

SVET

RUSSIAN MEDIA GROUP



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СВЕТ В ЧИКАГО

(Light in Chicago)

Skokie-based newspaper is Russian in language and American in spirit

By Paul Galloway

Alex Etman removes one of the hand-written letters that he and his wife, Emily, have tacked to the wall of the small basement office. All are written in the Cyrillic alphabet of the Russian language.

He translates: "My family are immigrants from [the former Soviet republic of] Moldavia. Your paper was the first newspaper we read when we came. Which we are happy to like very much. Even though we have a hard economic situation, we try to save money for a subscription and we tell about your newspaper to all our friends and relatives. . . ."

He pulls another from the wall: "This is from my heart. When I came here I was very lonely. Your newspaper has made me feel not so lonely. . . ."

Alex stops reading and looks at his visitor. "You can see the need for our paper," he says.

The paper is Cbet, the Chicago area's only Russian-language newspaper. In the English alphabet, Cbet is written as Svet (pronounced sub-VET). It means "light."

The tabloid made its debut as a free monthly in January 1992; 3,000 copies were printed. By its third month, it turned a profit. Last January it became a weekly that generally runs from 24 to 28 pages and sells for 75 cents.

Its founders, Alex, 33, and Emily, 28, who came to the U.S. from Latvia in 1990, say Cbet now has a circulation of 30,000, third-highest among Russian-language newspapers in the United States.

Several thousand issues are also sold in Europe, they say, most in what was formerly the Soviet Union, and in Israel.

Its youth, singularity and all the facts that can be translated into numbers and graphs make the paper notable and newsworthy and of interest to businesses that cater to the Russian-language community in the Chicago area.

The Etmans estimate that community at between 50,000 and 60,000; it's believed that a large portion, if not a majority, are Jewish. The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago says that 19,000 Soviet Jews have come to this area since the 1970s.

For many people who don't speak Russian, probably the most intriguing thing about Cbet is how it came to be published.

The answer is partly a love story, partly another installment in the quest for the American dream by immigrants, and partly a chapter of contemporary history as seen through the effects of geopolitical tectonics on individual lives.

The roots of Cbet are romantic, and their origin is Riga, a cosmopolitan city of 900,000 and the capital of Latvia, a part of the Soviet Union until its independence in 1991.

The tale begins on the evening of June 1,



After a year and a half, Emily and Alex Etman have seen the circulation of Cbet, the Chicago area's only Russian-language newspaper, grow to 30,000.

1983, when a dark-haired, 18-year-old premed student named Emily Shatsky got up her nerve to visit Allegro, a bar that was a hangout for the local male intelligentsia: artists, writers, actors, jazz musicians. In other words, the sort of fellows who supported democratic ideals and opposed the communist regime and liked to talk about books and ideas and maybe put on a few intellectual airs now and then.

Emily was attracted to such types and considered herself among their female counterparts.

But to get the guys' attention she was relying

on more than her good looks and the traditional conversational gambits to demonstrate her intelligence.

She had taught herself to play *nardy*, a board game we know as backgammon.

"No women played this game," Emily Etman says in recounting that fateful day 10 years ago. "And I beat nine men in a row. Finally someone said, 'Get the champion.'"

You can guess who the joint's top *nardy*

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