

From Russia with Love

A Surgeon's trip to Russia and Ukraine (2003)

(As posted on SURGINET 2003)

This is dedicated to Professor Boris Dmitrievich Savchuk



Professor Boris Savchuk
(1933–2004)

“He never could resist the lure of Moscow...he could feel the charge of history beyond the muddy glass: in the dark and renamed streets, the vast apartment blocks, the toppled statues. It was stronger here than anywhere he knew...that was what always drew him to Moscow—the way history hung in the air between the blackened buildings like sulfur after a lightning strike.” --Robert Harris' *Archangel*

Recounting one's own travels is like forcing guests to a slide show from your son's Bar Mitzvah. Talented travel writers, like Paul Theroux for example, know how to edit their abbreviated travelogue, how to shred their notebook and mix it with a perspective attained from previous readings about the visited country—its past and

present—and its people. This is what I will attempt here –not in one go—but in pieces as time permits. In order not to be a bore, to be politically correct, and not to irritate the constantly watching big brother I will narrate this as if it was fiction, using a ‘third person’ voice—that’s of our friend Mustafa.

Now please note that Mustafa’s impressions, although built upon a foundation of knowledge-- gained from existing fiction and non-fiction about the region-- are superficial and thus may be inaccurate and misinterpret the reality. For any false opinion and misjudgment Mustafa asks to be pardoned.

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Chapter 1: Arrival at Moscow & the hotel-prison

The pork fillet, stuffed with dry prunes was delicious. Mustafa washed it down with another glass of red from Bohemia and attacked the Bohemian cheese. He enjoyed the Czech Airliner from Prague to Moscow: excellent service and corpulent, blond flight attendants. Certainly, Eastern Europeans airlines are improving rapidly and offer excellent deals. While the Boeing flew over endless forests, villages, lakes, rivers and fields—approaching Moscow, Mustafa sterilized his palate with a last drop of Czech prune brew –*Slivovitz*--and browsed through the *Lonely Planet* booklet on Moscow, published in March 2003—later he’ll find it rather outdated.

Landing in Sheremetevo 2 airport, 30 km northwest to the city center. Passport control, luggage carousel, customs—in contradiction to the *Lonely Planet* manual and warnings by others, it was uneventful and took not longer than 30 minutes. Better than in NY’s JFK, Mustafa though. Boris and Denis were waiting at the gate, together they hoped into Boris’s brand new Volvo; to Moscow !

Just outside the airport Mustafa noted a monument marking the site where, in December 1941, the German had been stopped, just 30 km. from the Kremlin. At the monument, fresh brides and grooms were being photographed on that cool spring Saturday. The Germans who had arrived here from the West more than 60 years ago –

probably all dead by now; most had been killed then---wouldn't be able to recognize today's Moscow. A huge metropolis ringed by several circumferential arteries and pierced by many radial converging on its center—the Kremlin. A chaotic megapolis; on Saturday, when Muscovites escape the mess and poor air --generated by ancient cars and disintegrating buses--to their *Dachas* in the country side, the road was relatively empty. But during the week the traffic situation is perhaps as bad as in Bangkok if not worse: a journey into the center may take two hours. Thus, for most Muscovites the preferred transportation medium is the mammoth and beautifully constructed and decorated subway system. Those who can afford it --and some can--employ a full time driver and conduct business from the backseat while stacked in the congested traffic.

Muscovites drive like crazy on their 8 or 10- lanes poorly marked city roads—changing lanes sporadically and taking U turns through dividing lines. Seat belts? Forget it—whenever Mustafa attempted to use one he was told: “why? Why do you need it? It is not necessary?”.

“But isn't it against the law?”

“*Da, da, charasho...*there is a law but who cares...”

Until the Soviet era the typical Moscow dwelling was the *izba*—a single store wooden cottage--which is still common in the countryside. But Moscow had gradually turned into an ugly brick and stone complex—spiced here and there by a beautiful church, a cozy museum or an old theatre; with the huge neoclassical Stalin's public buildings pockmark it. And now,--the products of capitalism and pseudo-westernization stain the vistas in all main roads: shopping outlets, malls sporting global trade marks, sushi bars. Huge electronic screens hang at each corner transmitting ever-changing ads to Audi, Mercedes and Budd Light-as if Russian beer was not tastier.

This is the so-called “New Russia”—controlled by the emerging capitalist oligarchy (i.e. Mafia), which swallows everything. The “New Russians” are seen everywhere: in tailored black Italian suits, seating in black American SUV's (Lincoln Navigator is the SUV of choice) driven by chauffeurs clad in black suits as well. Those are who also fill the numerous fancy restaurants, the five star hotel lobbies, and the nightclubs --unaffordable to average Muscovites. The Russians describe the “New

Russians” with a hand gesture: flex your thumb, the 4th and 3rd fingers and extend your index and the little finger and you’ll have the sign—denoting a bull who wants to screw and push--control everything around !

After a dinner in a Georgian restaurant, where the delightful *shishlik* was served with Vodka, along with freshly cut vegetables and red wine, with the waiters dancing and singing as they bring the meat, Mustafa and his hosts continued towards the center: Bolshoi Theatre, the notorious Lubyanka prison where for many generations innocent and blameless Muscovites faced the unknown (on the way to the grave or to Siberia), the Duma, the majestic Kremlin, the Moscow river—to the Rossia Hotel. The Rossia Hotel is described as the largest hotel in the world. A huge and most ugly complex of 3000 rooms –wedged between the Moscow River and the walls of the Kremlin—a 3 minutes stroll from the Red Square.

It had been built by the Soviets in 1967, and expanded just before the Olympic games in 1980. Then it had represented a state of the art hotel but now it provides reasonably prized and ugly rooms (\$70-to \$100 per night) to provincial Russians businessmen visiting the capital, and organized tourist groups from around the world. The hotel is still run like a prison camp in Siberia. Each of the few lobbies is constantly controlled by an army of unsmiling blacksuits. To enter the elevator leading to the floors you have to show a pass. On arriving to your floor you have to go through a command post staffed by a mature, middle aged typical urbane middle aged *babushka* -- heavily built, clad in an old fashion suit, the mandatory blond hairdo (if not natural then dyed). In order to supervise the “foreigners” she would be able to say a few words in English but won’t smile—unless handed a \$5 bill. Later Mustafa will find that just off the lobby, behind an unmarked metal door, there is a small police station and even a prison cell. A sarcastic comment to the ladies at the front desk, a little “argument”, and 2 blacksuits immediately will appear at your both sides—marching you off towards the metal doors.

In order to get into the room you have to present the *babushka* on-call with your pass, which she’ll exchange for your room key. A reverse process would take place wherever you want to leave your room, descend to the lobby or leave the hotel—day or

night. The rationale of this is clear: they want to know when you are in or out and prevent you having any guests in your room—either males or females. So in order to come up with Mustafa to his room Boris and Denis had to walk to a special pass-office—present their passports and get a special temporary permission. So that Mustafa won't starve during the long and lonely nights in his hotel room, Boris provided him with bottles of vodka, wine, beer, a loaf of black bread, cheese and a large chunk of dry sausage.

