

The “Rehabilitation” Of Igor Sikorsky

Sergei Sikorsky writes:

“In the mid-1960’s, I began to travel to the Soviet Union for (then) United Aircraft. The trips were to determine if there was a realistic market for United Aircraft products behind the Iron Curtain. Officially, the name of Igor Sikorsky was not used in aviation history, exhibits or history books at that time, since he had been declared a “non-person” by the Communists shortly after the 1917 revolution. However, it was clear to me from my first visits, that the name and achievements of Igor Sikorsky were well known throughout the Communist Block.

On one of my earliest trips to Moscow, I was given a tour of the Zhukovsky Museum, dedicated to the memory of a pioneer in the study of aerodynamics. There, I stopped to admire a large, beautifully-detailed model of an early Il’ya Muromets bomber. I

began to read, out loud, the descriptive label below the model. “...the Il’ya Muromets series of bombers were designed by an engineering collective at the St. Petersburg factory of the Russian-Baltic Railway Car Company, or R.B.V.Z.” My guide, a feisty little lady of some eighty years, responded: “Everybody in Russia knows that the aircraft was designed by your father, Igor Ivanovich Sikorsky, but no-one is allowed to say it out loud!”

After the Brezhnev era, things began to loosen up under Gorbachev. A young engineer at the Mil helicopter factory began to research the work of Igor Sikorsky in Russia. He began to seek out relatives and friends of Igor Sikorsky, whose children had hidden photographs

and documents for some sixty years. He began to publish articles on Igor Sikorsky. By 1980, Vadim Mikheyev was generally recognized as Russia’s leading historian on the early work of Igor Sikorsky.

In 1989, Mikheyev was instrumental in creating an exhibit at Moscow’s Polytechnical Museum honoring the Centennial of the birth of Igor Sikorsky. Scheduled to run for six months, it was extended another six months due to it’s popularity.

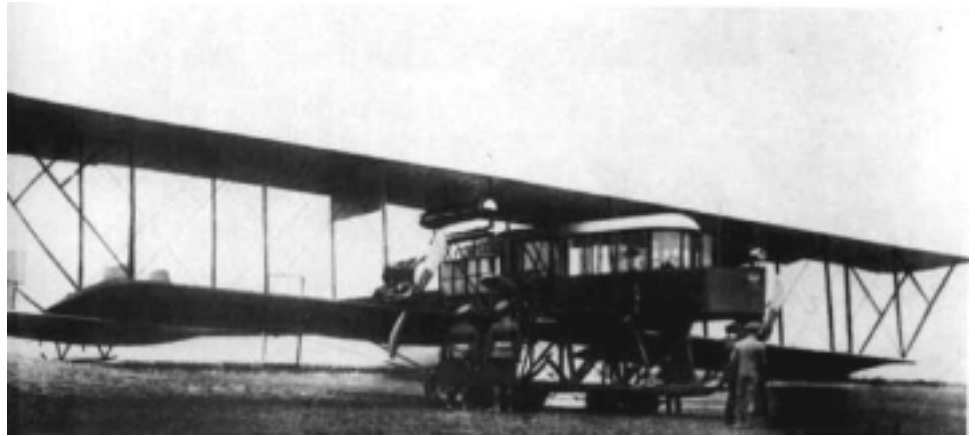
Today, Igor Sikorsky is known and honored both in Russia and Ukraine. In St. Petersburg, near the site of the old R.B.V.Z plant, a major intersection is now called the “Sikorsky Square.” The St. Petersburg Civil Aviation Academy hosts a technical symposium annually, on the date of his birth, May 25th.

Ukraine’s newly-elected President, Viktor Yushchenko, recently signed a decree taking title to the abandoned Sikorsky home in Kiev. During our meeting in Blair House, the President told me that he was determined to renovate the building and make it into a museum honoring the life and work of Igor Sikorsky. According to one associate of the President “...he is determined to make Igor Sikorsky a national hero.”



The “Grand”

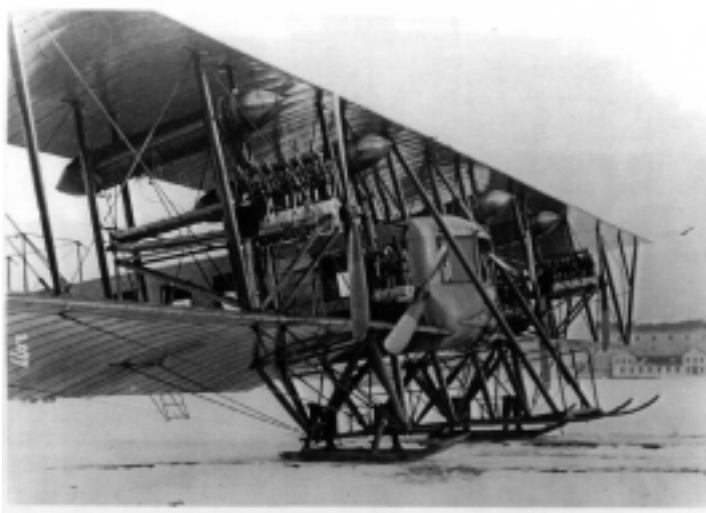
This story begins with the “Grand”, the world’s first four engined aircraft. After experience with his initial designs, Sikorsky decided a large multi engined aircraft was feasible, though many thought the idea foolhardy. In 1913 he had been recruited by the Russo-Baltic Wagon company under the directorship of MV Shidlovskiy, enabling him to continue work on the early single



engined designs. No one had any experience of large machines such as the one he was contemplating. It was designed in the winter of 1912-1913, and he called it the *Russkiy Vityaz* (Russian Knight). However it soon became known as the “Grand”. Sceptics called it the “Petersburg Duck”. It was powered by four German “Argus” engines of 100 horsepower each. It had unheard of luxuries such as an enclosed cockpit, passenger compartment equipped with table, wicker chairs, and electric lights. It confounded the critics and made many successful flights with various engine configurations.

“Il’ya Muromets”

Following the success of the “Grand”, a new aircraft was built using the same type of Argus engines. Due to improved efficiency, it could fly with a larger payload than the “Grand”, and was named after a legendary Russian warrior. Designed in late 1913, it first flew in early 1914. It came into prominence when Igor Sikorsky, Lt.G.I. Lavrov, Staff Captain Kh. F. Prusis, and mechanic V.D. Panasiuk performed an epic 600 mile flight from St Petersburg to Kiev



(during which they endured an engine fire, successfully extinguished by Lt. Lavrov and Panasiuk who went out on the wing to put out the flames), challenging weather conditions, navigation problems, and fatigue. The return flight was equally challenging. No fire this time but the aircraft entered a spin while flying in severe turbulence over forest fires, fortunately recovering at low altitude. The entire flight was a 1,200mile round trip.

This was the first of about seventy five “Murometsy” built between 1914 and 1917 powered by Argus, Salmson or Renault engines. In 1918 another five were assembled from half built aircraft by the Bolshevik Government. It is a sobering thought that in 1914 the most advanced German aircraft was the Focker “Eindecker” and the British RAE “BE 2C”. The later Handley Page and Gotha bombers were inspired by the example of the “Murometsy”.

