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Bob Aaron  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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May 6, 1994

Contact: Bob Aaron, 309/556-3181

*From Russia With Love*

**5,000-Mile Trip Brings Parents to Daughter's IWU Graduation**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--It took a costly 5,000-mile Moscow-Chicago flight, borrowed money from friends and family, working four jobs, and a helping hand from friends in Bloomington-Normal, but Valery Kravchinskii and Nadezhda Kravchinskaya will see their daughter receive her college degree, May 21, at Illinois Wesleyan University.

The Kravchinskiis will arrive in the United States for the first time on May 10, beginning a month-long adventure highlighted by the graduation of their 21-year-old daughter, Yelena, from IWU, where she earned a bachelor's degree in business administration.

On the eve of her parents' arrival in the United States, Yelena said: "At first, we thought only my father would come for my graduation because of the cost of the trip. But we're a very close family and it's difficult to be away from each other so long. So I asked both my father and mother to come.

"The trip is very expensive," Yelena added. "So my parents borrowed money from friends and family. My father worked four jobs. Friends in Bloomington also are helping out and I'm very grateful to them."

Yelena is working out an itinerary for her parents' visit to the United States that will include meeting her friends in Bloomington, graduation parties, and sightseeing in Chicago and St. Louis.

Yelena completed her classes at IWU last December. Since then, she has been looking for full-time work with companies interested in doing business with Russia.

"I'd love to do consulting or research work in a university or business to help people working in Russia and Eastern Europe," Yelena said. "I've acted as an intermediary between two American and Russian businesses involved in developing computer software and I'm working on a U.S.-Russia trade project. When my parents come to the U.S., they are going to bring some samples of possible Russian exports.

"There are a lot of businesses in Russia that would like to establish joint ventures with American companies," Yelena added. "There is a

possibility for me to develop contacts between a group of Russian businessmen in Pyatigorsk and a company in Washington, D.C."

Yelena's long-term plans are likely to include attending graduate school in the United States.

"I want to stay in the United States," she said, "because of the opportunity and freedom here. But I don't want to turn my back on Russia--I'm close to my family and I love my country. I would like to be involved in international business and work in the United States. But I also want the opportunity to visit Russia and my family."

Just like her father, Yelena has been juggling several jobs to support herself and help pay for her parents' trip to the United States. She has worked part-time for a bank, an optometrist, an insurance company, a restaurant, and a law firm.

Yelena was an accounting major at Yaroslavl State University, when her father told her of a U.S.-Russian exchange program with Stonehill College in Massachusetts, sparking her interest in studying abroad. That news came on the heels of Yelena winning second place in an English language competition, sponsored by the university's Economics Department.

Yelena explained she attended college in Yaroslavl, a city about 1,000 miles from her home in Pyatigorsk, "because I had family in the city --my sister and her family, an aunt and uncle, and four cousins. The school offered an accounting major and had a good English language program."

Yaroslavl State also offered a group that studied colloquial English, which appealed to her. To join the group, students had to pass a test. The 12-member group got together every Wednesday at about 5 p.m. for two to three hours to practice English, while sipping tea and munching cookies.

Yelena's English skills placed her among the top 15 students campus wide. The top 20 English speaking students, she said, had a good chance to come to the United States to study under various exchange programs.

In 1990, Yelena met a German girl, an exchange student, and invited her to Pyatigorsk for winter break. A snafu over the German's travel papers brought Yelena into contact with an administrator who told her about a student exchange program and encouraged her to take part in an English language competition in Moscow. To clear the way for her to study in the United States, Yelena had to get permission from Yaroslavl State's Economics

Department, obtain a passport, take and pass written and oral exams at Moscow State University, and fill out reams of paperwork.

Yelena left for the United States from Moscow virtually at the same time that communist hard-liners were mounting a coup aimed at toppling from power then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. She arrived at IWU on Sept. 3, 1991, planning to major in accounting and stay in the United States for 10 months. Eventually, Yelena switched her major to business administration and made arrangements to complete her education at IWU.

"It struck me," she said, "that students in the United States were more serious about their studies than in Yaroslavl. In Russia, students don't pay for their education and the curriculum is set--so students aren't always interested in their classes. You just go to class and do what has to be done. You don't have any options.

