

The Power of One

CHARLES E. HANSON ('73) IN RUSSIA

BY LISA KAISER

In 1994 it may not seem unusual for Americans and Russians to see each other as friends and potential allies. But in 1988, before the fall of the Berlin Wall and before all of the extraordinary events that have since occurred in Russia, the citizens of La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Dubna, Russia, saw beyond their political differences.

Now, through the La Crosse-Dubna Friendship Association, they are working to set up new democratic institutions in Dubna, a center of nuclear research which had always been cut off from westerners.

According to Charles E. Hanson ('73), a partner in the La Crosse law firm of Hale, Skemp, Hanson & Skemp and founding president of the La Crosse-Dubna Friendship Association, Inc., the sister-city relationship of La Crosse and Dubna has flourished in ways that he never predicted. "This wasn't the result of a master plan, it's evolved over the years and I definitely could not have foreseen it," he said.

The relationship began in 1988 when a letter was sent from Dubna to the mayor of La Crosse, Patrick Zielke, with the idea of creating a sister-city relationship which would encourage cultural and educational exchanges in the hope of increasing awareness of both Russian and American cultures. Zielke turned to Hanson because Hanson had been interested in Russia since he had visited the Soviet Union with his wife Cheryl in 1985 as part of a citizen diplomacy group.

After almost two years of work the relationship was formed as a not-for-profit



Charles Hanson ('73), President, La Crosse-Dubna Friendship Organization

Wisconsin corporation and in August 1990 a formal sister-city protocol was signed and recognized by the federal governments of both countries. Since that time many projects typical of sister cities have been carried out, including exchanges of girl and boy scouts, hosting high school students and college and non-traditional students who traveled to Dubna or La Crosse to study, hosting musicians and teachers, and sponsoring medical and dental professionals to share their supplies and expertise.

In the medical field, La Crosse has been the recipient of a major grant from the American International Health Alliance to work on Dubna's medical resources. According to Hanson, this effort has been successful because La Crosse focused on helping the Russians improve medical care with their existing equipment rather than

trying to immediately install sophisticated equipment which they were not prepared to use.

But these projects are just the beginning—the two cities are creating business relationships, a business school and a more-democratic government. Hanson said that despite Dubna's history as a scientific center crucial to the defense of the Soviet Union, it's actually quite receptive to western ideas since most of its citizens are highly educated. "It's this intellectual base that has helped our relationship because they have a lot of knowledge to build on," Hanson said.

Besides its human resources, Dubna is also the home of the Cosmos Space Communications Station, built to transmit via satellite the 1980 Olympics and to communicate with cosmonauts. It was also used to receive western news reports of the 1991 coup attempt despite a news blackout within the Soviet Union. This information helped to foster support for Boris Yeltsin and progressive reform.

The Cosmos Center is integral to Russian and American relations at all levels. "It's now the conduit for the Washington-Moscow hotline, but we also use it for the La Crosse-Dubna communications," Hanson said.

They're now using the Center and the Internet to help them set up new institutions. Dubna, with a population of 65,000 and located on the Volga River about 70 miles from Moscow, is now a free trade zone, which will help attract international businesses since much of the bureaucratic processing will be reduced.

This development has led to the creation of the Russian American Transport Association, the first joint venture established in Russia. This trucking company was originally owned by the regional government, then sold to Dubna and privatized to allow the company to become a joint stock company with both American and Russian stockholders.

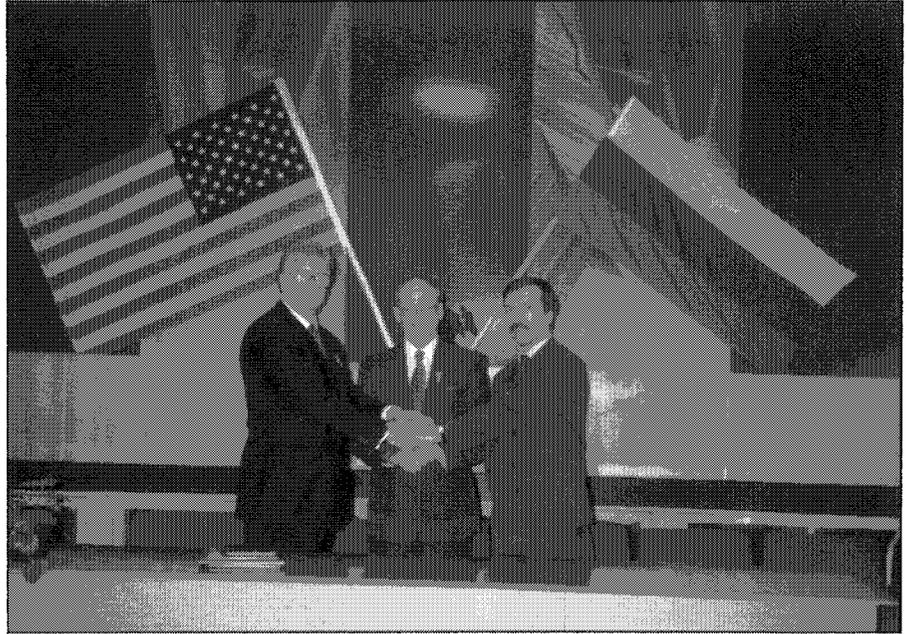
The company was set up by the Commonwealth American Development Corporation, a private consulting corporation established by Hanson and Morris Patterson to help Wisconsin businesses create joint ventures or develop trading partners in Russia. Hanson said that they're helped by the personal relationships built up over the years which will protect them from some of the riskier aspects of Russian business. Hanson is also responsible for creating a Rotary Club in Dubna, the first such club in a Russian city with a population of less than one million.

