

From Russia with Glasnost

By MELYNDA JARRATT

When the University of Moscow decided to send a contingent of students to Afghanistan as part of a house-building team, "it was no easy thing to do," says Maxim Sotnikov, leader of Moscow University's Komsomol (Young Communist League) organization. "Many people feared for the student's safety there and were against the idea."

Nevertheless, the University did send 20 people to Afghanistan where for 45 days during their summer holidays, they worked at a house-building factory in Kabul.

This and other interesting facts about Soviet student life have come to the *Brunswickan* as part of an exchange between Canadian-USSR university media. The exchange began in March 1987, when the *Brunswickan* received an inquiry from Viktor Bogdanov, Press Secretary for the USSR Embassy in Ottawa, asking us if we would be interested in an



(Left) Maxim Sotnikov, President Moscow University Young Communist League



(Above) Winter scene, University of Moscow

exchange of photos, articles, columns or the "entire pages of the most important aspects of student life." Our reply was positive and some months later we finally received the first of what we hope will become a regular exchange of media with students in the Soviet Union.

Bogdanov stressed the "average" student in his correspondence with us - he emphasized how much other "average" students in the Soviet Union wish to communicate with their peers the West. With this in mind the *Brunswickan* finds it curious that our only contact so far has been with the president of the Communist Youth League at the Moscow University.

Nevertheless, Sotnikov has provided us with some insight into the life of the average Komsomol student and in a sense this sudden openness on the part of the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa can be viewed as "Glasnost" in action. Regardless of where the idea for a student exchange came from, the *Brunswickan* has wholeheartedly accepted this unique venture along with the other Canadian university newspapers - the *Manitoba*, for example. At the very least we hope to create a bridge of understanding between our two very different worlds.

Sotnikov tends to emphasize the role of the Komsomol organization when he talks about student life in the

USSR - and it is no wonder when membership in the organization is practically a preliminary to advancement. He personally is head of the Moscow University Young Communist League, which boasts a membership of over 24,000. In an age of "Glasnost" it is not surprising then that when problems relating to "perestrioka" arise, the YCL is beginning to talk candidly about them.

Perestrioka is the policy of encouraging people's creative energy and activity in the social spheres. For the Young Communists, this could mean anything from local volunteer activity to house-building in Kabul. The harder one works in voluntary positions, the greater are one's chances for benefits. In the USSR, just as it is in Canada, the dictum "hard work never hurt anyone" holds true.

But for Sotnikov, the reality is that while most first and second year students were eager to work in the Komsomol organizations, "senior students used every pretext to avoid... work." "Why?" he asks. In a poll conducted at the University of Moscow on the eve of the 20th Komsomol Congress, the general consensus was that the organization's prestige was falling - Sotnikov elaborates: "Some students frankly told us that they did not believe that their social activities could change anything."

When asked if students in the Soviet Union have the right to organize and hold demonstrations at their universities, Sotnikov gave a carefully worded reply. "A demonstration can be held within seven days after notification has been given to the local body of power... But a demonstration is the final and most extreme means of protest when other methods do not help. Most frequently," he elaborated, "young people resort to it when the matter at hand is ecology and the protection of cultural monuments."

He cites last year's demonstrations - and later, round-the-clock pickets at a cultural site in Moscow which was later torn down by builders in order to build a new street. Another example is that of an environmental demonstration which was successful in halting oil production in the Baltic Sea. Other plans for the future include a plan to set up a student's camp on the Solvoki Islands in the White Sea to protect architectural monuments there - ancient Russian monasteries and churches.

This is a 2-part series on Soviet student life. Read next week for more of the *Brunswickan's* interview with Maxim Sotnikov.

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