

# Ralph Mosher - A Personal Note

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I met Ralph Mosher at the annual AME conference in South Bend, Indiana, in 1990. It was my first visit to the United States, so everything connected with it is still fresh in my memory. Among our meetings and talks, Ralph and his wife Jessica impressed me as very kind and open people. They expressed to me and my colleagues, Professor Ludmilla Novikowa and Dr. Natalia Selivanova (both from the Russian Academy of Education in Moscow) extreme friendliness and readiness to help. They were interested not only in Russia itself but in contacts with Russian educators and learning more about Russian schools. It sounds incredible, but I felt very much at home with them as if in the company of good friends. They asked me many questions and were very attentive listeners. Unfortunately, time was flying away very quickly, and in a week we were back in Moscow again. But the ties of our new friendship, although so quick and unexpected, remained strong.

A year later, in Georgia, USA, I again attended another AME conference. Ralph didn't participate in it due to a number of reasons, one of which was his health problem. But he decided to invite my Russian colleague, Dr. Natalia Selivanova and me to his house in Boston. Our trip to Boston was full of adventures. We arrived in New York, and needed to catch a plane to Boston, but we happened to be in the middle of an awful storm that prevented us from flying out. I called the Moshers who were anxious and nervous. Finally, our carrier decided to take us to another airport and put us on board another plane which successfully (with only a 2 or 3 hour delay) arrived in Boston. Jessica promised to be wearing red but, frankly speaking, I would have recognized her in any case - friends are not easily forgotten. Then followed several wonderful days in their friendly home where I enjoyed true hospitality and warmth. I can confess now that before coming I was rather anxious of how to behave, what was allowed and what was not, and what they would consider appropriate. No wonder, it was my first stay in the house of a "foreigner"! Finally, I decided to follow the proverb, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." But the reality destroyed all my fears and broke all my superstitions - it was one of the most hospitable homes I had ever stayed in. Ralph and Jessica behaved as if we had known each other for years. Although it's not easy to make friends at a mature age, but it was very easy with them. They spoke about friendship and they behaved friendly in all the possible ways.

Once Jessica invited a journalist from the local newspaper to interview us. The article soon appeared, and it was rather good. I don't remember all the questions and answers but one is still very fresh in my memory. The young man

asked Ralph about the sponsor who covered our expenses for that visit to Boston. Ralph, relaxed and smiling before, immediately got anxious and tried to avoid the answer not to make us feel uneasy. He said, "Oh, please, let us not discuss it. It's OK". It took quite a while before I understood that they had given up their own trip to Georgia and AME conference in order to cover the costs of our trip to Boston. People are very different, some try to impress a guest with their own achievements, speaking about themselves, but it doesn't concern the way Ralph behaved. He always tried to remain in the shadow, highlighting what the others were doing. One most impressive highlight was our visit to Brookline High School. Ralph had been their consultant for a "school-within-school" project for many years. So the teachers greeted him as a colleague and a friend but not as a stranger. They all seemed to know him personally and appreciated his wise advice and sharp mind. Hugs, handshakes and warm words greeted us all during our stay at that wonderful school. One of the teachers said, "We are so happy, that you are staying with our Ralph." They considered him theirs and that's probably the best appreciation of one's life.

In Russia we say, "Tell me what your friends are, and I will tell you what kind of person you are." Meeting with Ralph's friends and colleagues helped me to understand what Ralph was. I saw him in different situations and with different people. For example, that evening after visiting the school, teachers were invited to his house for a party, which we all truly enjoyed. Many were teachers without any advanced degrees and he was a famous university professor but looking at him one would never notice the slightest hint of arrogance or snobbishness. It was just a meeting of equals.

We spoke a lot about democracy in schools and the way it should flow to the students and teachers. Ralph was never tired of repeating that, "the hardest point was to teach people to look at democracy in its fullest implications, to live democracy". He was always sincerely interested in what was going on in Russian schools and I tried to openly answer his hundreds of questions. I told him, as an example, that the brown uniforms mandated until recently for all students were disappearing fast, and that the portraits of Communist Party leaders which used to stare from classroom walls were gone. But what's left? Never being very optimistic, I considered that the young generation remained suspicious of elders who had discarded notions held sacred until shown to be false. Children stayed very skeptical. The values we had had before, of Marxism-Leninism, were destroyed. To build new educational values, to find the basis for them, was, and is, our goal in schools, and Ralph's books and ideas helped a lot. On the whole, Russian schools have been

stripped of their old ideological certainties, but are now attempting to replace them with common human values such as Truth and Kindness.

One of the problems, which we heartily discussed, was freedom in schools. I couldn't say that I was fully satisfied with the relaxed demeanor of self-governing students we had met at the Brookline High School. In Russia, I was more used to students who would stand up in front of elders, who would never eat during the class, who would never talk to each other when the teacher was in the classroom, etc. I believe, Ralph understood me completely, I was not criticizing, I was just explaining, what was not possible in our schools at that time. We agreed that getting freedom was not solving problems. Freedom means choice, and it's always more difficult to make a choice than to follow a prescribed path. One of Ralph's main ideas was to go back to basics in school education, especially to the ideas of John Dewey who was mainly concerned with school democracy, development as the aim of education, and using children's everyday experience in their school life and studies. Ralph was one of the few researchers who tried to "reinvent" Dewey for American and Russian teachers.

On the whole his devotion to Russian educators and his passionate desire to help us were amazing. For example, he took a very active part in a big international conference in Moscow, in 1993. No wonder, his last book<sup>1</sup> "is dedicated jointly to the youth of the United States and the youth of Russia as they struggle to learn how to live cooperatively in a democratic society."

#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup>Mosher, R., Kenny, R. A. & Garrod, A. (1994). *Preparing for Citizenship. Teaching Youth to Live Democratically*. Westport, CT: Praeger.