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Nyet to Nukes. Citizens of the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan protest nuclear weapons testing at a test site near Semipalatinsk. August 1989.

The protest was organized by the Soviet anti-nuclear testing movement. Nevada-Semipalatinsk. Photo: Yuri Kuidin

‘We’ve been silent too long!’

**Capturing Glasnost in Action:
the Anti-Nuke Movement in the Soviet Union**

by David L. Brown

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In February of 1989, a powerful citizens’ anti-nuclear movement exploded into existence in the Kazakhstan region of the Soviet Union. Those involved were protesting 40 years of contamination from Soviet nuclear weapons testing near the city of Semipalatinsk. During those four decades, local people had been afraid to speak out about the health effects of nuclear testing, but *glasnost* has given them freedom to voice their anger and sense of betrayal. This citizens’ movement was born at the Writers’ Union in Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, when charismatic writer/poet Olzhas Suleimenov galvanized 5,000 people with the call to action, “We’ve been silent for too long!” The new movement, whose primary goal is a global end to nuclear weapons testing, was named “Nevada-Semipalatinsk” in solidarity with anti-nuclear testing activists in America.

The co-producers of *Free Zone: Democracy Meets the Nuclear Threat*, Jim Heddle, Mary Beth Braun and I, saw the first video footage to reach the U.S. showing the birth of this historic movement. We quickly decided that it had to be included in our documentary on the international nuclear free zone movement. The struggle in Kazakhstan was a dramatic example of an effective democratic response to the dangers of nuclear contamination. A few months after *Free Zone* was completed, I learned that the Nevada Semipalatinsk Movement (NSM), and the International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), recipients of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize, were co-hosting an International Citizens’ Congress for a Nuclear Test Ban in Alma-Ata in late May of this year.

I decided to raise the money to attend and videotape the proceedings. I also wanted to arrange for broadcast of *Free Zone* on Kazakh Television, which had produced and aired a program on the NSM. My decision to go turned out to be one of the best decisions of my life. As a filmmaker and activist, I was inspired to witness a new world being born, a people experiencing their first tastes of freedom and democracy, and of their power to bring about social change.

I decided to shoot the congress, plus rallies and interviews, in high-band video 8 for broadcast quality video with the most portability. My friends at In Vision Productions, Andy Neddermyer and Elaine Trotter, owned a Sony 9100 Hi-8

and had shot several times in the Soviet Union. They advised me about the electric current and other pitfalls, and provided the transformers to convert 220 volt current to 110, and the necessary Soviet mini-plugs for the translation receiver. I did not have to be reminded that shooting alone in a foreign country requires careful planning and backups. In one large case, I brought a lavalier and a shotgun microphone, two total lights with stands and accessories, a small monitor, extension cords, audio cable, a tripod and a Sony TC-D5 cassette recorder to record the translation tracks. I brought the hi-8 camcorder with the videotape and still film in a carry-on camera bag.

I spoke with many people who had filmed or traveled recently in the Soviet Union, generating a long list of valuable contacts. The best contacts included a young woman producer at Gorky Studios in Moscow, the leaders of the organization Union Chernobyl, an aikido black belt from Moscow, and Kairat Umarov, the principal English speaking organizer of the NSM in Alma-Ata. I had met Umarov in San Francisco. The other key preparation was having *Free Zone* translated to create a Russian script in Cyrillic. This proved crucial to persuading Soviet TV stations to accept the documentary for broadcast.

After the long-awaited visa arrived and I had registered all the serial numbered gear at customs, I packed and flew to Belgrade, then to Moscow. En route I prepared interview questions and read *The Russians*. Relieved to have avoided excess weight charges or customs hassles, I arrived 23 hours after leaving San Francisco at the Rossia Hotel, the largest in Europe with 6,000 beds. As the sun rose over the Kremlin next door, I began a long walk around Red Square and central Moscow with my Russian friend, Oleg. After three hours and 10 miles without finding an open cafe, the now-famous McDonalds was a surprisingly welcome sight, but, deterred by the four-hour line, I settled for a funky apple and roll from a large market with a lot of room on the shelves. Shortages of all consumer goods in Moscow are dramatic indeed. Oleg described *glasnost* and *perestroika* as merely the lengthening of the dog’s leash—allowing the dog to bark while removing its food. The people I was to meet in Alma-Ata a few days later had a much less cynical view.

