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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

LIKE ANY SAGA, this story has a long pre-history which begins—naturally—in Mozambique. To afford the down-payment for a house in Chicago, I first had to sell my four-room apartment in Moscow. That fabulous dwelling was in every sense dearly earned. Though we never had a chance to live in it. So this is:

Part One—My Moscow Apartment

Admittedly, while in Africa, we were paid rather lavishly. As much as fifteen to twenty times the average wage in the USSR. Returning to Moscow in 1985, I discovered that life continued to be eerily normal there. After Tete it took us months to feel comfortable sleeping on sheets in a bed, without a gun, or being able to drink tap water. Every gloomy Moscow morning I would take the same crowded Metro to the university where the familiar cloakroom babushki would not even notice that I'd been away for a year. 'Were you sick?' they would ask compassionately, taking my parka and fur hat. 'I didn't see you last week.' Meantime I had become an unusually wealthy student. I could buy the most expensive available car (Volga-31) with cash, and there would still remain plenty to buy presents for all the relatives. But why get a car? I still lived in the university dorm, four guys in a room. Instead, we ate delicacies by crateloads. Moscow was supplied exceptionally well compared to the rest of the country. We could indulge in Soviet Gargantuanism: Czech beer, Hungarian ducklings, Romanian salami, Bulgarian fruits, Yugoslav patés, Finnish cheeses, Cypriot juices, Iraqi dates, Algerian red wines, Cuban cigars, Portuguese sardines, olives or port.

I had lived in the dorms of Moscow State University for five years, since I was sixteen. It was a world of our own. But we were about to graduate and leave. (Five years later several dorm-mates emerged as leading lights of post-Soviet politics, as either warlords in places like Tajikistan, Karabagh, Ingushetia or Transdnistria, or as more peaceful parliamentarians; or even in more distant lands like Eritrea, Palestine and Lebanon). After the chronic overcrowding of the dorms, the idea that I could afford a whole co-op apartment of my own seemed ever more dazzling as the day of graduation approached. But, as I was immediately told by a friendly-looking lady at the Bank for Foreign Trade, I really couldn't buy an apartment because I didn't have a residence permit for Moscow.

In the usual Soviet fashion, I tried several ways round this stupid rule, until I ran into a particularly irritable old man at the Public Reception Desk of Moscow City Soviet. He looked rather like one of the moving skeletons in Steven Spielberg's films. Dressed in a worn double-breasted suit in the fashion of the 1930s, with a tiny red-gilded pin in the lapel, he stood up and, shaking slightly, cried in a high-pitched voice: 'Comrade—or shall I say Mister?—Derlug'yan, there are probably many rich men like you in Moscow, but if we allow all of them to buy mansions on Gorky Street, what will become of our socialist values?' As I was about to leave, he hissed: 'You know, back in 1938 I used to shoot your ilk.' Well, I was suffering from my own veterans' syndrome. Standing in the door, I retorted that it wasn't certain who would have shot whom first and whose pleasure would be greater . . . He promised to report me to the appropriate authorities.

All available legal channels were now exhausted, and I had no access to extra-legal capabilities. At this point, as scientists say, a miracle occurred. Which was always an integral part of Russian reality. For when I went back to Mozambique a year later, I was assigned as interpreter to an inconspicuous individual with the common name of Voronenko. He had come to teach a month-long course in urban planning and earn his own legally sanctioned hard-currency roubles. Yet he wasn't as blindly interested in Japanese electronic wares as most other Soviet aid workers. Voronenko, rather, developed a collector's passion for Makonde ebony sculpture. When he discovered that, beyond fluency in Portuguese, I had a degree in African studies, our professional relationship grew into

days of leisurely conversation under a mango tree about the history of Mozambique, African mythology and everything else in the world. Eventually talk turned to the inevitable question of the little fortune waiting for me in the Bank for Foreign Trade.

So far its main effect had just been to fatten me up after the year of starvation in Upper Zambezi, when I got back weighing 120 pounds. It had also impressed my mother into taking me more seriously. For several years she felt ashamed to tell anyone in our town that I was studying in Moscow a language called Hausa (she would pronounce it 'chaosa'). Being quite a resolute woman from a Cossack stanitsa near Gorbachev's, she came to Moscow when I was in my sophomore year and tried to bribe the entire Dean's office to have me transferred home or expelled outright. She always wanted me to become something practical, a Party secretary or a gynaecologist. So when I returned after the first stint in Mozambique, I requested that my last half-monthly pay be issued in cash. It came to 1,813 special roubles that could be used for purchases at hard-currency stores (they fetched twice the number of the normal roubles on the black market). By way of comparison, my father earned 250 internal roubles a month as a factory manager, and my mother's disability pension was 58 a month. For increased propagandistic effect, I asked for the sum to be given me in smaller bills, which resulted in several neat fat packs in bank wrappers that I stacked in every one of the many exotic pockets of my Portuguese commando camouflage pants. In mitigation, I had barely turned twenty-three and wasn't even a graduate. The ploy worked. When my mom saw me pulling the bundles of cash from every imaginable recess of the uniform, for the first time ever she admitted that probably I had a reason for not becoming a gynaecologist. She still complained bitterly that I came back too skinny.

In Tete I told Voronenko about the talking cadaver I had run into at the Moscow City Soviet. He nodded understandingly, wrote his phone number on a cigarette pack and told me to call him when I got back to Moscow. During the next seven months or so I occasionally wondered who he might be. Although he taught a modest course in planning, wore sandals and shorts, could readily sit in the red dust with the African wood carvers, and wove baskets as his hobby, there were times when I couldn't help detecting markers of a powerful courtier in the way he listened and conducted conversations, or when I observed how willingly he was served by the normally frosty diplomats from the embassy. The

very fact that he could develop a serious amateur interest in African art and mythology matched what I had learnt about the dispositions of near-the-top nomenklatura.

