

Georgia on his mind

After teaching the Soviets literature, Fred Newberry reflects on their warmth

Americans have many stereotypes of the Soviet Union and its people. And because of geographical and political distances, Americans, as well as Soviets, rarely move beyond those boundaries.

But one University professor was able to see a different side of the Soviets than what's usually presented in newspapers or broadcasts.

During his four-month teaching stint in the Soviet Union's Republic of Georgia, English Prof. Frederick Newberry became close to the Georgian citizens. His experiences reveal the human side of its citizens: their strong emphasis on relationships, their admiration for Americans and their quiet sadness over the oppressive communistic system.

Newberry was one of ten Fulbright applicants approved by government authorities in Moscow from an original field of 44 applicants. He taught American literature at the State University of Tbilisi in the Republic of Georgia, from which he recently returned.

The Republic lies in the southernmost part of

the Soviet Union. On the south, it borders Turkey. The Caucasus Mountains border its northern and northwestern sides. Within the Republic live 5 million people, of whom 1.2 million reside in its capital, Tbilisi, where Newberry stayed.

To understand his experiences, one must first put them in the proper context, Newberry says. He met only Georgian citizens, and their impressions of Soviet life may differ from the Moscovites.

The Georgian "intelligentsia," many of whom Newberry became friends with, are comprised of teachers and professors. They consider themselves the educated and enlightened class.

"They're old aristocrats hanging on to their sense of cultural superiority — particularly over the communists," Newberry says. "They think of the Russians as being quite culturally inferior."

From the Georgians, Newberry received many "expressions of warmth and hospitality and love." The competition for military superiority that exists between the Soviet and American governments does not extend to the Georgian citizens.

"I think that I was accepted, and if you'll permit me, loved, because I was an American," Newberry says. "The Georgians have a predisposition to like us."

In fact, the Georgians went out of their way to impress Newberry and make him feel at home. He received "such eloquent expressions at dinners and other occasions amongst friends that made me cry. I've never had people speak to me in such a way. And it made me cry because they think so well of us and they have such a marvelous image of our country. They're so proud of their own heritage, and yet feel so oppressed within the Soviet system."

Newberry was able to gain the trust of a few Georgians who revealed to him their feelings toward the "oppressive" Soviet system. Newberry could not disclose specifics about these conversations "for fear of jeopardizing" his Georgian friends. Yet he described situations that exemplified their oppression.

Because the Soviet government does not encourage its citizens to fraternize with one another — or with Westerners — Newberry met his friends in secret. When he wanted to leave Tbilisi to visit the countryside, he did so secretly because his visa mandated he stay within the city limits.

And when Soviet citizens do fraternize with Westerners, they must inform the KGB, the Soviet intelligence agency. "I'm fairly confident a couple of people I was seeing were reporting to the KGB," he says. The 'reporters' were merely following a ritual by giving "innocuous reports" to the KGB, he says.

In the city, people must keep a tight rein on their behavior, because stepping out of line can lead to trouble with the government. "I knew a case of a man in Moscow who was taken by the militia and beaten for hours simply because he yelled too loudly for a taxi," Newberry says.

The Georgian citizens have seen "Russians coming in and machine-gunning people down" when they stepped out of line, Newberry says. So they rightly fear for young rebels.

In his American literature classes, which were taught in English to Soviet students majoring in the language, Newberry was forced to lecture for the entire class period because "the students had no experience of being asked their opinions. I couldn't get them to talk. They were embarrassed."

Although Newberry was able to lecture openly in his classes, he was careful not to step "too far out of line — but I could tell I did." Newberry's students, as well as the Soviet teachers observing him, were surprised to hear him occasionally criticize America or tell negative aspects of its

history. "They have a pretty idealized view of us. They know negative things about our country, but these are very selective things, things they've been told and propagandized."

The citizens are told America is poverty-ridden and violent, yet the image of the wealthy American is prevalent. They see America much in the same way the 19th and early 20th century European immigrants saw America — as the promised land, Newberry says.

