



ELENA HUGHES

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CITIZENSHIP**

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Translated and edited by Robert Protosevich

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ELENA HUGHES *Dual Citizenship*

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“Away from home, even a falcon is called a crow.”

Vladimir Dahl

PREFACE

Everyone makes his or her own choices in life; and despite the most ambitious of plans, we all at times are made hostage to the most unexpected of circumstances. Unfortunately, living among others, we constantly run into not only the most brilliant and talented personalities, whom we rejoice in and are drawn to. Alas, along our journey there are also those who are quietly envious of others' success — blatant scoundrels who feel no pangs of conscience either during or after their vile deeds.

But come what may, during the course of life we learn to maneuver under any conditions, and, with age, to reflect upon our given lot in life with wisdom. The country in which we live often determines our destiny, and the greater the economic wealth and political strength, the more probable it is to attain success and to build a happy life. And exactly which events fill this life is a personal matter for each and every one.

Dual citizenship has always been a sore subject for those who have emigrated from a country ideologically opposed to America. I am glad to have been born and raised in the Soviet Union and then settling in the US as an adult. I still do not conceal my Russian roots, in which I take pride, because to deny cultural heritage is to intentionally impoverish oneself in every way. Having become an American after immigrating to the US in June of 1996 and having tried on American values, I find myself lost somewhere in the middle. Russians repel me, while Americans do not fully accept me. Had I not tried to reach for social heights and had been satisfied with the role of an American housewife, my life probably would have passed without any complications. But I wanted something different and something more. And for this there was a price to pay.

“Beat your own, so that others will fear you”—a common saying among Russians. I constantly find affirmation when dealing with former countrymen, especially those who represent Russian

authorities in the US or who have close ties to Russia. Any time you visit governmental institutions, you suffer the humiliation of strict young officials who address you in a pedantic tone as soon as you enter. In such situations, you regret that you have a Russian appearance because they tend to treat foreigners much kinder in such places. Attending concerts by Russian performing artists at the Cultural Center or Embassy in Washington is an exclusive luxury for a select few of Russian speakers with connections. When meeting former countrymen, you invariably come across opportunists, those who are in need of the least amount of help, but will thoroughly pry into your life to determine your potential for long-term exploitation. And after gaining confidence over many years and becoming independent, certain Russian immigrants display a sense of haughtiness and estrangement from that which they had valued during an earlier time in their lives. Many simply want to use a superficial acquaintance with others to sell their goods or services. And how can they simply forget about “their own”?

In turn, my own demonstration of sincere loyalty to America is looked upon with distrust, especially when mentioning my country of origin — Russia.

My short autobiographical sketch is a brief survey of twenty years of experience as an immigrant — a naturalized Russian-American. I reflected upon my aspirations and hopes, which with every year of life in such a magnetic country were now ignited, now extinguished. With regard to becoming acquainted with its inner workings, I began to sense myself in one way, and then another. Having become happy and successful, I imprudently spilled that which I should have valued and enjoyed in solitude. But a miracle happened; I again seized my bird of happiness and enjoyed life. Having grown older and gaining experience surviving in what earlier had been a foreign country, they tried to “drown” me, but I nevertheless came up with my head above water.

It is easier to overcome all adversity together with someone. This is exactly what happened to me. I met a kindred soul — my talented and outstanding Robert — and my life in America began to abound

in vitality once again. And with such vibrancy! Events with Robert deserve special attention because they are exceptional, assimilating him into a team of the “lucky ones”, which I also belonged to, but at another point in time.

Let what I have written serve as a primer for those who might decide on a similar “experiment” in life. You see, not everyone will have the same “luck” as I ran into over the course of these twenty years. Having learned my story, I hope that you will understand what it’s like to be a citizen of two great powers at the same time.

Elena Hughes

Washington, DC

CHAPTER 1

Ask any Russian about his or her desire to visit America, simply as a tourist—for one month, maybe two. But then to work there with the prospect of remaining for six months... it sounds very enticing, especially when an upstanding American professional, a lawyer, made me such an offer for an entire year. He was far beyond from being young, at that time over seventy years old. Such was the case in 1995. He wanted to establish open and enduring contacts with the former Soviet republics, as well as with other countries in neighboring Eastern Europe. He was attracted to Slavs, especially Russians, because, according to local legend in a distant suburb of Chicago, they distinguished themselves by having unique physical endurance, magnetic charm, instinctive intellect, and various other talents traditionally developed since childhood. He was particularly attracted to Russian women who were very demure, educated, hard-working, faithful, and romantic—practically each and every one of them. These are national characteristics, according to which one can easily identify a Russian woman, even if she were to work her way into a crowd of normally dressed blondes—without fail, they are betrayed by their modest dignity and sense of style.

I met Herb Rice in Moscow when I worked at the European Union Economic Consortium and zealously involved in marketing for British entrepreneurs. They knew little about consumer demand in Russia, especially deep inside the country. Within the framework of the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program developed by the European Union, the consortium wanted to develop consumer demand along West European lines: to develop a chain of grocery stores, fast-food restaurants, and min-bakeries. The main strategy was to develop the most effective use of local resources. All food products were to be derived exclusively from local sources: huge arable lands, farms, pastures, and gardens. They viewed this project at first in terms of Moscow and its suburbs,

and then expanding into northwestern Russia — Saint Petersburg and Velikiy Novgorod.

