

My Life in Russia  
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Thank you to the Camden Conference and to Karolyn Snyder for asking me to be a part of this exciting 2015 Camden Conference. Thank you to Josh Hixon and 3-Crow for this delicious lunch. I am honored to be talking to you all.

About 7 years before many of you were born, the Soviet Union was dying. Most of you probably know that the USSR was the number one mortal enemy of the United States. Specifically its type of government - Communism. When I was in my teens the buzzwords on the news were: the Cold War, the Iron Curtain, and the Red Scare. I grew up a little frightened of the Soviet Union, but when I got to college I took a Soviet Politics class with the most amazing professor and it was all over for me.

From the first day of class I had decided my major – Government with a concentration in Soviet Politics. I took Russian Language, Russian History, Russian Literature, and Comparative Politics. I wanted to learn all that I could. I went to the Soviet Union for the first time in 1988 on a month long study trip with my college. After I graduated I did a four-month intensive language course at Moscow State University.

My course at Moscow State University started in January of 1992. It was the end of the Soviet Union and things were dismal. There was almost no food in the stores. There were long lines for what little there was. Drunks lay about in the snow banks, on benches, and in doorways. It was cold and it was dark. It was a **very** very hard time for Russians. I lived in a dorm for international students and was one of three Americans in the whole dorm. The rest of the students living there were Europeans or Iranians. They divided us by floor – Europeans and the Americans together and one floor below were the Iranians. There was not much intermingling between the floors.

As students it was definitely rough, but it was also exciting. Our budgets were small, but we had kitchens in our dorms so we all cooked for each other. We braved the cold to find the hard currency stores where for dollars you could find just about everything except fresh meat or produce. We ate the horrible food they served in the cafeteria at lunch **and** because we were all in the same boat that made it not so bad.

After class and on the weekends we ventured out to explore the incredible city of Moscow. One evening after a group of us had enjoyed a fun dinner at a Russian restaurant with a huge menu but only two things to choose from, we stood in the snowy street trying to hail a car to take us back to the dorm. Back then there were few cars on the road in general and almost no real taxis. Just about anyone would pull over and act as a taxi to make some extra cash. We could not believe our luck when a huge city bus pulled over and after haggling for the price, the driver agreed to return us to our dorm. I rode in ambulances, police cars, and sometimes private cars during those years. You never knew who might be driving you. One time my driver was a scientist who had just returned from a year-long stint in Antarctica. Another time my driver was a heart surgeon on his way to

work. I always loved talking to those people and hearing their stories. They were equally interested to be talking to me as few had ever met any Americans.

We made friends with the two black market traders who had staked out our dorm as their territory. They were young Russians who had learned to work around the system. They knew that where there were foreigners, there was foreign currency. They changed money for us. They got us train and theatre tickets. They had a car and knew where to find things. They were invaluable to us and without them life would have been very difficult.

A few interesting facts you should know are that in the eighties and very early nineties if a Russian citizen were to get caught with the equivalent of \$50 in foreign currency, they could go to prison. Another thing is that most of those young men who started off as black market traders are now the leading businessmen in the country. Mikhail Prokhorov who is an owner of the Brooklyn Mets and one of the richest men in Russia started off stonewashing jeans and reselling them. Mikhail Fridman, a very successful banker, started off scalping theatre tickets. They learned business from the ground up and in a way that no one could teach them. They were the real go getters with a taste for capitalism.

During the time that I was in class learning Russian, things were changing. At first it was slow and then it was happening at warp speed. Restaurants were opening up. Small stores started popping up selling western products. There were basement bars with Russian musicians playing until late. It was so exciting to witness first hand the incredible change. We felt a little like pioneers.

My four month long course came to an end at the beginning of the beautiful Moscow Spring. My visa was due to expire and my parents were expecting me to come home and find a job. I did fly back to the States only to renew my visa and return to Moscow. I had no job and no place to live. My Russian teacher from the University took me in and told me I could stay as long as I needed. She was so kind and treated me like family. She insisted I sleep in her room because the bed was more comfortable, and she slept in her daughter's room.

