

Russia is located in Northern Asia (the area west of the Urals is considered part of Europe), bordering the Arctic Ocean, between Europe and the North Pacific Ocean. Russia is the largest country in the world in terms of area (total: 17,098,242 sq km) yet despite its size, much of the country lacks proper soils and climates (either too cold or too dry) for agriculture.



Reference https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/maps/maptemplate_rs.html

The climate ranges from steppes in the south through humid continental in much of European Russia; subarctic in Siberia to tundra climate in the polar north. The winters vary from cool along Black Sea coast to frigid in Siberia; summers vary from warm in the steppes to cool along Arctic coast. Russia has a wide range of natural resource including major deposits of oil, natural gas, coal, and many strategic minerals and timber.

Rarely do we think of Russia and Racing pigeons in the same breath yet I recently planned a trip to Moscow, with the intention of learning more about the Russian pigeon sport. To say that it was very different (in some ways) from my trips to Asia would be an understatement. This trip provided me an excellent opportunity to learn a great deal. It is curious to see how our sport and its participants adapt to different climates, different surroundings and a different systems. I hope that you will find my introduction to the Russian sport and some of its important personalities interesting. When we think of Russia it is safe to say that we are more likely to think of its exceptional vodka, caviar and very cold winters than we are to image anyone racing pigeons. During my trip I experienced the bitter cold first hand to the tune of -25°C . These frigid temperatures gave me a great appreciation for warm, thick winter coats and good vodka. Not sure whether my trip would have been as successful without these two indispensable aids.



“Why visit Russia”, you ask? Good question. Over the last few months we, at PIPA, have been getting more and more signals that the interest in the pigeon sport is on the increase in Russia but especially in the capital city of Moscow. Email and correspondence regarding all facets of the sport including maintenance, medication, interest in purchasing quality stock, sources of supply and much, much more. Inquiries from Pharma Companies asking why was Russia purchasing so many medications for pigeons? We are always excited to assist in the development of additional indepth knowledge as regards serious fanciers anywhere in the world and the signals coming from this gigantic country convinced us to take the time to take a closer , first hand look at the nature and scope of development of the racing pigeon sport in Russia.

There were additionally other reasons for the authors interest. Reasons that I will reveal later in this text.

Sergey Stegantsev



Sergey Stegantsev on the right, in the middle his loft manager

Our very first contact with the Russian pigeon sport occurred via Sergey Stegantsev. PiPa came into contact with Sergey during the Spring of 2007. At the time youngsters from Dr. H.P. & Peter Brockamp were being auctioned on PiPa and a few of these were sold to Russia. The contact with Sergey was exceedingly professional, smooth and flawless. Following a more comprehensive (digital) acquaintance and after setting out PiPa's objectives to Sergey a decision was made to collaborate, in that Sergey would represent PiPa in Russia.

Sergey grew up with pigeons. As an infant he was often at the bird market with his parents, he later erected a small pigeon loft so that he could race with the pigeons. Today it is only possible to combine the pigeon sport with his professional career with the assistance of a 'loft manager'. The distance to the loft, almost an hour's drive, and the busy business life means that he has to settle for a 'co-ordinating' function and that he has to leave the care of the pigeons to someone else. Naturally Sergey would prefer to see his pigeons daily instead of weekly, but as owner of several restaurants/bars in Moscow there is just no time...

We were welcomed by Sergey in one of his favourite bars. A bar, in the most expensive street in Moscow, with a 'Dutch accent'. The setting is very ordinary, but what a fantastic kitchen!



One of the things that I found especially interesting was how the pigeon sport was organised in Russia, on what scale was it being practised and how did the local fanciers handle the extreme winter temperatures. Here is how Sergey responded to these queries:

“First and foremost it is interesting to know that in Moscow (meaning greater Moscow) there are only 150 active pigeon fanciers. Knowing this you can directly form an idea of the scale on which they race. This region can be compared size wise with provinces in Belgium or the Netherlands. Then you know straight away that with this number of fanciers over such an area, the pigeon sport is experienced differently here than as by you in Belgium.”

When does the Season Begin?

