

“Who was the genius who decided Plombir ice cream should be sold in enormous, beautiful bricks?”



Dear Alumni,

Hello! My name is Rachel, and I am writing to you today to thank you for all that you have given me through the Dobro Slovo scholarship. I've thought a fair bit about this scholarship and how alumni have been generously contributing to it over the years, and I realized that as the summers pile up like so many empty shawarma wrappers, you might find yourselves wondering “To what exactly are we donating? What are they actually doing over in Russia? Is anything being learned?” Well, I am pleased to announce that we have in fact been doing other things besides terrifying the locals with our American-ness! In addition, we have been doing intensive research into extremely important matters of Russian culture! I come today to satisfy your curiosity and present some of the incredibly important knowledge which has been gathered by me personally (with a fair bit of help from you!) on the latest escapade to Russia.

--The word “Волга” has two definitions- In one sense, it is the name given to a very large and lovely river in central-western Russia which plays an important role in the country's history. Otherwise, it is the name of the most terrifying car in which I have ever ridden. I was first introduced to the second definition in Yaroslavl when I was traveling with our Russian tutor, Vika, post-program. We were on our way to Tutayev to visit a friend of hers, and he had just picked us up at the Yaroslavl train station. We made our way from the platform to parking lot and a little car which he unlocked and started piling our luggage into. Upon seeing the car, Vika said “Oooohhhh, Lev, you have a Volga!” Lev proudly explained to me that the Volga was the “Mercedes-Benz of the Soviet era.” This should have been enough of a warning. We got in and set off into Yaroslavl, Lev pointing out all of the interesting sites along the way. I believe it wasn't until the first intersection we came to that the car stalled out. Now, being a seasoned stick-shift driver, I have certainly had plenty of experience with stalled cars, but this was my first time experiencing it mid-turn in the middle of an intersection. It was now that I really began wishing that the Volga featured seat belts. Ultimately there was no terrible issue, the drivers around us seeming to be quite used to such occurrences, and we carried on to stall in the round-about, the turn onto the highway, and various other scenic places throughout the Russian countryside. Even though I was honestly pretty terrified the first time the car stalled, I actually came to be rather attached to the lumbering old thing over the course of our trips around the Yaroslavl oblast and even felt a bit disappointed when we used other, less exciting vehicles.

--Russians like to give you things- And I'm not just talking about those people handing out fliers on the street. Many of the Russians with whom I became personally acquainted wanted to give me a gift of some sort: little books, jewelry, aprons and oven mitts, tourist information, help with the things I'm carrying, health advice, food and tea, banya access, shoe criticism, email addresses, invitations, tours,

and all sorts of other wonderful gifts. The most memorable present is a certain book I received when over at dinner as a guest one evening. The evening had been progressing very nicely, with good food, conversation in which I was doing my best to intelligently participate, and all sorts of new acquaintances. About the time that the tea portion of the meal had rolled around, one of the guys reached onto a shelf and passed me a very ornate book of Russian history which was large enough to have an atmosphere and satellites, asking me if I was interested in looking at it. I said “Да,” as I usually do in situations when people are offering me food or books, and started flipping through to see what kind of pictures there were for me to look at (because no one wants to watch me try to read a complex Russian text during the middle of dinner; it is sure to ruin appetites). After I had my fill of pictures I handed the book back. The hostess asked me whether I liked the book, and I told her that I did indeed. To that she replies “Great! It's yours!” Struck utterly speechless, I sat there and turned several shades of red as I tried to figure out the most effective way to express my tremendous and awkward gratitude. I even felt a little bad; these people had been nice enough to invite me over for dinner, and now I was running off with their books! It would seem that I was the only one of this opinion, however, and the evening continued pleasantly as I sat there with my tea, my history book, and my new Russian cultural lesson.

These, ladies and gentlemen, are just two examples of what has been discovered in our latest trip, thanks to your help! Research topics for future trips include: why is the accordion such a great addition to pop music? If you give a Russian a monument, how likely is he to climb on it? Is “Don't mess with the babushki” really the secret first rule of Fight Club? Who was the genius who decided Plombir ice cream should be sold in enormous, beautiful bricks? Why is it so cute when little kids speak Russian? Just what is it about Eastern European folk music that makes you want to dance like you are full of demons? Why is music so much better when Rachmaninov writes it? Is there anything which the St. Petersburg pigeons will refuse to eat? How much is appropriate when it comes to over-pronouncing the word бизнес-ланч (beeeeezznyeeehhs LAAAAAAAAAAAAANCH!)? The mullet???? (Yes, that is a question.)

But all antics aside, thank you very much for your generosity and support when it comes to the Dobro Slovo scholarship. Through that, you gave me the opportunity to make some discoveries in a more authentic and personal side of Russia than I could have reached alone. From the ballet and symphony to folk bands in the back of pubs, the Petersburg metro to the fields around Myshkin, Moscow film festivals to TV with my host family, and all of the tea drinking and being у кого-то в гостях in between, it was an experience which I'll never forget. I hope that you will have the chance to be back in Russia having your own adventures sometime soon.

Sincerely,

Rachel Faith