I spent winter through spring of 1995 in Oxford on official business sponsored by the consortium. I returned home to Moscow full of enthusiasm to continue working. I had to prepare for the signing of a major business plan financed by the European Union, and then launch the enterprise. We had tremendous success. BBC Television came to Novgorod to do a special report. It was remarkable at the time to watch people rushing into a huge supermarket in the depths of northwestern Russian, where everything was thoroughly cleaned and beautifully packaged — prepared to sparkle and smell deliciously. Moreover, there was almost everything, everything that embodied the “capitalist” way of life.

I lived in Novgorod and Saint Petersburg at the time, and on September 1, hurrying toward the market one early sunny day, I was involved in a horrible car crash along the road leading to Saint Petersburg from Pushkin, a nearby town. Sasha, the young driver of the Zhiguli, a car provided by the consortium, raced along to get three passengers to Saint Petersburg as quickly as possible in order to get away from his everyday worries, to escape from life, and surrender himself to the beauty of the city. As it turned out, he never realized his dream. He drove the Zhiguli through a red light at a high rate of speed and the car was struck hard in the right rear side in the middle of an intersection. As a result, the light car flew into a telephone pole. This put an end to our journey. The rear axle broke as it hit the pole and the car flipped over. As if in a slow-motion movie, I remember how a huge crowd of onlookers gathered and then blocked the path of police cars arriving to the scene. I remember how they prevented the slow-to-arrive ambulance from getting through, and how the police held long conversations with the driver and front seat passenger, our interpreter Vadim, who successfully managed to climb out of the car. I subsequently found out that Vadim and the driver were related and that the young driver Sasha was the brother-in-law of our coordinator at the consortium’s subsidiary in Velikiy Novgorod.

By some miracle, they took me to Moscow by train for treatment. Before that, I was at a local Novgorod hospital, where they did not find any critical injuries and only treated me with ointments and bandaging to stop the blood flowing from my head and hands. I then had the unpleasant experience of long waits while going from doctor to doctor in Moscow, where I was laid up in bed for an entire month because they observed a serious concussion and spinal abnormalities, which caused dull headaches and excruciating back pain.

I received the greatest moral support from my immediate supervisor, an Englishman named Peter. Peter had an easygoing personality, adventuresome spirit, and always found some encouraging and inspiring words. During the European Union accreditation process, he was able to establish contact with Dmitriy Likhachev and arrange a number of business trips to Saint Petersburg, the home of the renowned academician. Their joint efforts resulted in the Pushkin Foundation. Peter was named the British representative of this foundation as he claimed to be a distant relative of the famous poet. Later, upon completion of our project, Peter returned to England, where he continued to carry out his responsibilities. The fact of his alleged heritage provoked thoughts associated with *The Children of Lieutenant Schmidt* (a Russian satirical novel by Ilf and Petrov, in which a con man claims false relations to famous people).

Before his departure in the early spring of a distant 1996, it actually was Peter who helped fulfill my desire to travel to America to work in the office of an elderly attorney as a marketing consultant, highlighting the fact that I had been mentored by European experts in his letter of recommendation. I knew nothing about the city where I planned to travel to. He characterized it as “Blues City” and right then and there taught me the correct pronunciation of the city’s name.

Youth and lust for life took hold: I was exactly forty years old and wanted to leave all terrible feelings behind. I wanted to celebrate a prosperous return to normal everyday life and I did so together with my mother.

My mother, Vera Vasil'evna, was a very energetic woman. She was a teacher, having studied two foreign languages in her distant youth (English and German) and received two advanced degrees, the same as my father, Vasiliy Petrovich. She had taught political economics for the past fifteen years at the Novosibirsk Conservatory when our entire family still lived in an elite five-story building in the city center. Defense industry directors, military generals, city managers, musical professors from the conservatory, film and theater artists, and other high-ranking officials lived there as well. The conservatory was literally a five-minute walk from our home. The sound of music always drifted into our open windows: someone's poorly tuned cello, the virulent voice of a future opera prima donna, or the rehearsal of an entire orchestra. My sister Olga and I attended the best concerts. My mother's favorite vocal students helped me to learn a number of popular songs and to prepare for musical competitions at school. Thanks to my hard-working mother, my sister and I attended the installation of the first organ in Siberia, which was tuned by Harry Grodberg himself, the patriarch of Russian organists who generously agreed to perform a concert series.

Thanks to my parents again, I attended the most elite school in Novosibirsk, School Number 10, which was located near our home and where distinguished parents brought their children in the hope of enrolling them by all possible means and connections with the director, Efim Naumovich. It was, after all, an experimental school focused on English and mathematics, and the teachers also were selected through either connections or strict competition. Sometime long ago, my parents ended up teaching the upper classes in history (Mom) and geography (Dad). This fact, as well as the school's proximity to my home, made the opportunity to study there a reality. To be accepted there meant not only having had success in studying history, geography, literature, Russian, and English, but active involvement in sports as well. The school is still regarded as a leader in preparing the best future athletes who will take part in national competitions and major championships.

