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Thanks to Dear Stalin for a Happy Childhood

By Marilyn Murray

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Multitudes of children raised in the former Soviet Union relate that they do have many happy childhood memories — despite sundry negative circumstances. In our advanced classes where participants research their family history, one day is spent with each person sharing their most cherished memories. Through their stories, I have learned a great deal about what it meant to be a Soviet child. As you read these quotes, let the memories wash over you — as they did me.

Many men and women treasured their times with their grandparents, who often served as primary caretakers year round or during summer vacations, when the children stayed at their grandparents' dacha or at a collective farm in a small village.

"I remember sitting with my grandmother as she told us about her life. There was a great view of the river and the beautiful rolling hills. The voice of blood still calls to me from there."

"Grandmother had bees, and there is nothing better than fresh milk and grandmother's freshly baked bread with fresh honey."

"I remember the men cutting the grass for the animals — it smelled so good! The women were coming home from the field — singing and laughing. I especially remember the sunflower seeds and learning how to eat them like a man."

"I loved spending summers on a collective farm with my grandparents. Six boys and I rode bareback on horses and took 200 to 400 cows to the fields every day. We did this from age 12 onward for several years — they called us 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.' In the fall, back at school, I got lots of awards in Pioneers and became a hero for doing all this work for the collective farm."

"I had a barefoot childhood. We went to the forest to gather berries and mushrooms. I loved doing that and still enjoy this whenever I can. There were so many beautiful flowers and landscapes."

"I loved the springtime when the river roars with the melting snow. Then, in the summer, people swimming, washing vegetables and doing laundry in the river."

"My grandmother was very industrious — she had a big garden next to the house. She also had cherry trees. She made so many delicious treats from those cherries. She would have her friends over, and sometimes they cooked together and shared stories."

"My sister and I spent our summer with relatives in Ukraine. It was such a peaceful time — I loved new things: orchards with apples, peaches, pears; drinking milk from a jar."

"I remember a lot of sunshine and rainbows."

Friends and high jinks are mentioned with smiles and laughter:

"Our apartment area was huge and had a good playground. Our parents built it themselves — they 'stole' all the material from their factories, and it was very good! I was very proud of my father for helping to build our playground."

"I had many friends in the yard and played a lot. We played 'spies.' Sports played a big role in my life — today I still play football and hockey."

"I remember Soviet movies for children. Of course everyone loved Buratino," the Russian version of Pinocchio.

"My father was a military officer, and I grew up on military bases. I remember the weapons, and I played a lot with them — real weapons! Every officer had some 'borrowed' weapons hidden, and the guns had real bullets in them!"

Being a model Soviet child meant being patriotic and involved in the Communist youth groups: Oktyabryata, Pioneers and Komsomol.

"We were so very excited and proud when Yury Gagarin became the first person in space — that was a huge victory for our people!"

"I was honored in 1980 that we had the Olympics in our country — and I was so offended that the Americans did not come. I even took part in the parade in Red Square."

"It was a big, honorable thing to be accepted into Pioneers. The Pioneer scarf warmed up my soul."

"I was a sincere believer in Pioneers and Komsomol. I gave my entire heart to them."

"Red Army Day was a very important day for us. I loved seeing the parades — I was very proud of my country."

"'Glory to Labor' was a slogan on the wall at school. Those who learned well had their photo on the wall — and my photo was there."

"I was a real Soviet child and felt that my childhood was happy. I had no fear and could go everywhere. I became an Oktyabryata, then a Pioneer and was very involved there."

"Being active in Pioneers covers my childhood. I loved the summer camps. There was a brass band, and I played in it. The music was great!"

"In 1963, I went to an old Pioneer camp — it was smothered with roses. I have wonderful memories of waking up in the morning and smelling those beautiful roses. A woman had us write a letter to put in a bottle — something political. It had to be perfect with no mistakes — it was about 'Soviet children voting for peace in the world.'"

"I was so proud that my father was an officer in the military. I remember his elegant uniform covered with medals that he wore for parades a couple of times a year — he looked so magnificent in it! I loved just to touch it when it hung in the closet."

They were introduced to the marvelous world of Russian culture at an early age:

"My uncle was at Moscow State University, and he mailed books to us — 'Fairy Tales' by Pushkin with illustrations by Vrubel."

"Going to concerts, ballets and museums was a normal, regular part of a Soviet child's life. I cannot imagine being without those beautiful gifts for my spirit."

"I was in a theater production at age 4 — I enjoyed it so much. Later in kindergarten I was the Snow Maiden. I still love the theater."

"Music was my life. I danced like a queen — with a bedspread as a robe. It was my world. I wanted to be a ballerina and wore my mother's wide scarf as I pretended to be in 'Swan Lake.'"

"We had a great library — mother created it herself. She taught me to differentiate good art and literature from bad when I was very young."

"My father and grandfather both read to us a lot — Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Pushkin and so many others. They fed my soul with their words."

"I remember one time when I was 6 and my mother and grandmother had very little money.

But, we went out and bought flowers (and not food), and we sat at the table and were happy that we were together. We went to bed hungry, but we were together! So today, I know how to be happy with my husband and my children even when times are hard."

Buying flowers and going to bed hungry — but being together — is the epitome of what it means to be Russian.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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