

7. "JUST LIKE IT USED TO BE"

A Tale of Hospitality 2003 by Nêst Adams. (October 2003)

One of my earliest memories is being carried into the kitchen in my father's arms and seeing my mother standing next to a very tall, blond strange young man. I was both frightened and shy, and immediately hid my face in my father's neck. "Don't be frightened" my mother said, "this is Uncle Alfred, he has come to stay". This must have been about 1948 or 1949, and in those days any one who was a family friend was "Uncle This" or "Auntie That". However, Uncle Alfred had once been a stranger to our family and would have been considered an enemy four or five years earlier. He had fought in the German Army during World 2, was captured in Normandy and spent time as a prisoner of war in America; at the same time my father had been teaching aerodynamics to RAF Bomber Command. Alfred had come to the very first Eisteddfod in 1947 to sing in the Vienna Academy Choir, and had stayed with my parents. They became firm friends and he came to us for several years afterwards. Competing against Bretons and Americans had helped break down the bad feelings left by the war. By the time I remembered him he was like one of the family and certainly earned his title of "Uncle".

I was reminded of this incident during the 2003 Eisteddfod. My husband Chris and I had two very interesting guests staying with us. One was a young German-Italian girl and the other was a professor of music.

Verena arrived first, on the Saturday. Not as a competitor, her visit to Llangollen for work experience in the Eisteddfod office had been arranged by Denbighshire County Council through its links with the regional government of South Tyrol, an alpine province of Italy also gripped by bilingualism. Verena's nationality was Italian, but her first language was German; she thought of herself as German, and in the autumn she would start university in Innsbruck. She spoke half a dozen European languages, and wanted to become an interpreter like her mother. Her introduction to the Eisteddfod on the Sunday was to help me in my rôle as UK competitors officer,



Sergei prepares for performance on stage

settling the 60-odd members of the Loughgiel dance group into the halls and camp beds for the week. She was delighted to see how cosy the halls became once the Irish group had unpacked their bedding and belongings.

Monday brought us Sergei, a Professor of Music from the Izvest in Udmurt Republic, part of the Russian Federation, and the home of Tchaikowsky. Sergei was a competitor in the Folk Instrumental Competition and played a fascinating string instrument called a Kreish. This small Russian harp is of rhomboid construction; it is held and played pressed against the chest, with strings horizontal. Sergei makes his own instruments, writes much of his music, and has led a revival of this traditional folk instrument.

We were a little nervous before Sergei arrived as we had been told that he spoke no English. It turned out that he did speak a little; with dictionaries, sign language, drawings and mime we all made ourselves understood. Verena was much more skilled than we at understanding what Sergei was trying to say and we often had a good laugh at our efforts.

What I hadn't realised until later was that Verena had been very nervous about Sergei's arrival. Apparently, her grandfather had been fighting in the German Army on the Eastern Front during World War II and had been captured by the Russians. He had spent several very unpleasant years in Russia as a prisoner of war, and had developed an understandable animosity to everything Russian. When she told me about these feelings I explained that breaking down old barriers and learning that we are all the same people really is what the Eisteddfod is all about. I related to her the "Uncle Alfred" story and she agreed this was good; it was not long before Sergei and she were partners in the job of understanding English.

The week went very quickly. We quickly became as one family anxiously taking Sergei to the folk instrumental competition prelims, sorting out any problems with the administration, and especially cheering him when he got on the stage. Verena was as keen for him to win as we were. On the Friday, Sergei's last evening, we had a Welsh lamb dinner with some wine, followed by vodka and chocolates from Russia. By now Sergei and Verena were converted to Welsh food, and Verena especially liked the Russian chocolates. Sergei played every instrument in the house: piano, guitar, spoons, along with his own Kreish. He then wanted a Welsh Pub experience so we all went down to the Wynnstay Arms where the Loughgiel musicians were playing in the corner. They were delighted for us to join them and soon Sergei was eyeing their banjo. It didn't take long before he was allowed a play on it and was jamming to their Irish folk music. Then he borrowed their whistle and played one of his own compositions. They made up a backing for that. The respect between musicians was wonderful to see. The Irish were secretly pleased when he failed to play their ceilidh drum - now they could teach him!! Very little English was spoken, the language of communication was music.

Sergei left on the Saturday and we were all very sad. Verena bought him a bottle of HP Sauce as a farewell, as this had become one of his favourite items of food during the week. He gave her a painted Russian wooden bowl with

carved wooden spoon. She was very touched and obviously lost her fear of Russians. He called her his adopted daughter and she gave him a hug.

They both hope to bring groups to Llangollen next year. I am just pleased to see that the old Eisteddfod magic is still working.

