

THE ROTARY CLUB OF LUTON NORTH



WEALTH ARRIVES ON THE WIND

or

To Russia with Love

When 14-year old Dima Skvortsov went out to play in the garden of his home in Kum'ja, a small village in the republic of Mari El, 500 miles to the east of Moscow, one day in July 2000, he could not have known what changes it would bring to the life of his family.

For in a corner of the garden Dima found a small, partly-inflated balloon which had a strange piece of paper attached to it, with what looked like writing in a foreign language. Dima thought it would make a nice new toy for his 9-month old sister Polina, but she wasn't really interested. So Dima took the strange object to his father, Sergei.

“I was fixing my car, a 'Zaporozhets' at that moment. My son brought the balloon and I understood nothing at first and even scolded him for disturbing me. I did not have time to worry about any balloon, but then I noticed a label.”



The Skvortsov Family, Dima (right) with the balloon, and (in mothers' arms) little Polina

Sergei took the label to the local Schoolteacher who translated the text and told Sergei that the balloon had been sent by the Luton North Rotary Club in England and was a sort of competition. She told Sergei that if he sent the label back to the Rotary Club in England they promised to send him £50 sterling (about 2400 roubles), which was what Sergei would normally earn in about 4 months. The teacher helped Sergei to fill in the label so that he could return it to the stated address.

The helium-filled balloon had been launched by the Luton North Rotary Club in June that year (2000) as one of 6000 balloons released from a field in Toddington, Bedfordshire, to raise money for their charitable community work. Local people had been invited to sponsor a Balloon for £1, and there was a prize of a £1000 holiday donated by local travel agent Ray Mulford at **Travel Extras** for the sponsor of the balloon which travelled the furthest. The event was also sponsored by the local newspaper, the **Luton News**. On the ticket was the offer of a £50 reward to the finder of the winning balloon, payable when they returned the label to the Luton North Rotary Club.

A 'Charity Balloon Race' label from the Luton North Rotary Club. The label is titled 'THE LUTON NORTH ROTARY CLUB CHARITY BALLOON RACE' and includes instructions for the finder. The label is filled out with handwritten information: 'CARD FOUND BY Mr Sergei', 'NAME SKVORTSOV', 'ADDRESS Mira Street, 11 Kumja, Kalemorsky district, Mari El, Russia', and 'FOUND AT the garden'. The number '4381' is written at the bottom right of the label.

The Luton News **TRAVEL EXTRAS**

ROTARY INTERNATIONAL
IN GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND
DISTRICT No. 1106
THE LUTON NORTH ROTARY CLUB
CHARITY BALLOON RACE
NOTICE TO THE FINDER OF THIS CARD
Please fill in the details below and post the card to the address overleaf. A prize of £50 will be awarded to the finder of the card which has travelled the furthest.

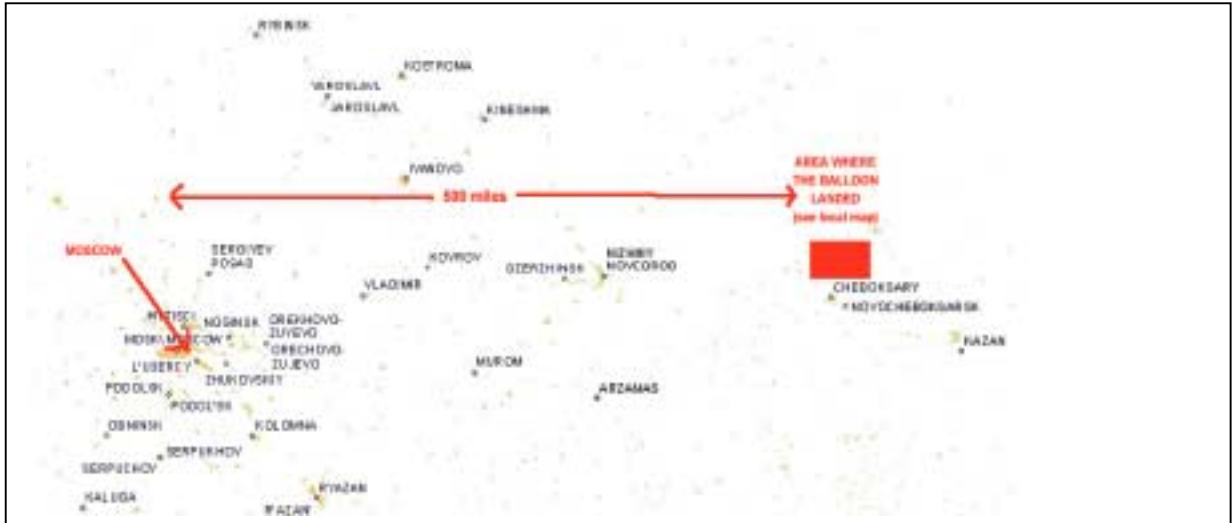
CARD FOUND BY *Mr Sergei*
NAME *SKVORTSOV*
ADDRESS *Mira Street, 11
Kumja, Kalemorsky
district, Mari El, Russia*
FOUND AT *the garden*

