

# To Russia with Love

## **Dr. Ellin Lieberman Co-founds First US-Russian Collaboration for Continuing Medical Education**

by Linda Taubenreuther

Just Over 70 years after her grand-uncle, a physician, signed the death certificate for Vladimir Lenin, Dr. Ellin Lieberman stepped off an Aeroflot jet onto the tarmac in St. Petersburg, the former Leningrad.

She didn't know it yet, but she was about to play an historic role in the country's affairs - and bring her family's Russian history full circle.

Dr. Lieberman thought she was there for two days of much-needed R&R. As Senior Attending Nephrologist, Head and Founder of the Division of Pediatric Nephrology at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles and Professor of Pediatrics at the USC School of Medicine, she had just wrapped up a demanding eight days as an exchange professor in Orenburg, a city at the base of the Ural Mountains.

Battling oppressive heat, with no ice, no air conditioning and no fans, she'd perspired through lectures and consultations, met academic and clinical faculties, done rounds and spent time with medical students. Now, she was ready to relax in Russia's historic old capital.

### **Information Hunger**

But Dr. Lieberman couldn't forget what she'd seen in Orenburg. She'd been deeply impressed with the tireless efforts of local medical personnel in the face of daunting shortages of equipment, supplies, and - most of all - information. In America, the flow of medical information is taken for granted. In Russia, a rigid hierarchical medical structure limits that flow to a trickle. Everyone she met expressed a hunger for information on the latest treatments, techniques, research.

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The country's massive health crisis makes the lack of information even more frustrating for Russian doctors. infectious diseases - diphtheria, hepatitis, typhoid, dysentery - are rampant. The life expectancy for Russian men has plummeted; Russia has one of the world's lowest birthrates, and the number of sick children is heartbreakingly high. Yet the government spends far less than other industrialized nations on health care. Russia, thought Dr. Lieberman, is an accident waiting to happen.

### **A Medical Legacy**

Raised in a family of physicians, she knew what an impact informed doctors can have on their communities; 25,000 people attended the funeral of her grandfather, Leon Louria, a general practitioner in Brooklyn. Her father, Harry Louria, a general surgeon, performed 50,000 operations - and never sent a bill.

Their dedication fueled her fascination; from age 11, her birthday present was attending her father's operations. On the staff of Childrens Hospital Los Angeles since 1963, Dr. Lieberman became the first head of its Division of Nephrology and founded its Renal Dialysis and Transplant program, then one of only two such programs in the world. She and her husband, Dr. Harry Lieberman, a pediatrician, are members of the Children's Circle of Care, the hospital's major donor recognition society. Her brother, Dr. Henry Louria, is also a physician, in Orange County.

In Orenburg, she talked about her experiences with a new friend: Dr. Alexander Arieiev, head of the Geriatric Department at the St. Petersburg Medical Academy of Postgraduate Studies and president of the Creative Nephrology Association. She left St. Petersburg with the seeds of a powerful idea.

Back in California, Dr. Lieberman's husband sensed a transformation in the woman he'd known since their courtship at CHLA 37 years ago. "Anything Russian got her attention immediately," he smiles. "She was madly in love with the place." In March, she and Harry returned to St. Petersburg. That June, Dr. Arieiev invited her back to address the Creative Nephrology Association.

### **The Idea: Collaboration**

By then, she and Dr. Arieiev had decided on something they could do about Russia's information hunger. They proposed a one-year collaborative medical curriculum, organized by the United States and Russia, to train Russian physicians in the latest clinical developments. After two years of complex planning, consultation and negotiation, The International American Russian Programme for Continuing Postgraduate Medical Education in Nephrology in St. Petersburg was born. Its goal: a course tailored to the immediate needs of Russian physicians, with an internationally recognized faculty.

Kidney disease, a common malady that responds well to treatment, was chosen as the first subject. A three-part curriculum was planned for June and October of 1997 and May of 1998. At the end of the course, participants will take a comprehensive test. Those who pass will receive a special certificates

### **A Five-Year Extension**

Part I was so enthusiastically received a five-year extension was negotiated on the spot. The program has opened way for a range of other dialogues, among them a proposed exchange

program for a Russian renal pathologist to work with an expert at UCLA, a collaboration on radioactive renal damage in the Ukraine, publication of course materials for individual study and a request for a May 1998 meeting on learning disabilities in children.

The idea is gathering energetic support outside Russia. An International Advisory Committee is being formed, with representatives from the nephrology, pathology, international public health and telecommunications fields. The University of Toronto recently came on board as a program sponsor, and The International Society of Nephrology is backing it as part of a mission to support developing nations.

Dr. Lieberman is immersed in creating the five-year program. Her love of Russia, the land from which her grandfather emigrated to America, keeps growing. "It's opened up a whole new world for me," she says. She believes the gift she's helped give the country - a vital source of knowledge for Russian physicians - has come back to her many times over.

"There's an old mountaineer's saying," says Dr. Lieberman. "You leave the cabin richer than when you arrived."

She likes to think of Russia as her cabin.

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