

## MAKING A HOME IN KIROVOGRAD

Lorraine C. Heller  
Ukraine (2005-2007)

Among the many things a Peace Corps Volunteer is encouraged to do is to integrate into the community in which we live and work. Integrating into the community allows local people to get to know us as individuals, helps foster good will, and helps Volunteers stay safe. Speaking the local language, interacting with neighbors, developing social relationships, and simply being a visible presence in the community are all essential aspects of Peace Corps life.

Throughout my two years of Peace Corps service in Kirovograd, Ukraine (2005-2007), I spent a lot of time and energy integrating into my community. Not only did I meet people who would become life-long friends, but I also got to know some of the people I did business with in the most ordinary of circumstances. By integrating into my community, I came to feel that Kirovograd was not just my Peace Corps site; it was, in fact, my home.

I invite you now to come and meet some of the locals of Kirovograd,  
Ukraine:

One of the first people I met was Olia the bank teller. When I first arrived in Kirovograd, Volunteers did banking the old-fashioned way, by waiting in long lines and telling the person at the window that we wanted to withdraw a particular amount of cash. After stating my request in memorized Russian, Olia would enter the information into a machine, from which would come four pieces of 18-inch long paper, all of which had to be signed in precisely the right place. Invariably when signing, I made a mistake, and mustering all of her authority, Olia showed me how to sign all of the forms just right.

At the bazaar, there was Luda the butcher, who worked at the last counter on the end of a long row of vendors. Whenever I approached, Luda's smile always beckoned me to come and see what she had for sale—even if I wasn't buying. When I did want to buy, Luda would proudly show off her cuts of beef, always starting from the least expensive and ending with the highest priced, pointing out the special qualities of each piece of meat. I understood little of Luda's words, but never failed to understand her pride.

I also got to know Yura and Lena, husband and wife, who sold small icons and other religious items on the street, wherever they could find an available stretch of sidewalk to set up their wooden display case. Often, Yura would

summon me over to practice his English, repeatedly apologizing for his mistakes—most of which I never noticed. He would also tell me about his business trips, which he made by bicycle, often traveling far distances to bring back new merchandise. He even confided in me that when Lena minded the store, business increased dramatically.

In one of the local museums, I met Elena the tour guide, who explained with great enthusiasm about all of the wax figures in the exhibit, speaking in Ukrainian, Russian, and German, in the hopes that I would understand some of her detailed commentary. Most of Elena's wisdom was lost on me, but her passion for history was unmistakable, and despite the language barrier, we would become fast friends.

And finally, there was one very special woman whose name I didn't know, nor did she know mine. I simply called her "my phone card lady." Like most Volunteers in Ukraine, I used a cell phone, adding minutes to it by buying cards with a code used to log in new minutes. Close to my apartment building stood a small kiosk in which a woman sat day after day, selling only phone cards and lottery tickets. In transactions that couldn't have taken any more than five seconds, this was where I usually bought my phone cards.

One day, as I was walking on the street, a woman I barely recognized walked up to me and appeared to know just who I was. Looking me straight in the eye, she asked in a somewhat agitated manner, “Kartochka ne nada?” (“You don’t need a phone card?”) I had never seen my phone card lady in full view, but there was no mistaking it now. Indeed, I hadn’t bought a phone card from her in a while, and she assumed my minutes must be low. I could only think to myself, now I’ve arrived; I’ve truly integrated into my community. I have a phone card lady who knows exactly what I need, even before I did.