In Comrade Voronenko's office

So, back in Moscow again, one evening I called his number. His wife recognized my name: 'Oh, you must be the Africanist student from Mozambique, aren't you? Do call him at the office.' It was almost ten in the evening, and he was still at his desk: another sign of a high-rank functionary. The secretary who took the call was not at all the type favoured by the high-ups in the Young Communist League or, later, by Nouveaux Russian bankers: the chirping sexy coquette. Sounding rather like a heavily built schoolmistress, she asked me stolidly: 'One moment, please. How should I report your organizational affiliation?' At that I was caught unprepared, and could only reply: 'My affiliation? The Institute of World History, Academy of Sciences.' I seemed to catch a faint snort. A moment later she switched back to me again and said, with only a very slight hint of surprise: 'Comrade Voronenko will see you tomorrow at 11:40. Your pass will be ordered for Entrance Number Two.' I now regained enough composure to ask: 'Excuse me, could you kindly explain where is Entrance Number Two and, incidentally, what is Comrade Voronenko's position?' Her jaw plainly dropped. After a second, she yelled at me: 'Young man! The Head of the Apparat of the Moscow City Soviet offers you an extraordinary appointment during his personal time tomorrow morning, and you are trying to tell me that you don't know with whom you are scheduling a meeting?'

The rest was easy. The building in which the Moscow City Soviet was housed was a typical nineteenth-century governor-general's palace, which had been expanded in Stalin's time till it came to look like a Constructivist factory box with neo-classical columns in front. (It would be rebuilt again in the 1990s with the appropriate addition of a glimmering shopping-mall tower of tinted glass atop everything else.) Inside, the mysterious place consisted of endless red-carpeted corridors and very tall, tightly shut identical doors. Serious men in grey suits with thick briefcases on their knees were patiently waiting in Voronenko's anteroom. They glanced with curiosity at my bearded appearance. The secretary (apparently another one) showed me into a huge office with predictably monumental Stalinist furniture, heavy dark-red drapes on

the windows, and an assortment of different size and colour telephones on a special stand at the left of the redwood desk. We sat down in deep leather armchairs in the corner and for half-an-hour chatted about Mozambique and basket-weaving. I didn't remind him of my problems. At the end of the conversation, seeing me to the door, he simply suggested that I should mail him a formal complaint: 'As an elected deputy of the City Soviet I have a duty to react to people's complaints about soulless bureaucrats, don't I?'

By this time I was married. Liuba's mother was both a veteran of Stalingrad and a mistress of complaints. She sat down at the kitchen table, sent us out, and wrote in a school notebook the whole story of German tanks halted in 1942 a few yards from their ruined house, of rafting wounded soldiers and munitions across the Volga amidst the burning oil, then living for twelve years after the war in old trenches, barracks and railroad cars until she could get her prized, tiny Khrushchevka apartment in 1958. A powerful document it must have been, but my mother-in-law wouldn't let us read it. Then I wrote my own short and, I hoped, legally astute explanation of the case and sent off the package.

A week later a cheerfully accommodating young man called to say that the 'question' was 'considered' and, given the circumstances of my 'honourable internationalist duty' and 'special need for home study to further social scientific research', it was 'resolved favourably'. I was all set. No, there was no need to come to any office. They would gladly do everything themselves. I was placed second in the waiting list for four-room apartments in the whole city of Moscow. I only needed to transfer the necessary sum into the account of a construction company and go there to indicate whether I agreed to the location of my future residence.

At the office of the construction company that specialized in building for hard-currency deposits, there sat next to me in the line an elderly Jew who, when he saw me reading a Portuguese newspaper, inquired in a distinctly Castilian accent whether I wouldn't mind practising some Spanish with him while we were waiting. After graduating from a Minsk high school in 1937, he had been picked as a languages-capable volunteer for the NKVD special forces, and put through a crash course in Spanish, parachute jumps and demolition. But by the time he reached the Pyrenees the Spanish Republic had already fallen. With great difficulty, eluding the French police and Nazi secret services, he made it back

across Europe to the USSR and was promptly imprisoned as a Gestapo suspect, because so many others didn't return.

I knew such stories. Once, when I was a teenager, I discovered with no little astonishment an old picture of my father's uncle Leo dressed in the black uniform of an SS officer. They almost never spoke about the past in our family. Too many tragedies. Great-uncle Leo, as I learnt from him later, was dropped in Poland in June 1941. It took him three months of walking with his radio operator through the woods to catch up with the retreating Red Army. Somewhere around Brest-Litovsk they ambushed and strangled an SS motorcycle patrol with their belts. Then they opened the barn where the SS Sonderkommand kept those slated for execution. Uncle Leo liked to recall the triumphant moment when, dressed in full German uniform, he released the people inside, most of them very young, and told them in his beginner's Yiddish and Polish to hide in the forest. Then he drove into the village and asked for food. He was still wearing the remains of the SS uniform when he reached the Soviet lines—actually, a drunken Red Army officer peeing into the river as uncle Leo was swimming across—and narrowly escaped being executed on the spot as a German spy. In 1945 he met in Berlin the same officer who once had nearly shot him, and they got royally drunk together. Many years later he learnt there was a small monument at a rural cemetery in Poland erected to villagers killed by the SS. The plaque mentioned two unknown Soviet soldiers.

We practised Spanish for a while, then my companion told me sadly that his grandson had emigrated and become a successful businessman in Israel. He had sent his grandfather the money to buy a car and an apartment in Moscow, because the old man refused to leave for Israel: 'Of course, it is right to build a Motherland for the long-suffering Jewish people, but why at the service of the most aggressive circles of American imperialism? Why couldn't it be a peaceful Soviet republic?'

The construction site turned out to be on Academician Korolev Street, next to the eighteenth-century summer palace and park of Count Sheremetiev, across the pond from the Ostankino TV tower. A glamorous location indeed. On 3 October 1993, when the nationalist and neo-Communist rebels against Yeltsin tried to seize the TV centre, all the windows were blown out in the neighbouring houses. But this would happen later, and we never got an apartment there anyway. Meanwhile

time passed. Gorbachev fell. The Soviet Union disappeared. I don't know where my benefactor Voronenko is now. For a couple of years I avoided thinking about what happened to my precious account at the Soviet Bank for Foreign Trade—found plundered and empty, according to press reports, after the August 1991 coup. Which is not entirely unbelievable, I must admit. Banks rarely survive revolutionary upheavals. By now, in another odd miracle, we lived with two kids in Binghamton NY and were desperately poor for a change. As far as the common consequences of revolutions go, we had no reason to complain.

