

A Russian Story

by Phillip W. Weiss

I want to tell you a story about three people: me, Russian woman named Galina and her now four year old daughter, Irina.¹ The story begins about one year ago. I connected up with Galina through an online matchmaking service. I learned that she was 36 years old, lived in Moscow, Russia and had a three year old daughter. Soon after we agreed to continue communicating via cell phone texting service. For the next several months we exchanged scores of texts messages, videos and pics, including those of her daughter, Irina. The vids and pics showed a happy, bright, and well-cared for girl. Galina explained that during the week Irina stays in what she called a “kindergarten.” On weekends she stayed with Galina. Galina was able to communicate in English.

Galina learned that I was 68 years old and single; I learned that she wanted to leave Russia. I learned that she was a single mother, had no job, and was estranged from her mother and brother whom she claimed had taken her apartment and put her on the street. Galina further claimed that Irina’s father was married to another woman and had nothing to do with Irina, and that her mother, Irina’s grandmother, had nothing to do with Irina too. At one point Galina proposed that we meet somewhere in Europe and get married. I ignored that proposal. Galina also said she preferred older men because they are more reliable. During this time I mailed Irina a number of presents, such as toys and other child-appropriate items.

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¹ The names in this essay have been changed to protect their identities.

In April 10, 2018 I visited Moscow. The purpose of my visit was two-fold: to see the city first-hand and meet Galina and Irina. Galina met me at the airport. As soon as I saw her what little thoughts of a romantic involvement I may have had immediately dissipated. She was five-feet tall, weighed maybe a hundred pounds, and was casually attired. She had a friendly disposition. I perceived her as being more like a younger sister or cousin than a romantic partner. Although she could read and write English well, her ability to speak English was more limited. Nonetheless, she knew enough English that we could communicate reasonably well. Galina invited me to stay at her apartment. I declined the invitation and told her that that I would be staying at a hotel. We agreed to meet at a later date and that I would call her to arrange a place and time.

For the next four days I visited different historical landmarks in the city and got to get the “feel” of the city. I visited Red Square, crossed the Krymsky Bridge, went to Moscow City (where I had a pleasant conversation with a very nice lady who was babysitting her grandson), visited Moscow State University, visited a residential district near the outskirts of Moscow, and of course, traveled on the Metro. I found Moscow to be a huge city bustling with activity. Stores appeared well-stocked and basic public services in place and functioning. I saw few street people and relatively little graffiti. I saw no evidence of people starving and no evidence of political discord or instability. I saw no evidence of anti-Americanism or of a country that was in dire distress. Indeed, Moscow contains scores of McDonalds, Burger Kings and other American style fast food places. Although I saw housing that was shoddy by American standards, I saw few, if any, people living on the streets.

Compared to New York City, Moscow's population ethnically is far less diverse. I saw very few black people, no Hispanics, no Hasidic Jews, no one wearing kippurs, and no Indians (not even who were tourists). The only Chinese I saw were tourists. The only fairly sizeable minority group I saw were central Asians. However, the vast majority of the people in Moscow were white and Russian. Linguistically, Russian is the dominant language. Although, some Russians know English, Russian is spoken everywhere and by everyone, regardless of ethnicity.

There were lots of tourists. However, most tended to stay close to the Red Square area which is highly commercialized. Travel away from Red Square and no tourists are to be found. Some impressions about Red Square: Red Square is one of the most impressive public meeting places in the world. It is huge, can easily accommodate hundreds of thousands of people, and is beautifully designed. It is bordered by the GUM on the east and the Kremlin on the west. The Kremlin itself is an immense fortress. It has several towers, several of which overlook the Moscow River which winds through the city.

Although it was mid-April, during my entire visit the weather was sunny and reasonably warm. On two occasions the temperature approached 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Some people told me that I had lucked out with the weather.

Regarding the character of the Russian people, I can say without reservation that I detected no evidence of any kind of cultural decadence or social dysfunctionality that would suggest a society in dissolution or decline. What I did see was a city in which millions of people live, work, live and get on with their lives.

Russia is not in denial of its Communist past. This is evident by the presence of an immense statue of Karl Marx located in square right in the heart of the city, visible to all, and to the series of immense buildings built during Stalin's regime whose presence still dominate the Moscow landscape. Two of those buildings are now hotels.

Now, back to my story. On Saturday, April 14, I met Galina and Irina at Red Square right in front of the Lenin Mausoleum. Irina was now four years old. I found her to be a bright, charming, happy, friendly child. From red Square we walked across the Moscow River to Tretyovskaya where we rested and got some food. From there we took a taxi to Arbat Street, which a pedestrian zone, where we went to an indoor petting zoo for children. What an enjoyable place, especially for a children. The zoo had goats, rabbits, raccoons, foxes, birds and even a monkey. It was clean, well-maintained and the animals well cared for. We all had a lot a fun. After we left the petting zoo we ate dinner at restaurant, took a taxi back to the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. There we walked around the grounds and enjoyed the weather and the surroundings. While there Galina invited me to attend a picnic being organized by her friend, Larisa. I accepted the invitation and parted company.

