

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody I'm joined today by Maya Reinfeldt, UW-Madison junior from the Madison area studying International Studies and Russian Literature. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to talk with me.

**Maya Reinfeldt**

Yeah, of course. I'm excited.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So although Maya and I spent a couple months when we were babies together in a playgroup, we grew up in different school districts and haven't chatted, and probably like 18 years. So can you bring us up to speed, me included, about what your education and linguistic background was kind of like and why you decided upon these particular majors?

**Maya Reinfeldt**

Yeah, of course. So I attended the Madison Russian school until I believe I was about 13, or 14. At that point, the class of students that I was in kind of all became very busy with high school and extracurriculars, I continued my kind of Russian literature education with a private teacher who, you know, used to be my teacher at the Russian school, but we did private lessons after that, and with my grandma, and then when I got to college, I realized that I didn't want that to be the end of it. So I chose Russian literature as one of my majors. And I've been kind of focused on that plus International Studies, which also relates since then.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And so if I understand correctly, did you have a couple opportunities to teach as well as in the Russian school? And if so, I don't know. Do you have any experiences about what teaching Russian is like or anything about that experience?

**Maya Reinfeldt**

Yeah. So I've substituted for my mom's lessons at the Madison Russian School, both with her younger children, and with kids who are about 15-16. At the time, it was definitely easier with the older kids, as they're, you know, Russian levels or were higher, and they were, you know, it's easier to carry a conversation. But it was also really exciting with the younger kids just knowing that, you know, we were instilling something in them, that would be very important for their futures and for understanding the culture that they come from. And, yeah, and then as well as substituting, I also used to help out at the Madison Russian School summer camp, where I would just kind of be a counselor. And I think their main goal was immersion for the kids. So even if they speak English back to us, just bombard them with Russian as much as possible. And it was exciting seeing how much they can understand at the beginning versus at the end of the summer session.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And so there's a lot of different reasons why people learn languages, as well as why certain language programs are funded. And for you and so many others, there's obviously a very

important family heritage and cultural and religious connection. But others may be interested in learning Russian because of the economic utility if they're going into business, or because the government's National Security Education Program, or the Defense Language Institute, designates it as like a critical language for national security, and there's funding attached. And personally, I feel like designating a group of speakers of a language as a threat to our national security creates a really negative view of these people and the speakers of the language. So how can we kind of separate governmental affairs and ideologies from the millions of people who speak the language? Or who live in countries that speak the language and not using it as a threat marker?

### **Maya Reinfeldt**

That's a really tough question. And one that I think about a lot, actually, because, you know, like, growing up in elementary school, I got called Soviet before I even knew what it was. And I feel like when people find out that I speak Russian, it's like, oh, what do you think of Putin? And I'm like, well, you know, that's not the first thing that I feel like you should be asking me, you know, and so on. One thing I found is the more people you know, even if people start learning Russian for national security reasons, or economic reasons, there's no way you can avoid the culture and learning about the culture and kind of becoming entrenched in it. And I feel like that's where that separation lies between politics and people is you have to learn about the history and about the culture and the way that the language relates to the culture. And the more you start to understand the people for who they are and why they believe what they believe, and also understand that the Russian people are not a monolith. I mean, there are plenty of people who disagree very much with me on different social issues and political issues. And then we're all still connected by Russian language and culture. So I think I'm focusing on yeah, the culture and the history and the people behind the language rather than just seeing it as a way to, you know, yeah, like you said, to promote national security. Does that make sense?

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure. And, you know, like you kind of mentioned, there is a cultural component, and Wisconsin does have a Russian population, but it's not probably as large as Spanish or Hmong or other linguistic or ethnic groups. So how do you find that connection with these people? Is it mostly in the Russian School? Do most families have that Russian cultural heritage background? Or are there other avenues for connecting?

### **Maya Reinfeldt**

Yeah, I think the ones that I've most commonly used has always been the Russian school growing up, we would, you know, pre COVID, we would have events like the New Year celebration, which was this huge thing, kids would prepare plays and performances, and there'd be activities, and you kind of, you know, obviously all the parents most of the parents were coming from growing up in Russia. So they knew what they did when they were kids. And they replicated it for us. And I think that was a wonderful way to connect and, and kind of understand and of course, people who met through the Russian school or through the Russian community would get together and have celebrations for March 8, which is International Women's Day it's a huge thing in Russia are four May 9th, which is Victory Day from World War Two. And I think

kind of growing up with those celebrations was a really big kind, it grounded me and the culture. And I think now through the university, there's been a lot of stuff that I've been able to do. Through the flagship program, the Russian Flagship Program, through Russian Club, and the various events that all those programs put on, it kind of replicates it in a more you know, what I had growing up, it replicates it in a more academic setting, I think it'd be very interesting to look into what opportunities there are for people who aren't either, you know, with kids, or college age or are associated with UW. And that's something I know a little less about. I know there's Russian tables for speaking practice. I actually played back, you know, before COVID, with the Russian Orchestra at UW, which was open to anyone and kind of a way to connect again. So yeah, I'm sure there are opportunities, but the main ones that I've been a part of are the Madison Russian School community and stuff through UW.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure. And I will definitely leave a couple links below in our transcript if anybody's interested in checking out those resources because I didn't know about that orchestra that sounds really cool. So others might be interested. And so a goal here is to celebrate linguistic diversity, so I don't want to put you on the spot but if you want to respond in Russian feel free to, but can you just share one reason why speaking more than one language is a positive thing that we should celebrate?

**Maya Reinfeldt**

You want me to go in Russian?

**Claire Darmstadter**

If you want to, that'd be great!

**Maya Reinfeldt**

Мне кажется, знание больше чем одного языка - очень важно, особенно в современном мире, потому что мы все глобально соединены друг с другом. Сейчас, конечно, есть конфликты и проблемы между США и Россией, и я не хочу, чтобы, как Клэйр уже сказала, были недопонимания между людьми и культурами этих стран, потому что они [культуры] обе очень богатые. Я хочу, чтобы американские люди понимали, почему российские или русские люди отличаются от политики между этими двумя странами. И мне кажется, знание больше чем одного языка - путь к этому пониманию, потому что не совсем возможно понять русскую культуру без понимания языка. Мне кажется, что если люди ценят язык, то они будут ценить культуру и понимать людей. Как-то так. Okay.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Thank you so much. Can you give us like a five sentence summary of what you just said just so other people can understand that might not speak Russian?

**Maya Reinfeldt**

Yeah, absolutely. Basically, I was talking about how, as you mentioned, there's obviously tension between the two countries right now like the USA and Russia, for obvious political reasons. But I

think that a key to understanding the Russian culture is through the language. Obviously, you can, you know, you can learn about it. But I think the best way to really connect is through the language. And so knowing the language is kind of going to be a channel to connection and to understand, and this goes for any country, not just for Russia. If you learn their language, you're that much more entrenched in their culture, you know, with my boyfriend's help and trying to learn Chinese right now is definitely hard. But I mean, even though just like a month or a couple of weeks of study, I've been able to understand more about the Chinese people than I ever have in my whole life. And so yeah, I think I think language is a path to understanding culture. And that in itself is a path to connections between people that will lead to understanding and hopefully peace. Yeah.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Well, great. Thank you so much. I appreciate your time and I hope you have a good rest of your semester.

**Maya Reinfeldt**

Well, thank you, you as well.