

January 6, 1991 (December 24, 1990 in the Julian reckoning)

Russian Christmas,

Dear Friends,

In Sitka we're lucky to be able to celebrate two Christmases, the "Western" on December 25 and the "Russian" on January 7. Russian Christmas Eve is welcomed by change bell ringing at St. Michael's Cathedral and carolers who take a big star door to door, "starring." For years Russian customs have been honored here, perhaps more than in Russia. Now, however, that the ice curtain is melting that may be changing.

We spent the week before "Western" in the Soviet Far East, Vladivostok, as part of an Alaska delegation, the first exchange between Alaska and Vladivostok since the Second World War. All four of us participated. Brian and Kevin spent a week at school 14 in Vladivostok while Suzi and Rich attended various social, economic and political events.

We almost didn't make it back to Sitka for Christmas. On the plane back, while Suzi, Kevin and Brian shared a row of three seats, Rich sat next to a man from Western Alaska who ran a reindeer slaughter house and was talking about marketing reindeer sausage as a US-Soviet joint venture. Perhaps it was the wrath of Rudolph, but weather kept out plane out of Anchorage (we sat on the ground in Fairbanks for four hours, not able to leave because there was no customs to clear us) so we missed our connection. We just made the last flight to Sitka before Christmas and got back in time for Rich to do his Christmas Eve program on Raven Radio. Several of the delegation, not so quick out of customs, didn't make it back in time.

School 14 is one of five magnet schools in Vladivostok that specializes in English instruction. On Friday evening the parents of the Alaska children were invited to a Christmas party. The party was secular in nature, and included many Russian Christmas season traditions. There was traditional food, including Christmas pancakes, baked goods, and fruits. There was singing and dancing, (arranged by our older son Brian's "mother" who was a music teacher) including a visit from masked visitors in sheepskins who travel from door to door in a tradition much like English Wassailing. At one point we had a visit from "De-et Mor-ose" or Grandfather Frost, a thin Santa Claus. He brought a tree that we were all encouraged to dance around, and distributed gifts to the American children.

The description of the party that most comes to mind is sensory overload. There was something for each of the senses, vivid costumes for the eye, food for the palate, music for the ear, aromas from the kitchen, and the firm hand of a Russian student pulling you up to dance. And, unlike Alaska public schools, there was vodka and Champaign.

The Christmas celebration in School 14 was for our benefit. However, we got a chance to visit another of the English language magnate schools, School 13, which was next to our hotel. Some of the students came to the hotel and invited us to the English language Christmas program. Their teachers were surprised by our visit. They hadn't expected 15 Americans. The program

was more sedate than the party at School 14. It included the presentation of two English language Christmas plays, one written by the students.

This was one of two Christmas programs at School 13. An English teacher told me that there would be another program on Christmas day, which would not be a holiday, but a school day. Two 10th form students assured me that they did not celebrate Christmas on their own, but did it as a way of better understanding the culture whose language they were learning.

The students sang Jingle Bells and at both schools we were asked to sing a Christmas song. In spite of the secular nature of the school celebrations we sang religious songs, "Silent night," followed by "Joy to the World" and ending with "We Wish You A Merry Christmas." We left copies of the music with the teachers at both schools.

The day after the party in school 14 we went to dinner at the home Kevin was staying at. Between vodka toasts (Uncle Valery had always wanted to get drunk with an American) they gave us fresh pineapple, potatoes with meat, lots of tea with sugar and other things I had seen people standing on line for or complaining were not available. It was no use refusing food, or urging them to take more. The generosity was overwhelming. After dinner we went to the final party for the Americans and their hosts at the hotel. As a farewell, a group of ladies sang an Elvis song. 'Love me Tender.'

Although it's the end of the season and not the beginning, happy holidays.

The McClears.