

Why Russia?

- by Eric Schempp

Those of you reading this probably already know more about me than you care to know. Thus, I will keep it short.

My name is Eric Schempp. I was a Peace Corps volunteer serving in Western Russia. I was born in Boulder, Colorado and I graduated from the University of Wyoming in May of 1999 with a degree in Marketing. On August 28th I left America for my two years of volunteer service in Western Russia.

I arrived in Russia on August 29th and lived just outside of Moscow in the city of Zelenograd with a family that today I am still very close with. I spent two months learning Russian and the role of business in the Russian economy. On November 4th, I was sworn in as an official Peace Corps volunteer by the United States Ambassador to Russia in his house, the Spasso House and was then sent to Lodeynoye Pole to start my two years of service.

Lodeynoye Pole, three hours north of St. Petersburg, is a town of about 25,000 people. It is a quaint little place where very little happens and is beautiful when covered in a blanket of snow. In the winter, it is cold and dark and a day of more than six hours of sunlight is rare. The sun may rise at 10 A.M. and set at 3 P.M. while the summer hours are just the opposite. The sun sets around 3 A.M. but the light lingers, illuminating the sky and giving the sense that darkness does not exist. It is called "White Nights."

I lived in a one-bedroom apartment with a small kitchen and bathroom. There was a wood burning furnace to heat water when a shower was in order.

My first year was spent in Lodeynoye Pole teaching English to the 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th form (grade) students. I sponsored English clubs for both children and adults and occasionally offered assistance to the local business center. Three times a week I boarded an old, rickety, run down bus and rode 30 minute out to an orphanage in the nearby village of Svir Stroi. I taught English and tried to develop business projects in an attempt to help the orphanage become self-sustaining and less dependent upon the Russian government.

While working at the orphanage, I came in contact with Miramed, an organization whose main goal was to help orphans. They offered me a chance to make working at an orphanage my primary project in the city of Uglich. I approached Peace Corps and they agreed to move me to Uglich in August of 2001 to complete my second year.

Uglich is a city of about 40,000 people but feels much smaller. By Russian standards it is a village. It is located about 160 kilometers north of Moscow and is situated on the Volga River about 30 minutes from Yaroslavl. Like Lodeynoye Pole, it is a little place where very little happens. However, contrary to Lodeynoye Pole, the orphanage is located smack dab in the middle of the city instead of the outskirts of a village.

My main objective, while working at the orphanage, was to establish a small business in the field of agriculture. Again, it was an attempt to help the orphanage earn some steady income and become less dependent upon the government. The project was a pig farm and was designed to be self-sustaining. The business plan I developed for the project and other details are laid out in a web page that can be found at

<http://uglichfarm.tripod.com>

In Uglich, I lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Hot water was a bit more frequent than in the Lodeynoye Pole. I had it once or twice a week. In the winter, the average temperature of my apartment was 16 degrees Celsius (60 degrees Fahrenheit). I slept in a turtleneck and sweats.

My reasons for joining Peace Corps were many and mostly indefinable. When Americans asked me why I joined Peace Corps and went to Russia, I usually said: "I wanted to have an impact, if only a small one (and hopefully a positive one), on a few people of Russia. I have always wanted to travel. I wanted to push my own personal envelope and see what I was capable of doing. I wanted to learn a foreign language and see the world. I am intrigued by other cultures and those that do not operate in the same fashion as I do. I have often thought that Russia lacked the element of common sense, but then turned around and found myself thoroughly amazed at how they conquered and

overcame seemingly impossible day to day problems.

I have loved and hated Russia and have experienced culture shock at its finest every week and every day. It results from struggling through and carrying out everyday responsibilities. It results from struggling with the language and trying to communicate. It's laughing and drinking vodka with the locals. It's rejecting the offer of more vodka the next morning as a cure for a hangover. It is being yelled at by Babushkas (grandmas) because you forgot to put on your scarf in the morning and reluctantly returning home to get it. It's watching Russians try to learn a foreign language and understand a foreign world. It is answering the question, "Why in God's name would you want to come to this country?" and listening to their dreams of living anywhere but Russia. It's struggling to explain that, "No, America is not necessarily a better place. It does have its advantages, but it also has its disadvantages too." And it is explaining the political and election systems in America to curious students and wishing they cared just as much about Russian politics.

Culture shock is a roller coaster that seems to never end. It's trying to buy train tickets. It's trying to figure out the Russian system and failing at business. It's getting laughed at when struggling to figure out the outdoor market and wiping the snow from a sweater to see if it is something you might like to buy. It's getting taken care of by the locals. It's eating ridiculous amounts of food at random houses where people don't care who you are, they just want you to eat and be happy. It's having people take you by the arm to help you across the ice. It's falling when there's no one there to help you across the ice. It's wondering when the heat is going to be turned on by the city government and seeing people survive through the worst of conditions. It's getting use to minimal

amounts of sunlight in winter, and trying to sleep when it is still light out at 3:00 in the morning in summer. It is the indescribable general attitude of the Russians: constant indifference while at the same time a love for life. It's many things.

I wanted to experience a different environment and perception of the world. I wanted to understand Russia. And even though I knew I never would, I wanted to understand the people.

That is why I joined Peace Corps. On July 3rd, 2001, my service ended. A fear that I once had about entering the unknown has been replaced by a new fear. My fear is no longer derived from not understanding an unknown country. I have lived there, called it home, and still don't understand it. But it doesn't bother me. My fear is no longer about communication and a language barrier. I struggled, became frustrated, and eventually learned that I do have it in me to overcome it. My fear is no longer about finding the means and resources to get daily tasks done. I learned how to seek out help, and to trust and rely on people I didn't even know. I learned that if you put faith in a stranger, they wouldn't fail you. And my fear is no longer about failing or succeeding. I did both of those many times on a daily basis. My fear now is a pretty simple one: Will I be able to put my experiences into words?