It's true that many of my classmates at this very school were "corrupted" by the symbolic attendance of a sixteen-year-old girl from Australia, Galya Savva. Her mother, a former immigrant from Ukraine, appealed to the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union himself, Brezhnev, to allow her daughter, who was born to an English husband in Sydney, to attend school in southern Russia for two or three years in order for her to learn Russian. She won the favor of the Soviet leadership. However, instead of a city in southern Russia, they were offered an apartment in Novosibirsk. As a result, this striking and liberated girl ended up in our showcase class, which was divided into three groups: the weakest (athletes and those less capable), middle, and advanced (future linguists). Our class reflected the school's orientation toward a thorough study of foreign language. Thanks to this girl, we all learned non-standard English, including the declension of the most commonly used words such as *fuck*, as well as getting together to smoke Marlboro cigarettes and go to the bar after school. Galya had complete freedom to attend classes whenever she wanted because she was in a privileged position. She chose when and where to attend, when and where it was more suitable and pleasant to attend. She succeeded in only three areas: English (which was her native language), physical education (beating everyone in the sprint), and military training (she loved rapid-firing at targets from a Kalashnikov). Military training was a mandatory subject for the senior classes. They taught us not only the theory of the debilitating effects of poisonous gas, but also the disassembly and reassembly of this famous weapon, which we learned to fire from the prone position.

Two huge windows of our two-bedroom apartment with the tallest of ceilings, almost four meters high, looked out onto the city square called Vodnik (Water-Transport Worker)—in honor of the Water-Transport Engineering Institute that was located in direct proximity, and where its students loved to take breaks and stroll. A fenced-in, cast-iron statue of Lenin rose in the central part of the square close to the road. This is where detachments of young children from throughout the region marched every April 22 to mark

the birthday of our fearless leader. It was there where Young Pioneers held their induction ceremonies. Buglers marched in front and sounded off horrendously. Third graders marched out of line as teachers yelled, herded the children in, and then showed them where to lay bouquets of flowers as they approached the sainted one.

Each and every event on the square, whether it be early and especially ceremonious or late in the evening and torch-lit, was accompanied by singing songs that were either morose or unnaturally cheerful, focused on the ideological significance of the moment, and left an indelible impression on my young mind. I still remember lines from these songs, “Long had they kept us in chains; long had hunger tormented us. The dark days have passed; the hour of redemption has arrived.”

And oh, how so much of our time was devoted to singing songs in English during music class in the middle grades! It was there where my voice took hold, as well as a desire to sing more loudly. They forced us to memorize songs about Lenin while tossing in choruses in both Russian and English. Our innovative English teachers also acquainted us with singing such inconceivable American tunes as “Roll Along Covered Wagon, Roll Along” and “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean”. At eleven years old, we had little understanding of the lyrics.

It became clear to me at that very age that they were trying to turn us into geniuses when we began an experimental program to study geography in English, taught by Vladimir Ivanovich, an ambitious former graduate of our school. Otherwise, how could you explain giving thirteen-year-olds such refined homework assignments as translating passages of poetry by Byron, Shelley, verses from Stevenson, and Shakespearean sonnets. I desperately slaved over any given assignment, not having found the correct word for translation in the dictionaries that my parents struggled to search for in stores and libraries, especially for those written in Old English. I was not a stellar student, but I did learn to become resourceful. It was exactly this resourcefulness, combined with a broad erudition acquired dur-

ing my school years that helped me throughout my life to achieve success, having adopted the motto “No One in Front”. Although the way to my personal success was not easy, I am proud of the fact that I paved this path by myself. I never exploited anyone, and never caused harm to anyone around me; nor am I ashamed of any of my retreats or falls, of which there have been more than a few.

As a matter of fact, many of my fellow graduates have long resided abroad, including in Israel, England, Italy, and America, working at and in the most respectable places and positions. I only accidentally found out while talking to a fellow classmate in San Francisco, Natasha, about the tremendous success of our fellow classmates, the pride of both America and Russia. One shining example is our classmate Andrey, who served one, then another, and then the youngest and current Russian president as their favorite Russian-English simultaneous interpreter. And my native city of Novosibirsk was officially considered to be on the Russian periphery, and for many long years was almost closed to foreigners. Only many years later, I found out that Vice President Richard Nixon had visited in 1959 when Nikita Khrushchev invited him to see the boundless expanses of Siberia. The leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union assured his highly placed foreign guest with a critical reproof that this city would become famous for its science and that the whole world would know about it. He kept his word: a grandiose construction site turned the outskirts of the city into the largest scientific and educational center in Russia. Akademgorodok (Academy Town), founded and built in a massive forest, is reminiscent of Los Alamos in the American Southwest, but exceeds it in size ten times over. Even before that, our opera house was the largest architectural marvel and cultural center in the country, where Nixon attended the ballet *Swan Lake*, as he was unable to view such spectacles in Washington: there was no such theater in the nation’s capital at the time. Oh, for the Russian periphery!

