September 15, 2011

My Family’s Experiment in Extreme Schooling

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY

The phone rang, and my stomach clenched when I heard her voice. “Daddy? I want to go home,” said my 8-year-old daughter, Arden. Two hours earlier, I dropped Arden and her two siblings off at their new school in a squat building in a forest of Soviet-era apartment blocks on Krasnoarmeyskaya (Red Army) Street in Moscow. They hugged me goodbye, clinging a little too long, and as I rode the metro to my office, I said a kind of silent prayer to myself that they would get through the day without falling apart.

But Arden had just spent the minutes between class periods hiding in the bathroom so no one would see her crying. Finally, she composed herself, found her teacher and pantomimed that she needed to talk to me. “I don’t understand . . . anything,” she told me. I tried to respond with soothing words, but I had no idea what to do. You can tell your kid to tough it out when she transfers from one school to another in your hometown. This was different.

My three children once were among the coddled offspring of Park Slope, Brooklyn. But when I became a foreign correspondent for The New York Times, my wife and I decided that we wanted to immerse them in life abroad. No international schools where the instruction is in English. Ours would go to a local one, with real Russians. When we told friends in Brooklyn of our plans, they tended to say things like, Wow, you’re so brave. But we knew what they were really thinking: What are you, crazy? It was bad enough that we were abandoning beloved Park Slope, with its brownstones and organic coffee bars, for a country still often seen in the American imagination as callous and forbidding. To throw our kids into a Russian school — that seemed like child abuse.

Most foreign correspondents, like expatriates in general, place their children in international schools. Yet it seemed to us like an inspiring idea. After all, children supposedly pick up language quickly. So what if mine did not speak a word of Russian and could not find Russia on a map. They were clever and

resilient. They would adapt, become fluent and penetrate Russia — land of Dostoyevsky and Tchaikovsky, the Bolshoi Ballet and the Hermitage Museum — in ways all but impossible for foreigners.

But the fantasy of creating bilingual prodigies immediately collided with reality. My children — Danya (fifth grade), Arden (third grade) and Emmett (kindergarten) — were among the first foreigners to attend Novaya Gumanitarnaya Shkola, the New Humanitarian School. All instruction was in Russian. No translators, no hand-holding. And so on that morning, as on so many days that autumn of 2007, I feared that I was subjecting them to a cross-cultural experiment that would scar them forever.

I told Arden that I would call her back, and then I called my wife, Julie Dressner. "What should we do?" I asked. We had decided together on a Russian school, but it would become a source of tension between us. Our children were miserable, which caused us to doubt moving abroad — and to sometimes turn on each other. I wanted to give the school more time and not demand more from the teachers. Julie was alarmed and thought that we had to do something. But Julie was frustrated by our options, short of pulling them out. At one point, after a lengthy discussion with several of the teachers, she walked out of the school nearly in tears. She was studying Russian, but she realized that she had missed much of what had been said. How can you help your children when you can barely communicate with their teachers?

Julie and I talked. I wondered whether it might be better if I went to the school and persuaded Arden to stay until the end of the day, if only in a quiet room, reading a book in English. Julie wanted her picked up, reasoning that it would be smarter to start fresh tomorrow. I didn't want to argue about it. When I found her at school, she brightened. It was as if she were being rescued. I held her hand as we walked to the metro, and I told her that I recognized that what she was doing was hard. I gently added that it would be nice if this were the last time that she left school early because she was upset. I suspected that it wouldn't be.

When we started searching for schools, we assumed that a large public one in Moscow would be too daunting. Julie stumbled upon the Web site of New Humanitarian, a private school with 150 or so pupils and small classes. It promised an enlightened and innovative interpretation of the classic Soviet education — all the rigor, without the suffocating conformity. Moscow progressives! Maybe the transition wouldn't be too rocky.

