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TRAVELLERS OF THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST IN TIMES OF CHANGE

“I don’t have chemical weapons, I’m not going to marry a US citizen, and I’m not a streetwalker!” I had to prove these things when I crossed the US-Canadian border. Even though the Governor General of Canada had signed my invitation to the World Youth Congress, my red Russian passport was like a red bullfighter’s cape for the American border guards. Of course I was angry. After all the humiliation to get the visa, they were putting me through all possible shades of suspicion. Twenty years ago nobody would have thought that a twenty-year old, unmarried, Russian girl could be a potential danger to American citizens.

On the other hand, twenty years ago we couldn’t go abroad at all and actually didn’t want to. Why explore other cultures and exchange ideas and values? We had all the best things in the Soviet Union and there couldn’t be anything interesting outside of our country.

But my mom adored travelling when she was a student in the city of Orel. After traversing the Ural Mountains, crossing the rivers of Siberia and the forests of the Russian Far East, she finally stopped in Vladivostok, at the Sea of Japan with its salty breeze.

And then I was born in 1989, spending the first ten years of my life in a dormitory – one of the last free accommodations provided by the Soviet Union to single mothers. But one night, we went to sleep in one country and woke up in another – getting not only rights and freedoms but also lots of problems.

If you are a child of the nineties in the Russian Far East, you definitely have many skills: making food over a fire in your flat because there was no electricity; finding fresh water in the neighbourhood because the water pipe was often broken; and recharging public phone cards in the fridge because they were expensive but worked longer after being frozen.

And even now, twenty years later, when we can enjoy all the amenities of modern urban life, each of us has candles, matches and fresh water in storage “just in case”. There

is a humorous saying: “If you have survived the 1990’s in Vladivostok – you can survive anywhere.” It is not funny to me.

Nevertheless my childhood was wonderful and amazing, filled with new experiences, rapid changes, and constant dreams about inaccessible things like plastic bags, colourful umbrellas and pink synthetic dresses. I grew up in the city of new trends and great travellers – sailors.

In the nineties there were three prime destinations for them – Japan, Korea and China. The luckiest could even go to Australia, the US and Europe.

A sailor was like a window on the world. He always came home with presents. People would gather around him to hear him tell “fairy tales” – for example that in Australia it was illegal not to put trash in trash bins, while the Japanese were throwing away really good equipment and clothes.

Actually Japanese dumps (known in Russian as “pomoiki”) were primary destinations for our sailors. What a paradise for Soviet man – high-tech gadgets for free! They would bring home amazing rubbish from the dumps, from toys to TV sets and cars. And I must say that the seven-year-old Japanese fridge we got in 1994 is still working.

We – the children of Vladivostok – were the happiest of all, since we could get Korean juices and chewing gum and sometimes even “chocko-pies” and melon ice-cream. And my friends from Orel were just jealous that I had colourful Chinese socks and plastic sunglasses. (Orel remained without imported goods and seemed stuck in communism until about 1997-1999.)

Indeed, that was the strange feature of the early nineties: everybody was crazy about things which were worse. People gladly exchanged real chocolate for foreign candy bars, organic juices for coke and leather shoes for coloured, plastic slippers. It was not only the desire to try everything new, but the fact that people wanted to be more similar to Westerners. Of course they couldn’t have big houses with swimming pools, but they could drink coke and move closer

to a Western life style. We gave up communist values and started to look for a new way.

When my mom was twenty, she would take an eight-hour train ride from Orel to Moscow just to buy a glass of “Mirinda” at the train station. It sounds so unbelievable now, in the age of luxury, to make a journey for a glass of sparkling orange water.

But my travels to Moscow were even stranger. Each summer I had to fly nine hours to wait eight hours for the train to Orel. Where did I spend the time between the airport and the train station? In McDonald’s of course! I knew every toy that came with the “Happy Meal” and always got three or four sets for my friends in Vladivostok, who envied me not because I had seen the Kremlin or Lenin’s tomb, but because I had a plastic Ronald McDonald clown.

In the nineties, there were even stranger travellers in the Russian Far East – the “pomogaika”, or helpers’ businessmen. This phenomenon appeared after Vladivostok’s main industry, shipbuilding, closed down. It worked like this: A trader in Chinese clothing would gather a group of thirty and go to the Chinese border town of Suifenke where they spent two days shopping and eating. Returning to cross the border, the trader would give each person 70 kilos of goods, since one could legally import two huge bags plus whatever you could wear. This translated into a daily masquerade at Russian-Chinese customs. One would pass “travellers” with huge sacks, each dressed in multiple T-shirts and coats, with wedding dresses underneath, bearing lighters, irons and mixers.

Other funny travellers of the time were people who wanted to get cheap Japanese cars. They would go to Japanese ports, buy cars and then cut them in half. These half-cars could be imported as tax-free scrap metal and then glued back together and sold. This was of course illegal – since no taxes had been paid and goods had been sold under the table, but it was a way to survive for hundreds of entrepreneurs, a way for thousands of people to travel and of course a way to get affordable goods to millions of Russians during these years of change, a period I call a “transitional mess”.

During seventy years of communism, everybody had lived stability and everything like education, health care, jobs and pension was provided. By the end of the nineties people had started to believe that they could build their own lives and earn some money without trading oil, killing or stealing.

Communism didn’t work and capitalism has not been working either. We have started to seek our own way by bringing foreign values to our soil and opening not only borders but minds. Different NGOs began to appear and

I, as an activist, have managed to travel half the world, representing my region, our activities and Russian culture.

I have labelled this time the “I-would-have-never-thought-years”. I have taken part in festivals and events that were unimaginable a few years ago. Living in a tiny room with a candle ten years ago, I could not have imagined that I would now be a university student, have my own NGO and represent it at the APEC CEO Summit in Singapore. For me the last years have been years of change, and I think that my area of Russia has been the most dynamic one because of its unique location – and of course because of the adventurous spirit of its travellers.

Still, in 2009 we don’t have a McDonald’s in Vladivostok. The reason? Several years ago we protested against it. We have gone from being children seeking chemical sweets to those who support organic food, natural materials and local production.

The Russian Far East has changed dramatically since 1989, and it is continuing to change. The next few years are going to be even more unpredictable than the crazy nineties. There are several huge projects, such as the APEC Summit in Vladivostok, which will bring new impulses to economic development and give optimism and hope to people. With all roads now open, young people have all the opportunities to find a way for themselves and their country.

Nonetheless, even for me, crossing borders is still much harder than for UK citizens. I do it proudly with my red Russian passport, because I know that I am going abroad for new knowledge and experiences. I know that I will bring them back to help create a new national identity – all the while trying to maintain the good old values which survived the times of change, developing new ones for a new age.



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