But behind all the spectacular transformations in Moscow, bureaucratic wheels kept on revolving at their own stately pace. In late 1993 a man called my mother-in-law from an ostensibly bankrupt and defunct Soviet hard-currency firm romantically called 'Beriozka-Uslugi' (the Birch Tree Services). He briskly demanded the deposit of an additional three million roubles for 'appreciation of building materials due to hyperinflation'. I did not follow the Russian inflation and had no idea how much this could be. Several thousand dollars, as it turned out, which we couldn't find anyway—we were subsisting on a stipend of \$7,800 a year. Without telling us anything, my dad called on neighbours, relatives and friends in Krasnodar (networking is dense in a southern provincial town) with a notebook in hand and borrowed the necessary sum, in cash, from all who could contribute. Of course, at no interest and without any formal guarantees except the good family name. My mother then made him a secure body pouch, dressed him warm for the Moscow winter, and sent him a thousand miles north by train through the newly established customs of independent Ukraine.

I visit my new apartment

Everything went fine until the last minute. The money was paid, the title and keys were issued, though the apartment turned out to be not as centrally located as we hoped, but at least it was decently built. Despite minor cracks and the standard awful plumbing, one could live in it right away. At the end of a long day, dad grew so cold and tired of Moscow that he lost his bearings. But he still felt entrepreneurial and capitalist, according to the new spirit of the times. In his view the apartment must now pay for itself, so he rented it to the first willing 'biznessman' he saw. The guy was in his early twenties, just out of military service, selling chocolates, beer and vodka from a steel-reinforced box near the Metro

entrance. He practically lived in the kiosk and had a sign, 'Will rent for good dollars', in his shop window.

The young businessman, of course, never paid the rent. He lived on borrowed money himself, hoping to strike it rich soon. Instead he had to hide from creditors who had hired the mob, or were the mob. For that reason he wouldn't let me in when I came to Moscow the following June. Naturally, after all these adventures, I wanted to see my apartment of the fabulous 101.2 square meters. I made several long trips to the windswept construction site where it was located at Zhulebino, just outside the Moscow beltway, which resembled a huge haphazard pile of blue-and-white children's Lego blocks left in the middle of tangled rail tracks and former potato fields. All just to stare at my own locked door and hear muzzled noises behind it.

Facing an impasse, I decided at least to get acquainted with my new neighbours. The first door opened even before I rang the bell. The woman inside was watching me through the judas-window all along. She was in her mid-forties, dressed in a slightly torn dressing-gown, and terribly talkative. Dragging me into her kitchen amidst the flow of words, she plied me with a bottle of Bulgarian brandy, pickled cucumber and the remains of a pie. Then she demanded to know whether I really worked in America. Her husband, in pyjamas and slippers, sat glumly in the corner reading *Zavtra*, the leading Russian chauvinist newspaper, pretending he was deaf. I glimpsed the uniform of an Air Force Colonel on a hanger in the corridor. Natalya Ivanovna told me first of all not to pay attention to her husband: 'Ah, let him brood. Ivan is nearing retirement, and military pensions are no longer what they used to be. Dear Georgii Matveevich, if only you knew how impoverished Mother Russia has become because of these macro-econo-mists! Life is so hard—no prospects for young people. Take my daughter, 19 years old, and I can say without boasting, quite pretty, if you know what I mean? We shall soon need a husband for her, preferably an American, of course. When I was her age, we girls loved cadets. But that was back then. Today, life has changed, who would need someone like my Ivan? Please, I beg you as a mother, get me a nice American boy. What would it cost you? We shall take care of the rest.'

The other neighbour's door was a steel slab worthy of a bomb shelter, only without the locking wheel. After some introducing and negotiat-

ing through this iron wall, I was invited in for tea. Saccharine music from Indian movies filled the flat. My host wore a counterfeit Adidas jogging suit, was of very dark complexion and densely unshaven. Grinning widely and showing many golden teeth, he said with an Azeri accent as thick and sweet as Turkish delight: 'I see you are this Armenian guy, so I want to tell you from the beginning, this Karabagh-marabagh war-shmore doesn't concern me at all! I am a peaceful baker-maker of Caucasian chureks, and my wife is a Russian from the Ivanovo cotton mill. I don't deal with politics!' Ali, of course, was an Azerbaijani trader from a remote mountain village in the Zakatal district, fabled for its walnuts. He gave me a lot of tea with halva and confided that my tenant was a dangerous man. Very young, reckless and with bad company visiting him all the time. Behind the fake leather on my door he had installed bullet-proof armour plates (actually, from both sides, as I later discovered) and kept a big dog. Very dangerous! It sounded like my tenant was rather in danger himself.

My university classmates began calling to offer their help. Mostly they were former history and philosophy students who had once belonged to our Caucasian circle in the dorm: an informal community united by sheer nostalgia, Georgian home-made wines, Armenian cognacs, Azerbaijani caviar, and all other foods and fruits sent from our homes. For a moment, I entertained the vision of a splendid scene worthy of a Soviet-era ethnic comedy—an Armenian in Moscow comes to evict a Russian tenant with a grim-looking band consisting of a Chechen, two Azeris, a Tatar who grew up in an orphanage in rural Georgia, and a Yezid (Yezids speak a Kurdish dialect and belong to the vestiges of a mystical sect of Manichean origin, which is why ignorant people consider them devil-worshippers). Most of this crowd had doctoral degrees; Yusup, for example, the Tatar from Georgia, was our best specialist on Luxemburg and Gramsci. Nonetheless to many Russians we often looked menacing, and I admit we sometimes exploited this perception for student pranks. A raid by this bunch could have been a nice show of regional internationalism, but I managed to resolve the matter less dramatically and with the surprisingly courteous help of the local police precinct where I had originally gone to stamp my passport.

The Major on duty inquired if I would rent the place to a trustworthy person whom he would personally recommend; a well-to-do banker, by the way. I gladly obliged, he asked me to fill a form, called a locksmith—

and within an hour I finally saw my apartment from inside. It was the usual Soviet high-rise apartment, only it was unusually large. The drab wallpaper was shabbily glued right over the bare concrete, the bathroom was painted in colours normally reserved for basements, and electrical cables protruded from a few outlets, but who would expect anything else? The policeman's reliable banker turned out to be a tattooed thug with a pocketful of hundred-dollar bills and a TT pistol showing when he scratched his armpit. I jokingly remarked that when we were being trained, they told us to avoid pistols in general, and bulky TTs in particular. He wasn't too credulous, but still curious: 'And what did they advise you to wear in this school of yours?' Frankly scared by my newest tenant, but trying to impress him with macho professional patter, I replied: 'They told us to avoid trouble in the first place, but otherwise to carry a couple of hand grenades. Pistols create a false sense of being armed. Grenades are much louder, more fearsome, versatile and reliable.' A prophetic comment, in hindsight. Two months later he disappeared, reported killed. Soon afterwards I convinced my relatives that the apartment had better be sold.