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Late at night, left alone in his prison room—with the lights of the Kremlin glimmering across the window—Mustafa felt like relaxing. The TV set was out of order but in the fancy *brochure* (printed in 1972) he found on his table (only in Russian of course—tourists in Russia are expected to know the Cyrillic script) showed a picture of an attractive spa. Ah, thought Mustafa, a nice warm Russian *banya* would be a perfect way to celebrate the first night in Moscow. And perhaps, he thought, it will come along with an old *babushka* equipped with a hard broom to torture his steaming skin—as described in one of Tolstoy's novels. He descended to the lobby and asked one of the younger agents at the desk: “*Banya?*”

“*Ya ni panimayu*”(I do not understand)

“*Ya chachu banya*”, he tried again, making signs of swimming with his hands.

“*Ya ni panimayu*”, the agent said laconically.

“Sauna? Massage? Mustafa tried desperately.

“Ah”, the agent woke up and changed into English, “go to the South wing—take the stairs down... on the left.”

In the vast and now deserted lobby of the South Wing Mustafa spotted a very attractive young woman in black nightdress. “*Banya?*”, he asked. She smiled and guided him downstairs into a large complex of rooms. In the middle of a large hotel but no written signs, nothing, strange, he thought to himself.

“Yes, *banya*”, smiled at him another impressive beauty and brought him into what sadly materialized not a *banya* but a conventional strip joint. A naked *jevuchka* was

curling around the pole on the stage; in the corner a few others were spread as snakes around two fat “New Russians” who were sipping French brandy and burping.

“What would you like to drink?” inquired a non-dancing nymphet.

“*Piva* (beer) ...but I came for a *banya*, not a strip show”, lamented Mustafa.

“OK, sure, the *banya* is now occupied, you’ll have to wait an hour and meanwhile please see our special *menu*”, the kind nymphet commanded in reasonable English.

An elaborate *menu* in Russian and English was brought to Mustafa, detailing numerous options: Sauna+body massage=\$75, sauna +body massage+extra=\$100, sauna+body massage+erotic extra=\$150..and so forth and so forth, 5full pages.

Mustafa sipped his beer slowly. The girls were beautiful—better than an old babushka with a broom, he thought--but they showed no interest in him. They were glued to the two fat Mafioso who now converted to champagne. Mustafa emptied his beer, paid, said *da svidaniya* and left. Instead on a *banya* with a *babushka* he went to sleep with a piece of dry sausage in his mouth.

Rule number one: do not attempt to “explore” Moscow alone. At least not on your first night...

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Chapter 2: Moscow in spring

When Mustafa woke up, arctic wind was blowing from the Red Square through the open window. He felt frozen under the thin duvet. To his surprise the expected hangover was absent despite the entire bottle of Vodka they consumed the night before. Must be that excellent “Standard” Vodka he though, a real Russian Vodka-- not the western shit. After closing the window and emptying his bladder Mustafa attempted to call his wife in New York. A long beep tone followed the international number; nothing followed. He dressed up and walked to the *Babushka* on call at the floor’s command post. “Oh, you have to pay deposit”, she said. No smile.

“What deposit?”

“To use the phone you have to pay deposit to the phone company,” she said, “down in the lobby.”

Mustafa handed her the key and received the pass. The *tovarish* at the front desk directed him to the North Wing—almost a mile away-- to pay the deposit.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the deposit when I’d checked in?” Mustafa complained. A shrug but no reply. After paying 500 Rubles Mustafa returned to his room –gave in the pass—got the key –dialed the number and talked with NY for 60 seconds. But then, when he tried to call a local number, the phone was dead again.

“Your deposit must be exhausted”, explained the poker-faced *babushka*, “you have to deposit more.” Again he exchanged the key for the pass and went to the front desk where, after elaborate study of the computer system, he was charged 300 Rubles. Again he traded his pass for the key...but his phone was still dead. The key for the pass...back to the front desk...”ah, the 300 Rubles were what you owned the phone company but now if you want to call again you have to pay another deposit, *niet, niet*—not here—go to the North Wing.”

It is not easy to be a tourist in Moscow. Tourists seem to be kind of “tolerated:” but not openly “welcomed”. The “old system” encourages organized tourist groups to be shepherded around but the lonely, not accompanied “novice” tourist has lots of obstacles to face and overcome. Even in central Moscow – where tourists are concentrated –there are no signs of any attempts to ease their plight. If you are not familiar with the Cyrillic font you are lost because nothing is written in Latin—not even in large international hotels. Without Boris and friends Mustafa's visit would have been a disaster.

Mustafa entered the newspaper and bookstore in the lobby and asked for the Moscow Times –which is the leading English daily in Russia. “*Ya ni panimayu*”, the bookstore *babushka* said.

“But why don’t you have anything in English? Isn’t this an international hotel? Don’t you want to sell—to earn money?”

“Ask at the front desk.” Another emotionless poker face.

The front desk referred Mustafa to a Kiosk half a mile away. To be able to speak with any kiosk owner in Moscow you have to almost crawl on your tummy and peer through a tiny window 2 feet above the street level. “Moscow Times?”

“Perhaps next week, try the Kremlin.”

Mustafa searched the Red Square region but no newspaper kiosks or shops there. Instead, parallel to the Kremlin he found a huge 4 levels—4 corridors—almost half mile long, fancy and elegant shopping mall. Miles of gold, diamonds, perfumes, watches, fashion, shoes but no books or newspapers. New Russia! Mustafa was told that during the old days everybody on the subway was reading books...not anymore.

Tourists and foreigners pay more. You go to the exquisite Pushkin art gallery with a Russian citizen and at the gate the *babushka* readily identifies you as a foreigner and sends you back to purchase a “tourist ticket” which costs three times more. In front of each shop or restaurant—and inside—you see at least one security person in black suit. Apparently the security and military systems had discarded hundred thousands people; the only occupation available to them is the “security business”.

Another phenomenon, which initially surprised Mustafa, was the “unsmiling faces”. You smile at people in the hotel, the elevator, shops, street and they do not smile back- all you see are frozen, poker faces. But why should they smile? For many years the system taught them to keep their emotions to themselves—to look at the ground and carry on. And why should they smile now? For many of them life is as hard as it was before—or even harder. While the New Russians spend \$ 30 for a bottle of “standard Vodka” in the restaurant, for most Muscovites this is the average monthly salary. But of course, as everywhere—and even more here-- under the frozen faces one can find warm and most generous human souls, who after knowing you, will smile widely and open up.

Clearly the collapse of the Soviet regimen did not eliminate old traditions. The huge army of *apparatchiks* is still in place, controlling a grossly inefficient bureaucracy – which mares the quality of life of the average citizen. While the new capitalism enriches a minority of Russians, the average Russian is still struggling and despite the new (relative) freedom of speech and “democracy” his fate is not much better. With the collapse of the Soviet regimen citizen lost what was perhaps advantageous under the old

system, such as excellent education for all, more or less uniform health system, pension funds and so forth.

Talking to people who had arrived at Moscow from the “periphery” Mustafa learned that the “new Moscow” is not Russia and compared to the rest of Russia Moscow is sort of an affluent paradise. They said that the countryside and regional towns are extremely poor with crumbling infrastructure. With Boris Mustafa visited a typical suburban peasant “house”. The man of the house earns a few Rubles in town; the ladies work the garden and raise a few animals. The house is extremely poorly furnished, with cracked walls and chimney. In a little room two little cute girls watched TV, laughed and talked English to Mustafa. The young generation, which is born into freedom, is changing the gloomy face of a great proud nation, which suffered too much and for too long.

* * *

Moscow has numerous tourist and cultural attractions. Above all Mustafa was impressed with the Bolshoi Ballet (and opera) where before the show and during the many intermissions, most elegant Russian ladies nibble at small caviar canapés and sip little French cognacs. Surprisingly, no Vodka is served at the Bolshoi.

