

Bridging the Gap:
An International Exchange Makes a World of Difference
By Carley Fisher-Maltese

Olga took my hand and gave Anna a knowing look. She said to me, “Uh, Carley, it is custom in our country to take a moment before *ve* say good-bye.” We all joined hands and sat down in a small circle in my foyer. I studied the faces of my friends, Olga and Anna.

Then it was time for them to leave. As the car drove away, my husband and I hugged each other. I thought about the last seven weeks. How could these two people be the same strangers I welcomed into my home such a short time ago? I felt like I had just said good-bye to two family members. It is true what they say about finding what you are looking for without looking. Over the course of one summer, I had found friendship and an active interest in another part of the world, Ukraine.

The Beginning

I remember the day they arrived; they were two exchange students here for the summer of 2002 to train to be Montessori elementary teachers. I rushed around cleaning and straightening, fussing over the sheets on their beds, and filling the guest bath with clean towels and a basket of toiletries. The day before, I had spent way too much time shopping. I had been told that nice bath products were extremely expensive in Ukraine and that Ukrainians liked yogurt. I bought lots of yogurt, soaps, and scents.

Anna, 23 and very tall, was trendy and urban. She wore a zip-up shirt with metallic fold thread and blue jeans. Her round face and fair hair reminded me of the paintings of angels that I’ve seen. She was the talkative one.

Olga was the opposite in looks and personality. She was petite and dark. I learned that she was in her late 20s and married. Her clothes were casual and outdoorsy, more like mine. She was quiet and reserved. I wondered if she spoke any English.

Our first dinner was awkward and formal. Olga loved the onion rings. She had never had them before and she asked for the recipe. I sheepishly told her they came frozen in a box from the grocery store.

I tried to fill the silence with questions about where they live and their families. But no matter how slowly I spoke; I could tell from their puzzled

looks that it was still too fast. I enunciated every syllable and used a lot of hand gestures.

Anna and Olga had met just a week before. They worked at different Ukrainian Montessori Schools, the only two in their country. I was surprised by their limited vocabulary and difficulty conjugating verbs. As they struggled, they apologized and explained that, although they started learning English as children, their English class consisted of listening to British audiotapes. Anna often asked Olga for the English equivalent of Russian words. They spoke Russian with each other, although they spoke Ukrainian at home with their families.

Over the course of the next week, I drove them to and from school, cooked dinner, and took them to my favorite restaurants. I wanted them to experience our culture through food we enjoy. I cooked my husband's favorite, Italian-Asian stir-fry, as well as my great-grandmother's meatball stew with dumplings. They told me that my family's Jewish Eastern-European dishes were similar to Ukrainian ones. We were discovering similarities, and slowly the ice began to melt.

I asked Anna and Olga if they would like to cook for us. They were thrilled to have the opportunity to prepare a traditional Ukrainian dinner, and spent an hour with their pocket dictionaries; frustrated that some of the words they were looking for had no English equivalents.

That night my husband and I dined on borsht (a cabbage and beet soup), *varenyky* (dumplings and potatoes), and *sirniky* (dumplings with farmer's cheese). This was just the beginning. Over the next few weeks, we enjoyed *holubtsti* (stuffed cabbage rolls), *diruni* (potato pancakes), vegetable ragout, and for dessert, "Magic Pie," or *volshebny pirog* (a kind of fruit cobbler with sour cream).

The Middle

Sharing food opened the door to sharing cultures. One afternoon I asked Anna and Olga about Ukrainian money. With their currency, they explained how the Ukrainian people won their independence from Russia.

I learned about the geography as well. Olga shared a photo album of a camping trip she and her husband took in the Carpathian Mountains. They told me about the rocky beaches by the Black Sea.

Over the next few weeks, their training was rigorous. Having just finished my Montessori certification a year earlier, I helped them with their training manuals. One evening before they had a practical exam, I demonstrated a grammar lesson, using the language and procedures I had been taught.

The days were long and homesickness took its toll. I showed Olga and Anna how to use the Internet to correspond with their families and friends, while my husband rented some Russian and Ukrainian movies. One movie, set in Kiev, thrilled them with familiar sights of home.

Anna and Olga traveled with other teachers on the weekends. Their excursions included tubing down the Delaware River, going to the theatre in New York City, and visiting local museums. For me, the house felt empty when they were gone, and I looked forward to their return on Sunday nights.

The End

In Anna and Olga's last week in the United States, we threw a going away party at our house. We invited everyone from school who had participated in their exchange experience. It was a beautiful evening, and our guests stayed well after the sun dipped below the trees behind our house. The strange thing, which was so apparent to our guests but did not occur to me, was that Anna, Olga, and I had really invited these people over to *our* house. I had not thought that when I agreed to open my home to these two people, I would also open my heart. But that is what happened. After many years, we still write each other e-mail, signing our messages "with love."

I look forward to visiting the Ukraine one day to see my friends and travel around their country. I want to see all the places they described: the cobblestone streets of Kiev, the jagged Carpathian Mountains, the impressive domes of the Kremlin, and the rocky beaches by the Black Sea. Who knows: I may even learn to speak Russian and Ukrainian so I can talk to them in their language, and become as immersed in their culture as they were in mine.

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