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How different was the culture in comparison to the Canadian way of life?

I could not believe how entrepreneurial they were. Reminiscence of communism stuck around long after the wall came down, which is one of the reasons why I believe these people were so entrepreneurial. They completely understood how business worked: bartering, supply and demand, setting prices. So when I was teaching my classes, the skills had come as second nature to them.

Typically, the common working man would hold two jobs. The first would be with the government; this helped subsidize credits to pay for their car, food, and others. The latter would help pay the bills consisting of black-market activity. Here transactions of goods and services were conducted in exchange for cash in something nicknamed the "shadow economy". Overall, it was a poor time for the people and companies because of the lack of government support, corruption, and an unstable financial system.

What was the hardest hurdle you had to overcome while you were teaching?

The students were wonderful. Everyone would always be attentively jotting down notes and entirely involved in the course. Albeit it was a few days in when we finally realized, half the class were paid assistants who were ordered to take notes for their executives. We didn't know what to do! We didn't want to upset these people and cause a commotion with our students. In the end, I remember we created a new separate certificate of completion, which was addressed to the executives who had their assistants sit in on the classes.

Did you make any sort of international connections when you were abroad?

I became good friends with one of the translators, who was quick to arrange a tour at a locally owned appliance factory. Given my previous work experience in factory operations for a global manufacturer of home appliances, I was happy to oblige.

When I first stepped foot in the factory, I could not believe what I saw. The factory was producing something like 300,000 units annually with over 2,000 employees. Not only were they producing half of the quantity they should be producing with twice the employees, but the quality was also an absolute disaster. It was clear that no one had invested a penny since the 50's or 60's. The worst part was that this was the standard in Eastern-Europe, yet no one knew any better. What they thought was just a small problem, was going to take a lot more time and effort than I could provide.

Can you tell me about a story about you and the other LEADERites?

I will never forget the train rides through the city. Out of nowhere, large men who were accompanied with these small children would come onto the train and disperse themselves amongst the riders. The children, not older than the age of 7 maybe 8, would pull at your clothes, ask for money and even look to pickpocket travellers. The Russian Mafia and organized crime was very much a real thing going around. It was not only a different time, but it was a completely different culture. We had some scary moments where we were glad we were Canadian.

What's one piece of advice you could give to a new LEADERite?

The biggest piece of advice I can give a future LEADERite would be to be as flexible as possible. I would start a day with my teaching plan, and at times would have to throw it right out the window within 5 minutes. Business in the developed world was just so different.

I still remember the class asking me, "How much cash should businesses keep on hand, and how much do they keep in the Bank?" The class laughed. It was then I discovered that "Bank" in Ukraine was short for "Bankruptcy", because so often Banks would go under and steal their money. Money was either kept in their business, or, under mattresses and in floorboards.

Overall, I learned more from the students than they did from me. I was just 21 years old and I was teaching business professionals! The LEADER Project was by far my greatest HBA experience.



David Wood is a Lecturer in Operations Management at The Ivey Business School as well as a graduate of both the HBA and MBA program. He has spent many years in industry as the Director of Sales & Marketing in the US and then VP Manufacturing before becoming President for W. C. Wood Company, a global manufacturer of home appliances. David has had extensive experience in international business, mergers and acquisitions, and currently sits on several corporate boards. He has also worked as a consultant to medium and large corporations in strategic planning and operational restructuring. David participated in the LEADER program in 1997 and taught in Kiev, Ukraine.