4381

After a few weeks, reports started to come in of balloons turning up in Holland, Norway, and Sweden. Then one was reported from Estonia and everyone thought that would be the winner.

Then Sergei's ticket was received, and no one could believe that a balloon could have travelled as far as Russia. But it was true. The next problem of the Club was how to get the prize money to Sergei Skvortsov.

"We knew how much the prize could mean to him, and we were determined that it *would* get to him", said organiser of the race, Rotarian Alan Corkhill. "It may have been a relatively small sum in England, but we knew it was a small fortune in Russia and we simply dare not

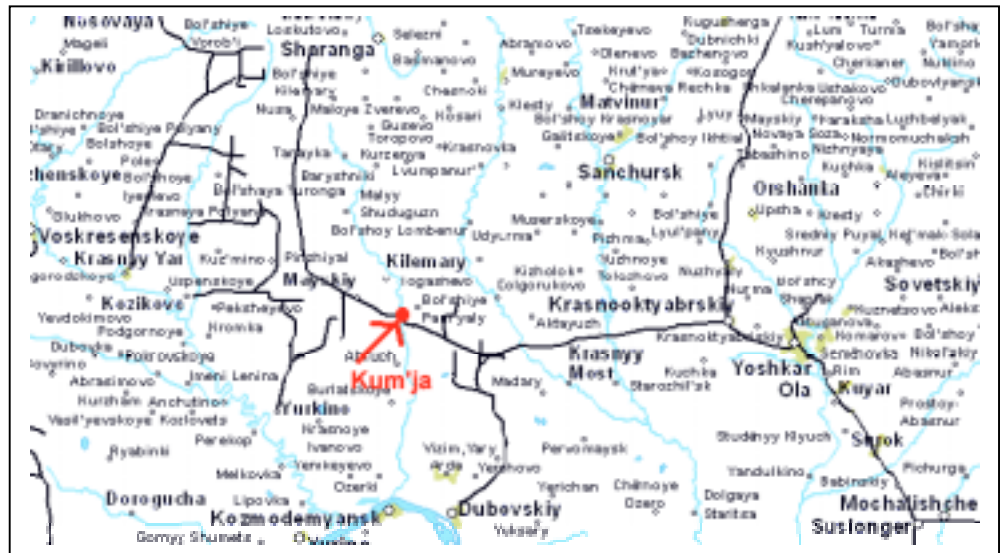


Central Russia - from Moscow to the republic of Mari El, where the balloon landed

just put the money in an envelope and trust it to the postal system. At that time, we did not even know precisely where in Russia Sergei's village was."

Sergei Skvortsov did not have a bank account to which the money could be transferred, and it was a long time

before a solution could be found. "We were concerned", said Alan, "that he would think it was all a hoax and would feel badly let down. As Rotarians, that concerned us, but there was little that we could do about it"



The region of Mari El where the balloon came down.

Then another member of the Rotary Club, Richard Giles, found a contact in the Moscow Narodny Bank in London who said they could help to get the money through safely, and the problem appeared to be solved.

