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Today the World Became a Little Smaller

People

By Christin Ondrusek

It was the summer of 1999 and I was working hard at the Penn State Horticulture farm. The days went by with my hands in the soil, eating the fruits (and veggies) of my labor, and meeting new people from all walks of life.

One sunny afternoon while working in the cantaloupe field a group of Russian exchange students made an effort to say hello. This was a wonderful opportunity to ask those questions which pertained to my upcoming trip to Mother Russia. I was enlightened with stories about their agriculture system, even if only from personal experiences. That meeting ended with the exchange of email addresses and promises of future contacts.

Now tell me this hasn't happened to all of us; one day you have something and the next it's gone. That's the story of how I misplaced the names and addresses of my newly found Russian friends, all except for one. By some strange fate I kept the address of a Yulya Bolotova. She was a Russian friend of the group but instead attended Madison University in Wisconsin, and I was asked to include her in my writings. After deliberating the idea of contacting someone I would never see, I decided to write her in Madison, Wisconsin as she was studying in the U.S., with my thoughts and questions. Unfortunately, before I left for Russia we talked only a few times due to the madness we both experienced with school schedules.

Escaping to Maslenitsa

Activities

By Suzanne Bruening



Traveling out of the city small Russian summer houses (dachas) can be seen, building up our anticipation of seeing the countryside.

It is nice to be reminded that the city isn't endless -in Moscow's outer region there exist trees, fresh air, and the intensity of nature's beauty. Two weeks ago we ventured 60 kilometers outside Moscow to celebrate, "Maslenitsa", to mark the beginning of spring. In the past, it was said that there was either a beautiful girl or town fool who welcomed spring into each village. Nowadays, Russians escape the city and go into the countryside to enjoy this ritual with friends and family. Traditional games are played like the two person saw races, wapping your opponent with a hay filled pillow while standing on a four by four beam, beer chugging, snow ball fights, and climbing a 20 foot pole to save a chicken. The highlight of the afternoon was the burning of beauty, the scarecrow, and the eating of pancakes, symbolizing the sun and its new presence in our lives.

The situation I'm about to describe makes me believe that sometimes two people, by God's will only, are destined to meet to be eternal friends... Before I left for Russia, I emailed Yulya and included my address with final thoughts never foreseeing the events, which would follow. Imagine receiving this, "Hi, Christin. I'm now back living in Moscow only 10 minutes away from you". What! I - I - I can't believe this. I was both amazed and excited to know an acquaintance would be waiting in Moscow for me.

A heavenly intervention occurred in Moscow... At first glimpse I sensed we had known each other all our lives. She gave the best hug, which exhausted all my worries about awkwardness. Her composure and style resembled that of an all-American girl with English skills to boot. In days that followed the entire Penn State "group" built new relationships with Yulya. To make the situation even more ironic Yulya became one of our teachers. She was given the opportunity to teach a law class with emphasis on Russian/American policies to the students in our program. The class meets every other Wednesday for 5 hours. We have the freedom to ask all questions that plague our curious minds about the newly-formed Russian government. With Russian and American students together in one class learning about the past, present and future of our mutual governments I see a better understanding of tomorrow. Yulya continues to work hard daily as a teacher, student, and auditor, and her free time is spent with friends and family.

I know that someday she will visit the States again, and, when she does, our doors will be open.



Barbie and Ksusha draw a crowd!

A highlight of the weekend was the cross-country skiing, which helped us say goodbye to the snow with which we have had so much fun. Swooshing through the forest was utopian, which made me appreciate the pure Russian land. It was truly beautiful the way the snow relaxed on the branches until it was startled by our presence.

The weekend allowed me to slow down and begin to realize what I have learned during the past 3 months. For instance, sometimes we are content with being in solitude. Other times we are happy that we have companions to share little moments with and to remind us that we are actually seeing what we are seeing. As springtime approaches we understand that we have only a short time left in this great city- in this great experience.

Inevitably, we will take with us the memories, which will shape us in the future. Luckily, in life, the little things make people very content. Maybe it was the people we met, the secrets we shared, the beer we drank, the songs we learned, or the adventures we succumbed. But, most of all, it is who we have become in the last three months.



Yulya Bolotova

Put Away the Warm Wool Blankets

Weather

By Dan Moore

This week officially brought spring to Moscow. She delivers an early morning wake-up call in the form of an enduring but gentle sunshine that nevertheless goes unheeded by this college student and gives way to the crow of my roommate -- "It's five minutes before class." The temperature has been crawling degree by degree from the thermometer bottom to the freezing temperature of water.

Ludmilla, our Russian instructor, welcomes spring every morning through the window of our classroom and the vendors at the vegetable market followed suit recently as they did away with their insulated-glass display cases, deeming their goods capable of enjoying the warmer temperatures as much as they do.

