

Slavic Scholars Broaden International Boundaries

Intermarriage, bilingualism, and career choices are some of the issues that young people face in the modern world. These issues are personally familiar to Jim Kolesnikoff (1936-), a Canadian Doukhobor, and Nina (1943-) from Poland. The two married 1968, raised a family, and both became closely involved in Slavic studies. For them, languages are door openers to the wider world and a source of establishing self-confidence and a broader perspective in life. Today they reside in Hamilton, Ontario where Nina teaches at McMaster University, while Jim commutes to Toronto and works for a Russian-Canadian rare gems company.

Jim was born in Watson, Saskatchewan. Later his family moved to British Columbia where Jim graduated from the Grand Forks High School in 1954. During the next several years, Jim worked for the Sunshine Valley Co-op and the Grand Forks Credit Union. At the same time, he was an active member of the USCC Union of Youth in a program of singing, Russian language evening school program, support for *Iskra* publication, and discussions. He was one of the hosts for the Saskatchewan Doukhobor students who in December 1957 descended on the interior of BC with a questioning attitude of 'Where do we go from here?'

When an opportunity presented itself, in 1959 Jim left to the USSR where he studied until his return in 1963. Two years later, he again travelled to the USSR. This time he attended Moscow State University and received his MA in Russian language and literature from the Philological Faculty in 1967.

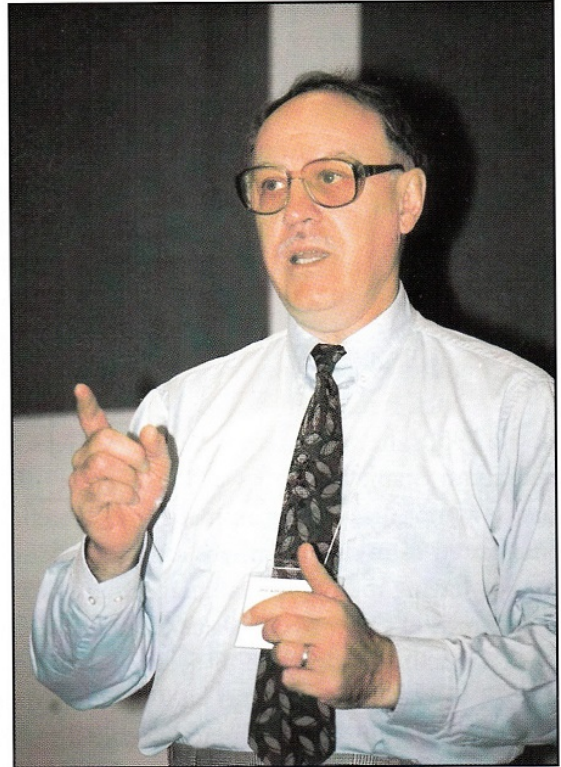
Nina was born in Pinsk, Byelorussia. After World War II her parents moved to Olawa, a small town in Western Poland. Nina graduated from High School in 1961, enrolled in the Russian program at the Wroclaw University. In 1965, she won a scholarship to study in the USSR. During her studies at Moscow State University she met Jim. They were married in 1968 and moved to Canada the same year. For three years they lived in Edmonton, Alberta where Nina completed her PhD studies in the Department of Comparative Literature. Next, Jim completed his Slavonic Linguistics in the Department of Modern Languages at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby. The couple moved to Hamilton, Ontario where Nina now teaches Russian at McMaster University and has written extensively on Polish and Russian literature.

In an interview by Dmitri Popoff of *Mir* publication (vol. 3, no.1, May 1975), Jim and Nina reveal the reasons why they consider languages to be a valuable asset to society:

'Nina: I agree with Jim that it is very important to know other languages. I believe that such knowledge enriches each person and broadens his or her viewpoint. What is more important is that it brings people together. If you know another language, you can read in that language and you begin to know the culture of the people. You also begin to understand the people themselves. In this way you become part of the broader community instead of being aware only of your own nation or your own small country.' (*Ibid.*3).

Nina went on to say that it is much easier to learn languages when you are relatively young. If you start as a child your chances of learning the language are much greater, and this is what happened to her. She said:

'I learned Polish as my first language and I didn't have any problems learning Russian since I started at a very young age and I had the chance to use the language. We often visited our relatives in the Soviet Union so Russian became my second language almost equal to my first. To learn the English language has been much more difficult. From my own experience I would say that people should start learning languages as early as possible, and should make efforts to maintain them throughout the years.'



Jim Kolesnikoff of Hamilton, Ontario.

Love and romance facilitates the learning a language and a culture. Jim admits that when he was exposed to a new culture and a new language, and fell in love with Nina, the acquisition of Polish 'becomes a very desirable and a pleasant experience.' (*Ibid.*4).

When it comes to intermarriage, the dynamics of understanding and acceptance of stepping into the shoes of another party requires much effort. Intermarriage does not actually preserve an ethnic minority, but it does bring people together, says Jim. It 'educates tolerance, it broadens the individual's perspective and ultimately it leads to a more international point of view' (*Ibid.*8).

Nina supports this trend towards more internationalism because it encourages people 'to look toward a broader perspective' (*Ibid.*43).

Reflecting on his five years of studies in the former Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, Jim Kolesnikoff was deeply impressed by the Soviet people in several ways. One is that the people were extremely conscious of the effects of wars on them and feel a great need to improve international co-operation in order to prevent the useless slaughter of humankind. 'It is very difficult to imagine a people who, in the second world war alone, lost 27 million human lives, and unaccountable...material wealth, not to be sincere'. Second, he liked their ability to be well disciplined and yet be very flexible and good-natured. Third, Jim admired their extreme patience and high idealism. 'They have a certain faith in what they are doing. They feel inwardly that they are accomplishing something great. This idealism is helping them overcome their shortcomings' such as waiting for two or three years to move into an apartment' (*Ibid.*44).

Jim Kolesnikoff has learned well the Russian language and the need to develop international structures that will help bring together the East and West. When he and his colleagues John J. Verigin, Sr. and Jim E. Popoff were in Ottawa in the fall of 1981 attending a national disarmament conference, we met together at my place and drew up a plan to help bridge cross cultural understanding. With us as the Coordinating body, we organized the first International Doukhobor Intergroup Symposium in Castlegar, BC 25-28 June 1982. The combined efforts brought a number of 'firsts': the historic peace groups (Quakers, Mennonites, Molokans, and Doukhobors) came together for the first time in their 300-year history; an open door policy in the Brilliant Cultural Centre allowed zealots to participate; Doukhobor performers were permitted to use musical instruments in the Centre; professional simultaneous translation was used in the sessions; and many seeds were sown to help bring together our common energies in the important journey of human survival (Tarasoff, 1983: 5). All agreed that the use of Russian and English languages did help to facilitate international understanding and we were all glad to be part of this important pioneering historic venture.

Source: Koozma J. Tarasoff, *Spirit Wrestlers: Doukhobor Pioneers' Strategies for Living* (2002), pages 232-233.