As Newberry became more aware of oppressive situations, he began to sense "great fear," despondency and hopelessness lying beneath the warm surface of the Soviet citizens.

Yet within their despondency, the Georgians try and live the best they can in a system that is "remarkably inefficient and unwieldy."

There was one issue that the Georgians often raised with Newberry: nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers.

"They're afraid of a nuclear confrontation," Newberry says of the Georgians. "But they're not opposed to our standing up to the Russians — at all. Some seem to welcome it. They don't mind if the Russians and Americans go at it, but they don't want to fight against Americans. They don't want to die in the process or have their country wiped out. So they're very much afraid of nuclear war."

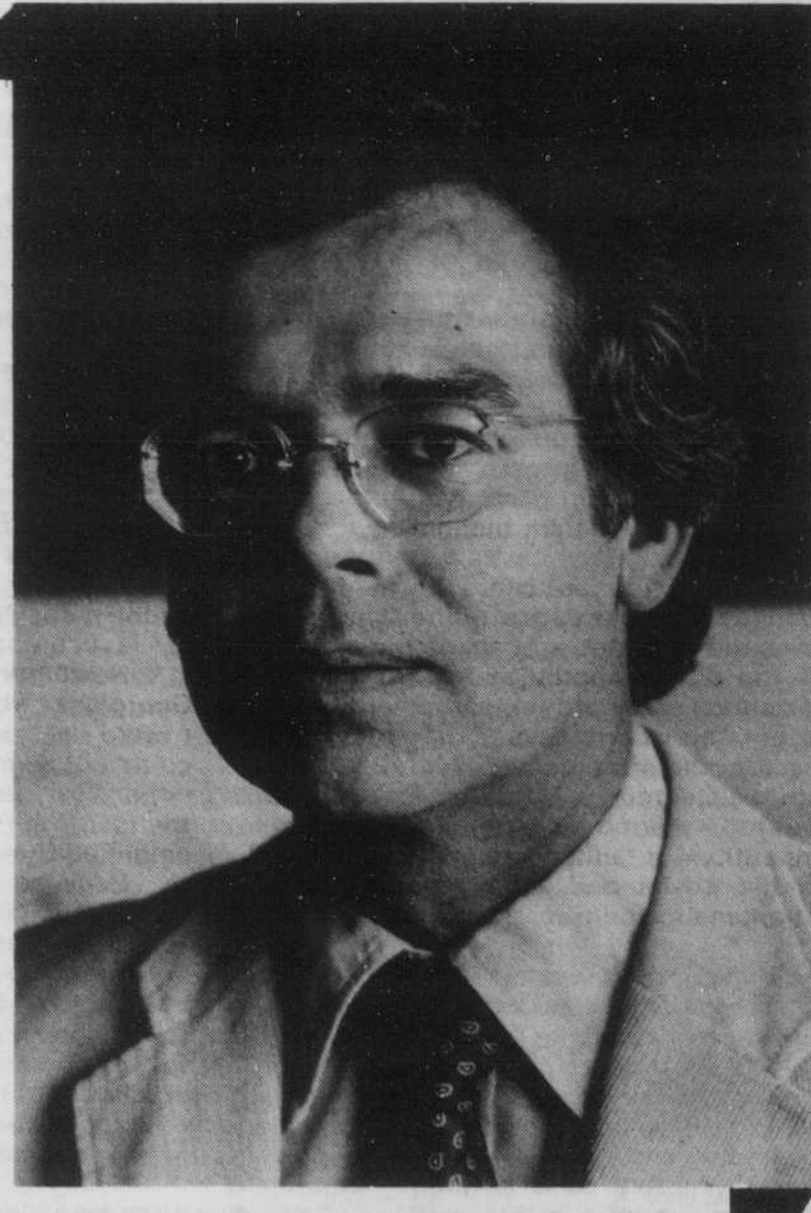
"They're leary of Reagan on the one hand because of the nuclear issue, but they admire him on the other because he stands up to the Russians," Newberry says. "They fear that the Soviet system will take over the world. They look to us as a kind of hope that that won't happen, but they fear that it will."

