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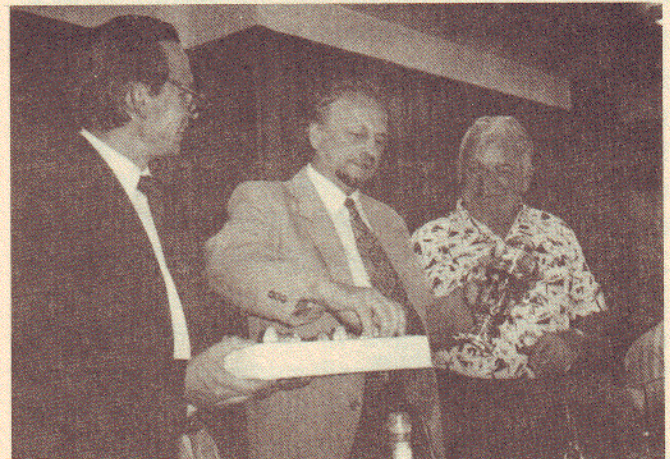
SKYROCKETING SOVIET STRESS

An International Conference entitled "Society, Stress, and Health", was held in Moscow, June 26-July 1, 1995, to focus on difficulties in interrelationships between these areas in countries undergoing rapid transition. Its purpose was to explore in depth the causes of numerous and severe stress related social and medical problems that are increasingly being encountered in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, and to develop strategies to prevent or ameliorate them.

The Conference was organized by the Russian Academy of Sciences and P.K. Anokhin Institute of Normal Physiology, in collaboration with the World Health Organization, and was sponsored by the National Swedish Institute for Psychosocial Factors and Health, The International Regional Stress Management Center, The American Institute of Stress, and other organizations interested in various relevant issues. It was co-chaired by Konstantin Sudakov, M.D., and Lennart Levi, M.D., Ph.D., and the Faculty included a multidisciplinary mix of more than 70 scientists from Russia, Lithuania, Belorussia, The

Ukraine, Germany, Austria, Britain, Hungary, Romania, Sweden, The United States, Japan, and India.

Sessions addressed the soaring stress related problems of children, adolescents, workers and the elderly, ecological concerns, the stress of rapid socio-cultural changes, internal military conflicts, marked increase in job stress, problems associated with rehabilitation of Chernobyl victims and others with impaired immune system resistance to infections and malignancy, stress reduction and rehabilitation strategies, new stress monitoring and measurement methods, indications for pharmacologic and psychological interventions and other pertinent topics.



From left to right: Drs. E. Yumatov, General Director, and K. Sudakov, President, Regional International Stress Management Center, Moscow, and P.J. Rosch, President of The American Institute of Stress at Birthday-Farewell Gala.

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The Newsletter of
**THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF
 STRESS**

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In my opinion, the meeting was a stunning success. Although it did not solve any of these problems, it was a sobering eye opener with respect to how and why Russia has fallen from the status of a major superpower, to a Third World embarrassment. Stress is a major culprit, and we quickly came to appreciate stresses in Russia today that are due to:

- poverty, unemployment and job insecurity
- violent and dramatically increased crime rates
- various types of post-traumatic stress disorder
- chemical, physical and radioactive pollution
- hopelessness, helplessness and frustration
- premature death and unexplained disappearance of relatives and close friends
- disruption of family, social and other important emotional relationships
- lack of faith in promises of political reform and individual freedom
- a sharp decline in moral standards and ethical values

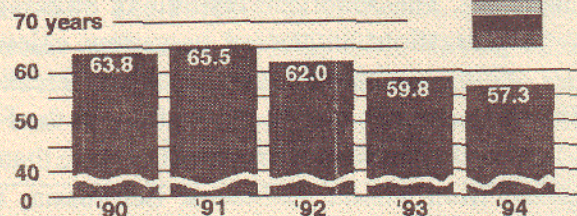
However, this list could not possibly convey the true dimensions of these problems. So many of these social and resultant medical problems are stress related, that this entire issue will be devoted to the current crisis of stress in Russia.

Many are directly attributable to the phenomenal increase in smoking and alcohol consumption. More than 15% of 5th grade Russian boys now smoke. While smoking decreased by 25-38% in Western

Europe during the last decade, it has increased 4-11% annually in Russia. The problem is not limited to the young, those with lack of education, or older smokers with ingrained habits. A recent survey showed that 70% of Russian males, and more than 31% of females in secondary professional schools were smokers. Smoking contributes to more than 25% of all newly diagnosed non-dermatologic malignancies. More than one third of all of the cancer patients in Israel are new Russian immigrants who have arrived since 1989, but constitute less than 10% of the total population.