Moving around town is easy. Every car is a potential taxi. You step out your hotel at 2 AM and lift your finger and immediately a car will stop. An engineer would come home after a day work, eat dinner, take his private 1972 Lada (Russian Fiat) and drive through the night in order to supplement his ridiculously low income. You tell him where you want to go; he’ll state his prize, brief negotiations and here you go. Fast and safe.

An obligatory place to visit is the huge WW-II memorial at the outskirts of the City. Most impressive are the huge panorama wall paintings—painted during many years by a group of artists—elaborately depicting the main battles of the war. For many hours one can stand there staring at the many details. The memorial offers also a large collection of excellent drawings from the war-- art can move you deeper than words.

And there is art everywhere in Moscow: along the Moscow river a mile long open market of contemporary paintings...

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Chapter 3: Moscow at night

It was 2 AM when Mustafa was dropped back in his prison-hotel. After showing the pass he took the elevator to his floor. On the wall of the elevator a large glossy color poster looked at him: an attractive Russian girl in a Jacuzzi, gesturing with her hand “join me”. Oh, a *banya*, thought Mustafa, finally I will find a real Russian *banya*. The poster was of course in Russian –no decipherable Latin characters—but Mustafa hastily copied the phone number and rushed to his room.

“Hallo, do you speak any English?” Mustafa inquired.

“Da, da,” the receiver was dropped down and picked up by another feminine voice. “How can I help you?”

“Well, I am calling from the Rossia Hotel. I saw your add on the wall of our elevator. Do you offer a *banya*?”

“Sir, I do not understand...”.

“I’m calling to find out what do you offer. A *banya*, a spa, a massage, whatever...”. Another voice came up on the phone, this time masculine and harsh. “Vot do you want?”

Mustafa was desperate. “I need information. I want to visit your club but need further details.”

“What do you want?”

“Look. Why do you place ads on the elevator of the Rossia Hotel if you can’t provide information to the customers...”. Click—the phone went dead.

Fucking paranoid xenophobes, Mustafa muttered to himself –looking with distaste at his narrow, lonely “monastery” bed. Third night in Moscow and no *banya* yet—disgusting.

Mustafa chewed the remnant of the dry sausage, cleansed his mouth with a gurgle of vodka and left the room. He found the Kapo on call lightly snoring at her command post. He did not wake her up but placed his key on her desk, removed his pass from her draw, went down -- across the battalion of snoozing guards and clerks in the lobby-- and into the wind swept street. An old battered car stopped immediately in front of him with howling breaks. Mustafa jumped in. It was 2.30 AM.

“Ya chachu *banya*,” Mustafa explained to the driver. The driver cursed under his mustache. What does this fucking foreigner want?

“*Banya*,” repeated Mustafa producing movement of swimming with his hands. “*Banya* and *jevuchkas*.”

“Ah, *jevuchkas*,” smiled the driver, exposing a gold incisor, “*Ya panemayu. Trista* (300) Rubles.”

“*Dvesti*.” (200).

“*Charasho*,” said the gold tooth and pressed on the accelerator.

Banya here we come Mustafa laughed to himself—ignoring **rule number two: you do not explore Moscow at night by yourself even on your third night.**

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The goldtooth shot his taxi forward like a bullet fired by a *Kalashnikov AK 47* into Moscow’s empty wet predawn avenues. He was driving with one hand; with the other he was maneuvering to light up a stinking black Georgian *papiros*.

“...*ëb tvoju mat*”(your mother’s cunt) he grumbled, raising his right middle finger in an universal F sign, when the Lubyanka building appeared on their right.

At this late—or early-- hour, the vacant New Arbat street looked like Las Vegas downtown immediately after WW-II. The goldtooth turned swiftly to the right, engaging into small side streets. It turned dark as the shaking wreck left the asphalt road, entering what appeared to Mustafa an enormous complex of ancient, vacant block houses undergoing renovation. “*Sukin syni*” (SOB’s), the driver cursed, spat through the open window and continued turning left and right into the maze of unpaved and now entirely dark alleys.

Constantly elated and high on his chronic sleep deprivation, and intermittent acute on chronic intake of vodka, Mustafa found the whole situation amusing and interesting. He re-lighted the stump of his cigar and relaxed in the torn upholstery of the seat. He knew that at the end of the black tunnel there would be a hot *banya* waiting for him. With a *jevuchka* or with a *babushka* or alone-- who cares—all he needed was a *banya*. The Lada jumped over a deep ditch, entered a huge courtyard and stopped suddenly. On the left Mustafa could see a silhouette of a big black car. A Mercedes? A few glowing orange lights. Cigarettes? As Mustafa's eyes adjusted to the darkness he saw that the cigarettes were in the hands of a few men dressed in long dark leather coats. Fuck it, he murmured to himself, so is this the *banya*? Automatically his hands palpated the \$ 100 bills evenly divided between his breast pocket and trousers. It was a good idea to leave the main part of his dollars under the pillow in the prison hotel—where the *babushkas* kept an eternal watch on his room—if he survives this-- he smiled to himself.

“*Pizda, pizda,*” the driver mumbled, adding something else which Mustafa did not catch, “*davai, davai...*”. And then suddenly the Merc's flood lights were switched on—shining on a long line of human creatures about 50 meter away. A police line up? A Mafia execution site? Unanswered questions were rushing rapidly through Mustafa numbed mind. The driver said nothing, sitting with his hands frozen on the driving wheel. The bastard must be one of them. As Mustafa opened his car door and placed his feet on the muddy-splashy ground, a short *babuchka*-- dressed as if she were coming directly from Siberia-- approached him. Mustafa spat out his cigar and braced himself for the events to come...

“*Sto dollari,*” commanded the rather short and stocky Siberian *babushka* in a hoarse voice. One hundred dollars. The cold, fresh air, the drizzle, the white light shining on the long line of humans 150 yards away, cleared Mustafa's mind. Suddenly he realized that this is a line up of girls. They want him to choose one. “*Sto dollari,*” repeated the dwarf. One of the leather coats approached Mustafa and examined with interest Mustafa Schaffhausen wrist watch. His breath smelled of stale vodka, garlic, sausage and cheap cigarettes.

It took Mustafa 5 seconds to decide that there is no way out –he has to choose one and he has to pay. Looking at the distant he saw only faces and bodies covered against the chilly and wet night. Just be tough- negotiate, be cool-- he told himself. “What are the terms? Is there any *banya* included? Anyone talks English?” he asked in a strong voice.

A few giggles emerged from the girlies line. One of them raised a hand and said “*Ya gavarit pa angliyski.*” At this distance Mustafa could see only a blond head on a tallish frame. Not a bad combination –what there is to loose? “OK, I’ll take her”, he said to the Siberian, and removed a *sto dollari* bill from his pocket.

The blond immediately came forward and jumped into the backseat of the Lada; reluctantly Mustafa followed her. “Where are we going?, asked Mustafa. Close-up, even in the darkness, he could recognize a pleasant, wide Slavic features under the boyishly cropped blond hair. Not more than 20 years old he thought.

“Your hotel. *Gde?*

“Rossia.”

Rossia *gastinitsa,*” she commanded the goldthooth. Rossia, whatever, Mustafa thought, just let us leave this fucking place.

She leaned on him and clutched his hand. It turned out that she could chat in rudimentary English. At such hour, in the back of a dark and stinking cab, human beings communicate easily. A few words in English, a few in Russian, some in Polish –and understating comes natural. Her name was Svetlana, she was 21 and came from a small (1 million...) town 1000 km. North East to Moscow--allegedly a university student who decided to make some money in Moscow. “How much does she make?”

