

OTHER PASSIONS...

From Russia with love

When Janet Neville was a “sub-teenager” in New Zealand, she came across a set of Reader’s Digest Russian literature classics – and a passion was born.

“They were Dostorovsky and Tolstoy and I absolutely had to own them,” LAWASIA’s Secretary-General (Acting) said.

“My father had the same initial as me and I thought it might be construed as a reasonable mistake if I ordered this collection of books in his name.

“Needless to say sooner or later I got sprung by not paying one of the bills!”

Janet’s father let her keep the books.

“It took me many years to read them. Obviously a 13-year-old is not going to get very far with Crime and Punishment but I loved the richness of the language.”

The daughter of an aluminium windows tradesman and a medical administrator, the “Russian thing” was hardly from parental influence.

“They couldn’t understand why I was the least bit interested with owning the bright red, pretend leather bound books but I think by then they had identified me as a bit of an odd fish in any case,” she said laughing.

“I think the link is that when you grow up in a country that is as small and parochial as New Zealand and you do have an eye to the rest of the world, anything foreign is fascinating.”

But it wasn’t until some years later that Janet really got into her passion.

“I didmy degree in Modern European languages with a major in Russian and when I finished there was a position in the Modern European Languages department at the Australian National University as a research assistant.

“So one of my first jobs was actually sitting in the National Library in Canberra, going through old 1930s and 40s editions of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, which is the organ of the Russian writers union.”

Despite encountering attitudes of “oh if you don’t like it (here), go to Russia”, Janet continued to feed her passion and soon developed a love for Russian posters, thanks to a Russian historian she worked with who was developing a database of the renowned artworks.

“I think it was after the revolution they used actual brigades of poster designers and distributors because it was one of the very few ways that they could get messages across to a group of people who were largely illiterate,” she said.

“The Russian posters were very important and, of course, they’re one of the hallmarks of socialist realist art. Unbelievable artwork when you see them.”

personal collection

Janet’s personal collection ranges from very early pre-revolution to the 60s and 70s and she still keeps a look out for them.

“If you ever see them, they’re really worth grabbing because it was a huge legacy and it’s such a good way of getting messages across. I mean, a lot of the posters in those days were concentrating on literacy and politics,” she said.

Luckily for Janet, her family are not Russian literate and her posters have come in handy in other ways. For instance, the one featured as a watermark on this page.

“I used to tell my children it said: ‘A declaration from your mother. If you do not clean up your rooms right away, all these people with guns will come and get you’,” she said laughing. “It worked – they did clean up their rooms.”

Janet has also collected other “bits and pieces” from the exotic country including a display of Russian futurist books and the shawl pictured with her here which was a gift from her sister-in-law.



And though she has never been there (“but would love to go”), she is a dab hand at the culinary delights.

Borscht (Russian beetroot soup) is a favorite with her family and she’s also known to serve up *piroshki* (a type of small pie).

Back at work and LAWASIA’s reach has given Janet the chance to meet Russian legal professionals (“another different group who are very interesting”).

“I admire the Russian people. You look at all they’ve been through, the man on the street in such a big country and you can’t help but have a lot of respect for what they’ve done and what they’re doing,” she said.

“They got bossed around by the tsars and then bossed around by another group of people who thought they could fix everything and then became terribly bureaucratic and hopeless. You’ve got to respect the Russian character.”

For Janet Neville that respect will always be part of her passion – to and from Russia, with love. ☺