

A Semester in St. Petersburg Fall 2009

by Anastassia Fagan

Blog entry #1

The airport shuttle has just barely started to hobble along when I immediately begin studying the Russians' faces. It isn't very hard for me to spot which ones they are: Slavic long noses and piercing eyes giving them away, the red passports only offering confirmation. "You're on a safari looking at animals", our resident director told us, "and they are on a hunt." And I refuse to get caught. So, not even in Russia yet, the muscles in my face begin working furiously trying to capture the expression on the women's faces. I dare not name the look yet, but like a young animal in the wild, I am determined to blend in. It was not literature or history that first drew me to study Russian at the University of Notre Dame. Rather, an obsession with travel and exploration, and an off chance moment that allowed me to first glimpse the tinkling language with its curvy alphabet. I was in Hungary at the time, struggling, but loving every minute of it, when I happened to sit in on a Russian language class of my Hungarian host sister. It struck me at the time where I sat at the brink of university determined to study something new. Therefore freshman year I sat, with the other slightly petrified students clutching my beginner *Troika* book, awaiting the professor who would tell me what the letter that looked like a backwards "R" sounded like.

As every student of the Russian psyche or soul or experience (perhaps, all three) will tell you, with each layer of language and culture pulled back for discovery, fascination for this culture grows. I found myself wanting to know what kind of nation could produce masterpieces such as Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, and Levitan's landscapes? And now, putting my two meager years of learning and imagining to the test, I am finally making my way to Russia. There is great meaning, I think, a great potential for something when one studies in Russia. The world becomes simultaneously smaller and larger; it becomes much the same, yet so much more different. Therefore, in pursuit of understanding this wonderfully incomprehensible nation, I study. There is something very naturalistic about studying abroad. The idea being: to study creatures in their natural habitat in an effort to learn about our present, and therefore create our future. It is noble, if not a little daunting. Frankfurt is cold. A theme, I fear, that will become all too familiar. I am lucky enough to be sitting at a window seat, and I am anxious to have my first views of St. Petersburg. I have dreamed of going to this city since I was a little girl, but I am trying to eliminate all expectations I have. It has been harder this time, but I am trying to have a flexible mind and not be quick of tongue. But I will take it one prefixed verb of motion at a time, and hopefully, by the end, I will have something to write home about.

Blog entry #2

After fighting the desire to scribble three or four little paragraphs about life in St. Petersburg, now, at the moment when time, and space, and freedom should converge into creation, I have nothing to write. It is this city, no doubt. It is becoming hard to remove the dirt from under my fingernails, but for some reason it is special. If there ever was a city in need of a good scrub down, it's St. Petersburg, but I am deathly afraid that to remove one miniscule speck of dust would irrevocably change it. Now that wouldn't do. I live next to the Alexander Nevsky Lavra; one of Russia's highest ranking monasteries which houses a cathedral, the city's only Seminary Academy, and three major cemeteries. Some of Russia's greatest citizens such as Tchaikovsky, Lomonosov, and Dostoevsky are buried here. On the way to school I can almost feel the ghosts of the dead writers and musicians all pulling at my heart to write, make music, or to draw. But I am too scared. I consider myself a brave person. After all, there must be a certain courage that one needs to travel to the mighty bear of Russia with nothing but two suitcases and a tattered dictionary. An even greater courage is needed to survive and to succeed. But language acquisition consists of ebbs and flows, days of confidence and complete and utter failure. Today, unfortunately, was one of those days.

It started out by confusing the verbs "to write" and "to pee" (only an accent mark difference!), and ended with referring to my younger host sister in the formal, male-gendered speech. However, after having a day full of contempt at my language abilities, and allowing myself to envision a future without a solid proficiency in any language including English, I was sent from the mighty beings that be a wonderful and truly special bit of encouragement. After dinner I confessed to my host dad that I was often scared to speak Russian. He looked at me straight in the eyes, the windows into the soul, and said, "Forest. Do you understand this word, forest?" I did. "Wolf. Do you understand this word, wolf?" Where was he going with this? "The wolf," he said, "lives in the forest. If you are afraid of the wolf, then you will never go into the forest. You must go into the forest. You mustn't let the wolf scare you." I replied by smiling the most thankful smile I could muster. He gave me the encouragement I needed to renew my passion and my energy. I was reminded of why I love meeting new peoples and discovering strange new worlds. I seek to understand the souls of the musicians buried next door, and I seek this through my language and my studies. Nothing happens in Russia until the exact moment that it occurs; when time and space and freedom all converge into creation and produce a masterpiece. All in all, it was an inspiring little day.