Moscow was awash with young foreigners from as close as Germany and Norway and as far away as America and Australia. Foreign companies were opening up new offices everyday. The first people they wanted to hire were foreigners with a decent knowledge of Russian. You could walk into an office with resume in hand, be interviewed, and be hired that same day. They paid well and living in Moscow was very inexpensive if you had foreign currency.

With my very intermediate Russian, I was able to get a job at the American Embassy. There, I had to use my Russian everyday on the phone with people who called in, and in person with people who came in with questions. It was the talking on the phone that really helped me improve my language skills. When you are face-to-face you can use gestures or body language to get your meaning across but on the phone it is all in the words. I went on from there to several different jobs.

One job allowed me to travel all over Russia and meet incredible people from politicians to artists and students. I worked for a while as a desk assistant at the ABC news bureau. The bureau was right in the center of the city – about a mile away from the Kremlin. From the top of our building where the correspondents did their live feeds - you could see Red

Square and all of the Kremlin. When we did a live feed it was usually late at night, and it was the desk assistant's job to call a secret number and give our password to the man who answered. He would ask what we wanted lit up – all of Red Square or just the Kremlin buildings. One night he asked if I wanted the bells, too. I always imagined him and coworkers to be in a small smoke filled room at the top of one of the Kremlin towers with the ruby red star on top. They probably had a small table with a chess game going, an open bottle of vodka, an overflowing ashtray, and some Russian snacks. When my call came in he would go to some huge switches and light up the power center of Russia. I loved those nights when I got to make that call.

In 1994 I met my husband, who is Russian, through some mutual friends. Dmitry and I hit it off immediately and I broke one of the promises I made to my mother, which was not to come home with a Russian boyfriend. Sometimes promises are meant to be broken. We have been married for almost 18 years and have three amazing children. They are 16, 14, and 11.

Through my children I got an inside view of Russian schools. My daughter, Sofie, was the trailblazer. She started at a Russian preschool at three and a half. I took her for her first day for the celebration that was in the courtyard of the school. The first of September is the start of school all over Russia. Children arrive with huge bouquets of flowers for their teachers. Some kids can barely hold them - they are so big. The girls wear fancy dresses and enormous bows in their hair. The boys wear little suits and ties. There is loud music and clowns and lots of talking by the director. Most of the kids end up in tears because of sensory overload, but some seem to fall right into it all. Sofie had a small bow in her hair, a sweet but not fancy dress and her bouquet for her teacher was child size. Right away I wondered how I would ever figure out, or start to fit into this system.

Sofie was at school from 9 to 5. This time included a breakfast of oatmeal, a lunch of black bread, smeared with garlic, soup, salad, and a main course, that was sometimes tongue. She loved it all especially the garlic bread. She napped in a huge room with about 30 toddler-sized beds all with matching bed covers. Her days were filled with lots of playtime, English lessons, and even swimming lessons.

I kept thinking to myself how is this little half-American girl going to find her way. The kids seemed so tough. The mothers were not always friendly. The teachers were at times loving and kind and at times gruff and short tempered. In the end the joke was on me. Recently my two older children were talking about kindergarten and preschool and all they had were warm wonderful memories. They loved the food, the teachers, the kids, the games, and the rickety playground that would have been condemned in America. They loved it all. In the end my kids are more Russian than American it turns out.

All three of my children went to this same kindergarten. The playground was just changed last year. They all had the same teachers, experiences, garlic bread, tongue and share the same fond memories. From there they went on to the same school.

Russian schools are very strong in math and sciences. From first grade the children do their math assignments and class work in pen. Penmanship is still taught and is very important. I was so frustrated when my son came home with a 4 out of 5 on a math test and the only thing wrong with the whole thing was that the teacher thought it was messy. He was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

Physics and Biology are taught in seventh grade, and Chemistry and Geometry are taught in eighth grade. Luckily for me my in-laws are both scientists. My mother-in-law is a rocket propulsion engineer and my father-in-law is a chemist. Needless to say they have been very helpful when it comes to homework in science and math.