“Oh, 3000 dollars per month.” Half goes to her –the rest to the Siberian and the “protectors”. “Each day I earn more than a hotel front desk clerk makes in a month....”

The taxi turned right and left and right again –shaking and splashing through flooded potholes. “V pizdu,” cursed the driver, and continued doing so when he figured out that the gates leading into the paved street are locked. Svetlana instructed the driver how to find his way through the maze of the construction site but to no avail—wherever he turned he found the gates to the open road locked. “Yo tfui yo mat,” he finally

exclaimed, switched off the engine, placed his woolen cap on his face and immediacy started snoring. Mustafa's watch showed 4 am.

Svetlana produced a metal flask from the inner pocket of her coat and handed it to Mustafa. "*Kanak* (brandy)...make you warm." He took a sip and she followed. They cuddled together to keep warm and perhaps dozed a little. At 5 am the gate opened to allow a lorry entering the construction site. "*Davai*, let's go," said Svetlana and knocked the goldtooth on his head.

As the Lada sped at 100 km/hour towards the Rossia Hotel a gray dawn lighted up Moscow in an unnatural creepy light. Here and there Babushkas were sweeping the streets.

What should I do now? thought Mustafa, at 9 am I have an appointment with Boris. He disentangled himself from Svetlana's hands and said tamely: "But all I wanted is a *banya*, ,nothing else. Now you go *damoi* (home) and I will go to the *gastinitza* (*hotel*)."

Svetlana appeared amused and laughed. "*Banya?* OK, you have a bath in the hotel? Ha? We'll fill it up with hot water and you'll have a *banya*." She clutched his hand again. Notwithstanding the exhaustion, cold and hunger, Mustafa could not remain indifferent to the presence of this face and body so near to him. He resigned to his fate. Whatever. As they neared the Kremlin, with the Lubyanka appearing on the left side, the goldtooth initiated a long series of obscenities followed by a productive spit. What's his problem, Mustafa wondered, had his father been tortured here?

* * *

A Russian saying: "there are no ugly women-only too little vodka." But one does not need vodka to appreciate the stunning beauty and charm of Russian women. Russian expatriates had warned Mustafa about Russian girls: "you would never see so many pretty girls in your life"; so they had predicted and this was an understatement. A Polish connoisseur once had told Mustafa: "Beauty stops on Poland's west border ...but it continues and increases well into the East..."He'd been right.

Mustafa learned that one can classify Russian women into *babushkas* and *jevuchkas* –both types denotes females, but an entirely different genetic and mental cup of tea. Luckily, the number of *jevuchkas* is huge and tends to concentrate in large cities—around universities, businesses and any source of income. Walking through Moscow one sees them everywhere: mostly well build, very slim, dressed elegantly –in fact dressed to kill: always fully made up, tottering on high heels-- with an exaggerated swaying of their hips –a heartbreaking and nerve shattering vision. Externally, they appear shy and introverted until spoken to. Unlike western girls, in public places the *jevuchkas* seem to be observant, to look around, and see everything. You enter a coffee house and the three *jevuchkas* in the corner table look you up from toe to head—estimating your origin and wealth...”. While in NY Mustafa sees models only on TV –in Moscow he observed model-like creatures anywhere and everywhere.

Back to the Rossia Hotel. At the front of the Rossia the goldthooth loudly demanded compensation for the prolonged night. Mustafa didn't argue, shaded a few bills and followed the girl into the lobby.

5.25 am: The blacksuits are stuck to the wall, asleep with opened eyes like Egyptian mummies. Two young clerks, young man and a women, slumber at the front desk. A few unidentified subjects occupy the leather seats around. An eternal *babushka* is busy vacuuming the gray carpet. Svetlana and Mustsfa approach the desk –she producing her passport and he his hotel pass. The lady clerk starts barking at Svetlana in Russian.

Suddenly Mustafa had enough. It's time to show some authority and leadership, he thought. “Stop it,” he exclaimed, “talk to me –not to her. I'm your guest-- so talk to me in English.”

“Your friend can't go to your room. It is forbidden.”

“Why? What's your problem?”

“You have a single room...”.

“OK, how much is a double room?”

“Ten dollars more.”

Mustafa threw a \$10 bill on the desk. “Here it is...now let us go,” he grabbed Svetlana by the hand.

“Niet, niet, it is forbidden, your room has only one bed.”

“So change it for God sake, you have hundreds of empty twin rooms. Change it! Use your fucking ancient computer.”

“We can’t change it, you have to hire another room.”

“But why? Mustafa voice was becoming louder and louder, “I am paying for my room, why do you want me to pay for another. But anyway, who cares, get me another room. Now!”

“No Tovarish, it is possible not. All room changes are to be conducted through the agency which arranged your trip,” said the sleepy clerk without stirring any of her facial muscles.

The entire lobby was observing, with moot interest, the foreigner who dares to argue. Even the security mummies woke up-- expecting an imminent action.

“Bring your manager down-now,” barked Mustafa.

“*Niet* impossible...”.

“I want your manager now—immediately.” But Svetlana’s assessment of the situation was clearer than Mustafa’s. She had to know that in these parts any argument with the “authorities” might lead to a disaster. “Let’s go from here, please, let’s leave,” she said with agitation, grabbing Mustafa by his arm. “We’ll go to the Sputnik Hotel. It’s cheap....”

“I’m going nowhere. I want the fucking manager.”

Suddenly the blank metal door off the lobby opened up and two uniformed policemen appeared. They took Svetlana by both arms and led her away. “Where the fuck are you taking her?” screamed Mustafa but the metal door was banged in front of his nose. No word from the onlookers –no expression in their faces. In these parts what happens to others is no one business. Experience had taught them to look for themselves. So it was then and so it seems to be now.

Mustafa started pounding vigorously on the metal door, first with his fist and then with his foot—for almost 5 minutes-- until it opened up and he was let in. He was brought to the center of the police complex; in a tiny cell he saw Svetlana. “What do you want?” asked the fat officer.

“Let her out, she did nothing.” Now Mustsfa was calm; the banging on the door released his excessive energy.

“Her passport is invalid. Go to sleep and leave her to us...we know what to do with her. And where is your passport?” He examined Mustafa’s red passport—turning it from side to side.

“*Davai*, go away. You don’t want to be deported. The girl will go home in the morning. Go, go, it is your problema not.”

Mustafa parted from the girl and walked towards the door. But he could not resist himself and said to the officer: “This is still a police state...like before...nothing has changed ...like Lenin, Stalin...”. The officer seemed amused, burst out laughing and added:”...*Da, da*. Stalin, President Bush, President Clinton...ha, ha, ha...”. To him obviously they were and are the same.

At the front desk Mustafa retrieved his hotel pass. The pale and subdued young receptionist smiled at him with her tired eyes and said sottovoce: “You are a good man. But she—the girl-is not so good...”

So no Svetlana, no *banya*, nothing, thought Mustsfa and climbed towards the dining room, where already at this early hour traveling businessmen in *Politburo*-like gray suits were ravenously consuming mountains of broiled sausages, eggs—here they like it hard boiled-- boiled ham and cabbage cooked with tomatoes. On his own plate Mustafa piled up two hard-boiled eggs, freshly cut tomatoes, green cucumbers, and onions—he poured over a whole cup of salted buttermilk, garnished with fresh dill. He smeared the chunky slices of black Russian bread with a thick layer of butter. He was starved. Like the breakfast he used to have in the Kibbutz after irrigating the orchards before dawn. But didn’t the founders of the Kibbutz arrive from these parts? Somehow, the idea that he won’t see Svetlana ever again saddened Mustafa. But one day he’ll be able to use her in his novel; he’ll have to invent the sex part and the *banya*...

