

SHARING PROVERBS OVER COFFEE

• NOVA SCHMID

It was February 1999, not the smartest time for an American to be in Russia. The Kosovo situation was escalating and the rumor was that not many Russians were enthusiastic about the American involvement in the war. In Moscow, this was easily demonstrated by making a quick pass by the American Embassy to see the vandalism.

I'll claim to be a citizen of the world, I thought, but my passport always reveals me. It pinpoints me down to the very last hair. I am American. Passport number, Social Security number, birth date 11-04-79. FEMALE. This was me. Everything you needed to know was there. Forget about my religion. Forget about my favorite color.

My friends and I planned this trip to take advantage of living so close to one of the greatest empires on earth—rich with history and culture. Actually, I knew nothing of the rich culture in Russia. I knew only what I had studied in school. The “passport facts,” I call them. I had only read books about communism and the Cold War. Why did we not study this “rich culture and history,” I thought? There was no option to study Russian language or cooking. What makes them so different that we don't embrace their culture the way we do with the French or Italians? I felt as if I was going to another planet.

The second day that I was in Moscow, the weather took a turn for the worse. The frost-bitten air was flowing through the square at an incredible

rate. My nose was bright red and my fingers were stiff. The clouds were rolling in and the sky had turned dark gray. It was time to take refuge in a bar or cafe until the bus came.

I popped into the first cafe I saw. It was nice, warm and full of other cold people. I enunciated the words “coffee please” twice, to be sure he understood. In the past week, I hadn't had much luck speaking English with Russians. It

proved to be quite difficult to order food or ask directions. But the barista understood; he handed me my coffee and I added some milk and found a

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major. In 1999, when
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ventured into Russia.

seat. I took out my book with the intention of having a good reading session, but my attention was lost in the storm.

My thoughts were interrupted when a petite, wrinkled old woman tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to meet her eyes, deep and watery. She had wisps of gray hair showing from underneath her scarf. Her lips were cracked, but her smile was big.

“Are you English?” she asked, revealing a thick accent in her warm voice.

“No,” I answered, “I am American.” At those words, she took a seat at my table and put her hand on my shoulder. Despite her age, she was giddy like a 12-year-old girl.

“I lived in Sweden,” she said. “I lived in Sweden for a long time, that is why I speak English. It has been almost 10 years since I have returned in Russia. I worked in Sweden, but my family is here. I love to speak in English. I spoke in English for my job.”

She continued to tell me more of her life in Sweden, people she had met, where she had lived and traveled to, and how painful it was to move back. I listened and asked occasional questions. “Swedish,” she said, “I miss speaking Swedish too.”

“Hur mår du?” I asked her. Her eyes lit up. She returned my greeting in Swedish and patted my shoulder slightly. She was surprised I knew some Swedish; I told her I was studying in Finland and a new conversation began.

“Finns and Russians aren’t the best of friends,” she told me, “but I like them, they are good people.”

“Russians and Americans aren’t the best of friends right now either,” I said, “and you are the first Russian that has approached me.”

She looked away a moment as if she had forgotten something. Then she turned as if to tell me something secret — a series of proverbs.

“The world will always fight wars. We are children with much to learn. We will never understand if we don’t lower ourselves to a human level. My government is angry with yours and your government is angry with mine. But I am not angry with you and you are not angry with me. People are still dying. Governments disagree with other governments. Money is not only ‘bread and heat’ to a government, and people do not always have faces. Russians don’t hate Americans. Governments unfortunately speak louder than the rest of us.”

I listened intently as she went on.

“You are young, and already you have left your home to explore the world on a human level. It is people like you that can help change things. I am doing what I can, how little that is, and I feel it makes a difference. Russians want to be a part of the world; it is taking time. When you go home, tell your friends and family what you saw here and what you felt. War can never be resolved fully if there is not a cultural understanding, if we don’t reach a human level.”

She spoke sweetly, but the gravity of her message was in her eyes.

“On a human level,” she repeated, “me and you, this is a human level. Who knows maybe you will live to see peace.”

She stood up and grabbed her handbag. I stood up too. She shook my hands and half hugged me. She looked me in the eye and said, “Udachi,” which is Russian for good luck. Then she left.

I sat until the bus came.

Now I feel as though I understand what working for world peace means. It is saving real faces in what was before a faceless land. It is a compassion for humanity, compassion that can only be reached if we travel beyond our own neighborhood, if we reach out past our differences in order to obtain this human level. A mission was laid out before me. I knew what I had to do, and I intended to do it.