

A Carrot Cake in a Revolution
by Cristina T. O'Keeffe

Several years have gone by. I was in Ukraine for two and a half years and now I am home. But With each autumn chill come the memories of what it was like to be there, how out of place I felt amid the tumultuous climate. I don't mean weather, but revolution. The famous "Orange Revolution" took place during my time in Ukraine. Looking back on it now, the outcome of the revolution is probably not what many people dreamt about when they suffered the cold to protest, living in tent cities in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv for several months. But that time was undeniably electric. It was a current of emotion that swept through cities, towns and villages. I was definitely charged - listening at work to stories and opinions as best I could as a non-native speaker. But I was torn as well. In the middle of this revolution was the American Thanksgiving holiday and I desperately wanted to celebrate. So, this is how I ended up transporting a carrot cake through Ukrainian streets during the height of the Orange Revolution.

The cake I carried was brown with a white top. I'll say that upfront. I was not running around with a big orange tort. My carrot cake in no way had any political affiliations. It was an unbiased cake. Those of you who know carrot cake well, know that it is neither truly orange, colors of the "opposition" nor is it blue and white, colors of the party controlling Ukraine at that time.

But the cake was still a problem. I mean, it was a revolution and there I was, cake in hand, making my way to the tram. That's American nerve for you: celebrating an American-only holiday in the middle of someone else's revolution. But it was Thanksgiving. To give it up would admit defeat, and as a Peace Corps volunteer, every small psychological battle won is a major accomplishment. The show would go on. And so would the revolution.

No one could believe that the opposition would last that long in Independence Square. But if the non-believers lived here and saw people waiting in line to buy train tickets, make transactions at a bank or pick up a package at a post office, they would understand the endurance of Ukrainian citizens. And that doesn't even count the types of hardships the average person endured during communism. But even those of us with an understanding of Ukrainian stamina were impressed. But would the demonstrations, protests and blockades yield results? Surprisingly, they did.

The first result was the international media attention. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine, the biggest complaint I had about friends and family back home was that they kept calling my country of service Russia. No matter how hard I tried, I somehow ended up in Russia, or worse yet, the Soviet Union. I mean, USSR? C'mon people. Work with me. A now-RPCV told me about a friend on the New York City subway who heard the name Ukraine and asked, "Is that upstate?" A comment like that manages to insult Ukrainians and upstate New Yorkers simultaneously but sometimes you just have to let it go.

So, all it took was a major revolution to bring the Ukrainian nation into the spotlight. Covers of magazine featured stories about the “Orange Revolution.” Back in America, friends were hearing news updates about Ukraine on top 40 radio stations and the local evening news. PCVs and RPCVs everywhere were hailing the miracle that people would now recognize Ukraine. Pointing it out on the map? Well that was a separate promotional campaign.

But the bigger story was the domestic media attention. Television stations that had followed the government mandates about what to broadcast, switched positions right on the air saying they would no longer tow the party line and now supported the oppositions efforts. Following months of news stories investigating the alleged murders of outspoken journalists, the action of those journalists who made public pronouncements was like a mini-revolution itself as efforts at unbiased reporting pervaded the airwaves.

The second result of the mass demonstrations in Kyiv was the rallying of Ukrainian people. There was the physical rallying: physical movement to the capital to show support, the bringing of food and clothing to demonstrators by local Kyiv citizens and the strikes happening throughout the country. But there was the mental rallying as well.

Ukrainian people were plagued with outside perceptions about their nation, the most major being the supposed cultural divide between the east and west, the Ukrainian and Russian speakers and the values of the old and the young. There were many convenient juxtapositions for the purposes of news stories but in the end, those differences were not what was being seen. In Kyiv, Russian and Ukrainian speakers were gathering without qualms. Old and young stood together. If the extremes existed, Ukrainians were able to put aside those differences for the purposes of standing united. To the foreign observer, it was that type of mentality that was impressive.

Further impressive were the actions of some organizations and schools to use the election as a catalyst to improve east-west relations. Round tables, dialogues, discussions and celebrations are now being organized to address the divide in the cultural identity and find areas of common ground. This type of cooperation was less shocking for outsiders who spent two weeks watching massive crowds stand in Independence Square or in local town squares throughout Ukraine and not disintegrate into violent mobs. The politeness, respect and courtesy shown on television was only reiterated by witnesses who spent time in Kyiv and testified themselves that this was true.

Why do I tell you all of this? I tell you this only to make you understand how possible it was to carry a carrot cake through the streets of Lviv and onto a crowded tram in the middle of a revolution. It was the spirit of the time. People were motivated, enthusiastic but not aggressive or angry. A cake could be carefully carried through the crowd, down the street and onto the tram. People on the tram could make way and the cake could be safely transported to the site of our celebration. Yes, in the middle of a revolution.

But I also tell you this because the cake not only could be, but had to be. In the midst of the demonstrations and political upheaval, in the midst of the enthusiasm, the disappointment, the opposing opinions, an American living in Ukraine for two years had to be grateful. The political process, however scandalous, however rocky, however tentative, was taking place all around us. From freedom of speech to legal actions, the Ukrainian people were making motions in court and appealing those motions. They were protesting and counter-protesting. In each heart, there was hope for a different outcome. Some for Yushchenko. Some for Yanukovich. And some of us for carrot cake on Thanksgiving Day.