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# A Moscow Education, in More Ways Than One

By Evan Haddad

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A recent article published in British weekly Times Higher Education revealed that one in seven Russian undergraduates admits to cheating on exams. The figure is probably much higher. Any expat in Moscow teaching English will confirm that. Cheating in the Russian educational system is rampant, even acceptable.

I experienced it firsthand while teaching English literature at a private school in the south of Moscow — a place where "my driver forgot to take my homework" was sometimes an excuse. Parents paid the equivalent of $1,000 a month for tuition, which included an English immersion program with a native speaker starting in the first grade.

The school's educational policy promised parents a rich intellectual experience for their children, who would be fluent in English and another language by the time they graduated. One line of the policy read: "We value academic excellence for its own sake, rather than the sterile pursuit of grades."

The big selling point for the school was the native speaker — however, several months into the academic year, it started becoming clear that it was just a selling point. There were two English classes: one for grammar, taught by a Russian teacher, and my class. Nina, the senior teacher in the English department, told me point-blank the first day that I wasn't allowed to teach grammar.

"The Russian teachers can explain grammar to Russian students better," she insisted. "You teach the kids about holidays and read books with them."

She left me alone in the school's library to make curricula for grades 4-10. There were massive hardcover editions of old American history books and paperback novels. When Nina returned three hours later, she reviewed the lesson plans — a mush of Alice in Wonderland, Native American history and J.D Salinger.

"But where are the poems in the plans?" she asked. "The students should memorize one poem a week." Memorization of poems is a keystone of Russian language classes.

Together, we selected some Robert Burns and Roald Dahl.

On the school's website, everything looked great. But there was a big flaw in the English program: the native speaker could only give students a plus or minus for the term. The Russian English teachers could calculate it into the student's final mark, or ignore it — which they often did to escape the principal's wrath.

The school's grading system invalidated my class — and the kids knew it. The ninth grade class spent a term reading The Catcher in the Rye and wrote essays as a final project. What I got was a stack of plagiarized papers straight from Wikipedia and CliffNotes.

When I went to the principal, Tatiana, an enthusiastic middle-aged woman who had founded the school, she confessed there was little she could do. "Parents pay good money for their children's education here," she told me in her office, a huge room spangled with trophies from the school's victories in various academic competitions. "They expect the best."

On another occasion, Tatiana allowed a girl from my 10th grade class to do her chemistry homework in the corner during lessons. Apparently, the student's mother had called and complained that discussing Nabokov's "Pale Fire" was a waste of her daughter's time.

"She wants to be a doctor. What can I do?," the principal again told me.

Tatiana's job was to dress up the school in Shakespeare festivals, academic competitions and keep it stocked with Americans. She wanted to convince rich parents that here in Moscow was a real American school. And for a while I was the resident American she shoved onstage to illuminate certain American events like the bombing at Pearl Harbor and St. Patricks Day. The theater teacher had written a play about Pearl Harbor in Russian that the kids translated into English. Before the debut, I was to go before 300 parents, the Irish Ambassador and even an American admiral to make a statement. Just what that statement should be and how the Russian parents would understand it was unclear.

"What should I say?," I asked Tatiana.

"Just say something...Talk about the impact on Americans," she replied.

What followed was a three-minute-long nervous rant touching on American isolationism, kamikazes and battleships. When I put the microphone on the stand, the crowd applauded. Tatiana and Nina glowed. I couldn't remember what I had said, but that didn't seem to matter.

After the event, Tatiana and I talked over a glass of champagne in the school cafeteria where the attendees had gathered for snacks. She told me how the school was born. Originally from Ukraine, Tatiana had received a master's degree in education at the University of North Carolina and returned to Moscow with the dream of opening an American-style school. She founded it in September 1990, with official registration in 1991. In the beginning, the school was a small room where she taught Russians English with old grammar books brought back from the U.S.

"It was the right time,' she told me in the cafeteria. 'Nobody knew what they were doing. Getting a school registered nowadays is an unbelievable headache."

Twenty-five years later, Tatiana's dream had blossomed into a financial success, with over 350 students and a modern campus. It was a financial success — but I wondered whether it was a moral one.

By the end of the year, my relationship with the Russian English teachers had soured. The lesson planning each term had become a nightmare. I no longer saw the point in spending long hours inventing projects the kids would cheat on and classes that were not valued. But the administration demanded plans — they needed a native speaker and those quaint lessons on Valentine's Day and the American judicial system. Tatiana put enormous pressure on the Russian English teachers to get my plans done. I was the bumbling foreigner — I was expected to show up, not to know how things really worked.

One day in May, the assistant principal caught me in the hall after class. The fourth graders were screaming and punching each other in the corridor, and she had to shout over them.

"Go to the director, she's looking for you."

When I got to her door, I could hear Tatiana screaming at someone about "Evan's plans." A few minutes later, a tearful Nina ran out of the office. She looked like she wanted to kill me. I went in and sat down on a leather chair before Tatiana's desk. She recomposed herself.

Throughout the year, I had heard Tatiana shout at all the staff. But she never shouted at me. She treated me differently than the Russian teachers. She even paid me more. She asked whether I was planning to stay for another year at the school.

"I'll renew your visa if you plan the next year by the end of the month," she told me.

In spite of everything, it was a tempting offer. I had really bonded with most of the students. They were bright kids and Russia's future. They didn't need to cheat, but they were a product of their environment. After all, it wasn't their fault that the school system was so screwy.

Later that night, I talked it over with my roommate and colleague Maria, a girl whose family had immigrated to Atlanta from Ukraine. She taught in the elementary school. Although she was ethnically Slavic and spoke Russian with her parents, she hated Russia and was counting the days until her flight home. We often swapped opinions about the school.

"Why don't you write a letter to Tatiana?," she suggested.

I did just that.

Two hours later, Tatiana responded with an acquiescent message about my resignation. She finished the letter with this sentence: "People usually go; it's unusual for them to stay."

It was an appropriate conclusion.

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