Anastassia Fagan
Russia Blog #3

It hasn't taken very long for the four walls in my room to appear as if they are caving in and the ceiling to start lowering into a floor that I am sure stretched farther into the hallway than it does now. I have been exiled. Not to the Gulags or to some other prison on an isolated island, but just to my room. And not because of some radical political beliefs that I have been recklessly spouting, but, rather, because my fever has hit 102 degrees, and the last time I went outside, I fainted. Getting sick in a foreign country

is not a good idea. Things that you don't really think about back home such as illness/medical vocabulary, the actual severity of your illness, or even something as basic as where to find tissues becomes something of concern. However, since the occasion has chosen to present itself, I have decided to approach it as a case study, and faithfully document the war going on between the brave Russian front (henceforth known as "the Resistance") and the cunning and devious antigens that are coursing throughout my bloodstream with astounding skill and ability.

Symptom no. 1: fainting. The Resistance's response: unidentified white pills.

Symptom no. 2: chest pains. The Resistance's response: boiling hot milk.

Symptom no. 3: high fever. The Resistance's response: extra blankets; thicker sweaters.

Symptom no. 4: upset stomach. The Resistance's response: activated charcoal.

Symptom no. 5: cough. The Resistance's response: a shot of grapefruit-flavored vodka.

(two weeks later)

Two weeks and three trips to the doctor later, I have been diagnosed with a viral infection that has turned into bronchitis. Not nearly as glamorous sounding as I would have liked, but one must not be picky. And however humorous sounding I can make my illness seem, this experience has made me understand what the words "family" and "health" and "survival" really mean in Russian, and to the Russian family. My host mother, with two small girls and a husband who needs to work six days a week to think about, never hesitated in caring for me for a moment. From the second she came home and saw me shivering and holding a thermometer I, as a member of her family, became the sole focus of her attention. Her attention and sacrifice were simply heartwarming to see, and they helped me to think less of home, and how much I missed my own mother. Family means the continuation of life in Russia, as it does in many cultures. A person begins life with family, and, if all goes well, should end life with one to carry on the family name, experiences, and the love of those who came before. If something threatens that, such as a war, or a disease, even something as small as my bronchitis, then it must be defeated, and the family peace restored. So yes, the walls in my room do look like they are caving in, and the ceiling does seem a bit a lower than it did when my temperature was a normal 98.6. But this is home, and I know that there is a battle-ready Russian mother on the other side of my heavy wooden door with a cup of hot tea and a fresh round of ammunition. Antigens, beware.

Anastassia Fagan
Russian Blog #4

In Russia, things run in circles. The march forward through time is made, certainly not in one continuous circle, but by many little circles that, though they loop back every once in a while, still push forward. My last week with my host family looks very much like my first week with them. I come home from school, eat a quick dinner, and commence into a "Connect Four" or "Candyland" tournament of Olympic standards with my seven-year-old host sister. After the representative from the United States of

America is soundly defeated, I help my older host sister with her English homework. It is a routine that I have grown to love, and though it sounds simple, these hours of just playing in Russian have done so much for my language skills. We have also learned a lot about each other, my host family and I. For example, my host family has learned that I am more likely to eat my dinner if I don't know what it is, and that when I marked on my application form that I considered myself "a clean" person, I lied. I, meanwhile, have learned that when my host mother asks if I will eat dinner, it is not a question, it's a command, and that it is not absolutely necessary to let her know that my host dad has been teaching me curse words on the side. Indeed, I am getting the distinct impression that Mother Russia, Herself, is not happy that I'm leaving. She taunts me with a sudden accessible wi-fi in my apartment that wasn't there before, but then shows Her displeasure with me by causing the temperature to all of a sudden plummet two days before I fly home to sunny south Mississippi.

But She is not the only one who is a little bit sad. I, very simply, am not ready to go home. The country that has left me more bruised, scarred, and, perhaps, slightly more depressed than I was four months ago, has also won my love and a lifetime of dedication and study. And it pains me dearly to have to begin the process of rolling up the heart strings that I have left tangled, tied, and knotted along the city. Each knot, it seems, tied at my favorite statue, my favorite park, my favorite Georgian restaurant, has become a monument of sorts. A reminder of the times when I loved, cried, was frustrated, and experienced joy. Because as every student of the Russian psyche or soul or experience (perhaps, all three) will tell you, with each layer of language and culture pulled back for discovery, fascination for this culture grows. There is great meaning, I think, a great potential for something when one studies in Russia. The world becomes simultaneously smaller and larger; it becomes much the same, yet so much more different. Therefore, in pursuit of understanding this wonderfully incomprehensible nation, I study. I study in Russia; I study at home. And I will never stop studying, and learning, and shaking my head over the audacity of the Russian language for having so many verbs of motion. I have decided, ultimately, to not count time from when I was last in St. Petersburg, but to count time until I can return again to the city on the water, the bronze horseman keeping watch over its castles and treasures.