We were, of course, naïve. New Humanitarian, which runs kindergarten through high school, was still rooted in Russia's educational and societal traditions. Students recite by heart from Pushkin's "Yevgeny Onegin" ("My uncle was a man of virtue. . . .") and tackle algebra as early as fourth grade. Children older than 9 are regularly rated, based on test scores. Student rankings are posted on a central wall for all to gawk at, like the latest sports stats.

In those first months, our kids found themselves bewildered and isolated. Danya was a typical oldest child, a coper who rarely lost control. At night, though, she had insomnia. In class, she braced herself for that moment when she was asked for homework. She sometimes did not know whether it had been

assigned. During Russian grammar, the words on the blackboard looked like hieroglyphics. She tried to soothe herself by repeating a mantra: "It's O.K. to feel like an idiot. This is going to take time." But she felt betrayed. We had assured her that children grasp language effortlessly, and there she was, the dumb foreigner.

Arden was resisting getting out of bed in the morning, hugging her blanket in her room, where we had painted the walls to resemble green hills and blue skies. At recess, while others played *vyshibaly*, a Russian version of dodgeball, she passed the time walking back and forth on the curb, all alone, as if on a balance beam. Back at P.S. 321 in Park Slope, she relished her relationships with teachers, sometimes preferring to hang out with them instead of going to recess. At New Humanitarian, she could barely talk to them.

We hoped that Emmett would fare better, because he was only 5½ when he started. But one morning, he did so poorly on a minor exercise, involving drawing lines on graph paper, that he refused to hand it in. "Please let me see it," his teacher implored. "Everyone is just learning here." Finally, he crumpled the paper and smothered his face in it.

One night, he complained that he was not getting called on in class and knew why.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I'm an American," he said.

I tried not to laugh. Though I could have used a good laugh.

I convinced myself that what they were doing was no different from what millions of immigrants in the United States do all the time. Yet my unease stemmed from more than the school. When we arrived in Russia, the country was still suffering through the aftermath of the humiliating Soviet collapse in 1991. Vladimir Putin, a former K.G.B. agent who scorned Western-style democracy, was ruling undisputed. Many Russians — fed up with post-Soviet disorder — applauded him.

With oil prices soaring, the economy, based on natural resources, was riding high. In Moscow, newly prosperous Russians embraced a breathtaking materialism, making up for Soviet deprivation. They sped down Tverskaya Street in Lexus S.U.V.'s, outfitted their homes with Poggenpohl kitchens and piled into Cantinetta Antinori and other restaurants run by celebrity chefs from Europe. Moscow has 10 million people, and most are not wealthy. But after a few months, I remember thinking, Was this a society that I wanted to embed my kids in?

We first visited New Humanitarian when Danya, Arden and Emmett were being evaluated for admission. We were met by a man with a shock of steel-wool hair and teeth whose color and arrangement suggested decades of Soviet dentistry and heavy smoking. His name was Vasiliy Georgievich Bogin, and he was the school's founder and maestro.

We had just left Brooklyn and were spending our first year in Russia in St. Petersburg, the country's second-biggest city, where I was studying intensive Russian before starting my job in Moscow. The kids were at a private school in St. Petersburg that had a program for foreigners who wanted to learn Russian. Their language skills were rudimentary.

At the school in Moscow, Bogin spent 45 minutes with each of the three, speaking to them in English. He gave Danya an algebra problem that was clearly too hard for her. He constructed the outline of a fish with toothpicks and asked Arden to make the fish face in the opposite direction by moving only a few pieces. He had Emmett take apart and rebuild a house made of blocks. He seemed to care about the way they thought, not what they knew. The children found him bizarre. But Bogin was giving us a taste of his methods.

Bogin, who is in his 50s, would be nearly six feet tall if he had better posture, but he always seems to lean forward, drawn to something else as he prowls the school. His eyes have the impish gleam of a man cooking up a brainteaser for the next person he encounters. ("Anyone who thinks that 2 + 2 = 4 is an idiot," he likes to say. But more on that later.)

