affairs Bangladeshis can perhaps relate to. "But in Ukraine," she said, "people are still nice to each other. Nobody cares if their neighbour is having a nice life." And I saw that.

Once I was buying a bottle of wine at a kiosk by the marshrutka taxi stand, and the woman behind the counter asked in Russian, "Sweet or dry?" I asked for dry and the woman looked me up and down before saying, "Is it for a girl?" On the way to Svetlana's there was only one response: "Da". "You'll need a nice bottle then," she said, before scouring her selection to find the best. She checked the chocolate situation too.

On the weekends Svetlana and I would sometimes find a café to watch the afternoon pass, by tradition first meeting at our regular place: beside the left shoe of the Lenin statue in Lenin Square.

When it comes to Val – well, her kitchen is where I learnt much of what I came to know about Ukraine. She made sure I was well familiar with the cuisine.

It was through her I picked up additional classes with the three-year-old Senya. His mother wanted him to be bilingual. His classes were not stressful or rigid. The instruction was, "just play in English." And we did. Senya was obsessed with Spiderman.

At the end he had tears in his eyes. "When are you leaving?" he asked. "After eight days," I said, accurately.

"No," he replied firmly, "After three days!" He had the concept of bargaining but lost the concept of numbers at crucial moments. He hoped to lengthen my stay.

I mention Senya because he discovered a new term I came to embrace. From confusing English pronouns with his country, he once told Val he lived in "Mykraine." And that's the thing of it – it became Mykraine.

The language connected: they enjoyed when I invented words, in the way that happens in any living language, what you can't get in books. There was the Soviet washing machine I had, plastic, semi-manual, the size of a television set. You had to load the water by bucket before plugging it in. Lena chuckled when I called it the "electric bucket." And in the park after rain, when I pointed to a small flow into a drain and called it a waterfall, and was rebuked because it wasn't a waterfall, well, the English teachers took amusement when I said it was at least "waterfallish."



Soviet built war memorial in Donetsk.



Donetsk bus station.

With grammar: they knew the rules and I knew the answers. Team work: they could explain the former, which native speakers are not taught; while I helped apply the rules correctly.

The decoration and food in the new big: I'm not sure I wanted it. It represented such an enormous loss, about to come. On the other hand, as an Australian had once described my moving there as "throwing myself into a transcontinental abyss", well it hadn't been at all bad. Surely I could do it again?

I'd been dreading that there might be cake restrictions, as there were on Teacher's Day when each teacher had a single slice ration. I remembered those cucumber and parsley sandwiches with the bread cut so thinly they must've split grains of wheat in the process. The institute liked to save. But these things did not recur.

Instead both Lena and Marina gave speeches so full of praise I was convinced they were talking about somebody else; and Marina, in describing me, didn't use a single bad Russian word. ■