

## **Secretary General's report to the European Alliance of YMCAs General Assembly, Suzdal, Russia, May 20, 2004**

“Spasibo bolsjoie! Thank you very much!”

Do you sometimes have the feeling that the world could have been more grateful to you?

I once had the opposite feeling; I really could not understand why people were so hilarious and cheerful after one of my rather short speeches.

This story includes so many elements of my love for our Russian hosting movement. The Field Group for Russia in itself is an experience. It is a very strong group with humour and seriousness and quite a strong family feeling within the group.

So, Field Group Russia on tour, we were on our way over the Norwegian Taiga towards the Russian boarder on the Kola Peninsula when we discovered that we simply had lost one of our members, our dear friend Cornel Burgtorf. So we had to go back to base and find our lost friend and then start all over again.

The minibus takes us to Murmansk, Kirovsk, Apatiti. The land of the midnight sun and as always in huge Russia – wild nature without any trace of human presence. You really feel small and humble in the middle of this impressive, powerful nature. Then, in a split of a second, the road makes a bend and Nikkel is straight in front of us. Terrible, the poisonous smoke from the Nikkel plant has totally destroyed the forest around the city, it looks like after a nuclear attack. The double face of Russia. The beauty and the beast. The wealthy rich nature with resources in abundance. At the same time huge challenges to overcome the mistakes of the past.

I cannot help being totally fascinated by this country, it really stretches your imagination in all possible directions. Everything is deeper, wider, higher than anywhere else. On our way to Murmansk we pass one war-memorial after the other. Few people know, but up north there, probably the biggest battle of the whole Second World War was fought. People said the river was red in those days, and the Taiga was made into a huge cemetery. The pain of the Russian history goes so deep. But the warmth of the people is friendlier than anything I have met. And a summer night on the river Volga, distant sounds of balalaika, the white riverboat heading for the sunset and a group of friends around a bottle of champagne and black caviar. Friendship par excellence. And Volga, mystical, beautiful, powerful. The soul of Russia.

Back to Murmansk and the YMCA. I have been working with Russian YMCA for many years now, and this is the second fascination of my Russian experience. I have followed it through crisis and problems, but also through growth and the fabulous experience of the Russian Programme Festivals and I have seen new leadership growing and developing. Today, under leadership of Nikolaj Kurotchkin and Marina Astreina we see a Russian YMCA in all the main regions of this country and we see a YMCA on its way towards independence and sustainability with quite a good capacity of fundraising for its own needs. Still a long way to go, but I am really proud of Russian YMCA today. And may I add, also proudly, that our EAY staff, Misha Guskov has been an important supporter of Russian YMCA from its very beginning.

Again we saw the young people of Russian YMCA in Murmansk, Apatiti and Kirovsk. A variety of programmes and activities and smiling faces and bright eyes all around.

Having shared with you my love and fascination both for this country and for its YMCA, I am slowly coming to the punch line of my story, as promised. But first I would like all of us to stand up and give our Russian hosts a good hand and thereby say Spasibo bolsjoie, Thank you for being our YMCA hosts in such a splendid way!

In Apatiti there was graduation day at the local school. The whole Field Group was taken to the school and I was invited to say a few words to the young generation. I told them how I was working at the Norwegian side of the boarder, more than 30 years ago, and how I was looking across the boarder and wondering how people lived their lives on the other side. Now I was so happy to be here, with them, and even finding a YMCA in their city. The translator worked hard, and I could feel the atmosphere becoming very positive and excited. So I congratulated them and said goodbye. I got standing ovations; both kids and their parents were shouting and congratulating me, as if I had done something special.

I did not understand anything, until my Russian friends explained that the translation had not been quite accurate. According to the creative translation, this fine foreigner from Norway had been standing at the boarder some 6 years ago, and then decided to take his rowing boat and go to Russia, and now he had spent 6 years rowing and finally reached Apatiti.

Let me take you through some highlights from this year, some of the very good reasons for saying thank you!

When we met in France in 1999 the Kosovo-crisis was a terrible pain for all of us. We discussed what we could do. The conclusion was that emergency relief-work was not our field of expertise. We did not join the more than 400 NGOs operating in Kosovo at that time. I do not know how many NGOs are left in Kosovo now, but now the YMCA is blooming in Kosovo. This is our time and this is our field of expertise, and as I always tell our new friends, we may be slow in coming, but when we come, we always come to stay. Long term commitment to Begleitung, to assist in developing viable YMCAs, that is our field of expertise.

