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SUNDAY, JUNE 16, 2002



## THE Chkalov connection

TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

Vancouver became the first American city to memorialize a Soviet achievement in 1975, when this marker to the initial transpolar flight was erected. Volunteers raised \$200,000 to pay for it.

*Vancouver's respect for Soviet aviation pioneer Valeri Chkalov has helped make it a welcoming new home for Russian immigrants*

### Russians to help celebrate journey

Clark County will celebrate the 65th anniversary of the first transpolar flight — from Moscow to Vancouver over the North Pole — at a ceremony Saturday night at the monument to the journey at Pearson Field, 1105 E. Fifth St. The 5 p.m. public event will be followed by a dinner and auction.

Several Russian dignitaries will attend, including the adult children of pilot Valeri Chkalov, Igor and Olga, as well as Vladimir Kirienko, vice governor of Nizhny Novgorod, and Maxim Bezayev, the top official in the International Relations Department. Andrey Veklenko, consul general of the Russian Federation from the Seattle consulate, plans to make a speech. Slavic musicians also will perform, complemented by decorations and artwork provided by the local Association of Slavic Immigrants. Expected to arrive mid-week, the delegation of more than 60 Russians will be following the historic flight path in SU-30 fighter jets accompanied by an IL-78 refueling tanker.

The money raised from the dinner will be used in promoting future programs sponsored by the Valeri P. Chkalov Cultural Exchange organization. Dinner is \$35 per person and features borscht, beef stroganoff, salad and wine. For more information on the event or the group, call Jess Frost at 360-735-0365.

— Brett Oppegaard



DAVE OLSON/The Columbian

Complementing the monument, now at the entry to Pearson Field, the city in 1975 named a Cascade Park street after the pilot of the historic flight.

soil to memorialize a Soviet achievement. Dozens of Russian dignitaries and local supporters once again will gather at Pearson Field on Saturday

night to commemorate the anniversary of the flight and to further build the relationship between the countries. With so much made of this event here and in the former Soviet Union, it seems at least feasible that the flight, its notoriety and the mass immigration of Russians/Ukrainians are somehow related. It could be a calling — subconscious or not — fueled by Van-

CHKALOV, page D3

By BRETT OPPEGAARD  
Columbian staff writer

During the past two decades, Clark County's population has swelled by roughly 80 percent. That influx of more than 150,000 people has brought greater density as well as diversity and cultures, with the biggest surge in ethnicity coming from Russians/Ukrainians fleeing religious persecution.

In fact, Clark County now has a higher rate per capita of that former Soviet population than any other place in the Vancouver-Portland area, as the raw numbers of such immigrants have risen from about 350 people in 1980 to more than 10,500 in 2000.

Most folks are coming here for the same general reasons. The homes are less expensive. The schools are better. It's a safer place. Yet other conditions also contribute to such a mass migration. Access to entertainment and higher education might draw some. Living on the Columbia River could be enough of an appeal. Then there are even more subtle factors, such as knowing a bit about a place or someone who has been there before.

That complexity leaves more questions than tangible answers about why the former Soviets are choosing Clark County and Vancouver more often per capita than their metro-area counterparts. There is no one source that knows the answer.

But with the anniversary of the first transpolar flight and its connection of Russian heroes to Vancouver being celebrated soon, it seems logical to at least speculate about: Why are these immigrants coming here? And is there any link to that flight?

Vancouver has been a prominent city in Russian lore since 1937, when a trio of Soviet aviators, led by pilot Valeri Chkalov, completed the trip from Moscow over the North Pole to Pearson Field by plane. Virtually every student in the former Soviet Union has learned about that feat, and Vancouver's continuing observance of it has included a street named after the pilot, Chkalov Drive in Cascade Park, and an elaborate monument that was the first on American

