Russian Music Lessons

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I met Marta in November 1993 through a small penciled notice left on the bulletin board at the South Gate of the American Embassy Compound: “Violinist from the Bolshoi wants to give private lessons.” My six-year-old began studying with her shortly thereafter. We set out together from the gate of the compound, Alex and I, down a side street of deep gray snow. Ducking into an underpass on Novy Arbat, we came up on the other side of the world.

Leaving the embassy for the Moscow streets was like passing through a force field—from artificial America to impoverished post-Soviet Russia in one giant step. Compound America was as homey as a minimum security prison. People there wore fashionable heavy weather gear. It was a high tech pressure cooker of work and play. They worked hard at the embassy and worked out in the weight room, or swam laps in the pool.

Moscow back then smelt of dirty clothes and hard cigarettes. People wore drab, ill-fitting garments with gloomy expressions to match. They tasted exhaust fumes and street dust, and down to the last babushka every Muscovite had developed a special sidling movement for negotiating the steep mounds of ice and snow, packed in places to a thick, black crust.

“Was this place here when Jesus was alive?” Alex wanted to know. I led him down an icy flight of steps to the back door of Marta’s apartment building. The common area was gloomy, and like many Russian buildings during that time, in a state of disrepair. It was probably built in Khrushchev’s day.

From the dark basement we found our way to a ramshackle elevator which jolted towards the third floor. We passed through a set of double doors. By Russian standards, Marta and her family were fairly affluent. The big door was padded on the inside. A profusion of bikes, skis and outer garments filled the hall. We took off our boots, hats, gloves and coats. A dried out bouquet decorated the small dark table, and the wall was hung with black and white photographs of the Bolshoi Orchestra. A Yorkshire terrier barked around our feet, and Marta kissed us in welcome.

She was a softly rounded woman in her late fifties, with Slavic features and rosy cheeks. Her eyes were intelligent and sad. There was an enchanting sweetness to her, and a womanly grace deepened by the hardship of Russian life.

Marta offered me a pair of slippers, so worn they had lost any modifying adjective. They were not pink slippers, nor soft slippers, nor comfortable slippers. They were merely flattened worn out pads. Nothing but the essence of slippers.

In her room, Marta began explaining the different parts of the instrument and made Alex pronounce them out in Russian. She shared this room with her husband Isaak. The narrow lumpy bed was covered in an orange velour bedspread. The wallpaper was old and yellowed. There were photographs on the wall, and books stacked around the floor. How did they both fit into that bed? I wondered.
She turned to me suddenly. Did Alex have to go to school every day? she asked. Could he spend a day with her each week, or a couple of mornings during the week? “I’m afraid he has to go to school,” I said. She looked disappointed and perplexed. The prearranged hour a week seemed not enough time to Marta.

“What about you?” she asked. “Are you going to miss him?”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to,” I said. She looked disappointed.

Marta was unimpressed. “Then you will never be any of them,” she told him soberly. “If you want to excel you can only choose one of those things.”

We packed his tiny violin into the new case and snapped it shut. Marta and Alex smiled, catching each other’s eyes. She patted his shoulder. “It looks important,” she said. “You will feel proud to walk the street with your case, like a real musician.”

Each time we went to Marta’s we met more people living in the apartment. A boy of fourteen, apparently unrelated, sat in the half light of his tiny room, studying homework. He allowed Alex to play with a humble building set made of colored plastic. There was also Marta’s son, Leonid, and his wife, pregnant in a wool floor length dress and thick glasses, Marta’s mother, her husband Isaak, and their dog.

While Alex and Marta practiced, Isaak sometimes lay on the bed reading. He could speak a little English, but Marta spoke none at all. A few months after we met, he and Marta took us to a dacha in the countryside to see a piano, which Alexander Alexandrovich from the Moscow Conservatory was trying to sell. Marta, Alexander Alexandrovich’s daughter Svetlana, myself and the children squeezed into the back of our car, with Isaak in the front seat talking to my husband Ben as he drove. Isaak had been born in Saint Petersburg. In August 1941, when he was ten, the city was cut off from the rest of the Soviet Union in the German siege. Many died of starvation. One day, Isaak’s mother went out to look for food and left him alone, with nothing but a loaf of bread, for many weeks. He never saw her again.