Before the arrival of the non-Soviet congress participants, including several Bay Area friends, I made phone calls

to arrange meetings with filmmakers, with Greenpeace, and especially with Chernobyl survivors referred by Union Chernobyl, the organization founded to aid survivors of the disaster. I considered the risks of traveling to Chernobyl itself in light of reported radiation levels of 200 to 500 times background half a mile from the nuclear plant. Then I met Tom McDowell, an American cameraman/producer from Anchorage who is the U.S. executive director of Union Chernobyl. He had shot at Chernobyl, capturing powerful footage of the entire area, including the Pripjat ghost town (where eerily, music plays continuously), entire school classes of young children with leukemia, and several survivors with harrowing tales. He offered his footage for free, and together with the founder of Union Chernobyl, who supervised the disaster clean-up for six months, he agreed to set up several interviews with Chernobyl survivors at the Chernobyl Museum in Moscow upon my return from Alma-Ata in five days.



No Nukes! Citizens march against nuclear testing at the Polygon nuclear weapons test site in Kazakhstan in the Soviet Union. Photo: Yuri Kuidin

The 300 non-Soviet participants of the Citizens' Congress came from 24 countries. The 150 Americans represented most of the major peace and environmental groups - Greenpeace, National Mobilization for Survival, Natural Resources Defense Council, American Peace Test, SANE Freeze, Downwinders, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Lawyers' Alliance for Nuclear Arms Control, Western States Legal Foundation, and several dozen more. They were a fascinating, committed yet fun-loving group of people. After socializing and touring with a few of them in Moscow, it was a challenge to shift into production mode for Alma-Ata where I would spend four 14-hour days filming.

Flying on Aeroflot to the southernmost edge of Kazakhstan near the China border, we arrived in Alma-Ata to a heart-warming greeting from the local citizens at the airport. Women in gorgeous gowns sang and offered smiles and flowers. A friend theorized that this area, surrounded on three sides by magnificent, snow-capped mountains, served as the model for "Shangri-La" in *Lost Horizon*. The hospitality continued with a lavish banquet and extravagant Kazakh entertainment, including more dancers. This celebration was in striking contrast to unsmiling Moscow—and to the terrible health problems which gave rise to the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement and to this Citizens' Congress.

An interpreter named Tala was assigned to me, and could not have been more enthusiastic. Punctuality, however, was not his strong suit. The first morning of the congress, Tala was nowhere to be seen 20 minutes after our meeting time. I had to negotiate for a cab in sign language to take my gear to the congress hall. Once there, I could not locate the room I had been promised for conducting interviews, stowing cases, and screening *Free Zone*. Nor could I communicate about the audio feed, the position of the speakers, the translation receivers, or the fact that my Soviet AC plug did not quite fit. Feeling abandoned, I struggled to regain the composure which characterizes a seasoned professional under pressure. A friendly Kazakh cameraman, responded

to my earnest sign language, agreed to share his AC strip. Tala appeared, unfazed, just as the program was beginning.

The Kazakh TV crew had lit the hall generously for their four studio cameras. Five other TV crews jockeyed for position. I staked out a good central tripod position and ran the mic cable up to the podium. The opening plenary included NSM founder Suleimenov, IPPNEW president Dr. Bernard Lown, the President of Kazakhstan, and several "downwinders" from the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Suleimenov described the launch of the NSM in response to thousands of letters and personal accounts of illness, birth defects and death coming from the nuclear test site: "It was a revelation for me to learn that underground tests, through ventings, can be dangerous to people's health ... and that contamination has occurred regularly for 27 years. People are dying of radiation ... We cannot be silent."

Calling for a bilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, he angrily attacked the military-industrial complexes in both the Soviet Union and the U.S. for continuing the nuclear arms race. In the 16 months since the rise of the NSM, Suleimenov has ridden a wave of Kazakh anti-nuclear sentiment to win a seat on the Congress of People's Deputies and on the Supreme Soviet, where he is a formidable presence who reportedly has the ear of Gorbachev. Pressure from Suleimenov and the movement he leads had already profoundly impacted Soviet nuclear testing: 11 of 18 scheduled Soviet tests in 1989 were cancelled and, remarkably, the Soviet government has agreed to stop testing entirely near Semipalatinsk by 1993. Personal testimony from the podium was a compelling argument for such a moratorium, and several downwinders gravitated toward my camera to tell their stories.

When the Soviet Union tested its first hydrogen bomb in 1953, the town of Karaul was evacuated, but 40 people were told to remain behind. Talgat Slyambekov was one of them and he was never told why: "For 40 years, the military-industrial complex has waged undeclared nuclear war against us. I call this

genocide. They tried to eliminate us. No one told us there was any danger. We've been silent too long." Slyambekov had devoted most of his time for the last two years to shutting down the test site: "They never asked for our permission to put the test site here. They knew it was dangerous even back then. But we were afraid to talk about it openly. It was a real secret. Now there is hope for stopping this threat."