Having graduated from high school, I entered the Economics Institute, where I studied for five years. Despite the fact of my early marriage at nineteen years of age (my husband was a handsome Ab-

khazian), I was one of the best students at the institute and excelled in social economics. I twice was awarded for presentations at academic conferences in Saint Petersburg and Alma-Ata.

Dad encouraged my studies and always provided financial rewards in addition to the twenty-five percent stipend I received for good grades during the winter and summer semesters. Thanks to this support, I was able to travel throughout more than half of the Former Soviet Union during frequent school vacations.

My endless lust for travel strengthened as I matured, and the need to be the best and always to be in first place remained in my blood. This was a family trait: my mother, all throughout her later years, constantly strived to move from place to place. When she was young, she provoked my father to abruptly change life's path and move from one apartment to another. Later on, under pressure from my mother and against heated resistance from my father ("Only over my dead body!"), my parents began to change cities, moving first to the southern city of Rostov on the Don for a long twelve years, and then to Moscow. My parents lived in Moscow well into their later years, eventually changing apartments three times. I supported and encouraged moving to the city in every way possible. This is where I had lived since 1980, fervently trying to convince my father about the advantages of living in the capital. Once gaining capital city residence, my father would be able to enjoy exclusive privileges for veterans of the Great Patriotic War and as a Defender of Moscow, which were only available to residents of Moscow. These privileges expired only after his death on June 10, 2001.

When I nearly fully recovered from my accident, I decided to celebrate my "return to normalcy" and thought about my mother — an extraordinary woman who devoted fifty years of her life to the care of her husband, a first class invalid (one with the most severe disabilities) of the Great Patriotic War. My father, Vasilii Petrovich, lost his right leg and right arm, practically half of his body, defending Moscow against the Fascists. Despite everything, he had a beautiful, athletic build. He had an attractive appearance and very strong will to live. He had a very strict character and was a man of the utmost

integrity, which captivated my mother, who decided to become his wife. Of course, while taking care of my father and serving him, helping him to put on incredibly heavy strap-on prostheses every day, my mother did not even dream about distant travels.

However, owing to my father's work and veteran status, my parents regularly visited the best sanatoria in our formerly far-reaching country. This not only included the prestigious Black Sea Coast and Caucasus Mountains with their fresh air and pure mineral waters, but also the Baltic republics, where a Russian felt as though he or she were somewhere abroad: reading signs in a foreign language, listening to a foreign language, contemplating an unaccustomed, more modern and bold style of clothing, and almost always running up against people who were unfriendly, cold, and displayed a blatantly superficial politeness.

I always wanted to take my mother abroad. I thought it was very unfair that my mother, who had spent so many years teaching political science to gifted musical students while giving examples of West European and American economic progress and achievements, had herself never traveled abroad. By the way, I also had studied the works of John Galbraith in college and never had the opportunity to read his writings in the original, even though our Soviet economic thought was based on his theories at the time.

I opted for the Netherlands and purchased a ten-day excursion to Amsterdam. It was easy for me to obtain a Shengen visa: my foreign passport was already speckled with entry stamps for trips to Great Britain, Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, and Cyprus. It's true that I had to put on the face of an active Komsomolka (member of the Communist youth organization) during my first trips and had to address social topics at both college and at work; otherwise, I would not have had the opportunity to meet with foreigners my own age group. Having become a member of the Komsomol, I was bestowed a very honorable assignment during international friendship receptions in Moscow — I presented traditional bread and salt to the heads of foreign youth organizations. This tradition originated in Russia in ancient times: a young girl dressed in traditional costume

with her hair braided back would present a round, freshly baked loaf of bread sprinkled with salt and covered with a kerchief on a tray to the guest of honor to slice and sample. This act of the utmost in hospitality is still alive in Russia and other Slavic countries. I was young and attractive and had the exact same braided, thick blonde hair. I appeared on stage to greet guests in traditional costume, an original cotton print dress sewn by my own design with white leather shoes. I would leave home in advance with freshly baked bread, after placing it on a round tray and covering it with a kerchief carefully ironed by my mother. It goes without saying that after any festive ceremony, I would mingle with the crowd and socialize with guests, as well as the “golden boys” of Moscow. It was obvious that due to ideological reasons, such personal contact usually led to internal monitoring conducted by Komsomol officials and other organizations. First and foremost, I had to concern myself with a host of questions that were developed and approved “from above”. Our so-called “colleagues”, who were close to us in age, monitored and controlled those attending with extreme vigilance. That being said, several of us clearly recognized them by the tense expressions on their faces and focused attention. As a rule, they were innocuous with closely cropped hair and displayed a heightened interest in foreigners, asking them provocative questions and criticizing their replies while praising our socialist society.

