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UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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The Soviet Union in 1990 was about to break up, and in Moscow, Luda Makarova could not buy milk for her infant daughter, Natasha.



"It was civil war everywhere around Russia," Makarova said. "Security was low. You could not buy nothing at the store. I had a small daughter, 1 year old. I could not buy milk, I could not buy cheese, I could not buy sausage, nothing. I did not feel security because it was Gorbachev in power. There was a lot of crime."

Makarova, her husband and her daughter would begin an odyssey that took them first to Canada and finally to San Diego, where Makarova, once a Fed Cup player for Russia, is a teaching professional at the Barnes Center, where she works with high-performance juniors.

Among them is Natasha, now 16 and preparing to compete, possibly prominently, when the USTA Girls 16 National Championships are held at the Barnes facility beginning Aug. 7. Luda and her husband, Michael Popkov, a microbiologist with the Scripps Institute, also have a second daughter, Christina, 9, who is ranked No. 1 in San Diego in the under-10s and has done well in national "Little Mo" competitions.

"San Diego!" Makarova said. "It's like another planet. It's not reality. The sky, all the time blue."

Getting here has had to represent a trial for Makarova and her family. "To leave Russia, it was nothing, because I was nothing in Russia," she said, "but it was difficult to live at the beginning in Montreal."

She did not speak French when she arrived there, but she said she fell in love with the language.

As a tennis instructor, she became involved with Canada's national program and produced, by her accounting, a number of national junior champions.

At the Barnes Center, Makarova has gained respect, partially for her background as a one-time Fed Cup player, but also for her demeanor on the court. "She's very strict with the kids," Barnes Center Director Steve Bickham said. "She barks her commands, but not in a negative way at all."

"I love tennis," she said. "It's like my life."

Born in Siberia, she was schooled in the game at Moscow's Spartak Club, which has been responsible for the development of such players as Anna Kournikova, Elena Dementieva and Dinara Safina. Makarova remembers cradling Marat Safin in her arms when he was 2 weeks old.

Her year as a Russian Fed Cupper was 1982. This was before the Soviet Union permitted Russian women to collect prize money, which did not begin until 1989 when Natalia Zvereva, Russia's "Mother Freedom," demanded to be given the whole of her purses rather than a subsidy.

"All the best athletes didn't have money," Makarova said. "When I won tournaments, I could not get paid."

This is a different time. No country is more prominent in women's tennis than Russia.

"Russia has changed a lot," she said. "I miss it for what it was."

While the Acura Classic, beginning with qualifying Saturday and Sunday at the La Costa Resort and Spa, is without question the most prestigious tennis event offered in the San Diego area, for sheer size, it doesn't match the Girls 16s. The Acura has a singles draw of 56. At the Girls 16s, there is a 194-player draw with 32 seeds.

Natasha Makarova is likely to be among the 10 leading seeds. [Reka Zsilinszka](#) of Fayetteville, N.C., runner-up last year, is expected to be the No. 1 seed.