

Jack and Jane's reactions

“We need lawyers to run our government; they are honest and know what to do.” Radabor was very certain about Russian leaders. But Masha countered: “Lawyers don’t know everything. We need people with experience.” I got a heated argument when I asked my 7th-grade Moscow students what they thought about Russia’s current problems. Radabor and Masha were the stars of the class.

It was the end of a week of teaching English conversation in Moscow. My husband Jack and I each had a 6th and a 7th-grade class. Each group came to our classrooms two or three times a day. The school chose the best English students to study with the seven Friendship Force International volunteer teachers. We were each assigned a classroom, given a textbook and then left on our own for the week. We all shortly dispensed with the textbook. The kids preferred to hear us talk. Jack talked about health issues. I went from computing to Hany Potter and Lord of the Rings. Some of the 6th graders had a lot of imagination, but little outlet for it. The students learned by memorizing. If we asked a question about a topic they had studied, they would stand and recite paragraphs of information. We tried to introduce new topics for discussion so they would formulate their own ideas in English.



Jack surrounded by Russian students.

Our first two weeks were spent in Novgorod, an ancient city near St. Petersburg. There we usually had a teacher in the room with us. The first discussions concerned families, hobbies, pets and sports. Then we got to be more innovative. For Jack and me this usually meant talking about the world, its peoples and problems. We had the most success getting the students to talk to us in informal gatherings between class periods.

In Novgorod we lived on the sixth floor of a building in an apartment protected by locks and double steel doors because of the fear of crime. Our hostess, Natasha, is an English teacher and her husband, Alexander, is an engineer who builds industrial towers. Like most school teaching in Russia, Natasha’s work is more a labor of love than a source of significant income. Their two children, Masha 15 and Nikita 8, were serious students. I don’t know how this happened, but we were instantly incorporated into the family as grandparents.

In Moscow we stayed with a family from the Ukraine. Slava, the father, is an attorney who defends Russians caught in petty crimes. Larissa is a stay-at-home mom and wonderful cook. The two boys, Radabor 12 and Arseny 10, were our translators. In the evenings we played nardi—a form of backgammon—with them.



Jane with one of the Russian boys

In both Novgorod and Moscow we went sightseeing or to concerts with our families or the local FFI club in our free-time. The Russian Orthodox churches and monasteries were the highlight for us. When we were in Russia in 1970, buildings such as these were used as storehouses, and at best maybe museums. Now, in 2002, they are full of People, beautiful icons and inspiring music.

It was a wonderful experience. Jack and I recommend it to anyone who would like three weeks of working with Russian children and staying with Russian hosts. There have been two exchanges a year since 2001. We went in April, 2002. The exchange director is Jim Tolbert of Oregon who will be taking a group in October. He can be reached at: jimtolbert@comcast.net or at 541-926-3228.