Alcoholism is an equally distressing addiction that causes additional serious social and health problems. Alcohol consumption in Russia in 1960 was 4.4 liters/year/capita, compared to 1.2 for Western Europe. Over the next two decades, it increased by more than 50 per cent, and consumption is now in excess of 16 liters/year for the average individual over the age of 15! Alcohol related deaths in Russia averaged 12,500/year, between 1960 and 1970, and during the following decade, soared to 400,000/year. It has continued to rise steadily since then, along with an increased incidence of cirrhosis, congenital birth defects, and other alcohol related medical disorders. Alcoholism also contributes significantly to the current epidemic of accidents, substance abuse, murders, rapes, and other violent crimes.

Life expectancies for Russian Men



Source: Russian state statistics

Reference: NY Times

A front page story in the August 2 issue of *The New York Times* vividly confirmed the timeliness and importance of this meeting. It reported that life expectancy in Russia, already the lowest in any developed country, has again plummeted in the past year. These statistics are hard to believe, and no country that reports to the World Health Organization has a life expectancy this low. While longevity has been steadily increasing all over the globe, life expectancy rates for

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Russian males has dropped from 64 to 57 in just the past four years, as noted in the above graph. As one London economist who specializes in health demographics noted, "There is no historical precedent for this anywhere in the world." Death rates have more than doubled in the past decade, largely due to epidemic rates of heart disease, cancer, and accidents. In 1994, the death rate approached 16% for every 1000 people, an increase of 10% over 1993, and 30% over 1992. Russia has become the first country in history to demonstrate such a sustained decline in health statistics. The Labor Ministry reports that if current conditions persist, nearly half of today's youths will not even live till the retirement age of 55 for women, and 65 for men.

"Suffer The Little Children"

Deaths in Russia are now twice as common as births, not only because of excessive mortality, but birth rates which are also the lowest of any other country. Only 1.4 million children were born in Russia last year, a figure which is less than half the number of abortions that were officially recorded. Infant mortality rates, already among the highest in the world, have increased 15% in each of the last two years. Of equal concern is the condition of those who are born. More than one in ten have serious birth defects, half the school children suffer from some chronic illness, and these percentages have been steadily increasing. In 1990, 388 of every 10,000 children died in their first year of life because of congenital anomalies, four times as many as those in the U.S. In 1993 it was 407, rising again to 463 last year, and these numbers reflect only those defects that were serious enough to kill.

Congenital deformities are now increasing faster than any other health problem according to a National Security Council official. Pollution is an important factor. In addition to exposure to tobacco smoke, auto emissions and smog, there have been "decades of open testing of nuclear weapons, chemical plants spewing deadly toxic materials into the country's most important rivers, and generations of factory workers and farmers exposed to huge doses of dangerous pesticides and harmful chemicals". Apart from the Chernobyl disaster, there has been nuclear irresponsibility at waste dumps and test sites around the country that "threaten the nation's genetic heritage".

Other contributors may be the conception of children by drunken couples, and failing to vaccinate for preventable diseases, like German Measles. In the U.S., where Rubella vaccinations are common, there was an average of 427 cases per year from 1985 to 1989. Compare this to 546,000 in the former USSR, with only 15% more people. In Russia alone, there were 128,000 cases in 1993, which tripled to more than 360,000 last year! If half of these were female, only 5% of whom were fertile, this would represent 25,000 potential infections during pregnancy that could cause birth defects. The vast majority of the 70,000 youngsters in orphanages in 1994 had been abandoned by their parents, who could no longer cope with the added burden they imposed, or simply no longer wanted them. The increased nutritional needs of most children are not being met, and juvenile smoking, alcoholism and crime is rampant.

The Mystery Of The Missing Babushkas

The elderly have also been particularly affected by the rapid changes that have taken place. Many have not only lost their hopes and ideals, but also savings that had been put away for retirement. Most are irritable, frustrated and bitterly disappointed because they feel deceived, while others are apathetic and have simply given up. They are confused and uncertain about what the future holds for them and their loved ones. The sky rocketing rate of violent crimes has resulted in frequent fear of possible loss of life, because they cannot defend themselves and no place is safe. Many have had their life savings absconded with by charlatans through various schemes. Widows and older couples with choice apartments, who receive promises of large sums of money in return for bequeathing them, suddenly disappear, or succumb to mysterious accidents.

