

24. CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Peace Corps Volunteers must be open to ideas and cultures different from their own. Give an example of a significant experience that illustrates your ability to adapt cross-culturally. You may draw from experiences in your work, school, or community in the U.S. or abroad. Please include the circumstances of the experience and dates.

It was the summer of 2001, and I was studying in Moscow on the University of Illinois's International Programs in Engineering scholarship. Hoping to see some of the countryside, I went one day to buy a train ticket to Suzdal from Moscow. The vokzal was crowded, and running at full Russian inefficiency. After waiting in two different lines for an hour and a half, both I and the people around me were angry and tired. A retired army officer stood next to me in line, and started to chat with the people around him in a colloquial-sounding Russian which I could barely understand. Eventually, he turned to me, and discovering that I was an American, began to make fun of me to all the people in earshot. Not being able to follow what he said, I kept quiet, but as he attracted more and more amused attention, he grew angry, then aggressive. Finally, standing very close, he said slowly and loudly, "American – Vietnam! Puk puk puk," and pantomimed a machine gun. "America – Palestine! Puk puk puk, America – Iraq, puk puk puk!" Quite angry, he spat at my feet, and thumbs down, he said, "Soon – America dies. Russia – America – puk puk puk!" The crowd was delighted.

I found myself at a loss, and with Russian too poor to explain myself, even if I could have gathered my wits about me. So I quietly sat on the ground, and relieved some energy by writing in my journal. The soldier didn't know what to do about this, so he tried to pull me to my feet. When I remained sitting, he threatened to get the police. I suggested that he do so. He left and didn't return.

My reaction later that day was anger and indignation. How could he identify me, an individual, with his prejudices about my state and its violent foreign policies, which I personally opposed? I thought that he was ignorant, and should be dismissed. But a Chinese student friend with whom I discussed the incident surprised me with her lack of sympathy: "You live in a democracy, don't you? If free individuals are not held responsible for the state's actions, then who will be?" This brought a new perspective to my idea of democracy – it does not only mean the right to have one's own opinion, it carries with it the responsibility to act on it. This does not excuse the soldier's presumption, but it did defuse my indignation.

As for my anger, a close Russian friend was similarly surprisingly apologetic for the soldier. He reminded me that many people, but particularly elderly soldiers, have suffered terribly following the USSR's breakup. America was the enemy for two generations, and that doesn't change overnight. There was bound to be a lot of anger, and it would naturally find outlet against American students and travelers. And was this Russian man's prejudice against me any stronger than what that of many Americans would have been, had our countries' situations been reversed? Could that man have been my father, who, though kind and good, is also aggressive, outspoken, and politically mainstream? Though this possibility does not justify the soldier's behavior, it

did calm my anger.

Many Russians were extraordinarily kind and loving to me. I don't want to belittle their affection by choosing a negative example for this essay. But the value of loving cross-cultural relationships is clear, and the value of antagonism took me longer to begin to understand. Through this encounter, I came away with a new sense of what it meant to be who I was, as a citizen of a democracy, and a new patience for people who reacted with anger against it. I want to continue to put myself in the path of such conflicts, so that I can continue to grow to fit into them. Cross-cultural friendships? They are only half the reward. Cross-culture conflict can be just as valuable.