

## TARI AND BYU-IDAHO: NEW RELATIONS

Vaun Waddell—Department of English

My first journey to Kazan was in March of 1996. There was a UNESCO conference on multi-cultural education, and I wanted to get a breath of air outside Moscow. I wasn't officially invited to the conference; but by paying my own train fare, I was accepted by the Moscow organizer. The conference lasted a week. We listened to talks by day and by night were entertained by Tatar folk music and dances. One of the main questions of the conference was whether the Tatars, along with other ethnic groups across Russia, would be allowed to teach the children their native tongues in the schools. This was my first experience with a personal interpreter, a young woman whispering so close to my ear that the scent and moisture of her breath were as distinct as its sound. The speakers seemed cautious and tentative, and there were heated expressions by Muscovite delegates, even a threat to walk out. I felt a twinge that I would someday return to Kazan—that was all. There was no specific purpose, no particular acquaintance, no notion of timing; I just felt that I would go back to Tatarstan.

Kazan is a city of more than a million, the capital of Tatarstan, located 500 miles east of Moscow on the Volga. In the 13th century the Tatars (also Tartars) undertook what they thought of as an expansion westward into Russia and Eastern Europe, where their arrival was considered an invasion. In the late 15th century Ivan the Great, Grand Duke of Muscovy, was successful in pushing them back eastward; and Kazan became their center. Ivan's exploits effectively unified Russia, which then conquered in stages eastward to the Pacific. The Tatars are Muslim, with Turkic and Mongolian ties. Today many more Tatars live outside Tatarstan than in it, and almost half the people in Tatarstan are ethnic Russians. Tatarstan is a semi-autonomous republic fully enclosed by the Russian Federation. In 1991 its leaders chose their political stance; leaders in Chechnya chose another. A family in Kazan who are friends of mine have named their sickly house cat Genghis, a silly parody and a serious reminder.

The idea that I would return hung on, so in 1997 I e-mailed Natalia Tschoshanova, a leader of the interpreters, asking whether she could arrange a letter of invitation and a place for me to stay. I planned to spend two weeks in Kazan. She arranged for me to live with her friends Rashid and Nelia, a wonderful Tatar couple with a daughter, Nargiz, who was away working on a movie production. Every day we feasted on triangles, pies filled with cubed meat and potatoes and onions, fried in oil, in Tatar *ishpeshmak*. It was the season of green onions, which Rashid ate by the fistful, rubbing the ends in salt before biting them off and

**Tatarstan is a semi-autonomous republic fully enclosed by the Russian Federation.**

smacking his lips. Nelia was overweight and high strung, not unusual in her land; later that summer she died of a stroke. Natalia's official letter of invitation, required for me to obtain a visa, came from her employer, the Tatar-American Regional Institute, or TARI.

TARI was founded in 1992 as an experimental university. The purpose was to eclectically combine ideas and methods to make education useful and to teach principled behavior as well as academic subjects. The premise was an admission that what was already being done in the community was less than perfectly successful on both counts. The man with the vision and the stature was Dr. Mirza Izmagilovich Makhmoutov. TARI's development until now has in significant ways paralleled the Bannock Stake Academy, or Ricks College, in its first 70 or so years. Both were founded for the same purposes and from similar visions.

I spent the two weeks in May 1997 visiting TARI and schools whose students feed into it, also visiting the English language department at KAI, Kazan Aviation Institute. I observed a three-day visit by three professors from a midwestern American university, how they swept in with a sense of mission, a time schedule, and objectives, and then swept out; in the days after their departure, I observed the minimal residual impact of their visit. The lesson to me was that foreigners are not perceived as having answers or better ways of doing things. I had no grand agenda but talked a time or two with Dilyara Mansourovna Shakirova, TARI's rector (president), about bringing students from BYU-Idaho, then Ricks College, to TARI. What I had in mind was stopping in Kazan for a couple of weeks, having our students live with families, work with local English teachers in the schools, and spend time with TARI students both in and out of class. Starting in 1991, I had done the British Literature Tour; and wonderful as it was, cultural immersion was not possible within that travel-study format.