* * *

Chapter 4: Russian surgery

Mustafa has to admit that he does not understand the overall structure and organization of Russian Surgery. But what he has gathered from talking to many surgeons and visiting a few sites is this:

--There are much too many doctors produced.

--The doctors' status and image within the society is well below that in the "Western world" and even the "third world".

--Surgeons' salaries are extremely low (~50 dollars/month). In order to survive one has to "supplement" his income by whatever means. The spectrum of that whatever is wide...

--Training of surgeons is short (3 years) and unstructured. Teaching is by the apprenticeship model. You find a professor who likes you and wants to teach you—very good. You do not find one—you are lost.

--There is a spectrum of hospitals: VIP hospitals for the very privileged, "teaching – academic institutes" (everything in Russia is an "institute") –apparently funded by the federal government to serve as academic icons, and city hospitals to serve the "normal population." But even within the city hospitals there are university department run by "professors" who teach students and non-teaching departments. And there are a growing number of small private hospitals –where doctors go to earn real money during afternoons, nights and weekends.

--The world of what we call "general surgery" is entirely fragmented. The prevailing idea is that surgeons should focus on a very narrow field; thus, even in city hospitals there are surgeons who do –and are allowed only to do—biliary surgery, hepatic surgery, pancreatic surgery, colorectal surgery, peripheral arterial surgery and so forth.

Oncological surgeons do only cancer. Astonishingly, emergency general surgery is a separate discipline and there are surgeons who would operate only on acute abdomens – not allowed to do elective operations. Of course, such radical fragmentation has its "advantages" and "disadvantages" -:)

The first hospital Mustafa visited, under the guidance of Professor Boris Savchuk, was the one nick named “**The Kremlin Hospital.**” A vast, few square miles complex, at the outskirts of Moscow—standing on woodland, which separates many of its solid, somber, post WW-II buildings. This was and still is a VIP hospital, serving the political old elite and now apparently those who are well insured or can pay. It is here where President Yeltzin underwent his heart surgery with Michael DeBakey standing by.

After a standard “welcome *tovarish*” speech by one the medical directors of the surgical “institute” (the thoracic surgeon Andrey S. Zykov), Mustafa was shown the most impressive surgical block. The vast OR complex –with its shining, polished tiled walls looked as fancy—and perhaps more—then the Methodist Hospital in Houston, TX. The chief OR *babushka* guided Mustafa through the numerous rooms. Dedicated OR rooms for any purpose: UGI, colon, rectum, anus, “general”, esophagus, lung, peripheral; vascular, endoscopic, laparoscopic, contaminated, infected, trauma and so forth.

“Why do you need a special room for specific operations?”, asked Mustafa.

“Each room is equipped with what the specialist needs. We are always ready,” said proudly the *babushka* that sported a good layer of red lipstick. It was 2.30 pm and the numerous OR rooms were all empty. Only a few aging ladies were obsessively sweeping the sterile floors.

“So where are the patients?”, asked Mustafa, “you have so many rooms –is it cost effective to keep them empty?”

“Oh, we are very busy, very busy and always ready”, laughed the lipstick.

Mustafa was taken up to visit the chief of surgery, Professor Vitaly. A kind looking, knowledgeable and smiling man who toured with the surgical floors: corridors as wide as a football field, specious patients’ rooms--mostly empty. A few attractive nurses sat in the stations or cooked meals (for themselves) at the attached kitchenettes. [Later Mustafa learned that Russian Hospitals provide no food to the staff—not even a cup of tea or a piece of bread for the poor residents on call. You want to eat or drink—bring your own!]

The tour ended at the chief's elegant office: black leather sofa and easy chairs. Much better than Mustafa's modest office in New York City. The Chief went on the phone and barked a few "*davai's*", and a model-looking nurse showed up with a tray: thick slices of dark bread covered with a healthy layer of butter and black caviar and a frozen bottle of "Standard vodka." After a few toasts everybody became happy and in love with each other. "We don't do it everyday," explained the Chief in good English, "only for special guests, and, I apologize for not joining you in more toastsI still have to drive to my *dacha*." Good life, though Mustafa: Caviar and vodka in the early afternoon, model-like nurses, and a *dacha*...don't they have a position for me here? The visit ended with the chief showing a CD ROM with his last few "interesting cases"- mainly "gee wiz" major oncological cases.

* * *

To the **City Hospital number 15** Mustafa was taken by Denis A. just before midnight, not in a fancy car but by subway and a "taxi". It stands in the periphery of the city—one of the many mammoth city hospital complexes erected in the 1960's around the city, to care for the rapidly growing and sprawling population of post war Moscow. If the **Kremlin Hospital** looked like the Houston's Methodist, or the new building of the New York Hospital, number 15 looked to Mustafa like a depilated blockhouse in Stalingrad after the annihilation of the Wehrmacht. The night tour through the hospital was kindly guided by the Chief Surgeon on call Mohamet.

The only CT in the hospital is situated in an adjacent complex, without a joining ramp affording access to hospital patients. To undergo a CT the patients must be transferred in an ambulance (1/4 mile). Anyway, the CT functions only during daytime and is always occupied. Therefore, CT is rarely used for emergency or in hospital surgical patients. Instead, the ultrasound is the preferable abdominal imaging modality. "Our ultrasonographer is excellent," said Mohamet, " he can diagnose and exclude everything...appendicitis and all the rest...".

The mandatory OR tour: again numerous rooms—standing ready –and empty—for each specialty and specific procedure –like in the Kremlin Hospital but much more

shabbier. Then a tour through the surgical floors. A large number of patients recovering from severe acute pancreatitis and/or infected pancreatic necrosis—all managed with minimally invasive methods (see below).

Mohamet, who apparently is the local laparoscopic guru admitted that lap cholecystectomies are performed only on patients who “can pay ”for the equipment and the surgeon. The rest receives open procedures—despite the huge poster in the ER which says: “By Law all Russian Citizen are to receive full free treatment”. Mohamet explained that they admit at least 10 acute pancreatitis per night—many severe. According to him **it all depends on the quality of *zakuski* (the appetizers served with the vodka): good *zakuskis* prevent acute pancreatitis.**

We went to the “step down intensive unit”—a vast depillared hall with a few beds containing some gasping patients. No monitor to be seen.

“How do you monitor them?” asked Mustafa.

“This is our monitor,” laughed Mohamet pointing to a young doctor munching on an apple at his desk. There was strong aroma of urine in the air...Mustafa noticed that the open ends of urinary catheters are dripping into improvised plastic containers. No money for closed collecting systems.

The main ICU was even more depressing. Mustafa’s ICU in a “black” Johannesburg Hospital during the apartheid era, in the early 80’s, had looked like a 5 stars hotel in comparison to this one. One or two monstrous ventilators, which seemed to survive the Afghanistan war, stench of urine, gasping patients, doctors drinking tea. and no monitors.

But the endoscopy suit was modern and well equipped. The chief –who was on call but Mustafa lost his name—showed a few recent videos. The guy—a non surgical endoscopist-- has a huge series (over 200 cases) of non-invasive percutaneous debridement of infected pancreatic necrosis—apparently with “good results”. Under US guidance he inserts trocars into the retroperitoneum and removes the dead pancreas. He manages acute cholecystitis in high-risk patients percutaneously-- by inserting a trocar into the GB—then breaking and evacuating the stones.

