

Episode 72: Inside and Outside the Soviet Union

Summary

Our guest Ed talks about his parents' early lives in the Soviet Union, growing up in Tajikistan in the 1960s, and moving to Canada at age nine.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Ed about his background. And, Ed, when we have guests on this show, they often talk about one particular country or one particular city where they're from, which is great. But in your case, uhh, it's a lot more complicated than that. And so let me start by asking you: where were you born?

Ed: I was born ... thanks for the invitation first of all, Nick.

Nick: You're welcome.

Ed: Umm, I was born in Tajikistan, which is now an independent country, but when I was born there in 1963, it was part of the Soviet Union. So it was, uhh, one of the more benighted¹ parts of the Soviet Union, quite poor in, sort of, objective terms. Umm, fairly traditional lifestyle out in the country. And we lived in the city which was basically a Soviet, middle-sized, provincial almost-capital. And, umm, I lived there until the age of nine, so that was when my parents moved to Canada.

Nick: OK, but your parents weren't, uhh, from Tajikistan themselves.

Ed: No, no. So this isn't my story, but my parents' story more, but it's more interesting. They were born in the Ukraine, but into, umm, a German colony, of which there were a lot in the Soviet Union and in Russia before that, for hundreds of years actually. So they grew up in southern Russia, umm, near Saratov, and, uhh, were speaking ... they spoke German at home, they spoke Russian in the streets and Ukrainian also. And, umm, there were ... so, there were Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Jews, Tatars, living around there. So it was a very ... fairly cosmopolitan place. This was in the twenties (1920s). Umm, and, umm, then ... so they ... as children they went through, they experienced collectivisation, the tail

¹ benighted: unenlightened, ignorant (not a common word)

end² of collectivisation. They experienced the huge political purges³ of the 1930s as young children, and then of course the war (World War 2). So that was a very eventful childhood and young adulthood that they went through. And after the war they ended up in Tajikistan.

Nick: OK, and so were they ... because they were of German origin, were they persecuted?

Ed: Not because of their ethnic, sort of, identity so much, no. But, uhh, but they're quite religious, for one thing, and when collectivisation took place, like many, many, many people, they, you know, had their traditional way of life, which involved farming. So there were a lot of small farmers and some big farmers as well. And collectivisation basically meant, umm ... well, it was a very violent and, uhh, traumatic affair for the entire society. So they went ... my parents didn't go through that. Both my parents were born in '28 and '29, and so they experienced the tail end of that process where, basically, nobody was left owning anything much in terms of, uhh, livelihood. Umm, there were the collective farms, there were famines, there was persecution, pretty well arbitrary⁴, random persecution based on anonymous denunciation, based on, uhh, people ganging up⁵ on their neighbours, that kind of thing. So I think it was an appalling time to be born, uhh, but it meant that my parents, umm, moved ... set out into life with incredible reserves of strength, resilience and even optimism, paradoxically⁶. So, umm, when I was born in Tajikistan in 1963, they'd started making their life there. And, uhh, even though they were living in a desperately poor place, they, uhh, they did what they could do to, uhh, to make it, uhh, to give us a good childhood, which we had, me and my brothers and sisters.

Nick: And so what language did you speak at home?

Ed: So we spoke German at home.

Nick: OK.

Ed: My parents insisted on that. They still considered themselves, sort of, ethnically, as Germans, that was important to them. And we spoke Russian of course in the street and at school. Umm, and Tajikistan itself was a very cosmopolitan place at the time, so we heard Uzbek and there were Tatars. And actually there were a lot of people from all over the Soviet Union who lived there.

² tail end: last part

³ purges: clearing away or wiping out unwanted elements

⁴ arbitrary: random, based on one person's discretion

⁵ ganging up: multiple people joining forces against one person or fewer people

⁶ paradoxically: appearing to be contradictory and to not make sense

Nick: Right, because as I understand it, the Central Asian Republics, when they were drawn up by Stalin, it was almost, or in fact deliberately, uhh, he had different ethnicities in the ... you know, he didn't draw the country lines as you would think that you would, to include only Tajiks in Tajikistan. And that created a bit of chaos and allowed Moscow as a central governing power to have more authority, I guess, in those areas. And so it created these stranger countries than you'd think would be necessary, I guess.

Ed: Yeah, could be. I don't know much about the history of those particular borders. And, uhh, I mean the countries ... I think it was in Czarist times that, uhh, Central Asia was sort of taken over by Russia. And, umm, but I know, I mean it was an incredible patchwork⁷, I think it has been for hundreds of years, with in particular the Uzbeks and Tajiks, the main two ethnic groups, uhh, and also very different languages, umm, sort of completely intermingled and yet maintaining their separate identities. And, uhh - well, identities, I mean: same religion, different languages, different traditions to some extent, but very much intermingled, very much. So I think, uhh, I'm not ... yeah, I can't really tell you how much ... what part Stalin played in creating what to us looked like, you know, unviable states because they're non-homogenous. I'm not sure that a non-homogenous, uhh, ethnically non-homogenous state is necessarily unviable. In fact I would probably beg to disagree⁸. But the fact is, of course, that Tajikistan, umm, and that area is ... has been a patchwork for a long, long time.

