



*Victor Beknyev, addressing an undergraduate YMCA lunch forum.*

# CALTECH'S FIRST RUSSIAN STUDENT

*by Lance Taylor*

Caltech got its first Russian student this September when Victor Sergeevich Beknyev arrived from Moscow for a year of graduate study in mechanical engineering. Thus far, Victor has spent a great deal of his time trying to convince everyone that not all Russians have downcast eyes, moldy shoes, and washed brains. Thus far, he has succeeded admirably.

Victor, 32, is at Caltech as part of the current USA-USSR student exchange program. The faculty council of Moscow Technical College, where he holds a position comparable to instructor, picked him early in 1959 to come to America as an exchange student, and he applied through the U.S. State Department for doctoral-level work at either MIT, Caltech, Harvard, or Yale. Through some governmental procedure he doesn't understand, he ended up in Pasadena. The Institute pays his tuition costs here; the Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants furnishes him about \$175 a month for living expenses, and will take him and the 26 other Russian exchange students now in the United States on a tour of the country next sum-

mer. The Russian government — which supports Victor's American counterparts in Russia — provides him nothing but indoctrination and review of his three years of college English (he's fluent now).

Victor's specialty is air flow in turbomachines, and he practices it here under the tutelage of Duncan Rannie, Robert Goddard Professor of Jet Propulsion. Right now, he is doing theoretical work on air-flow conditions near the walls of an axial flow compressor, with an eye toward designing compressor blades which will behave more efficiently in such "boundary flow." He optimistically plans to build a set of improved blades and test them fully on Caltech's compressor before he leaves next July.

### *What it's really like in Russia*

Above and beyond working on air-flow theory in his office at 05 Engineering, Victor is passionately fond of telling people "what it's really like in Russia." As a member of the Russian Communist Party, he feels a need exists for such explanations, because — like Khrushchev — he believes that eventually Americans as well as Russians will live in a Communist society.

According to Victor, society is bound to become socialistic, and there's not much of anything anybody can do about it. In fact, the big difference between America and Russia, he says, is that Russians are planning for socialism and Americans aren't. Since they are essential to state social planning, Victor sees nothing wrong with anonymous and autonomous boards that have final authority to censor anything published in Russia. Such boards, he says, are necessary to the growth of the state now, and will disappear when the new society arrives — "in the future." Also billed for future arrival are a state limited solely to distributive functions, and a worldwide machine-supported class choosing their own occupations.

Like any good missionary, Victor argues for his favorite subject at length and with finesse. Often he will expound for 30 minutes on why communism and capitalism are irreconcilably different, and then completely disarm his antagonist by switching to the necessity for co-existence. Only half-a-minute later, he's back on why capitalism must go. Rumors of such tactics brought one of the largest crowds in years to the undergraduate YMCA lunch forum last month, at which Victor held forth. He made no converts, but collected a fair number of slightly bemused friends.

Because of State Department retaliation to Russian retaliation to something else, Victor's sight-seeing area is limited (without special permission) to a circle with a 25-mile radius centered at Caltech. This means he can go to the Santa Monica beaches, Hollywood, and Mt. Wilson — but not to Los Angeles Harbor, Marineland, or Big Bear.

In his two months here, he hasn't violated his honor-system restrictions by going outside the circle, but he

pushed his boundary to the limit (25 miles plus 100 ft.) by going to Disneyland in November. (He was crazy about the tree house and the jungle trip.) He has also journeyed to the beach, where he got his first honest-to-goodness look at an ocean, and to sundry places around Los Angeles. Before too long, he hopes for State Department permission to go to the San Francisco area and see some fellow students at Stanford and the University of California at Berkeley, and before he leaves the country he wants to try surfing, and is looking forward to seeing the Dodgers win a ballgame.

Victor has a room at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Alfred Ingersoll, across Wilson Avenue from the Caltech campus. He cooks his own breakfast, eats lunch at the campus cafeteria, and dines at the counter at one of the local drugstores. He likes American food — especially hamburgers, and even Caltech Student House fare.

For night life, he goes to movies in Pasadena. He liked *The Cranes are Flying*, a Russian film; and *North by Northwest*. He uses *The Tingler* as an argument in favor of movie censorship boards.

### *Russian couple on the way up*

When Victor came to America, he left his wife Helen and two-year-old son Alyosha home in Moscow. Victor's wife is an engineer too, and works full-time designing refrigeration equipment while Alyosha stays with his grandmother. The Beknyeys have an apartment in Moscow and a country place 20 miles from town. Victor and his wife make, between them, about 37,000 rubles a year — which is considerably above the Russian average. Unlike "Young American Couples on the Way Up," they don't have a car. They ride the train into Moscow, and take the subway when they are in town.

Victor was reared in Moscow and Ulyanovsk, Lenin's birthplace. He was born in the capital, but he, his mother and sister were evacuated when the Russians were threatened in 1941. His father died in Moscow while they were away. Victor attended Russian lower and middle school in Ulyanovsk and Moscow, and skipped the ninth grade. After the war, he went to the State University of Moscow and to Moscow Technical College. He was appointed to the faculty of Moscow Technical College after he graduated, and met his wife when she was in one of his classes.

Like most proud fathers, Victor will pull out a walletful of family photographs at the slightest pretext. But he pulls them out with an extraordinary flourish, as if he were attempting to prove something besides the fact that Alyosha has his yellow hair. Indeed, the whole idea behind Victor's stay as an exchange student is to prove that Russians and Americans can get along together because they are alike. Victor — party devotions aside — makes the idea seem pretty plausible.