

What I Learned About Russians as an Au Pair

By [Francesca Ebel](#)

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People's first question when they hear that I've just returned from a winter in Moscow is usually: "What on earth drove you to go there?" The answer is not an easy one. I landed at Sheremetyevo Airport in January with dreams of balalaikas, samovars and golden domed churches. It did not take me long to realize that living in Moscow was less about folklore and literary romanticisms and more about surviving a harsh climate and an arduous routine.

When I contacted Dasha, a 30-something interpreter and family friend, looking for work, she instantly wrote back saying that her family would love to take me on as an au pair. Their dream is to immigrate to Australia within the next few years. "Life is safer there" she once told me "I don't want my children growing up in a society racked by drug and alcohol abuse. I want them to walk alone on the streets, free from danger."

But to adhere to the rigorous immigration laws, Dasha's husband Valera, an IT specialist, would have to pass an English language exam. So for 3,000 rubles (\$100) a week, I was to care for her children, Sonya, 3, and Lyova, 2, and teach Valera English.

The family sleep in one bed in a tiny apartment in Zheleznodorozhny, an industrial town 21 kilometers east of Moscow. The apartment is also home to Dasha's 23-year-old brother Pasha, and his friends, a dog and a rabbit. The place is never quiet, and there's certainly no room for secrets. The lack of peace and bleak, unforgiving surroundings are enough to draw anyone into a deep depression.

With so many families wanting their children to learn English, native English teachers are very much in demand and are paid handsomely. Subsequently, I soon found myself braving the commuter trains into the Moscow outskirts to teach a group of Dasha's colleagues. But for a young family living off a modest salary in Zheleznodorozhny, employing an English girl was a real innovation.

Au pairing was a novelty for me, too. My attitude toward children has never been particularly positive, but Sonya and Lyova were adorable. I instantly fell for their miniature hands, infectious laughter and funny little walks.

Caring for two toddlers in the extreme Moscow weather was a real challenge. It would take a good half hour to dress each of them up in their thermals, woolly socks and coats amid their capriciousness before setting out across the small courtyard to the kindergarten, only to spend another half hour taking everything off. On particularly brutal days, the residential blocks would create a wind tunnel which would whip up a torrent of snow, lashing at our cheeks and blinding us. I'm not a sturdy girl, so it was hard enough for me to fight the force of the wind. But the moment the children felt the cold, they started to scream. The only thing I could do was scoop them up in both arms and battle on, repeatedly slipping and falling into the snow.

The arrival of an English nanny in the area did not go unnoticed. I became known to all as "Miss Francesca" — except for Lyova who, struggling to pronounce my name, called me "apteka," which means a pharmacy in Russian. People's reactions at my lack of comprehension were mixed. Some were abrasive or impatient, others were kind and helpful. On one nasty occasion, during my first solo outing with Sonya to the local circus, I was shouted at by a particularly grumpy babuskhka who demanded that I leave or pay for an extra ticket. Indeed, the language barrier was an obstacle for some time, and I found myself getting more demoralized by a country that clearly had no time for foreigners.

This irritation, however, did not exist with the children. They accepted me, with my funny accent and tea-and-milk quirks, for what I was: their nanny. They didn't care if it took me 10 minutes to read them a sentence from their favorite storybook. Nor did they particularly mind if I gave them sausages when they'd asked for ice cream.

The children's favorite game was babaika, the Russian word for bogeyman. If they ever got too restless, I'd shout "babaika is coming!" and watch with satisfaction as they ran off squealing. Their main sources of entertainment, however, were the weird and wonderful creatures that roamed the apartment. During one memorable incident, when shopping at the local supermarket, Sonya demanded a pet fish. "It can live in the bath," she said. Seeing my look of dismay, Dasha assured me that it was OK. They'd once kept a crab whose shell Sonya had colored in with a blue, felt-tip pen.

In the end, we returned home cradling a large, gasping carp. Assuming it would be dead by the

time we arrived, I passed the bag to Sonya who had a bad habit of squeezing living things too tightly. I drew the bath and as the poor thing floated to the surface, I waited for the moment of disappointment. Suddenly, as if struck by lightning, it twitched violently and started to swim. For 2 days it remained there, happily circling the tub. On one fateful eve, I opened the freezer to find poor Arnold, as I had secretly dubbed him, in his final resting place. It was not the first time I had to question the normality of the family.

On the surface, living with a Russian family was quite different from living with an English one. Before I went to Russia, my mother had warned me "never approach a Russian with an empty stomach." Indeed, the wonders of Russian hospitality were to get the better of me on more than one occasion. Together, we celebrated the spring festival of maslenitsa and other national holidays such as Women's Day. They trained me in the complexities of vodka drinking and took me to a Russian banya. I ate copious amounts pelmeni, caviar and blini. One time, I trudged through the snow with Pasha and his friends to go to the Zheleznodorozhny's favorite nightclub, complete with laser lights, disco balls and popular Russian hits.

My Russian family interacted like any other family. They had their arguments and conflicts and squabbles. But they also loved each other unconditionally and worked tirelessly to provide and protect. It was such a privilege to be welcomed into such a lovely and generous family.

I left them in April in heavy tears and with promises to join them in the Crimea next summer. Through them, I was able to experience the "real" Moscow region, not the shiny version of Moscow that most people see within the limits of the Garden Ring. I witnessed the daily hardships that normal people endure with indifference.

Most important, I had the chance to separate stereotype from reality. I concluded that Russia has its share of absurdities but that the typical Russian is not that different from you or me. He's just a little stronger.

Francesca Ebel is an au pair from Britain.

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