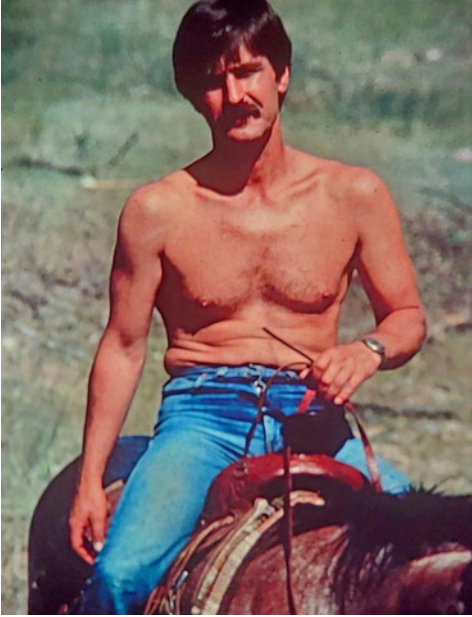


# TRIBUTES TO ALEXANDER KLIMCHOUK

## NSS 31491, RL, HM

BY DEAR FRIENDS OF ALEXANDER



"Klim and I were together for fifty years. We had our caves, our sons, our grandchildren, our dogs and cats, our trees and flowers in the garden. For me Klim is now in the long expedition... Forever.."

- Natalya Yabolkova, his loving wife

During the night of April 11, 2023, the world lost a great caver, scientist and speleological leader. And many of us lost a dear and wonderful friend.

I, like many cavers my age, grew up during the cold war. I suspect most Americans didn't know there was a difference between Russians, Ukrainians or any other state within the Soviet Union. I later would find out that there's a big difference. Alexander Klimchouk would let me know.

In the 70's and 80's we proudly kept Wind Cave, South Dakota moving up on the world's long cave list. However, some Soviet cave, with a name I couldn't pronounce (Optimis . . . something) always claimed it was just a little bit longer. Damn. I would make sarcastic comments like: "Sure! Prove It!"

In June 1988, Dave Springhetti and I

were co-chairs of the NSS Convention at my ranch in Hot Springs, South Dakota. Through some amazing diplomacy and planning, Derek Ford arranged for a group of Soviet cavers to come to Canada and hopefully into the US to attend the convention. The paperwork wasn't done in time for convention, but it was done thirty days later.

In late August, Alexander and five other cavers landed at Rapid City Regional Airport. It didn't take long to realize that Alexander is a person of great integrity. To our surprise, Alexander and all the Soviet cavers quickly embraced US culture. We not only went caving, but also exposed them to all sorts of western activities such as county fairs, square dancing, horseback riding and more. They worked their way into our hearts.

One year later, in August 1989 as President of the NSS, I received a letter from the Soviet Academy of Sciences inviting an American delegation to come to the Soviet Union. This had been arranged by Alexander through the Soviet bureaucracy and was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

For the next couple of weeks, we were treated with spectacular hospitality. There were so many unique adventures and memories from the weeks we spent with Alexander and all the cavers in the USSR, especially in the Ukraine. Alexander touched the hearts of all who've known him.

Through the years there were many more trips. Some of the outcomes included:

- The creation of the National Association of Soviet Speleologists (NASS) using the NSS constitution as a model. It later morphed into the Ukrainian Speleological Association.
- Ukrainian cavers were introduced to single-rope-technique which revolutionized their deep cave expeditions.
- Cave scientist Yuri Dublansky became deeply involved in the controversy of Yucca Mountain, Nevada proposed nuclear waste disposal site.

First and foremost in Alexander's life was his dedication as a cave scientist. He grew to become one of the world's most respected cave scientists. His passion took him from the longest (Optimisticheskaja) and deepest (Kubera) caves and beyond. He literally rewrote the book on hypogene karst development. But more importantly, he was a caring, loving husband, father and a true friend to many, many cavers all over the world. He had a great sense of humor, an infectious personality and a strong desire to bring all cavers together. He said many times that we all share the beauty and splendor of caves.

As Alexander always said, "One World Underground." We toasted that 35 years ago and every New Year's Eve. This year, especially, we need to make an extra toast to Alexander Klimchouk, who brought us all together.

Alexander was a very proud Ukrainian. I had once thought that everyone from the USSR was my enemy and discovered that couldn't be further from the truth. I jokingly told Alexander that something wasn't right, I found my enemy to be a far better man than me. I am humbled by him and so proud to call him my friend. Be at peace my friend. We love you. We miss you. Rest knowing that you have done well.

- John Scheltens, Former NSS President

It is with great sadness that I learned of the death of Alexander ("Sasha") Klimchouk. We became good friends upon first meeting in Slovakia in 1983, when he was already becoming a leading figure in cave and karst science in Ukraine. In the next few years he showed me the great gypsum maze caves. There was also Zolushka ("Cinderella") Cave that had just been drained by an adjoining quarry and thus was a wonderful place to reconstruct very fresh phreatic processes. Sasha and his colleagues have written professional papers on them in Ukrainian and other languages. In 1988, I was able to respond by showing him and two others our principal alpine

cave and karst sites in the Canadian Rockies. Then we all drove to Kentucky to receive a warm welcome from NSS members. With his open personality and professional expertise, I believe that he made many enduring friends in the Society who, like me, will deeply regret his passing.

- Professor Derek Ford,  
McMasters University, Canada

Happy travels, dear friend! We're crushed that you were carried away so unexpectedly with no chance to say good-bye. It's been a terrible year or two for you, both in health and personal security, and we hope that you're entering a new phase of travel where you can explore effortlessly and at peace. We've had our little disagreements about cave origins, but always involving a light touch where we all felt at ease in the tangle between our contrasting ideas. Would it have been better if we agreed on everything, leaving nothing to debate? How boring!