Exploiting my membership in the Komsomol, I decided to tempt fate with my first ever travel abroad. I took a bus tour in the beginning of 1984 with a large Komsomol group to the friendly countries of Romania and Bulgaria. In order to be included in this group of happy vacationers, I had to go through a strict interview process two months in advance; at first with the regional Komsomol, and then with the regional Communist Party. It was one thing to go through an interview with people my own age at the regional Komsomol. It was quite another at the regional Communist Party where there was a full-seated commission of gray-haired men and several bitchy old women. They all had strict and blank expressions on their faces. It was obvious that they had been entrusted with such highly respon-

sible work in order to thoroughly screen candidates for such a prestigious twelve-day trip. I remember a number of specific questions the high commission asked. Aside from the first, basic, probing questions, one of the women with a beehive hair-do, screwing up her eyes, continued, “Do you know who Georgiy Dmitrov is and why he is honored both in Bulgaria and the Soviet Union; why a memorial was erected for him?” This question turned out to be fairly easy in comparison to one posed by her colleague, a bald, pot-bellied man sitting next to her in a jacket with soiled lapels, “What impressed you most about Georgiy Dmitrov’s testimony during the Nuremburg trials?” I became flushed with shame for a lack of knowledge about a brother nation. I had to admit the fact of my ignorance and promised the high commission that I would immediately seek out historic references at the city library. They approved and allowed me to exit the country.

Unfortunately, I left the ranks of the Komsomol not of my own accord. At the end of our trip to cities in Romania and Bulgaria, we stayed in a hotel in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. I called a Bulgarian acquaintance, whom I had met in Moscow when he studied at the Academy of Economics. Lyudmil worked at the Ministry of Justice and was happy to receive my call. He offered to come to my hotel and to show me his workplace and favorite sights in Sofia. I introduced him to the leader of our Komsomol tourist group, who graciously allowed me to be absent for several hours after reviewing my escort’s documents.

I visited the building of the Soviet of Ministries, where I was issued a temporary pass. We had lunch together and then went to the best stores in the city center, where I bought souvenirs for home and visited an art exhibit by one of Lyudmil’s friends. Having been so distracted by interesting excursions, I completely lost track of time. When my escort finally brought me back to the hotel, I realized that I would not be forgiven. My friend was decked out in a white suit, and, while opening the door of his luxury car (also white), took an armful of my purchases and helped me carry them into the hotel. While saying good-bye and hugging me, I observed jealous glances

from my fellow Komsomol members as they pressed their faces up against the windows. And then our towheaded supervisor Yuriy whispered to me, “You’ll see what happens to you after what you did to me!” The entire group of our activists openly blacklisted me — no one talked to me the entire way back to Moscow. When I returned to Moscow, I was summoned to the regional office and forced to surrender my Komsomol identification card. At that point in time, I was afraid that I would be labeled a *neveyzdnaya* (someone unable to leave the country). That frightened me more than anything else. After all, I had so dreamed of traveling abroad!

Hope for change arrived with Perestroika, when the Iron Curtain slightly opened and then fell, separating those bursting toward freedom, trusting in the usual media with their specific, ideological bias, from those who lived in real freedom, and not with rumors of life abroad and its blessings. I found out about contemporary America and Americans through the television bridge established between Vladimir Pozner and his American counterpart, Phil Donahue, as well as documentary films by the international journalist, Valentin Zorin. I was thrilled by the huge flow of pirated videos featuring the most famous American directors. At first, we watched these films after gathering together in small groups in the apartments of trusted friends. Later, we began to exchange video cassettes with other acquaintances. And gradually the ice broke...

It was easy for my seventy-year-old mother to get a visa at the time because she did not present herself to be at risk of not returning at the regional OVIR (immigration and registration office). At the end of 1995, we flew together to Amsterdam — a remarkable city where anything goes, and yet, at the same time, one of high culture and art.

It was namely on this trip that my past dreams were reawakened and gave me the impulse to further explore life’s adventures.

I burst out laughing when an older rather than younger American lawyer from St. Louis, with whom I was acquainted, began to send me faxes and letters, and then began to call me at home in Moscow with a brazen offer to move to America to work at his small

private business as a marketing consultant. America was so inaccessible, especially for any prolonged period of time. And although my personal life had somehow strangely attracted the envy of my girlfriends, when interesting foreigners had fallen in love with me and offered me to move now to Poland, now to Bulgaria, now to Germany, now to Italy; my trip to America simply seemed illusory. Even in the middle of the 1990s, when many Russians were able to travel abroad, trying to obtain a visa at the American Embassy seemed to be completely hopeless. American officials viewed each and every person (especially young people) trying to obtain a visa at the embassy as a potential non-returner and subjected them to humiliating questions regarding their “true intentions” — namely: Why not leave and dissolve into the boundless expanses of such a tremendously beautiful and magnetic country without even thinking about returning home to the Motherland?

