Thank you, Pete Seeger!

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At the Mast House, November 1991. From left to right: Eunice Mast, Tatiana Nikitina, Don Mast, Pete Seeger, Ken Marsh, Sergey Nikitin

Pete Seeger passed away last night. For Tatiana and me, this wonderful singer, guitarist and composer was among those who comprise the soul of the American people. They are called 'folk singers' in the USA: Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary, Johnny Cash… Indeed, when Pete Seeger started singing 'We shall overcome,' say, in New York's Central Park, tens of thousands of those who were there sang along.

This was the time of the civil rights movement, the fight against segregation and the Vietnam war. I was a student at Moscow State University when I saw Pete Seeger for the first time at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall and then later, at the main auditorium of the Leninsky Hills MGU building.

I was struck by the combination of the highest level of stage professionalism - I wanted to learn to play guitar like him - and his down-to-earth demeanor and a free way of communicating with the audience. I remember how this American performer asked the Soviet members of the audience simply to shake hands with their neighbors to their left and right. Our stiff and uptight students reacted without much enthusiasm. Pete then immediately jumped off stage, ran to the back row of the concert hall, shook hands with several audience members, ran, flew up the stairs back on-stage and continued his song. I learned much from Pete Seeger that day. In any case, my sing-alongs with the audience definitely started there.

Many years passed. In 1991, Tatiana and I met Pete Seeger at our American friends' home: Don and Eunice Mast
lived in Woodstock, IL - not the same mind you, as the Woodstock, NY, famous for its rock festivals. But in fact, Don, Eunice and their family put together a
two-day folk music festival
to which they invited Pete Seeger, as well as Tanya and me.

We did a concert together with Pete, at the local Woodstock opera house, a special children's concert and then another concert for 200 or so who gathered at the Mast House. What an amazing audience they were! At the start of each song by Pete, they would sing right away, so musically, in multi-part harmony, along with their idol - no, I correct myself - their friend. For two days, Tatiana and I were in heaven.

I told Pete about the Grushinsky Song Festival. We invited Don and Eunice to be our guests at the 'Grusha' in 1990, where they sang in front of 80,000 strong. We tried to convince Pete Seeger to come as well. He showed interest, but later his health and busy schedule prevented him from carrying out the plan.

The last time we saw Pete Seeger was on TV, during President Obama's first inauguration. And when, standing before an audience of a 100,000 on the National Mall, Pete started singing "As I go walking that freedom highway…"
('This land is your land, this land is my land…'), and the audience responded in chorus, Tatiana and I had renewed hope that the spirit of free individuals who have come together - according to which Pete Seeger lived and which he defended all of his life - was still alive and in demand in this world!

I don't know about other families, but our grandchildren know and love Pete Seeger's songs, funny and sad, whimsical and wise - how for example, children need to "be kind to their parents, though they don't deserve it" or how "to everything (Turn, Turn, Turn) there is a season": a time to laugh, a time to weep; a time to plant, a time to reap; and a time to be born, and a time to die… Thank you, Pete Seeger!

Sergey Nikitin