Ed Kumferman, Rudy and LeAnn Puzey, and I put together a group of about twenty students in 1998. We spent a week in and around Moscow, several days in St. Petersburg, and nearly two weeks in France, Germany, and Switzerland. But everyone agreed that the highlight was the two weeks in Kazan, a place no one had heard of. There was frustration because every night we all received telephone calls from the administration changing our travel and teaching assignments for the following day, as if the printed schedule meant nothing. There was indigestion over the liver and Dr. Pepper for breakfast. And there was exhilaration over the love we learned in our families, the open hearts of the youth in the schools, and the excitement among the students at TARI. We went with the idea of giving whatever we could give but took much more away. We wanted to help the students learn English though in two weeks we wouldn't help much. We wanted to assure people in an out-of-the way place that they

**The lesson to me  
was that foreigners  
are not perceived  
as having answers  
or better ways of  
doing things.**

**The most memorable moment was at the end of the two weeks when Dilyara Mansourovna asked, “How do you do that?”, meaning: How do you teach standards and behavior along with academic subjects?**

were important, and we wanted to confirm to them their own goodness. To us it was a routine matter to live by the Spirit of Ricks; but of course this set us apart in dress, speech, and behavior. We did not expect to be drenched in love; we did not expect the shower of gifts and the lasting friendships. But the most memorable moment was at the end of the two weeks when Dilyara Mansourovna asked, “How do you do that?”, meaning: How do you teach standards and behavior along with academic subjects?

The point is, the Tsarists and the Soviets set standards for the people; but ever since *perestroika* there is a void, a vacuum rapidly filling for young people with western rock culture and for some mature people with nasty forms of capitalistic materialism. Russia has distinct social classes; and the intelligentsia live for education, imaginative and scientific pursuits, and family. These are the ones we from BYU-Idaho lived with and worked among; they are good people living good lives. They recognize and value the good in their world, living by the brightest light they have. But the attraction of rock culture and materialism to the youth is easy to understand. Concern over them on the part of their elders is deeply felt.

At the train station when we parted, our students lined up for photos with families or friends. Some arrived early and some arrived nearly too late. Luggage bulged with gifts and souvenirs. Addresses were exchanged. Bags were stowed in compartments, but students returned to the platform for hugs and tears; idling engines of the faraway locomotive sent silent shudders along the ground. Finally, in an action that seemed almost without time or movement, the students left the arms of those they loved and boarded the train. As its almost imperceptible movement began without a sound, we sang from the open windows, “God Be With You.” I couldn’t have been the only one thinking: Is this an old, sentimental movie? I was also thinking: For us Kazan was a thrilling two-week adventure; for those still on the platform it is the past, the present, the future, and the always. Dilyara Mansourovna’s half rhetorical question, “How do you do that?” would be the catalyst directing what was to come.

The 1999 visit to Tatarstan was essentially like the one in 1998. Rudy and LeAnn Puzey’s place was taken by Kendall Grant, who brought along three members of the women’s basketball team and one from the volleyball team. These four young women made a great impression wherever they appeared. One morning upon arriving at their assigned school, they were surprised to find the first activity of the day a basketball game against local athletes. To the delight of all, they represented the Ricks College sports program at its best: a whopping victory with complete courtesy for the opponents. One of them, along with others from both the 1998 and 1999 groups, was later called on a mission to Russia.

We also had with us a violinist. Our host schools often organized assemblies where we were the guests of honor, typically including performances of language, music, and dance. At the end of one such program, our violinist picked up the instrument of a performer and played a classical piece, followed by a foot stomping hoedown. That she stepped up to perform was one thing, but that she was so very, very good at it was something more. Sometimes applause is just polite, but for her it was exuberant.

TARI had arranged an overnight excursion on the Volga to visit Bulgarin, a 1000 year-old ruin from Tatar pioneers at a distance downstream. We were with administrators and students of TARI on the ship. Mirza Izmagilovich is a very distinguished and very important senior scholar and diplomat in Tatarstan. He is a former Minister of Education; his specialty is philology, but he knows everything about everything. Do you recognize his patronymic—Son of Ishmael? Constantly so much more is happening than we at first perceive.

