

HIDDEN TREASURES IN VLADIMIR, AH newsletter, October 2005
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I found the American Home by accident. As a scholar traveling in Russia for a year on a Fulbright-Hayes Doctoral Dissertation Award, I was planning on spending several months in Vladimir with my family while I worked in the State Archive of Vladimir Oblast. This necessitated a lot of planning, of course, and so I went on-line to search out possible organizations in Vladimir that could provide me with information. Thankfully, I found the American Home.

Everyone there was incredibly gracious and extraordinarily helpful, starting with Ron Pope, the president and founder of Serendipity-Russia which built and operates the Home. The staff in Vladimir, initially Alexei and Galina Altonen, but eventually the American teachers (the AH's major activity is its English Program) and other staff as well, allowed me to become part of the community, which was very important to my sense of belonging in Vladimir. (As a provincial city, Vladimir can, at first, be daunting.) In this connection I particularly want to thank Alexei for taking time out to help me with a project for the Fulbright Foundation. He graciously offered space in the American Home and his expertise as I interviewed a local candidate for a Fulbright English Language Teaching Grant -- I couldn't have done it without him!

But the most important members of the American Home community for me were my Russian teachers, Nelli and Tanya. Throughout my year in Russia I have had many teachers. Wherever I go I try to keep up lessons, to push my knowledge of Russian further. I was happy to hear that the American Home had a Russian for Foreign Language Learners program in place, and took advantage of it four hours a week. The first five weeks I spent with Nelli, and the second five with Tanya. There could not be two more different, or two more excellent teachers imaginable. Unlike most of the native Russian teachers I have had, neither of them scowled or yelled! That is to say, they were not at all intimidating, but each welcoming in her own way, interested in my work, and encouraging my study of Russian, which, as anyone who has tried it knows, can be a difficult business. They were both prepared to work on the things that I thought I needed. Since I was living with a host family, at first I wanted to concentrate on everyday vocabulary, so that my host and I could understand each other. Nelli and I worked on this for five weeks, and I learned not only a tremendous amount of vocabulary, but also a lot about Russian customs and lifestyle. The wonderful thing about this work was that Nelli was always meticulously prepared, and unlike in most language classes, introduced me to living, spoken Russian -- the things that I might actually hear in a home setting, rather than formulaic phrases that had no relationship to reality. By the end of the five weeks I felt that I knew what I needed to know in this area, and my conversations with my "khoziaika" went much more smoothly. Consequently, when Tanya took over, I asked her to concentrate more on my disciplines -- history and religion. She, also, was always well-prepared, and I not only became more comfortable talking about my work in Russian, but I was introduced to a number of sources and concepts that are important to what I am doing, and which I probably would have missed completely if it hadn't been for Tanya. For example, she introduced me to the ritual and meaning of a number of Orthodox religious observations, and most significant for my work, explained to me the tradition of peasant girls turning to the Virgin Pokrov for help finding husbands. I have been studying Russian history for seven years, and I have never felt the immediacy of it more than in working with Tanya.

Unfortunately, I've moved on now, back to Moscow. The American Home was not only instrumental to my success in Vladimir in a host of ways, but really is, and will always be a "home away from home" for me. I am so very grateful to everyone there who took an interest in me, my work, and family, and who made me so welcome. And I must especially thank Nelli and

Tanya for THEIR hard work. They managed to combine the exacting standards of true professionals with the sort of humanity and intelligence that made them a delight to learn from. I cannot recommend them highly enough to anyone who wants to study in an authentically Russian and timelessly beautiful place like Vladimir