

12/15/12 Saturday

Another chunk of time has passed and I haven't been keeping up. Happily, we have solved some of the issues mentioned in my last entry. (Soft, perforated toilet paper has been found!) I have another cold so I have used up my tissue and have gone through about 4 rolls of toilet paper...poor me! However to improve my life perspective, a package of real coffee arrived from the Packards so Woody and I have been able to worship the coffee in the wee hours of the morning as we prepare for the day's lessons.

In the last week of November we celebrated Thanksgiving, Mongolian style with the Russian-English Department. Each level (Freshmen to Seniors) presented some thing about USA Thanksgiving. The students prepared different kinds of salads and foods for their tables which they shared with the



instructors. Woody and I (and Reesa, an instructor who came over) made six pumpkin pies. Five of them were enjoyed. The fifth



looked like it had been sampled, so it went home with one of the teachers for her children to try. It took some creative work to find the right pans to use for the pies. We took the handles off our frying pan and stew pan in order to put them in the oven. And we borrowed a couple spring-form pans from friends who like to cook. Woody's

sister Jan gave us the piecrust recipe but we struggled with it. I'm not sure if the flour is just different here or our measuring implements weren't correct but the piecrusts were questionable. A few pumpkins were found in the market and Reesa's family grows pumpkins in the countryside. I understand that Mongolians put cubed fresh pumpkin in their soups, otherwise pumpkin is not commonly eaten. We have quite a lot of cooked fresh pumpkin left over in our freezer, so scones and soup have been on our menu.

Tonight (12/15) we will host our first dinner with new friends. Woody will prepare a stew of some kind and a cabbage salad. I'm responsible for clean-up. The couple we have invited are from Khovd and the husband works with Woody in the Chinese-English Department. His wife works in the local hospital.



Because we are essentially in desert-like conditions here (<2 inches of precipitation per year) there is a lot of dust and sandy dirt everywhere. We have seen some photographs of Khovd in the summer and it is a very green place, but since our arrival (9/30) the leaves on the trees, the weeds in the gardens, and the flowers have all been brown or gone. On the ground is a layer of sand that gets blown around by the wind and moved around by the street cleaners. They are all women who sweep the streets and sidewalks with short-handled brooms. In order to reduce the sand in public buildings, the Mongolians have shoe dusters outside. These are wooden handles with rags attached, that a person can use to dust off their shoes before going in the building. (Photo courtesy of Woody.)

There are cleaning people at the University who are constantly mopping the floors (on their hands and knees) or sweeping with short handled brooms. The students are responsible for room cleaning. Frequently on Friday afternoons the students are carrying buckets of water and rags to individual rooms to clean off the desks and sweep the floors. The desks are made from wood, usually painted orange, with

a bench for two students. These are often stacked up and pushed to the side when the floors are cleaned, (not regularly.)

There seems to be a close-knit community within the University levels and the students stay together from year to year even if their skills are not equal. One instructor cycles through the four years with them so everyone becomes well-acquainted. There are seven secondary schools (grades 5-12) in Khovd so not all the students from the city know each other before arriving at University. And there are a handful of students from other aimags (states) that come here.

Woody and I haven't figured out the grading and testing system yet. The students are always interested in the corrections on their papers and test don't seem overly concerned or motivated by seems that their final grades don't determine the next level.



scores, but they the scores. And it their promotion to

Two students explained to me this week that students in the Russian-English department teachers. This is from a class of 24 (10%). choose another profession, move to continue on in University in another field or degree. As prospective teachers, they take a

only three of the will become The others will Kazakhstan, or for an advanced government-

sponsored examination at the end of their senior year. These two women explained that only the top 2-3 scorers will end up with teaching jobs. Other people (foreigners) have told us that students can also get a job by bribing the school administration. Mariya and Harashash knew of this, but weren't convinced the claim was true. I was also told by one of my fellow instructors that most secondary schools in Mongolia teach Russian for 3 years and English for 7 years, yet our University prepares future teachers with 70% Russian and 30% English classes. This discrepancy confuses me but she said it was because the University was not keeping up with current practice in the primary and secondary schools.

This explanation seems likely and may also explain why there is a Chinese-English department which only prepares English teachers and a small percentage of Chinese teachers. These departments share the same building and same hallways but not necessarily the same classrooms. I attended a Saturday morning workshop for the University language instructors a few weeks ago. Three of the instructors in my department have excellent English and they translated the speaker's information in whispers for me. From what I understand, the professional development for current teaching methods for University instructors is minimal and the speakers, who had all attended a government-sponsored 4-day workshop in Uvs aimag (6 hours north by car) encouraged us to use handouts, use the chalkboard, and stand up in the classroom. Teachers provide their own paper and chalk so the motivation for these simple tasks isn't high.

