

**The other side of the coin**

# A student in Russia

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Some might call her an idealist, but 22-year-old Melanie Alton thinks there's nothing naïve about wanting to promote cultural understanding and awareness between North American and Russian people.

Five months spent in Russia as a student have shown this Mississauga resident that underneath the cloak of communism, the Russians are like people anywhere.

"The Russians are people just like we are," said Melanie. "Participation in government matters is very limited there. The people have no say — all they can do is laugh at the decisions and make jokes about politics. When you have little power to change things you just accept it and live around the system."

## SIMILARITIES

Melanie explains that aside from cultural similarities such as interest in the theatre, sporting events, going to the beach, eating ice cream and having picnics, Russia has many climatic similarities to Canada.

As a fourth-year University of Toronto student, majoring in Russian studies, Melanie is fascinated by all areas of Russian culture. Since her days in high school at Toronto French School, Melanie has been an avid student of the Russian language.

Continuing her studies into university, she completed her first and second years at McGill University, moving on to Dalhousie in Halifax for her third year. It was here that Melanie was offered the opportunity to travel to Moscow and study at the Pushkin Institute.

## STUDYING

Nine other Canadian students and Melanie set out last February for Moscow, where, along with students from other countries, they were to study the Russian culture and language first hand.

Melanie agrees the institute offered excellent language instruction, but the courses in history, culture, geography and political economy were heavily laced with Soviet propaganda.

"It was the typical Soviet propaganda about how great, how strong and how quickly developing the country was," said Melanie.

Soon tiring of these well-rehearsed lectures, Melanie and the rest of her Cana-

dian cohorts began making friends of their own. It was through these contacts that the real Russian lifestyle soon began to reveal itself.

Many of Melanie's initial acquaintances were active in the arts world — directors, actors, writers, and journalists — all of whom formed a very closely knit group.

"In Russia 'friend' means something very special and very firm," explained Melanie.

Russians visit their friends frequently and take the relationship very seriously. This posed some problems for Melanie who was more used to the Canadian style of friendship where acquaintances meet occasionally on more of a social level.

Through these people Melanie discovered much about the Russian attitude to work.

"In Russia everyone has to have a job and people do the jobs they have to do," she said. "Once you've been channelled into a career you cannot change. It would be very difficult to be retrained."

## APATHY

"This explains a lot of the apathy. Nobody seems to have a great interest in their work. There's a lot of nonchalance about it."

The well-publicized Soviet alcohol problem was much in evidence, Melanie discovered, with wine and vodka playing a large part in most social events.

"There were certainly more drunks in the street," she said. "It's sad. People will ignore other people passed out on the sidewalk and walk right around them."

The typical notion of Russians as dowdy and rather dull dressers is not true any more. Melanie found the Russians to be quite taken with western styles and much of their clothing was an effort to emulate North American fashions.

## CLOTHING

"The big difference in their clothing is the absence of natural materials — everything is synthetic," said Melanie. "There's no leather — even shoes are vinyl — no cotton or no wool."

This desire to "look western" plus the absence of quality materials is just one of the reasons for a flourishing black market, sometimes known as the "second economy."

"It's everywhere. They say it helps keep the country going," said Melanie.

Exchanging American dollars for Russian funds is grounds for expulsion from the country and students going into the country are warned against becoming involved in black market trading.

Melanie, while avoiding the black market, did leave many of her cotton clothes and wool sweaters behind for her Russian friends.

"They really appreciate products not available there," she said.

Just as westerners hold the popular misconception that all Russians would love to get out of the country, Soviets believe the west is a violent and bleak place.

## CURIOUS

"The people in Russia are very curious about the west," said Melanie. "Their preconceptions are usually negative. They associate America with crime, poverty, abuse of blacks and in general, excessiveness."

In one instance, a Russian woman in a lineup at a fruit stand asked Melanie and her friend where they were from.

"When my friend said she was from the United States, a look of terror spread across the lady's face. It was as if she had come face to face with the enemy," said Melanie. "Then she started on a tirade about peace, blaming the U.S. for all their aggressive actions."

As a student in Russia, Melanie was offered the ultimate in freedom and privileges.

## WATCHED

"I never had the feeling I was being watched," said Melanie. "You assume there are bugs in the ceiling of the residence, but you just watch what you say. In the end it really didn't matter. We even had some heavy political discussions."

It was only when her official student status expired and Melanie chose to remain in Russia for several weeks as a tourist that she became more aware of the omnipresence of the communist regime.

As a tourist, all trips within Russia must be prearranged with the Intourist agency which will book all flights, trains, meals and hotels.

"It's all first class," explained Melanie. "They want you to meet nice people, stay in nice places, eat nice food and hear nice music."

Melanie, who was more interested in seeing the earthier side of Soviet life, was frustrated by this restricted system of travel.

"I hated it at the beginning," she said. "I wasn't a typical tourist and didn't go there to be taken on a propaganda tour and stay in fancy hotels. I resented having to stay there, but if you want to travel, you have to play the game."

It soon became obvious to Melanie that

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