

Mini Berlitz School of Languages



When the Russian-born dramaturgist and translator, Xenia Bordukowa Pattberg first moved to Amsterdam in 2006, she had no idea that her household would soon resemble a Berlitz School of Languages. Now, around the dinner table, Xenia, her German husband, her 6-year old daughter, and 2 and a half year-old son speak Russian, German, English, and Dutch, “German is the language we speak in the family setting,” she reports.

Text: Benjamin B. Roberts

“Russian is the language I speak with my children, English in the language we speak with most people around us, and Dutch is the language we speak for practical matters.” The couple’s daughter attend a local elementary school in the center where almost 25% of the pupils, have at least one foreign born who speaks another language.

In the last few years, the number of expats residing in Amsterdam has grown and 4.1% of the labor force is expat, which is much higher than The Hague (2.7%), and Rotterdam and Utrecht (both 1.8%). Xenia and her husband do everything possible to encourage their daughter to become fluent in Dutch and not get behind other children at school. “We even enrolled in a program

for someone to come to our house and read in Dutch to our daughter, but when the woman arrived she was flabbergasted by our wall of packed bookshelves.” She smiles, “evidently, the program was intended for parents that were not that used to reading as much as we did.”

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Xenia is optimistic about raising her children in multicultural Amsterdam where so many of the children at her daughter’s school are from all over the world and will expose her to many different cultures. Though, “Dutch is the language in which the children communicate with each other,” she knows that it is never certain what kind of cultural identity children will have, given how

many factors involved. “When I ask my daughter now what she is, she replies that she is German,” Xenia explains. “I think that is odd because my daughter was born and raised in the Netherlands and never lived in Germany. Cultural identity is a sensitive matter and will probably change later in life.” Xenia see that in the media there are have been negative reports about expat children who never feel as though they belong, never develop roots in the countries they grow up in and live. But she points to the value of exposure to so many traditions and what it means to be open to other cultures and people. She adds, “When I was growing up in the Soviet Union, we were suspicious of people that were different. Everybody did everything humanly possible to conform in order *not to stick out*. Now that I am living in Amsterdam, diversity is encouraged and everybody does everything possible to *stick out*.” She laughs, “on the other hand the Dutch say *‘Als je normaal doet, doe je al gek genoeg’* which kind of balances it out”.