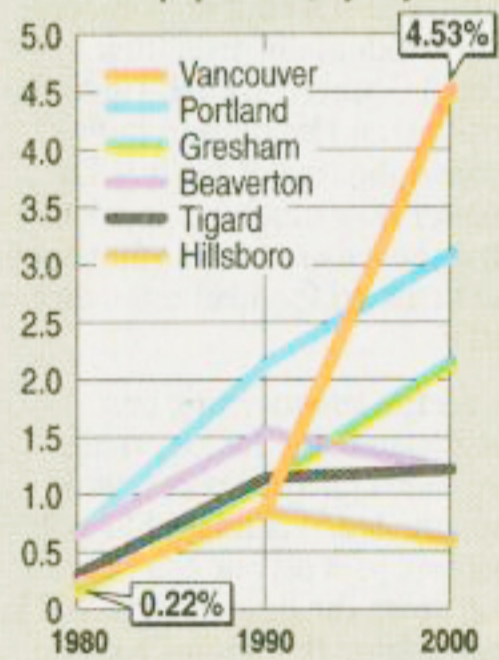
#### HOW TO SAY IT

■ Chkalov (chik-AH-luf)

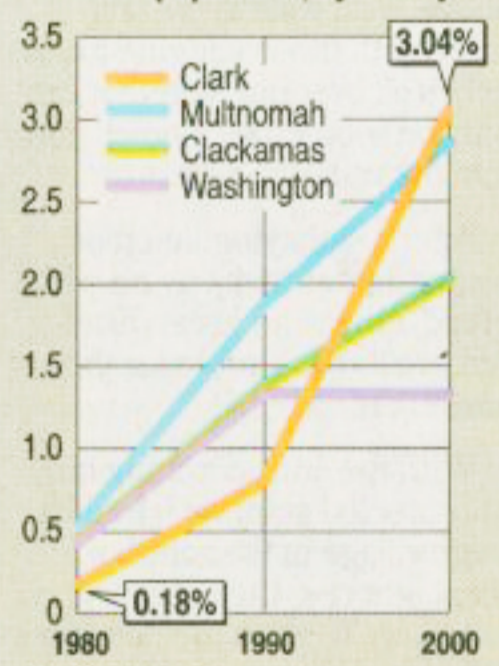
#### Following Chkalov's lead?

Since 1980, the ratio of people of Russian/Ukrainian ancestry in the metro area has risen most significantly in Vancouver and Clark County.

% of total population, by city:



% of total population, by county:



SOURCE: U.S. Census data  
The Columbian

## Advice to the Class of 2002: Grab your diplomas and go

DAVE BARRY



And so we are gathered here today — you, the eager members of the Class of 2002, and we, your family members, who will sit on these hard folding chairs until every last eager one of you has picked up a diploma, at which point we will feel as though the entire Riverdance troupe has been stomping on our buttocks.

Because, gosh, there sure are a lot of you in the Class of 2002! We in the audience are wondering if there is anybody in North America besides us who is not graduating today. And although we know this is very exciting for you, the Class of 2002, we are fighting to stay awake.

We have already engaged in the traditional time-passing activities of

commencement audiences, such as trying to remember the names of all Seven Dwarfs, and looking through the commencement program for comical graduate names. We have nudged the person sitting next to us and pointed to names like "Konrad A. Klamsucker Jr." and "Vorbanna Freepitude," and that has given us brief moments of happiness.

But we can only do that for so long, Class of 2002, and now we are feeling the despair that comes over members of a commencement audience when they realize that 40 minutes have passed, and the dean is just now starting to hand out diplomas to people whose last names start with "D," and the last name of the lone graduate we actually came to see

starts with "W." We've decided that, if we ever have another child threatening to graduate from college, we're going to have that child's name legally changed to "Aaron A. Aardvark." Yes, the other families in the audience will make fun of it. But their laughter will turn to bitter envy when our child gets his diploma first, and we get up off these folding chairs and head for a restaurant! Ha ha!

We also think it would be nice if commencement programs had interesting articles for the audience to read, or even short works of fiction with appropriate educational themes. ("As Vorbanna walked across the stage, her tassel swaying seductively, Konrad watched her, his sweating hands caressing the smooth

hardness of his embossed leatherette diploma cover, and he thought about that unforgettable night when the two of them, for the first time, matriculated.")

