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## ECHO Gives a Hand to Russia

Martin L. Price

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ECHO is still waiting for someone to give a serious try to the inexpensive rooftop gardening techniques we have developed (EDN 30). The rest of the world needs a successful model to be convinced of the potential. So we decided to become a hands-on partner somewhere, and selected Russia. On a brief exploratory and speaking trip last fall I was thrilled at the enthusiasm Russians showed at the idea. Millions live in multistory buildings with flat rooftops built to hold the weight of the worst conceivable snowfall. A mayor in St. Petersburg has made available both unused land in the city for community gardens and variety trials, and rooftops to demonstrate the technique and what can be done there. Our in-country partner is the Center for Citizen Initiatives.

ECHO sent the following letter to our supporters in the States. It prompted so many comments that I have decided to share it with you. It will not help your work and is not typical EDN material, but I hope you enjoy reading it.

What was it like for a 49-year old man to visit the country that for as long as I can remember was “the evil empire” and our country’s arch enemy? The Russians’ response to ECHO’s rooftop gardening idea for their cities was indeed gratifying. And their eagerness to get to know Americans was equally moving. At the personal level, it was an emotional trip, comparable in its impact to my first trip to a Third World country. I was there as one of seven speakers and consultants.

Our sponsor, The Center for Citizen Initiatives, is a citizen diplomacy group based in San Francisco. Since “perestroika” they have begun efforts to help the Russian people survive and develop a strong democracy, but their person-to-person approach is still very much in evidence.

For example, several times local families took two or three of us to see their small gardens and apartments. (The two times that a meal was served, the main course was a pot of boiled potatoes. Food is definitely at a premium.) Our translator/tour guide in Moscow is a professor of agricultural economics and a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. He brought a bag to each meal, discretely hidden under the table, into which he placed any food we did not eat to take home.

After one meeting I enlisted a young woman, who I had noticed knew some English, to help me in a conversation where my limited Russian had only gotten me lost. Later she said that a couple years earlier, in the very hall in which we were meeting, she took notes as secretary of the local young communists league. “Now that we

know we were lied to, we just do not know what to believe." She said that many of her friends are turning to the church, but she felt that since she was not brought up a Christian this would not be possible for her.

It may sound strange, but I always envisioned Russia as black, white and grey. Maybe it was because as a child I only saw black and white images of Russia on TV and in the newspaper. So I was unprepared to find that St. Petersburg and Moscow are beautiful. The Kremlin lit up at night was as colorful as something out of Disneyland. People love color and gardeners over and over requested that when garden seeds are distributed next year they should include flower seeds!

I expected there might be one or two multilane highways, but instead found dozens of them. On each side of many of these highways are miles of spacious sidewalks surrounded by a row of trees on each side. To walk the sidewalk was almost a walk in the park, complete with park benches.

Everywhere one meets people who are hustling to start one kind of small business or another. There seems to be a desperation to find a way to earn an income beyond their salary. There is good reason for their concern. My taxi driver to the Moscow train station was elegantly dressed. He is a physician, head of the rheumatology section at the clinic, and is trying to supplement his 8,000 ruble a month salary (US \$40). Professors make the same salary, retirees much less, some laborers more.

Many Russians are avid gardeners, and others would become gardeners if the government let them have a plot near their home. Someone told me that ¼ of the people in Moscow and St. Petersburg have access to a small plot somewhere in the country. Gardening brings people of diverse backgrounds together here in our own country. The small farmer, the businessman, the housewife, the doctor all face the same gardening successes and failures. They can readily share favorite gardening hints or seed of special varieties. Our common interest in gardening helped us make personal bonds quickly.

I was frustrated at how slow Gorbachev was in privatizing farmland. Now that I see how difficult it is to become a private farmer, I think he was wise. How would you farm 50 or 100 acres if you had only been an employee on a HUGE farm doing one or a few specific things? Your savings, if any, are lost to inflation. How much land can you farm with only hand tools? Where do you get fertilizer and seeds, and how do you pay for them? How will you harvest your crop and where will you store it? Where will you sell it, and how will you get it there?

One man who wanted to plant potatoes on the 30 acres he had just been given told us that the bank wanted 100% interest and half the harvest. Many farmers are hoping to find foreign partners, other farmers, to help them get minimal equipment. And organizations to expedite such arrangements exist.

When a government becomes weak it often fails in one of its prime duties to restrain the effects of sin that pervade every culture. Most employees of state farms, and most managers, are against privatization (change). If a new private farmer is somehow successful, it is so resented that in many cases his fields and/or home are burned. I was told that some farmers are petitioning the government for permission to bear arms to defend their farms.

Over and over we heard of the Russian mafia's control of marketing of vegetables. Remember those TV segments of all those vegetables for sale but few could afford them? Did you wonder why they didn't lower the price then? People are convinced they would be killed if they even lowered the price to quickly move some produce that was about to spoil.

Retirees are especially worried. After one retiree showed us his garden, his son told me that his dad was very frugal. "He saved 10,000 rubles and could have bought a new car three years ago. Today his savings might buy two pair of boots."

Our team of six speakers spoke to 350 wouldbe urban gardeners in the hall used by the former communist party for political indoctrination. The "energy" between the group and the Americans was moving. The meeting went from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and people seemed hesitant to leave. As the oldest speaker, it fell to me to make a few concluding remarks. I shared how I was struck at how very much alike our two peoples are, and that I was especially thankful that our missiles were no longer pointing at each other [I hope that is right!].

At that both the audience and speakers gave a loud applause, for it had been an unexpressed thought on all of our minds. There were reasons we had to arm ourselves. But these hospitable gardeners, and in some cases fellow believers, in front of me could fit readily into the farm community where I grew up in Ohio. It is moving to meet and enjoy the very people that we would have killed.