“By us the season starts the 3rd or 4th week of May with a race of 150 km. We have a race every week and one of the furthest races is roughly 1.200 km. Occasionally there is even a 1.500 km race organised. The season ends at the beginning of August. So we have a relatively short season in Russia, but this is under the influence of the weather conditions. There is no chance of training early because it can be freezing cold here until the end of March, and training the pigeons in freezing temperatures isn't even done here in Moscow. “Early” breeding is not possible here either as the average temperature here in winter is -15° C to - 20° C, sometimes even lower.

Take note, this also has its advantages, we believe that these temperatures have a positive influence on the health of the pigeons in regard to it being impossible for bacteria to develop by these temperatures. The resistance of the pigeons is certainly strengthened under such conditions!”

How Many Races Per Weekend?

“There is only 1 race per weekend, this 12 to 14 consecutive weeks. Normally we begin as said with 150 km for the first race, but this year we started directly with 250 km. Many fanciers disagreed with this ‘serious’ 1st race, we prefer to race our first competition from 100 to 150 km. We now have to make sure that they are better prepared than ever.”

***250 km
320 km
400 km
600 km
320 km
740 km
320 km
850 km
400 km
600 km
320 km
1165 km
400 km
320 km***

I asked ,if there is only 1 race per weekend, what about the fanciers who only want to race the sprint or middle distance?

“There is no other alternative for these fanciers.They have to race 600-700 km and further otherwise they have no race. But there are not many, the majority race every week and usually with the same pigeons. When you see the racing programme you can see that these must be very strong pigeons, because one week a race of say 800 km, the following week 500 km and the following week 1.000 km again, very tough and a completely different system to Belgium or the Netherlands.”

Sergey was able to relate to me the details of his best ever performance. In July 2004 there was a race of 1.000 km. Sergey had entered 12 pigeons for this competition and won no less than 1st ,2nd and 3rd against the entire competition. The number of pigeons can't be compared to the numbers in Belgium or the Netherlands, yet it was still a thousand pigeons. However, one of the most interesting details of this race was the fact that the 1st and 2nd placed birds arrived together and the 3rd placed pigeon was only 1 min 30 seconds behind, and this from a distance of 1.000 km!! An unprecedented performance, by Sergey's pigeons in Russia!



The lofts of Sergey Stegantsev

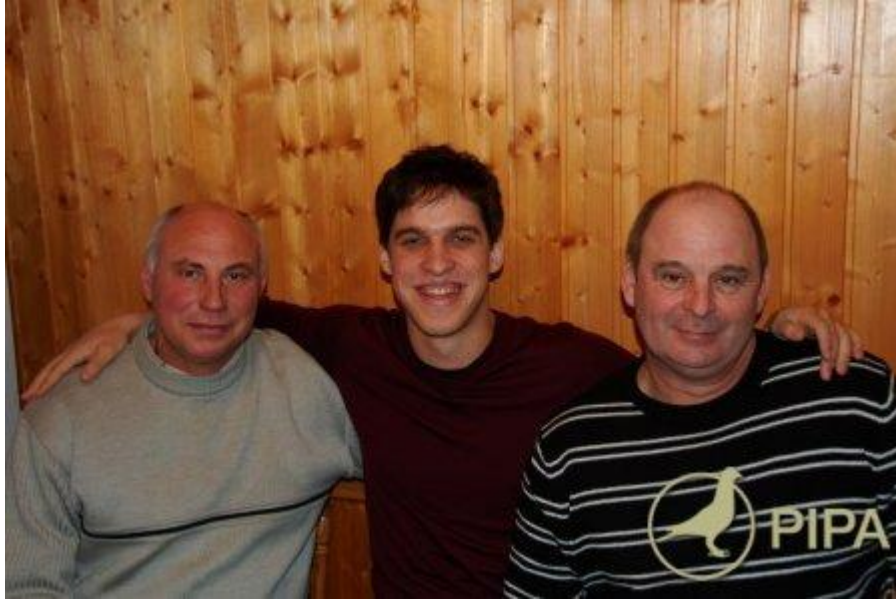
But success or ‘fame’ can take their toll, or have dire consequences if you will. A few years ago, in April 2006, Sergey’s pigeon loft was set on fire and all the pigeons were killed. It is unfortunate to experience this level of jealousy and criminality, but it does indeed happen. Nowadays all the lofts are guarded by an enormous guard dog which, when he stands on 2 legs, is bigger than the average person. Not much chance of the vandals striking again.

