

Dedushka - A Remembrance

My grandfather, or as I've always called him, Dedushka, was a great many things – a brilliant engineer, a respected professor, a loyal friend, a loving and proud father, grandfather and great-grandfather, an inveterate tinkerer, a graceful speed skater and skier, a skilled photographer and painter (. . . a terrible singer), and a gentle and kind man. But as I think about him now, I remember one quality most of all: he was a great communicator.

For those of you who encountered him on his daily walks around the neighborhood, you know that his spoken English was mostly limited to his favorite greeting - an enthusiastic “Good day!” - and a polite response - “Very well! Thank you!” But I know you’ll agree with me that he still found ways to convey his thoughts and emotions - his broad smile and waving hand said he was happy to see your familiar face; his gestures and signs told you a story about the tree he had been observing and how he wanted to try to paint the sunlight through the clouds; the way he touched and examined the trumpet you were carrying showed you that his engineer’s mind was studying and admiring the workmanship, and maybe even comparing it to the mechanics or the sound of my own French horn.

Those of you who came to our house will remember his favorite gesture of hospitality: “Chai s limonom?” he would always ask. If you prefer your tea without lemon, you probably had to learn to respond with “bez limona.” . . . And then to repeat it two or three times when he asked you if you were really, really sure. But you rarely refused a cup of his trademark tea altogether, because you understood that he was saying more than just “have some tea” - he was saying “Come in, relax, feel at home, and feel like one of us, a part of our family.”

I'm sure many of you will also remember him as much for his hospitality as for his selflessness. He hardly ever asked for anything for himself, in part because he was eminently capable of creating what he needed or making do with what he had, and in part because he never wanted to inconvenience anyone else. Of course, when he did ask for something - a vest to keep him warm in winter or help connecting to the BBC Russian internet feed - we were all happy to oblige.

Some of you, like my husband Jesse, even suffered patiently (. . . I mean, smiled attentively!) through his attempts to get into more substantive discussions about his paintings or his apparatuses. You'll remember that his enthusiasm for sharing his thoughts far exceeded his ability to express himself in English, not to mention his patience for me or my mom to finish translating. We would plead with him to just say it in Russian and let us do the rest, but he would get too excited and would interrupt with a confusing mix of English, Russian and even German. Luckily, words like "perspectiva" and "gorizont," "acupunctura" and "electron" hardly need translation. And neither does the real message he was trying to convey - "Jesse, I am so happy that you are a physicist because it means we speak the same language." Or "Abe, look at this painting of a tree on a riverbank - don't you agree that nature is beautiful? I am so lucky that I have seen a sight like this and that I am able to paint my memory of it. And thank you for being here and admiring it with me."

As for me, Dedushka often used to say that we have always understood each other. I know he meant it in more ways than one. When I came back from Cuba at the age of 4, I had forgotten all my Russian and he didn't speak a word of Spanish. But as he loved to remind me, we still got along just fine. And over the years of living together, from then until I went away for high school, we developed that special bond that grandchildren

have with their grandparents. When I got in trouble with my mom, I knew I could come to him for comfort and understanding, though he still usually turned the experience into a lesson, making me think about what I might have done wrong and what I might do differently in the future. Though he was hopelessly tone deaf, he used to try to sing me to sleep with lullabies; ever the procrastinator, I would always ask him to sing one more, and even if bedtime had come and gone, he would always do it. Even as a baby, I valued his company even if it meant I had to suffer minor discomforts. Like that one time he always recalled, a bit guiltily, when he had put me in a backpack and taken me out for a winter stroll - he didn't notice until we got back that the snow was piling up on my head and face while I slept, but I didn't get sick and didn't complain!

I'd like to imagine that we would have gotten along just as well if I had known him in his youth. I know from the stories I've heard that the resilience, ingenuity, and loyalty that he embodied later in life were qualities he had from the start. How else could he have made it through the second world war, completing his degree amid a famine and thousands of miles from his home, then raised his daughter (my mom) and built a career and a life amid the deprivation and uncertainty of the Soviet communist regime. With dedication and love, he helped that little girl with dark braids and a sharp mind become a successful professional with a daughter of her own, and with resourcefulness and good humor he filled in the countless voids of daily life and made our small Leningrad apartment a cozy place to grow up.

Later, when he was already over 70 years old, and most people would have expected him to retire and slow down, he gathered a few of the most important pieces of his life and moved to a new country where everything from the language to the politics to the customs to the music was foreign to him. And here in the States he took up new challenges, like learning

to paint, with the same grace and enthusiasm and engineering mindset that he had brought to all the challenges he had faced before.

I am so glad that Dedushka got the chance to know my son - his great-grandson - Adrian, who is now the age I was when I moved back to Russia. And it's lovely to see parts of Dedushka's nature in Adrian: his resourcefulness and his inventiveness. Dedushka often saved things that were broken or almost (but not completely) spent, because he saw the value of things and had faith in his ability to fix or find a use for almost anything. His various contraptions made of found, repurposed and repaired materials filled his room and spilled over through every apartment and house he shared with my mom, but everything had a designated purpose and place. Like Dedushka, Adrian loves to collect items that others see as unneeded or used up so he can transform them into collages or toys. I hope I will be able to pass on other parts of Dedushka's legacy to him in the years to come.

There is much more I could say about my grandfather, but I will close by sharing some of the things for which I am the most grateful:

I am grateful to Dedushka for passing down to me at least a fraction of his love of math, science, and art and for teaching me as much as I wanted to learn about the things he knew and loved.

I am grateful to him for taking joy in my accomplishments in these subjects, which he knew and understood, and for being my enthusiastic cheerleader in things that were more foreign to him - languages, music, and the law.

And I am grateful to him for showing me the real meaning of perseverance by the way he handled any difficulties he ever faced - from

dealing with university and party bureaucracy to reinventing himself late in life in a new country far from everything he had ever known, and doing it all with grace and good humor.

I, like you, will miss my grandfather's gentleness, his intellect, and his tea.

We will all miss my Dedushka.