

A WINDOW TO BELARUS

How Wayne State students discovered a new country and a new culture through Russian

“The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.” - Sydney J. Harris.

...and languages open windows to cultures many in the US are unaware of.

If you have not heard of Belarus, you are not alone. Once part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, then the Russian Empire, then a Soviet republic, Belarus attained recognition as an independent country less than 30 years ago, following the collapse of the USSR. In the ensuing decades, it had one of the most conservative post-Soviet governments, and only today is beginning to open up to the West. Nestled between Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, it is a small country with a population of under 10 million. Although almost 25% of its citizens officially speak Belarusian, almost all communication in the country, both personal and professional, is conducted in Russian. Nine Wayne State Russian students led by Laura Kline, Sr. Lecturer in Russian, had the unique

experience of visiting this little-known country and discovering its rich cultural and historical legacy.

How did Wayne State students end up in Belarus, and become the first US study abroad group to visit Vitebsk State University (VSU)? In Fall 2018, VSU Professor Denis Berezko visited Wayne State on a Department of State Program administered locally by Global Ties Detroit. Prof. Berezko visited Wayne’s third-year Russian class several times, and after his return home, organized weekly Skype conferences for it with Belarusian students studying English to foster language and cultural exchange. Soon the Wayne State students decided they wanted to visit Belarus over Spring Break. With

generous support from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, as well as numerous local donors to GoFundMe and Warrior Funder campaigns (both organized by the students themselves), the students were able to get on a plane to Belarus on March 7. The following day were warmly received by both the university and immediately settled in to homestays with the students they had been skyping with.



Third-year Russian students at the DIA with Denis Berezko, Fall 2018



During the week the students were in Vitebsk, the birthplace of renowned artists Marc Chagall and Kazimir Malevich, they gave a series of presentations on Detroit, Wayne State, and life in the United States in both Russian and English to various groups of Belarusian university students. They also participated in bilingual exercises with university and high school classes, and recited poetry in Russian and English to an audience of nearly 600. Outside the university, the students went on a series of excursions to museums and churches, attended a play and a concert, played laser-tag with their fellow Belarusian students, and participated in the Belarusian “Maslenitsa” (Butter Week) celebration. However, the most exciting outing of all was to one of Belarus’s numerous ecotourism destinations, in a village called “Ninel” two miles from the Russian border. In a centuries-old tradition, the students steamed themselves in the “banya” (a wet sauna), then ran outside and rolled in



WSU students in the woods near WWII battle sites

the snow. They also enjoyed locally produced food and drink, including mushroom pate, rye bread, cabbage salad, blini, tea, and homemade preserves. On a tour of the woods, they engaged in the centuries-old pagan practice of tree-hugging and learned about the history of the area, including the fate of the region during WWII. Belarus suffered terribly during the war, losing a quarter of its population, and many towns, such as Minsk and Vitebsk, were almost completely destroyed. The students walked through areas where Belarusian partisans once hid in dugouts, as well as trenches where early in the war Soviet soldiers fought unsuccessfully to stop the bloody march of the Nazis toward Moscow. Most importantly of all, however, they were immersed in Russian and spent their days (and nights) learning the language with help from their new Belarusian friends.



Running in the snow after steaming in the “banya”

Both the students and faculty of Wayne State were overwhelmed and deeply touched by the incredible level of interest, hospitality, and attention they received from their Belarusian hosts. Not only did numerous VSU instructors, including Prof. Berezko, actively participate in many of the events, the Dean of the College of Languages and Literatures, Sergey

Nikolaenko, met frequently with the students and had two of them over to his house for dinner. Even the President of VSU, Aleksey Egorov, was directly involved in the visit. At a formal gathering he welcomed the group to Vitebsk State University, presented them with a signed agreement providing for future collaboration with WSU, and expressed his desire to expand relations with Wayne State in the future.



With the president of Vitebsk State University

After leaving Vitebsk, the US and Belarusian students went to Minsk, the capital, for a visit to the US Embassy. Public Affairs officer Leonard Kovensky, as well as several other members of the embassy staff, spoke about the history and function of the embassy, jobs in the foreign service, and ways to foster an exchange program with Vitebsk State University. Then the WSU students were off on a two-day trip to Riga, Latvia, where they saw how another former Soviet republic has been transformed since the collapse of the USSR. They were able to practice their Russian everywhere from the famous “Central Market” in Old Town to an ethnic Latvian restaurant. The highlight of the trip was a visit to a church of “Old Believers”, a branch of the Eastern Orthodox Church that split from the Russian Church in the 17C, leading to centuries of persecution. The visit was particularly meaningful for one of the WSU students, whose Old Believer ancestors had fled Russia for the United States, eventually ending up in Detroit, where the Old Believer church they helped build still operates today.



At the US Embassy in Minsk

This Belarus study abroad program was a profound experience for all involved. It provided an excellent opportunity for language study, the fostering of international ties between both students and faculty, and the discovery of many fascinating, and sometimes tragic, elements of Belarusian (and Latvian) history and culture. The trip also expanded the global dimension of Wayne State’s mission, as it was

not only the first visit by US students to Vitebsk; it was the first official visit of WSU students to Belarus. Since their return, the WSU students have been working hard to share their experience with the Detroit-area community. They represented Belarus at the Schoolcraft Multicultural Fair and presented posters on it at the Rushton Undergraduate Conference.



WSU and VSU students in front of a mural of Chagall in Vitebsk

All the faculty and students involved expressed the hope that this trip will be but the first step in a long-term relationship between WSU and VSU, and plans are already in the works for a Belarusian contingent to visit Detroit this fall. A Belarusian doll presented to Prof. Kline by VSU Dean stands elegantly in her office in Manoogian Hall, and a Pewabic dish engraved with the WSU logo sits in the office of the VSU president. Hopefully these gifts will become the symbol of a long and fruitful relationship between our two institutions.

Prof. Kline and the WSU students involved in the program would like to extend their heartfelt thanks to all those who made this trip possible on both sides of the ocean.

This trip was one of the most eye-opening, inspiring, rewarding parts of my entire life.

It not only changed my life; it impacted the community we visited.

I’m so thankful for everything and for everyone who took part!

– Jack Marone, WSU Russian student on his first trip outside the US.