

MEETING WITH THE REAL PIERRE SMIRNOFF

There are many interesting incidents in my life that took place in my busy career as a General Contractor during my tenure with Marbella Pacific Construction Limited while operating on the Pacific Coast of British Columbia. At the time of their occurrence, it was not possible to document due to the time constraints at that time. Now, these memories flash by me and I do have the time to write about them to enjoy those dated thoughts.

This story is about a real person, named Pierre Smirnoff who I met at Vancouver, B.C., in and about 1985-86.

While I was constructing the International Pavilions at Expo '86, a potential client approached me to assist in exploring the potential of a trading partnership with a firm from the USSR, at that time, and a Canadian Society with the purposes of entrepreneurship and fund-raising for the Canadian Society. The Trading Company had an office in downtown Vancouver and several discussions took place. Since the trading objective is not part of this story, I will just identify one person in that Russian trading company which is the subject of this story.

One of the lead executives was named Pierre Smirnov.

Obviously, after meeting these people, several times a "friendship" emanated, and I asked if he had any relationship to the Vodka family of Smirnoffs. This history was taken from Google but the account that Pierre afforded me was very similar to this story. I cannot confirm if he claimed to be a direct descendant of the Smirnov family but as I recall, his past credentials caused the USSR to trust him with his dated responsibility....."

History



Pyotr Smirnov

Pyotr Arsenyevitch Smirnov (9 January 1831 – 29 November 1898) founded his vodka distillery in Moscow under the trade name PA Smirnov in 1864, pioneered charcoal filtration in the 1870s, and by 1886 had captured two-thirds of the market in Moscow by virtue of the first use of newspaper advertising while suppressing clerical calls for temperance by generously contributing to the [clergy](#).

Russian royalty reportedly regarded Smirnov as a favorite. When Pyotr died, his third son Vladimir succeeded him. The company flourished and produced more than four million cases of vodka per year.

When the Tsar nationalized the Russian vodka industry in 1904, Vladimir Smirnov was forced to sell his factory and the brand. During the [October Revolution](#) of 1917, the Smirnov family fled the country. In 1920, Vladimir Smirnov established a factory in [Constantinople](#) (present day [Istanbul](#)). Four years later he moved to [Lwów](#) (then in [Second Polish Republic](#), now [Lviv](#) in [Ukraine](#)). He renamed the vodka "Smirnoff". It sold marginally well but not nearly as it had in Russia prior to 1904. Although an additional distillery was founded in [Paris](#) in 1925, sales remained far less than that produced in Russia.

In the 1930s, Vladimir met Rudolph Kunett, a Russian who had emigrated in the 1920s to [New York](#), and had succeeded in business. The Kunett family had been a supplier of grain to Smirnov in Moscow before the Revolution. In 1933, Vladimir sold Kunett the rights to Smirnoff vodka production and sales in North America. Kunett then returned to the United States, quit his sales job, and established his first North American distillery in Bethel, [Connecticut](#), after the end of [Prohibition](#) in 1933. However, the business in North America was not as successful as Kunett had hoped. By 1938, Kunett could not afford the sales licenses, and contacted John Martin, president of [Heublein](#), a company that specialized in the import and export of liquors and foreign foods. Using the \$14,000 that the Heublein company made from a new product that ended up saving them from bankruptcy, Martin bought the rights to Smirnoff in 1939. His board thought he was mad. Americans were traditionally whiskey drinkers unfamiliar with vodka and so sales were slow. Sales picked up considerably after Heublein advertised it as a "white whiskey" with "no taste, no smell" sealed with whiskey corks.^[3]

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Now for the story and subject for this blog entry.

My General Manager was a habitual “workaholic” and usually came to work at 0300 hours, so he was always organized and operating when the site Superintendents, Engineers and Architects were just coming to work. He also had a habit of declaring the early afternoon on Fridays as a “Safety Meeting” and invited the Administration to a “Beer”. It was at just such an occasion that “Shishliki” was mentioned and how all of us from the Kootenays needed a “Shishlik” after all this stressful time at Expo ’86.

My GM wanted to know what this event was all about and in the later discussion, offered his yard at Surrey to conduct “whatever it was” so he could experience it for himself.

We cautioned him that it involved much preparation but that most of that would be conducted by us and all we needed is his yard to cook the Lamb and his house for conveniences. We suggested strongly that he consult his wife to ensure she knew what was happening in advance. To this a recommendation he wholeheartedly undertook, and we were advised that his wife was excited about hosting the event.

The meat was ordered and set aside to marinate, the alcohol and other food supplies obtained and salads created in advance of the chosen Saturday afternoon.

I discussed this planned event with Mr. Smirnoff on one of our meetings and he got very excited and wanted to know if he could his wife and children to the event to which I responded, “why not?”

The chosen Saturday arrived and three (3) of us headed to the house in Surrey to dig a pit in the garden and deliver firewood for the embers to roast the Shishliki. Our GM met us at the door and ushered us behind the house to identify the area of his small garden that we could excavate. It was about this time that, we saw a startled face in the Living Room window and the patio door opened to “what the Hell is going on!”

We knew then that our GM was not truthful with his wife at all.

Tillie, my brother Russel’s wife showed up with two (2) big salads and that caused a flurry in the house with the GM’s wife asking, “what is else is happening that I don’t know about?”

The invited guest started to show up and we were waiting for the ‘tasters’ to come off the pit, when we heard a scream from the house as the GM’s wife ran out the patio door shouting at her husband “there’s a man, his wife and two (2) children at our front door identifying himself as Pierre Smirnoff,” she took a deep breath before she hollered “this is the limit!”

I went into the house to try and salvage the rude welcome that the Smirnoff family had just received but Pierre was an experienced person and just took this into stride.

I had purchased a few bottle of Smirnoff Vodka for my planned suggestion to Pierre, “here is a small shot glass and could you please take a bottle of Smirnoff Vodka and walk around the guest to act like a bartender in the Russian manner?”

My expected response from Pierre, “of course, just as I was trained by my ancestors”. The gesture was a hit with all the guests.

The party went well from that point on and everyone had a good time.

Some time later, Pierre invited Marilyn and I to his apartment and we enjoyed a great evening with Caviar and all the Russian trimmings.

I went on with my busy life and my client did not pursue the trading idea. I lost track of Pierre Smirnoff as well.

Written by Elmer Verigin and dated November 13, 2023