Recollections With Leading World Figures
By Daisaku Ikeda
Dr. Rem Khokhlov—Former Rector of Moscow State University

AS I walked down the steps leading from the plane, a smile as bright as spring sunlight greeted me. Though this was our first meeting, I felt a strange sense of familiarity and rapport.

The meeting I describe took place more than twenty years ago, in September 1974. Dr. Rem Khokhlov, then rector of Moscow State University, was at the head of the group who had come to welcome me at the airport on my first visit to the Soviet Union.

"President Ikeda, please have a leisurely look around our nation," said Rector Khokhlov, in the bus on the way to the airport terminal building. It was here that our dialogue began.

Dr. Khokhlov, a respected nuclear physicist, was 48 at the time, two years older than I was. His handsome, sharply defined features revealed a keen intelligence. A genial smile always lit his face. It was a smile that came from the very depths of his being, where a warm, empathetic current of love for others flowed. He displayed a lively interest in people. He was full of energy and vitality, always in pursuit of something finer, something higher.

On that first trip to the Soviet Union, I vowed in my heart to meet and forge ties of friendship with as many people as possible, as one human being to another, even if critics called my efforts naive.

Soviet–Japan relations in those days were as cold as the frozen winter earth. The Soviet Union's relationships with the United States and China were also frosty, and mutual mistrust and suspicion had led to a seemingly inextricable arms race.

The average Japanese person had no real grasp of what the people of the Soviet Union were like, only a vague picture of them as somehow frightening and inhospitable. A variety of historical factors had predisposed the Japanese toward holding such an image. But harping on the past did not serve the best interests of either nation. Nothing could be more dangerous than allowing mutual distrust to perpetuate a relationship of meaningless antagonism–and nothing could be crueler for the future generations of both nations.

That is why I declared to Dr. Khokhlov: "I have come for those of future generations."

Differences do indeed exist between nations, peoples, social systems and ideologies. But I have always believed that we should recognize those differences and, precisely because of them, work harder to get to know and understand each other better as human beings.

I decided to make a start, doing whatever it was in my power and capacity to do. I would light lamps of friendship, no matter how small, that would provide comfort and reassurance, just as lights burning in one or two windows of a house can warm the heart of a caller on a dark, icy-cold winter night. Confident that even the seemingly endless Siberian winter eventually turns into spring, I would plant seeds— if only a few—for the flowers of a new season of hope. I

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mentioned this determination to Dr. Khokhlov.

I was not a politician, nor was I undertaking this trip on anyone else's behest or agenda. Nevertheless, when I announced my decision to visit the communist country, I was harshly criticized in Japan. "Why are you going to the Soviet Union now?" the media demanded to know. "Why is a religious leader visiting an atheist nation?" "Are you going to endorse communism?" Such were the attacks I endured.

Three months earlier, I had also made my first visit to the People's Republic of China. My Chinese friends, too, criticized me for even contemplating a trip to the Soviet Union. The standoff between the Soviet Union and China that had begun in the '60s had become fierce mutual antagonism by the early '70s. Those who wished to pursue friendly relations with China could not be friends with the Soviet Union, and those who tried to forge closer relations with the Soviet Union would find the doors to China barred. That was largely the mood that existed at the time of my first visits to both countries.

I had my own thoughts and beliefs on this subject, however. No matter how strident the opposition, someone had to take the first step to open a pathway to peace.

It was with that intention that I went to the Soviet Union, where the very first person I should have the good fortune to meet was Dr. Khokhlov. My meeting with him—covered in the Japanese media and a number of articles I later wrote on my visit—changed many Japanese people's opinion of the Soviet Union. They learned that people of fine character most certainly did exist in that country, contradicting the stereotype image they had formerly cherished; they discovered that behind the "Iron Curtain" were living, breathing human beings who loved peace as much as they did.

Standing atop the observation tower of Moscow State University and looking out across the city, Dr. Khokhlov and I discussed the subject of educational exchange as a means for fostering peace. "Soka University is like a young 'grandchild' compared to your venerable university," I told him, "but it is my dream that by the twenty-first century, our school will become as respected as your fine institution and make valuable contributions to the world." Dr. Khokhlov held my gaze and assured me: "A university's greatness has nothing to do with its size. Soka University has a wonderful founding spirit that upholds global human values. That is why we of Moscow State University are committed to developing a meaningful mutual relationship with your school."

