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ATG Interviews Kent D. Lee

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CEO of East View Information Services

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: Tell us about East View Information Services

(EVIS). When did it get started and why? How big are you and how many employees do you have? Offices?

KL: I registered “East View Publications” as a sole proprietorship in the Bronx County Courthouse in New York City in March 1989. So that makes us 20 years old this month. At the time I was a graduate student at Columbia University’s Harriman Institute and pursuing my Ph.D. in political science, basically I was a budding Sovietologist. East View was very much a co-creation, and my partner in crime was a young Soviet political scientist Dima Frangulov. Dima worked at one of the USSR Academy of Sciences’ institutes which dealt with international relations, very much akin to my own Columbia. We came together as a result of my grad-school project to translate a book by one of Gorbachev’s bright new political advisors, Alexei Arbatov, who happened to be Dima’s boss. Arbatov invited me to Moscow to do some dissertation research, and Dima and I hit it off. It was a very exciting time. Everything was changing so quickly.

The decision to start East View was quite an opportunistic one. Lots of people played roles. I suppose I was the motive force, since I wanted to do something else with my graduate school education than become a CIA analyst or get an assistant professorship. The circumstances were just too amazing to study them from the outside — I wanted to be part of the action. The Soviet Union, a closed society for 70 years, was opening up, and since I could speak Russian well enough to operate on my own, I did. A lot of people over there, frankly just about everyone, were ready for change and this opened up all sorts of opportunities.

The two key external ingredients for East View’s success were the issues of supply and demand. On the demand side, high-quality information from Russia of all kinds was highly desired by both academia and government. On the supply side, access to it was increasing in theory as Gorbachev’s “glasnost” policies acquired momentum, but the practical matter of its distribution depended on a very decrepit system of a state monopoly channel and its designated distributors in various countries. At one point as a young grad student I was treated quite rudely by a clerk at the US distributor — they had no competition and I guess they felt they could treat customers any way they wanted. I never forgot about it. They are out of business now; I think we had a lot to do with that.

East View’s first product was a microfiche collection of the complete backfile (about 70 years) to a formerly classified Soviet military journal called *Military Thought*. It sold for about \$15,000, but our first sale did not come until 1990 or so. We sold a few sets and I was able to pay off some initial investors and keep the venture going with Dima’s help and a growing group of his former Academy of Sci-

ences colleagues. In late 1990 the first private newspapers started to be issued in the Soviet Union and this was of great interest to the US government, among others. By late 1991-early 1992 Dima and I had landed a big contract to deliver newspapers on a same-day basis from 11 cities in what was now the former Soviet Union — Moscow and four other Russian cities, three cities in Ukraine, and the capitals of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. This was before the Internet existed so it involved a lot of fax machines, leased lines, and coordination. By modern standards it was incredibly crude, but it worked and we set it up quickly and made it sustainable. In any event this contract, which long ago ceased when the special funding ran out, served to build the core infrastructure that East View utilizes to this day. This was essential because the old state monopoly distributor in Moscow was very hostile to us. Cooperation was out of the question. Only pure competition, and we needed independent supply lines.

Over the years East View Publications has morphed into a group of six companies: EVIS (www.eastview.com), the main company which specializes in providing “foreign” language publications in print and digital formats to customers worldwide; East View Cartographic (www.cartographic.com), which provides global geospatial data (that’s a fancy-pants term for maps) and related services; IVIS, our logistics and sales center in Moscow; IVP, our center in Kiev; EVIS BV, our sales office in the Netherlands; and a property company which holds our real estate. We have about 45 employees in our US headquarters just west of Minneapolis; over 100 employees in Russia and about 25 in Kiev. When including all our remote employees working in all of the former Soviet countries, plus in Europe and Africa and Southeast Asia, we have over 200 people.

ATG: Many of us old timers remember Georges Delorme and *Les Livres Etrangers*. What connection, if any, do/did you have with him and his company? What has happened to Mr. Delorme, do you know?

KL: Georges was very kind to me — a true gentleman who was loved and appreciated by librarians all over North America. His company went out of business at almost exactly the same time that we started up — but that was coincidental. In Georges’ case his company’s collapse was connected with the forced commercialization of the old monopoly distribution system. All of a sudden, he had to pay for his books and journals; in the past, this was highly subsidized by the Soviet State, which itself was now in a state of collapse. The same thing affected Collets in the UK, Nauka in Japan, Kamkin in the USA. They’re all gone now, none of them could adapt to the changing conditions.

In our early years we had a consulting relationship with Georges. He helped advise us on the collection development preferences and personalities of various North American librarians. And he provided a lot of practical advice from the bookselling point of view — something

we were pretty green about at the time. Once he came to a Slavic studies conference with us in Hawaii, about 1993 or so.

The last I heard of Georges was that he was running a restaurant in Paris together with his wife and ex-wife. Doesn’t that sound wonderful?!? I very much hope to see him again some day.

