

Tatiana

By Christina Lund Madsen

Interview with Tatiana Ponomareva, Russia Women

“It was 1990. I was 22 and in my last year of university. It was a very strange time in Russia. It was not the USSR, but it was not the new Russia. Nobody knew what to do, so we played bridge.”



The Russians are a bit mysterious and seem to prefer their own company. That makes me curious, so I decide to ask the one who scares me the least for an interview. Tatiana Ponomareva is one head taller than myself (I am about the average size of a female viking), however up close her mild eyes make my fear vanish. I promise her to speak slowly and correct her English. It is much better than she realises with her characteristic Russian accent.

“In 1972 bridge was forbidden by the central committee of the communist party. So if you played bridge, they would bring you to the police. So there was no bridge. When the USSR was broken up, bridge appeared from zero. In the USSR every child can play chess. Nobody can play bridge. Now the situation is similar because the tradition is staying. A lot of children can play chess, want to play chess. Cards have a bad reputation. The people who play cards are criminals.”

What was it like growing up in the USSR?

“When you are a child it is all normal for you. It is very funny. USSR was broken when I was in university. I started in 1985. When I finished in 1990, it was a different country. Not so much the country in itself, but in the minds of the people with whom I studied. Their words and their minds changed. It was very strange. In the first year of university they really believed in the communist ideology. After 5 years – nothing.” She laughs.

“They could think, they could believe in anything. They were happy. In the USSR there was only jobs for the government. All was broken and new was not grown. When you finished now there were no government jobs, it was a strange time, because you didn't know what to do. When you cannot decide what to do, you have a lot of time and you play bridge.”

Tatiana learned bridge from her husband at the age of 22.

“The first two years when we were very bad players, we played 12 hours a day. We didn't work, we had a lot of time to play bridge and we liked it. Then Russia needed to make some women's team for the championships in 1996 in Rhodes. At that time we didn't have a lot of good women playing in Russia, so we were only five and tried to find a 6th player for every championship. For 5-6 years we changed our partnerships a lot of times. I began to play with Victoria. Every year we decided to play, then to stop, then play again, then stop. The last time we decided that if we were not satisfied after a year, instead of stopping we would try to play one more year. That was 11 years ago.”

In 2004 Tatiana and Victoria Gromova won the World Teams Olympiad with the Russian Women's team.

How was that for you?

She sighs. “It was very...surprising. We went to Istanbul to ... In the Russian bridge site there was some vote: ‘What do you think about the result of the Women team and open team?’ 90 % thought we wouldn't qualify from the group. I think we thought the same. At the time it wasn't the strongest team. I don't know what happened. Maybe some stars from the sky. We had a very great atmosphere in the team. Nobody tried to... prove that they were the best pair of the team. They tried to play their best. One pair played less than others, and they had no problem with that.”

What is your partnership with Victoria Gromova like?

“Hm. I don't know what to answer in English. We know each other a lot, good things, bad things. We can cry or... usually we are good friends, but sometimes you can have some trouble in your relationship. But we know it is a good partnership and try to improve it. If we have some problems and we don't know who is right, we have a referee. It is Andrey (Gromov, Victorias husband, ed.). He tries to be honest. It is all about bridge, so he can be honest. We play a very similar system. It is why it is easy for us to play mixed. If we have some questions or bridge problems, we have Andrey.”

Children and Bridge

After finishing her math studies, Tatiana started working for a financial law firm. Both her and her husband worked and played bridge and when Tatiana was 26, they had her first child. Still she went to all international tournaments from 1996 till today besides in 1997, when her son was two months old.

Now her children are 19 and 17 and neither of them play bridge.

“My children don't play bridge and don't want to play. I

think maybe the reason is because the mother always goes some place to play bridge and they stay at home, so for them bridge is not a good thing. I think it is not bad, because they finish school and they need to go to the university to get some profession. If you want to play bridge, you need a lot of time to spend on bridge. First they get a profession and if they want to, they will play.”

When the children were small her mother helped looking after them while Tatiana was away, and when they were about 8-10 years old, their father could take care of them by himself.

“Maybe it was not good for my children. I don’t know. I think if children see their parents try to do the thing they like, they will also do the things they like. Not only do things because of duty, but freedom to do what you like.”

Bridge in the USSR

When bridge was forbidden in the USSR, people played bridge in their own flats. Sometimes their neighbours reported the illegal activities to the police.

“It was not some great punishment, but they needed to spend time reading newspapers, some moral punishment, not money. In the USSR the police always write to your work and it could be bad, that is why people played secretly.”

When bridge was allowed after the fall of the USSR-regime, there were some articles about bridge in a popular scientific magazine.

“It was a very popular magazine. It appealed to a lot of young people at the time in different universities. Almost all from our open team appeared after. When your friends in university play bridge, you become interested and want to play too. In Russia we have a lot of tournament players, we have very few social players. They are only interested in getting points, getting results. But is it tradition. There is no tradition to play bridge at home with the children and parents.”

I gain a sudden understanding of the Russian bridge mentality. For them it is only about bridge. They do not come to the tournaments to socialize, since for them bridge is not a social activity.

“When you are in the championship, you try to think about this. If you spend your energy trying to speak English, it takes energy from bridge. When you speak with the Russians, most of the time we speak about bridge. Very rarely we speak about something else. Our men speak about football, but only because of the world cup.”

“I usually communicate only with my own people. When I am in America I can understand people when they speak not so fast. When they tell some story slowly I understand everything. But then they start to speak faster and faster, and I understand nothing. I never know the end of their story.”

When Tatiana started to play in the States, she was shocked and did not understand the American bridge mentality, which was so different from the Russian. All the players were so much older than in Russia since the game was forbidden from 1972 till 1990.

“I was a little bit afraid, I felt myself in the house of... old people.” She is looking for the word retirement home. “I was not comfortable about this. But then I understood. They are very happy people, they play bridge, they converse with each other, they are interested in everything. It is very good. In Russia our old people sit at home and watch TV. Their old people... I think they are happy. Not about bridge, but with the interaction with other people. I think it is very good. If I were an old person, I would want to be in America. To be part of a great community and play bridge.”

Despite being only 45 years old, Tatiana stopped working one year ago. Not because of bridge, but because she has the opportunity not to work. After some tough years with small children and both parents working in the chaotic time after the crash of the USSR, she wants to relax and enjoy life.

How did you feel in the years after the USSR fell?

“Happy at the time, not because it was good in Russia, but when you are young, all of the time is happy. The people were happy about the freedom. During the USSR there was a lot of political conversation, but in the kitchen. You could not speak about this loud, only secretly with your friends. After the USSR you can speak about it anywhere you want. On the street, the people were happy. They received freedom. Some young people didn’t have money, they had problems, but they received freedom. They were more happy with freedom than with money at that time.”

What is your worst memory from the USSR time?

“Usually I never have some worst memory, because if I have some worst moment I try to forget about this, I don’t want to remember the worst, because I want to be happy and forget all the worst in my life.”

Which has been the best moment of your life?

“I read about this question,” she says. (I make a mental note to renew my questions.) She thinks a bit. “I don’t know. I can remember a lot of moments, but it is very difficult to choose one of them.” Suddenly she speaks with conviction. “I think it will be later. It has not happened yet.”

For the video of the interview, please go to:

[Interview Tatiana](#)