"For example, even with perestroika [restructuring] and glasnost [openness] in the early 1990s, we had to take two semesters of the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union--the party had discredited itself completely and by that time had almost fallen apart--but we still had to study it. The professor was very strict and wanted us to know all the little details. It was very frustrating."

Yelena adjusted quickly to the differences between the U.S. and Soviet higher education systems, but not without some trepidation.

"When I got back my first test in economics," she said, "I was afraid that my grade would be announced orally like in Russia. I didn't want to be embarrassed if I didn't do well on my first test. But here, students feel comfortable--you have your privacy--nobody knows your grades unless you tell them."

"In the beginning," Yelena added, "things were difficult. I was dealing with a different education system, a different language, and a hectic schedule. But my advisor, Mona Gardner, my professors, and a host family always were there for me, encouraging and supporting me as much as they could."

The Kravchinskiis, both age 54, live in Pyatigorsk, a city of 200,000 north of the Caucasus, known for its resorts, therapeutic warm and cold mineral waters, and mud baths, which soothe stomach, liver, and back problems. Pyatigorsk also is home to Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), where a museum and home commemorate one of Russia's great poets.

Valery Kravchinskii is an electrical engineer, who works out of Pyatigorsk's soccer stadium. An ethnic Russian, he was born in Baku, the capital of the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. Valery is a graduate of Baku's Polytechnical Institute. As a young man, he won acclaim as captain of the former Soviet Union's national student basketball team, playing games on courts as far away as Cuba. At six-foot, four-inches, he was known as a scorer.

"My father is a very good electrical engineer," Yelena said. "People all over our town know him because of his skills. People come to our house for him to repair televisions, stereos, lamps--he can fix anything."

Nadezhda Kravchinskaya is a former high school physics teacher, who graduated from the Pedagogical Institute in Yaroslavl. She was employed by a company for more than 20 years, where she did computer-assisted architectural design work. Now Nadezhda is unemployed, one of Russia's countless victims of the tough transition from communism to capitalism.

"This has been a very painful transition," Yelena said. "My parents saw the world they knew crumble. After a trip my father and I took to Western Europe, he was depressed. My parents had worked hard all their lives but realized they had nothing compared to the people in Western Europe and the United States. My father had the feeling so much of his time and energy was wasted. It was very painful for me to hear that."

Yelena's parents met at a dance in the early 1960s, when they were competing in a men's and women's basketball tournament in Ukraine, then a Soviet republic. They wrote letters to each other for a year before marrying in 1963. Yelena's older sister, Svetlana, is married and lives in Yaroslavl with her husband and son, who is almost five years old.

The Kravchinskiis live in a two-room apartment and are trying to cope with a super-inflationary economy, where 1,800-2,000 rubles equal a dollar.

"My parents," Yelena said, "don't write much about the problems, but I know they spend most of their money on food--it's very expensive. Wages are not keeping up with inflation."

Yelena has mixed emotions about the rapid political and economic change that has rocked her homeland in recent years.

"On the one hand," she said, "I'm glad that Russia is making the move to a market economy and that business from the West is coming to Russia."

"At the same time," she added, "things are very difficult for people, including my family. There is a lot of illegal business, a big black market, and the mafia--that upsets me a lot. It's very difficult to be optimistic about the future in Russia because we have to learn a lot about business ethics and business itself--how to do business up to Western standards."

When Gorbachev came to power, Yelena and millions of others were hopeful that their lives would improve.

"We got programs about America and the Western countries," Yelena explained, "and we saw how different life can be. With freedom of the press, people found out more about our history--the Lenin and Stalin periods and all the crimes, how many people were killed. All of this information was prohibited before Gorbachev. With freedom of the press and speech, people had the opportunity to talk openly and they weren't afraid of punishment."

Yelena and about 420 other students will receive their IWU degrees on May 21. Edward B. Rust, Jr., president and chief executive officer of Bloomington-based State Farm Insurance Companies, will be the commencement speaker. Rust, who heads one of the nation's largest insurance companies, is a 1972 IWU graduate.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,800 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. For five consecutive years, *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked IWU No. 1 in the Midwest among regional colleges and universities in its annual "America's Best Colleges" edition. *U.S. News* also listed IWU as a "best buy" in higher education in its first survey, "Paying for College," published in October, 1993.