At 2 am the tour ended with a small party: a bottle of Crimean Brandy and a selection of pancreas protecting *zakuski*. Now Mustafa heard that a young surgeon -a

SURGINET member-- had lost his day job for telling his Boss that there is no need to invert the stamp of appendix. Only after a detailed evidence- based presentation proving his point he has been allowed to do only emergency night calls...

* * *

Mustafa was told that what he had seen in City Hospital number 15 is nothing as compared to the disintegration of public medicine in peripheral cities and the countryside. It seems that the situation in Ukraine is even worse. A senior surgeon he had dinner with at a large Ukrainian City (Lviv) admitted that he is deeply depressed by the situation. "There are too many doctors," he complained, "departments which previously employed six juniors employ now 20 juniors to do the same work...you cannot educate anyone under such conditions and you cannot provide adequate care because public hospitals lack basic resources. Free medicine in Ukraine exists only on the paper...patients are forced to pay for everything and anything...thus elective surgery is only for those who can pay...the majority can't and thus neglect themselves and present as emergencies or too late." It seems that the demise of communism deeply eroded the financial well being of doctors. While before they did as well as others --the evolving socioeconomic changes left their salaries in the bottom, and their life savings devalued. This creates bitterness, depression and antagonism....

Mustafa tasted a little from Russian surgical academics during his visit to Moscow's Vishnevsky Surgical Institute where he had to give a lecture during a routine monthly meeting of the so-called "academy". He was surprised at how formal everything is. During the lecture-- which he hoped to be entertaining and amusing --there was no feedback from the crowd, not even a stir or a subdued laugh. Nothing. Later on Mustafa found this is Ilya Ehrenburg's writings: "The Russian love the theater but in real life they cannot bear anything theatrical; they are not convinced by an orator who speaks anything theatrical; they are not convinced by an orator who speaks too eloquently; they are ashamed of displaying emotions...".

After the lecture the “president” and “vice-president” provided an impromptu summary and conclusions (i.e. “this is what we want you now to think and to do...”). It went like this: “We thank the comrade from the USA for his lecture on philosophy of emergency surgery but we must be very cautious in accepting his philosophy...we must continue to do what we do because what we do is good for us...*spasiba blshoi*...”.

The questions from the floor were even more entertaining and original. A young surgeon asked in good English: “What kind of surgeon are you? Are you doing emergency surgery at all?” He was probably checking whether the guest knows what he is talking about and when was the last time he removed an appendix...Another question from the floor: “How do you manage secondary peritonitis?” That we do not use drains in such situations seemed unbelievable—and dangerous-- to many surgeons. Finally a smart question from the vice-president: “Doctor, would you tell us what is your personal mortality rate in emergency abdominal surgery?” (As if he knows his own “mortality rates”). Clearly, conceptually and culturally academic Russian surgery is still a “separate world”.

Russian friends asked Mustafa to “assess” what he observed. Well, it is clear that the public medical-surgical systems are in a great chaos and disarray (*bardak*). Old anachronistic systems and frames are being preserved by self –serving old (and younger) *farts* according to lines drawn during the Soviet regimen and even pre-Revolutionary Europe . Meanwhile the New Russians care only about themselves and neglect medical care to the population at large—where life expectancy is declining and in general life seems to be cheap.

But there must be a light at the end of the tunnel –represented by the new, emerging generation of younger surgeons (and occasionally older) who provide excellent and dedicated care under extremely hard conditions and insulting low pay, who are open to new ideas, who challenge old dogmas, who are intellectually hungry and curious, who would travel hours to hear something “new”, who after 24 hours shift attend night schools in order to learn English and be part of the international surgical world. We have to salute them –the future of Russian surgery is in their hands and it is promising.

This is Mustafa's superficial and biased 'evaluation'. He would appreciate rebuttals, comments and criticism from Russian and ex-Russian colleagues.

* * *

Chapter 5: On the train to Ukraine & about vodka

Nikolai Gogol, the Great Russian novelist, wrote in the early 19th century that his country faced two major problems -- "too many fools and awful roads". And this—the poor roads-- is why Russians prefer to travel by trains rather than by cars. It is here—on the long trains, which criss-cross this huge country-- a tourist has the best opportunity to mingle with the locals and taste the soul of the land.

Mustafa was brought to the Kiev Train Station --dominated by a large statue of Lenin --by Boris, Denis and Kheirbek. (although all statues of Stalin were removed that of "Saint" Lenin are to be found everywhere. Was Lenin "better" than Stalin? What would have happened to Russia without Lenin's revolution? Was Lenin, and what followed, "better" than a modern and liberal new Tsar? We will never know...but one can appreciate why a nation cannot suddenly negate the whole of its previous history—painful as it was). Before the train departed they stood together on the platform, sharing a last beer and the traditional minute of silence to commemorate the gloomy moment of parting.

The extremely long train (with no first class carriages) was packed with Ukrainian families and businessmen returning home, and elderly Russian vacationers taking advantage of the low priced holiday resorts in Western Ukraine (e.g. full "pension" in a spa resort \$22/day). Mustafa could not spot a foreigner or tourist in the whole train. The wagons, although relatively clean and decorated were probably used to transport troops from Kharkov to front during WW-II: the ventilation ports blocked, compartment's windows non operable, toilets like shitholes, and the suspension letting your bum feel every link and curve. But the overall experience was pleasurable: two attendings per each wagon- attentive, friendly and ready to serve anything one wants, be it a set of clean, white covers for the bed, tea, sandwiches or vodka. But the Russian and

Ukrainians do not need to be served anything: they come on board equipped with tons of cooked food, booze, cats, dogs, music –and women—to engage in a long lasting party—until arriving at their destination.

The *babushkas* that shared Mustafa’s compartment --one a retired teacher, the other a published poet-- immediately offered him a plate and fork and a share in their cooked cold Carp fish and potato salad. However, after listening to a brief version of each Babushka’s CV—and forced to recount his own-- Mustafa strolled to the restaurant wagon where he settled down for most of the 24 hours journey.

Misha, the chubby Ukrainian Boss of the restaurant wagon became a buddy after a few short vodkas, which initially went for something like 25 cents per shot but gradually came free and larger. The *babushka* that worked in the kitchen cooked superb soups –served in large metal bowls: Ukrainian *Borstch*, based on red beets, or the *Solyanka* –based on cucumber, mushrooms, olives and meat. These soups, when served with bread and butter—represent a complete meal. A good Ukrainian soup, when left to chill down, should make the spoon stand up—this is a test of its taste and nutritional value.

The changing views through the stained windows: large fields where old *babushkas* and young *jevuchkas* —stripped down to white slips and bras—collect hay under the hot sun. Many miles of dense forest where kids gather wild mushrooms and all sorts of berries. Isolated farmhouses, a lonely horse and few thin dogs; children swimming in a river or fishing. Small towns fly by and then larger: gray and depressing housing complexes, depilated and left to rot factories and nameless train stations—where the Moscow train is met by a crowd which tries to sell something and anything. When the train stops it is immediately invaded by locals of all ages who offer fresh cherries, wild strawberries, stuffed toys, smoked meat, huge smoked fish, dollars, rubles, or hryvni—anything.

