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# Putting a crisis in focus

*Alumnus' versatility with language helps him understand Eastern Europe*

**A**s a linguist and expert on languages of Eastern Europe, Victor Friedman, '66, knows the crucial value of words to the language of war and peace. He also knows from his e-mail how events there affect his friends and colleagues.

The *Washington Post* recently published one of the more poignant e-mails that he translated from Albanian. It came from a scholar in Prishtina, the capital of Kosovo, the disputed province in Yugoslavia where Albanians make up the majority but are suffering at the hands of the ruling Serbs.

"Here we are struggling for mere survival," wrote Rexhep Ismajli, a professor of linguistics at the University of Prishtina. "All week we have had staying with us a family of seven that fled from Junik. Meanwhile, we ourselves do not know where we will be in a few days. We cannot go anywhere in the evening, because on every corner we encounter an armed, uniformed Serb patrol ready to abuse us."

One of the consequences of the new freedom of the 1990's and the break-up of former Communist dominance in Eastern Europe has been a reassessment of national identity and a new understanding of the role languages play in forming those identities. Friedman's research and expertise has brought him in touch with the meaning of those changes.

By William Harms

## A rich stew of languages

As peoples throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union assert their sovereignty and individuality, language becomes a major focus of attention. In the Caucasus Mountain area, at the edge between Asia and Europe, dozens of languages are flourishing as a result of the breaking down of central Soviet power, explained Friedman, who traveled during the summer to the rarely-visited Republic of Daghestan in that region to study languages.

"This is a classic example of an area where languages multiply and pile up rather than being absorbed and leveled out," Friedman said.

"This is a characteristic of certain mountainous regions. If we include the three Trans-Caucasian republics—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—and the North Caucasian republics, the total number of languages spoken is approximately fifty. Of these, about 35 are indigenous, native to the Caucasus, and belong to three different families. There are also four branches of Indo-European represented. Some of these languages have definitely received more attention since the

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breakup of the U.S.S.R., and a number have instituted various reforms. Some of the smaller languages have been given official status and are used in schools and the press.

"On the other hand, Russification continues to advance in the cities of the members of the Russian Federation due both to influence of the central government and to the need for a lingua franca," he added.

The Caucasian languages are extremely difficult to learn because they are so different from Indo-European languages. "But that is precisely what makes them so interesting and rewarding to study. It is impossible to attain more than a superficial understanding of a cul-

ture without learning the language of the bearers of that culture."

## A diplomat as well as a linguist

Friedman, who developed an interest in languages at home and found intellectual support for it at the Lab Schools, is one of the world's leading authorities on the languages of Eastern Europe. He has traveled extensively in the region and put his talents to use with the United Nations when, during the summer of 1994, he was Senior Policy and Political Analyst on Macedonia for the United Nations Protection Forces.

In the United Nations position, he monitored the Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish press, listened to television and radio, and talked to politicians. He filed reports on the local news coverage and later returned to the region for the Council on Foreign Relations on a fact-finding mission. He met with top officials in Serbia, Macedonia, and Albania, but is circumspect about his evaluation of the political situation in the area.

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Friedman meeting with the president of Macedonia (left).

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30 minutes at a stretch,” he said, declining to become more specific. “In two other countries, all the leaders have pursued basically the same foreign policy with respect to one of their neighbors regardless of the regime. In yet another country, a

change of regimes has allowed for some improvements, but a combination of internal and external instability threatens to eviscerate the very concept of ‘leader.’

“The one Balkan leader that I have met on more occasions than any other impresses me as a man of tremendous strength and ability, one who successfully kept war away from his country,” he said. “The future of that country, unfortunately, may depend on external events, and there are both internal and external threats to stability.”

#### **An early interest in Macedonia**

Friedman, who developed an early interest in Macedonia, is something of a celebrity in the country, which was formerly a part of Yugoslavia. He studied the language while pursuing a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures and in Linguistics at the University

of Chicago, where he came after receiving a B.A. in Russian at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. He joined the Chicago faculty in 1993 after serving on the faculty of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

“I entered graduate school knowing that I wanted to do something on South Slavic and that I was interested in Caucasian languages, but not much beyond that,” he said. “One day during my first year in graduate school, one of my professors, Zbigniew Golab, asked me if I would like to go to Macedonia that summer. He had an extra invitation from the Seminar for Macedonian Language, Literature, and Culture and had thought to recommend me. I was

eager to go and, thanks to financial help from my parents and the Slavic Department at Chicago, I did.”

The year was 1971 and it was a good one in what was then Yugoslavia. The political climate was improving and the economy was picking up in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. “Life was traditional but comfortable. Every night during the warm weather virtually all of Skopje would be out at the main square in the center of town. There was music, dancing, and drinking almost every night. By the end of August I had decided: ‘I’m going to write my dissertation on this language.’”

Friedman eventually did groundbreaking work on the language, and wrote *The Grammatical Categories of the Macedonian Indicative*, the first book published in North America on modern Macedonian. As a result of the book and other scholarship, he was elected in 1994 to the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is only the second U.S.-born American citizen to be elected to the academy since its founding in 1967.