Lake Ohrid, two hours drive from Skopje, was the venue for the fourth big EAY Balkan-event. 80 participants from Balkan and a group of dedicated colleagues from local YMCAs in USA turned up at the Lake Ohrid. We worked hard, and I was noticing a new and strong energy amongst our YMCA-leaders. Of course the delegation from Kosovo impressed us and charmed us, and we heard about more than 2000 YMCA participants and a rich and varied YMCA programme, focused on reconciliation and leadership development. All of this has been developed within a few months under very capable local leadership. But there was also a very young and strong delegation from Albania, sharing with us their hopes for the future and showing what potential there is in this new YMCA of Albania. ACT Rumania reported new and positive developments with their Camp site and ideas how to resolve the court trial about the same Camp. Bulgaria came with a new vision for their national structure and concrete action steps were planned to implement this vision. Greece plays a very constructive role in this fellowship of Balkan YMCAs, especially with their excellent experience from YMCA Thessalonica. Our hosts from YMCA Macedonia agreed on a unification of their three YMCAs into one national structure and demonstrated a good capacity to organise and facilitate this rather big event. Field and Partner Groups are contributing to this development, and a big Swiss grant channelled to us through Horyzon as well as a big grant from Y-Care

help to finance our work in this high priority area. Nick Nightingale, former Secretary General of WAY, has been appointed as Field Group leader for Albania, but we need countries to participate in this group and we have started the work to establish a new FG for Kosovo. And be sure – next year I will report YMCA activities in other countries on Balkan, they are on their way, and they will face us with new challenges.

The Global Operating Plan started last summer in Belarus, Ukraine and here in Russia. With funds from Switzerland, USA and Y-Care the plan is starting in Albania and Kosovo just now. We are still searching for funds for Georgia, number 6 of the so called GOP-YMCAs.

A fresh report shows fantastic results in the three NIS- countries, increased membership, a lot of new and dedicated leaders and increased capacity for fund raising and networking within their own societies. A number of new YMCA employees have been added in all three countries, adding expertise and work capacity in the YMCA Campaign against HIV-Aids. The YMCAs have already experienced increased recognition and esteem for what people see as a very relevant approach to the strongest threat against the young generations. YMCA Belarus has for instance been given carte blanche from the government to visit all schools around the country to work with the pupils. Just a few years ago we had serious problems to register the YMCA in that country. Amazing growth and progress. When they are able to fundraise more than € 50 000 in their own country, we have come much closer to real self sustainability of the YMCA. In the autumn we had a big regional meeting in Ukraine and I was very satisfied with the quality and the outcome of that strategic meeting in Yalta. Delegations from all three countries went to Durban for a global YMCA conference in February devoted to the fight against HIV-Aids.

After one year of implementation of GOP I can report to you that this plan works and that it is worth while joining this experience. There are many ways to measure success. We are building YMCAs trough these methods, we plan for increased sustainability of those YMCAs and the report shows us the result. What the report does not show, is pictures of the young people who will not die from this terrible disease, because they got relevant information from young leaders of the YMCA in their own schools.

A warm thank you goes to our friends in the YMCA of the USA for funding all GOP-activities in the NIS area and part of the Balkan for half of 2003 and for all of 2004.

England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales have responded very positively to an initiative from my side to co ordinate our skills and knowledge and expertise in fundraising for GOP, and together with Y-Care we will meet in England next month to discuss how we can proceed and help giving strength to the GOP, not only in Europe, but also globally.

In this connection I will give you some facts which hopefully will both inspire and encourage all of us. In this overview you will see the totality of the EAY fundraising for leadership training and YMCA development during 2003.

One important element of the GOP is that it has become more meaningful to work together globally. We need to know one another to be able to work effectively together on implementing the Plan. Therefore last year took me to Asia Alliance as well as to USA , and next month I will visit Africa Alliance and Canada. In November last year we celebrated the 100 years anniversary of Brazil YMCA and I participated in the firs meeting of the newly elected Executive Committee of LACA – Latin American and Caribbean Alliance of YMCAs.

A long and difficult process has led to the creation of a new Area organisation in that part of the world, and I told the LACA leaders that EAY will be very committed to work together with our sister organisation and assist them, if we can, in a difficult and vulnerable situation.