When Bogin was growing up in the Soviet era, the party used schools to mold loyal Communists. Teachers wove propaganda through the lessons and enforced memorization like drill sergeants. Bogin detested it. "I didn't want to be a slave," he told me. "I didn't want to be a person who is ordered and must obey the orders without any thinking. I didn't consider myself to be a person who repeats texts without any criticism or thinking or any alternatives."

Just as political dissidents fought the Soviet regime, so, too, did others oppose the educational system. Bogin was one of them. After studying English in college and serving in the army, he decided to become the kind of teacher he craved as a child. At a school in the Moscow suburbs in the late 1980s, he challenged pupils to challenge him — and everyone else. It was the height of perestroika under the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Soon after Communism's fall, Bogin opened New Humanitarian, one of the first private schools in Russia, in a cramped building that had been a nursery school for children of workers at a military factory. New Humanitarian remains there, and Bogin's inability to renovate the building or find a bigger one reflects to some extent the establishment's ambivalence toward his brilliance as an educational provocateur. (While the school is private, it is still heavily regulated by the government.)

After Bogin met my children that day in 2006, he told us that he very rarely admitted nonnative Russian speakers, let alone Americans, and he made clear that he could not provide separate classes for my children. We thought that he was preparing us for rejection. Then he said, "But I will take them."

As the kids struggled during those first months, we promised them that they could switch to an international school at any time. Yet even as we fretted, they were developing survival skills on their

own. They asked teachers for extra help after class. To prove to classmates that they were not clueless, they tried to do well in subjects that did not require a lot of Russian, like math. The girls employed a tactic that they called the smile-and-nod when they didn't understand what someone was saying. They remembered the words and furtively looked them up.

All three were starting to converse in Russian, albeit with accents and grammatical errors, as if the language were seeping into their consciousness. "It was kind of like solving a code, because every day, you just have to figure out something new to say and some new way you have to act," Danya later told me.

Even Russian-literature class seemed less daunting. Arden's teacher was discussing Russian fairy tales one morning when she realized that Arden did not know the classic ending to many. It was akin to ". . . and they lived happily ever after."

She asked Arden to repeat each word. Arden did. She told Arden to recite the sentences by herself. Arden hesitated, as if she were going to refuse, as she had many times before.

But then she did it. Her classmates applauded, and she beamed.

At the beginning of the year, the other children treated Danya, Arden and Emmett as curiosities. They occasionally mocked the three for their mangled syntax, though the school cracked down on that. Bogin even devised a ploy for Emmett's class: one of the school's English teachers conducted a lesson entirely in English. "This is what every day is like for Emmett," the teacher explained. One boy was so tormented trying to follow along that he burst into tears.

The teasing eventually stopped, and some children started looking out for mine, assisting them with homework and inviting them to birthday parties.

Bogin had been concerned that our kids would not make it. But he saw that they were progressing and that they were an example for the rest of the school. By that point, we were enthralled by Bogin — he was a character out of our romanticized notion of the Russian intelligentsia. He could take humdrum topics — say, how children raise their hands in class — and turn them into lengthy dialogues that were never boring. Julie and I once had a meeting with Bogin to discuss Emmett's study habits. It went nearly three hours. Bogin began to believe in our kids and became invested in their success. We drew strength from that.

Late in the spring of 2008, Danya came home with a startling announcement: Bogin had chosen her for the academic Olympiad team, largely for her math prowess. We could not fathom it. How could she understand the questions? She assured us that she was getting it. For the first time, a feeling of optimism washed over us.

Julie and I all but panicked early on, in large part because we felt powerless. Our inclination as parents

had been to intervene to protect our children. But maybe it was better that they had to win these battles by themselves. As Bogin often says, "Life is the best teacher."

As things settled, we were discovering that New Humanitarian was a pretty remarkable place. Bogin set up a system of what he called curators, two or three teachers whose job was to oversee the 10 to 15 children in each grade. Curators generally do not conduct lessons but observe classes, identify problems and take children to meals and activities. Everyone ate breakfast, lunch and snacks in the cafeteria, where comfort food, from borscht to blinis to cinnamon rolls, was served by doting cooks. My kids gobbled it up, and Emmett stopped wielding a fork and knife like a caveman. Many children, including ours, stayed at school until 6 p.m., doing homework with curators. This was a godsend for us, because we had difficulty helping with assignments.

