

Past President's Message



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I recently had the great pleasure of meeting up with many of our planetarium colleagues in Russia, when I attended the 2007 Russian Planetarium Association meeting in Nizhny Novgorod. Between 1932 and 1990, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia's fourth largest city, was named Gorky after the famous Russian author Maxim Gorky, who was born there.

It was a very special time in Russia. The conference was held over the week of October 1-5, which, of course, included the 50th anniversary of the launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957. Fifty planetarians from all over Russia were in attendance, and the event attracted a good deal of local media interest.

For Nizhny Novgorod, however, it was doubly special: it was the week of the opening of their new planetarium. The attractive structure is located not far from the bank of the river Oka, which joins with the Volga at Nizhny Novgorod. The planetarium includes a small dome with a Zeiss ZKP2 projector, and the main dome is an impressive environment using digital projection with SX30+ projectors and a software system largely developed by a local company.

The building is well thought out, with sizeable exhibit and entrance areas and an obser-

vatory on the roof, which will house a 20-cm Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope for public viewing.

It was interesting to learn more about the planetarium history in Nizhny Novgorod. Although the current structure is quite new, a planetarium was established in the city as early as 1948. It was constructed within the Alexis Church, on the opposite side of the Oka River, and operated there until 2005. This is not the only case of a Russian planetarium having been built within a church. Times have changed in Russia, however, and the building has now returned to its former function as a church. A great deal of redecoration work is being done inside the structure, and churchgoers will undoubtedly be proud of the changes.

In Nizhny Novgorod, it was good news all around. Zinaida Sitkova, the director of the planetarium, worked very hard to ensure that Nizhny Novgorod would continue to have a planetarium. Her untiring efforts, including obtaining strong local government support, came to fruition.

I arrived in Nizhny Novgorod on September 28, and was warmly greeted by several of the planetarium staff. On Friday and the weekend, I was shown around the city, visiting several museums and Nizhny Novgorod's Kremlin. Friday's schedule included a visit to the Pedagogical Institute, which contains one of the other two planetariums in the city. It has a 4.4-m dome with a Zeiss ZKP1 projector. While there, I had the pleasure of meeting up with Dr. Albert Shutov, director of the planetarium, and staff member Olga Podkovyrina. An added bonus was a visit to the institute's rooftop observatory, which is run by Anato-

li Poroschin. The two observatory domes contain a 15-cm reflector and a 13-cm refractor.

Our colleague Alexander Serber, a member of the IPS International Relations Committee who had assisted me so much in organising my visit, had been delayed in returning from a conference in Paris. On Sunday, Vadim Belov kindly made himself available in Alexander's place. Although our conversations could not be conducted in English, Vadim's impressive command of French ensured a wonderful day.

The Third Planetarium

On Monday, I was taken to the city's third planetarium—in the Academy of Water Transport. This planetarium has a Zeiss ZKP1 in a 6-m dome, and is used for navigational instruction. We were greeted by its very enthusiastic director, Alexander S. Poliakov, who also played a major role in the construction of the planetarium building itself as a student project in 1970. Alexander must surely be a contender for the longest period working in a planetarium with which he is so intimately associated!

I was delighted to listen to several of the conference talks, including a most interesting discussion of planetarium history in Russia and presentations from many individual planetarians. I presented two myself: one about the IPS and another titled "Planetariums of the World." It was good to see that there were many discussions about the desirability of "live night sky" segments in the shows, with strong support for their inclusion. I was also very pleased to meet up with three planetarians from the Ukraine at the conference, and had extensive discussions about the planetarium situation in that country. There are currently five active planetariums in the Ukraine, and as a result of our meeting I shall be now working more closely with them in



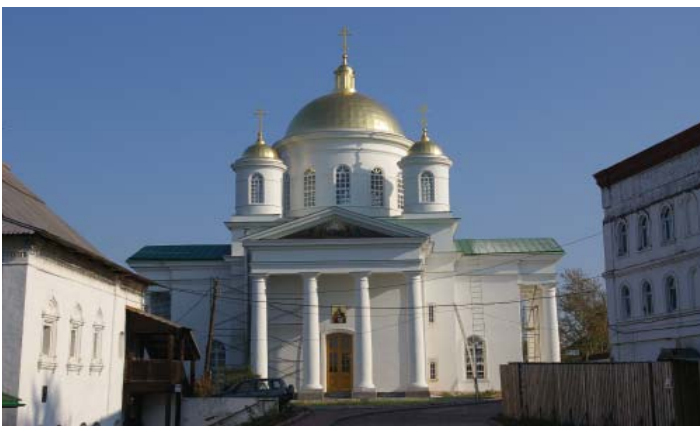
The Zeiss Projector in the St Petersburg Planetarium. From left: Mikhail Belov, Galena Michailova, Martin George, Mikhail Propopenko. Photo by Yulia Propopenko. (Unless otherwise stated, all additional photos by Martin George)



Left: The Nizhny Novgorod Planetarium; Right: Interior of the Nizhny Novgorod Planetarium. From left to right: Uljana Avdeenko, Zinaida Sitkova, Vadim Below, Roman Troitsky.



