A Summer in Moscow

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My summer in Moscow was amazing, but not what I expected it to be. Rather, it was filled with unexpected but wonderful surprises and changes along the way. The original plan was to secure an internship in a Moscow archive in order to learn more about how archive systems functioned and along the way, gather information about taxation and property records. Unfortunately, upon arrival in Moscow, internship coordinators working in conjunction with the BYU Moscow Internship program were unable to secure an archival internship for me. They insisted that due to feelings of ill will between the United States of America and the Russian Federation, Russian archives would not be willing to accept an American student as an intern. Although an archival position was not available for me, the internship coordinators were able to locate an internship at the Международный Генеалогический Центр (International Genealogical Center). The МГЦ is a Russian-owned genealogical research company located in Moscow. They do client work, archive look ups and create beautiful family history books complete with stories, families trees and document images. Working as an intern at the МГЦ was an amazing learning experience for me. Each day, I had the opportunity to participate in one-on-one private lessons with professional genealogists there. We examined common record types including metrical (church) books, the 1897 census, and the famous revision lists, which are a staple source in Russian genealogical research. We also examined Soviet records, studied Russian paleography and practiced using archive catalogs and guidebooks to locate records. Using skills I had learned at BYU and solidified through my internship experience at МГЦ, I located some possible taxation records in a Moscow Archive. Unfortunately, each time I called the archive, I was passed around from department to department, each one referring me to the previous department. Some of my Russian friends believe that I wasn’t able to get into an archive because of my American citizenship. It also may have been because the FIFA World Cup was held in Moscow this summer, and as a result, security in many places was tightened. Although I wasn’t able to visit an archive, the skills I learned in Moscow this summer were invaluable.

In order to fulfill the ORCA grant requirements, the project parameters were changed a bit. After a discussion with my faculty mentor, Thom K. Edlund, it was decided that although accessing taxation records in a Russian archive proved to be difficult, there is still research to be done in other areas. Consulate registration records are one example of this. Consular records are records maintained by embassies in foreign countries and often include valuable genealogical information. German Consulate records from Rostow, Russia have yet to be studied extensively. These records are unindexed, so a page by page search through them is necessary. The language tends to switch back and forth between Russian and German, sometimes even on the same document! The changing language can be difficult, but presence of both languages on the document allows the reader to employ both German and Russian skills to determine what the document is trying to say. Within the consulate records is a treasure troves of information. Record types include registration forms, copies of passports, letters and documents certifying birth, marriage and/or death. These records provide important genealogical information, and can be of great use to researchers and family historians.

The skills learned in Moscow this summer were useful to research in these German and Russian consulate records. Results from this research will be summed up in an article to be published for the genealogical community. When completed in the coming months, this article will be submitted to the ORCA office, if desired. Although the on ground logistical realities effected and redefined the original project planning, there are other paths my mentor and I can take.

Although no longer part of this ORCA project, we are in correspondence with Russian archivists and genealogists in Moscow about taxation records. Using these contacts and networks established through
my internship in Moscow this summer, we are arranging to receive copies of pre-revision list taxation records. By using these examples, we'll determine the typical record content and structure, as well as determine how the information contained in these records can be of use to family historians. Using this information, we will be able to establish trends that will be useful to genealogists and historians alike. With these findings, we hope to write a scholarly article that will provide some insight on the types of information and trends found in Russian taxation and property records. This will be of great value to the genealogical community, and the skills I learned from my experience in Moscow this summer and the ORCA project will be instrumental in helping me to accomplish this.
Fig. 1: This document is written in both German and Russian. It provides proof of birth and certifies that the participant is registered with the consulate.
Fig. 2: A German consulate registration form. This document provides interesting information such as age, hair color and even the presence of a beard!

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