And that is probably where the story would have stopped, if it were not for the modern miracle of the Internet. For in January 2002 the Club received an email message from a news web-site in Russia which was running a story on this strange event, which appeared to have

caught the imagination of the entire Russian media. The Luton North Rotary Club has its own web-site (www.rotary1260.org/luton-north) and the Russian editor of NisRevue, Svetlana Kukina, had found it on an internet search engine and made contact, through a reply-form on the club's site, with the web-master and International Committee chairman for the Luton North Club, Rotarian Roger Munday.



The launching of the balloons in Toddington, England in June 2000

And so more details of the story began to emerge as daily interchanges of information and photographs took place by email between Roger and Svetlana. The balloon had travelled over 3000 kilometres (nearly 2000 miles) to land in the village of Kum'ja where Sergei lived in the republic of Mari El, more than 500 miles to the east of Moscow. It is believed that this may be a world record distance for a charity balloon race. In Soviet times, Kum'ja was the central

collective farm for the region and was a small hamlet some 15 miles from the regional town of Kile Mari. Sergei Skvortsov was a small peasant farmer who scratched a living with a cow for milk, and a small bull, grew potatoes on his plot, and gathered cranberries from the local wood. It was very hard, laborious work.

The nearest town of any real size was Ioskar Ola, and it was to there that Sergei had to travel to post his balloon ticket and claim his prize. The journey was over 3 hours on the bus, and Sergei spent most of that night waiting at the local bus depot waiting for his transport.

Mosnarbank had a branch in Nizhny Novgorod, a city of some 2¹/₂ million people, which was the closest to Kum'ja. By chance the local Bank Director, Alexei



Alexei Dorofeef (left) and Peter Pletnev (right) with the finder of the balloon, Sergei Skvortsov

Dorofeev, was also a Rotarian and member of the Nizhny Novgorod Rotary Club which had been in existence for 10 years, since soon after the end of the soviet era.

Alexei invited the Skvortsov family to come to Nizhny to be presented with their prize, and Mosnarbank doubled the prize with a donation of a further 2400 roubles on top of the amount from Luton North Rotary Club. Alexei Dorofeev added another 1000 roubles personally. Peter Pletnev, the managing director of Nizhny Novgorod Information Networks, a Russian internet company is another member of the Nizhny Rotary Club, and Peter and his Chief Editor, Svetlana Kukina, generously donated another 500 roubles each. "It was our own will," said Peter, "to make this additional sum of money available. There were no instructions about it. We were happy to help this person and maybe it was the only chance for happiness for him in his life".

So the total prize to the Skvortsov family was 6800 roubles, worth nearly a year's income to them. The prize was eventually given to Sergei at a presentation in the offices of Mosnarbank on 15th January this year (2002). The whole Skvortsov family made the trip from Kum'ja

especially for the occasion, and Sergei is now a famous figure in Russia, along with the Luton North Rotary Club, and has even appeared on Russian TV to relate his adventure and good fortune.



From left to right: Alexey Dorofeev, Sergey Skvortsov, Peter Pletnev and: Svetlana Kukina, principal editor of the web-site "NIS-revue"

Asked if he had ever doubted that he would get his prize and whether he counted his prize accidental, Sergei replied "I always trusted. I have been troubled ...and God has awarded this prize to me" Something of a fatalist, he was sure that nothing happens without any reason and the same applied to the prize money.

Not to be outdone, and to show his gratitude. Sergei Skvortsov even brought his

own gift for his benefactors - a pail of cranberries from his native village.

And now his fellow-villagers are also watching the skies, and wondering if similar blessings might perhaps fall on them as well !!

Footnote:

Rotary is an organisation of business and professional men and women. Rotary clubs meet weekly and are non-political, non-religious, and open to all cultures, races, and creeds.

*The main objective of Rotary is service — in the community, in the workplace, and throughout the world. The Rotary motto is **Service Above Self.***

*If you would like to know more about Rotary or you would like to be a member the Rotary Club of Luton North would be very pleased to hear from you. Just call the membership officer **Alan Corkhill** on 01582 493332 or visit the club's website at www.rotary1260.org/luton-north, where there is a contact form.*

*The Club also has a separate **Friends of Rotary** membership section for those who would like to help in its work or participate in some of the many social events, but are unable for personal reasons to give the necessary personal commitment that full membership entails.*

R Munday, Luton North Rotary Club, 27/1/2002