New Humanitarian had standard subjects, like history and math, and Danya had many hours of homework a week. But Bogin added courses like antimanipulation, which was intended to give children tools to decipher commercial or political messages. He taught a required class called *myshleniye*, which means "thinking," as in critical thinking. It was based in part on the work of a dissident Soviet educational philosopher named Georgy Shchedrovitsky, who argued that there were three ways of thinking: abstract, verbal and representational. To comprehend the meaning of something, you had to use all three.

When I asked Bogin to explain Shchedrovitsky, he asked a question. "Does 2 + 2 = 4? No! Because two cats plus two sausages is what? Two cats. Two drops of water plus two drops of water? One drop of water."

From there, the theories became more complex. In practice, though, the philosophy meant that Bogin delighted in barraging children with word problems and puzzles to force them to think broadly. It was the opposite of the rote memorization of the Soviet system.

At dinnertime, the kids taunted me with riddles. "Ten crows are sitting on a fence," Arden announced. "A cat pounces and eats one crow. How many are left?" "Umm, nine," I said, fearing a trap. "No, none!" she gleefully responded. "Do you really think that after one crow is eaten, the others are going to stick around?"

Bogin had another innovation: classes were videotaped. This was not a vestige of Soviet surveillance. Rather, he wanted to critique how teachers interacted with — and nurtured relations between — children. Bogin and his staff often worked late into the night, reviewing footage and discussing methodology.

Life at New Humanitarian was full of academic Olympiads, poetry-reciting contests and quiz bowls. The school stressed oral exams, even in math, where children had to solve an equation at the blackboard and explain methodology. Children were graded and ranked, with results posted. We were not accustomed to this: in Brooklyn, the school instilled an everyone's-a-winner ethos. At New Humanitarian, Danya says,

"they send an entirely different message to the kids: 'Learning is hard, but you have to do it. You have to get good grades.' "

At first, when rankings were posted, the school left off Danya and Arden to avoid embarrassing them. (Emmett was too young to be ranked.) As the girls became more comfortable in Russian, their names began appearing. As the months went by, I noticed that they were creeping up the list.

New Humanitarian cost about $10,000 a child our first year. We could afford it — like many companies that send workers abroad, The Times paid tuition. Yet for Muscovites, the school was a strange breed. It was too expensive for most but not appealing to the rich, who often preferred compliant teachers and lavish facilities. With its warped floors and narrow hallways, New Humanitarian looked like an old annex to a public school in Queens.

The school attracted upper-middle-class parents who were impressed with Bogin. In my children's grades, the parents were lawyers, professors, bankers, architects, publishers, restaurateurs and a cosmetics manufacturer. They drove nice cars, lived in apartments that had been privatized in the post-Soviet era and vacationed in Western Europe.

I looked upon them as Russian versions of the parents who populate the Upper West Side, TriBeCa or Park Slope. Moscow has some strong public schools, but the system as a whole is dispiriting, in part because it is being corroded by the corruption that is a post-Soviet scourge. Parents often pay bribes to get their children admitted at better public schools. There are additional payoffs for good grades.

The parents at New Humanitarian exhibited one stark difference from their counterparts in New York: they were apolitical and often fatalistic about their nation's future. Like many Russians in the Putin era, they turned inward, shunning public life and focusing on the personal. To do otherwise was risky. You can criticize the government in private as much as you want — K.G.B. snoops no longer lurk. But anything more than that and you might be fired or lose a contract or get a visit from the police. That anxiety is always there.

Aleksei Skvortsov, a retail executive who was the father of a boy in Emmett's class, reminded me of the devoted dads I used to see taking their children to P.S. 321. When I asked Skvortsov what had happened to his generation, he responded: "I think that most people in Russia do not in any way believe that they can influence changes in society. So they concentrate on those changes that affect their personal lives."