Dubna will also make strides in business because three La Crosse institutions—UW-La Crosse, Viterbo College and Western Wisconsin Technical College—are helping to set up a business college in Dubna that will teach western business practices. Classes will start in the fall of 1994 since the Russian Federation has just given a federal license to this new institution. Hanson is one of the founding directors.

The sister-city organization is also involved in the public sector. Since governments existing at the municipal level have just been officially recognized by the Russian constitution, La Crosse officials and political science professors, along with UW Law Professor Walter Raushenbush, are helping to develop the Dubna city charter and to advise on various aspects of local government from land reform to elections.

"We're helping them to create a new democratic system of local government," Hanson said. "From a professional standpoint I'm delighted, and it's especially fun to bring my professional background into play with the sister-city project."

Hanson said that Dubna is ideal for leading the way in setting up new governmental structures since it has relatively few social problems such as organized crime, has a great location and is small enough so that you can know all of the key people.



Morris Patterson, Chuck Hanson and Gemady Strogov (l to r) at the first stockholders' meeting of the Russian American Transport Association.



Hanson welcomes Mayor Prokh of Dubna at the La Crosse Airport.



Hands Across the Heartland, 1992: Russians offer the American pilot of a C-5A cargo plane a traditional welcome of bread and salt at the Moscow airport.

“We think of Dubna as a great opportunity to develop different prototype systems, whether it be in the area of land reform, municipal government, or education,” he said. “We can experiment in Dubna and it will be less complicated than if we tried to do things in Moscow. Ultimately, whatever model the people in Dubna come up with it will be uniquely Russian. We can just offer our experience in what we do here.”

Despite these achievements, Hanson said that his most rewarding experience came from chairing the Hands Across the Heartland Campaign, a community-based effort that collected food and medical aid for Dubna during the food crisis in the

winter of 1991–92. Individuals and private businesses from the La Crosse area and eastern Minnesota donated 402,000 pounds of food, medicine and clothing while their friends in Dubna organized the distribution of the aid. Hanson estimated that about 12,000 people in Dubna were helped by this effort.

Hanson was with a delegation from La Crosse which flew to Dubna on a military cargo plane to help ensure that the relief got to the right people. “That was a really moving experience for me, seeing our military working with their Russian counterparts to deliver food,” he said. Not one box was lost along the way.

Hands Across the Heartland II sent

over 218,000 pounds of aid again in 1993. Hanson said that he’s impressed with the way the effort brought together so many different people both in Russia and Wisconsin. “We didn’t know that it could not be done, so we just went ahead and did it,” Hanson said.

But Hanson said that the best humanitarian aid is that which will help the people of Dubna help themselves. “I’ve made seven trips to Russia, not to tell them what to do, but to help provide them with options and the opportunity to see what has worked for us,” Hanson said. “It is up to the Russians to decide what is going to work for them. They’re going to have a Russian form of whatever model they adopt—they won’t just borrow everything from another culture.”

Hanson also said that building personal relationships will in turn encourage Russians to take a chance on what will sometimes be painful reforms as they work to develop a fully democratic society. The work of the La Crosse-Dubna Friendship Association is proof of what can be accomplished.

“I’m a firm believer of the power of one,” Hanson said. “It’s easy to throw up your hands and say that there are too many problems and that those problems are too big to solve. But one person, or one group, or one city, really can make a difference. You don’t have to have a huge government program to do it. You do have to be willing to begin with what you have and see yourself as part of the solution.”