workers - until his heavy Russian accent gives him away. Skotnikov studied English just six months on his own before coming to North America. That first trip was in 1991 to Canada, where he spent five months working and supervising student laborers.

This is actually his second stay in Benson. Skotnikov first came for several months last year.

"It's another planet compared to our country," the Russian native said.

Skotnikov became involved with Tyler through its president, Don McGrath, who traveled to Belarus with the Willmar Friendship Force last year in hopes of making business connections.

"We knew there was an enormous potential market in the former Soviet Union," McGrath said. He went hoping to find buyers for Tyler products; instead, he found Skotnikov.

McGrath was assigned to visit a collective farm 120 miles from Minsk. While there he traveled into the capital city to lecture on the business structure of U.S. agriculture, which differs greatly from that of Belarus, where 3,000 collective farms of 25,000 acres each comprises its very inflexible agricultural system.

Skotnikov served as his translator for McGrath's presentation. When Skotnikov expressed interest in coming to the United States, McGrath extended the invitation. He readily accepted and made the necessary arrangements, getting a leave of absence from his teaching position.

Adjusting to Minnesota was easy. Belarus is much like Minnesota in climate as well as population and area, he said.

What surprised him most his first trip was the people. His personal library contains many classics by American authors such as Jack London, Ernest Hemingway and Mark Twain. Their picture of Americans were surprisingly accurate.

"It seems to me I know about Americans," he said.

Skotnikov joking calls his U.S. home "famous Benson."

"I have here everything I have in my country," such as the theater and the fitness club, which he visits frequently.

What it doesn't have, however, is his family. His wife, Irina, is a bookkeeper at a university. Their daughter Natasha is 16 and son Denis is 15. Both attend school Sunday through Saturday, 60 hours a week, 18 hours of which are

elective art and English classes.

Belarus lost 20 percent of its arable land in the 1985 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Skotnikov's family spent two summers in contaminated areas because the government failed to inform them of the danger. Skotnikov has seriously considered bringing his family to the United States, but hesitates because of those he would leave behind.

Work at Tyler

If it involves farm equipment, Skotnikov has probably done it - from operating to designing to building them. He holds 20 Soviet patents for his work on harvesters and other implements.

Skotnikov received his doctorate from the Ukrainian Agriculture Academy. He is currently an associate professor of the farm machinery department of the Byelorussian Agri-technical University in Minsk, teaching classes in the design of farm equipment.

Skotnikov believes the old Soviet system of central control did indeed slow down the progress of technology in the former Soviet Union. But he said Tyler technology is just a bit ahead of that in Belarus, home of the world's largest tractor company, which employs 40,000 workers. He said the quality of the Belarus tractor is comparable to American brands, except in non-mechanical features such as the paint job or cab comfort.

His work for Tyler this spring may involve writing computer software for soil mapping and testing or designing the frames of farm implements. He is unsure how long he will stay this time, although the U.S. government has given him permission to stay through June 1.

"Work very interesting for me," he said, calling every step he takes here "exploration." He keeps a detailed daily diary of what he does, what he eats, the people he meets and so on. He plans to write a book or series of articles about his experiences when he gets home.

His American hosts

Skotnikov's host and co-worker is Audrey Arneson, a 23-year employee of Tyler. She and her husband Terry have hosted Skotnikov for most of his time in Benson.

"People are the same no matter where they live," she said, relating the lesson she's learned from hosting many foreign exchange students, including Tyler's last intern, a 19-year-old from France. Hosting Skotnikov, as with all their other foreign guests, has "really been a positive experience," she said.

Generally, the toughest part of having a foreign guest is the language, she said. But hosting Skotnikov has been easy, she said, thanks to his sense of

Skotnikov...See Page 12



Tyler employee Audrey Arneson is hosting co-worker Andrey Skotnikov, who has brought his engineering expertise from Belarus to help Tyler create markets in his country.

Skotnikov working at Tyler..... from Page 1

humor and philosophical nature.

She said he loves to cook and puts garlic in everything. His specialty is Russian *borsch*, but he also enjoys American food – thus the frequent trips to the fitness center.

She described him as a “go-getter” who wants to better first his family then his country. Arneson thinks Skotnikov would move his family to the U.S. “at the drop of a hat.”

His stay has opened her eyes to a few things.

One is the lack of food and consumer goods in the former Soviet Union. There are two sets of stores in the former Soviet Union – one well-stocked set for government officials; the other, bare-shelved stores for the general public. The same is true for gas stations, she said.

