

Faces of HMEA - December 2004

Yevgeniya (Jane) Panova was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, a former republic of the Soviet Union, now an independent country. She grew up in Baku, which is an industrial city. Jane attended Baku State University, where she met her husband, Victor, and they both earned their degrees in electrical engineering. They married in their fourth year of school and their son Dimitri was born two years later.

Jane is of Russian heritage, but her husband's background is Armenian. In February of 1988, a conflict within the Nagorno-Karabakh quickly escalated. Armenians were sought out and killed; Jane and her husband heard terrifying stories about neighbors and friends and their relatives. Those who had the means to do so quickly moved away, but Jane and Victor didn't want to leave their home.

One day, Jane's father told her about rumors he had heard that "something" might happen the following week. At the time, Victor was in Moscow on business. Jane's father suggested that she and Dimitri (then almost two years old) travel to Moscow to join Victor, as if they were just going on vacation for a week. Jane packed two bags of clothes, and they left; they never returned to Azerbaijan.

The Panovas heard that, for the first time in history, the American Embassy in Moscow was accepting applications for emigration to the U.S. They completed an application, and asked all their relatives to do so as well, but they were all afraid of the government. Previously, no one in the Soviet Union had been allowed to emigrate to another country. They were hopeful that they might be allowed to do so. They tried to find work while they waited, but passport stamps indicated where you were from, and where you were allowed to work. Even though both were engineers and well qualified for many jobs, they were forced to take what work they could and to be paid "under the table" – Victor worked some construction jobs, and Jane accounting.

Finally, in January of 1990, the American embassy interviewed them for potential emigration. They had waited 9 months for an interview, and still couldn't leave because there was no law in the Soviet Union that allowed Armenian people from Azerbaijan to leave the country. The law was passed after one year. The Panovas were sponsored by the Tolstoy Foundation in Rhode Island (no longer in existence) and they were given an apartment, money for food, furniture and household goods, and assigned a sponsor who spoke Russian. For 10 months, they studied English at RI College, and looked for work. Jane went to work in a jewelry factory, where many of the other employees were non-English speakers as well. It was a lonely, isolating experience, but the health insurance coverage was good, and Jane was now pregnant with their daughter, Linda. She worked there until Linda was born. It was at this time that



Yevgeniya became Jane, as others had trouble pronouncing her name. (Her nickname in Russian sounds somewhat like Janey.)

After her daughter was born, Jane stayed at home. The Department of Employment and Training helped her to attend a computer education school, where she earned all 'A's. Eventually, she went to work at Fleet Bank, and attended Johnson and Wales University, where she earned her second degree, this time in Information Science. After a series of jobs in Information Technology, Jane came to work at HMEA, where she is our database specialist.

She says that HMEA is a very friendly place to work. She's happy to be in the U.S., where she feels that there are many more opportunities for children and adults. Jane, Victor, Dimitri, and Linda are all now U.S. citizens. ◀

*Jane was interviewed by Karen Slowick,
Chair of the Diversity Committee.*