Most likely, I had been very lucky in youth, even though I achieved much through hard work and persistence, and often experienced joy and enthusiasm, hoping for a better future and not chained to past accomplishments. I had a huge two-bedroom communal apartment in Moscow in a renowned round building next to Stalin’s dacha that looked out onto the historic and towering Moscow State University building. I earned my apartment over the course of five difficult years, hiding the fact of my higher education and dealing with a far from cultured public, working day and night shifts in dank cellars under the watchful eye of intoxicated maintenance workers, lifting heavy buckets of water to wash the spit-covered, filthy floors of the entryways. Over the course of five years, I was able to “get ahead” in the world of communal housekeeping and work for several months as a passport controller, technician, administrative inspector, and eventually received such desirable living space in Moscow. I finally was able to deal with a disdainful cabal and fulfill life within a different context.

I attended evening Italian language classes for three years in a row, received certification as a translator, and was able to enjoy underground films in Italian. There was a boom in everything Italian at

the end of the 1980s, especially recordings of contemporary Italian music. We were able listen to recordings of leading artists at concerts held in major Moscow venues.

I never had the opportunity in my youth to travel to Germany and therefore, not knowing the country, never really thought much about it. And I long had the the opportunity to live well off in either Frankfurt or Munich, where my unannounced fiancé, Josef, owned homes. He was an elderly man (compared to me at the time) with enviable academic credentials and who came to see me in Moscow nine times over the course of two years. He had learned Russian and humbly accepted my harsh refusals, taking them as my being coquettish. In reality, I did not want to marry him because I did not love him. My numerous girlfriends at the time came in droves along with their husbands for the gifts he would bring and then tried on all types of clothing. They were the attributes of an import paradise. I was afraid to leave the suitcases and paper bags with gifts bestowed by Josef alone at home. I instantly distributed these riches to curious and impatient women for symbolic prices, keeping only things that suited me for the season. How many people benefitted from Josef, outfitting themselves in fashionable wear that he had purchased for me and being treated at restaurants as he hoped to win over my friends, so that they in turn would push me toward marriage.

Afterall, there was a terrible deficit from 1987–1989, during which the word *perestroika* had not yet gained popular currency, but had already been snobbishly uttered among those who clearly understood its deeper meaning. It was exactly then when the country was seized by a wave of emigration, when so many tried to leave, having taken in just a little bit of the fresh air that promised changes. Josef insisted on getting married and used the last levers of his pressure, promising to buy me an expansive, modern apartment and a BMW. When this did not work, he began to blackmail me with a promise to ask Gorbachev himself for permission over the radio. Afraid that he was completely serious, I began to firmly assert that my father would not allow it. I have to say that this dumb line, spo-

ken half-jokingly, often came in handy, and led my interlocutor to a dead end. But not in the case of Josef. When we met at Sheremetevo-2 Airport, he cast a Canadian wolf fur coat at my feet, fell to one knee, and held out a ring in an open box. I was in a state of panic because of the special services (KGB), who I was certain were surveilling us and therefore turned to my father for salvation.

My parents responded and arrived from Rostov on the Don for two or three days just to meet him. I remember how my mother and I fussed about and prepared dinner and how my father sat strictly at the head of the table and prepared to meet my fiancé. Josef came from the hotel by taxi and approached the threshold of my apartment. I opened the door, noticeably anxious and impatient. He then and there handed my mother a huge bouquet of flowers, addressed her in German, and then rushed to meet my father, handing him gifts and avowing his deep love for me as I interpreted from English. My father pushed aside the gifts with his arm, noting that he did not need anything from the *enemy*. And so we spent lunch under the most stressful of conditions when I, serving both as an interpreter and diplomat, translated my father's refusal to give my hand in marriage to Josef. The situation was devastating and I still feel nightmarish pangs of conscience remembering this episode in my life, when I resorted to exploiting exceptionally honest people — my own parents. I vowed to no longer think about Germany and German men with a heavy heart. An unpleasant quarrel ensued with my strict mother and especially my father, who both departed by train from Moscow on the following day.

Every person has their own *planida* — their own lot in life. As it became clear to me many years ago, mine was to attract inconceivable circumstances and to bear witness to or participate in them. People who lead humble and simple lives will never understand me. I cannot find any explanation for my ability to become acquainted with uncommon people and constantly to be drawn into a sequence of vivid life moments — both happy and not so much so. This is not to mention that I took part in the fates of others who lured me in, and not of my own accord. It is one thing when a person chooses

his or her own social circle, but there are also opportunists, including relatives who pretend to be poor while exploiting your good fortune. Having attained success with your help, they begin to display arrogance. But worst of all, they begin to envy you your success, and then gloat over your misfortune. And the the most awful thing is when they cause you misfortune and woe.

I am proud of the fact that I am a self-made person. I made my own career while not relying on anyone else. I had no one in Moscow who would look out for me. Girlfriends whose friendship I retained for many years occasionally would lend a helping hand. These were girlfriends whom I helped to get jobs someplace where I had gotten one, when luckily someone preferred me over others. Every former job added to a successful foundation for the further flourishing of my professional life.

