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Cowboy Hats May Have Saved Huntsman Professors From Arrest in Russia

By Randy Simmons, Charles G. Koch Professor of Political Economy



“Chris tells me you are coming to Russia with me,” Dwight Israelson said to me one day last March. Professors Chris Fawson and Dwight Israelsen have worked for several years with officials at North Ossetia State University to establish an inter-university agreement to exchange faculty and students. Chris was unable to go this year, so he drafted me to be his replacement. I did not think I had committed to go, but it appeared I had been drafted so I agreed to go.

I asked Dwight what was appropriate dress, and he said that we should certainly wear our cowboy hats. So, I dusted off my white, beaver Resistol cowboy hat and went to Russia. On the way there we had to spend a day in Moscow, where it turned out to be Inauguration Day for Vladimir Putin. The city was full of police, Special Forces, and paddy wagons. We put on our cowboy hats and started walking toward the Kremlin. We were in the middle of a group of college-age people who all seemed to be having a good time, until Russian army Special Forces men in full riot gear surrounded us. It turned out we had inadvertently joined an anti-Putin demonstration.

As children of the sixties, Dwight and I were fascinated to see how a modern-day protest in Russia would play out. It did not go far. Leaders were grabbed and hauled to the paddy wagons. Anyone who shouted seemed to be the next targets to be hauled away. But apparently two guys in cowboy hats were exempt from Special Forces attention. They ignored us. We did not know whether to be relieved or offended.

After failing to get arrested, we flew to Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, where officials from North Ossetia State University met us. As they took us to the university’s guesthouse, Dwight was informed that he was scheduled to speak at the Victory Day celebration the next day. Victory Day is a Russian holiday that celebrates victory over the Nazis. There were speeches, songs, Russian folk dancing, and Dwight in his cowboy hat. He spoke quite eloquently about his father’s World War II service and the importance of remembering history as we design new futures.

Dwight and I spent two weeks in total on our trip, taught several classes each day, and were treated to incredible Russian hospitality. The students speak English, are intense in their studies, and like cowboy hats. The faculty members appear to really care about their students.

For me, I was, at times, out of my comfort zone but that's a big part of what life is like for our students as they travel. They are, as I was, suddenly immersed in a new culture and have to relearn how to do even simple things like go out to dinner.

I found the trip rewarding and refreshing. Dwight will not have to draft me to get me to go next time because I have already volunteered. In fact, in anticipation of the trip, I just bought a nice Resistol summer-weight dress hat.