Another option would be to show movies during the commencement ceremonies. Wouldn't that be great? While we were waiting for specific graduates to get their diplomas, we could enjoy such classic education-related cinema moments as the scene in "Animal House" where John Belushi imitates a giant pimple by squeezing his cheeks and spewing chewed food out of his mouth. That would surely get a roar of delight and approval from the audience, and

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# Chkalov:

From page D1

couver's hospitality to Chkalov, his crew and their compatriots. Then again, it could be just a coincidence.

To understand even the possibility of any such connection, one first must appreciate the magnitude of Chkalov's accomplishment. While the flight across the Atlantic Ocean that made American aviator Charles Lindbergh famous had been done many times before (Lindbergh was the first to go solo), no one had been able to get over the North Pole prior to Chkalov and his companions.

Compared to Lindbergh's flight, Chkalov's took roughly twice as long and was even more dangerous (see accompanying story). Chkalov was immortalized in his culture with dozens of statues, monuments and other honors, including having his hometown as well as a mountain, island and planet named after him. In Chkalovsk, there is a restaurant named Vancouver, and the town's revered local brew is dubbed Vancouver-Chkalovsk Vodka.

Alan Cole of Keizer, Ore., has been involved with the commemoration of the historic Russian moment for more than 25 years, and he serves as chairman of the local Chkalov Transpolar Flight Committee. Cole has traveled to the former Soviet Union about 30 times, and for his work on this subject, he has been given the Order of Friendship award, which is the highest civilian honor in Russia. Because of his position on the Vancouver-based committee, Cole has had access to Soviet vice presidents, prime ministers, governors, mayors and cosmonauts. He says the Russians have treated him like royalty in reverence to Chkalov and spared no expense to make his visits there special.

During those trips, Cole says, he spoke three times to a national television audience about Chkalov and Vancouver, a viewership he estimates averaged between 7 million and 10 million on each occasion. "People over there might not know where Chicago is, but they know where Vancouver is," he said. "And they don't confuse it with (Vancouver) British Columbia."

Cole said he thinks that familiarity with the Clark County city has to have some effect on the Slavic immigration here, similar to the advertising principle of a name brand subliminally drawing people through repetitive exposure.

"It's like throwing a pebble in a pond," he said. "What effects do the ripples have?"

Jess Frost, who teaches Russian at Clark College and has spent about two years traveling around the former Soviet Union, said, "I can count on one hand the Russians I've dealt with who didn't know who Chkalov was."

Galina Boyechko, who works in human resources for the city of Vancouver, immigrated from Russia in 1991 with her family. After coming to Los Angeles, where relatives had settled, her parents decided to move to the Northwest, where housing was more affordable and opportunities more prevalent. The choices were narrowed to Vancouver and Bellevue, and Boyechko said Vancouver was chosen because the weather was warmer.

"I've heard people (at Russian social gatherings) say that they've come here because of Chkalov, though," she said. "And if they didn't know about (the flight landing here) before they came, they usually are very impressed once they find out."

Valentina Nosenko, who worked as a teacher in Russia before emigrating, said, "When I came here, I didn't know Americans cared so much about Chkalov. I went to his museum (Pearson Air Museum), and it was very touching. ... Of course, everyone (in Russia) knows about Chkalov, but I was proud to see that (the people of Clark County) are so friendly about it. They are trying not to lose (the memory of the flight)."

## Coming to Clark County

Slavic immigrants have been moving to America for centuries, starting with a Russian colony established in Trinity Bay, Alaska, in the 1780s. The migration of former Soviets to the United States generally has come in a few major waves, said Richard A. Morris, a research professor in the Russian and East European Studies Center at University of Oregon. A large group came after the Lenin-led 1917 revolution.

Another came after World War II, before Joseph Stalin firmly shut the gates. Huge numbers of Jewish refugees emigrated to many of America's largest cities, including Portland, in the 1970s as the result of an amendment to the Trade Reform Act that tied human rights to economic sanctions.