The trips we've taken together, especially in China, gave all three of us a chance to merge with other cultures, which you so effortlessly achieved. We're still angry that some kind of international rule prevented you from joining us on the 2010 round-trip through the former Yugoslavia. But our visit to China would have been hard to beat. For the 2010 to 2020 storm of collaboration on cave origin and geology across the globe we teamed up in the battle against time to discuss hypogenic caves of North America in a three-kilogram volume. That book was a glorious finale for you, encompassing the entire globe in a great international outburst on your favorite topic. Sail on in peace, and prepare some room in the afterlife for the two of us!

- Yours always, Art & Peggy Palmer

Alexander followed our progress in Sistema Cheve closely during the 1990s. He was working on extending Krubera in the western Caucasus, and we kept in touch about which site had the greatest depth potential. Alexander, allowing his explorer's heart to rule, insisted that Krubera was the world's deepest. I appealed to his geologist's brain to recognize that Cheve was truly deeper, but to no avail. We shared a passion for hypogenic caves. He came to New Mexico for an extended stay in 2007 to study hypogenic karst. It gave

us a chance to compare our experiences in deep and hypogenic caves. Even though he was not a fan of small aircraft, he flew with me a couple times to view the local karst and to visit our mutual friend, John Scheltens in South Dakota. When Russia invaded Ukraine last year, Klim regularly sent information. He and his family were safe, but his country was not. It was heartbreaking. Godspeed, Alexander. May your new journey be as rewarding and interesting as your time on Earth.

- Louise Hose

I met Alexander during his visit to the US in the late 1980s. The language barrier was difficult, but we had caves and karst as a common theme. It was an enjoyable evening, and little did I know what role he would come to play.

I saw him again when he was a scholar at the National Cave and Karst Research Institute (NCKRI). I invited him to San Antonio, Texas, to see the Edwards Aquifer, and he visited twice for a couple of weeks each time. Alexander presented a full day of lectures at the Edwards Aquifer Authority's Distinguished Lecturer series.

He was interested in the origin of maze caves in Texas. Among many others, we went to Robber Baron Cave, and he asked me how I thought it was formed. We spent the rest of the night discussing hypogene processes.

Alexander's thoughts on the formation of the Edwards Aquifer were important in helping to develop a conceptual model. I was able to bounce ideas off Alexander, and he provided great feedback and insight. One afternoon I accidentally called him a Russian and received a multi-hour lecture on the tortured history of Ukraine. Little did I know then, that this history is still being written. His intellect, knowledge, leadership and energy will be greatly missed. Rest in peace my dear friend.

- Geary Schindel,  
Former NSS President

I met Alexander in 1990 when the Vertical Section hosted a Ukrainian caver group. I was lucky enough to be selected among the Vertical Section members to go caving in the Ukraine in 1991. Alexander was our guide, translator and he became my friend. Our tag line for the trip was "One World Underground." We spoke about having a toast around the world in solidarity with our fellow cavers. Our first toast around the world was July 4th, 1991, at the NSS Convention in Schoharie, New York. Alexander was at the convention and about 20 of us celebrated our unity through caving. We continue to celebrate One World Underground on July 4th every year. Alexander will always hold a special place in my heart. The caving community has lost an icon, and I have lost a friend.

- Maureen Handler,  
NSS Operations Vice President

In 1991, I had the pleasure of being one of the six Americans on the caving trip to the Soviet Union. Alexander met us at the airport in Moscow on May 29th and during the next three weeks he was our guide, interpreter and soon our friend. It was this friendship that lasted through the years. It was also that year



ALEXANDER, NATALY, AND OLEG (SON)



that Alexander came back to the US to receive a Honorary Life Membership. Many of us have stayed in contact with Alexander through the year. In my last email, I expressed concern for him and his family due to the Russian invasion. I along with many others will cherish his friendship and will always remember Alexander as having a special place in our hearts.

- Adrian (Ed) Sira

I met Alexander casually at conferences, but didn't get to know him well until I became part of a bureau in the International Union of Speleology (UIS). Alexander was a worker, which is what every organization needs in its leaders. He didn't join the UIS to elevate his importance to the speleological world, but to elevate speleology. As President of the Commission on Karst Hydrogeol-

ogy and Speleogenesis, he established one of the first and by far most active UIS Commission websites. It served as a library for karst papers, a calendar of events and a forum that included most of the world's karst geoscientists. He built a community across all borders that advanced the knowledge of cave and karst origins and development. He led much of that progress by organizing multiple conferences, books and papers, most with international participation.

In March 2007, Alexander had been in the US for nearly a year on a research sabbatical with NCKRI. He presented me with a draft manuscript, *Hypogene Speleogenesis: Hydrogeological and Morphogenetic Perspective*. With this book, he firmly established hypogene speleogenesis as a wide-spread phenomenon. *Hypogene Speleogenesis* became and still is the major catalyst and

guide for many hypogene karst investigations.

Alexander was quiet and thoughtful, and often it was necessary to ask him questions to learn how he felt about certain things. He was a man of conviction and action in expanding the boundaries of cave and karst science and in defending his country. He broke past political stereotypes to connect cave and karst scientists globally, and when the time came, to seek their support for freedom in Ukraine. Above all, he was a good and wise man. His loss diminishes us all.

- George Veni, NCKRI Executive Director, Retired and Former President, UIS



Above: Eujenin Seneko, Interior Minister for the USSR, addressing members of Congress on the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Alexander is serving as the interpreter between Eujenin and Congress.  
All Photos in this article courtesy of John Scheltens, former NSS President