



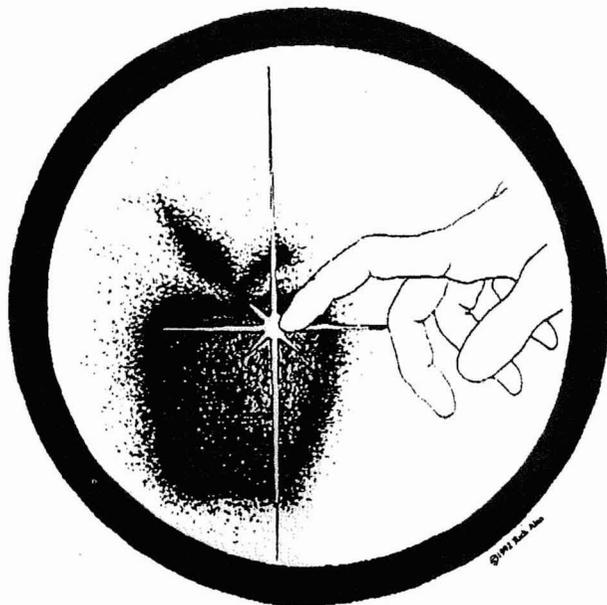
CoNNections

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“From Russia ...With Hope”

Wesley E. Snyder

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Newsletter Editor

In October, I had the pleasure of being the program chair for the first (hopefully of many) Joint Symposium on Neuroinformatics and Neurocomputers, sponsored by the IEEE Neural Networks Council and the Russian Neural Networks Society. The conference was held in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, a lovely city on the shores of the Don River, about 1000 km south of Moscow.

Our travel was amazingly uneventful — the customs official didn't even blink at my three large boxes of proceedings, and the ride on Aeroflot from Moscow to Rostov was smooth and on time.

The technical content of the conference was outstanding! The conventional wisdom that the Russians are excellent mathematicians but don't have access to good computing equipment is more-or-less correct. I consider it a good conference when I hear one excellent paper, with results which I find exciting. In this conference, I heard four such papers! All the presentations were in English, and for the most part, I had no difficulty in following the pronunciations.

Congratulations and thanks are due to many people: Witali Dunin-Barkowski, the general chair, and his colleagues in Russia; Bob Marks, former NNC president and current editor of the *Transactions on Neural Networks*; who was international chair; Dmitry Kaplan of the University of Washington who handled the (very complicated) finances of the conference, and doubled as translator and guide for Bob and me; all those who served on the program committee and reviewed papers; and my secretary, Carla Stout, who put in a lot of hours at a very busy time.

As far as life in Russia is concerned, I came away from the trip with a great sense of confidence and optimism. Life is going to be hard for the Russians, but I feel that they

will persevere, and come up with a successful economy and democratic form of government. I also came away with a sense of anger at what 50 years of communism has done to an intelligent, congenial, and sensitive people.

Even though Carl Marx supported the “labor theory of value”, the current system has NO theory of value. If you ask how much something costs, the response you may get is “how much would you like it to cost?”— remember, prices and costs have been uncorrelated for 50 years. They also have no legal system to deal with the potential abuses of a free market system. The average man-on-the-street knows what a monopoly is (I assume they study it in school), but the more subtle forms of monopoly, e.g. price fixing, are not well understood and not incorporated into the legal system.

Russian entrepreneurs, however, are starting to figure out these concepts, and in the absence of appropriate laws and enforcement, to take advantage of these opportunities. I heard much about the “Russian mafia” in this context, and was unable to distinguish between activities which were illegal and those that were unethical (of course, maybe we

Westerners shouldn't make that distinction either).

I remember as a schoolboy in the fifties practicing for what to do in the event of nuclear attack -- sit on the floor beside my desk, away from the window, put my head between my knees-- etc. in case the “Godless Russians” attacked. And symmetrically, I am sure the Russians had their drills in case the “Imperialistic Americans” attacked. After growing up in such a world, to walk across Red Square, to stroll the grounds and visit the churches of the Moscow Kremlin, and to have frank and open technical discussions with Russian scientists was the thrill of a lifetime. The trip would have been great even without the conference; and the success of the conference made it that much better.

The proceedings will be available from the IEEE or, at least for the moment, the conference still has a few copies left for sale. Send Email to carla@relito.medeng.wfu.edu if you are interested.



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