

I was born an American citizen in Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City. Yet every time I introduce myself, the fact that I am a simple New Yorker is not accepted. Only after I explain the origin of my name, the cities where my family came from, when it is revealed that I am Russian is my name approved. This is not a bad a thing. In fact, I have always enjoyed my Russian identity, embraced it, and more than once, flaunted it. I was raised in a Russian home, in a Russian lifestyle. I spoke no English until I entered elementary school at the age of four. I survived on a diet of fried meats, wrapped meats, meat soups, meat dumplings, and meat pies. I celebrated bastardizations of American holidays such as New Years' with Christmas trees and Easter with multicolored scrambled egg breakfasts. However, as I grew older, it became apparent that the methods of my upbringing and the environment in which they were being implemented did not perfectly coincide. Some series of factors that seemed routine in my Russian upbringing set me apart from my full-blooded American counterparts. I knew that there was more to the cultural dichotomy in which I matured. Soon, I realized that every mundane detail, from the food I ate to the disciplines that I endured, was critical in my becoming the man I am today.

I began with the most obvious influence on me, the Russian friends, family members, and estranged second cousins who taught me everything from volleyball to mathematics. Russians, like any people, contain extremes of good and bad, acceptable and odd, safe and insane. It is impossible to generalize an entire nationality consisting of millions upon millions of people dispersed throughout the entire globe. However, there are some averages to compare to. The average Russian is not one to give up on a task once the task has been started. He or she would hammer away until the early hours of the morning perfecting whatever duty they were assigned to complete. But the studiousness does not come from the Russian himself. Only after hours of mental preparation, training in will power, and a kick from behind will the work actually begin.

The average Russian enjoys the company of good friends, and is more than happy to welcome new people with open arms. A Russian is loud. While pursuing the center of attention, the top of the mountain, or the best of the best, an average Russian walks a fine line between urbanity and obnoxiousness, vulgarity and ambition. Being relatively neutral on the spectrum of Russian extremes, I can proudly claim that I have experienced the best and the worst of my people and my traits. I tried to learn from the mistakes of those who surrounded me as a child, and as a result every victory, as well as every defeat leaves me better prepared for the next match up.

When masses of Russians would gather, with their differing stories, backgrounds, and advice, one thing would always unite everyone, food. When diluted to a single phrase, Russian foods are greasy, meat containing dishes and assortments of wraps and dumplings containing everything from besides meat, jams, fruits, and chocolate. Almost all of it is bad for you, the word “diet” is not one that is recognizable in the Russian language. I recall that every trip to my grandparents’ was met with a mixture of excitement and dread. The excitement came from an explicable desire to escape the clutch of my parents into the embrace of grandparents’. The dread came from the fact that I knew that I would be fed from the minute I arrived to the minute I left. Regardless of what I was doing, whether it was reading, watching television, or doing work, there was a dish of something edible next to me. I would awaken from naps and in the mornings with a plate of food on my nightstand. When I would drive away from my grandparents’ I would be sent home with several Tupperware containers holding dumplings, cutlets, soups, and a mixture of unidentifiable liquids and meats. I was almost always bursting at my seams, bloated, and waddling from one dining experience to another. Food is an essential component of the Russian lifestyle. Everything is settled at the dinner table. Arguments start, political debates ensue, familial gossip is dispelled, and issues are resolved over multiple courses of soups salads,

pork lamb, and cake. The happiest memories from my childhood was when my parents would host large dinners for family and friends. The dishes that were cooked at home were supplemented with the dinners that the guests brought with themselves, and the night would drag late into the night as family and friends mixed, matched, and created memories.

Some of my most profound memories of childhood, when not consumed by eating and large extended family reunions, was being forced to sit at a desk and fill out pages of script and arithmetic exercises. Much of this autoethnography is centered on the discipline and “home-schooling” that consumed the weekends, summers, and other free time of many other Russian-Americans of my generation. This is because this shared trauma is both unique to Russians as well as shared by almost every single one. Education was always a key component within Russian culture. In the Soviet Union if one was uneducated or began falling behind in any professional pursuit, it was a death sentence. As a result, the Russians of the 20th century were raised in a brutal eat-or-be-eaten environment where the strong survive and claw ahead of those who were too slow or too weak-willed to keep up. There is a slight irony here because many Russians are procrastinators by heart, and require some willpower and pressure in order to excel. Parents raised in this environment understand not only the necessity of a good education but also the difficulty their children may encounter when faced with the necessity to sit and study for hours at a time. Therefore, they push and pull their children from a young age attempting to schedule and structure their lives in an attempt to guide them to a place where the mistakes and fears of the parent would not be made and encountered. However, as any therapist or physicist may explain, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The iron fist in which our parents attempted to shelter us in eventually broke down. For many of us, much like a bird that is kicked out of a nest, we began to fall. Having reached a level of maturity where our schedules,

organization, and balance of work-to-play were left to our control, many of us newly liberated did not know how to successfully manage such greater responsibilities. Only after a period of anxiety and terror were we able to begin climbing out of the holes we had dug and, with the newly gained knowledge of freedom and demise, were able to continue on the upward path towards our aspired goals and desires.

Having explained the general elements that had an effect on the upbringing of an average Russian, it is necessary to dispel the elements that do not affect the general psyche of the average Russian. Stereotypes exist for a reason, there are people in a group to which a stereotype is tagged that do indeed belong to the stereotype, and fulfill its definition to the letter. Although they are a minority, these people often become the poster children of the group. Although every Russian has an alcoholic family member, not every Russian is willing or able to drain liters of vodka and liquor. Not every Russian is an Ivan Drago muscleman, nor is everyone an overweight slob. Not every Russian is a moody Romantic dreamer, nor is everyone a protesting Pussy Riot follower. Not every Russian is in the mafia. Of course, every Russian contains some aspect of each of these traits. Russians enjoy a good party, but know when to sit quietly. They know how to treat their bodies well, but have no objection to being unhealthy as well. Russians enjoy to loudly express their opinions and attempt to convince everyone within earshot to prescribe to them, however they are not past sitting and thinking out their arguments before disseminating them in less a less than civil manner.

I have a rare opportunity to say that I belong to two cultures. I am often proud to hyphenate my nationality. I was and continue to be exposed to the best and the worst of Russian culture while living as an American in an American landscape. As I finished this project I not only realized how some of the most anecdotal and minor aspects of my life had influenced me as

a present day adult but also how many of the friends I had growing up share a similar story to mine, and are there to commiserate. Having explored my cultural duality with the knowledge of my friends' upbringings, the similarities stood out and led to other realizations. After having concluded my research, I am proud to always introduce myself as Russian-American.