I visit the Privatization Office

Selling the place was only slightly less exotic than acquiring or renting it. For instance, at one point I took a flight from Washington to Moscow only to learn that the prospective purchaser was not a woman called Natasha but her husband, who happened to be the elder son of an African sheikh from Timbuktu. Timbuktu! The real world is more romantic than dreamers suspect. But the old sheikh was ill, his son had filial duties in Mali and so could not be counted on to return any time soon. Eventually, however, we found our buyer—a builder with connexions to Moscow's all-powerful Mayor and thus the \$75,000 that was the going price for an apartment of this size and location. We were lucky. Eight months later the rouble would be devalued four-fold.

The buyer left no precaution unattended. The sale had to be secured from every legal and extra-legal side. From the outset he vaguely but insistently alluded to his mob connexions in case I cheated. To maintain reciprocity, I hinted at links to the KGB. More practically, he demanded I produce every imaginable piece of documentation to prove that I had the exclusive legal title to the property, including a recently dated psychiatric

affidavit of my mental capacity to sign legally binding documents. This started another bureaucratic odyssey.

First, in the bitter December cold, I wandered about looking for the District Privatization Office, where I was supposed to get something called the Updated Release Form Number Six. After nearly an hour of searching around the neighbourhood, I finally realized that the address I had been given belonged to the building which a couple of workers were demolishing at a leisurely pace with sledgehammers. 'Privatizatsiya has moved, its building was privatized and it will become a casino now,' they explained to me. Eventually I found, in quite another corner of the city, the actual Privatization Office. Visitors were required to put down their names on lists hanging outside the reception window.

Last on the list was a name that struck me like a bolt of lightning: Milorad Bozhevich Savich! Error was impossible—no two men in Moscow could possess this combination of Montenegrin names. In fact, every year the same practical joke was played on naive first-year girls, who would be incited by older classmates to approach the old monster with the question: 'Milorad Bozhevich, may I ask you, is your name Serbian or Croatian?' To which he would roll his huge eyes and roar: 'Chernogorske!' (Montenegrin). Dreadful yet adored, Professor Savich had taught Marxist-Leninist philosophy to generations of graduates at the Soviet Academy of Sciences ever since Khrushchev's reconciliation with Tito in the mid-fifties had put him out of active politics. He had led an eventful life. From a prominent Montenegrin family, he received a good classical education at Cetinje Gymnasium; fought as a partisan during the War; in 1945 came to Moscow to study at the Tank and Armour Academy—puzzling given his gigantic proportions (Montenegrins are the tallest population in Europe, and he was about six foot six high. During philosophy seminars we often quietly wondered how this figure could ever have fitted into a tank; but he had a voice capable of outshouting its engine). He would mention sometimes that he was twice imprisoned in Hungary and survived a show trial in Rumania. He ridiculed Tito at every opportunity ('Just look at this theoretical innovator! His latest achievement is to proclaim Islam a nationality in Bosnia-Herzegovina. What an Aristotle!') and dropped phrases like: 'Ah, the philosophy of Dyordyi Lukach, I knew it like my pocket. I criticized him . . .' Nonetheless, we loved Savich not only because he was such a striking personage. Though strongly opinionated, he was fair, surpris-

ingly irreverent towards Communist dogmatics, and truly steeped in philosophy. I looked around the line. No sign of Milorad Bozhevich. Had Savich been present, he would certainly have been visible, or immediately audible. I knocked at the window: 'Young Lady, please, where is the gentleman whose odd name stands just above mine in the list?' He is dead, was the reply. 'It's an inheritance case.'

A woman at the local ID desk, where I went to renew my passport, was mostly preoccupied with watering her numerous plants—the office looked like a seriously run greenhouse. Peering into my file, she looked at me again and said, tenderly: 'Why do you say that you work at some university in the USA?'—'It's not considered a crime anymore, is it?' I answered. 'God forbid! Work wherever you like, if they will take you. The problem is how are you going to substantiate this information? Do those American universities issue you Work Book Form Number 68?'—'No, but trust me, they issue plenty of other forms.' 'Who cares? I can only tell you that with this entry you'll have lots of headaches down the line. So why don't we erase it and write simply, "Temporarily unemployed"?' 'No job—no papers—no problems.'

Next, in a freezing District Military Commissariat, I had to obtain my re-registration slip. A tired-looking Lieutenant-Colonel, with a woollen sweater showing underneath his uniform, emerged with my papers in his hands and said: 'You realize that you are up for promotion? If you serve a month of re-training, you could become a Major.' He sighed. 'But I guess you probably won't.' Finally, at 6 pm on 25 December 1997, all the papers were in place, the buyer stood next to me, and we signed and notarized the deed of sale, having waited in line for five hours. That was the back-door line, where everyone who waited had already paid the bribe to skip the official line waiting in the front.

The next technicality was to extract the \$75,000 in new counterfeit-proof hundred-dollar bills (this sum fills almost an entire attaché case). Earlier that morning it had been deposited in a safe box at the bank, which is now a standard procedure. The deposit box was opened by the buyer in my name and in my presence, but he kept the key. The final act was to exchange the key for the signed deed of sale. And then—well, do something with the money. One doesn't keep it in a bank. The safe deposit was a refurbished nuclear bomb-shelter, adorned with faux gilded chandeliers and metal detector gates. The former Spetsnaz officers guarding

it, armed with machine-guns and garbed in bulletproof vests, did not allow more than three people at a time down there. The rest of the line had to stand outside in the street. It was an exquisite spectacle. A crowd of people clad in expensive furs and Turkish leather coats, milling about in the dirty snow and nervously hugging bags and briefcases with visibly bulging with piles of cash.

