IN THE CLASSROOM

Teens Behind the Cameras Focus on Old, New Life

Russian-speaking immigrants in L.A. explore their emerging cross-cultural identity in a photo documentary project.

By ANN M. SIMMONS Times Staff Writer

Armed with 35-millimeter cameras, two teenagers gingerly approach an elderly man and woman perched on a worn park bench and ask permission to take their photo. The seniors ask why.

"It's for a project about the community," Antonina Shcherban and Natasha Zotova, both 16, explain in Russian.

"Kharosho," says the man. "OK." The woman nods her consent.

It could have been a scene from Moscow's Gorky Park, save for the setting: Searing sunshine, balmy breezes and towering palms.

And that is precisely the point for the teenagers, newcomers from the former Soviet Union, whose aim it is to capture traces of their homeland in their newly adopted country.

So the couple strike a pose, squinting in the afternoon glare. Their lips crease into smiles. The camera shutter snaps, capturing the simple scene.

"Spasiba," the girls say. "Thank you."
The seniors smile.

Antonina and Natasha and half a dozen other high school students are participating in "In a New Land: The Stories of Russian Refugee Youth." The photo documentary project, currently in its first year, gives Russian-speaking immigrant teens a chance to explore their developing cross-cultural identity and experience as refugees by allowing them to capture images of their lives and surroundings on film.

"I want to show how people live, how children play, what people do in their free time," Antonina later said of her recent photographic foray into West Hollywood's Plummer Park — a vibrant retreat for Los Angeles' thriving Russian-speaking community. She arrived from Ukraine just four months ago. "I want to show that no matter where you're from, people are generally all the same."

The project's participants are under 18, and most have been in the United States for less than a year. A large number are Jews whose families fled economic strife as well as religious and political persecution in the former Soviet Union and settled in West Hollywood, where about 30% of residents speak Russian.

The project "gives them the opportunity to use the camera to document their new world," said Jim Hubbard, creative director of Venice Arts in Neighborhoods — a group that exposes low-income youths to the arts. It is running the Russian youth venture with funding from the California Council for Humanities. "The kids get to document their own reality."

But just as they learn about themselves and their roles in a new country, they also aim to educate those who know little about the city's Russianspeaking community.

"One of the things about L.A. County is that we are a very diverse community, but we often don't know our neighbors real well," said Andrew Campbell, a member of the West Hollywood Artist and Cultural Affairs Commission.

"Obviously, there are sometimes cultural and language barriers. So one of the exciting things is that this project is visual, and the visual surpasses the language boundaries," he added.

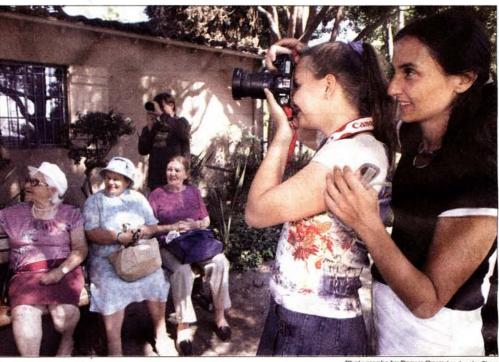
The photography team meets weekly to scrutinize black-and-white contact sheets and full-size copies of their work that will be displayed in Plummer Park next spring.

Discussion typically drifts from constructive criticism to sometimes prickly questions about the youngsters' progress of integration into the American way of life.

What are the stereotypes about their community? Are they embarrassed by their Russian accents and limited English? Do they feel more Russian or American?

Ilya Danilkevich, 17, a recent graduate of Fairfax High School who has been in Los Angeles nine years, says he has settled comfortably into U.S. living and likes it better here than in his native Belarus. But he is not ashamed of his heritage.

"I respect my roots," said Ilya, who



Photographs by Bryan Chan Los Angeles Times

CALIFORNIA

TAKING AIM: Polina Zolotova is encouraged by mentor and professional photographer Irina Shotadze, right, to take a photo of women at Plummer Park in West Hollywood. The park is popular with immigrants from the former Soviet Union.



CRITIQUE: Team members meet each week for a discussion of their work, led by Jim Hubbard of Venice Arts in Neighborhoods. The photos will be put on display in an exhibit at Plummer Park next spring.

recently enrolled at UCLA. "I don't mind people saying I'm from [Belarus]. We're all the same people. We just live in different environments."

For relative newcomers, other issues appear to be more pressing.

Fairfax High School student Daniel Korochkin-Zorin, 16, in the U.S. just three months, dislikes the dirt and overcrowding in American schools, the prohibition of smoking — he could smoke at school back home in Belarus — and the fact that his high school graduation will now be delayed a few years. Polina Zolotova, 13, in the U.S. for six months, misses the friends she left behind in Astrakhan on Russia's Volga River Delta.

Irina Shotadze, 34, a photography mentor with the program and a native of the former Soviet republic Georgia, tells the students to try to capture such emotions with the camera by photographing experiences from their everyday lives. Shotadze, who

arrived here six years ago, speaks from

"When I first came here, I was stressed and depressed because I didn't speak English," she recalled. "[Photography] was the best way to express myself. It helped me. And it's a great opportunity for the students to let us into their lives."

When the students were told about the project, they sat in silence. Some looked bored. But given the freedom to what the same.'

step outside and roam — cameras in hand — they came alive.

They charm grandmothers who sit reading Russian-language newspapers. They hover hesitantly over gaggles of seemingly surly men playing board games. They flock around Darina Mukhomedzyanova, a longhaired, bespectacled 13-year-old, as she rocks her niece's baby carriage. "I think it's awesome that other people are interested in learning about us," she said.

Antonina plans to invite viewers into her kitchen when she is allowed to take the camera home. The kitchen is where Ukrainians, Russians and Belarussians typically celebrate festivities such as New Year, Christmas, Easter and birthdays, seated at a table, feasting for long hours on <code>żacuski</code> (hors d'oeuvres), cured fish, pickles and pirogi, or meat turnovers.

The project has already taught the students that, for all their differences from native-born Americans, similarities abound if one looks for them.

"Once you get out of Plummer Park, it's different," Ilya says. "It's very diverse. There are people from everywhere. In Russia, it is very rare to see anyone that is not Russian. What it shows me is that when you immigrate, you adapt, and [people] become somewhat the same."