

RUSSIAN WITHOUT TEARS
IN A PLACE FEW HEARD OF - **Petrozavodsk, Russia**

-Why on earth would you want to study Russian in Petrozavodsk? Where is that, anyway?

We had this question many times, before and after.

Yes, why indeed?

To an elderly Swede like me, Russian Karelia has a certain fascination. When I first read about it during my school years, I used to see it as a mystic semi-wilderness, covered by deep forests and sparsely inhabited by people in folk costumes who played kantele and sang ancient Finnish folk songs. That is how it was described by Finnish national romantics before the Second World War.

Finns who were there during the war actually described Russian Karelia as a strange country, where people spoke a variant of their language that they could hardly understand, and lived in big wooden houses, built of lying timber, with the animals stables in the ground floor. I have actually met one or two Finns who talked about Petrozavodsk - they described it as a town of primitive wooden houses, full of fleas and bedbugs. But it was the only real city behind the front – somewhere where you could go sometimes on short leaves or your unit could lie in reserve for a rest period if you were lucky – a place where you could get deloused, have a sauna and get drunk, and sleep in a real house for a change.

I always wanted to see Russian Karelia myself. But I was not surprised when I found very little of the above – things change in 60-70 years. Petrozavodsk is now a bustling city of some 265 000 inhabitants. The Soviet Union did much to populate and develop Karelia. And to russify it – the Finnish-speaking population in The republic is now only some 10 per cent. The countryside is being depopulated, like everywhere. And Russian standard buildings have replaced the traditional Karelian houses – where you still see one, it has a roof of corrugated iron, instead of the old wooden shingles.

And why study Russian there? Well, maybe because Petrozavodsk is an interesting microcosm of Russia, And a place where you still need to speak Russian to get around – you can't like in Moscow or St Petersburg count on always finding someone who knows English. And because it is a smaller and more relaxed place, without a lot of things to distract you from your studies.

It's a common saying that you can judge a Russian city's position in modern Russia by looking at what cars people drive, at the statues in the squares and by the streets names. If Ladas and other Russian makes are dominant in the streets, like in Petrozavodsk, it signals a lack of economic development. If Lenin still stands statue and the streets have their old Soviet names it's a sign of slow political and ideological development. In Petrozavodsk, Lenin still holds his old position in the Round Square, and an old second-ranker like Kirov stands in the Theatre square. An old horror like Feliks Dzerzhinsky, head of the first of the internal security organizations, the Cheka, still has a street named after him.

But there are many good signs of development in Petrozavodsk. Much of the Soviet drabness is gone, street life is busy and night life lively. New apartment houses that go up look like something you'd see in the West, not a bit like the giant grey housing blocks, the instant slums, that are a Soviet heritage all over Russia. The old surly attitude among all service personnel towards their customers is all but gone. And – some taxis have functioning safety belts nowadays, at least in the front seat. And – the driver doesn't always take it as a personal insult if you use it.

The tuition at the university we found very efficient. In two weeks time, I had my 40-year old knowledge of Russian brushed up, so I felt I could start speaking the language again. Anne-Marie had a lift from a scant knowledge of some Russian to a level where she could actually start using it in everyday situations. Our teachers Katya and Marina were always cheerful and motivated and driving, although we sometimes sensed they were tired. We gradually understood that they spent their holiday teaching full days, in small groups or singly, to one student. I guess they just collapsed in the evenings.

Our host family was a very nice and helpful young couple, but had no time or particular wish to entertain us at dinner. Even the smallness of the flat forbade that, because the kitchen table, the only place to eat, was too small for more than two. Besides, Lidia's English was much too good – it felt artificial to talk a halting Russian when English worked so much better. Nor were we sure we would really have wanted to make conversation over the dinner table in the evenings. We were mentally exhausted after the day's lessons, and already engrossed in our homework.

Our younger fellow students went out at night and met Russians their age – but I wonder if they didn't lapse into English too, sometimes. We married 65-plussers don't go to discos – a few restaurant meals was enough for us. Shop attendants, waiters, bank clerks and the like were our conversation partners in real life.

But exchanging experiences about life in Russia and our respective contacts with Russians with the others in the group was a very stimulating feature of the course. Adam, Maarten and Ward seemed to meet people wherever

they went!

Weather when we came to Petrozavodsk was absolutely lousy, and had been so for weeks – cold and grey and a drizzle hanging in the air. Are we to spend two weeks in this drab place in this drab weather, was our first thought when we stepped off the train. The weather changed the same evening, and gradually became too hot – it's annoying when papers always stick to your underarms when you try to study, and everybody got drowsy during afternoon lessons. Petrozavodsk improved, too, and it wasn't without a certain regret that we boarded the train again.

The trip home felt like a reward for our two study weeks. But we learnt again something we had repressed from memory from previous times – that Russian toilets in public places can be terribly primitive sometimes, and unspeakable horrors to spoiled Westerners. This will improve over the years, I'm sure. (Besides, in all fairness, there are public loos at home we wouldn't want a foreigner to see.)

But every look out of the window on the Murmansk railway showed a problem that may take longer to overcome – an incessant string of litter along the rails. You are nowadays strongly admonished not to just throw refuse out of the window. The guard in every sleeping wagon has a big sack for collecting garbage outside her little cabin. But the torn plastic sacks with litter you sometimes see along the line makes you wonder if the guards don't make things simple for themselves sometimes.

Russians have a habit of throwing litter around them, and no-one picks it up for them. The lack of a functioning garbage collection contributes to this. You can sometimes understand them, when you try get rid of an empty bottle or a banana peel. But the result is that beaches, and indeed nearly all nature where many people go, become rather unattractive to us, who are not used to this.

Just think: from S:t Petersburg to Vladivostok, from S:t Peter to Murmansk, from Moscow to Odessa, all along every railway line all over enormous Russia, an unending string of garbage. How can you make people stop throwing waste around when it's already so littered everywhere? But who will pick up everything that is already lying around?

That's their problem. More important to us was that we had opportunities to exercise our newly-mastered Russian on the trip home. Like with 10-year-old Andrej on the boat to the Solovki islands, who talked with us and other foreigners all the way there and back – six hours in one day. We alternated between Russian and English, and taught each other. When he was occupied with others, his father took over. We think Andrej is next generation's Russia - eager for communication and dialogue with the outside world and for exchange of views and experiences.

By Mats Laurin, Norrköping, Sweden