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### ***Dasvidanya Rossiya***

The past semester has encompassed the most life-changing four months of my life. I have come to know this city on the Baltic Sea like the back of my hand, familiar with every nook and cranny of its 300 year history. I have seen Tchaikovsky's ballet at the Mariinsky Theater and explored the darkness and resilient light of besieged Leningrad. I have eaten more *blini*, *shashlik*, and *shaverma* than I would care to remember, and I have thoroughly sampled the Russian beer repertoire.

I have rubbed elbows with Gogolesque characters on Nevsky Prospekt, and stalked after Raskolnikov in the back alleys of Sennaya Ploschad. I have eaten a lifetime of sour cream and dill. I have sweated bullets in a *banya* and "caught" my own fish dinner. I have successfully dealt with the Russian postal system and have learned (the hard way) about the value of small change.

I have had my documents checked and (almost) bribed the police. I have picked mushrooms in the woods, climbed inside WWII bunkers, and visited Tsarist palaces. I have lived with a Russian family, eaten Russian food, spoken Russian on the streets and in stores, been a daily commuter on the Metro, and been stuck on the wrong island when the bridges went up late at night.

I have taken gypsy cabs (something I've purposely neglected to mention in my journal thus far to avoid giving my parents stress ulcers, I'll explain what these are when I'm back home). I have improved my Russian language and deepened my grasp of Russian history, society, and culture. I have gotten lost in the world's largest art museum. I have been to Novgorod, birthplace of Russia, and Moscow, the frenzied, throbbing heart of this nation. I have learned to ice-skate in the Ukraine and eaten dinner in a complete stranger's home. I have seen the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz and gorged on pierogies in Krakow cafes. I have wandered around clean, green quiet Tallinn and Helsinki, and soaked in the progressive spirit of the Swedish capital Stockholm. I have made friends for life, both American and Russian, and have come so far in my understanding of this enigma of a nation.

Little did I think 15 weeks ago that I would ever comprehend so fully a culture, people, city, and way of life so different from my own. Russia defies definition and smashes your expectations and prejudices. It is the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East and combines aspects of all three, without ever becoming one of them.

The adjective "Russian" conveys and implies more in a single word that almost any other that I can think of. There is no place like it on earth, and I feel so lucky to have had this opportunity to explore the very essence of such a foreign country. I sincerely hope to be back in Russia someday, to catch up with old friends and to revisit the sites of some of the great memories made over the past semester.

My time in Russia has also given me a much more objective view of America, something I now realize is very hard to do if you have not spent at least a few weeks outside of its borders. America certainly has its fair share of faults, but it is a great place to grow up, live and go to school. However, comparing Russia and America is impossible; its like apples and soccer balls. But I now have a deep appreciation for both countries; their strengths and their weaknesses, their beautiful parts and their ugly scars, their proud moments and their shameful pasts.

Whatever happens between Russia and the rest of the world in the future, I know that I will be a biased observer, telling everyone that the Russians aren't all that bad. This country, this city, and these people have become embedded in my very soul. In turn, I've left pieces of my heart and soul on the bridge overlooking the Griboedova Canal, on the platform at Chkalovskaya metro

station, at the Smolny campus, in the halls of the Hermitage, on Dymkaya Street, on the park benches in the Tavrishesky Gardens, and at the Trofimov's kitchen table in their sixth-floor apartment. When I return someday, I know that I will rediscover these pieces of myself that I leave behind here now. When that day comes, I am sure that I will continue to be stunned and left breathless by this Cradle of Communism, the Venice of the North, Peter's Pride, and the Northern Capital of Russia: Saint Petersburg.