Still, the parents' choice of New Humanitarian was in some sense an act of rebellion. They realized that after Bogin was done with their children, they would not succumb to anyone's demagoguery.

Bogin disliked the Russian leadership, especially Putin, who seemed too Soviet to him. But Bogin was not active in politics, knowing that to support the opposition was to court unfavorable attention from the authorities. I was curious, though, how the government perceived him. He had devised a compelling model that could help rescue the education system. But he was ignored.

Last spring, I went to see Valery Fadeyev, a prominent journalist who is a member of the Public Chamber, a Kremlin advisory council, and has close ties to the liberal wing of Putin's ruling party. Fadeyev's daughter attends New Humanitarian, and he was thrilled with the school. He told me that the Kremlin's educational bureaucracy was aware of Bogin but too calcified to care.

"The authorities do not prevent him from working, but they don't have any use for him either," Fadeyev said. "They don't understand that education reform is the only real source for the revitalization of our country."

Somehow, as the second year was melting into the third and fourth, life at New Humanitarian became normal. Danya was going to the coffee shop with her friends Masha and Dasha. Arden was excelling at Russian grammar, perhaps because she learned the rules from scratch, unlike native speakers. Both girls were at the top of the academic rankings. Emmett, still too young to be rated, was also thriving.

When I dropped them off in the morning, I was amazed as they bantered with other children. They no longer translated from English to Russian in their heads — the right words tumbled out. On the streets of Moscow, they were mistaken for natives. (Foreign residents have long resented how Russian theaters and museums charge foreigners a steep premium. We took great pleasure in sending the kids in to buy our tickets at the cheaper price.)

Their fluency and familiarity with the culture unlocked doors everywhere. On a long train ride to Estonia, they befriended a middle-aged construction executive and his wife, a doctor, who were from southern Russia. The couple set out black bread, pickled vegetables and smoked fish for the kids, and everyone sat there snacking and chatting for hours.

Arden joined a troupe that did not only ballet but also modern dance. At school, Danya was assigned Tolstoy and Chekhov, and then on her own, she started reading Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita," one of the most famous Russian novels of the 20th century, in the original.

The kids' sense of belonging raised an awkward issue: Were they becoming more Russian than American? Were they assimilating, like immigrants everywhere? Julie and I had grown to love Russia and its people, but aspects of the country — its drift toward authoritarianism, its conservative social mores — still troubled us.

The children, as always, figured it out before we did. They integrated their American identities into the school, rather than spurning them. They helped the English teachers. They described life in the United States to friends. I knew that we had nothing to worry about when one of Arden's curators, Galina Lebedeva, recounted how Arden demanded that girls move tables during cleanup, just like boys. "Arden, our American feministka, said the girls were as capable of doing the lifting as the boys," Lebedeva told me with a smile. "We said, 'Fine.' "

And then, after five years in Russia, it was time to return to Brooklyn.

Danya, now nearly 14, was ambivalent about leaving, drawn toward being a teenager in New York City. But Arden and Emmett would have gladly stayed. “I feel like I’m tugged in two ways, and I have no idea what to do,” Arden told me last spring. “That’s the one problem with living abroad. You end up getting those weird feelings like, Oh, I can’t leave; I can’t stay.”

On the kids’ final day, Bogin called an assembly to wish them goodbye. He started praising them for all they had overcome but then stopped. This, too, would not be just a lecture.

“What would we not have had if these three had not been here?” he asked. “How did they enrich our school?”

“Theater!” someone shouted back.

“The school newspaper!”

“Great friendships!”

A chant began. “*Spa-si-bo! Spa-si-bo!*” (“Thank you!”)

Some teachers and children had tears in their eyes.

I went onstage to express my deep appreciation but was too choked up to speak. Suddenly, Arden strode forward and took the microphone. In confident and flawless Russian, she thanked the school for all of us.

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