So we dashed in my brother-in-law's car through the winter night into the maze of downtown Moscow, looking behind us for potential pursuers. Nobody gave chase. Our scheduled hiding-place was in a friend's office, which happened to be located inside the headquarters of General Lebed's political campaign. Nothing exists in Russia without irony. Lebed's HQ occupied a wing of the Surikov Academy of Fine Arts, right across from the Tretyakov Gallery, and was patrolled by well-armed retired paratroop colonels. Student paintings hung in the corridor next to posters of Lebed. Personally—no doubt a sign of perverted taste—I was more taken by the posters. A typical placard showed the General in fatigues, on one knee in a firing position, a grenade-launcher on his shoulder, above a caption reading: 'THE GENERAL WHO STOPPED TWO WARS' (in Moldova and Chechnya, apparently).

But, as the economists say, my apartment had been converted into liquidity, like so many other former Soviet assets, and could now be dispatched on an inevitably crooked transborder route. Trusting only friends, or friends of friends, we brought it safely to Chicago. Here begins:

Part Two—The House in Illinois

It soon became painfully obvious that our little fortune was far too small to buy anything in the greater Chicago area within the reach of Northwestern campus. After a depressing housing search, Liuba found a tiny run-down brick bungalow whose owner wanted \$220,000. It looked very over-priced. We made a first tentative offer, and received the straightforward reply that the owner regarded it as an insult.

Living within the Chicago city limits meant being stuck with one of the most dreadful school systems in America, or finding the money for private school. By far the best and the safest school district was in Wilmette, a tidy green suburb (the ratio of concrete to vegetation is in general a reliable indicator of social status in Chicagoland) within a bicycle ride

to campus. Needless to say, the combination of safety, good schools, well-maintained vegetation and infrastructure are markers of a white upper-middle class fleeing the city. By the end of first week at school my younger son, getting off the yellow schoolbus, asked me why he was so brownish. I looked at the noisy crowd of Nordic-looking children, and said: 'Next time tell them that in the whole school you are the only real Caucasian born in the Caucasus.'

A week later I was bicycling down Wilmette Avenue when I saw a smartly dressed lady, in silks and many jewels, obviously a realtor, struggling to mallet down a FOR SALE sign into a front lawn. Politely offering to help her, I looked up at the house—it was a typical yellow-brick Chicago bungalow, much bigger than the one we'd tried to get—and said: 'I wish I could buy this place.' She looked at me and said: 'You must be an East European, because you all like brick. You know what? You might be able to afford it—take a look.' Well, inside the house looked as depressing as it gets in the American lower middle-class dream dwellings of the fifties. Faded pink wallpaper, carpets of that gooey greenish-yellow colour that Russians call 'little baby's unexpectedness', brownish cracked linoleum, clumsy doors, small windows painted over and over again during the past decades. The house had everything one might imagine—a dusty crucifix with plastic roses on one wall, a faded fishing trophy on the other, a bronze plate of the Iwo Jima monument, a framed photo of a boy in a Marine's uniform sitting in front of his bride, an over-permed false blonde with a Hollywood smile. Outside there was a decrepit two-car garage in which sat a boat-like 1981 Oldsmobile station-wagon, plastered with the bumper-stickers 'Be American, Buy American' and 'Semper Fi'. There was a gypsum statue of St. Francis preaching to doves in the backyard, and in the front an industrial-size flagpole lit by a powerful timed beam at night. The air reeked of stale cigarette smoke and cheap beer.

In short, the owners belonged to that god-fearing and country-loving population, the American working class. Descendants of German Catholic immigrants from Trier, they had changed their name during the First World War from Schneider to Snyder. The house was built by Mrs Snyder's father in 1928. In 1945 her brother returned from the Second World War with a bride, and they added several cardboard and plywood partitions in the attic, described as 'two bedrooms upstairs'. The half-century-old makeshift cubicles now looked no more cheerful

than Soviet *kommunalki* (the pre-revolutionary bourgeois apartments divided up to squeeze in a dozen Soviet families). So despite a stream of visitors on Open House Sunday, we ended up being the only bidders. We got it for a mere \$229,000. Mrs Snyder conceded one thousand for roof repairs. I convinced Liuba we should stay in our rented apartment for another month and do some fixing before moving into the house. That's how it all started.

The simplest re-roofing, according to the eager real-estate agents, would cost just \$5,000. With additional vents—'highly advisable'—it might reach \$9,000. Well, I said, why meddle with the old one, when we can build a new mansard roof that would increase the living space almost two-fold? I sat at the computer and did some calculations. Theoretically, it looked thrilling. But I couldn't do it myself.

At first we proceeded the usual American way, by looking at Yellow Pages and asking the realtor for references. The first contractor to appear was Polish, obviously of farmer stock, a smelly boar-like *bydło*. He asked how much money I had, laughed, and advised me to build an outhouse with that ridiculous amount.

We get to know Gideon

So then we phoned round the ex-Soviet community. Three stylishly dressed young Lithuanians turned up. They behaved in a very professional manner and apologized every time one of them, a huge blonde kid called Sigitas, swore in Russian. (I learned later that he proudly wore a black karate belt and had nearly enlisted in the French Foreign Legion.) I knew they were our men when the eldest member of the trio, 26-year-old Egidijus, frankly admitted that they had never built a real house, but would do their best to try for the money that I could offer. Egidijus, or Gideon in English, was one of the outcomes of Lithuania's independence. In 1990 he graduated from high school to realize that Soviet-era subsidies had ended and he could no longer afford to study at the Vilnius Architectural Institute. So he made his way to the US and stayed illegally, creating his own job—a company called Europe Style, Inc. He was a stereotypical Balt—blond, brooding, and terribly thorough. Like most Lithuanians, he treated Polish competitors with condescending irony. All three wore impeccable white pants and T-shirts with the Europe Style logo to stress that they were not dirty Polish contractors.

Working with Gideon had its own charm. One day we were spreading the felt underlining for the shingles of the rooftop. Gideon politely suggested that I might redo a layer, because it deviated almost an inch over the twenty-foot length. He pointed to the roof of a nearby yuppie castle (a brand-new mansion of faux brick with phony towers and a heated driveway): ‘See their roof? To impress buyers they used cedar and copper, as expensive as it gets, but their layers deviate by at least six inches between the ends of the roof, so the valleys don’t join up. Can’t you see what a sloppy job it is?’ Honestly, I couldn’t see anything terribly wrong with it. But I had to accept that I would not be allowed to put a single layer on my own roof without levelling it in at least five points. When I asked where he learned the secrets of laying shingles, Gideon replied that he had read books and watched a video of roofing techniques throughout the night before. Mine came to be a very sturdy roof, as the recent hurricane proved.