Marta’s mother was a different story. She hovered in the kitchen doorway, wearing a tatty cardigan. She had widely bowed legs and straight dirty locks of hair. Her face was sour and off-putting. “Ochen priatna,” I said. Then her eyes softened and she clasped my hands. She’d been told that I played the piano and she was a pianist herself. She drew me into her room, instructing me to sit at the upright instrument, jammed against the wall in her bedroom. I could think of nothing more appropriate than Schumann’s “About Strange Lands and People.”

“Enough of that – dru gia – another.” I began the next piece in the same series, “Curious Story,” but that wouldn’t do, either. She waved me brusquely aside. “I’ll play,” she announced gruffly, sitting with authority at the keyboard. She was diminutive. I could see the top of her greasy head. Her swollen knuckles flopped onto the keys. Her hands danced into position, the fingers approximating chords she had struck precisely in her youth. She started a Hungarian Rhapsody by Liszt, her hands moving maniacally up and down the keys with striking power. If you miss a note, she seemed to suggest, you must play it with more conviction and force than if it were correct. There was no point in compounding inaccuracy with timidity. Alex stood beside me, stock still and fascinated.
“Remember this forever,” I whispered to him. “Look at everything. Take it all in.” He nodded seriously.

Finally the old woman swung around on the piano stool to face us.

“Ochen krasivo,” I told her. And I meant it. That was beautiful.

“Krasivo?” she smiled broadly. She asked if I would bring my music and play with her the next time Alex had his lesson. “Yes,” I told her. “I’d like that.”

Every time I went to Marta’s thereafter, her mother lunged towards me and clasped my hands. Marta moved past swiftly. I gathered she did not wish me to bring my piano music along. She wanted to keep Alex and me to herself.

“I want to teach piano lessons,” her mother called out wildly in Russian. “Get me some piano students. I can teach piano. Any time. Any level of student!”

“Yes Mammy, she knows,” Marta said uncomfortably. “Come along, Alex. I want you to say hello to Leonid.”

In a large room uncluttered by furniture, Marta’s grown son Leonid stood with sheet music spread on a table before him. From the far window, I saw the broken panes and blackened façade of the Russian White House. A month earlier, we had been evacuated to the compound gymnasium during the October Revolution, where we slept on mats to the sound of gunfire and explosions. Now our children called it the “zebra building” because of the long smoky fingers left by fire. Alex lay awake at night fretting about “the hammer and sickle people.”

Marta stood beside me. “We saw it all,” she told me. “Tanks. Dead bodies on the steps. I haven’t slept since.” She asked for something I didn’t understand, then gestured towards her ears. Ear plugs. Could I get her some ear plugs at the American Embassy, she asked. They might help her sleep. I told her I would try. Maybe in the commissary. “Spaciba, Amandichka,” she said, using a Russian endearment with my name.

Leonid was a conductor, but also played the French horn. He sounded a few notes for Alex, and Marta piped up in a clear white voice the opening measures of the “Star Spangled Banner.” “Te znayesh, Alex?” Do you know that? He shook his head, not the American patriot she had supposed. Alex sat on a chair looking serious and attentive, his feet sticking out in front of him. Leonid played a little tune on the French horn. The lack of clutter gave a sense of uninterrupted quiet to the pace of life in this room, a sense belied by the sooty building just outside.

“Time for work, Alex,” Marta said at last.

After several weeks of lessons, Marta was still not allowing Alex to play any notes on his instrument, and he was losing patience. She explained that some of her adult students still couldn’t hold the bow correctly. They went for years and then came up against this problem of the bow hold, and couldn’t progress. “Once you learn to hold the bow,” she told him, “everything else will fall into place.”

My Russian comprehension in the area of violin lessons was rising to meet the demand. Perhaps it wasn’t the language I understood so much as Marta herself. We sometimes leaned together, our heads bent in laughter at little amusements that seemed to unite us. “Ya ochen lyblu tebya,” Marta told me. I love you very much. Then she’d go back to pressing Alex’s fingers into position on the bow.

“Panimaiyesh?” Marta asked him. “O, lekbo, lekbo – Panimaiyesh, Alex?” Lightly,