With the ground thawing, construction of the adjacent hostel has resumed and the buzz of heavy machinery provides a background music which I liken to that of elevator music - bland enough only to be only a minor nuisance. The earth, soaked with melted snow, now clings to my boots and hitches a free ride wherever I go. Yes, indeed, it would seem spring has mounted the peak of the seasonal roller coaster ride and has begun its



Smiling faces show the result of a weekend well spent together.

What did we do at the...

Activities

By Meg Bruening

Realizing that our time in Moscow has passed the halfway mark, we have been spending more time both with our Russian friends and with each other. Friday the tenth immersed us in togetherness; we spent a fun-filled three days at a sanatorium in the Moscow region.

Sanatorium: A spa-like place where Russians go for relaxation and a good time. Paxra, the hostel in which we stayed, was particularly nice with a wing to ourselves, lots of food, and a beautiful countryside to admire.

Adept skiers: We spent most of our time skiing-more time than some would have liked, on the cross-country skiing trails in the forest near the hostel. Those of us who weren't skilled at the sport, became skillful by the end of the trip. We would spend hours each day taking in the beauty of the virtually untouched piece of nature covered in a blanket of snow, while getting a good workout at the same time.

New friends: Ksusha, a Russian classmate,

fast paced decent upon us.



The woods at the sanitarium.

Seeing a Different Light

Education

By Regina Szczesniak

Though our Agricultural Bioscience class takes place only twice a week, many of the American students find its six-hour duration tiring. Yet, through the experience we are able to glimpse at the life of an average Russian college student. Our Russian counterparts are accustomed to such lengthy schedules, as most students take an average of ten classes per semester, which occur in "pairs," or one and a half hour intervals over a day which lasts from at least nine till four. The contrast is humbling.

Each Russian student in our group must not only take part in several classes aside from those shared with us, but also teach an English course for first year students at least one day a week. The boys whom we've befriended are able to share an alternate perspective through their experience of military training within the university. As each male Russian citizen is required to serve time in the military, many students elect to have formal training in school and graduate

introduced us to her family and their friends. Those of us with younger siblings spent a lot of time with the children of those families. The children knew some English; however, we learned that language does not have to be a barrier: you can communicate through gestures, song, and sharing experiences.

Affect: All twelve of us were positively affected by the events we had at the sanitarium. Christin said, "That weekend was probably one the best experiences of my entire life." Although we were more exhausted when we returned home, we learned a lot about Russian culture.

Time: Time flies when you're having a good time; nonetheless, keeping as busy as we did was more than fatiguing. We arrived at the sanitarium around 5 o'clock Friday afternoon and left about the same time on Sunday. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner - since arriving in Russia this was one of the first times we ate three meals a day. Going to bed at 12 and getting up at 7:30, some of us even slept regular hours.

Oodles: Every activity we did was done in excess. Some of us, namely Barbie, probably skied 20 miles that weekend. Others probably gained 20 pounds.

Recreation: Not only did we ski, but there were many activities to keep all of us occupied and happy. A few of us experienced a Russian sauna for the first time-and possibly the last. Genie said, "I love the result of the experience, I just didn't like the process." On Saturday we participated in Russian culture, playing traditional games while celebrating the holiday. In the evenings many of us would gather together with our new friends to dance and to sing.

Invigorating: Being able to breath fresh air

with the distinction of officer. However, such an endeavor adds several courses to a student's load for six semesters. Due to last year's bombings in Moscow, the boys in this program must also take time to serve as guards around university property.



Sasha saluting in his uniform.

We are able to see how such demanding schedules effect the daily lives of our friends. For example, many of the Russian girls add up to four hours of commute to regular class time, totaling a eleven or twelve hour day. One friend also commented on the difficulty of finding a part-time job because of school. No restaurants were able to accommodate his schedule.

From our viewpoint, we wonder how Russian and American universities accomplish the same goals with such varying means. Perhaps the systems are too different to even compare. While we Americans are able to chose our majors and enjoy considerable flexibility in selecting classes, the Russian students have their courses predetermined. Teaching methods are also quite different, as most Russian classes are of lecture format with

and to get away from the city, gave many of us a second wind. As agricultural students, we appreciate the outdoors and cherished the time that we were able to spend in nature.

Unified: Unable to escape from each other into the depths of the city, we, as a group, spent quality time together. And to make things more interesting, we drew names from a hat to see whom we were going to room with.

Maslenitsa: The Russian holiday which welcomes the coming of spring. Games are played, songs are sung, blini (Russian pancakes) are eaten, and dancing around a blazing scarecrow takes place.



Christin and Samra showing off their log sawing abilities.



minimal opportunity for delving fully into a topic.

Our friends seem happy for the chance to learn through American teaching methods, and despite our six-hour classes, we are happy for the chance to understand a different educational system. In the end, it seems, we've gained as much by simply learning together as we have through the curriculum.

As part of the festivities at the sanitorium, this 30ft pole needed to be climbed in order to get the prize at the top. This man chose the live chicken.

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Sara Hayden
Mathew Brubaker**

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