She’s observed Skotnikov’s amazement when one can actually go out and buy an item advertised on TV. In Belarus, products are advertised but are not available or are priced out of the reach of the average consumer.

“I guess I’ve always appreciated it anyway,” she said, but hearing his stories has given her a new perspective the vast supply of U.S. goods.

His stay has also given her insight into U.S. aid to Russia. He tells her what they need is knowledge, not dollars. Money will surely go into the hands of criminals and the average Russian will not benefit from it. Skotnikov instead supports doing exchanges of knowledge, as he is doing at Tyler.

Knowing him has also given her the travel bug.

“I hope to go there. In fact, I’m sure we will,” she said.

His views on his country

Skotnikov, who readily discusses his political opinions, gives a somewhat pessimistic view of the situation in the former Soviet Union. Life for most classes of people, including him and his family, is not getting easier, he said. Being a university professor does not mean getting government privileges or a large pay check. It is only because he works at Tyler, where he draws a salary, that their situation is improving.

Were it not for sky-rocketing inflation, their salaries might be adequate. His wife makes 15,000 rubles a month – but a gallon of fuel costs 400 rubles, a sofa and two chairs about 25,000 rubles and a television set 40,000 rubles. The cheapest car is 1.5 million rubles.

Belarussians still face many shortages and live with depression-like rationing. They receive ration coupons for butter, sugar, macaroni, cigarettes, wine, gas and other goods.

The rations are small. For instance, each person is allowed one pound of butter a month.

“It’s not enough and it’s even difficult to get that stuff,” he said. “For myself it’s better because I am able to buy such expensive food,” because of his job at Tyler, he said. People are not starving but “things become worse and worse every day,” he said. He tries to stay out of grocery stores here because it only reminds him of how little his family has back home.

Inflation there is so high that it is pointless to save money, even if you could. So you buy something you don’t need, like a camera. Its value will increase until, one day, when you need money, you can sell it at a higher price, he said.

It is a relatively new phenomena. Under communism, Soviet society was nearly equal. Now economic classes are becoming distinct, he said.

“Many, many things I don’t like in our situation,” he said. “We haven’t owners in our country” to create a free market economy, he said. And although now given the chance, he said, most Soviets would rather work for someone than own a business.

Skotnikov is no fan of either Russian President Boris Yeltsin or former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, whose biggest mistake was not creating owners.

Although not a “hard-liner,” or one who supports the return to the old communist regime, Skotnikov feels it was a mistake for the former Soviet countries to separate. When they did, they immediately took up their own language, printed their own currency and treated those from other countries as foreigners.

Imagine having to show a passport and change your money at the South Dakota border, he said. Imagine each U.S. state having an ambassador to the others, he said. The economies of the republics are so integrated they are unable to survive without each other, yet they have made cooperation almost impossible.

“I think we will be together sooner or later. We haven’t another way,” he said.

He compared the dissolution to dividing up a car.

“You receive seats, I receive wheel. We destroy car and it doesn’t move,” he said. Whatever evil the communists did, at least they unified the countries by giving them a common language and alphabet where once there were five alphabets and 130 languages. Skotnikov calls those who supported dissolution “gangsters.”

His opinion of the government may sound familiar – that it is run by criminals. Their ruling body, Parliament, is largely made up of business leaders who use their power for their personal benefit, such as selling themselves state property at low prices, he said. Although elected, they are bureaucrats who get into office because of their money and their power.

On the contrary, the United States’ system of checks and balances and the influence of the public makes it less dangerous to have a bad president, he said.

Tyler’s future in Belarus

Skotnikov is more optimistic about Tyler’s chances in his country. He said it is possible the company may be selling parts there sometime this year. He will continue researching markets in Moscow, Kiev, Minsk and other major cities when he returns to Belarus this summer.

McGrath acknowledges the long-term nature of the project.

“I guess we’re somewhat stymied. There’s a great deal of interest ... but no money,” McGrath said.

The problem is that it is almost impossible to secure hard currency for payment. So with Skotnikov’s help, they are investigating ways to take payment in parts, such as axles. Currently, one axle used by U.S. companies is made in Hungary.

“We’re going to keep chipping away,” he said, hopeful that the risks will decrease over time. He is glad it was Belarus that he visited, because its excellent manufacturing and superior education system make it the most likely prospect for joint ventures among former Soviet republics.

He is glad also because it was in Belarus that Tyler found the talented Skotnikov, who feels likewise fortunate.

Working in the United States has been “great time,” Skotnikov said. “I’m incredibly lucky person.”