

## **PROFESSOR**

**By James Collins.**

**Nickolas (Nikki) Feodoroff, my Hydraulics professor in college was unforgettable. He was short, squat, muscular, intelligent, well educated, humorous, pleasant, fierce, brave, long-lived, multilingual, internationally prominent and had an interesting and eventful life. He was born a Cossack in November 1901 on the Don River in Russia. As a Cossack he learned to ride, shoot, become proficient with a sabre and live off the land. The Cossacks traditionally serviced the czar, defended him and brutally oppressed the serfs as ordered by the Crown.**

**When the Bolshevik revolution started, he naturally gravitated to the White Russian side of the conflict. He was involved in many battles including Petrograd and received the King George cross for gallantry in action. Unfortunately, his side lost. He then with many of the other White Russians and Cossacks wandered through Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, and eventually ended up in the United States. There he went to Columbia University as a student and his basic intelligence allowed him to graduate, go on to become a professor at that prestigious university, authored several books and eventually become the Ataman of all the Don Cossacks in America. He died at 102 years of age in Ardsley, New York. He wrote a book, "The History of the Cossacks" and a second book outlining his life, "A Cossack Galloped Far, Far Away".**

**In the middle of this exciting life, I was lucky enough to have Niki as my Hydraulics professor at Manhattan College located in the Bronx NY. He made this course interesting and memorable. Several technical courses can be quite boring and at the same time very difficult to understand. Nikki had a way of removing these two negatives and turned the course into an exciting and interesting interlude. Part of his innovation was his marking philosophy. It was unusual and**

**incomprehensible at the same time. During his first class, he announced to all, his concept of grading students.**

**He started with the following comment**

**"Gentleman in this course we expect you to continually improve, reflecting the fact that I am teaching you the subject. If I am doing my job correctly, your marks will improve at each of our successive exams. For example, if you get an 80 on your first exam, 85 on your second and 90 on your third, you will get an 'A' because you are showing you are continually improving and learning from my instruction. If you get an 80 on your first exam, 85 on your second and 82 on your third you will get a 'B'. If you get 100 on your first exam, 90 on your second and an 85 on your third you will get a 'C'. I expect that you will continuously improve, as you learn from my instruction, and your mark will reflect that.**

**This was heresy as far as the students were concerned. Every other instructor in this college averaged the marks from the three grades and the percentages followed a prescribed rule. You could calculate your mark by looking at the average and if they curved the marks, you knew the marks would be better. With Nikki's very unusual marking methodology, the standard rules were thrown out the window. This was discussed by all members of the class who were totally dumbfounded. We agreed that the first thing we had to do was to validate that Nikki really followed this cockamamie rule. Therefore, we went to the engineering students from the previous class, repeated Nikki's statement and asked them if this was true. Unfortunately, they all agreed that this indeed was how he marked and if we did not follow the rules, we would get low grades.**

**One of the most stressful events in my college education was taking Nikki's first exam. I knew everything on the exam and could easily**

**have gotten 100. However, Nikki required improvement and how can you improve from 100. I could not guarantee I would get 100 in each of the next two exams so I was in a quandary. Even a 98 or 96 might result in a 'B'. With the greatest reluctance and trepidation, I had to throw the exam. I had to give incorrect answers in two parts of one question to guarantee a mark of 85. I did it and got the mark I had targeted. However, the stress did not go away, if anything it grew. Now I had to take two more exams, throw part of the second to get 88 to 90, and then plan to get between 90 and 100 on the final exam. The stress was with me for the entire semester. My plan worked out and I ended up within an 'A'. However, this initially negative experience was very helpful in my career. I learned to listen very carefully to my customers and my bosses and not disregard what they said as being completely unrealistic. For I had learned that what might seem strange to you, may indeed be the philosophy of the person who described it., Nikki, I really learned a lot from you. May you Rest in Peace; you are not forgotten.**

**THE END**