I asked Sergey what his greatest dream within the Russian Sport would be? Without hesitation he responded that:

“Representing Russia at the Olympiad would be a fantastic recognition. It is our aim to reach the Olympiad in the future.”

Sergey is one of the top fanciers in Moscow, and it is my hope that his dream comes true!

Vladimir Sotkov & Andrey Zotov



On the left Vladimir Sotkov, on the right Andrey Zotov

Our second visit to Moscow was in the direction of Vladimir Sotkov and his pigeon friend Andrey Zotov. We arranged to meet Vladimir at the metro nearest to his villa, where he was to come and collect us. After a 45 minute metro journey we had another 45 minute car journey waiting for us. This to give you an idea of how great the distance between various fanciers can be. Together with his wife and Andrey Zotov we were welcomed warmly and the Russian caviar with all the trimmings was waiting for us. The contact with Vladimir has grown since the total auction of Erik Limbourg where Vladimir bought three pigeons via telephone bidding. Vladimir emphasised how easily and smooth everything went in being able to bid from Russia in this auction. He was assisted on the telephone in Russian by PIPA co-worker Minna and was able to follow the prices of all the pigeons live via PIPA itself. "A fantastic experience", Vladimir found.

"In Moscow there are 4 pigeon clubs, all the approximately 150 fanciers are quite evenly distributed over these 4 clubs. You can generally say that the pigeon sport in Russia is quite an elite sport, usually businessmen. Simply because here in Moscow it is expensive to practice the pigeon sport. To be able to race the pigeons you usually need a bigger garden and in Moscow these type of houses are only the property of the richer people."

Andrey also mentioned that he was one of the very first Russians to purchase a pigeon from PIPA. Via Sergey Stegantsev he bought a pigeon in 2007 from H.P. & P. Brockamp. Later pigeons were bought via PIPA from Pros Roosen and others.



For both Andrey and Vladimir (due to their limited English) it is more difficult to follow the PIPA auctions. That's why they initially evaluate the pigeons by the photo before making a final selection, the pigeons they like best on the photo are looked into in more detail. They translate the description with an automatic translator. It is a lot of work for them to be completely informed regarding the pigeons on offer, but for these Russian enthusiasts nothing is too much!





Vladimir Zheltov

Recently we also came into contact with Vladimir Zheltov via the PiPa auction, to be more precise with his daughter Tatjana Zheltova (in Russian an 'a' is added to the surname of a daughter). Tatjana takes care of the communication in English on behalf of her father Vladimir. It was the Jewels Of The Sky November, a few pigeons from Etienne Meirlaen had aroused the interest of Vladimir. After bidding for several pigeons a son of the wonder racer 'Starlight' finally went to Russia. A few days after the auction Vladimir's chauffeur arrived at the PiPa offices in Knesselare, to pick up the pigeon and take it straight back to Russia!! Vladimir underlined his total satisfaction with the professionalism and perfect handling from PiPa's part. It goes without saying that for the long journey back the pigeon was given a large basket with plenty of food and water. A Professional photo of the bird in addition to the pedigree card were also included. The entire "PIPA experience" was greatly appreciated by Vladimir.



It was no coincidence that Vladimir chose a pigeon from Etienne Meirlaen to reinforce his lofts. He has been a pigeon fancier since 1997 and like many others he began with the Sprint races. At the end of the 90's pigeons were obtained from, who else but Gebr. Janssen from Arendonk. But for the last few years Vladimir has become

increasingly focused on the longer distances. Each reinforcement is rationalised and well thought through. The Belgian and Dutch pigeon sport is followed closely and over the last 3-4 years pigeons have been bought from amongst others, Etienne Devos (sister Zidane and child Patrick), Roger Florizoone & now Etienne Meirlaen. Only the best from the best then.





