

Moscow on the Colorado: Russians in Austin

By: Bryan Brah

She tore at the pirozki and few crumbs of beef, onions and dill spilled out the corner. She sipped her sweet warm tea, smiled and popped a bite of the savory pastry into her mouth.

"I love this place," said Anna Maslova, a senior at UT, the clipped vowels and rolling R's of her slight accent revealing her Eastern European heritage. "It reminds me of my childhood." She was referring to Sasha's Gourmet Russian Market, the only store in Austin that sells authentic Russian and European specialty foods, and the de facto hub of Austin's Russian-speaking community.

"I mostly sell nostalgia," said Sasha Lifschitz, the owner of the store. "We get a lot of people who come in here to speak Russian and get a taste of the old country."

In large cities, immigrants from the same country or region tend to congregate. Out of convenience or necessity they live in certain neighborhoods, shop at certain stores, go to certain churches and generally support each other through patronage and hiring.

There are stores and restaurants that sell traditional foods, newspapers, radio and television providing information in the language, professional service providers such as doctors, lawyers, dentists, mechanics and real estate agents who speak the language and organizations that sponsor and coordinate events.

This is not the case in Austin. Although there are about 3,000 to 4,000 Russian-speakers in Travis County there isn't much of an organized community, Sasha Lifschitz said. "There is a Russian-Speaker's Society, but it's never really taken off the way that it could have."

While the website for the Russian Speaker's Society of Austin lists some links to Russian businesses in the area and a few events on its calendar, it has not been updated since May and requests to Luda Voskov, the society's president, for additional information went unanswered.

"They have meetings and occasional events, but Russians prefer to get together in more intimate groups," Sasha Lifschitz said.

Maslova agreed, "Russian events are usually informal. A few people will meet and watch a movie or just hang out. I think that there may be some 'official' organization, but it's mostly old people and I don't have any desire to join."

Part of this disconnect can be explained by the age difference, but part is due to the cultural differences between the generations of immigrants. According to Elena Lifschitz, Senior lecturer at UT's Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, there are really two waves of immigration, Soviet era immigrants and post-Soviet.

"People who came 30 years ago fled persecution, but later immigrants came for economic reasons," Elena Lifschitz said. "When we came here, we left everything behind; there was no going back. People coming today are not as vested in America."

Sergey Karasev, a professional runner who has been living on and off in Austin since 1994, confirmed this assessment. "I still have an apartment in Russia, and will probably move back when I retire," Karasev said.

Besides these reasons, there are other factors that work against the formation of Russian communities. The first seems like a minor semantic point to Americans but is the source of much contention among people from former Soviet republics.

"You have to watch out and not call someone 'Russian,' because you never know where they're from," Sasha Lifschitz said. "They might get really mad if they're from the Ukraine, that's why we say 'Russian-speaking' instead."

Religion also tends to hinder kinship in the expatriate community. "Anti-Semitism was a real problem. Most of us who came in the 70s were ethnic Jews. We weren't welcome in Russia, so they let us leave. A lot of Russians saw this as an unfair advantage," Elena Lifschitz said. "Once we arrived, we didn't need to form Russian communities because we were welcomed by the Jewish groups that sponsored us."

Another reason comes down to simple demographics. "A lot of Russians living in Austin moved here after living somewhere else in the U.S., so they've already assimilated and the novelty of being around other Russians has worn off," Sasha Lifschitz said.

The last strike against forming a cohesive Russian or even a Russian-speaking community in Austin may be the fundamental way that Russians view relationships.

"Americans use the term 'friend' to loosely refer to everyone from brief acquaintances to people they've known since grammar school. For Russians it's different; we usually only have a few friends in our whole lives," Elena Lifschitz said. "We still need the support of a community of friends, but just because someone is from the same place as you doesn't mean that you'll be friends."

Maslova agreed saying: "Russians are very open and honest, and we can tell immediately whether or not we like someone. I'm not going to hang around somebody just because they're Russian."

Sources and References

Elena D Lifschitz, Russian/Austinite and senior lecturer, UT Department of Slavic Languages and Literature. elifschitz@mail.utexas.edu

Sasha Lifschitz, Russian/Austinite and owner of Sasha's Gourmet Russian Market.
512.459.1449

Anna Maslova, Russian/Austinite and UT student. anna.maslova@gmail.com

Sergey Karasev, Russian/Austinite, professional long distance runner and employee at Runtex. 512.577.2672

Luda Voskov, Russian/Austinite and President of the Russian Speakers' Society of Austin
lvoskov@austin.rr.com

Web Sites

Russian Speakers' Society of Austin <http://www.rusaustin.com>

University of Texas Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies
<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/creees/>