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Robert P. Bornstein

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus, steven.bornstein@unh.edu

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Steven Bornstein

Associate Professor of Communication Sciences and Disorders - College of Health and Human Services

Professor Steven Bornstein traveled to Russia in November 2008 to present a paper at Mari-State University in Yoshkar-Ola, Russia, on the effects of hearing loss on oral language and speech development.



Bornstein with his interpreter in the lecture hall

I travelled to Russia thinking about one of the famous quotes of Winston Churchill: "Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, surrounded by an enigma." When I returned from Russia I thought that perhaps that quote was appropriate before the internet and proliferation of global travel, but no so much now. I went to Russia to present a paper at Mari-State University in Yoshkar-Ola, Russia, province of Mari-El. My presentation was about the effects of hearing impairment on language development and ways of improving language development in children with hearing impairment. I also visited the major school for deaf for the province in the neighboring village of Semenovka. I repeated my presentation to teachers and had meetings with them and the headmaster. Finally, I was invited as a guest to a performing arts competition for deaf children where they signed and sang to classic and popular music. This occurred at the Mari Branch of the All Russia Deaf Society in Yoshkar-Ola. At the end of this competition I was asked to address the students, and answer questions from members of the adult deaf organization who attended.

As I interacted with all these people, I thought of the parable about the several blind men each describing an elephant while feeling a different part of the elephant. They describe the elephant differently and then argue with each other about what an elephant really is. In reality, they are all describing the elephant, but just from a different perspective. I discovered that there were many commonalities between educational and communication approaches in the United States and Russia, and also some significant differences. But even these differences were just a different way of describing how to help children with hearing impairment. I saw things from a different perspective, and it is good to stretch one's way of thinking.

I was treated like royalty when I was in Russia, and that is no exaggeration. The people were kind and caring. The people that I met in Russia want very much to have a connection with American people. It was of great interest to me that in addition to professional questions, I was asked the following types of questions almost equally: "What do you think about Russian people?"; "How can you vote in American election if you are here?"; "Who do you want to win American election?" I thought about this while I was traveling from Russia to Frankfurt during the middle of the night U.S. time, election night, not knowing who the next president would be. It was a surreal experience sitting on the airplane and then walking through the Frankfurt airport asking "Do you know who won the American election?" It had a personal meaning for me to hear that Barack Obama would be the next president. I thought about my grandparents who came from Russia. I thought about Barack Obama being the first president who was African-American. I thought about my father, who was Jewish, and my mother, who was Catholic, dating and not marrying for sixteen years because the religious difference made it taboo. Sixteen years to wait for a marriage.

Approximately two and a quarter centuries to wait for an African-American president. The people of Russia want to have a connection with American people. Most of them want peace in this world, as do most of us. It's time to move forward.



Russian newspaper which covered Bornstein's visit





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