What struck me during my visits to Vladimir's lofts was the small number of pigeons housed here, while there is room for so many more. We estimated just 15 pigeons after we had visited all the lofts. Vladimir's goal is within a few years to have a maximum of 10 breeding couples, at the moment he has 8 breeding couples which will later be paired off.



For the last few years the pigeons have not been raced at the Zheltov household, Vladimir firstly wanted to build up a solid breeding loft based on long distance and extreme long distance pigeons and for this he is taking his time to obtain good pigeons one by one. He now has 8 breeding couples which he has collected with great care and in which he has 100% confidence. 2010 will then be a year mainly for breeding and strictly selecting. Vladimir is also aware of the fact that at the end of this year or next year only a few of his pigeons will pass the strict selection for breeding. ***“But this has to be done if you are aspiring to the top.”***

In addition to being a passionate fancier Vladimir is also a passionate businessman. In everyday life he exports ready made meals to nearly all the countries in Europe. He has also proved his talent for business in the Russian pigeon

sport by becoming the exclusive distributor for Benzing in Russia and has made ensured a quasi monopoly in Moscow for this electronic clocking system. So as stated earlier, there are just 150 pigeon fanciers in greater Moscow. But almost all the pigeon fanciers in Moscow have a Benzing system in their lofts.



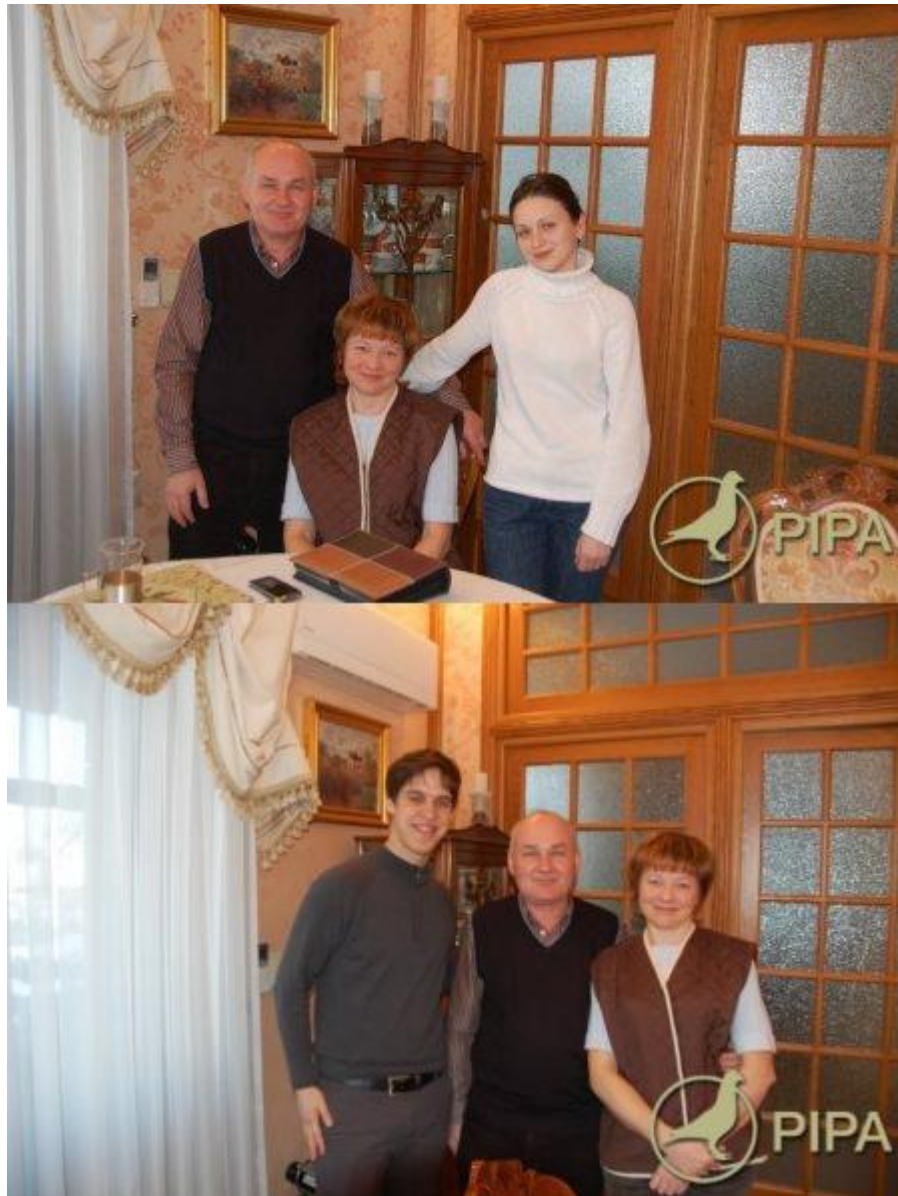
The lofts & the villa of Vladimir Zheltov

