

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 and [the disciplines](#) that I endured to [the people](#) that were a constant presence and the [stereotypes](#) that surrounded me, was critical in my becoming the man I am today.

To understand everything about a culture, one must begin by looking at that group's basest element: the people. Growing up, I was surrounded only by Russian adults and influences. These were the people who taught me everything from volleyball to mathematics. The group consisted of absurd characters, people who were focused only on muscle, only of food, only on drink, or only on having a good time. Yet there were people who were focused on completely opposite pursuits. There were athletes, musicians, bankers, cooks, grandparents, scientists, and oddball members who would appear without anyone being certain on how they belonged. Yet what I was able to learn from them was that there is so much more to a group of people than

those who do not belong to it believe. Generalizations were thusly impossible. I could claim that most Russians need an extra kick before they can be productive, yet there are plenty who can motivate themselves to power through any assignment for any period of time. I could say that Russians make up a gay-bashing, anti-West society attempting to resurrect the Soviet Union, yet this minority is overwhelmed by a happy, welcoming, and incredibly profound people.

When these 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. It was this nutrition nostalgia which caused me to differentiate between my American and Russian self. It was not necessarily the edible content (Americans are not known for having the healthiest of diets), but it was the events that accompanied the meals which were truly unique. The dinners encompassed everything that I felt made me Russian. There were loud relatives, drunken friends, Stereotypes were perpetuated, and discipline was dished out to the younger members of the meeting. It was here that I felt a rift between being American and being Russian.

When my time was not consumed with eating, and my free time was coming to an end, I was being forced to sit at a desk and fill out pages upon pages of arithmetic, script, and other “fun”, educational 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 not because I have nothing else to say but because it was such a critical component in my childhood and one of the greatest effects on my becoming the person I am today. 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 from what I have seen, many Russians are procrastinators by heart). 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. Social and racial hatred are not common, but neither is immediate acceptance. 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 too 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.

Having completed a rather general analysis of the culture which raised me, I sat down and began to reflect. I had learned much of my people, found more similarities between my friends and I than I knew existed, and begun to identify the Russian and the American components of myself and began to differentiate between the two. Towards the end, I was able to dilute my reflections into two laws which were hammered into me for the entirety of my academic career, Newton's Third Law of Thermodynamics and "Don't judge a book by its cover".

Newton's third law of thermodynamics states that any action has an equal and opposite reaction. Beyond its quantum, chemical, and other scientific applications, this law proves to be of great use in a social setting as well. This conclusion became incredibly evident to me through both the interviews as well as my personal reflections. We, the young Russians, were raised in a forceful manner. Our parents attempted to shelter us from their mistakes but in the process we were imprisoned in their schedules, structures, and regulations. As a result, their pushing us caused us to push back. Therefore, throughout the years when many teenagers are experiencing rebellious phases, we acted out and fought back against our individual upbringings more fervently than others. The iron fist with which we were ruled was met with a steel force. Understandably, this did not please our parents very much and as a result they attempted to tighten their grips on us. Thus, a tug-of-war of sorts ensued, and for a large portion of our high school lives we were in a Mexican standoff. Only when a balance was struck, when we were able to understand the necessity of the way we were raised and when our parents realized the

necessity of our independence were we able to move on and begin growing into the adults we will one day become.

For as long as I can recall, I was told not to judge a book by its cover. In the third grade the rule was emblazoned above the classroom door in gold letters. In the fifth grade we had to write an essay on when we judged something incorrectly or were judged incorrectly. We were schooled in the methods of judgment and were told to pass them on to the younger students, campers, or whoever was below us on the educational hierarchy. It is this lesson that I wish to impart onto those who do not belong to the Russian-American communities. Through interviews and nostalgic reminiscence I can proudly claim that Russians are not all as media, your friends, or the bad few make us out to seem. Not every Russian is a gay bashing, muscle or fat bound, chain smoking, vodka drinking, chaos causing maniac. All of these qualities, and plenty more, exist in the Russian community to a certain extent. However, what I was able to conclude is that the Russian community is a perfect example of misjudgment.

After comparing the stories of my two friends to myself, I was happy to see that we, besides sharing a certain disdain for filling out workbooks, also share similar sentiments on both our upbringing, maturation, and eventual clarity. I thought that it was interesting that we all had period of rebellion and acting out. Teenage angst is nothing new. Everyone, from moody middle-school minors to unruly and often agonizing high school students, begins to resent their parents, argue, and make several years generally unpleasant for those around them. However, for me and those I interviewed they seemed to make a point of attempting to connect the way they were raised, specifically the hours of rigorous disciplining, schedule structure, and homework that were done outside of normal school work. I found that the fact that for most of our developmental childhood, we had relatively little say in our upbringing. Obviously, an eight-

year-old, ten-year-old, or even a fourteen-year-old need someone to guide them, to set up some guidelines because they are simply too inexperienced and naïve to make key decisions. However, when every step is plotted and planned out, by the time we are let loose into the world that is high school, we begin to feel as though all of the rules that were and will be set for us are designed specifically to harm, torture, and agonize us.

What I also found interesting, something that became quite unique, was that towards the end of our respective high school careers, after several years of goofing off and being generally unproductive, we were able to find a foothold. From that foothold, we were able to build a base for our future selves. Soon, we realized the necessity of our parents' rules and embraced their order. However, having grown up under their fist, rebelling, and then returning we had a greater scope of the direction we wanted our lives to take and a better sense of how to achieve those goals.

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.