

A Sad Tale of a U.S. Teenager Stuck in Russia

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In Russia, an American teenager is fighting a battle for her future.

Nastya, 17, first arrived in the U.S. when she was just two years old. Her mother, Natalya, had returned to her small Siberian town after a visit to the U.S. to announce to her Russian husband that she was divorcing him. She took Nastya to the U.S., where she remarried a U.S. citizen.

Thus, Nastya Petrova became Sophia Roberts. As she grew up in Chantilly, Virginia, she became an American in every way — in her thinking, mentality and perceptions of the world. Nobody in her home ever spoke Russian or discussed Russia. When she turned 13, she learned that she had a biological father in some faraway Russian city and was astonished. That soon turned to complete bewilderment when her mother introduced Sophia to her biological father through Skype. Sophia saw a stranger looking back at her whom she was supposed to call "Dad." Her biological father did not speak a word of English, and Sophia could not speak

Russian, and within 15 seconds their attempt to communicate became pointless.

The family problems began when Sophia's mother divorced her American husband, who was the only father Sophia knew and loved. When her mother married for a third time, Sophia found little in common with her new stepfather.

This was all happening at a time when Sophia was entering her difficult teen years that are so often fraught with problems, especially when the young person lacks love and attention at home. Sophia lacked love at home because she felt she was an unwanted child. Not surprisingly, she was having problems at school, and her grades were bad.

When Sophia turned 15 and was old enough to fly without a chaperone, her mother put her on a plane to Russia and sent a telegram to her father telling him to meet Sophia at the airport in Moscow. Natalya told both of them that for Sophia's own good and to "knock some sense into her," she should live with her father in a small town near Novosibirsk for a couple of weeks.

Sophia's relationship with her father and other new Russian relatives went wrong from day one. She saw them as complete strangers, and she viewed her stay in Russia as imprisonment. Everything in this new place was strange for her: the people, their language, way of life, food and even entertainment. She had no desire to become part of their world and was praying to return home — to the U.S. She withdrew into herself and answered all questions with the only Russian words she knew: "Ne ponimayu." (I don't understand).

Sophia's three-week stay in Russia turned into much longer after her mother announced that Sophia could only return home after she improved her behavior and her grades — in a Russian school. Of course, this was a ridiculous proposal because she had no knowledge of Russia or Russian. Nonetheless, this is how Sophia began her new life in Russia.

Sophia was not the only one with troubles. Her father, a poorly educated and poorly paid railroad worker, could not imagine how he would live with a rebellious, 15-year-old stranger. But he managed to enroll the girl in a one of the better local high schools where teachers gave her individualized instruction to help her make the transition from English to Russian.

But the gulf between her and her father grew wider. He did not know how to be a father, and she did not want to be his daughter. Sophia tells disturbing stories about her life with him. Food was scarce, he sometimes hit her in fits of rage and even made sexual advances. Finally, Sophia was forced to find work teaching English to support herself. Sophia's father accused her of disobedience, saying she would come home late and throw drunken parties with boys when he was away.

Whatever the truth is, one day Sophia came home to find her suitcase packed and waiting for her in the stairwell. Her father had given up on her.

Now, Sophia could not even call her father's run-down flat home anymore. Her only real support was her school teachers. They helped her in both word and deed, regularly collecting money for her clothes and other needs.

Sophia has now lived in Russia for nearly three years. But she has not so much lived in Russia

as struggled to survive there. And even though she now speaks some Russian, she continues to view life and people here through the eyes of an American — as a strange, unfriendly and obscure world. To this day, she gives the impression of a cornered animal in a cage, bristling at the world, angry and unhappy. But Sophia continues to fight for her one and only dream: to return home to her mother.

But during those three years, Sophie's mother has only called her daughter a couple of times. And when Sophia attempted to call her, the stepfather answered the phone and strongly suggested that she stay in Russia — for her own good.

Complicating the situation further, Sophia's mother never obtained U.S. citizenship for her. By law, Sophia is a Russian citizen, and only her mother has the right to file the necessary paperwork that would enable her to return home. Once Sophia turns 18, it will become even more difficult for her to get U.S. citizenship and return home.

Fortunately, Russia has shown a lot of compassion. In addition to her teachers, others of modest means have also offered assistance, however limited. But then the situation seemed to improve. Sophia was featured on a popular television show ["Pryamoi Efir" on Rossia 1](#). Soon after, a lady called at the television station and offered Sophia a decently paid job and a room in Moscow. Should the girl accept the offer, her situation will markedly improve.

Yet the only people that can truly help Sophia are employees of the U.S. immigration service. Although the regulations are not in Sophia's favor, I also know that exceptions can be made in extreme cases. For example, during the Russian coup in 1991, Washington bypassed stringent regulations to make it easier for Russians to remain in the U.S. if they did not want to return to a communist dictatorship.

The current situation is no less critical. If the U.S. Embassy in Moscow were to show goodwill, it could serve as the first step toward helping a young person who is trapped in a completely foreign land. Perhaps the U.S. ambassador can help in this situation. Sophia desperately needs the necessary documents to return to the U.S.

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