

FROM KHARKOV WITH LOVE

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FOUR years ago, as winter's icy grip moved across the Ukraine, sombre colours and darkening skies seemed to mirror a lifestyle which had little to offer since the fall of Communism.

High above, the plaintive cry of wild geese echoed forlornly across featureless steppes.

Life was becoming harsher throughout post Soviet Russian states. The Old Guard had gone, yet conditions were bleaker than ever. By October 1996 Inna and Alexander "Sasha" Ptilidi and their three children were poised to leave the tiny village of Balakleya, a settlement beside the Donetz, some 100 km south of their original home in Kharkov, the Ukraine's 2nd city (Pop 1.8 million.)

The Ptilidis were bound for a town called Masterton in faraway New Zealand. It was a leap of faith for Inna. At school she'd been taught that in America and throughout the West millions were homeless, all were poor, capitalist populations were suffering on a massive scale.

"The truth was turned upside down," she says. "But unlike many of our countrymen, we heard the lies exploded in news from Sasha's mother. She had married a New Zealander and emigrated to this country."

So what were Inna and Sasha's first impressions of New Zealand? Amazement and shock. "We could hardly believe the colours, the fresh air, smiling faces, babies on the streets.

"Fewer and fewer people can afford to have babies in the former USSR and today Ukrainian deaths exceed the birthrate." Inna was speechless at the New Zealand supermarkets; "the amount of produce and such a bewildering variety of foodstuffs."

Sasha, a trained electrician could hardly believe his eyes in Mitre 10. "It was more like a museum of technology than a shop," he recalls.

Looking back on her free education in a Communist society Inna tells how the curriculum was compulsory, offering little or no choice. "We learned geography, history (Soviet-style), Russian language, maths, physics, chemistry and biology. Basic subjects were well taught and very thorough, and at least 3 hours homework was expected every night.

"My father insisted I study piano at a Kharkov Music School. I hated it but lessons started when I was six and continued for 8 years. Today I'm glad I have those skills and recently generous friends in Masterton have given us a piano, so I can start to play again."

Throughout her school years Inna invariably heard good things about Soviet life and living, and bad things about the West.

"Ukrainian people seldom travelled large distances and I only ever visited the Black Sea resorts, ... 300 (approx) km south of Kharkov ... on two occasions. I made one visit to Moscow, and one to St Petersburg.

At Kharkov University Inna completed a degree in mechanical design and later she worked at a huge plant designing metal cutting equipment used throughout the Soviet states.

With the breakup of Communist rule and the advent of Gorbachev's 'perestroika' Russia quickly fragmented into separate states and its monolithic economy fell apart. Says Inna; "All the republics wanted their independence. But Russia tried to dominate. So even now the Ukraine government has to refer many of its main decisions back to Moscow.

Firms still operate dated and failing equipment while control shifts uneasily between local government, the 'mafia', central government and the tax department. Far-reaching change had come but many factories ceased to pay their workers.

Instead of receiving money employees were rewarded in kind. "Workers at a condensed milk plant would be paid 1000 tins of condensed milk," says Inna. "But what can you do with so much condensed milk, other than selling it?" "Engineers, doctors, teachers . professional people everywhere couldn't get money.

Many were driven to working on the streets. "Men and women would visit the former satellite countries; Turkey, Poland, Hungary - to buy cheap merchandise. Then they'd return and offer their wares by the roadside. They sold chewing gum, pencils, cosmetics, household utensils, food, clothes; anything that provided an income."

Inna and Sasha made the best of a worsening situation. In 1988 they moved to Balakleya and began subsistence farming . "Here, beside the Donetz, we grew vegetables and fruit and kept animals .. goats, chickens, geese, pigs and three cows.

At first their produce kept the family thriving. They soon discovered the Ukrainian plain is covered in deep rich loam ; gouged by glaciers and deposited when the Ice Age ended some 10,000 years ago. In this soil the Ptilidi crops flourished and soon they were producing sufficient to send to outlets in Kharkov. "We sold meat, eggs and vegetables, cottage cheese, sour cream and butter," Inna explains.

For many, any prospect of leaving the Ukraine was impossible. And entry to New Zealand was governed by the 'points system'. But Inna and Sasha were determined their children would have something better. Before too long their two boys would be called up for compulsory military training .. 24 months service; followed by a five year period during which leaving the country was forbidden.

"In fact, says Inna; "many of the new intakes were going to the war in Chechnya. Others were sent to continue the lengthy task of cleaning up Chernobyl. We knew several people who worked there, and have since died."

Fortunately Sasha's mother had married a New Zealander and both parents were living in New Zealand. "We told the military authorities that this might be the only chance the boys had to see their grandparents.

Eventually, their bid for a 'new life' became a reality. Since arriving in Masterton, Inna has completed a Polytechnic chefs course, worked as a chef at Cophthorne Resort (a hotel restaurant), helped out at a town coffee bar, Mad About Food, and taken on the increasingly popular 'Russian Jack Café ' next to Library Square.

Sasha works three days at Juken Nissho Wairarapa (timber) Mill and assists in the café when he can. In between he grows sandersonia flowers. For the future he plans to cultivate organic vegetables. "One day New Zealand will adopt organics on a much larger scale, like they do in Europe," he predicts."

Inna and Sasha's youngest son helps with the flowers, the youngest child Ksenia is still in her 5th form year at Chanel College, and their eldest boy studies law and psychology at Victoria University. Sasha misses the matchless taste and giant dimensions of produce grown on bounteous Ukrainian soils.

But New Zealand's smiles and opportunity, Wairarapa's climate, and the Ptilidi's change of fortune have captivated this industrious family . so much so that now Masterton alone, seems like home.

[Wairarapa] is the Maori name for this region.

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