Sadly, there are no classes for any children with special needs. A close friend of mine, who is also an American, lived in Russia with her four children for about 12 years. All her children attended Russian school. She was forced to leave after she went through the admissions process to get her youngest son into 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The director told her that they did not teach "sick" children. He was dyslexic.

One of my biggest problems with Russian schools is that there is a lot of cheating. It starts early and never really stops. Teachers tend to look the other way and students are rarely punished for it. For my kids this was always a problem. I am not sure how and where I instilled it into them, but they are not cheaters. It is not in their DNA. They found it really annoying when they would get an average grade for their real work only to see a classmate get a top grade after having cheated. Cheating is not looked down upon in Russia the same way it is in American schools. There, it is just part of the process. Some might even think that those who don't cheat are foolish for not cheating. This speaks to the level of corruption that we see in the government, with the police, and throughout Russian life.

Russian teachers and school administrators in my experience still teach with a very Soviet attitude. They teach to the smartest students. They want their students to conform and don't always welcome thinking outside the box.

Russian schools finish in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. By 9<sup>th</sup> grade most students have an idea of where they want to go to University. Getting into a University in Russia is very different from in the States. All students take a standardized test like the SAT in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Without this test you cannot enter a Russian university. From there it is mostly about who you know, and how much you are willing to pay.

Russian universities are generally oriented to one sphere of study – chemistry, physics, economics, mathematics, international relations, or law. Liberal arts colleges really do not exist. Most universities do not have a campus like you would find at Bowdoin or University of Maine. There are dorms for students who live from outside Moscow. Many students from Moscow continue to live with their parents during college. The experience is very different from the typical American college experience. Muscovites generally stay in Moscow for their university experience. It is a dream for students in Siberia to come to Moscow to study, but Muscovites would never want to go to Siberia to attend a university.

My husband and I decided that at some point it would be important for our children to get part of their schooling outside of Russia. There are a lot of reasons for this. The most important one for us is that Western schools offer so much more to help round out a student than do Russian schools. At our school there are no clubs, no sports, no extra curricular activities. There is very little and I mean almost no community service. The extent of the community service that my older children did during their 8 years at our school was to visit WW2 veterans - one time.

My oldest two are studying abroad. Sofie is in her tenth grade year in an international school in England. Nikita, my 14 year old son is in his eighth year in a pre-prep school in New Hampshire. They have both flourished in their new environments. Sofie was on the cross-country team her first year after never wanting to do any sports. Nikita was on the mountain biking team this past fall and is now on the alpine ski team. He was recently selected to become a member of the National Junior Honor Society. All three of my children speak perfect unaccented English and perfect unaccented Russian. My youngest loves correcting my Russian which is helpful and at times humbling when it is in front of his teachers.

Yes, even after living in Russia for twenty-three years, I still make mistakes. Sometimes they are huge glaring ones and other times they go by unnoticed. But I have learned to just talk. Long ago I decided that I was going to get nowhere by being embarrassed of my mistakes. Believe me, in Russian it is easy to make really embarrassing mistakes. My husband loves to tell the story of when his mother took our daughter to see a play. He asked me what play they had gone to see. The play was Thumbelina. Instead of Thumbelina I said Crapalina. I mixed up one letter and I had changed everything.

Learning Russian has opened up an entire world for me. I understand Russian humor. Russians are very funny people. They have a wonderful sense of humor and appreciate a good laugh. I have learned to be funny in Russian. You know you have made it when you can be funny in another language. I feel 100% comfortable at a dinner table with just Russians. I can hold my own in any situation. What started as an incredible experience has become my life.

I will end with just a few words of advice. Whether you are interested in Russia, China, Madagascar, or Uruguay, start by learning their language. It will give you so much. Speaking another language well opens doors to the world. Then if you can, find a way to travel and spend time in a different country. You will learn so much about yourself, America, **and** the world once you can see it through another language.