But above all Mustafa was fascinated observing the pattern of vodka drinking in the restaurant wagon. It goes like this: two large size, middle-aged guys, dressed in T-shirts and track pants wait for their lunch-- silent and gloomy. Together with the soup they are served vodka in large tea glasses –filled to the brim. [A Russian joke: “How

much should I pour? Are you blind; don't you see the brim?"]]. They raise their glasses, mumble a toast, and click their glasses –the head is tilted backwards as the vodka is poured-- in one swallow—directly into the esophagus. The soup is wolfed down nosily. Then “*davai sto gram*”. Another toast and another tea glass goes down. Each toast is friendlier; the faces turn redder and happier, sweat is pouring from the pink foreheads. When the cabbage stew is gone the 750 cc of vodka are gone as well. No one drinks as the Russians!

It is said that to understand Russia you have to understand vodka. Tradition maintains that at the late 9th century when Volodymyr of Kiev--the ruler of Rus—decided that his empire needed an advanced religion he first consulted the Muslim Bulgars. He appreciated their fondness of women and indulgence but not their abstinence. “Drinking,” he said, “is the joy of the Russes, and we cannot exist without that pleasure”—true until the present day. Alcohol dominates Russian lives: you find it everywhere: large quantities, of all sorts and cheap. In Moscow beer is sold on each street corner and subway station. People walk with open beer bottles; they stand in the corners and drink—empty bottles all around. In hotel lobbies you won't find a foreign newspaper but a bottle of Bourbon whiskey will be cheaper than in Kentucky. According to Denis one can observe five stages of public drinking:

1. Organized toasts. Each of the people at the table stands up –when his turn comes—and gives a polite and formal toast –only then you are allowed to empty your glass.
2. Toasts in subgroups—when the table is divided to subgroups of people—separately toasting each other.
3. Solitary toast. People toast themselves.
4. Toasts are replaced by fistfights.
5. The face falls into the desert plate.

According to another book Russian cuisine is not known for its deserts because no one is left conscious when they arrive. And one has to know that in Russia bottles of vodka are not sold with reusable corks—thus, once open they have to be fully consumed.

After dinner Mustafa returned to his compartment and climb to his upper bunk bed. Both *babushkas*, in white-laced pajamas, were already neatly settled under their blankets on their lower bunks. The closed and poorly ventilated compartment was hot and stuffy but the *babushkas* demanded: “Please shut off the door—we are cold and there are *banditi* everywhere.”.

The rhythmic movement of the train induced sleep rapidly but an hour later Mustafa woke up to the horrendous snoring of the poet and the intolerable heat. He had to leave the compartment. An intense smell of sweat, exposed feet and cooked food welcomed him while negotiating the corridors towards the restaurant wagon. Half naked men were standing and smoking in the closed “link” sections in-between the wagons: smoking is forbidden elsewhere and this rule—surprisingly—is strictly observed.

At this late hour the restaurant was almost deserted. At the front table Misha, was sitting with his tired cook and the exhausted waiters—who in addition to serving in the wagon had to walk up and down the aisles, selling food and drinks. “Hey Tovarish, come and join us,” beamed Misha at Mustafa in Polish. They were consuming *zakuski* of sausage, pickled beans and salted cucumbers; a bottle of vodka was being dealt with.

A few toasts for friendship, Ukraine, Russia, the USA and so forth were exchanged while everybody got happier—a real band of brothers. Then a young woman entered the wagon and took place at the other end, ordering *sto* gram of white martini. She removed a paperback book from her bag. Long and curly auburn hair framing a wide made up face, high cheekbones. Tallish, well build but not too thin—in tight jeans and high heels—the style Mustafa had observed by the Muscovite girls. From the corners of his eyes Mustafa noted the huge breasts wanting to burst from beneath the restraining jeans jacket. *Irresistible*. He moved up.

She continued with martinis, he with vodka. Twenty something. Returning from Moscow to her small hometown on the Ukrainian side of the border. Previously some sort of a physician assistant in some “institute”. What she did in Moscow? Oh, she just went to Moscow for a year to save money. Her father had died recently, he was only fifty years old. You know, drinking too much. With her index finger she knocked on her

throat—the way locals describe excessive drinking. She has to support her mother and younger sisters. Did she work for doctors in Moscow? Not really; just a personal assistant. Mustafa guessed what she had to do in Moscow but said nothing. She smiled nicely and her hands were tiny in proportion to her physique. What she reads? Agatha Christie; she loves thrillers. Her name is Natasha; her father used to call her Natashka.

Another white martini, another vodka. Misha served them slices of bread smeared with *shmaletz*—cold pork fat mixed with fried onions, with lots of salt. Through the dark windows black forests were rapidly passing by towards Ukraine. A few hours and we'll reach the border, *Banya* or no *banya*, this is it, thought Mustafa. Are there any empty compartments on this train? Or perhaps Misha has one available in the restaurant wagon?

Chooo-choooo-choooo-klik-klik-klik-bum-bum—the ancient train groaned and moaned on its aged suspensions—wobbling and vibrating through the dark night. Mustafa's blood almost congealed in his veins as she wrapped herself around him like a long, cool reptile—soft and hard at the same time. First, the ample and supple breasts on his face—gently suffocating, then her teeth biting his lips—the exploring tongue...oh—just do not shout...

Her smoothness moving down and still lower down—consuming-eating the rest of him. Chooo-choooo-choooo-klik-klik-klik-bum-bum----the train swayed and turned like a small boat in a stormy sea—is it going to break down? Somehow, he always predicted that one day such immeasurable gift would present to him in these parts. Didn't his father—who fought around these forests many years ago -- tell him about the Ukrainian women: hard, soft, cool, hot, wild, giving and demanding? Her mouth shifted back onto his now, her gray-blue eyes wide open—exploring his; she rode him with all her weight and might. A knock at the door and a shout: “passports, passports”...the compartment suddenly flooded with bright light. “Wake up, Ukrainian border control.”

In the morning, over a breakfast of fried eggs and smoked bacon Misha told him: “Oh, that one, she left at the second station after the border, early in the morning. Nice piece, eh?” A wink.

Was it only a dream? We'll never know.

* * *

Chapter 6: Lviv, Lvov, Lemberg & Galicia

The train continued South West, towards west Ukraine and Galicia. Under the glorious early summer's blue sky Mustafa noticed how the flat and monotonous Russian landscape turns hilly. Small farms with overgrown vegetable gardens, ducks everywhere, blond children running in the meadow. Swamps. This is the "borderland", a term coined by Joseph Roth—describing the old pre-WW-I border between the Galicia province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Tsar's Russia—where for hundreds of years the West was meeting the East. Joseph Roth—considered by many one of the best European novelists between the world wars—who in 1939, in a small Paris Café, suffocated in his own vomit—provided in his masterpiece *Radetzky March* an eloquent image of that "borderland". He turned it into a literal and metaphorical swamp: "Any stranger coming to this region was doomed to gradual decay. No one was as strong as the swamp." A few more hours and the train arrived at Lviv.

Lviv (in Ukrainian), which was Lvov (in Polish), which was Lemberg (In German) looks like any old, well-preserved middle European town. People compare it to Salzburg—albeit without all the Mozart kitsch. For hundreds of years prior to WWI it has been the capital city of the Galicia province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After WWI it was returned into the newly founded Polish Republic, in 1939 it fell into the hands of the Soviets, now dividing Poland with their new German buddies; in 1941 it came under the German occupation until the "liberation day" (1944), when it went back to the Soviets. With the recent fall of the Soviet empire Lviv became part of the independent Ukraine.

