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## KARAGANDA, KAZAKHSTAN

### SAILING STORMY WATERS

*The events of the past twenty years through the eyes of a common Kazakh family*

My very first, bashful childhood memory is milk. I'm not talking about the sacred substance with which mothers breastfeed their children. I'm talking about powdered milk – 50 old Soviet kopeks per kilo, nutritional value zero. That insipid, papery, de-spiritualising placebo, which would always leave a dry and somewhat tart aftertaste in the mouth, was the gustatory accompaniment of my early years. Dare I say, it was also the gustatory accompaniment of the early years of my entire generation.

There were two powdered-milk-associated concepts that were firmly rooted in kids my age – “queueing” and “rationing”. Those two words are guaranteed to give shivering fits to any person born in the Soviet system. Although I was barely three years old, I remember very well the daily ritual: my mother would wake me up at 5.30am, wrap me up in a furry bundle of clothes, place me on the hand-made sled and drag me four blocks to Karaganda's biggest grocery store. Then we would join an already enormous queue and wait for several hours for our turn to buy some bread, milk, sausage or butter. Always the same amount, always the same contemptuous “no” in response to “Can I get some more of that?” Strangest phenomenon of all – the population has the money, but doesn't have anything to spend it on.

In January 1993 even the money was taken away when Kazakhstan switched from roubles to tenge. Initially, the switch appeared to make sense – a new currency for a new country. For the first couple of months the currency experienced moderate deflation, which, however, was soon replaced with inflation so high that the value of the American dollar skyrocketed from two to around eighty tenge. There weren't any queues anymore – most of the queue-regulators were begging on the streets. I was getting older and will forever remember the astonishment I felt at how rapidly the

cemeteries were growing – by half-a-mile over the winter. Thousands of crude, hacked-together wooden crosses.

It was the fly-or-die period for our fledgling country. Families had to choose between learning to stay buoyant in the new waters of the market economy or getting sucked into the abyss of poverty and desperation. My family chose to learn.

Until the early nineties we were a typical, well-off Soviet family. Mom and dad graduated in 1990 with degrees in geophysics, granddad was an engineer and grandma was a prominent journalist. In order to survive after 1991, however, dad and granddad had to learn to do business, mom taught herself accounting and grandma retired early to become a housewife. In 1994 granddad bought out the ferrous materials plant that he previously worked for. Several successful iron-trading deals that he concluded brought us a lot of money, real money, kept in dollars and deutschmarks. We had a safe embedded in a wall. The incongruous promise of time-deposits offered by Kazakhstan's embryonic banks could not be trusted.

In the meantime, my father became our city's official representative for the German carmaker Audi. We would always have several brand new models parked in front of the house. Dad had the luxury of being able to present his best friends with cars for Christmas at a time when unemployment was hitting forty per cent and average household income was less than a hundred dollars per month.

Looking at the events of that period through the prism of my current experience, I understand that the likes of my dad and granddad were merely the first wave, the paper-thin social stratum of benevolent businessmen. Those *nouveau riche* didn't know how to make their riches work, and neither

did they know (or, at least, they didn't accept) the "by-any-means" approach. They weren't sharks. The sharks arrived a couple of years later: gangsters, fraudsters, racketeers, drug-dealers, all the riffraff of the new supply-and-demand mindset. Worse yet, the riffraff all had connections in the government. De facto they were the government. The starry-eyed communist ideologists of the past were gone and a new breed of officials was in power.

Unsurprisingly, all the money was soon gone, either extravagantly spent, or stolen, or never returned by the people who borrowed it. Our personal fleet of a half dozen Audis was replaced by an old Ford pickup and my collection of LEGO began to get old. That ferrous materials plant still belonged to our family, but turned into a liability rather than a source of income. The scrounger government didn't want anything to do with supporting the domestic producer, the market was chaotic, demand – unpredictable. My grandad would often be forced at gunpoint to relinquish the little money that he did make.

My family's last attempt at staying afloat came in 1996. All remaining money was pulled together to open a café, a stylish, cosy little place, which was christened "Blues Café," because there was always live music playing. It is hard to believe it today, but in 1996 "Blues Café" was one of only three cafes in a city of almost a million. This really tells a lot about how seventy years of a centralised economy crushed the entrepreneurial spirit.

"Blues Café" forever remained more of a plaything, a way to vent the family's cultural frustration in, arguably, the most degrading and stupefying period in the history of the nation. My dad never really believed that it could be an effective enterprise. He wanted to flee Kazakhstan as did most of the non-Kazakh population. The rate of emigration was such that the country plunged into a precipitous demographic hole. Back then Israel, the U.S. and Germany were the most popular destinations, so for about a year dad had me and mom take ten hours of German a week.

But the move to Germany had to be put on hold because of unexpected changes in Kazakh emigration regulations. Dad was devastated. He knew it was the end of his dream of life in Europe. I wasn't particularly happy either – it all happened long before I was able to understand that, had everything gone according to plan, we would have become just another family of "Polish plumbers."

I remember feeling increasingly disillusioned about the future. Me and my now jobless mother were spending freezing evenings of the winter of 1998 in front of the TV, trying to stay warm under a down blanket. We would first watch the Russian ice hockey team lose to the Czechs in the

final of the glittering Nagano Olympics, then see the footage of Americans "bringing peace" to Belgrade and Sarajevo. That was also the year of the Russian financial crisis, which had severe implications on the oil-price-driven economy of Kazakhstan. The dollar now stood at about 140 tenge, which rendered people's savings and salaries worthless. Disposable incomes were barely enough to cover the cost of food. Not for the first time since the turn of the decade the situation was looking hopeless.

No matter the circumstance, my granddad was never one to give up. He sold "Blues Café" for the now-laughable sum of \$20,000, but that was enough to keep his plant going and to steer the family through the crisis. My mother received a university degree in the fast-expanding area of web design and started to do some freelance work. By the end of 1999, I knew that my family was making a respectable \$300 per month. Together, we made it through the most difficult period, and that was the end of the turbulent first decade of my life.

The following ten years seem rather pale by comparison. The country has been making steady progress, based mostly on appeasing Russia, the U.S. and China with the natural riches of its bowels. My family's joint income grew to over \$1,000 per month, and the number of cafes in Karaganda is now around a hundred – it didn't take too long to restore the entrepreneurial spirit after all. The current financial crisis hit the country hard, but not as hard as that of 1998 – there is no sense of desperation among the public, most people feel optimistic, although some do say that the worst is yet to come.

In my view the most notable change of the past decade was the rise of globalism in post-Soviet Europe. Places like Cairo or Detroit lost their aura of outlandishness and became mere points on the map. Knowing one or two foreign languages became a sign of good manners. A friend of our family who now lives in China has recently called me up suggesting a trip to the Shao-lin monastery for my nine-year old martial-arts-obsessed brother. It is feasible now, the Iron Curtain seems finally to be gone for good.

Until 2004 I had never been outside Kazakhstan. Fast-forward five years and I'm a senior student at the American University in Bulgaria. Just for the record, I've also visited China, Greece, Romania, Italy, Russia, the U.S. and Turkey. At twenty, I've seen and learned more than my parents could ever imagine. I think, I can safely say that this is the case for most of the powdered-milk generation.

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