Madina Zhakupova, a gentle, articulate 22-year-old student from Semipalatinsk, described the death of her 30-year old aunt by leukemia. Two of her girlfriends have given birth to children with horrible deformities. She admitted that she, like many of her friends, is afraid to have children, especially with a man from Semipalatinsk. Maira Shangelove, professor of medicine at Semipalatinsk Medical School, lost several young family members to cancer. She said that her own data on cancer, leukemia and birth defects downwind from the test site indicate rates significantly higher than the rest of Kaakhstan, but that official oncology and health data have been kept secret. A central demand of the NSM is an end

to the secrecy surrounding Soviet radiation victims. This coverup of health effects from radiation is one of a score of commonalities between Soviet and U.S. nuclear testing history: secrecy, deceit, betrayal of trust, a trail of victims, and a lack of accountability.

The second and third days of the Congress included more passionate and heartbreaking testimony delivered in plenaries, interviews, and in workshops on the medical and environmental effects of nuclear weapons testing and production. After two days of vigorous pursuit, I finally got an interview with Suleimenov, who was in major demand from the media corps. The dynamic founder of the NSM spoke eloquently—with Kairat Umarov interpreting—on the history of the movement, the nearly one million letters of solidarity they have received since February 1989, their success in influencing the Soviet government to end testing at Semipalatinsk, and the power of the military-industrial complex in both our countries. Among the strengths of the NSM, he emphasized, are its international links with anti-nuclear groups in dozens of countries, a fact made evident by the Citizens' Congress.

The high point of the congress' second morning was the world premiere of a masterful documentary, *Polygon*, or *Test-Site*. A Soviet film impossible to imagine before *glasnost*, the 35mm answer print had just come from the lab and was translated in our headsets. The film contained amazing, newly declassified footage of Soviet nuclear tests, with horses and goats receiving third degree burns from the blasts. It included the last interview with Andrei Sakharov, in which he predicted six million cancer deaths from atmospheric nuclear testing, as well as statements from other "fathers" of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, and poignant interviews with victims of the testing. *Polygon* was in every way comparable to the anti-nuclear classic *Dark Circle*, by Chris Beaver, Judy

Irving and Ruth Landy. The film left many people in tears and received a standing ovation. I told the producers I was honored to be at the premiere, and would be pleased to assist in its American distribution.

Still reeling from the impact of *Polygon*, I was invited to appear on a talkshow on Kazakh Television that evening to speak about *Free Zone*, the congress, and global nuclear issues. The TV station management had seen *Free Zone* and when I presented them with a Russian script and a SECAM dub, they decided to air it. It was this Kazakh TV station in Alma-Ata which had documented the historic meeting which launched the NSM

and provided the footage we used in *Free Zone*. The show's host asked about the role of TV and film in catalyzing social change, and whether or not I felt my documentaries had made a difference. I thought about *Free Zone* and my earlier *A Question of Power* having been broadcast on over 100 PBS stations, and being widely used by anti-nuclear activists in the U.S. Mostly, however, I thought about *Free Zone* being

broadcast in Russian, helping to forge the links in a growing world-wide anti-nuclear movement rising from the grass-roots. I was proud to answer in the affirmative.

The congress ended with the mass signing of the Appeal to Leaders of Nuclear Testing Nations to halt nuclear tests—including a special appeal to President Bush—followed by a massive, spirited march from the Public Political Center to the Sports Stadium for an antinuclear rally. There, 40,000 supporters of this citizens' movement heard folk music and more angry, eloquent, determined speeches from doctors, activists and radiation survivors. My photographer friend, Jim Lerager, had scouted the route of the march and found a great perch for a high angle shot on a couple of poles with ladders. We ran, shot, ran some more as our cab, with our interpreter, got blocked by the flood of people converging from three directions. The marchers carried banners and placards, and entered the stadium Olympic-style, with a complete trip around the track to wild cheering and chanting, "Polygon! Shut it down!"

After a few more interviews with downwinders, and a miner who had secretly photographed contaminated lakes and land on the test site, I joined the farewell party in the Hotel Kazakhstan. Russian vodka and cognac flowed with toasts, laughter and great warmth. I met more Soviet filmmakers and TV producers who were covering the NSM story. We talked of footage trades, a previously unknown but intriguing idea for them. I found it difficult to say good-bye to the generous, spirited people of Alma-Ata.

The next morning, the non-Soviet congress delegations flew 300 miles to Semipalatinsk where another anti-testing rally took place before we boarded buses for the three-hour trip to Karaul. In this remote village near the Soviet nuclear test site,



Photo: James Lerager

Writer/poet Olzhas Suleimenov galvanized a movement.

the hardship of life is etched in the face of every resident. The dilapidated shacks and mostly unpaved roads are surrounded by the rolling plains known as the steppe.