Ukraine and the Ukrainians were never entirely free before--always under Russians, Poles, Germans, and occasional invaders from the North, East, South and West. The newly acquired independence and the long years of lack of it make today Ukrainians rather nationalistic if not chauvinistic. They do not like any of their new or old neighbors, except perhaps the Austrians. Historically, in the towns of Galicia Poles

owned the streets, the Jews the houses, and the Ukrainians nothing. In the countryside the Poles owned the estates, the Jews the inns and the Ukrainians worked in the fields and bought vodka from the Jews. Consequently, when possible the Ukrainians liked to hang a Pole, Jew and a dog from the same tree with a sign: **“Pole, Yid and hound—each to the same faith bound.”**

But Mustafa did not travel to Galicia in order to tell tales about Ukrainian history, nor did he go there to study the local *jevuchkas*-- albeit connoisseurs claim that they are even more impressive than the Russian variant. The aim of Mustafa's pilgrimage to Ukraine was to visit Turka, a tiny village at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, some 120 km. South to Lviv--where many generations of Mustafa's family resided since the 15th century --until 1941.

Mustafa was taken to Turka by Drs. Andriy Yarka and Nicolai Ivashkevitch of Lviv. Pastoral countryside, small towns with potholed roads, impoverished markets, charming old buildings from the time of the Empire, deserted Polish Catholic churches, ugly Soviet era slums, and everywhere the mandatory statue of the National Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko. Seems that each of the toppled statues of Stalin has been replaced with that of Shevchenko.

Turka proved to be a tiny village spread on a few hills—like if emerging directly from one of Aharon Appelfeld's novels. Before the war its population of eight thousand was half Jewish and half Ukrainian: now it is fully Ukrainian. They located the old cemetery, where generations of Mustafas had been buried, now totally destroyed—with the few remaining tombstones unrecognizable. Nicolai Michailovitch, the local chief surgeon, took them to the home of an old *babushka* “who may be familiar with our pre WW-II citizen.”

“Oh sure, the Mustafa family, “the *babushka* exclaimed, “of course I knew them.” They lived just around the corner in that house,” she pointed towards the house with a twisted finger “Many of them left for Palestine before the war, the others—when the German came—were locked in the old factory building, kept there until the transport.” [Pre WW-II Ukraine was the home to 3 Million Jews; 2.5 million perished. Ninety percent of Galicia's Jews perished. Overall 5.3 millions of Ukrainians perished during

WW-II: one in six of the entire population. (The ratio for Germany, France and Britain would be 1:15, 1:77, 1:125)].

Mustafa was standing under the hot sun looking at his old family house, which he had never seen before. Almost exactly 63 years ago, on a hot summer day like this, his father had come to this place to bid farewell to his mother and sisters before moving eastwards with the retreating Russians Army. He never saw them again. What do I feel now, Mustafa asked himself. Don't I feel like a Palestinian visiting his old father's house in Jaffa –now occupied by Jews? No, no, no—not at all—the Palestinian would want his house back, to return “home”, he would hate—but Mustafa was left cold and unemotional. That his family had lived here for a few hundreds of years; that his father stems from here—was only a bad mistake of history. Jews never really belonged to this part of the world and that sad chapter in their past is passé' -- or should be.

The end of the tour in Turka was celebrated in the best (and only) local restaurant - generously hosted by Nicolai Michailovitch. The food was heartbreaking: Borsch mixed with fresh cream, dumpling stuffed with meat swimming in it. Tender beef cooked in cream and fresh herbs—delicious.

* * *

Mustafa was depressed by Lviv. The aging pianist playing Schubert's Waltzes at the breakfast room. The old imperial buildings without its original masters, the beautiful Polish churches deserted or turned into museums, the Jewish synagogues destroyed. He saw what was once the Jewish Hospital where his father had trained to be a surgeon. After the hot day Lviv was suddenly sponged down by an immense thunderstorm. And in the light of the après rain twilight the town appeared beautiful but bleak—like a museum. It has lost its soul because it had lost the majority of its original inhabitants – the Poles had been sent en masse' west wards, and almost all of its hundred thousand Jews killed on spot, or at the nearby extermination camp Belzec.

Mustafa walked back to his hotel on the hill above the old city. At the hotel's portico he ordered a tasteless microwaved chicken sandwich along a glass of tasty Moldavian red. The local Mafia occupied the adjacent tables --”international” hotels are

where the “New Ukrainians” like to sit and drink Scotch or French cognac. The pretty statuesque waitress appealed to Mustafa. Should he ask her whether she’s available for the night? Or should he turn in for yet another lonely and *banyaless* night --as in Russia—with a book and some vodka? Didn’t he promise himself that after the night sagas in Moscow he’d calm down? In an attempt to delay the decision he ordered another red and re-lighted his cigar. But suddenly Mustafa realized that this is his last night in Lviv and Galicia –that he’ll never return to this place which in some way represents his homeland. Shouldn’t he celebrate the parting? He emptied his glass and approached the driver of the taxi parked in front of the hotel. “Would you be able to take me to a local *banya*?” he asked in Polish. In Lviv, which is situated 50 miles east to the Polish border, locals speak basic Polish.

The young driver smiled with professional compassion. “Well, there is the Grand Hotel but it is very *expensive* but perhaps the *pan* (mister) can afford it. Is the *pan* German?”

“God forbid. But what I want is not the Grand Hotel. Isn’t there a simple, real, old Ukrainian *banya* around?”

The driver scratched his head. “Yes, if the *pan* really wants I know of a place which may meet such description but it is at the country, about 50 km. north to the city. I will have to charge 50 dollars.”

Mustafa palpated his pockets. Passport, visas, money, smoke, lighter—all present? Yes. Let’s go.

Late next morning Mustafa climbed the train to Krakow. At the Polish border the train was lifted by a crane in order to receive the wider wheelbase used west to what was once the Soviet Union. At the same place, some sixty years ago, the trains carrying his grandmother, uncles and aunts from Turka to Belzec had to undergo a similar process.

A Russian told me an aphorism: “**You have to leave Russia when it stops surprising you...but it would never stop surprising you...**”

The End

Acknowledgments:

Since I landed in Moscow, through Ukraine, and until I climbed on the airplane in Krakow, I was constantly welcomed, guided, looked after, protected, fed, entertained, well hydrated, and engaged in an ongoing spiritual feast. Above all I would like to thank:

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Professor Savchuk passed away a year later: about this fascinating surgeon you can read in: <http://www.docschein.com/RussianSurgeon.pdf>

Denis Arkhipov, (you saw his face here before), a charming, young and enthusiastic surgeon—symbol of the “new emerging generation”—who like a young brother looked after me during the long nights.

Denis’s friend **Irkali**, a surgeon of Georgian extraction from Moscow's hospital No 15, who drove us around in his black Mercedes, organized delicious Georgian food and company, and guided us to the right night places.

Denis’s friend **Dr. Kheirbek Alhareth**, a surgeon who escaped political repression in Syria—I thank him for the care, company and friendship.

Drs. NicolaI Ivashkevitch # and **Andriy Yarka**—surgeons of Lviv, Ukraine and Dr. Nicolai Michailovitch, a country surgeon of Turka, Ukraine, for wonderfully hosting a man they have never heard about before. # **Nicolai Ivashkevitch has passed away a few years alter.**

My old friend **Wojciech Gorecki** of Krakow (and family) for yet another wonderful hospitality in their magnificent city.

Moshe Schein

Wisconsin, 2008