With that in mind, and recognizing the constant dichotomy of what I hear and what I observe here, one of the younger instructors asked to observe my class last week. In return I was able to observe his class this week. His was a first level Russian class and contrary to my expectations, the students were engaged, excited, and active in their learning. The teacher, Nimjo, related well to the students, explained things clearly (in Mongolian) and used quite a few useful teaching techniques: games, group work, and role plays. He explained a few vocabulary words and otherwise presented some concepts that the students worked through together. It was easy to feel the excitement in the class despite the language barrier. Almost all the students were engaged the entire 90 minutes. Yes, there was some memorization of proverbs and sentences from the book but this was a small segment of the class and the students seemed happy to do this.

In my own classroom, I have both negatives and positives each week. Cheating seems to be a typical practice for a few students in each class. My tolerance for that is low so I either move people around during an exam or I try to isolate the “cheater” from students who could “help” him/her. This week when I returned two quizzes with half points due to cheating, the wrath of the entire class was upon me! “No, no, she didn’t cheat.” “No, no, you are wrong.” Shaking of heads and disgust came from all corners of the room. Of course, it didn’t help that the “criminal” collapsed on to her desk and wept for most of the 90 minutes. At one point she called me over to re-do the math. She wanted the extra .25 that I had taken off when dividing by two. Other instructors have had similar troubles and just take the quiz away when the cheating occurs. Half of my quiz was short answer and sentences that the student had to create so I wanted to see what could be done on those sections. The other “criminal” came to me after class because she had been to the hospital with her sister. She yelled, ripped in half, and waded up her paper before throwing it down and storming out. (Young women can be so dramatic. My mother would be laughing at this statement. Thank goodness I raised boys.)

Seven of twelve Juniors attended my last weekly class on Friday afternoon. They had convinced me earlier in the week to allow them to practice for the New Year’s party that they are holding on 12/24 at a local restaurant for all the Russian-English Department. (I need a party dress, I’ve been told!) So, we had re-scheduled an hour of our class to follow our usual 90 minute lesson on Friday...yuck! Anyway, one student disappeared at break and another went home to the countryside for the weekend. So, five were left. I turned on the holiday music and we sang some songs for awhile and then played a game with vocabulary. After about 30 minutes I asked if we could stop and go home. (I’m an old woman and need a break by Friday afternoon!) “No, no,” They begged. “Will you do a spelling bee with us?” This is one of the first times I’ve been convinced to stay in class to practice English. So we spent the next 30 minutes spelling English words. Even the lowest-skilled speakers and readers are good spellers. Is this where memorization, the typical or traditional Mongolian teaching technique, benefits the students?

At 7:45 A.M. when we quickly walk through the brisk and smoky air to the University, it is still dark. And at 6 P.M. when I walk home on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, it is already pitch dark. The winter solstice will be welcome next week. Woody is anxious to have more light in his Khovd Square photos. (A small video sampling of his ongoing project is on his website, woodypackard.com, “notebook.”) As “a cup half empty” person, as my sisters have told me, the darkness doesn’t help my personality. So, I’m looking forward, despite the warnings of the 9 cycles of cold winter, to more daylight. Beginning on 12/22 the winter of 9 cycles of 9 days each begins. I’ve been told that the first three cycles are brutally cold...possibly -30 degrees C. (-22 F) daytime temperatures. I’ll find out. So far it has been on average around -10 C (14 F) during the day. There is rarely any snow although a dusting fell this week and didn’t evaporate for a few days.



All the students seem to be looking forward to their winter break that happens in mid-January after final exams. The holiday spirit is here. In Woody’s department, the instructors have been exchanging gifts all week between secret “monetos.” And my department starts this on Monday between instructors and seniors. Each day someone leaves a small gift for their moneto. Chocolates and office supplies seem to be the favorite although lunch has been served to a few monetos by surprise.

Grandfather New Years (thin with a blue robe) and the snow girl (his helper) show up on December 31 for some Mongolian families. Some Kazak families celebrate with a family gathering and a meal. Some Kazak families (those with stronger Muslim religious ties) avoid the holiday completely as it has connections to the Christian holiday of Christmas. But others exchange gifts and drink champagne. We have quite a few dinner parties with students, instructors, and our Peace Corp friends scheduled. So, we won’t be missing out on fun. And, of course, because it is Mongolia, there be plenty of surprises!