Over 17,000 people were reported missing last year, many of whom were probably killed by the more than 30 criminal groups involved in some housing scam, according to Russia's Parliamentary State Security Committee. A significant proportion of these were elderly Russian women, often referred to as *babushkas*, or grandmothers. Some simply disappear from their apartments in downtown Moscow, or "are found shot, stabbed, thrown down stairwells, or poi-

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soned with food or pills" according to a local newspaper. Since the demise of Communism in 1991, residents have been allowed to purchase their apartments, and their real estate value has gone through the roof. Many elderly women don't realize that their apartments are potential gold mines. Most are struggling to get by, and are overjoyed at the prospect of receiving substantial continuing financial support, in return for a bequest to their supposed benefactor. However, as one police spokesman noted, "One day they're here, the next day they're gone... and soon thereafter, an American is living happily in the apartment, completely oblivious to the murder that has taken place."

Despite its widespread poverty, Moscow is paradoxically the most expensive city in the world in which to live, save for Tokyo and Osaka in Japan. A three bedroom flat can fetch as much as \$100,000, or rent for several thousand dollars a month. The Moscow mayor has now forbidden the elderly, alcoholics and mentally disabled from selling apartments without city permission, and has also made it illegal to deal in Moscow real estate without a license. Few believe this will do much good. At least 30 women in Moscow had been murdered and 14 others kidnapped within the first 2 months of 1995. This swindle is only a fraction of Russia's constantly increasing crime epidemic. Last year, in Moscow alone, murder and armed robbery rose 107% to 16,243 crimes. Nobody knows how many more went unreported.

The marked spiritual degeneration as well as degradation of societal values has been nurtured by the mass media popularization of violence, aggression, cruelty, pseudo-erotica, and sex. Rudeness and disrespect have now become a way of life, and the decline in morals and regard for human relationships has resulted in unrestrained acts of cruelty and vandalism. There has been a complete erosion of the social support and family values which normally serve as a powerful stress buffer. Irrational political, and economic activities have led to a variety of ecological, production, and transport disasters. Intensifying urbanization, pollution, a lack of leisure time, inadequate nutrition and exercise, are other characteristics and contributors to this decadent society. What is most alarming, is that all these problems are steadily increasing.

Comrade Criminal

Here are some other grim statistics:

- criminal cartels control 40% of Russia's wealth by infiltrating stock exchanges and real estate markets.
- they now open banks instead of bank accounts.
- Ministry officers commonly sell all sorts of contracts to the highest bidder.
- stolen weapons are stored in Army barracks.
- in 1992, 100 people were eliminated by professional killers in Moscow, rising to 250 such assassinations the following year. These were all contract killings, the telltale sign being that the gun was always left next to the corpse. One person was murdered in Russia every 18 minutes in 1993.
- at Moscow's Sheremetyevo II International Airport, thefts of freight and luggage increased by more than 200% between 1991 and 1992. On one day, a million dollars worth of diamonds, and \$700,000 in platinum ingots, disappeared from the cargo holds of two Aeroflot planes, probably stolen by security guards.
- guns were formerly rare in Russia, being limited primarily to the KGB. A citizen arrested for possessing a revolver was an unusual and newsworthy event. Today, they are abundant and readily available on the Black Market for \$17-\$26.
- 70% of the unregistered guns circulating in the former Soviet Union are stolen Army weapons, most having been sold by military commanders.
- years ago, it was safe to walk the streets. Last year, in Moscow alone, there were close to 27,000 reported cases of murder and armed robbery, an increase of 107% over 1993.
- millions of dollars worth of timber, oil, gold, and drugs are smuggled out of Russia and the commonwealth of independent states every month.

These and other startling details are revealed in *Comrade Criminal: Russia's New Mafiya*, a recently released book by Philip Handelman, Moscow Bureau Chief for a Toronto newspaper. It is based on interviews with 150 mobsters, police personnel, political crusaders, former KGB and ministry officials, millionaires, and ordinary citizens. He traces the roots of the current criminal underworld to elements of society that have existed on the margins of Russian Life for centuries. Since the fall of totalitarianism, they have not only grown like a cancer in Russia, but have

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metastasized all over the world, including the United States.