But almost all of Clark County's Slavic surge came from Mikhail Gorbachev's period of perestroika (or "restructuring" of the Soviet government). Roughly from 1985 to 1991, perestroika gave refugee status and thereby a relatively easy emigration path for many religious groups, including the Pentecostals, Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists who make up virtually all of the local community. Some of the immigrant placement was random, but much was funneled through host families via churches and later through relatives.

Former Soviets arrived everywhere in America during this period, including Portland and its surrounding cities. Clark County and Vancouver, though, picked up more than their even share during this population rush. Of the four counties in the metropolitan area, according to census data, Clark had the lowest percentage per capita of Russians/Ukrainians both in 1980 and 1990, but in the 2000 census, it had jumped to the top of that list. Vancouver, similarly, was fifth of the six largest metro-area cities in 1980 and 1990, but in 2000, it had the highest percentage per capita, roughly 50 percent more than Portland.

## Factors to consider

Irina Sharkova, who teaches urban and regional planning at Portland State University and specializes in demographic data related to geography, attributes that unusual growth pattern in Clark County to a variety of issues:

- More affordable housing. In 1990, when this population wave was peaking, census data shows that about 85 percent of Clark County homeowners were paying 30 percent or less of their income toward their mortgage, which is the nationally established threshold for "affordable" housing. Clark County was the best in that category in the metro area at the time.

- Tatyana Bobrick of Lutheran Family Services, one of the major organizations that helps immigrants adjust to life in America, said she and her family left Ukraine in 1988 and eventually arrived in Portland. She moved to Vancouver in 1995 because she bought a house that she felt was more reasonably priced than anywhere else in the metro area. "I liked the house," she said. "And I liked Vancouver for a lot of other reasons. It's quieter than the big city. It's also bloomed. It's just amazing to see how it's growing with new construction everywhere. But I didn't come because of Chkalov. I think that's just more of a coincidence."

- Calling on relatives and friends to join them. Once this immigrant community became established in Vancouver with churches and infrastructure such as interpreters and stores that cater to their needs, word spread that it was a pleasant, welcoming place. Some of those already in the country relocated here. Extended family members were brought to Clark County through a sponsorship process.

- Nelly Tishchenko, wife of Peter Tishchenko, who doesn't speak English well but leads the local Association of Slavic Immigrants, said her family, which came in 1990, and many of the people she knows chose Clark County because of relatives or church sponsors who brought them here.

- "We're proud of Chkalov," she said. "But we didn't (remember) that he had landed here until our sponsor took us to the monument and showed us the street."

# Dangerous flight was a close call

Valeri Chkalov's original destination for landing the first transpolar flight wasn't Vancouver. It was San Francisco. Even when the Russian pilot and his crew were running out of gas over the metropolitan area, Pearson Field was the second choice of two options.

Yet that's the way it worked out, and the flight's landing here still ranks as arguably the most significant single world event in the city's history.

As a rare example of Soviet-American cooperation between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and World War II, Chkalov and his crew left Moscow on June 18, 1937, in an ANT-25 aircraft dubbed "The Route of Stalin" and flew over the North Pole into North America. Two days later, they touched down in Vancouver unannounced.

Chkalov often is compared by Americans to Charles Lindbergh. That probably should be the other way around, though, says Jess Frost, who teaches Russian at Clark College and also is president of the local Chkalov Cultural Exchange Committee. Although Lindbergh's flight happened a decade earlier, the route across the Atlantic Ocean had been well established by a dozen flights before Lindbergh, who was the first to do the journey solo.

In comparison, Lindbergh's flight from New York to Paris took about half as long as Chkalov's (33 hours to 63 hours) and covered a third less distance (3,500 miles to 5,300 miles). At the time Chkalov completed it, the transpolar route was considered so dangerous that many thought it was impossible.

