

# An Interview with Elizaveta "Liz" Moussinova: MALS 2002 by MALS

Alumnae Nancy Silliman, 1996

**NS:** Please tell me about your childhood; where were you born and where did you attend school?

**EM:** *I was born in Moscow, Russia but spent six years of my childhood living in Algeria in Northern Africa. Both my mother and father were multilingual, my father worked as an interpreter of French and my mother is a linguist and a teacher of French. My mother began teaching me French when I was six and it has remained a large part of my life since then. For two years I attended pri-*



*almond trees, large fields of poppies as well as many animals like wild boars, porcupines, jackals, wild rabbits and many birds. We had three turtles and a hedgehog at home, which we brought from the mountains. I returned to Russia when I was 8 years old and went to the French School. My school years were very bright and amusing. I lived with my grandparents because my school was near their house. At the French School, I started learning English, when I was 13 years old. I think that it's a bit late for learning a language. For many years, I could not understand what the sense was in using the present perfect tense, but*

*my parents told me that if I wanted to learn English, I had to learn by heart every grammar rule, every phrase I met in a book; and then my knowledge of English would reach a point which Hegel formulated in the following way: "quantity will become quality. .. And they were right. Eventually, I got accepted to the International University, which had an entrance exam on English.*

*Regarding my secondary education: Russian school has 11 grades. When I was in tenth grade, I transferred to a Lyceum specializing in management, economics and languages. I continued learning French and English there. I also began learning German and even went to Ashafenburg, Germany, to a two-week program to learn German. I lived with a German family. People were very nice and hospitable. They took me on a trip to Frankfurt-am-Mein with them. They organized a birthday party for me because I turned sixteen. At the age of sixteen, I was accepted to International University.*

*My childhood was a very happy and colorful childhood, just like in a book. In Algeria, we lived in a small town with other Russians from the same company in which my father worked. A small Polish community lived there too. We lived next to the Mediterranean seashore near the Atlas Mountains. It was like heaven! We went to the shore to swim twice a day during the summer. We went fishing, too. My favorite dish was fried stin-gray. The Atlas Mountains were gorgeous. You could find*

**NS:** What are your parents' background and occupation?

**EM:** *My parents both graduated from the Maurice Therese Institute of Foreign Languages. My mother graduated knowing three languages: French, English and Spanish. My father graduated, and was fluent in German and French. This institute is now called the Moscow State Linguistic University. This university is considered to be one of the strongest schools in linguistics not only in Russia, but also worldwide. My father also completed one year of studies at the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena in Germany. He worked as a journalist for many years. Now, my father teaches French and German on both high school and university levels. My mother is a manager and translator at an American-Russian company.*

**NS:** Where did you get your graduate degree, before being accepted in the MALS Program?

**EM:** *The Russian educational system requires choosing a major before applying to a higher education institution. In 1994, I finished school. I applied and was accepted to the Department of Law at International University, Moscow. I thought of becoming a commercial lawyer or a corporate lawyer. I graduated from the Law Department and from the Graduate School of Business Administration (MBA) of International University. When I started my career in a law company, I felt that law and a job in the corporate world did not bring me any enjoyment. I'm happy that destiny gave me the opportunity to study at the MALS program and consequently the opportunity to find myself.*

**NS:** How did the MALS Program benefit you?

**EM:** *MALS played an important role in my life. It helped me to find myself and to shape my professional interests and goals. I received the opportunity to study folklore and oral history. I have been interested in folklore since I was a child. At Dartmouth, I took an independent study looking at trickster characters in animal tales, including the Native American Coyote, Russian Fox, Japanese Badger and some others. In this work, I analyzed the images of animal trickster characters in folktales and myths. I enjoyed that work so much that I also wrote my final thesis on folklore. I studied several works on the structural analysis of folktales, including *The Morphology of the Folktale* by Vladimir Propp. The revolutionary study created by Vladimir Propp and my developing interest in animal folktales inspired me to make an analogous but independent attempt to apply the structural linguistic approach to animal folktales in my thesis. In my thesis project, I analyzed the morphological structure and distinguished the functions-*

*actions of characters of animal folktales and myths, using the theory by Propp. I selected folktales from Asian and European collections. I realized that I like researching folklore very much and I would not like to do anything else. Thus, I decided to apply to a doctoral program in folklore. I was writing this thesis for myself-not for defense, not for receiving the degree. It was my work and only for me. I should probably . have dedicated this thesis to myself! I receive from people an interesting range of reactions, when I tell them that I'm applying to a doctoral program in folklore: from disgust and giggling (because some people think that only a kid reads fairy-tales) to a great interest. Usually people say: 'Oh! Folklore! Tell me*

*a story!' That's the request, which I receive every time, when I tell somebody that I'm a future folklorist. To conclude, the thesis work was very important for me. I'm very grateful to the MALS Program (and to myself). It helped me to realize that I want to continue my studies on the PhD level and I want to be a scientist!*