The Mafiya

In 1980, a government spokesman commenting on the absence of crime, drug trafficking, and the high degree of safety in Russia, bragged that it was because "We have no Mafiya", the Russian term for gangsters. An unholy alliance between Mafiya groups and high ranking officials, have now made drugs the most profitable post Soviet commodity after stolen goods. According to one police official, every ruble invested in "narco-bizness" will turn a profit of 1000 rubles. Opium, marijuana, hashish, and amphetamines can be readily obtained in any "Farmers' Market", or by just a phone call. Two years ago, customs officials in Vyborg, a Russian city on the border of Finland, accidentally broke open a large container labeled "Meat and Potatoes" addressed to a commercial importing firm in St. Petersburg. They found 20 canisters stuffed with Columbian cocaine, and the rest of the shipment proved to be one of the largest single cocaine hauls anywhere in the world. The final destination was quite likely Western Europe or the U.S., where its street value would have been several hundred million dollars. According to Russian police, crime syndicates were conducting open business with at least 29 different countries that they were aware of, with most of their money hidden in untouchable Swiss Bank accounts.

For several years, there have been well entrenched Mafiya groups in Brooklyn, which subsequently spread to New Jersey, Florida and other states. On August 7, Federal authorities unsealed a 39 count indictment charging 25 people with taking part in an elaborate scheme that cheated the government and states of more than \$500 million in fuel taxes. The majority were Russian émigrés who posed as a legitimate group buying home heating oil which is tax free. This was then transferred through a series of dummy corporations, and the name changed to diesel fuel, a nearly identical compound which is subject to state and Federal taxes, which they collected. When the IRS tried to recover this, the dummy corporation and all the money simply disappeared. However, this may be only the tip of the iceberg, since it is estimated that \$2 billion in fuel tax revenues targeted for highway repairs are siphoned off every year. Last May, a

Russian émigré and two other men, including an associate of John Gotti were convicted in Federal court in Newark in another gigantic rip-off. Nobody knows how many other more sophisticated schemes have gone undetected.

The potential for illegal activities, especially smuggling, is staggering. Russia, or the Russian Federation, is the largest country in the world, occupying more than half of the entire Eurasian land mass. In terms of natural resources, Russia may well be the richest country in the world. Coal is found in both the European and the Siberian parts of the country, and petroleum, natural gas, precious metals, and other valuable minerals abound. These are immense reserves of iron ore, as well as gold, silver, platinum, lead, molybdenum, manganese, tungsten, nickel, titanium, and cobalt. Most of these minerals—like the country's oil and natural gas fields—are located in remote, sparsely populated areas in the eastern part of the country, while three-fourths of the population and four-fifths of all industry are located west of the Urals. This fact, along with different cultures, religions and languages, has seriously complicated efforts to extract and profit from these rich reserves, and decentralization has further facilitated smuggling and black market activities.

The Rich Grow Richer

Since the fall of Communism, there has been abuse of the judicial system, a decline in the standard of living, decreased salaries, and rising unemployment and prices. When Yeltsin began phasing out price controls in January 1992, the price of bread in August was fifty times higher. More individuals are now living below the poverty level, and even well paid specialists whose services continue to be in great demand, struggle to survive. The official salary of many eminent scientists, academicians and physicians may be little more than \$30.00 per week.

Contrast this with the Moscow "Members Only" clubs, like the Grand Dynamo, where cash, not Communism is the criterion for admittance. Here, "gamblers with tumblers of Scotch and score cards in hand place their bets (\$10 minimum) on large trained rats that scurry through a neon-lit, glass encased race course, prompted by a hand bell rung by a dwarf dressed as an 18th-century page. Safety is a constant preoccupation, and an African security guard dressed

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to look like an American marine in helmet, fatigues and an M.P. armband, stiffly salutes arriving Mercedes-Benz and Volvo sedans", according to an August 4, *New York Times* report. The 300 members pay around \$3000 a year for the privilege of betting on the rodents, playing pool, or talking business at a foaming Jacuzzi, or one of the bars, although charges are waived for some 62 high-level Government officials who are "honorary" members.

There is also a private yacht club on the Moscow River, and a golf course, which you might be able to join for \$25,000 a year or \$90,000 for corporate memberships. Dachas with hot tubs around the course rent for \$90-130,000 a year but there is a waiting list as more are being built. There are dozens of restricted clubs in Moscow, Vladivostok, Murmansk and other cities, where the rich and politically powerful are offered "casino gambling, gourmet dining, cabaret shows, strippers and a cozy sense of exclusivity".

