

NOTE: This article provides a very interesting Russian perspective on the Fulbright social studies teachers program published in a popular Vladimir newspaper.

I am not afraid of Russia, I can live here if necessary!

By Irina Sadovnikova

Vladimirskiye Vedomosti, October 16, 2004

"Dear Irina, tell Babushka that she is becoming famous in America! Those who have tried the dishes made according to her recipes say that they are awesome! My son's friends from college like to come to visit now!" Who do you think wrote these lines? No, it was not a Russian restaurant owner in the US. It was an ordinary history teacher who had come to Vladimir last summer. At that time my aspiration to improve my English brought me to our American Home where I got to know about the forthcoming program for hosting American Social Studies teachers. There were 14 of them--teachers who had won a competition to go to Russia. Oh, my gosh. Did they want to try something extreme? Boy, did they have a complete experience. First, there was no hot water. Don't smile - we are accustomed to such things, but if some westerners were deprived of hot water at home... But this is impossible to imagine because this doesn't happen to them.

So, I decided to host an American guest for a couple of weeks, got information about her and wrote to her by e-mail. And, late in the evening on June 22 after long impatient minutes at the American Home our Americans were "distributed" among the hosts. As soon as I saw Patrice, I realized that it was her! A cheerful "kolobok" [the hero of a Russian fairy tale - an animated bun in the shape of a sphere] was rolling towards me. "Hello, Irina!" The "kolobok" was all shining. I understood that she recognized me from the photo I had sent her. We found out later that she had sent me a response, but I deleted it without reading it because I mistook it for a virus.

Twenty minutes passed and I found out that she lives in the state of Illinois, she loves her job and her family, she has a wonderful husband and two grown-up children, that her daughter has a very beautiful name - Amber, that she is a "non-conventional American mother" because she likes to cook very much, she likes to sing walking along the banks of the Mississippi River, that in her two enormous suitcases she had brought - guess what? A normal Russian would not understand this. She brought football [soccer] uniforms for a whole team! I found out later that the enormous suitcases also contained things like detergent. Of course, she was coming to Russia! It was absolutely necessary to bring everything with her, even laundry soap!

We were lucky to have Patrice as a guest. She was prepared to try Russian cuisine, and she did! And she also had a chance to try Ukrainian and Belorussian food, because I had lived in Byelorussia and my grandmother had lived in Ukraine. And she also had a chance to experience Russian hospitality - you should know my babushka. Poor Patrice, her American endurance did not last long! It was much more difficult for her to stand up after having dinner than to go to the table before it! And the first thing she did after that was to write down one more recipe. She spent a lot of time talking to her family on the Internet, saying hello and thank you to us from them from America--for taking good care of their wife and mother. And she laughed--they were waiting for her and for babushka's recipes! By the way, babushka was her first word in Russian and she always spells it with a capital letter.

The American Home worked very well. The "itinerary" was really exciting. The Americans got the opportunity to spend two weeks with Russian families, meet representatives of the city and regional administration, to make as many visits as possible within that rather short span of time! And also to learn a bit of Russian. And meet a lot of people! Go visit someone on Sunday? Of course, she wants to talk to Russian people in their environment! By the way, when we came to visit, my sister's family rolled laughing on the floor when the guest took a glass in her hand, looked at a note she had made and toasted in Russian: "Za lyubov'" [To love]. And the American guest also sang the Russian songs "Katyusha" and "Moroz" in quite a Russian way--loudly and with emotion!

There were plenty of funny situations! Once on her way home near our house she met a friend of mine who recognized her based on my description! I want to assure you, you would recognize her too. Patrice walking in a cheerful girl-scout way and with a camera was a very vivid illustration of the theme "America, a land of miracles". And this miracle passed with quite an indifferent face by my friend who was smiling at her. Later on she explained that in America someone had given her advice not to smile in the street in Russia--or people might take her for an idiot. It is unnecessary to explain that such an explanation was heartily laughed at. In Patrice's presence--the only thing my family could do was roll about laughing. As soon as they heard her loud "ha-ha-ha", it was simply impossible to remain calm. And I have to admit that I looked at the ceiling with a feeling of glee, as if asking my neighbors who like to turn on loud music: "Well, guys? Why are you so quiet today?"

After the two-weeks' stay in Vladimir, the guests from across the ocean spent several days in Murom. They came back to Vladimir for a few hours only, and after that they were supposed to take a train to St. Pete. They were going to St. Pete and then to Moscow. Of course, we waited for her! Of course, it was a storm of emotions again! Yes, they had spent several awesome days in Murom, but when they were approaching Vladimir from the Zagorodny park and saw the domes of the cathedrals, someone said: "We are home at last!"

Of course, we showed her Vladimir--its "front-door" side as well as the opposite. You just could not miss a huge puddle on the way from our house to the bus stop! And a couple of weeks ago I wrote to her with great pride that, hurrah, our famous puddle was fixed! I got an immediate response: "Thank God! Every time I walked along the narrow bank, I was afraid I would fall into it!"

On the whole during Patrice's stay I experienced several revelations! For example, if your coat that you gave to your guest to wear because of the rain is exactly the right size for her, you would not want to call her a "kolobok." And if you hear the song "Moroz" from an approaching bus, you can be sure that those are Americans on that bus.

Of course, I helped her to choose a "traditional souvenir"--Russian vodka. Besides crystal domes, she also took some kind of liqueur with her. I asked her--what for? She answered--for the train! We are going to St. Pete from here! "Oh, Gosh, Patrice, you are going to get drunk!" She smiled slyly: "There are 14 of us!" Can you imagine 14 Americans in a compartment of OUR train with cranberry liqueur? I can imagine it now.

However, as it turned out later, the suitcase with the "Russian presents" did not make it home. Either it did not land safely at the Chicago airport or just did not leave Russia at all. All in all Patrice got only 2 of the tree suitcases she had. Of course, the notorious vodka was in the suitcase that was lost. It is bad for you to drink vodka--no one doubts it. And the fact that you lost the fur hat you had bought for your son as a Christmas present is not the end of the world. In the suitcase there were also the notes Patricia took while she was here--and that is what she was most upset about...

In one of her latest letters she wrote: "Just imagine, I am going on a hike with my school! Amber is going to help me. It's so great! And I will participate in all the contests myself--climb the wall, go through an obstacle course! Can you imagine me on an obstacle course?" Of course, I can! I could easily imagine her wearing a space suite! And her famous "ha-ha-ha" in air too.

The last letters from Patrice were sad. Especially after Beslan... And the preceding tragic events she also took with a sore heart. "When I first heard about an explosion near the Moscow metro, I clearly imagined the place where it happened. During my stay in Moscow in July I was there at Rizhskaya metro station! The time I spent in Russia became special for me; I left a part of my heart there." She is very sincere. I think only Russians and Americans can be that sincere. Foes? Friends? I do not know the answer. I know for sure that now on the banks of the Mississippi you can hear Russian songs. And that someday a girl with an "amber name" will sing them to her children. And it is really great, isn't it?