The label of the famous vodka Stolichnaya depicts the hotel Moskva, where I had the good fortune of working for two years during Perestroika, at first as a food manager and then as the business center administrator. I knew every secret passage in this building, especially in the underground portion, where our Kombinat Pitaniya (food product complex) was located. Deputies from the first two sessions of the city Duma lunched in this building when the most esteemed people of the nation — Andrey Sakharov and Galina Starovoytova (both now deceased)—walked down red-carpeted marble staircases and whose names were constantly referred to in the Russian media. Chocolate-glazed Birds' Milk, known throughout the country, was baked in this building. A large restaurant was located on the third floor where an orchestra accompanied dinner with dancing and played music upon request from the well-off public that could only appear there with reservations made in advance. The restaurants Seventh Heaven on the seventh floor and Moscow Lights on the fifteenth floor were lesser known to the general public because they quickly were filled exclusively by those who knew the way there.

This building has since been refurbished and I know nothing about its current “filling”, but then in the 1980s, it truly was a grand

enterprise — the symbol of Soviet prosperity. There were cascades of wide marble staircases, long and brightly colored carpets, heavy crystal and bronze chandeliers, rumbling elevators with their massive, highly polished doors, endless underground labyrinths, huge paintings by Pyotr Konchalovskiy of spreading lilacs — all of this made the hotel truly unique. It was namely in the restaurant Seventh Heaven that the movie *Soothe My Sorrow* was filmed. The director of this strange and incomprehensible film (in which the mysterious and charming actress Elena Safonova starred as the leading lady) spotted my friend Lyuda, the maitre d' of the third floor restaurant, and me in the elevator during lunch and offered us small incidental roles. There was a delicatessen, grocery store, and barber shop on the first floor; a bar and two restaurants on the second: Russian Kitchen, with a smorgasbord to the side of the main entrance, and Capital, with a view of the Bolshoi Theater and metro. One of the metro stations at the time was called Sverdlov Square, named after a since demolished monument to Yakov Sverdlov. It was there where people arranged meetings after work in no particular hurry, including me, as I headed home from this station to the Kievskaya station and where I witnessed the first murder in my life. The soon-to-be victim was standing next to me there in the cold autumn while I was waiting for my friend Gagik from Erevan, who was passing through Moscow. The victim was unable to escape fate as he was shot point blank through a slit in a *diplomat* briefcase by another man who passed by earlier and stood opposite us. The sound was so loud and the distance so close that I became deafened and speechless by what had happened. Suddenly, Gagik appeared, grabbed my hand, and quickly whisked me away from this ill-fated place. He later advised me to wipe this terrible episode from my memory as soon as possible. He himself worked for the Ministry of Internal Affairs and therefore was unmoved by my hysterics.

This very hotel Moskva became an unforgettable reviewing stand for those working there in the second half of the day on May 28, 1987, ironically the Day of Border Troops and Air Defense. Anxious employees, waiting for the end of the working day after the lunch

break, stretched out en masse in the personnel department on the third floor with a view of Red Square. The department, with two large rooms and a director's office, offered an exceptional view. Those who at that moment stood near the large windows were able to observe an unusual babel on the square where a crowd of curious onlookers gathered to see Mathias Rust and his *Dove of Peace* as he flew into Moscow from far off Germany in a light airplane to greet Gorbachev. All of our discussions focused on this extraordinary event during the following days.

At the very end of 1989, I had the honor to work for four months as the administrator in the Columned Hall of the House of Unions. There was genuine beauty and luxury in this building, which was vigilantly guarded by officials of the 9th Directorate of the KGB. Security guards maintained strict access while a magnificent tranquility and sparkling cleanliness reigned over the halls and vestibules within. To become accustomed to such a "palatial" lifestyle during an epoch of general deficit seemed mystical. While working there, I was not only able to satisfy gastronomic needs by acquiring butter and eggs for my girlfriends, but I also was able to quench my thirst for culture. After all, not only did the funerals of the highest officials in the land occur in this building, there also were concerts on the highest level, one of which I even was able to invite my parents to, as they happened to be in Moscow at the time. I myself was not able to sit in the auditorium, but I was able to watch my father and mother through an open door. During intermission, when I had to supervise the buffets, I remember how a smiling woman with a brightly-colored designer scarf tugged at my braided hair. She was accompanied by two young men and I immediately recognized her. It was Elina Bystritskaya — a majestically beautiful woman and stately actress.

I am very proud of the fact that I had the opportunity to see such brilliant and dignified people in these beautiful and historic buildings.

My subsequent position allowed me to find out about entire cultural layers and customs of nations from the Middle East. The first

joint Russian-Arab enterprise of its kind, an upscale entertainment club with a large restaurant and bar, opened at the end of 1990 in the Central House of Tourism in Moscow. I was “lucky enough” to immediately become the manager for two owners: one representing the Russian side, who observed all required formalities regarding co-operation; and the real owner, a Jordanian who financed the project.

The restaurant was solidly built over a long period of time, including the installation of a heavily sculpted and extravagant fountain in the center, VIP rooms equipped with soft sofas, and a bas relief copy of a fragment from St. Peter’s in Rome. Every employee took part in the grand opening of the hall. The Russian owner had the waiters and maitre d’s iron tablecloths by hand while the Jordanian had all the cooks review and re-review the menu and all of the staff’s apparel. Ambassadors and other authorities and dignitaries were invited from throughout Arab world. Ambassadors’ wives from Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and the Arab Emirates were especially strikingly dressed. Speeches by the guests of honor were broadcast on television. Three elegantly dressed and coiffured interpreters, hired by our owner, Ibrahim Muhaddin, spoke without resting for one single minute. Television operators slid their cameras from side to side in order to follow the loquacious and hospitable hosts.