Back on the farm, the old peasants know nothing of this, and continue to toil and eke out a bare existence, much as their ancestors did 300 or 400 years ago. In Kushalino, a small farming village four hours from Moscow, life has changed little for centuries. Life is tough, with 16 hours of daily hard work tending animals, growing potatoes and other crops, chopping wood, baking bread, making cheese, etc., in the same old way. But now, there are telephones and televisions showing American soap operas, and in a town with fewer than 12 private cars, papers carry ads for Italian shoes and Jeeps. The young people are aware of what's going on in the big cities and the rest of the world, and are no longer satisfied with their lot in life. They are leaving in droves, which is creating all sorts of problems for the economy, both by their absence there, and their presence elsewhere. A few decades ago, there were 73,000 small villages in Russia. More than 2 out of 3 of these have now disappeared. Over 60% of the inhabitants used to be younger than 35, but this is now down to 20%, and most residents are now older than 65. Regional hospitals have vanished or have been replaced by small clinics. Heat for the cold winter months must come from wood stoves, since a month's worth of propane gas costs \$12.00, which is about as much as most pensions. Such problems are even worse in some of the other former Soviet Republics.

In Stewart Wolf's marvelous study of Roseto,

socio-cultural changes much milder and occurring over a much longer period of time, resulted in a striking increase in heart attacks, hypertension, and strokes. What will happen in Kushalino?

The "Chechen Smile"

Some insight into the confusion caused by the current crisis was provided by an intriguing paper from the Russian Institute of Cultural Research. It dealt with the variation in stress responses seen in Russian soldiers, and Chechen fighters. The study was conducted in the fighting zones using both Russian military officers and Chechen field commanders as expert consultants. The Russian soldiers could be broken down into two age groups; 18-19 year olds who were legally conscripted for service, and 25-45 year old mercenaries. In contrast, the Chechen fighters between the ages of 18-45 were all volunteers, none of whom were paid. For centuries, the Chechens had no serfdom or aristocracy, and showed a fierce determination to fight for the preservation of their freedoms. Taking revenge for the death of loved ones and destruction of their property had become a way of life for them. The differences between these two opposing forces were astonishing. The Russian soldiers demonstrated the psychological signs of a defeated army, while the Chechens behaved like victors, despite the fact that the results of this military campaign were exactly the opposite.

One aspect of this which is of particular interest, was the phenomenon the researchers referred to as the "Chechen smile". Psychologists who have studied the ethnic characteristics of these stubborn people, note that Chechens often smile when subjected to severe stress. Nevertheless, it was still surprising for the investigators to see the Chechens grinning or smirking as they watched their houses burn, and even laughing as they promised to take revenge on the death of a loved one, even if it meant dying in a fight. "A smile is the chosen vehicle for all ambiguities", wrote Herman Melville, and the Nobel Laureate Konrad Laurence, noted that it often represents the substitution of an expression of aggressiveness, by one of apparent friendship and happiness. Similarly, the "Chechen Smile" appears to signify the ability to overcome difficulties, and to reflect the anticipation of the triumph of revenge, which for these people, supersedes the normal responses of rage and anger.

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A Declaration

At the conclusion of the Congress the draft of Declaration entitled, **Psychoemotional Stress: A Threat To Life And Health**, was circulated. It emphasized that these pernicious problems are creating a crisis that can only be curtailed by a comprehensive and coordinated multidisciplinary approach. The perplexities of psychosocial stress in Russia pose a predicament with respect to their resolution. This must involve political, social, economic, psychological, and medical considerations that are inextricably intertwined. Correcting this will require the cooperation and integrated efforts of various governmental agencies, educators, religious groups, medical institutions, philanthropic and cultural foundations, not only from Russia, but also other nations that are involved and affected. Legislative programs must be developed and adopted to enforce laws banning the propaganda of cruelty, violence, and aggression in the media. There must be concerted efforts to curtail crime, prevent poverty, protect the environment, and to encourage social support. Particular efforts must be directed to eliminating those factors which contribute to stress in the workplace and identifying individuals who are at high risk. Changes must be made in school curricula and the media to educate the population about the nature of stress, its harmful psychological and physical consequences, and how these can be prevented.

It seems doubtful that the Russian people can do this on their own without another revolution and blood bath. They will require the assistance not only of international health and relief agencies, but the cooperation of other countries to help in curtailing smuggling and other illegal activities that have been permitted or possibly even encouraged. It is very important to develop a comprehensive educational program that can instruct the public at all levels about the importance of preventive medicine, adequate nutrition, and physical conditioning.