I became Gideon’s apprentice by accident and only incrementally. First, we needed to demolish the old roof, and for a week, as I thought, someone had to be carrying the debris to a dumpster. Well, I economized a little. Ordering a dumpster is very expensive. Instead, I cut the old lumber with an electric saw and stockpiled it for firewood behind the garage. It came to be quite a pile. We still have plenty for roasting shish-kebabs. Then we discovered that someone who could speak English would have to be continuously present at the site to negotiate with the police, the firemen and the building inspectors. Like many East Europeans, I had naively believed that private property was sacred under capitalism. Well, that’s a normative ideological claim, as I now realize. From talking to the policeman and astronaut-like firefighter in full attire, I learnt that burning construction debris is a crime, but cooking on an open fire, even though in a savagely exotic brick pit, is not. So I kept on generously burning scrap lumber and feeding the team, always with culinary equipment to hand—in proud accordance with Fernand Braudel’s description of Armenian merchants in the 17th century: ‘stubborn, sober, hardy and enterprising mountaineers.’

Then it turned out that you cannot touch what is supposedly your own house without written and very costly permission from the Wilmette Village Authority. Back in the USSR, apartments ostensibly belonged to the socialist state, but the state was so busy with its own concerns (watching the ideological allegiances of its subjects, etc.) that there was

almost complete freedom to do whatever one liked with public housing. My neighbour Natalia Ivanovna in Moscow had ordered her Colonel husband to cut a hole into the elevator shaft to fit the back of their refrigerator and the dryer's exhaust pipe. This way they spared a couple of square metres of their corridor and filled the building elevator with the smells of drying laundry. Not so in the USA, where one cannot replace even kitchen cabinets without a formal permit, because they are attached to the walls and thus legally become part of the building-frame. Then, of course, there are all the plumbing regulations that guarantee a monopoly to the local craftsmen, offering one a good sense of what medieval guilds must have felt like.

I learn how to draw

On the third day of our grand demolition, a couple of village bureaucrats and a policeman drove into my yard and sealed the premises with red plastic tape. I spent the next two weeks trying to get the permits for demolition, dumpster, and then general construction. Experience soon showed that, as in Russia, most American bureaucrats are in principle nice people with very boring routine jobs. They first of all wanted to see my architect and the blueprints. Of course, I had none. I sat at the computer and started to learn how to draw. Gideon found a sad-looking man called Iosif who had just arrived from the Ukraine, where he had been the Chief Architect at the Donetsk Coal Combine. He knew how to build a factory but had long since forgotten how to draw. His main rule was quintessentially Soviet: if the manual says use the pine beam number 10, always go with number 12 or 14, or better yet make it steel. The lumber may turn out to be sub-standard, the workers drunk—so always allow for excessive safety, because it's the architect who ends up going to prison. We spent several days in the Wilmette public library going through the American building codes. Obviously, Iosif didn't know English. Neither did I know the technical terms.

Then I bought the necessary supplies at Office Max and we spent a week together drawing the blueprints. My first trip to the Village Building Inspector nearly ended in disaster. He gazed at our efforts incredulously—'Sure, we used the metric scale'. With a heavy heart I asked him, before leaving: 'If you want everything in feet and inches, tell me at least how many inches there are in a bloody foot?' Astonished at such cheek, he said: 'Twelve. Twelve inches, and three feet to a yard.'

That week I was teaching the origins of Mesopotamian civilization. I shook my head and muttered: ‘How Babylonian!’ When he asked who the Babylonians were here, I replied with some asperity: ‘Of course, not you, Sir. Your system of measurements’, and briefly explained about the sexagesimal counting system of early civilizations, Hebrew fascination with numbers, and why we are stuck to this day with twelve-hour days and sixty minutes, rather than dividing the day into ten hours of a hundred minutes each. Behind him, the Village Data Processor (aka secretary) made big eyes and said: ‘So, you ARE a real professor.’ She became an invaluable ally, placing my blueprints and permit applications on the Electrical Inspector’s chair—not the desk, where he could brush them aside, but rather the seat, where he could not avoid picking them up. Even the Building Inspector, sighing that he was not supposed to do so, would redraw my blueprints, with practical hints and types of materials he expected us to use.

We reduce our house to ruins

But we had to hurry up to make the house liveable. We did it in less than three months. It then took another five months or so to finish the decorative part of the job. For six weeks we nonetheless had to live like refugees on the floor in the basement, with four guests—an anthropologist from Krasnodar, his wife and two kids. Coming from Abkhazia, his wife had some experience of living in ruins, and her good humour saved us. For our appetite grew with every blueprint. If we are adding three bedrooms on the new second floor, there has to be a bathroom. Let’s make it a little more spacious than usual. With a deep whirlpool bathtub. I had bought one from a dismantled show-room at a bargain price before we started, so it had to be fitted somewhere anyway. There must be a closet. In each room. Perhaps two large closets in the master bedroom. And three, no, better five skylights—here, here, and there.

A sliding patio door would be handy. It leads to a 10-foot-wide balcony, protruding five feet. No, we can make it six feet, up to the maple tree in the back. Sixty square feet should be enough for a summer tea-room under the tree. We end up with an empty space around the stairwell, in the middle of three bedrooms and a bathroom. Too many doors there. Let’s create a visual distraction—maybe a six-foot-tall aquarium built into the corner? Then how do we support it? We sister the joists underneath with pine boards, and triple them under the projected fish-tank. The inspector suggests an additional column in the middle, to tie up the

trusses of the roof and prevent the ceiling from sagging later on. Fine: perhaps we can hang flowers from the column under the skylight overlooking the stairs? But one of the boys would be tempted to drop the flower pot on his brother's head as he climbs the stairs—that's too obvious a defensive position, overlooking the stairwell . . . And so went the hard labour of the mind.

