

Episode 6: Different Worlds

Summary

Nick's friend Lena was born in the Soviet Union, moved to Canada at age 10, and now lives in Russia. In this episode she talks about her childhood and her experiences in both places.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Lena about her experiences in Russia, which is her home country. Thank you for talking to me.

Lena: You're very welcome.

Nick: So, you have a really interesting background and a really interesting, sort of, experience, because you were born in Russia, is that right?

Lena: Yes.

Nick: But then you moved to Canada when you were young.

Lena: Yes, I was born in, uhh, Nizhny Novgorod, which was back then, it was the Soviet Union, it was known as Gorky, uhh, named after a very communist writer, and then I moved to Canada when I was 10 years old. And in Canada I lived in Winnipeg, then Vancouver, then Ottawa and then back to Vancouver.

Nick: Wow, so you moved around quite a lot.

Lena: Quite a bit, yeah.

Nick: OK, and so do you remember what it was like to move to Canada at age 10 from Russia? It must have been very different.

Lena: Uhh, I definitely remember it. I think everybody remembers their childhood really vividly¹, because it's the best time of their life, or hopefully it is. Uhh, so definitely I remember my move to Canada. It was my very first flight. It was my very first time out of my home region, umm, because in Russia you don't have that many

¹ vividly: clearly, brightly or intensely. It's usually used with colours (as the adjective vivid) or memories (as the adverb vividly - e.g. 'I remember vividly').

opportunities to travel, not just outside the country but within the country as well. It's a very big country, so you need a lot of, umm, patience and a lot of, I guess, resources in order to take the trains or the planes. So, yeah, it was, uhh, the first time I had ever been on a plane, the first time I went outside the country and it was ... I had no idea where I was going, because I didn't know Canada existed at that point.

Nick: And did you speak any English at that time?

Lena: I thought I did, but I did not. Umm, I studied English in, uhh, since grade 1. It was a secondary language in, uhh, Russia, but, umm, when I reached grade 3, uhh, they divided us into two groups, our class. So the first group who was people who showed some potential, and those were the people who were expected, maybe, in the future at some point, to speak English somewhat² decently, and then there was the second group, which was just hopeless and you just do it for the school credit. I was part of the second group, so when I arrived in Canada, umm, basically someone asked me my name and I couldn't understand what they said, so it was at that level, yeah.

Nick: OK, and so how did you improve your English even, uhh, at this stage?

Lena: I came at the end of April and I went to Canadian school for the first time in May, umm, and I was only there a month before summer vacation, and, uhh, I remember kids not making fun of me³, but the only thing they could so that I would understand is, 'Do you like me?' or, 'Do you like me not?' And I would say 'Yes' or 'No'. For a month, that's all I said, and then in grade 6, umm, I had a special ... uhh, the vice principal of the school would come and study English with me with a colour ... with a picture book, while everybody else in my class had French class, because it was, it's Canada, so French is the second language. And after one year of, uhh, studying with her, I started ... they put me in a French class as well so I had to know English and French and everything.

Nick: OK, and you also told me a really interesting story about another way that you helped learn English by yourself, uhh, on the weekends.

Lena: Yes, we had, umm, my parents, uhh, got a VCR player, uhh, when we came and we bought three cassettes⁴, so it was *Back to the Future*, *Home Alone* and *Titanic*, and *Titanic* was by far my favourite one. And, umm, I didn't understand what it was, I just saw the lovely pictures of the ship sinking, and, umm, I would watch it

² somewhat: to some extent, reasonably. 'Somewhat decently' means OK, but not great.

³ making fun of me: teasing me, making jokes about me.

⁴ cassettes: audio or (in this case) video tapes used to play music or movies before CDs, MP3s, DVDs etc.

every single weekend, every single Sunday, in the morning, while my parents were usually out for a walk. And, umm, I would listen to it every ... I loved it so much, I cried, I was ... I knew that he died at the end and it was very sad, and, uhh, I remember the first phrase that I learned fully in English was, 'Women and children first'. It wasn't very useful, but that came from my *Titanic* knowledge. And I still ... I think, I haven't watched it in a while, but I think I can still remember the script identically as it was, including all the sounds, yeah.

Nick: That's great. And so how long did you stay in Canada?

Lena: I was in Canada since I ... from the age of 10 to the time I finished university, so that was 2012, so it was by that point, I'm not very good at math, but I was around 25, yeah. And then I moved, my last degree in Canada was in journalism, and the really good job I was offered was in Moscow at an English-language newspaper. So I went back to Moscow for two years and I've been sort of 'commuting⁵' between the two countries ever since.

Nick: OK, and so when people ask you where you're from, uhh, do you have a direct answer or is it difficult to say?

Lena: It's complicated, yes, because, umm, I think my family when they moved from Russia, it was a very difficult situation. Uhh, it took a lot of effort. Nobody in my family - not just my parents, but no one in my family - has been outside the Soviet block. And, umm, my parents definitely don't have a very good memory of Russia. Umm, when we moved it was the 90s, umm, they didn't have enough money, they had to borrow money from all their friends, we had to sell everything we owned. Uhh, we had to, we didn't have an apartment, so we just ... it was really nothing we could sell, so it was really hard to collect the money and to make the move. My parents' salary was delayed. My father's salary - he's a university professor - uhh, it was delayed by six months, and when he did get it, it was very small. Uhh, my mother worked at a factory, also a very small salary. So when I told them, 'I'm going back to Russia,' after having been given all these opportunities in Canada, they really didn't understand me. They still don't understand me. They're very much against the idea, umm, but whenever I go back to Russia I just feel very much at home, because the rest of my family - umm, my grandparents were there until recently, my aunts, my cousins - so it's very, it feels like home. But Canada also feels like home because my family is there, my immediate family is there.

