



This summer I went to Russia

For this linguist it isn't just a language, it's her heritage

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For one linguist assigned to the 93rd Intelligence Squadron in San Antonio, Texas, a temporary duty assignment to St. Petersburg, Russia, was more than an opportunity to study the Russian language. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to visit her heritage.

Senior Airman Marianna Brashear was born in the Ukraine during the Cold War. "I was born in 1974 and at that time, only 10 percent of Russian Jews were allowed to apply for visas," said Marianna. Her family wasn't allowed to move directly to the United States, so the Davidovich (her maiden name) family lived in the suburbs of Rome, Italy, for six months before moving to Hartford, Conn.

"I remember my family used to watch the Muppet Show together to learn English. My grandparents spoke Russian even after learning English," said Marianna, whose grandparents moved to the United States three

years after Marianna and her parents. "I would have forgotten Russian if it weren't for my grandparents. Even today when I see or talk to them on the phone, that's all we speak."

"I was 6 years old when I realized I was different than all the other kids. When the teacher would ask me to write my name, I would spell it in Russian. The school put me in a special class because they thought I was a slow learner," said Marianna. "My parents taught me that my heritage was different and that's why the other kids couldn't speak Russian."

After two years in Hartford and another two years in Michigan, the Davidovich family moved to Florida where Marianna's mother coached gymnastics and her father ran the

gym. "After I grew up, I was going to follow in my dad's footsteps but I quit the gym, quit teaching gymnastics and took a waitressing job at Applebee's. I graduated high school with an academic scholarship and went to college for one year," said Marianna.

"I was 19 and all my friends were 30, and I didn't want to be like

them so I saw an Air Force recruiter. I was on the delayed enlistment program for two months before I told my family at my birthday dinner in February," said Marianna, who still had to attend the 47-week training at the Defense Language Institute. "I enjoyed it because I didn't have to study like the other students did, but I was illiterate in Russian so I had to learn the Russian alphabet and how to write Russian."

Marianna, a Russian language facilitator, won her squadron's linguist of the year competition which earned her the trip to St. Petersburg to study Russian in a total immersion environment.

During her four-week course, Marianna lived with a Russian-sponsor family to fully experience normal



Left page, top, Senior Airman Marianna Brashear holds a black bear cub in front of Gorkij Park, Moscow. Bottom, Brashear, a Russian language facilitator, teaches a Russian course to military and civilian linguists. Right page from left, Brashear and her classmates put on shoe protectors before touring the Peterhoff Palace, St. Petersburg, Russia. Brashear walks the Red Square with the Kremlin in the background. Brashear admires a chandelier in the Peterhoff Palace.

Russian life. The 30-year-old married couple lived in a three-room apartment.

“We hit it off right away. They said I adapted easier than anyone else they had hosted before; I didn’t have any problems fitting in. In two days all of my speaking skills came back to me like I was at a family reunion,” said Marianna.

Marianna went to school at Russia’s University of Communication. An average day of instruction would include advanced grammar, listening comprehension using the day’s morning radio news broadcast, translation and conversation. “I think Andre, our instructor, did a very good job with us. He used a flexible teaching style and could easily change the direction of our studies, depending on what we needed to concentrate on the most. We rarely used English unless we were doing translation exercises,” said Marianna.

After school, a group of 15 students would walk through the Kazanskij Sobor (Cathedral) grounds to a cafe they ate lunch at every day followed by an excursion. “Our first excursion was a city tour by bus. This was to introduce us to the city and show us all the sights from the outside. Throughout my month-long stay, I visited many other places including museums, palaces and fortresses,” said Marianna.

“We went to the Peter and Paul fortress, where there were always people sun bathing on the little beach. Of course, we visited the Hermitage museum, famous for its spectacular international art exhibits. It was unbelievable!” she said. “We explored the Navy Museum, the Russian Mu-

seum and the ship *Avrora* (Aurora). We climbed up to the top of St. Isaac’s Cathedral to see one of the best views of the city. My favorite was the Peterhoff estate. I could spend days just walking around the grounds absorbing the gorgeous scenery and enjoying the fountains and waterfalls!”

“I went to see *Silfida* at the Malij Opernij Theater, folk/character dancing at the Oktyaberskij Zal, and a play at the Baltiskij Dom. I went to the Philharmonic to hear Rachmaninov 3 (from the movie “Shine”) which was extremely moving, and last but not least, I saw a ballet at my favorite theater, the Marinskij Theater. It was absolutely breathtaking!” said Marianna.

“Russians definitely go to the theater more often than Americans. It’s part of their everyday culture. The cost is anywhere from 8 to 30 rubles (\$1.25-\$5) for average seats, depend-

ing on the show and theater. Tickets don’t seem expensive until you remember that the average income for a teacher is approximately \$350 per month.”

Some of the stories Marianna’s parents told her about living in Russia really came to light for her when she experienced it for herself.

“I didn’t think my parents were lying about some of the things they told me, but the older I got the more I wanted to see it firsthand. I could not comprehend people having to wait hours in line just waiting for a loaf of bread. Even going there after the Cold War you could see bits and pieces of what life was like – the slums, sadness and just how poor the people were. It made me feel really thankful and lucky that my parents brought me here,” said Marianna. ■