ATG: You started East View when you were in graduate school at Columbia in New York? Tell us more? How did you get traction to succeed? What is your training?

KL: Traction came in many forms — people, money, hard work. The people of course are the most important. First of all my enduring business partnership with Dima, but all of the dozens of key employees over the years. And our suppliers. And our customers. It’s all connected. In terms of my own contribution, it was absolutely essential that I spoke Russian — more or less. It gave me street cred and maneuverability in an atmosphere where a reliance on English would have been impossible. When you are reliant on an interpreter, at best you move half as fast and you’ll always get less out of any interaction — as will your potential partner. My original expertise was in public policy and international security issues. Columbia trained me very well, not just as a specialist but also as a generalist of Russian/Soviet studies. I knew a lot about practically all the major issues of the day and this carried us through many negotiations at a time when my business skills were a bit, uh, underdeveloped. Plus I’m a big guy and I handle my vodka very well, no minor matter when doing business with Russians then or now. Seriously, though, the personal side of business is just not to be underestimated when dealing in so many places around the world. In Russia, contacts are everything.

On the financial side, I relied completely on family and friends for the starting capital. My parents contributed the largest amount, \$15,000, back at a time when they must have surely thought they were kissing their money goodbye. The first two-three years I took no salary, so my wife at the time and our three children got by on her salary and my part-time income from Columbia and a DC-based think tank.

My formal training was really as an advanced user of information products — as a researcher, as a scholar. I have no formal librarian training, or business management training, or IT training. All of these skills are essential to run a business like East View, and I suppose a lot of people have suffered because of my inadequacies in these respects over the years. Obviously, we’ve survived 20 years, if not prospered, so on balance something has worked. I do learn relatively well on my feet in a practical sense, and when I become passionate about something, my engagement is pretty powerful. I feel especially that way with respect to mastering various geospatial technologies and issues affecting the development of East View Cartographic, which serves a variety of library and non-library customers.

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ATG: *What countries do you study/deal with? Tell us more, please?*

KL: Russia and China are the two countries of core competency for **EVIS**. I feel comfortable saying that we are the leading intermediary for supplying professional information out of these countries. But in fact we cover over 40 countries in our seven lines of business in **EVIS**. In the case of **EVC**, we deal with virtually every country and region on Earth — especially the difficult ones.

The general thrust of **East View** is to bring primary source information — print or digital — to western markets from countries of the East — Russia, Eastern Europe, the Far East, and now the Middle East. But these days it's really global, so while the dominant model is bringing Russian and Chinese materials to the USA and Canada, we also bring Russian materials to China and vice versa, and Chinese materials to Europe, and Russian to Japan, and so on.

Since our specialty is vernacular (native language) information, we are tremendously dependent on a given market's ability to absorb or consume materials in a given language. In North America, the health of area studies in academia is of great concern to us, as is so-called "open-source intelligence." And to a growing extent, so is the commitment of public libraries to acquiring foreign-language materials.

In the United States, considering our global role, aspirations, responsibilities, it is discouraging to see foreign language studies not funded more aggressively. Not just because I would like to sell more books and journals and databases and maps—which I of course would. Rather, I just see it as being so essential to the world being made a better place. The international information business has shown me thousands of times that its very existence and development is qualitatively transforming the people involved. The best minds of different countries are increasingly accessible to each other, and this on the whole is a radically powerful thing. The Internet, the Web and email of course are part of this, but not everything is free or machine-translatable, nor will it be anytime soon, if ever.

ATG: *How would you rate the book selling, journal publishing, academic, library, reading climates in the various countries that you do business with? Can you tell us more and perhaps in later issues of ATG? You are planning to do a regular column bringing us more information?*

KL: In a word — dynamic. In a few words — more than we can swallow here in the West.

A lot of people thought that publishing would collapse in Russia and in many of the other former communist countries of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It's booming, and staying on top of it is a huge challenge. The export markets are really just a trickle of what each country produces, and even before the recent big economic downturn there is far too much being produced in the various countries that **East View** covers than our North American and European customers can absorb.

China is a special case unto itself. The largest databases in the world — of journals, of newspapers, of books, of dissertations—are produced



The AEA is launching four new peer-reviewed journals in 2009:

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in China, for China. Export is an afterthought, indeed in many cases a non-thought. On the one hand there is still tremendous censorship and secrecy in China, but on the other hand, the government has been very effective at promoting literacy and education and the publishing resources to support it. The retrospective digitization of historical Chinese publications dwarfs anything similar in the West.

All of us here at **East View** look forward to making a regular **ATG** column contribution to help illustrate in depth the publishing, library and intermediary scene in the countries with which we are familiar.

ATG: *Do you have any dealings with Asia and that part of the world?*

KL: Since 2000-2001 we have been very active in China, first of all as the exclusive North American supplier of the TKN/CNKI series of databases. It's now more than half of our digital business (we are still 50-50 split between print and digital).

