

CONTEXT

The Moscow Times
ARTS & IDEAS

Single White Russian

How do Russian-speaking immigrants in the United States meet and fall in love? For a growing number of them, the answer involves the Internet.

By Masha Rumer

Published: January 12, 2007

Dina Dukhin was a busy 25-year-old MBA student in the suburbs of Chicago when she started to feel that something was missing from her life. "There were no single people around me. Everybody I know got married really early," said Dukhin, who was born in Baku, the capital of present-day Azerbaijan.

So she signed up for an Internet dating service, JDate.com, to meet a marriage-minded man. The next day, she got an e-mail from a user called MalenkiyPrintz, which means Little Prince in Russian. His real name was Boris. When they first spoke to each other on the phone, they ended up chatting till 4 a.m.

Dina and Boris fell in love, got engaged four months later and had a big wedding at a Russian restaurant in Chicago. They are now the parents of a baby girl named Nadya.

"We had so much in common -- we could just talk forever. It's like a fairy tale," Dina Dukhin, now 28, said without a trace of a Russian accent.

The Dukhins are among the many immigrants from the former Soviet Union, now living in the United States, who have embraced the culture of online dating. For those seeking a mate with similar roots, the Internet is often an efficient way to find potential partners -- and perhaps even marital bliss.

Since many Russian speakers in the United States are of Jewish descent, a popular choice is JDate, a dating service aimed at Jewish singles. The service has more than 30,000 Russian-speaking users in the United States, said Gail Laguna, a spokeswoman for Spark Networks, JDate's parent company.

Indeed, the demand has been so strong that a Russian-language site is in the works. Laguna said JDate.ru was expected to launch in the second quarter of 2007.

"People of the former Soviet Union belong to a relatively closed community and therefore are looking for a partner who's mentally, culturally, linguistically similar to them," the spokeswoman said.

Like other large dating sites, JDate allows users to search for a mate by language spoken and place of birth. That was how Boris Dukhin, a software engineer originally from Minsk, got in touch with his future wife, Dina.

Boris Dukhin, now 30, was looking for someone who spoke his mother tongue and had emigrated as a teen, like himself. Otherwise, "after some point, some jokes don't make sense," he said. "Eventually you run out of things to say."

Of course, it's not always easy to take the plunge into online dating. Some potential users are concerned about the risks of dealing with strangers on the Internet. Others don't want to seem desperate, like "something didn't work out in your life," said Lev, a 32-year-old software engineer from St. Petersburg who now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

He signed up anyway. After the end of the high-tech boom in Silicon Valley, immigration slowed down, making it hard to meet new compatriots. "People are sitting at work, driving around in cars," said Lev, who declined to give his last name. "Practically all single Russian Jewish people in the Bay Area that I know are on JDate."

"It's very tough with young women here," he added. "The demand is high, but the supply is low."



Dina and Boris Dukhin

Dina and Boris Dukhin, pictured in a wedding photo from 2005, met through JDate.com.

The appeal of online dating has spread well beyond Silicon Valley computer nerds. In New York's community of Sephardic Jews from Uzbekistan -- known as Bukharan Jews -- finding a mate is no longer limited to "the old fashioned, let-my-grandmother-introduce-me way," said 27-year-old Milana Khodorkovskaya, originally from Tashkent.

The Bukharan community has retained many of its traditions, but it has accepted online dating. It even boasts its own web site: Bjew.com, complete with personal ads and a "Hunk and Beauty of the Year" competition.

Khodorkovskaya, who works in the finance sector, knows many people who have found dates or spouses on JDate, but she isn't a member yet. "I did not seem to like anyone there last time I checked," she said.

Not all immigrants are determined to find a mate with identical roots. In fact, some have used online dating services to connect with partners from different backgrounds.

Maria, 35, a web developer in New York, wanted to steer clear of Russian men after she left St. Petersburg and her marriage ended. She was turned off by the sexual politics of men acting "superior and women [having to] just be obedient and then it would work," said Maria, who declined to give her last name. "Americans are more respectful to women than Russian men."

She started looking for a non-Russian on eHarmony.com and Tickle.net. She didn't have much luck there, however, and is now seeing a Russian man she met through LiveJournal.com.

Odessa native Olya Livshin also had a distaste for run-of-the-mill Russian males. A graduate student in Chicago, she went on JDate and AmericanSingles.com several years ago to look for a soulmate who shared her passion for literature and Andrei Tarkovsky films.

"I couldn't make a connection because a lot of people were very generic and American or very generic and Russian," she recalled. "The Americans watched football and the Russians ... liked getting drunk and eating pelmeni."

She was in for a surprise, however, after her father suggested a site called Holostyak.com. It was linked to RussianChicago.com, which is where another graduate student, Andy Janco, happened to look one day. Janco was born in Oklahoma, but he had studied Russian since third grade and traveled throughout Russia.

They met and got married two years later. Now, Livshin and Janco -- who are 27 and 28, respectively -- chat about topics like modern Russian poetry, share an appreciation of borsch and own a cat named Pushka. Livshin's parents call their American son-in-law "Andichka."

Mirroring U.S. society as a whole, Russian-speaking immigrants are much more likely to see online dating as socially acceptable than they were a decade ago, when services like JDate began to appear. Still, the stigma lingers. Many sources for this story were unwilling to let their names appear in print.

And many couples who met online keep their history secret. Dina Dukhin was astounded to discover that many people she knew had met their boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands or wives through JDate. Often, the truth only came out after she revealed her own story with Boris.

"That only came out after I got over my [own] embarrassment," she said.

**Copyright © 2007 The Moscow Times. All rights reserved.
URL of this page: <http://context.themoscowtimes.com/story/173529/>**