Ice reportedly built up to 5 inches thick on the plane's wings as the Russians dodged Arctic cyclones going over the pole. With the plane trembling from the strain of the added weight, potentially deadly problems began to multiply. Frost said the instruments went haywire, the radio cut out, the oxygen pump stopped, the crew members' noses started bleeding and the anti-icing system failed, among the calamities. Finally, they had to resort to using bags of urine to defrost integral parts on the craft just to keep it airborne.

When the crew determined the Bay Area was out of reach, they settled on landing somewhere between Seattle and Eugene. As the tank emptied, Portland became the logical choice. Yet when the crew took a pass over the airport, which then was on Swan Island, it saw a mob of people waiting that they thought might tear apart their craft as the Parisians did to Lindbergh's when

he landed in Paris. Pearson Field, a military strip, was the alternative. Gen. George Marshall, commander of the Vancouver Barracks at the time, greeted the unexpected visitors warmly, as did the rest of this community.

When word spread of the plane landing in Vancouver, the world embraced the monumental feat, with congratulatory telegrams coming from hundreds of notables from around the globe, including President Franklin Roosevelt and Stalin. Chkalov died about a year later, testing experimental aircraft for the Soviet leader, who was the head pallbearer at the pilot's funeral in Red Square.

Virtually every city in the former Soviet Union of any size has something named after Chkalov, Frost said, including dozens of grand statues and memorials, such as the elaborate Chkalov stairway in Nizhny Novgorod. Five years ago, for the 60th anniversary of the transpolar flight, about 40 television and print journalists covered the speeches and celebrations in and around Moscow. An even bigger display is expected in February 2004 in Russia, Frost said, with a week of festivities commemorating what would have been Chkalov's 100th birthday.

— Brett Oppgaard



The Columbian files

Photographer Ralph Vincent, one of the first on the scene, shot this picture of the Russian aviation crew moments after members emerged from their plane at Pearson Field on June 20, 1937, completing the first transpolar flight. The three Soviet airmen, from left to right, are navigator Alexander Belyakov, co-pilot Georgi Baidukov and pilot Valeri Chkalov.

- More generous social services in Washington than Oregon. For those struggling to survive in a new place, a few extra dollars can make a significant difference. In Washington, a single adult refugee gets \$349 a month in welfare, a couple receives \$440 and parents with a child, \$546. In Oregon, those numbers are \$306, \$427 and \$503, respectively.

- Washington does not have a state income tax; Oregon does.

Sharkova acknowledges that immigrants as individuals, as opposed to being part of a larger wave, might choose a place for what she calls "residual" reasons. "Some people might want to move to where the biggest sitka tree is, too," she said, "but we wouldn't be talking about a mass migration."

Clark College's Frost also is skeptical of a significant link between Chkalov and the overall growth in the Slavic population in Clark County. In the early 1990s, he worked for the Southwest Washington Private Industry Council, helping those immigrants make the transition into the American workforce. Out of curiosity, he would ask each client how Vancouver became home.

"I never heard anyone say that Chkalov really played a role in their coming here," he said. "(Vancouver is) more of a tourist attraction for Russian visitors because of that, not a destination for the immigrants." Frost said that most of the immigrants in his experience said they came to Clark County because of relatives who were already here or because of church sponsors.

Boyechko says even though she's heard of a few people who did come to Clark County because of Chkalov, she too thinks there are more significant factors bringing a majority of the immigrants to Van-

couver, such as better housing for the money, better schools and at this point, a well-established ethnic community that supports 10 or so churches.

Yet the recognition of that great Russian hero in this American city, as well as the annual festivities that highlight the historic Soviet feat, help Boyechko and others feel more comfortable in their new hometown, she says. Meanwhile, they are maintaining the link to their heritage that they just can't get anywhere else in the metro area.

"It's very impressive (that Vancouver) shows so much respect for a Russian. That there's commitment to celebrate (the flight's anniversary)," Boyechko said. "For me and my family, it's made us feel more connected. It's made us feel that people here really do care about people from Russia. ... It makes me feel like I'm home."

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