We have many important visitors from around the world this time, headed by the President of WAY, Cesar Molebatsi, and we find it deeply meaningful to share our thoughts and European perspectives with all of you as well as listen to your advices and perspectives from outside our area. I hope you all feel very included in our fellowship here!

Allow me please to highlight one of you - I am especially proud to introduce to you my very good friend and colleague, the new Secretary General of LACA – Oscar Escalados.

It is important for me to introduce the staff of the Alliance at least once a year, this is the only time they meet their employer, they all work for you!

Michal Szymanczak – Dep. Secr. Gen. We pretty much run the show together and he is responsible for Movement Development and Leadership Development and we play the Blue Music together.

Eva Tschornova – you all know her diplomatic voice and capable leadership of the EAY office.

Martina Hudcovska – the EAY potato, we can use her almost everywhere, Finance Manager, She represents us in European structures, works with Programme and Ten Sing and leadership Development.

Misha Guskov – Development Secretary for Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and World Champion in organising Caviar-parties on Volga.

Vardan Hambarzumyan – Development Secretary for Caucasus and Fund Raising and Project Writing, great historian and the perfect guide to that interesting part of the world.

Adam Rychlik – Development Secretary for Balkan, and also historian, and a happy owner of a new car!

Radek Hlavsa – also a bit of a potato in EAY: Book keeper and information, website and office companion to Eva.

And last but not least – leader of the most exciting project in the history of EAY, Jana Mackova – From Litomysl and Manager for the Training Centre and also student of Theology.

A great crew, wonderful people to work with and they deserve a good hand. Thank you!

Since I have too many items to report this year, I will cover the Training Centre next year. I will only report to you that the reconstruction work is continuing and that what I see growing there will exceed any expectation that you may have. It becomes simply beautiful, and now we have our own EAY-chapel inside the building!

## “YMCA EUROPE 2003”

What can we say about the festival? There are more than 7000 versions of the festival in Prague. More than 7000 heads full of colours and music and dust and smiles and vision for the future.

I have had some dark moments and a few sleepless nights over the festival, both before and after. I have tried to convince myself that life would be easier without such “blue” ideas. If we did not do the festival, nobody would have punished us. There were so many huge challenges. There was so much responsibility. Still I observe with great interest that never had I any doubts whatsoever that all of this was worth doing. And during the evaluation the whole Steering Committee with one voice said that it is worth doing again!

With an event which took place in Prague and had its registration office in London and its bank in Oslo, it was not an easy task to wind it up afterwards, and it has taken time until the final result was clear. An unbelievable amount of grey music has been needed. One of those grey days I was searching for some notes in my papers, and found a Newspaper with photos of young people under the hot sun in Prague. A sixteen years old girl was quoted with big letters all over the newspaper: “FOR ME THE FESTIVAL IS SHINING!” In a split of a second I was back in Prague and for a long while it was all Blue Music. It was like God stretched his arm my way and lifted me for a while out of the grey and reminded me what the Prague Festival was – a splendid gift to all of us from the Lord above. A shining gift.

Let me just comment a few key elements of this project. There will be time later on for you to react and share your opinions.

Did we reach our goals?

The first goal was about INTEGRATION. Should we succeed, we had to see real evidence of both geographic as well as programmatic integration. We made a mistake with Central Europe. We thought lack of travel would make it possible for them to pay full price. It was too late when we realized that this was not right. But from Eastern Europe people came in big numbers and the programme was strongly influenced from the new YMCAs. Integration took place. Nobody present in Prague could seriously doubt that. It could have been more and better, but it happened.

The second goal was about MANIFESTATION. We wanted to experience together that we are big, that we are diverse and rich, that we are young and that we are Christian.

The festival was big enough, diverse and rich enough and definitely young enough. Was it Christian enough? I will comment on that at the end of my report.

The third goal was about ANTICIPATIONS (future scenarios). We wanted to create resources for future development of YMCA in Europe. I think it is fair to say that we succeeded enormously in developing energy, vision, faith, skills and leadership for the future. We did not succeed in generating financial funds for the future. We were so close, but we did not reach it. May 12, 2003 is a day I will never forget. All expenses were within budget, and that day we got information that we had a real deficit . A key to this problem is that almost all the equipment for the festival was ordered so late, that the prices became unnecessary high. For four months the steering group had not been told about these delays and the very substantial extra cost that these delays had caused. 12<sup>th</sup> of May we reduced dramatically all

our expected expenses and cut everything to the bones. When the festival opened that beautiful August evening last year, we were in control of all the cost and new what we had spent. Only the following elements were forced upon us and created a deficit: Fewer volunteers than expected turned up, and we had to pay for construction workers to build the site, for additional security to safeguard expensive equipment, some extra transport plus loads of water due to the very special weather conditions. We did what was humanly possible to make sure that we had no empty beds in the many hostels, but with so many thousands it is impossible to avoid paying for a number of beds not being used. We even have reason to believe that some people were able to come without paying or to stay before and after the event without paying the extra cost.

