

Pittsford teenager tastes pre-coup Soviet life

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

PITTSFORD — As the winds of change swept through the Soviet Union on Aug. 19, Christopher Clark was dealing with some changes of his own.

Clark said he developed a different attitude toward the Soviet people after spending four weeks in southern Siberia. He returned from the trip just four days before the start of the failed coup attempt.

The McQuaid Jesuit junior traveled to southern Siberia in July as part of the Peace Child Program. The international program for youths is designed to foster mutual understanding of different countries.

During Peace Child's summer program, a group of youths from the United States collaborated with peers in the Soviet Union to create and perform a theatrical production emphasizing world peace.

Clark, who auditioned for a role in the play last February, was accepted as a cast member in March. Along with six other Rochester youths, Clark headed to Washington, D.C., on July 15 for a three-day orientation session designed to prepare the youths for their trip to the Soviet Union.

During the preparation period, Clark, 16, said students had to brush up on current events and various American policies.

"You had to know things about your own country because over there they want to know everything. The kids ask so many questions," Clark said.

When Clark arrived in Moscow, he said he was amazed by the city's beauty. The McQuaid student also said the kindness of the Soviet people impressed him.

His final destination, however, wasn't Moscow. The students traveled to a highly guarded community called Krasnoyarsk-26. Clark said he was a little apprehensive at first because the area was constantly under the watch of the KGB, the Soviet secret police and intelligence agency.

But once he and his American friends met their Soviet counterparts, Clark said, his nervousness subsided. Soon the Peace Child youths — 14 Americans and 20 Soviets — had settled into their cottage at a Soviet pioneer camp, similar to a Boy Scout camp in the United States.

The youths had nine days to write and the students rehearsed night and day to perfect their message of peace, Clark said.

The thespians then performed two full shows for the Soviet people in the city of Krasnoyarsk. Clark said he never expected such tremendous reactions from the au-



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Christopher Clark traveled to southern Siberia in July as part of the Peace Child Program. Among the souvenirs he brought back are these "matrushka" dolls of Russian leaders past and present, as well as a police officer's hat.

diences after the show.

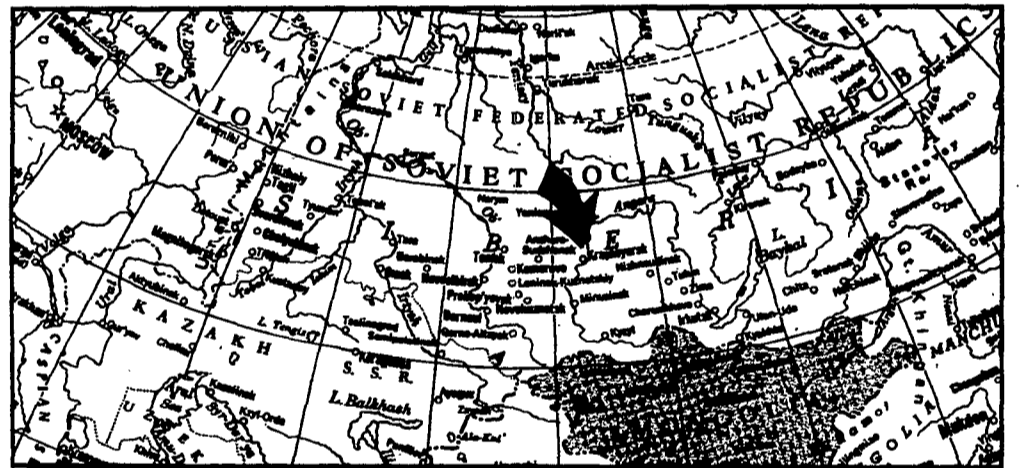
"We had the greatest reception," noted Clark, a parishioner of Church of the Transfiguration in Pittsford. "When we were done with our show, over 600 people made a path as we walked to our bus and they cheered for us."

Clark said he wished he was back in the Soviet Union during the days of the failed coup. He said he kept a constant eye on the news, watching to make sure his new friends were safe.

He noted that the citizens of Krasnoyarsk will probably not feel the effects of the new regime for quite some time. Because they are so far from Moscow, Clark said, it may be several months before his friends experience any loosening of the communist reins.

"I don't know if those changes have reached out that far to Siberia," explained Clark. "There's no way that all that is happening has reached there yet."

He added with a smile, "But from us being there I think that it changed them because they had never met Americans be-



Clark stayed in a highly guarded community called Krasnoyarsk-26. Because of the town's distance from Moscow, residents probably will not feel the effects of the new regime for quite some time, he noted.

fore. Now they love all Americans."

The McQuaid student said he and his American peers fell in love with the Soviet people, largely because they had so much in common with them. Although American teenagers often perceive the Soviet people as cold and somber, he noted that those stereotypes are not at all true.

"When you are there you experience all the warmth and caring of these people and it is impossible to believe any of those things you have heard before," Clark said.

Clark noted, however, that it is true that many Soviet citizens are not allowed to demonstrate their belief in God.

"I had one really deep talk with one friend who had always been told in school

that there was no God," said Clark. "But he had been talking to his grandparents who had believed in God and he realized he believed in something. He wanted to believe in God."

Clark said he would have liked to give Bibles to his new friends in the Soviet Union as gifts, but he did not bring any over. He added that he was glad to see crucifixes being sold in Moscow.

The McQuaid student said he found it difficult to answer the fervent questions of his Russian friends, who asked, "Why won't they let us have God?"

Hopefully, the McQuaid student said, that, too, will now change.

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