

ART OF WAITING IN LINE

In Russia, it's a key to survival

By MICHAEL SHIPLEY
Guest Columnist

What's in a line? Not much, you think. From the movie theater to the gas station to the nursery school, everybody knows how to stand in line. Right? Wrong. Come to Russia and you'll quickly discover you know nothing whatsoever about the subject.

Consider a typical line at a Russian polyclinic. With child in tow, I approached what appeared to be an amorphous mob of patients milling about in the hallway. Lining the corridor were doors leading to various doctors' offices — pediatrician, dentist, physical therapist, etc. A man stood near the pediatrician's office I was hoping to enter.

"Are you in line?" I asked. A nod of his head told me he was. But after 10 minutes of waiting, he sidestepped the pediatrician's door and moved off in another direction.

"Are you waiting for the pediatrician?" I asked him this time. "Vaccinations," he said. "The pediatrician's line is over there."

He pointed to some distant horizon barely discernible from where we stood. Feeling rather foolish, I trudged down the hallway to find still another throng of parents and children, painfully aware that during the time I had stood in the wrong line, more people had undoubtedly queued up for the pediatrician.

"Is this the line for the pediatrician?" I asked, already dreading the answer.

Without bothering to turn in my direction, a man grunted out a yes, indicating I'd found my destination.

But that brief moment of relief was followed by a new dilemma. Where was the line? Taking a wild guess, I asked the woman farthest from the pediatrician's door if she were last. She pointed to a parent and child standing in the thick of the mob.

"You're after them," she said. That was nice to know. After all, now I knew my place. But just to be sure, it seemed best to confirm it.



"Are you last?" I asked the parent in question.

"There's a man standing behind me as well," she said.

I looked around to find where that man might be. Seeing my confusion, she added, "He had to run an errand, but he'll be back."

I thus understood that this line was not only formless, it was also filled with people not even present. As the realization began to sink in, a woman in a big huff, pulling her 4-year-old behind, breezed in from nowhere and took a place neatly in the middle of the whole mess. This raised a commotion and an argument ensued among those standing nearby.

"What do you think you're doing!" an angry grandmother shouted.

"I don't remember you," another joined in.

"I was behind a man with a green cap," came the defense.

"There's nobody like that in this

line!" the grandmother snapped in retort.

Sure enough, no green caps could be seen. But as the furor intensified, a man stepped forward, explaining that the woman had, indeed, been in line behind him, and that he'd only minutes earlier removed his cap.

That seemed to quiet the mob a bit. The complaints subsided, giving way to general grumblings directed at nobody in particular.

And so we stood. Occasionally an impudent soul would brush past the crowd and dive into the doctor's office, raising shouts of scorn from the obedient line-standers. Nevertheless, the horde gradually diminished in size. In the end, we were lucky. We finally saw the doctor, received a prescription for cold medicines and were on our way.

I once saw a curious sight. A line of people had formed on the sidewalk. The first person stood at the curb facing an empty street, and 10

more people queued up behind. Why they stood there I couldn't begin to guess. Periodically, others joined the line, each of them silent and full of purpose. Passersby paid them no attention whatsoever. Apparently this was a common occurrence. The scene defied explanation.

I stood there watching and wondering for some time, when the members suddenly became animated. A large green truck slowly rolled up to the very spot where I stood. The tailgate dropped open, revealing both cabbages and a salesman ready for business. The person in that line quickly produced his or her own tote bag after a brief transaction, carried their purchases home, rewarded their ample patience.

Michael Shipley is an American who has lived in Russia for several years and in Chita, Abilene's sister city in Russia, for the past forty years.

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