

My Ukrainian/Russian Experience

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As a girl who loves to talk, suddenly finding myself mute after touching down at Odessa Airport, I felt like I'd woken up in one of those dreams where you open your mouth to speak, but no sound comes out. But this wasn't a dream. I'd volunteered for this experience, I'd knowingly walked onto the plane taking me to Ukraine - to a country where the people speak a language completely alien to me - a language whose alphabet I had at best a shaky hold on.

I'd travelled more than a thousand miles from London to Odessa and had plans to travel several thousand more, spending a year exploring Ukraine and Russia as I learned more of the language. But at that moment, standing at baggage reclaim in Odessa, my plans couldn't have seemed more ridiculous had I suggested making the entire journey on foot - I didn't even know how to ask the way out of the airport.

Somehow, of course, I did make it out, and was welcomed to Ukraine (at least I think that's what they said), by my host family, who'd be my home for the next three months... and I began to learn Russian.

Being totally illiterate in a strange country makes life at once very simple and amazingly complicated. The boundaries of your world shrink dramatically - you can't expect much more of yourself than to be able to get to school and back, and to try to ask what's for dinner. Even simple daily tasks, such as catching the bus, bristle with unknown words, and the risk of getting lost and being unable to ask the way home. I was fortunate to have a landlady who'd been hosting students for many years and our 'morning drill' during breakfast - naming everything I could see - elbow, fork, teacup, tablecloth - was not only incredibly helpful for me, but also provided her with great entertainment, as I managed to confuse elbows with spoons and knives with nails, before I'd even drunk my tea.

There was so much around me that was new that the word 'why?' was one of my first in Russian. Why, for example, did my landlady keep buckets and bowls of water balanced all over the bathroom? I discovered the answer the first time the water was cut-off. Why would anyone want to have their photo taken with a lizard, snake, small crocodile or all three, by the men who offered such a service (and each seemed to own a small zoo) on Deribasavskaya? I never did see anyone having a picture taken. And why had a dozen men dug a trench all along our street and then left it for a month? That one, no one had an answer for. I learned that to some questions the only answer was a shrug and a simple "It's Ukraine".

Gradually, through the fog of cases, verb aspects and mysterious grammatical constructions called 'verbal adverbs', I started to make limited sense in Russian. I was getting my voice back, and as I learned more of the language, so the boundaries of my world grew. I don't think I've ever been so proud of anything as I was when I managed to buy my own train ticket to Crimea, get on the right train and go away for the weekend. And here I'll let you into a secret: trains are ideal for the language student. Your unsuspecting fellow passengers are actually a captive audience for you to practice your Russian on. You can corner them for a chat, and with only the choice of their coupe or the corridor, they really have nowhere to escape to. So it was that I discovered Ivan's fascination with Margaret Thatcher and the Falklands War (he'd been a Soviet fighter pilot and admired a strong woman); and that was also how I ended up singing 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' with eight-year-old Christina from Moscow - who's granny Raia was taking her back to her village for the summer - and who fed us all on an endless supply of cheese pies, chicken drumsticks and cucumbers. In fairness, I think I was entertainment for them too: all of them said they'd never met

an English girl before, and I was amazed that the stereotypical images of gentlemen in bowler hats, and afternoon tea, still held sway in the imaginations of many Ukrainians I spoke to. Even back at Odessa University I was told that they'd been greatly relieved when I arrived, to see that I smiled. "Not at all like an English person" they said. I assured them that other English people also smiled, and felt that, in a small way, I'd done some good for the image of Britain abroad.

Three months in Ukraine sped past, and I headed north into Russia, from the edge of the Black Sea to not far (in Russian terms) from the White Sea. Petrozavodsk in Karelia seemed fresh, cool and sane after Odessa - the calm blueness of Lake Onega making a clear contrast with the oily bustle of Odessa's sea port. Karelian nature, with its lakes, rivers, waterfalls and endless forest, has a reputation for beauty throughout Russia and beyond, and the people of Petrozavodsk are proud of their republic. "Wilder than Finland, but more civilised than the rest of Russia" my landlady told me.

Here my relationship with Russian has begun to change - now I've become capable of doing the basic things, daily life is no longer a confusion of mysterious symbols, and at some point I've started to understand street signs without thinking. For the first time I begin to explore Russian culture. I read - short stories, bits of novels, newspapers, adverts, fliers - anything that crosses my field of vision. I watch TV, go to the cinema, listen to the radio - I even catch myself translating Russian pop lyrics. I'm indiscriminate in my interests as everything seems fresh and new - slogans and adverts that in English I'd dismiss as mundane or clichéd, I discover for the first time in Russian - so that for the first reading, at least, nothing is boring to me.

And as the horizon of my understanding extends, I explore more of my surroundings too. I go out into the Karelian countryside - though in truth there's little need - here in Petrozavodsk the country seems to reach into the heart of the town. Many people have dachas out of town and spend every spare moment of summer growing fruit, vegetables and flowers, picking berries and hunting for mushrooms. The whole of Petrozavodsk seems to be occupied in transporting the fruits of the forest back to their flats - there are even adverts on the buses from food processing firms offering to buy people's pickings.

As I write this, the dacha season and my stay in Karelia, are both drawing to an end. I'm sitting in my landlady's dacha feeling, for the first time, just a little chilly, as the temperature's fallen fast on this late September afternoon. We've picked the last few cucumbers, pulled up the beetroot and courgette plants and been for a wander in the woods, just in case there are any mushrooms about (this year's not been a good one for them). It's already three weeks since we cleared the bushes of blackcurrants, redcurrants and gooseberries - most of them have now become immortal in jars of thick, sugary jam. The last couple of months have taught me all about stewing, pickling and conserving, and, of course, the Russian words that go with them...

Now we have to clean everything up, shut all the windows, check the doors for cracks and make sure the dacha's sealed and safe from the frost, ice and snow which will soon be on its way. And I'm packing up again too, heading off to Moscow to try another slice of Russian life. And after that, who knows? It seems a shame to stop in Western Russia when the tempting mass of whiteness that is Siberia, stretches out across the map, promising space for adventure and a world of new words.... maybe I could even make the journey on foot?