

Artifact Analysis

As I packed up my bookshelves, placing tomes of dusty adolescent novels and tween tales that have not been opened in years into cardboard boxes, I run across approximately a dozen thin workbooks. Inside are lines upon lines of letters written in script accompanied by red corrections made on every exercise. Through the chicken scratch I am able to decipher the work that had plagued my childhood and had caused more than one unpleasant tantrum. These workbooks contain nearly all of the torment that was my childhood Russian exercises, everything from how to write script letters to arithmetic to grammatical structures and paragraphs. These notebooks which had remained closed for years, my ability in reading, writing, and basic arithmetic far exceeding the difficulty of the exercises, are small connectors between me, my academic roots, and the dozens of other Russian kids who grew up with the same plagues as I.

I am ashamed to say that I was not always the hardest working student. For some reason, my six-year-old self preferred to build Lego buildings and draw comics that to be forced to write out dozens of curved letters and solve long division problems. Yet every day, for an hour a day, and extra on weekends, my mother and father would sit me down and force me to complete pages of exercises. During the summers, when I would be shipped off to my grandparents' house in Sarasota or the Poconos, the lessons would be increased tenfold. Every aspect of my day was regulated, every action documented, and every calorie counted. My parents would receive detailed oral reports of my progress, hearing tales of how many minutes I swam, how long I played outside, how much of the lawn I mowed, and how much of the soup I had eaten. This structured lifestyle weighed me down, especially as I left the era of pampers and into one of corduroy. By middle school, I had graduated from mere workbooks supervised by my parents to full on mathematical after school programs and extracurricular tutors in neighborhoods rarely

visited. I was shuttled from one classroom to another to a third. Understandably, as I stood by the sideline as I saw my friends and peers proceed to self-sustainability and education, I began to rebel against the schedules which my parents had built up around me for nearly a decade. I would begin arguing more with my parents, claiming that they had no idea how to do my homework, them having never attended the particular seventh grade that I had. I would procrastinate more and as a result, hand in assignments late. I would begin doing poorly on some quizzes and assessments, creating harmless little rifts in the perfect conspiracy I believed my parents had established.

By the time I graduated to the new and terrifying realm that is high school, my velvet revolution against my parental orders took on a life of its own. I had left the environment where I knew the lay of the land, where I could afford mistakes because I knew how to get away with them. I was in a place where no mistakes could be made, but as I had already established the habit, could not be avoided. Throughout high school, the slacking off which I had become used too overpowered the study habits which had been forced into me as a child. Being a quite kid, the necessity of a strong social life overpowered the necessity of a strong academic one, and soon the neglect of work and the refusal to follow the track that my parents attempted to lay out caught up with me.

It was not until the end of junior year that I began to understand that the practices that I used to think to be unnecessary and incorrect were in fact beneficial and revolutionary. Sitting down and often spending hours completing piles of mindless and agonizing work. The evenings when I would be the only one up in my household, when all the lights but the ones on my desk were off, when I had to tiptoe to the fridge so as to not wake anyone, reminded me of the times when I was younger and was forced, physically, by my parents and grandparents to spend hours

completing terrible and pointless exercises in little cartoon workbooks. I began to realize that the organizational principles that were thrust onto me as a child were more than just assurances that I would complete some irrelevant exercise and perfect my ability to write Russian script and do long division as the Soviets had. These principles were meant to provide me with the tools and skills necessary to develop a habit of working and thinking where I would achieve maximum productivity and maximum success.

Having understood this, today I believe I have found a proper balance between work and play. My parents attempted to raise me in the way they had been raised, in the style that the Soviet society they grew up in mandated they be raised. This, of course, could not apply to me as a student growing up in America, where my friends seemed to spend more time playing in the park more than they would reading their textbook. What I realized did apply was the ethics of work, which was the end goal of my parents' foray into academia. What they knew how to teach me was how to sit down and work and only recently has their lessons finally taken root in me. Today, although I understand what their intention was, a little shudder goes down my spine when I looked back on the workbooks that I had now packed into a box. The simple memory evoked post-traumatic giggles.

Something that provided me with great entertainment as a reminiscence is the memory of my meeting with other, young Russian youths who struggled against the oppressive nature of the cartoon characters who would coax us into the exercises and the parents who supported them. I am happy to know that regardless of how absurd, vague, or backbreaking a struggle can be, I can always find someone to commiserate with, and my small circle of Russian friends is such a group. We all share a bond of having gone through the similar disciplinary tactics of our parents,

of completing the mindless tasks they set out for us, of the arguments we had, and of the realizations we encountered. As I spoke with some old friends this issue presented itself almost every time. They all claimed that the complaints they shared with me all resulted in a period of rebellion against what their parents thought was right, and the eventual realization that everything that had been done for them, from a very early age, was done for their own good. After speaking with these people, I was happy to know that I was not alone when I looked at my old home-schooling notebooks and cautiously laugh.