Ask how many tons of this or that is produced in Tatarstan, and Mirza Izmagilovich knows year by year; ask about the Tatar people, and he will tell you how many live in various nations. In 2000 he completed overseeing the first translation of the Koran into Tatar. His was the vision that conceived TARI at the end of *perestroika*, and his influence brought it into being. His concept is to educate students as whole people: intellectually, morally, and physically. They should become individuals along with practicing the cooperation at which their countrymen excel. Does this educational philosophy sound familiar? I have never worked closely with another who has the balance of knowledge, experience, good sense, diplomatic skill, wisdom, and love for people that Dr. Makhmoutov has.

I had looked for a way of attracting his notice to Ricks College. The second day of the river excursion, I found some leaders relaxing on deck chairs. I sat down next to Mohammad, the Arabic language professor from Yemen and gave him a photographic souvenir booklet of Idaho. Briefly I told him about Ricks College, with no apparent interest shown by the others. A couple of hours later I ambled along the starboard deck, now deserted but by Mirza Izmagilovich. Walking past him I nodded, to which he replied in his soft and measured tone, “Nine thousand students.”

This was my invitation to stop and lean on the rail next to him. A couple of minutes later he was saying, “I know Islam and Catholic religion; I know Buddhism and Protestantism and Judaism and Orthodox religion. But what is Mormon religion?” Approaching at that instant from opposite directions were two of our students, who, hearing the last end of the question, stopped and answered it with an only slightly abbreviated First Discussion. The one produced a Russian language *Book of Mormon*, in which they wrote their testimonies and their names, and presented it to

**His concept is to educate students as whole people: intellectually, morally, and physically.**

Mirza Izmagilovich along with a recent copy of the *Liahona*, the foreign counterpart of the *Ensign*. I continued leaning with my back against the deck rail, side by side with Mirza Izmagilovich, listening to the two impromptu teachers.

Mirza Izmagilovich listened politely, asking appropriate questions. He thanked them for the book and the magazine and promised to read them. He looked at their signatures and asked to know their names. The first one he read deliberately, a syllable at a time, “Ka-ri A-ta-man-chik. Your name originates from the Turkish word, ‘ataman’ (ottoman), which means ‘leader of the people.’” Kari said, “Uh, ok, I guess so. My ancestors are from Ukraine.” He went on to the second name, “Mona Quireshi. What is this name?” Mona said, “It’s Pakistani. My father still lives there and is still Muslim.”

**I have tried to learn to accept the little miracles and some pretty big ones as well, without questioning so much; for me this is one of the hard parts because I feel too insignificant for miracles.**

I have tried to learn to accept the little miracles and some pretty big ones as well, without questioning so much; for me this is one of the hard parts because I feel too insignificant for miracles. It seemed like a great deal that the two members of our group with whom Mirza Izmagilovich could establish a cultural link had wandered by at this precise moment. Later on I asked Kari what she had been doing at the moment, and how she came to have the reading materials in hand. She said simply that she had studied a long time in her stateroom and wanted to take a little air. As for the *Book of Mormon* and *Liahona*, she had no explanation but left her room with the question in her mind why she picked them up on the way out the door. Later Mirza Izmagilovich asked Kendall and Ed if maybe they could provide something in writing about our religion that he could translate into Tatar for his people.

We have walked softly on the subject of religion. Our Church is not officially recognized in Tatarstan. Elders first arrived there in the mid-nineties, and since then have been by turns in and out of the Republic. At the moment they commute in on weekends, but are not permitted to stay. There is a small branch.

I spent a few days in Kazan with my wife in 2000—there was no student tour to Russia that year—and in 2001 I timed my visit to coincide with the passage of our students, who were traveling with Ed Kumferman and Kevin Call. After their departure, I lingered to work with English teachers and visit some classes. I proposed to Dilyara Mansourovna that she could see for herself the answer to her question asked in 1998 following her initial observation of our students, “How do you do that?” by paying us a visit. None of the road has been smooth since the first step in 1996, and working out the details of the visit was rocky business. But she and Mirza Izmagilovich spent a week with us in April 2002 followed by several days in Provo. They met students, faculty, and administrators. They oo’ed and ah’ed over our campuses. But what impressed them most

deeply was the diversity of experience we offer to students. We spent a Sunday in Salt Lake City, including the Choir broadcast and sightseeing in the predictable manner.

