

## First Report

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On the fifth of September I started my classes at the European University at Saint Petersburg. The university is small compared to where I went for my undergraduate studies, University of Washington, but it is well known and located in the center, which makes it a lot easier for me to attend Rotary and Rotaract meetings which are held in the center. Nevertheless, the staff and the professors are very knowledgeable and focused on the works and progress of students. The load of studies are very high and if the student is an international student, it is even more time consuming experience. But the professors are understandable and helpful. We are getting toward the end of the semester here, so the stress of preparing final papers and course works are high.

Before arriving here, I had communicated with former Rotary Ambassadors and students who had studied in Saint Petersburg and Russia. I had heard a lot of scary stories of them being lost, losing their items and facing some cultural challenges during their experience here. So, I was a little nervous and concerned. Now, after about two months of stay and settling down, I can see how much my concern was irrelevant at least in my case. That is mostly because of having Rotarians and Rotaracts around me. I was picked up at the airport by Maxim, husband of Valeria, my host Rotarian and was dropped at an apartment. After a nice warm meal at the apartment, I got to relax. In other words, after many hours of being in the airplane, I didn't have to look for a hotel or a place to stay after my arrival. And this kind of warm hospitality by local Rotarians and Rotaracts has been accompanying me whenever I am around them. So, I don't feel homesick or alone at all. I enjoy interacting with the people here and deeply appreciate the kindness and caring of the Rotarians and Rotaracts around me.

Out of the four Rotary clubs that are active here, I have been to two so far several times, Rotary Club Saint Petersburg (RCSP), the biggest and oldest rotary club in Saint Petersburg and Rotary Club Saint Petersburg International (RCSPI) with about 17 members. Last weekend, a group of Rotarians and I went to an orphanage that RCSPI supports. The orphanage has about 35 residents ranging from babies to 18 year-olds. In the past, RCSPI had donated the orphanage a van, and had done some renovation that their building required. We cleaned the yard of the orphanage and planted fruit trees for them. We also, made them barbecue and played soccer with them. It was a fantastic experience for me. I was surprised to find out that some of the Rotarians have been to Seattle and to our Rotary clubs there. Each one has a story to tell about their experience there.

There are three Rotaract clubs in Saint Petersburg. So far I have been to Rotaract Club Saint Petersburg and Rotaract Club Saint Petersburg International. Every other Monday I meet with

Rotaract Club Saint Petersburg organizing our projects and when and where to implement them. With this Rotaract club we have planned about three projects so far. One to promote interaction between youth and elderly, the second one is to teach elderly to use Skype and computers. And the third one is organizing blood donation sessions for the local hospital. I am very much impressed with the enthusiasm the Rotaracts have here to do projects as such in addition to their busy lives. So far most of the Rotaracts I have met are full time students who are putting 20 to 40 hours of work a week, and doing Rotaract projects. One of the challenges I have noticed being common among the Rotaracts are the issue of funding their projects. Once in a while they get lucky with Rotary clubs helping them with the funds, but it is definitely not common.

This coming Saturday, October 22<sup>nd</sup> we will go and implement our first project with this Rotaract club which is the promotion of interaction between youth and elderly. We will hand out postcards and flowers so that the youth could give to either grandparents or elderly relatives.

Every other Tuesday I meet with Rotaract Club Saint Petersburg International. This club is small, about seven or eight members. We are working on fund raising activities for our local projects. Some of the ideas we have so far are to give out hot tea on the streets or parks in return for donations to our local humanitarian projects. People here drink a lot of tea, more than we drink coffee in the States. Also, it is very cold here so while walking to work or class during the cold days holding a nice, warm cup of tea in your hand feels very good and people will appreciate that. Also, we are organizing free Russian or English lessons for possible donations to our humanitarian projects. We are in talks with Rotarians and universities to provide us with a class and a few chairs for once a week. If we succeed with our goal of finding a room with a few chairs, we will start giving free English/Russian lessons on November 10<sup>th</sup>.

I have also met with Interact Club in Saint Petersburg. Unfortunately, it is not active but we talked about possibly starting it again soon. We brainstormed some ideas about how to start it again and what kind of projects we could have.

Saint Petersburg is very beautiful and a lot bigger than I thought. Unfortunately, I have not had enough time so far to go to sightseeing places. Most of the time is spent on studies and working on our projects with other students and Rotaracts. Though I went to Pushkin once with one of the Rotarians and visited one of the six famous parks in the area. Hopefully, once the semester is over, I think there is a month of no studies during which I plan to visit some of the historical places in Saint Petersburg.

I am very glad that I chose Russia. It is a country that is quite different and goes through a unique phase in its history, culturally and politically. The new generation has a lot more in common with the west than their parents and grandparents had, and this has created certain challenges and new ways of lives for people here. Young people are less dependent on their parents because of the abundance of jobs in the big cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg and are more into traveling abroad to different countries and being part of the pack than to be

isolated. Even after being in the country for more than a month I am still excited to further get to know the locals here, experience their ways of life, what they offer to the world and what the world has to offer them.

Although Saint Petersburg is bigger than Seattle, there are lesser varieties of restaurants here. I usually eat out because of walking around the city and going from place to place throughout the day, nevertheless I do enjoy the Russian mushroom soup and chicken soup my flat-mate makes once in a while. Zoe, she is the owner of the flat I am living now. She is 71 years old and has some fascinating stories of her experience under the Soviet Union. She used to be an actress and has traveled to many countries. She still teaches theater twice a week. If I don't understand something in Russian, she tries to explain in English. I am very much impressed with how nice Russians are with foreigners who mispronounce words in Russian. They are very patient and willing to help.

On the floor that we are living there are three flats, all the neighbors have lived there for more than forty years. They know each other very well. Once in a while they share food with one another. A few days ago, one of the neighbors had gone to fishing and had brought fresh fish. They gave some to Zoe and she cooked it and kindly shared it with me. On a weekly basis she goes to the forests with her friends of 50-60 years and collects mushrooms. It is a great hobby and a fun way to hang out with old friends. If she catches me in the hall or in the kitchen she enthusiastically shows me her mushrooms and explains what kind they are.

I am sure you have heard of the Russian underground metro, which is the deepest in the world in Saint Petersburg as I was told. Riding in it is quite an experience. While outside it is below zero degrees, once in metro, it is quite warm and, hot if you are a foreigner like me wearing several layers of clothes. I am amazed by how Russians got to adjust to this weather variation here.

I am excited about our projects with the Rotary and Rotaract clubs here and am looking forward to meet the rest of the Rotary clubs in Saint Petersburg. If it wasn't because of the Rotary and Rotaract clubs here I probably would have missed home. Once a month it is common here not to have electricity at home for a day or not having warm water while it is below zero degrees outside. But I am getting used to it here and share this experience with the rest of Russians who are living in these buildings. I am very fond of their culture and in sharing my culture with them. I have made many Russian friends here and have learned tremendously from their kindness and their willingness in promoting friendship and service to others. I am very proud to be part of a group of Russians who are improving their communities and am very thankful for having this unique and fruitful opportunity in my life.