In 1991, he was given the University of Skopje’s golden plaque award and he also received the “1300 Years of Bulgaria” jubilee medal from Bulgaria in 1982. “I am now the only American and probably the only person in the world to

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#### **Learning French at Lab School**

Friedman began formal study of a foreign language at Lab. “The most important thing about my Lab experience with regard to language learning was the fact that a foreign language was required starting in third grade. The choices in those days were French and German, and I chose French.

“My first teacher was M. DuPont, and he was great with us. I remember that I was the waiter in a play he had us perform—‘Un repas au Restaurant.’ I learned a lot of food names. I also remember Mme. Pillet quite well. She spent extra time with me working on French during the summer.”

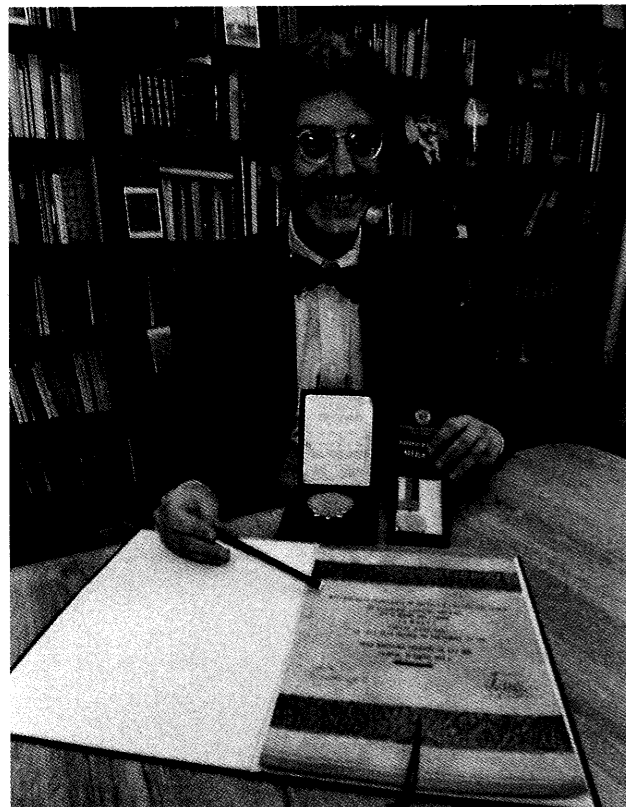
Access to Harper Library, then the University’s main library, was another advantage Friedman had in

going to Lab. “Most of the foreign language dictionaries were in the old Classics stacks, and there was a very nice young woman there on weekends who used to let me go back in the stacks to browse among them. Those are actually some of my happiest memories from those years.”

Friedman continued studying French throughout his time at Lab School. “In addition to giving me the necessary exposure to foreign languages, it made it easier for me to acquire other languages later in life. The French I studied at Lab School stayed with me. I never took another French course, but I had no trouble following the French literature course I audited my senior year in college. I passed the graduate reading exam in French as soon as I came to Chicago, and I continued to use French in all sorts of international venues while I was working for the U.N. and in my dealings with the Council of Eu-

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rope, as president of the U.S. National Committee of the International Association for Southeast European Studies, or when visiting colleagues in Paris.”



Friedman has been widely recognized for his work. In 1991, he was given the University of Skopje’s golden plaque award and he also received the “1300 Years of Bulgaria” jubilee medal from Bulgaria in 1982. “I am now the only American and probably the only person in the world to have been honored by both Bulgaria and Macedonia for contributions to their languages.”

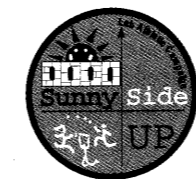
## **School Scene**

### **Lab community “builds together” by supporting Campaign**

**T**he Campaign for the Athletic Complex continues to make substantial progress toward its \$5 million goal, thanks to gifts from alumni.

Gifts from alumni, as well as from other members of the Laboratory Schools’ community have brought the total to \$3.4 million.

“The motto of the Campaign is ‘Building Together’ and alumni have truly risen to the task of being part of the team,” said Gay-Young Cho, Co-Chairman of the Campaign. “But we still need your help. If we do not reach our goal by early winter, we may need to delay the start of the project.



Building Together

“We are pleased with the support they have

shown so far and look forward to their continued support in the months ahead,” she added.

People who would like information on multiyear gifts through pledges to the Campaign should contact Eileen Epstein in the Development Office at (773) 702-0578.

Alumni and parents will get an opportunity to further their support of the effort at a Sports Day, which will be held during a spring weekend in the 1998-99 school year with indoor and outdoor events, culminating with a barbecue.

The event, which will include sports and games for every age level, will provide students, parents, teachers, and alumni and their families as well as other friends of the Laboratory Schools an opportunity to celebrate the athletic heritage of the Schools. Funds for the Campaign will be generated by athletic

events on that day.

It is anticipated that ground will be broken for the new Kovler Gymnasium in the spring of 1999. The plans call for it to be completed by September 2000. The new construction and renovations will benefit students throughout the Schools.

As a result of the campaign, the Schools will build the Kovler Gymnasium, named in honor of major donors to the Campaign, Jonathan Kovler, ’63; Peter Kovler, ’69; and their father Everett.

One of the new playing courts on the second floor will have seating for 550 people. An aerobic dance/multipurpose room will be built on the first floor. There will be a second playing court at the basement level. The new Kovler Gymnasium will have nearly twice the space of Sunny Gym.