Those participating in the conference were asked to provide assistance in devising ways to teach the population how to improve their coping skills and social support systems. In addition, there is a need to develop improved methods for the objective monitoring of stress, so that those at high risk can be identified, and effective stress reduction strategies implemented.

A Personal Perspective

I did not witness any of the violence noted above during my brief visit to Moscow, possibly because I was carefully escorted everywhere. Most of the adults looked dejected and harried, and the buildings and facilities were seedy and run down. However, I was more impressed with the vibrant and enthusiastic demeanor of the young people I saw, and their sincere love of music, art, and their rich cultural legacy. The Bolshoi Ballet was overflowing with them, as were the concerts and museums I attended. I made a detour to St. Petersburg on the way home to view the current Hermitage Winter Palace exhibit of French impressionist paintings. These had not been seen for 50 years, since they were removed from France and Germany during World War II for "safe keeping". Here again, there were vivacious young people patiently waiting in long lines to get in, although the museum's regular collection of impressionists makes this pale in significance. It would take months to view the rest of their over 2 million acquisitions collected for centuries from all over the world. Just outside the city a remarkable ring of large sculptures commemorates the phenomenal resistance to its 900 day siege by German forces in World War II, also surrounded by throngs of local citizens, gazing in awe and admiration at their history and heritage.

The German historian and philosopher, Oswald Spengler, in his magnum opus, *The Decline of the West*, noted that every culture passed through a life cycle, from youth through maturity to old age and death. In analyzing the rise and fall of the Greek, Roman and other Empires, Spengler found that all growth periods were associated with artistic creativity, and that declines were characterized by a preoccupation with materialism, or "gadgetry". At the end of Roman civilization, there were no longer any great dramatists, sculptors, or architects, but there was hot and cold running water on the barges.

In his opinion, Western civilization was beginning this period of decadent decline, and the flowering of art and creativity was taking place in Russia where a new culture would arise. This was written shortly after the promises of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and when Tolstoi, Dostoevsky, Chekhov,

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Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, and numerous other Russian figures were prominent in the arts.

Two decades later, Arnold Toynbee's 12 volume, *A Study Of History*, came to a very different conclusion. Toynbee hypothesized that the health of a culture depended entirely on its ability to successfully adapt to the stresses of both human and environmental challenges, rather than any artistic achievements. In his view, it was only Western Christendom, that would survive. If Spengler were alive today, it is likely his opinion might also be different. Although Russian artists continue to flourish, many, like Mikhail Baryshnikov, have emigrated or even defected to the West, to pursue their careers.

Finally, the most indelible impression of my brief visit was the warmth and hospitality of our hosts. Despite meager resources, their generosity and thoughtfulness was always evident. Since the visit coincided with my birthday, they had arranged for the Philharmonic to play "New York, New York" and other popular U.S. selections, during the concert they gave for us. They also organized a gala birthday-farewell celebration dinner, with Beluga caviar, numerous gifts, and countless vodka toasts. I was surprised that as soon as their glasses were emptied, the Russians placed them upside down on the top of their heads. As my good friend, Konstantin Sudakov explained to me, in the old days, they used to throw their glasses in the fireplace. Although that is a luxury they can no longer afford, the same spirit of enthusiasm and comradeship still prevails.

Paul J. Rosch, M.D., F.A.C.P.
Editor

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CALL FOR PAPERS

8TH INTERNATIONAL MONTREUX CONGRESS ON STRESS

February 18-23, 1996
Grand Hotel Excelsior
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Sessions on Stress and Cardiovascular Disease, Occupational Stress, Stress and Vehicular Accidents, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Subtle Energy Medicine, etc. For further information, contact Jo Ann Ogawa, The American Institute of Stress, 124 Park Avenue, Yonkers, NY 10703. Phone: 914 963 1200

Meetings and Items of Interest

Oct. 13-14 Chronic Pain Conference, Madison, Wis., Contact Sarah Aslakson, 2715 Marshall Ct., Madison, Wis. 53705

Oct. 17-22 American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, New Orleans, LA, call (202) 966-7300

Oct. 20-22 Psychopharmacology offered by the Massachusetts General Hospital-Dept. of Psychiatry, Westin Hotel, Copley Place, Boston, MA, call for info (617) 432-1525

Dec. 4-10 The Psychology of Health, Immunity & Disease sponsored by NICABM, Hyatt Regency, Hilton Head Island, SC, call (800) 743-2226

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