The next day, Sunday, April 15, Galina and Irina met me at the Tekstilschiki Metro Station, located in the southeast area of Moscow. From there we walked to Larisa's apartment, about a fifteen minute walk. This gave me a chance to observe the neighborhood. The area contained many drab and run-down looking apartment buildings. The grounds appeared to be in state of neglect. Lawns with

no grass, uncollected garbage, benches needing repair. We walked past a high school. In the yard, some boys were playing soccer.

We arrived Larisa's apartment. Larisa lived in the first floor apartment. The entrance to the building was dark and dingy. Larisa lives in a small one room apartment with her son, Yevgeny. Larisa was friendly, out-going, and hospitable, a thoroughly likeable person.

Larisa informed that she owned her apartment. She is a 40-year old divorcee, and a mother of one child, a boy, Yevgeny, who was in the apartment. Yevgeny was active, friendly and intelligent. She is employed as a medical translator for a Russian pharmaceutical company. Her job takes her throughout Russia. She is aware of Galina's plan to leave Russia. Larisa said she had no intention of leaving Russia. She visits her parent, who live in southern Russia, on a regular basis and still maintains contact with Yevgeny's father. Also, present in the apartment, was Larisa's friend, Christina. She would be joining us at the picnic. Hence, six people would be at the picnic: Larisa, Christian, Galina, Yevgeny, Irina and me.

Larisa and Galina packed up the food and the portable grill, and left for the picnic area. We carried everything. We walked for about fifteen minutes and arrived at a park. The park had a wooded area, which also seemed to serve as a garbage dump. This is where we would have the picnic. There were other people in the area too, including at least three groups of men who appeared to be central Asians. The weather was sunny and warm. We set up camp, set up the grill, took out the food and preceded to have a picnic. I found the entire experience enjoyable. We made a fire, cooked the food, which was pork, potatoes and

vegetables, drank some alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages and enjoyed the day.

While we were picnicking. Galina said that the group of central Asian men who were gathered nearby wanted to meet me. I agreed to meet them. There were about eight of them. They were Tatars who were working in Russia. With Galina acting interpreter I told them a little bit about myself. They offered me food, which I accepted and we shared some vodka. We had a pleasant conversation and parted company on friendly terms.

After about four hours, we decided to leave. We packed up and walked back to Larisa's apartment. We ate cake, drank tea and had good conversation. We parted company on friendly terms. Larisa gave me her business card and personal mailing address. Christina had parted a few minutes earlier.

Galina, Irina and I walked back to the Metro station. On the way, I asked Galina if I could look at her apartment. She agreed and we went to her apartment. The entrance to the building was dark, drab and rundown. She lived on the first floor. To get to her apartment required climbing about five steps. Her apartment was small, cramped, and untidy. The apartment was in poor condition. Galina explained that this was somebody else's apartment, and that she was planning to leave Russia to go to the United States and apply for political asylum. She said that she had "papers" showing why she needed asylum. Galina reiterated that her mother has rejected her and wants nothing to do with Irina, and that no one will miss her. Galina also said that she was employed as a photographer and has looked for a job but cannot find work because she has a young child and the Russian government provides no benefits while in the US she will be eligible for benefits.

I took photographs of her apartment, and then we left and walked to the Metro Station. At the Metro station we stopped for tea and cake. Galina told me that she will need to provide the name of a person in the US who knows her and with whom she could stay and asked me directly if she could provide my name as the person with whom she could stay. I told her that she could tell the authorities that she knew me but that I would not provide her a place to stay. Galina said that she would then stay in a shelter. I told Galina that I had reservations about her plan to leave Russia and apply for political asylum in the United States, especially since it involves a young child. However, I also promised to provide her something to help her. We finished our snack, parted company on friendly terms, and that was the last I saw of Galina and Irina.

Two days later, April 17, I returned to the United States. Galina and I continued to text each other. The next day I wired Galina \$1,500 in cash and purchased a \$5,000 annuity with Irina as the sole beneficiary. I explained to Galina that the money was for Irina's benefit and hoped that she would use the \$1,500 to help with expenses while she looked for a job. Galina thanked me for the money and said that she is leaving Russia. In a series of texts I expressed my reservations and concerns about her uprooting her daughter who seems to be happy and well-adjusted and having her daughter detained in a US detention center. I urged her to get a job instead. Galina wrote that she has nothing in Russia, that I don't understand how people live in Russia, that she will get a job in the US and that she was leaving.

As I write this essay, Galina and Irina are on a plane heading to Cancun. From there they will go to Mexico City. From there, they will go to Tijuana, where,

despite having no job and no income, Galina plans to apply for political asylum for herself and Irina. As for how she spends the \$1,500 that is something only Galina can decide. I hope she spends the money wisely.