Nick: And so then when you moved to Canada at the age of nine, it must have been incredibly different. Do you remember what it was like to arrive there for the first time?

Ed: Yeah, it was fantastic. It was, uhh ... because the Soviet Union was actually, culturally, a very grey place. I mean, umm, it was quite poor and backward. There were just not a lot of colours. Literally colours, but also colours in terms of food, colours in terms of, umm, hmm, in terms of people's backgrounds and aspirations⁹, in terms of what you could do with your life. Umm, and we arrived in Canada in 1972 so it was, sort of, just, you know, well into the heyday¹⁰ of flower power and free love, not that I knew much of that as a nine-year-old, and the hippie movement and, uhh, it was all very wild, very exciting for a kid to see, umm, and just to breathe this air. So that was ... for my parents it must have been a huge culture shock and for me it was just very stimulating.

Nick: And so did you speak any English up until that point at the time you arrived?

⁷ patchwork: something made up of different parts

⁸ beg to disagree (idiom): politely disagree

⁹ aspirations: dreams, goals

¹⁰ heyday: pinnacle, period of greatest success or strength

Ed: No, none of us. Uhh, I've got three brothers and three sisters and, uhh, so we arrived as seven kids with our parents and none of us spoke any English, so we had to pick it up on the spot. My ... the younger kids - me - well actually all of the kids picked it up in school fairly quickly, uhh, and my Dad picked it up sort of by working, umm, and learning (listening) to religious radio in his car, so he acquired the strip minimum to allow him to get by pretty quickly I think.

Nick: And do you still consider that German is your native language, or do you think English is, or even Russian?

Ed: Well, you know, at age nine, I think you can become completely assimilated in a new culture.

Nick: Yep.

Ed: Which is what, sort of, happened. But because my parents - in Canada, as well - they insisted on speaking German to us, so German never, umm, sort of, receded into the background. So ... and Russian, of course, having been immersed in it from an early age, umm, I still have a special ... it has a special place in my heart and brain. So, umm, I guess I'm ... I consider myself lucky in that I think I have three. English is the only language that I would really write confidently in, let's put it that way. Umm, but I love all three languages and feel very much at home in all three of them.

Nick: Alright, that's very, very interesting. So thank you very much for talking to us.

Ed: Thanks for the invitation.

Comprehension Questions

1. What were the three main events Ed's parents lived through in their early life in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s?
2. What language did Ed speak at home with his family? Why?
3. How large is Ed's family?

Exercises

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

1. We eventually made it to the party but we only got there for the _____ of it. Some people were already starting to leave by the time we arrived.
2. "I _____, sir. With all due respect, I think that's the wrong decision."
3. He's quite a poor judge. He seems to hand down decisions in a very _____ way that doesn't make much sense to me.
4. At school he got bullied a lot. The other kids were always _____ on him.
5. Back in her _____, she was a terrific tennis player. Now that she's a bit older and has had some injuries, she's not as good as she once was.
6. Europe is a _____ of different countries and cultures, so it's not surprising that the European Union can have some difficulties pulling it all together.
7. He originally thought the islanders were _____ and backward, but when he got to know them, he found that they had a lot of basic intelligence and that he could learn a lot from them.
8. They had been together as a couple for 10 years, but in the end they just didn't have the same _____ in life, so I think it's for the best that they broke up.
9. A common feature of communist governments in the 20th century were _____ that helped get rid of opponents of the regime and consolidate the leader's power.
10. _____, he loves IKEA even though he doesn't like building things himself.

Discussion Questions

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

1. What do you know about collectivisation of farms in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s? Can you imagine what that would have been like for farmers?
2. Do you have parents or grandparents who lived through World War 2 or another war? What was it like for them?
3. Apart from English, Ed also speaks German and Russian. Do you speak any German or Russian? If so, how and why did you learn? If not, would you like to learn either language? Why or why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. The collectivisation of farms (the 'tail end'), Stalin's political purges, and World War 2.
2. He spoke German with his family because his parents considered themselves German, ethnically, despite being born in Ukraine.
3. He has three brothers and three sisters.

Exercises

1. tail end
2. beg to disagree
3. arbitrary
4. ganging up
5. heyday
6. patchwork
7. benighted
8. aspirations
9. purges
10. paradoxically