And then routine workdays set in, which consisted of serving the “owners”, who grew in numbers and who demanded special attention. One of them, Musa, the trade director, graduated from a Lenin-grad college, was married to a Russian, Olya, spoke Russian fluently, and had two young sons, who along with his Russian wife and mother-in-law frequently traveled to Moscow and stayed in the building where our hotel and apartments were located. When he appeared in the hall, he began to berate the waiters and female staff, who were forced to acquiesce. All of the Russian employees were highly educated and considered it to be a great stroke of luck to work at such a prestigious place as security guards, stockmen, cashiers, busboys, waiters, or in housekeeping.

The beginning of hard times in the 1990s was approaching when, with the onset the new year 1991, monetary reform exploded and

all the money of hard-working people became worthless within an instant, turning it into multi-colored paper fans. It also struck the young maitre d's who had arrived from Syria in order to earn money for their families. Two of the Syrians were quite cultured and intelligent, but only one other, the youngest among them, Asad (who we nicknamed "Camel" because of his height, repulsive servility and unsightly appearance) was the favorite among the Arab owners, having shown himself to be an overseer and informant. He was not well-educated and, unlike his two colleagues, spoke English poorly.

The Iraqi ambassador frequented our restaurant since the beginning of the first Persian Gulf War — a tall, wiry man with a very unique appearance and sleazy look. He would stay in the VIP rooms until two or three in the morning, which irritated the waitstaff, who then would have to rush home to their families. He invariably spent a late dinner accompanied by the next in line prostitute, whom he would take to the room of his owner friend on the twenty-eighth floor. We all had to stand and smile to greet this honorable dignitary whenever he appeared. He always carried a tribute in hand — a gift for his next escort enclosed in plastic wrap. It turned out that that the gift was the usual one, irrespective of the age or appearance of his chosen one: a gold-spangled black dress and a bottle of traditionally sweet Arabic perfume and mother-of-pearl cosmetics. The emaciated face of this ambassador, as well as that of his tall, red-headed, blue-eyed male friend then flashed on the screen during television documentaries regarding martial law imposed under Saddam Hussein.

Owing to my close cooperation with the Arab side, I found out, not through hearsay, exactly what was meant by the Muslim evening prayer when a manifest of twenty-eight grown men flew in, suffering from jet lag after a long flight, and sat down at a full table at the restaurant. They suddenly removed their shoes, rushed to a corner, and bent down on their knees before the stunned eyes of occasional guests. I saw with my very own eyes, while sympathizing with the waiters, how an enraged Arab with bright, swirling red eyes threatened to fire everyone and cursed at them. And all of this

was because our waiter, an ethnic Tartar, Ramil', accommodated one of the other hotel guests who strolled into our restaurant and requested the momentary use of a knife to slice a sausage. A wild scream rang out and I ran into the hall as our trade director declared a scandal had occurred with regard to a "blasphemous" knife that the waiter had dared to return to the kitchen. I began to calm down Musa, who had become so dramatic. It turned out that this was a terrible sin that we never would have suspected. Not a single apology was to any avail. Only the owner's contrition resulted in our being granted forgiveness.

I am glad that I managed to acquire such vivid impressions during four months of work in such an unforgettable place, where I had the good fortune of becoming acquainted with the leader of a large group of Greek Cypriot tourists, including someone my own age, Andreas. He became interested in me because of my work ethic. Over the course of our conversation, it became clear to him that I valued my position, but not that strongly, and so he offered me to go to Cyprus as his guest and to stay in the hotel of his brother, Grutas, the general manager, with the objective of working there in the future. I gladly agreed.



I began to write this story six years ago at my mother's prompting before she passed away. My modest writings certainly are not a serious attempt at self-aggrandizement.

I spent the first half of a life filled with interesting events in Russia, and continue to enjoy the second half in America.

I received advanced education in the fields of economics, medicine, and foreign languages in Russia, and successfully worked in product management, international restaurant and hotel management, trade administration for an Italian company, as the wholesale purchase manager for a British corporation, as well as in marketing and business development under the auspices of a European Union program.

While living in America, I continued to study foreign language and master skills in a variety of fields. I worked for five years in a row for the US Department of Justice as a contract Russian language examiner.

I now prefer to work as an interpreter, especially within the judicial system, which allows me to broaden my horizons, including matters pertaining to immigration.

I have taught Russian language and traditional culture from time to time over the past few years to diplomatic students who were destined to serve in the former Soviet republics.

The fact that America and Russia continue to fiercely oppose each other, using every means of propaganda, greatly disturbs me and has had an indirect impact on my daily life. It is exactly for this reason that I finished my writing only at the very end of 2016.

Elena Hughes

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