When I was ushered into the rector's office, I saw prominently displayed on one wall a huge tapestry depicting the grand vista of the thirty-two-story main building of Moscow State University. "This," revealed Rector Khokhlov, "was a gift from Beijing University on the occasion of our bicentennial." Here, at least, I thought, is a world without "walls." Here was proof that friendship in the realm of education could survive despite strained relations between nations in the political realm. This encouraged me tremendously.

We promised to meet again, and the occasion arrived sooner than I expected. Just six short weeks after my return, Dr. Khokhlov and his wife, Elena, a woman of simple refinement and culture, came to Japan [in November 1974]. During their stay

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they visited Soka University as well as the Soka junior and senior high schools.

During their visit to the latter, a smiling Dr. Khokhlov stopped to talk with students who had gathered to welcome him at the entrance, saying: "You are the treasures of Japan. You are a gathering of fine young people of intellect. The world is eagerly awaiting your contributions." Everyone could feel his sincere desire to respond to the heart-given welcome he had received by offering warm encouragement in return. Many people would have simply waved and hurried inside the school. But people of character create an unforgettable impression wherever they go.

The following year, in May 1975, I made my second trip to the Soviet Union. White apple blossoms adorned the campus of Moscow State University, where I was awarded an honorary doctorate. After my commemorative lecture on that occasion, titled "A New Path for the Cultural Exchange Between East and West," Rector Khokhlov said to me: "Yes, it is just as you have said. Exactly. Let us open a spiritual Silk Road." His words rang with all the more profound determination given the closed nature of Soviet society at that time.

When Dr. Khokhlov visited Japan again two years later, in April 1977, I learned that his mother was ill. He was looking for a particular medicine in Japan, but he couldn't locate it. We made various inquiries on his behalf, and finally tracked the medicine down in a country overseas and had it forwarded to him. The next month, May, I received a letter of thanks from the rector. "I hope we can meet again in Moscow," he wrote. However, in August, less than three months later, I received the news of his sudden death.

Dr. Khokhlov died as the result of a mountain-climbing expedition. According to the report of one of my close friends from my first visit to the Soviet Union, Dr. Vladimir Tropin, pro-rector for International Affairs of Moscow State University, Dr. Khokhlov was making his third attempt to scale the summit of the country's highest mountain--the 24,591-foot-high Communism Peak. He made it up to 16,405 feet and was preparing to make an ascent of the summit when he suffered a sudden attack of chills, the result of insufficient acclimatization to the bitter weather conditions at such high altitude. His feet began to freeze and grow numb.

Dr. Khokhlov was not the type of person to give up easily his goal of reaching the top, and it was only with great reluctance that he finally decided to descend. Yet, in spite of the fact that he was so ill, he allowed the younger members of the team to go first. That delay in his own descent may have contributed to the rector's death, admits Dr. Tropin. Dr. Khokhlov was flown to a hospital in Moscow. But it was too late. He died at the young age of 51.

In a collection of memorial tributes published by his friends, one person writes: "He met his death challenging the highest peak, just as he lived his life." These words attest to the high esteem and respect in which others held him. Dr. Khokhlov was forever looking onward and upward, and acting based on that vision. His warm smile was born of the rigorous self-discipline and high standards he always demanded of himself.

The world has changed greatly since Dr. Khokhlov's death, but my friendship with his family has remained constant. Three years ago, in Mie Prefecture, Japan,

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I had another opportunity to meet with his son, Dr. Aleksei Khokhlov, a professor of physics at Moscow State University. It was our third meeting since I visited Rector Khokhlov's grave and his family home in May 1981.

At our meeting, Professor Khokhlov said:

> I am very proud of the fact that a new flow of exchange between our two countries was set in motion through the relationship between my father and you, President Ikeda…. Today, it is easy to talk about friendly relations with other nations, but I know how difficult it was at the time of your first visit—amid public skepticism and lack of understanding—to advocate that people of different nations could be friends, and to act on that belief.

Gazing at the younger Dr. Khokhlov, I couldn't help but think how proud his father would be of him. The torch had been passed from father to son.

The exchange program signed between Moscow State University and Soka University two decades ago has produced and will continue to produce many talented young people. "Let's do it, for future generations!"—this was the shared determination of Rector Khokhlov and myself all those years ago. Today's young generation is demonstrating just how right we were to take that first step toward spring, toward a season of hope—a step of faith in our shared humanity and trust in the invisible ties of the heart. ❑

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