It is also difficult for Vladimir to combine his professional activities with pigeon sport at a high level. That's why the daily care is left in the hands of his dear wife. Everything is perfectly organized by Vladimir, but in the end it is his wife who does most of the work.

Vladimir told us that a few years ago he came into contact with Leen Boers. Vladimir needed expert advice in connection with the racing system and Leen Boers was a good teacher. A friendship blossomed for which Vladimir made the journey to Belgium/the Netherlands numerous times and a trip to Moscow was organized several times for Leen Boers. He regularly stayed with Vladimir for a few days and every day he was 'given a lesson'. The knowledge over such a racing system was practically nil in Moscow and Russia and Vladimir realised that

knowledge in this domain was an essential factor for sporting success. Feeding systems, training methods, motivation methods, he concentrated upon all of these aspects and has mastered them all.

The Zheltov family lives in what the West often refers to as a “Gated Compound” with strict security measures in place and where access is strictly controlled. There are exactly 47 villas in this district, mainly owned by politicians and business people. The answer to the question as to whether there are other pigeon fanciers in this district is answered negative by Vladimir. It is not easy to persuade people here to start with the pigeon sport. ***“Pigeon sport doesn’t really belong to our culture here in Russia, whereas in Belgium & the Netherlands the pigeon sport is a national heritage. When it is so difficult for you to attract new fanciers, you can imagine that here in Moscow it is almost impossible.”***



A striking conclusion whereby before our trip we had developed a different perception. For example, the fact that the producers of medicine have seen their profits rise enormously in Russia over the last few years is, according to the fanciers we visited, the result of the enormous popularity of the fancy pigeon sport in Russia. But the normal pigeon sport as we know it is not on the increase, the number of fanciers has remained stable for a few years and

will probably remain at +- 150 for some time to come. There is no doubt that the cultural background is one of the reasons why the normal pigeon sport is not growing in Russia, so as Vladimir Zheltov stated. But the difficult weather conditions with extremes of sometimes – 30°C or -35° C in the winter makes it difficult to make young or even older people ‘warm’ to the pigeon sport. In addition the distance that has to be travelled to be able to race is certainly no plus point. Defying the dramatic traffic in Moscow for a few hours just to basket a few pigeons does not encourage people to start keeping pigeons. Yet just like in many countries in the world, there are also real pigeon fanciers in Moscow for whom nothing is too much when it comes to racing the pigeons. The motivation and enthusiasm found here by the fanciers is a universal characteristic. It is one of the nicest facets of the pigeon sport, it opens the gates to meeting pigeon fanciers over the entire world, because everywhere in the world pigeon fanciers like to talk about their favourite hobby with other fanciers. The globalization that has developed in the pigeon sport over the last decade via the internet, via One Loft Races etc... can be one of the main attractions for keeping the pigeon sport alive in the future. It is the X-factor that the pigeon sport needs....

At the beginning of this brief article I stated that my personal interest in wanting to learn more about the pigeon sport was not strictly PIPA business related, that there was more to my interest. In fact I am delighted to say that my wife Lena is Russian and that she accompanied me to Moscow as she did to all of our loft visits. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my lovely wife “Lena” very much for all the hours she patiently spent by me at the various fanciers that we visited.



Gyselbrecht Thomas & Silvio Mattacchione - 07/06/2010