They were received by Presidents Bednar and Bateman. A highlight in Rexburg was the dinner where Don Bird presented them a veritable sheaf of papers attesting to a relationship between BYU-Idaho and TARI. The technicalities are not of great interest, but the documents are valuable to TARI's struggle for recognition and to explain their inviting so many foreign visitors. In Provo they had badges hung around their necks and were ushered into the archive deep under the Harold B. Lee Library, where Mirza Izmagilovich held in his hand a 3000-year-old cuneiform tablet and then an 11th century Arabic script. Perhaps to return the favor, during my visit to Kazan in May of this year, I was given a tour of the ancient documents collection at Kazan State University. There I learned that this was the primary repository of antique texts until the bulk of the collection was moved to St. Petersburg in recent times. A mere 50,000 texts remain in Kazan, the oldest dating from the ninth century. Some are on wood, some on stone, some on calfskin, and so on.

**A mere 50,000 texts remain in Kazan, the oldest dating from the ninth century.**

The object of bringing them to visit us in Idaho and Utah was to respond to Dilyara Mansourovna's question. Whether she found the answer, you can judge by something that happened in Kazan in late May. Her vice-rector, Farida Tansukovna, was preparing to attend conferences in the United States in June, first in Washington D.C. and then in Utah. The invitation had been initiated through Don Jarvis at BYU in consequence of Dilyara Mansourovna and Mirza Izmagilovich's visit to Provo in April. The information was incomplete, and I helped through e-mail to learn for Farida which American cities she would visit. I named to her the cities in the presence of Dilyara Mansourovna, who has now been in the United States six times—the East, the Midwest, the South, the Northwest, and now the Mountain West. When I named the cities, she exclaimed, "You will visit the most wonderful part of America!" Farida muttered, "Yes, Washington D.C.," to which Dilyara Mansourovna cried, "No, no, no. You will see Salt Lake City. This is the most beautiful city, and it has the most wonderful people."

As I was saying goodbye to colleagues in Kazan this May, suddenly everyone leaped to their feet. Mirza Izmagilovich had entered the room to see me off. We walked out and paused at the top of the stair. He said in his gentle, reflective tone, "So, we are brothers." I answered, "Yes, we are brothers. And you will always be the older brother." We went outside where his car was waiting, and he asked a small favor: he knows of three or four old documents; back in America, maybe I would ask the FARMS people in Provo whether they would like to photograph them to CD and provide a copy to Tatarstan. At FARMS, Dilyara Mansourovna and Mirza

Izmagilovich are well remembered from their April visit. Inquiries led to the revelation that the documents Mirza Izmagilovich has in mind are the collection at Kazan State University. Remember the 50,000 documents left behind in Tatarstan? FARMS is sending experts to inspect the catalog and screen the collection.

**At BYU-Idaho some  
points of interest  
for them are  
distance learning,  
pedagogical theory,  
and teaching  
foreign languages.**

During their April visit, Dilyara Mansourovna and Mirza Izmagilovich learned the answer to her question about teaching standards and behavior. They sat on the stand at a devotional and watched the students hold up their scriptures. They sat in on classes and sat down to a computerized lesson. They expressed astonishment at the combined student bodies of about 40,000 in Rexburg and Provo. At BYU-Idaho some points of interest for them are distance learning, pedagogical theory, and teaching foreign languages. At BYU-Provo, they connected with Arabic and Russian language instruction, FARMS, and the Utah-Russia association. In May Dilyara Mansourovna held discussions at TARI on teaching courses in religion. That same month, Mirza Izmagilovich spoke at an international conference on family life, using our people as an example.

But the real connections are personal. Dilyara Mansourovna and Mirza Izmagilovich opened themselves to all of us in addresses they gave to our faculty and students and in meetings small and large. They received keys to the city from the Honorable Mr. Southerland, but their memory of the lunch is that nobody at the restaurant made a fuss over or got out of the way of the Mayor. They sat down with Presidents Bednar and Bateman. Their visitation schedule was exhausting, but they found it continually refreshing. The mission they have undertaken since *perestroika* is to reinvent education in Tatarstan and Russia. In this they find that CES offers practical and moral support. And they know that we are all of a family. ☺