It all summed up to a real deficit.

The reason for this becoming a real deficit and not just a reduced surplus, is the fact that crucial information was withheld from the Steering Group for 4 months. Without such unfortunate incidents I think it would be fair to say that this third goal will be reached at the next festival. It simply has to be reached, because it is possible.

The EAY Executive Committee was extremely sad to say no to a very generous invitation from Denmark to hold the next festival in Denmark. The Committee decided this because it saw it as the most important priority to secure the highest possible participation from Central and Eastern Europe. The Committee said unanimously that a festival with the ambition of hosting so many people from around Europe, has to be located geographically in the very centre of the continent.

Since the festival was the most important part of EAY work last year, it will also play the most significant role in my report. So now we shall revisit the festival and show the film from the festival for the first time ever. While seeing this film and observing what took place, I ask you to compare what you see with the four stations of our Strategy for 2001 – 2006, INTEGRATION, SOLIDARITY, NETWORKING AND SUSTAINABILITY.

## FILM

Inspired to serve – that was the mission statement of the festival. I have never in my life experienced such an overwhelming number of dedicated and motivated “servants”. It started early in the planning process. It continued after May 12, when everything changed and we had to cut in everybody’s budgets. It was so painful to see how ambitions and hopes for the festival had to be destroyed. Still hundreds of people continued to prepare and plan with very limited resources. As we struggled with too few volunteers to manage the whole event, people put in double shifts and extra energy and continued to work with smiles on their faces. I want to acknowledge this huge involvement of volunteers, and those numbers involve so many familiar staff –faces as well, colleagues from all positions. My good friend and companion through this unique “ordeal”, Chris Roles, refers to this huge commitment as the “costly giving”, almost sacrificial giving. Because love has a cost, and so many people paid that cost without lifting their voices or killing any smiles. Always they came back and asked where they were needed more.

Inspired to serve. It was for me a deep Christian dimension in this volunteer service.

These volunteers had only one wish – to serve young people and the future of YMCA. The crew behind the morning devotions, the crew behind the Cathedral of Silence, the crew

behind the House, the crew behind the 11 ecumenical services, the crew behind the Ten Sing Tent and all the different stages, the City Action and all the hundreds of workshops and other activities, the Birthday-crew and the wonderful programmes at Main Stage, all those crew members and volunteers had one vision – to share their Blue Music with thousands of youth from around the world. And when the sixteen years old girl said that for her the festival is shining, that is for me a confirmation that the festival reached at least the most important goal – to create an atmosphere where teenagers of today get the Christian Gospel communicated to them in a way that put smiles on their faces and joy in their voices. This holistic way of preaching and living and sharing our Christian faith has always been the YMCA-way. It still works – thanks to God!

A very special Spasibo goes to the Norwegian Movement. Not first of all because they have to cover the deficit, but first of all because they reacted so visionary when they got to hear about the festival. I introduced the idea of a big festival during my report to the EAY Assembly in Latvia in 2000. Minutes after I ended my report, the Norwegian Secretary General came up to me and just said: We will do it. What will you do? We will take responsibility for the economy in this project, because we think it is the right thing to do. Go ahead! If there is a deficit, we will pay it. If there is a surplus, EAY will get it!

The next festival will be in Prague August 2007. We ask for 4 or 5 National Movements who are willing to say the same this time: We will share the responsibility and guarantee for 20 or 25 % of a possible deficit - a consortium of vision!

Friday night at the festival, I could hear the wind; I saw the big trees in Letna Park move in the evening wind. I saw thousands of stars on the sky over Prague. In front of me was 7000 candles held by young hands. In that silence we heard the words of the Manifesto, the wind brought the words over the candles and up to the top of the trees, and some of the words even disappeared among the stars. If any night was a starry night, that night was it for me.

MANIFESTO