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Two Candles Burn in Russia

My memories of living and studying in St. Petersburg this past summer have become a scattered collage of moments and emotions, which I now have trouble distinguishing between. After awhile the everyday metro rides, Russian classes, borsch soup, Pushkin museums, beautiful statues, Orthodox churches, and conversations with my Russian host-mother blend together as one collective impression. We tend to remember, however, the turning points in our overall experiences more distinctly than the rest. This moment for me began on my way home from my first experience hearing the St. Petersburg National Symphony Orchestra.

Recounting the wonderfully fluid sound of the last piece of music with another American student in our somewhat broken Russian, I noticed that I had missed three foreign calls sometime during the performance. Stepping onto the platform at Vasilevsky Ostrov metro station, my phone rang once more. My Dad was on the other end of the line, sounding someone tense and dismissive of my orchestral account. The metro noise made it hard to hear the distant signal. He promised to call back in 20 minutes when I was safely in my 11th floor Russian home-stay apartment. Politely refusing tea, I locked myself in my room, becoming increasingly nervous as the minutes passed by. Soon after the phone buzzed once again, I learned that one of my cousins had passed away from a heroine overdose the night before. The shocking news left me wanting to desperately be at home in the United States with my loved ones. Instead, I was shakily sorting through my Russian-English dictionary, looking for the specific words “cousin,” “drugs” and finally for the verb “to die” in order to translate the streaming tears running down my face to my host-mother.

The next morning I made the decision to suppress my sadness and throw myself into my studies. I made it through my first hour of lessons before I broke into tears once more in the university’s upstairs bathroom. I realized that I could not bear this news alone without detection from others, and spoke to one of CIEE’s coordinators, Irina. She immediately poured tea for me and suggested that I go to a local church to light a candle and say a prayer regardless of my specific religion. Recommending the Church of St. Catherine on Nevsky Prospect, Irina quickly dismissed my claim that she need not accompany me the long trip to Nevsky. Insisting this situation was too important for her to diverge from her native language, I did my best to translate her Russian during our hour-long transport to the ancient church. I felt terribly numb on that lengthy walk, and remember thinking that the sun should not shine so very brightly.

The church was empty except for one woman selling candles in the far right corner. Irina bought two for us, one for each of us. She led the way to a small display of prayer candles. I watched her light her long white candle, turning it sideways in order to catch the fire, struck by the last prayer said. I followed her example, turning the candle to now catch her flame. Simultaneously, as top of my wick burst into flames, my eyes burst into tears. There I stood crying for several minutes. I cried for the loss of my cousin, for the sorrow in my family, for the distance between us. Then I noticed that Irina was crying too, dabbing her eyes to hide her own sorrow. I placed my candle next to hers in the prayer circle. There they stood, two candles burning in Russia.

When I think back to that moment I remember the warmth of Irina’s compassion, of her hug, and of her own tears. While our candles burned next to one another in that cold church, all of the cultural barriers that had previously existed between us disappeared as we both felt the utter humanity of the situation. In my mind, one candle still burns in remembrance of my cousin Nate, the other for the hope of a more compassionate world, a world where understanding of one another can surpass language, culture and religion.