The other major cause of extensive reconstruction was our mistakes. Most were due to lack of experience, while some should be blamed on easy access to sledgehammers. My sons (they are now ten and nine) could hold hammers and wielded them gleefully—you hit the wall, and it falls into pieces! Naturally, they soon made serious holes in the ground-floor walls, which we didn't originally plan to destroy. Then, with the old roof removed but a month before the new one arrived, it rained, with gusty wind and hail. Our hopes that a large tarpaulin would hold the water were literally dashed away. With the ceiling went the entire ground floor—so, what the heck! Another dumpster of rubble. The original bathroom was especially worthy of a sledgehammer. Five sticky layers of old linoleum over the rotten floor and tin tiles on the walls painted salad green. At one point, after I had gained some confidence in using the sledgehammer at full swing, the heavy cracked cast-iron tub flew up at me in sharp-pointed fragments.

In three weeks of hard labour we reduced our house to what I saw in Chechnya and Karabagh—just the exterior walls, as if a bomb had fallen and blown off the roof, windows, doors, leaving heaps of dusty rubble everywhere. At that point old Mrs Snyder came by and asked us to take pictures of it. I begged her forgiveness for having utterly destroyed the old home that she had so thoroughly tidied up before selling to us. 'Oh, no, not at all', she replied: 'I hated the house. Nothing good in my life ever happened while I lived there.'

But it was terribly hard to destroy. The plywood partitions would crack but not yield to the crowbar. The 8-inch bolts were inextricably held inside the plaster by steel spring 'butterflies'. Save for the concrete basement, studding, and the outside brick, the place inside was built amateurishly and frugally, without any frills. But very solidly: with just that excess of durability recommended by Iosif. It was riddled with an absurd amount of nails, screws and bolts. To enlarge the window openings, Gideon and I tried cutting the yellow silicate brick with a special

composite saw-blade. It burnt out in a couple of minutes, leaving only a groove on the surface—while we were blinded and choking with dust. Then I remembered that the ancients cut stone by pouring water over the saws. It was dangerous—our saw was electrical—but we thought of some protection, and eventually cut the windows larger. Inside they had used old newspapers for insulation, so taking a break between battering the windows and walls I would sit on a dusty pile of plaster, unroll the brittle pages and read the *Chicago Tribune* from September 1937 or July 1945. An archaeologist would have had no difficulty dating such ruins.

But the work was gratifying, I must admit. You rise before dawn to make use of every minute of daylight and work with what essentially are Lego blocks for grown-ups. Captivating, when it comes out right. Twelve hours later you only want a beer, a steak, and you fall soundly asleep. It is curious how tastes change with occupation. I really didn't want a bottle of red wine and cheese. Eventually I learnt basic carpentry techniques (but painting remained elusive—I was always bad with spreading gooey substances), and knew the rest at least in theory. I got used to wearing work-boots, pants and carpenter's belt. One day I saw from above two Black women (apparently not African-American, but almost certainly African), carefully examining my backyard. They turned out to be Jamaican, previously teachers and now housekeepers down the road. They asked me to cut them some spare boards. The older woman inquired who was the owner of the house. When I admitted to this status, she nodded: 'So you are a carpenter and you are building your own house. Good.' I explained that indeed, I was building it, but I was not really a carpenter, I actually worked at the local university. At this she scrutinized both my words and appearance and, after a pause, said: 'You mean you've never been a carpenter, but are a professor? Then what kind of accent do you have?' My confession that I was born in the Soviet Union had a surprising effect. Visibly moved, she turned to her shy companion, and said: 'Gloria, see, I told you many times. Under socialism men are totally different!' While I thought I had been overtaken by that typical petty-bourgeois philistine passion—self-exploitation . . .

Long live the home-builders' International

In fact, building a house near Chicago is a funny and informative guide to ethnic stereotypes. Our neighbour next door, Mrs Mueller, commended me for being as hard-working as an exemplary German. At the

lumber store two stocky carpenters, Assyrian by nationality and brothers in their fifties, once nearly fell to blows when I asked for their advice about various junctures in the balcony posts. One of them shouted at the other: 'Sarkis, shut up! I am older, and besides, what kind of shoddy advice are you giving to an Armenian brother? You disgrace all Assyrians this way!' Chicago has the largest concentration of Assyrians in the world today; there is even a King Sargon Street in the Devon area. But here all those who come from the former USSR—Armenians, Jews, Ukrainians, Lithuanians—are lumped together by locals in the same category: Russians. Ironically, the Soviet ambition of merging nationalities into a new supra-ethnic community has triumphed, at least for a generation or two, in the diaspora after the fall of the USSR itself. Which is not unusual of diaspora communities, I suppose.

In my experience the truly multinational, or internationalist, or colour-blind (whichever) melting pot is the sub-culture of home-builders on display in the chain of industrial warehouse stores that specialize in selling construction materials and equipment cheaply in the United States—Home Depot. Sometimes I used to make up to three trips there a day. Eventually you come to realize it is rather like a club. You end up knowing the entire personnel of the store, mostly former builders who have acquired green cards and opted for a stable job with fixed hours, and you recognize at least half the usual customers—all those small-time contractors and amateurs like yourself, who are trying to supplement their income with various degrees of ingenuity and self-exploitation.

Home Depot customers are predominantly lower-middle class, which is really the American working class. In large cities like Chicago this stratum is ethnically unbelievably diverse, yet it possesses a common class culture, if no politicized class consciousness. It is this culture that seems to override national, racial, even sexual divisions (yes, there are women there too), producing a sense of similar purpose and generalized solidarity, expressed in the ubiquitous friendly jokes, exchange of tips of the trade, advice where to buy better tools, or just readiness to help. Imagine a Ghanaian immigrant asking a Filipino and an Anglo to give him a hand in pulling down heavy batches of insulation from the upper shelves, a black American contractor advising a white American woman what door to choose, a Greek-American spending half-an-hour teaching me how to install a bathtub, a Latina woman at the cash register going way beyond the courtesy demanded by her job to help me

find a rental truck, a mischievously winking Arab helping two religiously dressed Jews push a heavy cart to the exit (I knew he was a Palestinian, but they probably didn't) and so on. This friendliness and readiness to share are certainly due in no small degree to the fact that this is a market place without acute competition. Amateurs are by definition not competitors with each other—they all have other jobs; while the contractors are too small and dispersed in a very large city to experience much face-to-face rivalry. (Although it's true my observations were made during a boom period in the business cycle.)

