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MS211: Albina Personal Statement

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Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. –Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance

Childhood was summertime in the pastures of Tarbagatai Mountains in ~~the north-east~~northeast Kazakhstan where my grandfather was the shepherd for our small family herd of sheep. I often flashback to a beautiful virgin-green valley surrounded by mighty mountains with their blue snowcaps disappearing into the sky. I recall being eight years old lying on my stomach looking through fragrant wild grasses in search of wild strawberries. There, in that moment, beneath the idyllic mountain sky, the world had no limitations. The sour-sweet taste of wild strawberries will always remain connected in my memory to the deep impressions left by late night childhood conversations with my grandfather, who at the earliest stages of my ~~life,~~life was my spirit guide through the mysteries of the world.

My grandfather was a wise man, though his wisdom was gained at a great price: living through the dispossession of Kulaks in 1920's, after Kazakhstan joined the Russian Federation, the great famine of 1930's that took away the lives of many millions in the country, Stalin-era Soviet domination and World War II, where he spent two years in a German concentration camp. He taught me what he himself had learned through adversity, that education was the ~~only-singular~~ asset that one cannot be dispossessed of, and that ~~only~~ one's skills and knowledge could provide in times of hardship. He also taught me never to forget my Kazak roots and culture no matter where ~~my~~ life may lead. While at the time, life seemed certain and predictable, and the world seemed safe and carefree, there would come a time when I would use what I had learned then to carry me through uncertainty and chaos.

As the 1980's brought Perestroika and Glasnost, followed by the Coup of 1992, when the Soviet Union ultimately collapsed, I witnessed, firsthand, the political, social, and economic chaos that followed the Coup, when people's lifelong beliefs were shattered and their life savings became worthless. The shelves in the grocery stores became empty and bread lines grew longer each day. Hospitals had no medications to treat the sick, and the judicial and political system became corrupt.

It was a time of great uncertainty as people strained to cope with a world according to a new set of rules, rules that evolved day by day. My ~~school-teachers~~schoolteachers did not know whether to require us to wear our

traditional red Pioneer scarves, the symbol of loyalty to the Communist Party, or whether to abandon them entirely. The entire educational system that emphasized the history of the Communist party and the study of Marx and Engels, no longer seemed to make any sense. ~~But~~However, what was one to replace it with?

The destruction of the Soviet Union and the chaos surrounding it occurred when I was just 13.; ~~the~~The chaos present everywhere added to the typical teenage confusion about myself and the world around me. In addition, that watershed year marked the divorce of my parents, which shook me on a more personal level.

All of these things made me realize one thing: that nothing is certain in this world except change. Amid change and uncertainty, I learned that the one thing that I could always depend on was myself, and as my grandfather taught me, education was something that others could not take away and could provide security in troubled times. Therefore, I focused on my studies and constantly worked on self-improvement. Because of my academic success, I was able to skip the seventh grade and enroll in Semipalatinsk State University Preparatory School, academically the strongest school in the region. I graduated as valedictorian from the Preparatory School at the age of sixteen. Because I have always been interested in the arts, I also graduated at the top of my class from Semipalatinsk Art School, which I attended for five years in an optional program parallel to my regular study at the Preparatory School. After I graduated from high school I was automatically accepted to the Semipalatinsk State Pedagogical University, where I was in English and Russian Literature, but I could not have guessed where I would end up just a few months later.

I was thinking of my grandfather's teachings and the ~~care-free~~carefree valley of wild strawberries on the nearly 24-hour flight from Almaty, Kazakhstan to Houston, Texas. I was only sixteen years old, and not prepared, as I had thought, to face a totally different culture in a country on the opposite side of the world from my home. I was one of the very few lucky people who were able to pursue education abroad for the first time since the fall of the Iron Curtain. I was eager to learn English, go to an American ~~un~~iversity and earn an education that would open to me a world of infinite possibilities. I was also aware of how fortunate I was to have this unique opportunity. I could not ~~sleep~~sleep, as my departure grew imminent due to the excitement that was bursting out of me, but I was also afraid to leave my family and be alone in a foreign country.

The difficulties I had to face were much greater than I could have imagined, but by overcoming ~~them~~them, I gained invaluable experience that helped solidify my character. The language barrier was initially the greatest obstacle. Nevertheless, after two months of ~~restless~~relentless study at the University of St. Thomas ELS program, I received a near-perfect score on the TOEFL.

The school system was very challenging to ~~me~~me, as I had to struggle not only with English, but also with new material and new ways of teaching and testing that material. After two semesters of hard work, I won the R.C. Baker Foundation and later the Delta Sigma Phi scholarships for academic performance. I remember the day when I received a letter in the mail stating that I was on the Dean's List after my first semester at the University of St. Thomas. I had no idea what that meant and only several months later I learned from my American friends that it was an honor awarded for academic performance.

—Coming from a third world country, I was always short on finances. Even though my parents were supporting me as they could, it was never enough. In my sophomore year of college, when I was 18, I was able to secure a part-time position with AIM Investments through a cooperative education program at the University of Houston. Not only was I able to support myself, but I was also exposed to the realities of the financial profession gaining invaluable practical experience related to my major subject of study.

Everything was completely different in the United States, as Kazakhstan would seem to an American visiting there even now, from automated faucets and Texas-sized meals to the fundamental cultural values and American mentality. I admired American individuality and the freedoms and civil liberties granted to its citizens, which was quite opposed to the collectivism taught in the USSR starting in kindergarten. I was also amazed by the wide diversity of races and cultures. I learned the pleasure of voicing my opinion and listening to the numerous and contesting opinions of others, which was and still is a forbidden luxury in Kazakhstan. I recognized the great opportunities for personal advancement that exist in America, as well as the freedom and security that Americans enjoyed.

In sum, I learned for myself through my unique experience what my grandfather had told me all those years before, the value of self-reliance and the value of education. While nothing in life is certain, education is a

path to self-reliance and independence. ~~And~~ Moreover, in the end, isn't that what we all strive for, in ~~one~~
~~way~~ one-way or another?