Out of their oppression and fear, the Georgians turn to family and friends to make their lives meaningful. No matter what sex or age, it is not uncommon to see people walking arm-in-arm or hand-in-hand down Georgian streets.

Being with family and friends is "part of the Georgian tradition," he says. "It betters their sense of not having much else in life." Unlike Americans, the Soviets have little hope of advancing in a career or acquiring certain things many Americans work hard for, he says.

Although the people try not to be sad, "you see it," he says.

"They try to be realistic. They do what they can to face the everyday realities of the Soviet system, and hold on to as much of their history and cultural identities as they can and cultivate them. They treasure them. Thus the great love for family and friends."



Newberry's Georgian friends all wanted to see him as much as they could before he left. They did not want him to go, and they gave him many gifts. In turn, Newberry gave them the books he had used in his classes. Uncensored editions of American works are rare in the Soviet Union, he says.

Although it was difficult to leave his friends, he was glad to get back to the United States. They all want their American friend to come back, Newberry says, but he is not sure if he will. Although Newberry does not verbalize it, one senses the pain he felt at witnessing the Georgian's sadness underneath their resilient, warm exterior. Americans cannot comprehend this sadness because they are 'free,' Newberry says.

While he was there, Newberry heard one word over and over — *freedom*.

"People said they could tell I was an American just in the way I laughed. It was the laugh of someone who was free."

Story by Joan Herman
Photos by Mark Pynes



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Soap

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"Instead of having artificial situations, you see real situations with attractive and crusty people" in the drama, Leong says. And at the end of the soap opera, the Russian characters don't live happily ever after, he says.

By viewing typical situations, students will learn a natural, contemporary Russian that is rarely acquired from a textbook, he says. The soap's issues are universal: the generation gap, young Soviet students' aspirations and, of course, love.

The four-day intensive classes will meet six hours daily, and "not a second is wasted," Leong says. "It's a very sophisticated class." In only one week, the class cannot give a complete grounding in

the Russian language, art and culture, but it's a good start, he says.

The class was designed specifically to give American teachers a global perspective of the Soviet Union, including its culture, history and current events, as well as its language.

Yet the class is especially useful for future travelers to the Soviet Union, a nation vastly different from the United States, Leong says. Knowing Soviet customs and mores is an essential survival skill in the foreign land. Not knowing them may land the naive American tourist in trouble.

"Going to the Soviet Union is like traveling in outer space," says Leong, who has made the 'ter-

restrial' voyage five times. "It's an entirely different world. We prepare our students for space travel."

In the soap, symbolically titled "Goodbye, Summer," Leong's students meet Olga, a bright journalism student at the University of Moscow or Mockba (pronounced Mos-kuh-vuh). Olga falls in love with the dashing Victor, a worldly wise taxi driver with an eye for the good things in life.

At the soap's ending, Olga graduates and the government, which has financed her education, assigns Olga her first job — in Siberia — which means leaving Victor and her family at the soap's conclusion.

Although the series was filmed entirely on loca-

tion in the Soviet Union with Russian actors, it was produced by the British Broadcasting Corp. and designed as an educational series for American teachers of Russian. But the engaging drama occupies only one-third of the BBC series. The other two-thirds include a narrative explaining the Russian dialogue, commentary on the scenes and instruction in pronunciation.

The value of learning 'standard' Russian in a predominantly English-speaking world may not be readily apparent. But communication with the world's other superpower is vital to the United States. Therefore standard Russian is "one of the most important languages to learn right now," Leong says.

And it's not as difficult to learn as the Soviets would have English speakers believe, he adds.

Difficulty aside, hope for peace among the two superpowers motivates Leong in his teaching.

"I always had a dream that if people had a better understanding of each other, they wouldn't kill each other."

"We (Americans) have the image of the Soviet Union as blood thirsty. Yet the people who have experienced the horrors of war don't want war. This is my way of trying to promote peace," Leong says.

The class — Russ 407g, "Teaching Russian Culture in a Global Perspective," — is being offered Aug. 15-19 for three credit hours.

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