

SEEING THE DIFFERENCE AND CHOOSING

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"I was 12 years old when I made the most important decision of my life: I refused to return to the Soviet Union with my parents. I did not have too much time to think about it because my parents were ready to leave, but my choice was pretty obvious. I decided that I would do anything to stay in this country. I didn't have any guarantee that I would be able to stay here, and I had to fight for more than five years. All that time I lived in fear that I would be forcibly returned to the Soviet Union. Finally, on my 18th birthday, I was granted U.S. citizenship.

Many people I talk to here say that I should have gone with my parents to avoid all the court battles, and just come back to America when I turned 18 years old. People don't understand that I never would have been able to leave the Soviet Union again once I returned. Even if I were to go there now as an American citizen, I wouldn't be able to return. People like me, and many others who defected or who spoke out against the Soviet Union, are considered to be traitors. For this, people get thrown in jail or sent to concentration camps.

Foreigners who visit the Soviet Union think that it's a great place. That is because they get to stay in the best hotels and eat the best foods. Visits to the Soviet Union are limited to particular places that are approved by the government. The government will not allow you to go outside the city limits into the small villages. That's why a lot of people say it's a nice place. I agree with them 100%--it's a nice place to visit, but I didn't want to live there. I have lived in both countries, and I have seen the difference.

Religion is outlawed in the Soviet Union. Any students who are caught attending church are punished in school the next day. The teachers make them stay after school, clean the chalkboards, wash desks, or collect scrap iron. Children go to school every day; they spend every religious holiday in school, watching films about communism.

After 8th grade, most children go to work; very few go to college. You need to have a lot of money or know somebody in a high position to go to a good college. And you must be a member of the Communist Party.

There is no such thing as a protest or strike in the Soviet Union. If you do strike, you are jeopardizing your future and the future of your children. You need the government's permission to travel to another town. An average citizen makes about 75 rubles, about \$95 U.S., a month. Food is hard to get. You have to wait in line to buy just about everything.

SEEING THE DIFFERENCE AND CHOOSING - Page 2

Everything is owned by the state. Very few common people own an automobile, since you have to wait five years or longer to buy one. Many people in the Soviet Union sleep on dirt floors in rooms without any heat. They have to worry about what they are going to eat the next day. How many Americans worry about what to eat tomorrow? How many Americans worry about where to sleep?

Many of us here complain when we don't get to take a shower. In the Soviet Union, people take baths once a month. Few houses have bathrooms inside; most of them are outside. In cities, you have to wait in line for toilet paper, and in many villages, people don't know what toilet paper looks like. They use newspaper.

In the Soviet Union, people do not know what is going on in the rest of the world. Newspapers and television broadcasts do not say anything about other countries, unless it serves the propaganda goals of the state. The Soviet press doesn't even cover the news around the Soviet Union. If there is a plane crash or a similar calamity, nobody hears about it at all unless some high official died in the accident.

When I lived in the Soviet Ukraine, I didn't hear one good thing about the United States. Everything I heard was horrible. People would say "It's very dirty over there" and that black people are slaves. They would say that this country is run by bums and that people are starving and have no place to sleep. When I came to this country early in 1980, I saw a very big difference. In this country our pets eat better food than many Soviet people eat. Any Soviet citizen would give his right arm to have anything that this country has to offer. Soviet people would do anything for many things we take for granted.

In America it is no big deal to have a pair of jeans. On the black market in the Soviet Union a pair of jeans costs the equivalent of \$190 U.S. A pack of gum is about \$3.75. A wool scarf that costs \$20 here can sell in the Soviet Union for \$150. You can't buy them in stores.

A lot of people I talk to {in the U.S.}, especially the young, think that life in the Soviet Union is almost the same as it is here. They are mistaken. People in America take freedom for granted. I don't and I never will. There is no place like the United States of America.

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