We are active in Hong Kong (still separate from the mainland in terms of publishing), Taiwan, Japan, and even North Korea. I would like to do much more in Japan and also in South Korea. For now, our primary new-country/new-language focus is on the Arab world and Iran.

ATG: *Who are your competitors? How many customers do you have? Are they largely academic libraries? Have you noticed any change in the market since the recession?*

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KL: Our primary competitors in Russia and China are the domestic intermediary organizations — both traditional and newly-established. The traditional ones are more wedded to print and in most cases have not evolved well into handling digital materials. I don't think that any of them cover the spectrum of producer to end-user as well as we do. Half of **East View** is dealing with suppliers and producers, and the other half of **East View** is dealing with customers and end-users like librarians, researchers and scholars. Ultimately, much of what we do involves value-adding, including through the creation and provision of MARC records and other metadata, services for other intermediary players like link resolvers, digitization, and so on.

We have over 2000 direct and indirect customers, including virtually every ARL institution. Our fastest growth has been among Russian libraries — it's a good sign that Russian consumers buy our Russian products, which generally speaking were developed for western audiences.

As for the recession, we are girding ourselves for what will obviously be a challenging time for all markets — academia, public library, governmental, corporate. Flexibility and innovation will be key, as will constant communication with both our suppliers and customers. I'm optimistic. Over half of **East View's** employees have already been through a cataclysm of political-economic proportions, namely the collapse of the USSR. I think this was even rougher than the US Great Depression, comparatively. Not that we'd like to repeat either experience...

ATG: Please tell us about yourself. What do you like to read? Education? Family? Hobbies?

KL: I'm a voracious reader, but not enough of books. I sponge up most issues of the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Economist*. My wife is the love of my life and best friend. She also has worked at **East View** for the past 10 years as Director of Operations of **EVIS**. I am blessed to have four wonderful children, ages 17 through 22. I'm not sure

against the grain people profile

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Kent D. Lee

BORN AND LIVED: Minneapolis, MN.

EARLY LIFE: Oldest child of hard-working machine-shop owner and nursing supervisor. Grew up hunting and trapping before suburban sprawl took over family home. Formative job was night shift emergency room technician while going to college.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Running **EVIS** and **EVC**.

FAMILY: Wife **Zina** and four kids (**Sasha, Nadia, Alex, Rachel**).

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Pheasant hunting, mushroom hunting, skiing, winter camping.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Zorba the Greek*, *Paradise Below Zero*, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*.

PET PEEVES: Televisions.

PHILOSOPHY: The Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's a small world and what goes around comes around.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Working to make the achievements of Russian cartographers known worldwide — Russians are to maps as the French are to wine.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Successfully execute the **EVIS** vision of becoming the preeminent intermediary in the "foreign" language information business.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Better than the present. There will still be too many products, lots of language/metadata challenges, lots of funding challenges for libraries and other end-users, but intermediaries and publishers will still have a big role to play. 🍷

what was more challenging — not sleeping and changing diapers for years, or trying to put four kids through college. **EVIS** has an investment property in the Canadian Rockies and we try to get there as much as possible for skiing, climbing, caving, just general relaxation. One of my

aborted majors in college was fine arts (ceramics) and I hope one day soon to rebuild my old pottery kiln and start throwing pots again. I've got several tons of great stoneware clay slaking down in the garage, ready to become something useful as soon as I can get the time. 🍷

From the Reference Desk

by **Tom Gilson** (Head, Reference Services, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston, 66 George Street, Charleston, SC 29401; Phone: 843-953-8014; Fax: 843-953-8019) <gilson@cofc.edu>

Oxford University Press adds to its collection of exceptional works on African American History with the publication of the *Encyclopedia of African American History 1896-Present* (2009 9780195167795, \$595). Subtitled *From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty First Century* this work chronicles both the trials and tribulations that African Americans have endured as well as their successes and triumphs up to, and including, the recent election of **Barack Obama**.

Edited by respected scholar and specialist **Paul Finkelman**, these five volumes contain some 1,250 articles covering an impressive diversity of topics and issues from art and

architecture to laws and legislation; education and academics to radio, television and film; and racism and segregation to political and social movements. In addition, numerous biographical sketches are included. These entries cover the full range of occupations and professions from civil rights activists to minstrel show performers and from entrepreneurs and business professionals to religious leaders. The articles are descriptive and fact filled overviews offering solid factual information as well as a starting point for further discovery. As you would expect, each entry has a bibliography of relevant books and articles appropriate to the importance of the topic as well as "see also"

references to related entries. Each article is signed and black and white photos complement the text.

The *Encyclopedia* also offers numerous special features including a complete directory of contributors and their affiliations, a thematic outline of entries, a chronology, and a thorough and comprehensive index. As one examines this set, the overall impact is one of expert, but accessible, scholarship presented with quality production values focused on meeting the needs of readers. Scholars, students as well as interested lay readers will find this work both useful and appealing.

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