The construction trades themselves are divided into ethnically specialized sectors. That may also help to reduce competition. Such specialization appears to emerge more or less accidentally, and then become institutionalized for a while in the mechanisms of chain migration. For instance, practically all recent arrivals from Rumania are in carpeting and painting—taking a cue from those who came earlier. When I was looking for a heating engineer, I met three Soviet Jewish migrants from Minsk on the same day, all called Semyon. Contractors of Soviet origin congregate at a chosen restaurant in northern Chicago on Wednesday afternoons, rain or shine (weekends are for relaxation and these meetings are work). They drink heavily, trade information, and divvy-up their clients. Italians and Irish, as historically better established communities, cluster disproportionately in by far the best-paid plumbing jobs, where Jews are now joining them, while Poles mostly work illegally outside the union. Sikhs are in the mechanical occupations. White Americans and quite a few African-Americans enjoy the double benefit of citizenship and access to vocational training, often via military service. They go into managerial positions or crafts like tiling, masonry, or electrics. Conversely, former peasants from Central America are in landscaping—i.e. cutting grass and raking leaves—or roofing and other less skilled jobs, though often supervised by white Americans.

Relations of inequality do, of course, obtain, for the simple reason that those who came earlier feel entitled to better positions than new arrivals, who haven't yet experienced their fair share of suffering and humiliation. But it is a dynamic relationship, as everyone eventually becomes an old-timer and tiny new 'firms' branch out from older ones. Another reason for the relaxed or paternalistic spirit within and among construction teams, at least in the household sector, is that they normally lack formal mechanisms of labour discipline and rule enforcement.

Compliance is achieved by consensus and the authority of the current leader, who is under a constant obligation to prove his prowess, either by securing new jobs or working harder than anyone else. (This is actually how many guerrilla groups emerged in the early phases of the wars in Karabagh and Chechnya, out of previous experience in self-mobilization for construction works abroad. Perhaps the pattern was like this in Bosnia too, where so many men had been migrants to Germany.) This kind of social environment, emerging from an amateur/artisan milieu based on petty commodity production, or often even non-commodified household reproduction and mutual help, stands aside from the structures of capitalism, although in present-day America it is certainly penetrated by capitalist relations and institutions from above. What we have is a nice illustration of Braudel's notion that capitalism exists only at the highest levels of exchange, where profits are sufficiently massive and pressures of competition can to a significant extent be suppressed by the application of political or economic power.

The owners of Home Depot may be aware of such interactions, judging by the recent memoirs of its two founders. They should be credited with an innovative and systematic application of seemingly simple principles, which have allowed a gigantic corporation to grow in a short period over this non-capitalist productive milieu. To name just a few: deliberately keeping the stores looking like a busy and somewhat chaotic work-place, a warehouse or construction site, rather than a gleaming supermarket; hiring former contractors as salesmen and floor managers; allowing for almost unlimited returns of materials and tools that remain unused or proved inappropriate (the suggestion is 'Don't fear to try it, you can always return it'); reducing and hiding the presence of any bureaucratic management; bargaining over the price of left-over materials—tell us what you can afford, and we'll see if we can sell it to you. Lower rank managers can decide on prices in the frequent odd cases, just what was lacking in Soviet planning and the Soviet military. These are pretty standard managerial techniques for creating a loyal circle of customers and avoiding clogs in moving stocks through the store. But they are effective. This is how, for instance, I got my slightly chipped, oak front door at a third of the original price, along with advice about how to cover the cracks with copper, or the heavily discounted Spanish tiles for the bathroom and granite for the kitchen. The guy who helped me load the platform turned out to be a professional tile contractor. He spent a good part of his day coaching me in selecting tools, mortars and

tiling techniques, taking special pleasure in instructing a Russian. He was a former Marine who had served in Vietnam.

Here is something often overlooked about American society. The normative perception of Americans is the white middle class. It is very homogeneous, sanitized and one-dimensional, like McDonald's food. This stratum is indeed a thoroughly capitalist product—efficient, specialized, functional. The division of labour makes them one-dimensional (individuals, of course, vary, yet the tendency is certainly there). Human beings attached too closely to a specialized function tend to become boring cogs, even if they drive a Lexus. The upper-middle class in the US can afford not to know what's under the hood of their cars, how to finish floors, or where to improvise a vacation trip—they can hire a specialist for everything. The least-effort principle prescribes that if you can hire labour rather than learn a new skill, you just go ahead and think how to make some more money for another such occasion. What I describe above defies this depressing picture. There is a different America, perhaps many different ones; maybe there is even a non-capitalist America.

Well, our house is done. It is a bit on the sumptuous side—marbles, granite, Spanish tiles (Liuba laid them), stained oak doors and sills, cornices, skylights, balcony. I know pretty much every nail in it. It remains to replace the wooden cap over the front entrance (squirrels had babies in it, so it was spared for a while), and build the aquarium. More luxury had to be created to cover up our mistakes. I often parked the truck on the front lawn, and generally mistreated it in many other ways. The lawn perished, and Liuba replanted it with flower beds. We ended up looking quite different from the rest of the houses in the street, but soon flowers began appearing on other front lawns.

And, of course, the flag pole. It was quite an identity problem. The old Soviet flag? It was parsimonious and beautiful, but better not. The new/old Russian? No, unfortunately too Yeltsinite. The Kuban Cossack? I would gladly, if not for the brutes parading under it these days in my native town. A friend from Yerevan suggested the flag of Nagorno-Karabagh, so I could declare my property historic Armenian territory (we could easily find the appropriate facts in the history books) and thus stop paying taxes. But then we would have to learn to survive in a blockade, like Karabagh itself. The solution came, as in most political deadlocks, by

default. My younger son Stephan, as we discovered, had expropriated the old flag of Muscovy from a lamp post in the Kutuzov Prospekt in Moscow during the 850th anniversary of the city. He had kept it in the pocket of his backpack ever since. The flag is indeed lovely—a red field, and in the centre, the icon of dragon-slaying Sv. Georgii Pobedonosets, the Bearer of Victory. For aesthetic reasons, and by association of name, we ended by hoisting the flag of Muscovy.

You will see it when you come.