Nick: So do you think you have a kind of different perspective on Russia having lived in the west? Can you look at it differently from other Russians, or how does it feel to be back there again?

⁵ commuting: travelling to and from work. Lena uses it in this way to show that she has been travelling between Russia to Canada a lot.

Lena: Definitely it feels ... I notice things that Russians might not notice. A prime example⁶ would be things like recycling that you just ... umm, in Canada you pretty much take for granted⁷ that this is the case, and then in Russia you walk around trying to find a recycling container and realise there is no recycling containers everywhere. It's things about freedom of speech, about the way the government should respond to the people's needs. Umm, in Russia people don't question that, because they've never lived outside a system that hasn't been a very, sort of, autocratic system. So, but in the same way when I go to Russia I get a different perspective on Canada than I would if I lived my whole life in Canada, so I think it ... I take the best from every place that I live and I try to go from there.

Nick: No, that's a really good way to think about it. And so being in journalism in Russia, that must also be a challenge.

Lena: Umm, well I haven't written many stories about politics at all in Russia. I was, when I was working in Moscow, I was writing for business, uhh, for the business section. I was writing for the arts section, so I didn't get, umm, the experience of what it might be like to write about controversial political issues, but my friends definitely, umm, who are foreign journalists in Moscow, they have experienced some pressure on them to write a specific kind of way and things that they should mention. And even the editors sort of encouraging them to stay away from certain topics because they don't want to create problems for the newspaper, so yes.

Nick: Another thing is that you're a vegetarian.

Lena: Yes.

Nick: Is that more difficult in Russia than it is in Canada?

Lena: Ooh yes, ooh yes. Umm, I think, well my parents are still trying to put meat in all my food and hope that I don't discover it, umm, but my grandma I think, that was the most difficult. Umm, when I visited her in the last couple of years, umm, she was starting to develop dementia, and for her it was very hard to remember that I didn't eat meat. And it was a very hard concept for her to understand that I didn't eat meat. So every five minutes, she would say, 'Oh, I have soup in the fridge.' I'd say, 'What kind of soup is it?' 'Oh, it's a chicken soup.' I say, 'Grandmother, I don't eat chicken, I don't eat ... I told you already, I don't eat meat, I don't eat chicken.' And she told me, 'Chicken, it's not meat, it's chicken.' I'm like, 'No no no, chicken is considered meat, In my world, it's considered meat.' And she said, 'But it doesn't matter, it's already dead, I already cooked it.'

⁶ prime example: a very good example. This is a very common collocation.

⁷ take for granted: to not fully appreciate something good because you are used to it and don't realise that other people might not have the same opportunity

And then we closed that conversation somehow, and then five minutes later, the same thing happened, so whenever I would stay at my grandmother's, she would constantly keep asking me about my meat situation. And, umm, I went to, umm, a psychologist in Moscow, for work-related issues, I wanted to figure out how to deal with the work-life balance⁸ and things like that, because Moscow's a very stressful place to live. And, uhh, I was asking her about how to manage my time better and things like that, and the only recommendation I got from her for six months in a row, was that my problems could all be solved if I started eating meat, umm, which I didn't, but I went to the market, and she did convince me to start eating fish, which I did for one winter. Uhh, she thought that would be the solution to everything and it wasn't. Russians don't really ... they're not really on board with⁹ vegetarianism. They think it's something that weak people do, and it's just a silly whim¹⁰.

Nick: OK, so Lena thank you very much for talking to us.

Lena: You're very welcome.

Nick: And good luck.

Lena: Thanks.

⁸ work-life balance: a common term usually used in the context of someone working too much and not having enough time for non-work activities

⁹ (to be) on board with: to understand and support something

¹⁰ whim: a sudden desire that can be considered silly and/or one that doesn't last

Comprehension Questions

1. How well did Lena speak English when she moved to Canada?
2. What did Lena do every Sunday morning after she moved to Canada? Why?
3. Why did she move back to Russia?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. When my parents sold their house we found a box full of old _____ in the attic.
2. It happened 20 years ago but I still remember it _____.
3. I like my new job but the office is on the other side of the city from where I live and I hate _____ every day.
4. I want to move to Russia but my partner is still not _____ the idea.
5. I'm working too hard. I'm struggling to find a good _____.
6. We didn't have any plans for the weekend, so on Friday afternoon we decided on a _____ to go to Paris.
7. In Europe and North America, people often _____ everything they have compared with poorer countries.
8. English speakers in Canada should be able to speak French _____ decently, but many of them hardly speak any French despite years of classes in school.
9. "I cried at school today because the other kids were _____ all day."
10. Russia is a _____ of a country that has seen many changes in the last century.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Lena's first time on a plane was when she flew to Canada at age 10. What do you remember about your first flight?
2. Do you have a movie that you watch over and over again like Lena did with *Titanic*? If so, why?
3. Lena said that people in Russia think that vegetarianism is for 'weak people'. What do you think about that?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. She had a very low level, and could not understand even basic questions.
2. She watched the movie *Titanic* every Sunday to help improve her English.
3. She was offered a good job at an English-language newspaper in Moscow.

Exercises

1. cassettes
2. vividly
3. commuting
4. on board with
5. work-life balance
6. whim
7. take for granted
8. somewhat
9. making fun of me
10. prime example