Left: The group photograph of many of the attendees—seated under a bust of Yuri Gagarin—at the Russian Planetarium Association Conference in Nizhny Novgorod. Photo courtesy of Nizhny Norgorod Planetarium. Right: Zinaida Sitkova and Uljana Avdeenko with entries contributed for an art competition at the Nizhny Novgorod Planetarium.



Left: Alexis Church, which housed the Nizhny Novgorod Planetarium from 1948 to 2005. Right: The Planetarium at the Academy of Water Transport in Nizhny Novgorod. From left: Alexander Poliakov, Martin George, Alexei Belenov. Photo by Roman Troitsky.

order to maintain their affiliate status.

Sadly, I could not stay for the “big day”—October 4, of course, which was the official opening date of the new planetarium—but was able to attend until the evening of October 2. Alexander Serber then kindly accompanied me on the overnight train to Moscow and to Moscow airport, where I departed for England in order to speak at the presentation of this year’s

Grote Reber Medal to Professor Govind Swarup of India.

Before attending the Nizhny Novgorod conference, I had a very pleasant visit to St. Petersburg, to visit the planetarium there and meet up with several of our planetarium colleagues. The St. Petersburg Planetarium houses a Zeiss projector in a 23-m dome, under which I watched several excited school groups take

their seats.

I had several engaging conversations with Director Mikhail Below, and with Mikhail Propokenko whose wife, Yulia, kindly gave up her time to be a valuable interpreter throughout my visit.

Several other staff work at the institution, including Galena Michailova, who specialises in earth sciences and also attended the confer-



Left: Olga Podkovyrina and Dr. Albert Shutov, director, in the planetarium at the Pedagogical Institute in Nizhny Novgorod. Right: Mikhail Propokenko with the Meade Telescope in the St Petersburg Planetarium Observatory.



The observatory at the Pedagogical Institute; from left: Alexei Belenov, Anatoli Poroschin, Vadim Belov, Olga Podkovyrina.



Left: The St Petersburg Planetarium. Right: At the Znanie Office in St Petersburg. From Left to right: Mikhail Belov, Martin George, Sergey Klimov. Photo by Mikhail Propokenko.

ence in Nizhny Novgorod; and Igor Toporov, who runs a “hands-on” science section which contains a delightful collection of old instruments, including the first televisions used in Russia. There is also an associated animated dinosaur exhibit.

The staff at St. Petersburg also took me on a special visit to the offices of the society known as Znanie, meaning “knowledge.” This is a St. Petersburg-based society with branches in other parts of Russia, and which is an umbrella organisation for many of the Russian planetariums. It has more than 16,000 members.

Znanie was founded in 1947 by prominent writers, scientists, and artists. It moved into full swing in the 1950s, running lectures on not only science subjects but also architecture, painting, Russian history, and many other subjects. It was through Znanie that the St. Petersburg Planetarium was established. We met with Sergey Klimov, vice president of Znanie, and had detailed discussions about the IPS. I was honoured that he had very kindly delayed his departure to a conference in another part of Russia in order to accommodate my visit.

I would like to record my thanks to all of our Russian and Ukrainian colleagues with whom I met and who assisted me during my visit to Russia! Very special thanks go to Mikhail and Yulia Propokenko in St. Petersburg, and Zinaida Sitkova, Vadim Belov, Alexander Serber, Roman Troitsky, Uljana Avdeenko, and Anastasiya Evsyukova in Nizhny Novgorod.

While in St Petersburg, I was also taken on a most interesting visit to the Pulkovo Observatory, and I shall say more about that in the next issue. Also to be covered in my next article is my attendance, after my trip to Russia, at the “Communicating Astronomy to the Public” Conference in Greece, which was a prelude to the 2009 International Year of Astronomy.

Meanwhile, I wish you all a very happy Christmas, and all the very best for 2007! ☆