The anti-testing rally, attended by some 10,000 people, took place on the side of a volcanic mountain where large anti-nuclear rallies had previously taken place. Fifty thousand were there last Hiroshima Day, August 6, and photos appeared on the front page of *Izvestia*. There is a large pile of rocks remaining from the oft-repeated ancient Kazakh custom of throwing rocks at evil--in this case, the Polygon test site. The rally included frequent chanting, and the most impassioned testimony yet. I interviewed a group of mothers of deformed children, along with the children themselves. One of them was a badly deformed dwarf; others



When Karipbek Kuyokov's parents were young, they would go into the hills and watch the nuclear mushroom clouds float above the steppe. Their first two children died in infancy. Karipbek was born without arms in 1968. Photo: James Lerager.

were afflicted with Down's Syndrome and other birth defects. These people are convinced their health problems are the result of radiation from the test site. Pain and hardship were clearly written on their unforgettable faces.

After unveiling a monument to the victims of Hiroshima, and to all of those sacrificed to the nuclear arms race, the rally moved to a nearby stage and exhibition area for extravagant entertainment and a feast in several dozen yurts. Sheep heads were presented to the eldest male in each yurt (a vegetarian friend was offered the ears), the vodka glasses were kept full, and the toasts were hopeful.

On the bus back to the hotel, we met Valentine Shelikhov, physician from Semipalatinsk who had witnessed the mushroom clouds from above-ground nuclear tests. He described how every test feels like a major earthquake, and how many of his patients were sickened from radiation. He voiced the widespread mistrust of the Soviet government in regard to safeguarding public health and safety. Jim Lerager and I wanted to stay an extra day to shoot, but we could not find an available flight back to Moscow in less than four days. Karaul had been the dramatic high point of the entire trip, and had provided the most compelling video. I agreed to license and trade footage with a Salt Lake City TV station, which had made special arrangements with Kazakh TV to stay two extra days.

After five days of flawless performance, the Sony Hi-8 camcorder suffered a cassette jam on the morning of our return to Moscow. This was unfortunate because our entire delegation was going to the U.S. Embassy to demonstrate our outrage at the news

that the U.S. Government had conducted a nuclear weapons test on the eve of the Bush-Gorbachev Summit.

With all the feeling engendered by our recent experiences, we sang *We Shall Overcome* and *We Shall Not Be Moved*. Four U.S. TV networks were there along with Soviet TV, but the summit, and Boris Yeltsin's election as Russian President, preempted coverage of our protest in the U.S.

The next day, I went for an appointment with a producer friend at Gosteleradio (Soviet TV), who told me with consternation that our tour of the TV studio could not happen because all of his superiors were in emergency meetings with Yeltsin's people, discussing the elimination of Communist Party control over Soviet TV. My friend did agree to use several segments of *Free Zone* in his programs on the NSM and the global nuclear controversy.

With a broken camcorder, I called the American videographer Tom McDowell, who agreed to provide his 3/4" video gear for our interviews with Chernobyl survivors. Of the five we interviewed, two had especially memorable stories. Vladimir Obuleg was working at the nuclear plant when the unit 4 reactor melted down and exploded, and he vividly described the fear, panic and chaos during and after the accident. Elvira Sitnikova is the widow of the hero of the Chernobyl disaster, the nuclear engineer who ran over three kilometers after the meltdown had begun, and shut down the other three reactors, which otherwise would have exploded as well. He received a lethal dose of radiation, dying 32 days later. Amazingly, his wife is still in favor of nuclear power, but she does not trust her government to tell the truth about the contamination and health effects of the disaster. The latest Soviet government estimate has four million people living on dangerously contaminated land. Food grown there is sent all over the country.

Throughout the entire trip, my sympathy had grown for these survivors of nuclear nightmares, along with my anger and revulsion at the governments of all nuclear powers which have consistently lied to their people. The Soviet stories were strikingly similar to the stories of the people in St. George, Utah; Fernald, Ohio; Hanford, Washington; and the Marshall Islands. Patriotic citizens - downwinders who believed in their government - were enduring the same radioactive hell in the name of national security. The nuclear testing programs of all the nuclear powers were shrouded in secrecy, exploited citizen patriotism, sacrificed human guinea pigs, and betrayed citizen trust.

At the International Citizens' Congress in Alma-Ata, in Semipalatinsk and in Karaul, downwinders from Japan, the U.S., the Pacific, and the Soviet Union came together for the first time. They had a great deal to tell each other: about mushroom clouds and radioactive fallout; about government deception; about a long list of cancer and leukemia; about living as victims of nuclear weapons. The new and robust citizens' movement in Kazakhstan had given the world's downwinders, and those of us who had met them, renewed hope that 45 years of nuclear madness can soon be ended. May my documentary play a part.

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