**NS:** Who are your favorite professors?

**EM:** *Lenore Grenoble. Prof. Lenore Grenoble was my MA thesis advisor. She is a very understanding person, very intelligent, and tolerant.*

*Myrna and Harvey Frommer.*

*I took the course on oral history taught by professors Myrna and Harvey Frommer. I made an oral history on the adjustment process of Dartmouth Russian students to the US culture and educational system. I interviewed 7 people for my project. I enjoyed working with Myrna and Harvey. They're wonderful people. They teach in a very informal and nice way. They allow you to express yourself through your work. They allow students to be creative. I liked their course because the course not only gave insight into what oral history is in general, but it also, developed particular skills, like tape-recorded interviewing, transcribing interviews, and creative writing.*

*Judy Worman.*

*Judy Worman is a very special person for me. She helped me a lot in my moments of stress and insecurity.*

**NS:** Did you encounter any difficulties at Dartmouth?

**EM:** *I encountered several problems at Dartmouth. The first one was lack of communication, sometimes even loneliness. Undergraduate students do not seem to communicate with graduate students. A Russian friend of mine and I went hiking with*

several undergraduate students from "Cabin and Trail" a few times. All they said to us was "hi." Maybe they were too shy to talk to us. Graduate students also often mix with their peers from their own programs. Also, my problem is that I can't hang out with a big crowd of people all at once. I need two or three close friends. I found it difficult to make friends here. Maybe that's because there are not many graduate programs at Dartmouth. I felt rather detached from the Dartmouth community; maybe it's because I didn't really have time for communication. Of course that's a very important factor. In my second year, when I was writing my thesis, I became even more isolated. Thank God, I lived with two girls from Russia: Elena Odinkaya and Oksana Frolova. Also, my friend Elena Klionskaia was our neighbor. We organized many parties. It was fun. For some time it was very difficult for me to make friends with Americans. I really worried about it because I saw no sense in my living in the US if I had no American friends. I believe that communicating with Americans is a very important part of education because you can learn more about the country and culture. It is also my understanding, that American Dartmouth students are quite indifferent towards international students and perhaps towards learning something new about foreign cultures. So, if this is the situation: when you are interested in learning from Americans, but they're not interested in learning about you and your country, this makes communication difficult if not impossible. That's very different from Europe. I think that's the disadvantage of Dartmouth. In my opinion, the International Office is very passive. It does not try to create opportunities for international students to meet people. I remember when I studied at a language college in Great Britain, they organized trips and other kinds of entertainment for us. We went to Edinburgh, Manchester and other cities. That's a good way to make friends. We also went to a special pub, where all students from our college met at night. Well, the Dartmouth experience was also useful to me. I learnt that there are sometimes periods in my life when I'm alone and I should not be afraid of being alone. Now it's becoming better. I have a great friend. We work together. She invited me over for Christmas. She's a very kind, decent, and understanding person.

The other problem was, of course, housing. I've moved at least 9 times in 2 years! It was very difficult for me in the beginning. I felt like I was homeless. And I got tired of carrying all that heavy stuff like bags, a computer. Then I got used to it. People get used to everything.

**NS:** What are you doing at present?

**EM:** I've applied to nine doctoral programs in folklore and I'm waiting for the results. I will know in March whether I'm accepted. I hope to get a teaching/research assistantship in order to pay for my tuition. It's quite difficult to be a first-year doctoral student. I can teach Russian. I can also work for a music archive or some other digital archive.

Right now I have two part-time jobs. I'm working as a Gaille Assistant for the Jaffe-Friede and Strauss Galleries at Hopkins Center for the Arts. I assist in showing exhibitions for visitors. It's an opportunity to meet wonderful people-artists and visitors. This job is particularly interesting for me because both my aunt and uncle are artists. I feel like I'm at home. I have also recently started my job as a Media Transcription Assistant at the Dartmouth Jewish Sound Archive. I am transcribing old recordings to the digital format. Some of them are very old; they date back to the 1920s. The materials include songs in Hebrew and Yiddish, folk songs, cantorial performances, Jewish humor, Jewish radio programs and other. After digitizing recordings, I will edit them and add to the online Archive database. I'm learning new computer programs for example, Sound Studio and SoundEdit 16. This job is exciting! Although I can read Yiddish, just a little bit, because I know German, I don't read Hebrew. I'm thinking of starting to learn Hebrew some time later, maybe in two months. For those who want to learn more about the Archive, please visit the link: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~djsa/index.html>.

I have also been elected to the MALS Alumni Board this past January. My primary task is to update the MALS Alumni website. Nancy Silliman, a member of the Board and a MALS'96, and I will work on it together.

**NS:** What are your hopes for the future?

**EM:** I hope to be accepted to one of the folklore programs and to receive a fellowship or graduate assistantship. So, that's the plan for the nearest future. After getting my doctorate, I want to teach folklore and the Russian language at the university level and to research folklore. I hope to perform fieldwork, to collect folklore.