

## KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

*His host mother was bound and determined to learn English*

by Joshua Barton

**M**imoza—my host mom—always seemed to have her nose in a book. When I first arrived in Bigir village, a sprawling agricultural community nestled in a crook of the Caucasus foothills, she would, decorously make herself scarce in the company of the foreign male guest. She would bring me tea and serve me *dolma* (greasy, stuffed grape leaves) or *bozbash* (a chunk of lamb and quartered potatoes in a lard gravy) and scurry back to the summer kitchen to read.

I wondered about the contents of the book she always seemed to have within arm's reach. Its cover was grey and frayed, with a worn, antique look. It reminded me of one of my American mother's cookbooks and this image of Mimoza engrossed in culinary pursuit seemed to mesh well with the traditional domestic role she played. After a few weeks, however, the monotony of her cooking made me suspicious.

As the weeks and months passed, Mimoza became comfortable with me. Memmet, her husband, had a quirky sense of humor and my progressing language skills strengthened our bond. In the fall I would come back from teaching English in the village school and help the host family harvest pomegranates from their orchard. In the evenings, Memmet and I would play Russian cards games after dinner and vodka (on a good day) or brandy (on a better day). Mimoza would cook and serve us, but always ate together with us and joined in the conversation.

One day, after coming home to an empty house, I found her book in the kitchen as I was warming up water for tea. Opening it up, I realized it was in fact an old Soviet-era English textbook

from the third grade. She was not trying to improve her cooking skills; she was trying to learn English! Her sister, who also served as the director of my school, must have given Mimoza the book from the school library before I came and Mimoza was doing what she could to try to learn to communicate with me in English.

I asked her about her English endeavors, and though initially embarrassed, after a few days she began asking me questions. How do you say this word? What does this mean? I noticed that if one of her sons was in the room, he would get upset with her for asking me these simple questions.

"Would you buy a box of tea when from school come?" Mimoza slowly pieced together one early winter morning as I was tightening my tie in

the mirror that hung in the courtyard. With a surprised but congratulatory chuckle I said, "Of course!" I realized she could understand written English quite well, but her conversational dexterity needed work. Slowly she began to improve, often peppering my breakfast with questions in English.

But still, any attempt she made to speak English in front of that one son of hers would provoke a stingy verbal rebuke. One morning she said to me, "When my family is gone, speak to me in English. When they are here speak Azerbaijani. They doesn't allow me to learn English." I realized, looking back, that she had become much more discreet about when and in what company she would read or speak English. Memmet apparently didn't approve of her learning English,



Mimoza Samedova, (left), and the author's mother, Hope Barton, (right) chat while preparing dinner.

but he had been polite enough not to raise a fuss in front of me, unlike her son. Mimoza, isolated in a traditional domestic role in a forgotten village and of an obviously sharp mind, was not allowed the simple intellectual frill of learning a language. I never really understood the chauvinism of Memmet's otherwise usually reasonable mindset. But Mimoza wasn't giving up.

One afternoon in May, I was digging through the empty kitchen for some food to warm up. Underneath the kitchen table, behind a curtain, and blocked by some rarely used pots, I found a bag of Chex-Mix left behind by a Peace Corps friend. Curious, I hoped that somehow it might still contain something salvageable to eat. Instead, inside I discovered two old English books. Despite her family's ire, Mimoza remained determined to learn whatever English she could whenever she could steal a glance.

My family came from America in June and stayed with my host family for a few days. By that time, if I was patient and spoke slowly enough, Mimoza could carry on a pretty decent conversation. She had a wonderful time talking to my mom and it was a relief for me to not have to translate every conversation. I think witnessing her speaking to my mom changed her family's attitude as well. She more bravely spoke English in front of them and she became less vigilant about hiding her English books.

After I returned from my vacation in Turkey, she asked me (in English) if I would buy her an English-Azerbaijani dictionary the next time I went into town. She left the equivalent of a few dollars by my room and, later that afternoon, I hid the dictionary in a place in the kitchen where she would quickly discover it. From that point on, we would speak English while I ate breakfast and Azerbaijani the rest of the day. Whenever Peace Corps friends visited, she would greet them in English, punctuated with an occasional chuckle and a gleam of delight in her eye.

*Joshua Barton was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Azerbaijan from 2004 to 2006.*

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