Phonetics in Leningrad

*Last month: In the Phonetics Lab*

She reminded me of a small hawk in a lavender suit.

Her eyes were intense, she could move very quickly, and none of us wanted her attention on us any longer than necessary.

I was part of a group of students studying Russian in Leningrad, now called St. Petersburg. We were housed in one of the student dormitories at the University of Leningrad and began our day to strident march music and morning greetings in Russian piped into all the rooms.

Our classes required a trek across the Neva River, a central feature of this beautiful city. Unfortunately, frequent rain and strong winds often left us soaked before class even began.

Our classes were designed for advanced Russian students and consisted of the standards: speaking, comprehension, reading, and writing. The little lavender hawk worked on our accents in the wide shallow classroom with only two rows of chairs. On the first day we were told that everyone would sit in the front row so she could *help* us. And then it began.

After writing a symbol on the board, she walked to the first person in the row and ordered that unfortunate to say only that sound. She shook her head *nyet* and moved on to the next person. The confident American voices rapidly because more tentative as, at each desk, she bent to face level and repeated the command. No one in the row made the sound correctly. No one.

Once again at the center of the room, our instructor meticulously went through each articulator, specifying where the tongue should be, how it should be shaped, how far apart the lips ought to be, where the tension should be in the cheeks. As a group, we imitated again and again and again as she walked the row, poking at one person’s jaw, drawing the lips back to demonstrate their placement, opening her mouth to show the tongue position.

Then she returned to the end of the row and repeated the initial command: say only that sound.

Our instructor was an expert phonetician. Her manner was terrifying, but her knowledge of Russian phonetics was unimpeachable. She also had the teacher’s true gift: she could explain until one understood.

After class, we wandered the city, visited art museums, and learned to love the ice cream specialties. We were forbidden to speak English outside of our dorm rooms, and these excursions provided opportunities to practice Russian in real situations.

Day after day, sound after sound, she worked with us. And we improved. Then came syllables, words and phrases. It was always the same. We struggled to avoid that first seat, but then she started in the middle of the row! Say just that sound, just that word, just that phrase.

Sounds I had particular trouble with still occasionally make me flinch in Russian conversation, but I truly appreciated her skill when I traveled to Moscow. There, after a few moments of chatting, a shopkeeper told me I wasn’t from Moscow. I agreed and asked him to guess. I was absolutely delighted when he said, “West of here. Perhaps near Leningrad?”