THE CHANGING FACE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGE

In front of me sits a smiling, blue-eyed, graduate student dressed in jeans and looking like any one of a hundred on the Tufts campus. He speaks hesitantly at first, and with a Russian accent, a foreign accent that we are not yet accustomed to hearing at the International Center. His English is very good but he is not sure what to tell me, not sure what I really want to know. I have told him that I am interested in hearing about his experience during the August coup d'etat in his country. However, I soon discover that the most fascinating part of his story is actually what came before, in fact, his life growing up in the recently-dissolved Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. I only wish I had enough space here to relay all the details.

The student is Yurly Gankin and he arrived at Tufts in late August, much to the relief of both his family and our office. Having worked long and hard to be able to come to the U.S. for doctoral study in Chemistry, he saw it all flash before his eyes in one history-making week. We had expected him to enter the U.S. on a student visa - he came instead as a refugee. Yurly had had his first opportunity to enter the U.S. as a refugee three years earlier with his sister, Irina, who works here at Tufts. But at that time, leaving the Soviet Union was a very final decision - one was forced to sign away his/her citizenship and would lose everything. Most importantly, there was no going back. Yurly was unwilling to make those kinds of sacrifices - he loves his parents, his friends, and his city too much, he says.

This is not to say that Yurly did not struggle or suffer at the hands of his government. As a Soviet Jew, he experienced discrimination which sometimes limited his educational and work opportunities, particularly during Brezhnev's time. But he learned how to "play the game" and despite his political views, managed to keep himself out of trouble. Looking back, however, he admits that perhaps he was a bit naive, as it was hard to know what the old government might have done to someone for something as simple as telling political jokes. But compared to his grandfather who lived during Stalinist times, he considers himself to be lucky in many respects - others were not so fortunate.

Because of his intellectual abilities in the field of chemistry, Yurly was allowed to travel for government-sponsored academic competitions, conferences, and consulting work to Eastern Europe and Germany. It was through these activities that Yurly was exposed to Western culture and developed foreign contacts. At one such conference he met a professor from a university in New York state who suggested that he come to study in the U.S. - Yurly thought he was joking. There was a belief in his country that only students who had strong connections within the government, through which they could get the necessary funds, could study in the U.S. They thought that they themselves would never be able to do so. Even taking the GRE or TOEFL exams had been virtually impossible up until that time. Yurly had been unaware, as had his colleagues, that it is common in the U.S. for intellectually promising graduate students to be given tuition scholarships and get paid for teaching or research work. Eventually Yurly was admitted to several U.S. universities and decided to come to Tufts.

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The events of this past August nearly prevented this dream from being realized. At first everyone was very scared, says Yuriy. Newspapers were stopped, radios were in danger of being confiscated, and only government announcements and music were broadcast on television. The citizens were informed that the "politic of perestroika is having difficulty and that we don't want to stop democracy but we need some special regulations for now", says Yuriy. The coup leaders promised increased salaries, decreased prices, and private ownership of land; they also stated that Gorbachev was ill. It did not take long for people to understand that if they did not do something fast, they would surely lose everything they had gained. No one believed the party propaganda and hoped the rest of the world did not either. Yuriy was amazed at the way people rallied around during the coup - five years earlier it never would have happened. Peoples' way of thinking had changed and it was a very emotional time. It brought tears to Yuriy's eyes as he demonstrated in Palace Square; he was proud of his countrymen for having prevailed. This also made it much harder, emotionally, for him to leave for the U.S., amidst rock concerts and all-night victory celebrations.

Yuriy believes that the vast majority of people were not happy with Gorbachev before the coup because their standard of living had gone down since he came to power. But Yuriy feels that Gorbachev has done many good things. From Gorbachev he got "freedom of speech and freedom of travelling - I was not so concerned about sausages...because I got freedom." And although many people feel that Boris Yeltsin was the hero of the coup, Yuriy believes that Gorbachev was the truly brave one because he had to make a choice about which side to be on - a choice to live or die.

When I asked Yuriy about the future of his country, something I never would have imagined a few years ago that I would be doing face to face, Yuriy says that the situation remains very unpredictable. He fears a social revolution and believes that "people were given a hope and this government doesn't have a lot of time now - change is too slow." He thinks that change was happening so slowly that it did not become very evident until someone tried to take it away. But he was realistic in making his decision not to lose the opportunity to study here. It also takes time to adjust to the changes; Yuriy himself has had to get used to calling the city in which he grew up, Leningrad, by its historical and now official name, St. Petersburg. But Yuriy remains an optimist. He is happy to be in the United States but still keeps an apartment in Leningrad to which he will be able to return if and when he is ever ready. And now that our two countries have become friends, and it is getting easier for Soviets to leave and later return home, we expect to see many more students like Yuriy here at Tufts in the future.

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