

Samantha Smith: The Girl who saw the Truth

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Samantha, with mom behind her.

Samantha Smith was a regular American kid. She was 10 years old. She was in fifth grade, in a little town in Maine. She liked to play with her dog, Kim. She liked to roller skate and play softball. And, she loved to read.

It was 1982, and the United States and the

Soviet Union were having a ‘cold war.’ That meant that they were not shooting at each other, but each side was threatening the other with awful weapons, and no one trusted each other. They had gotten into a stand off, and no one knew how to stop it - kind of like some gangs or families or towns.

She saw in the headlines that US President Reagan called Russia the “Evil Empire,” and said it was “the focus of evil in the modern world.” So of course no one liked or trusted Russians. He said we had to find peace by being the strongest, and so we had to keep making bigger and faster nuclear bombs to protect ourselves. We promised Russia that even if they bombed us, they would all die too, because

our bombs would be on their way to destroy Russia before Russia’s bombs could reach us. Samantha also knew from reading the newspaper that each side already had more than enough nuclear bombs to blow up the whole world.

People worried that someone might set off the bombs by mistake, thinking that the other side had shot at them, and the whole planet Earth would be destroyed, along with everyone on it. It was a very scary time to be a kid, because no one knew if they would ever grow up, and kids felt like they were especially helpless to change things.

Both sides said they would never start a nuclear war, that it would be too horrible. So Samantha was confused. If everybody would be dead if there was a war, why did Russia want to start one? Samantha very much wished she could do something keep that terrible war from happening.

Then, one day, she saw on the news that Russia had their first new president in 18 years, Yuri Andropov. She thought maybe the new president might not want to have a war like the old one did. She thought her mother ought to write to him, and ask him to stop it. Her mother said, "Well, why don't you write it?" So in the winter of 1982, she did.

After she wrote her letter, many months went by and nothing happened. She almost forgot she had ever written it.

Samantha's letter to Russia

Dear Mr. Andropov,
My name is Samantha Smith. I am ten years old.
Congratulations on your new job. I have been worrying about Russia and the United States getting into a nuclear war. Are you going to have a war or not? If you aren't please tell me how you are going to not have a war. God made the world for us to live together in peace and not fight." Sincerely, Samantha Smith."

Then one day in April, 1983, she was called into the principal's office because she had a phone call. It was from a reporter. He wanted to know if Samantha had written a letter to the president of Russia. He had seen a copy of it in Pravda, the official state newspaper of the Soviet Union.

Samantha couldn't believe it. Until then, she wasn't sure that President Andropov had even received her letter! Two days later, Samantha and her father stopped by the post office and there was a letter addressed to Samantha from President Andropov.!

By the time she got home that day, Samantha's front yard was crowded with reporters and photographers from all over the country. Flashbulbs popped, and they asked her about the letter she had written, and what President Andropov said back.

He called Samantha "courageous and honest." He compared her to Becky in America's Tom Sawyer story. He told her that the Soviet Union was trying to do everything they could so that there will not be war between our countries.

Of course, no one believed him, because they thought of Russia as our enemy. But at the end of the letter, he invited Samantha to visit the Soviet Union to see for herself what

the Russian people and the country were like, and he told her he would pay for the trip. After thinking about it and talking it over, she and her parents decided to go.

Samantha especially enjoyed several days at a Soviet summer camp on the Black Sea, where she met and talked with children her own age. The children were members of the "Young Pioneers," a youth group similar to the Girl Scouts and U.S. Boy Scouts.

She stayed in a dormitory with nine other girls. Russian children, like most European children, knew how to speak English, even though American children didn't speak Russian. She spent her time swimming, talking, and learning Russian songs and dances. She found out that many of her new friends were also scared about a war and wanted peace. She saw that Russian children were not all that different from children in America.



Samantha leaves for Russia

On July 7, 1983 Samantha left her small Maine town and flew to Moscow.

For two weeks she toured the country. She went to Moscow, Leningrad, Red Square, and she met with the first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova. She ate a burger and fries with the U.S. ambassador, and spent several days at a Soviet youth camp on the Black Sea.

A lot of people in America didn't agree with Samantha's decision to go to Russia. They thought Russia was just trying to pretend to be nice. But both Arthur and Jane Smith, Samantha's parents, told people when they got back



Samantha's dad

that the adult Soviet citizens they met said that the arms race was costing a lot of money and taking food out of Russian mouths and that they wanted better relations with America.

Over the next two years Samantha was on TV lots of times to tell what had happened, and she even

wrote a book about her trip. In her book, Samantha wrote, *"I dedicate this book to the children of the world. They know that peace is always possible."*

Next, she got to go to Kobe, Japan where she spoke at an international children's convention. In her speech she said she thought that Russian and American leaders should exchange granddaughters for two weeks every year. She explained that no president would want to send a bomb to a country his granddaughter would be visiting.

Meanwhile, all over Russia, schoolchildren were forming Samantha Smith Peace Clubs. Some classrooms of children in the US started being pen pals with classrooms in Russia, and people began understanding each other better.

Of course, Samantha was not the only one who wanted peace, and she didn't accomplish it all by herself. People all over the world were praying for peace and letting their

governments know how they felt about the arms race, and it wasn't very many more years before the cold war was over.

But looking back, Samantha's clarity and wisdom, in seeing the Soviet president as a person just like us rather than as a scary enemy you couldn't talk to, and her choice to visit the Soviet Union to meet the people there, was a big step on the path to peace and mutual understanding. "Sometimes I still worry that the next day will be the last day of the Earth," she once said, "but with more people thinking about solving the problems of the world, I hope that someday soon we will find the way to world peace. Maybe someone will show us the way." Samantha Smith, a regular kid who believed peace was possible, was one "someone" who showed many the way to create a more peaceful world.

In 1985 Samantha's mother established a foundation in her name. It is dedicated to increasing friendship between children of all countries and teaching people about peace. The foundation has sponsored several activities a student exchange program between the United States and Russia and has had conferences on peace education.



A life-size statue of Samantha releasing a dove with a bear cub at her side (the bear is a symbol for both Maine and Russia) was dedicated near the Maine state capitol in Augusta.