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RUSSIAN DISCO

Tales of Everyday Lunacy on the streets of Berlin

'Fantastic'
Rolling Stone

Contents

Russians in Berlin

In the summer of 1990, a rumour was doing the rounds in Moscow: Honecker was taking Jews from the Soviet Union, by way of a kind of compensation for East Germany's never having paid its share of the German payments to Israel. According to the official East German propaganda, all the old Nazis were living in West Germany. The many dealers who flew from Moscow to West Berlin and back every week on import-export business brought the news back to the city with them. Word got around quickly. Everyone knew, except maybe Honecker. Normally most people in the Soviet Union tried to cover up any Jewish forebears they had, because you only had hopes of a career if your passport didn't give you away. The roots of this lay not in anti-Semitism but simply in the fact that every position that carried any responsibility at all required membership of the Communist Party. And nobody really wanted Jews in the Party. The whole Soviet people marched in step, like the soldiers on Red Square—from one triumph of Soviet labour to the next. No one could opt out, unless he was a Jew. As such, in theory at least, one might emigrate to Israel. If a Jew wanted to do just that, it

was almost in order. But if a member of the Party applied for permission to emigrate, the other Communists in his branch lost face.

My father, for instance, was a candidate for Party membership four times, and every time he failed to get in. For ten years he was deputy manager of the planning department in a small business, dreaming of one day making it to manager. In that event he would have earned a whole 35 roubles more. But for the director, a manager of the planning department who wasn't a Party member was the stuff of nightmares. It wouldn't have worked in any case because the manager had to report on his work to the district committee of the Party assembly once a month. How on earth was he even to get in without a membership card?

Every year my father made a fresh attempt to join the Party. He drank vodka by the litre together with Party activists, he sweated to death with them in the sauna, but it was all in vain. Every year his schemes foundered on the same rock: 'We really like you, Viktor. You're our bosom pal for all time,' said the activists. 'We'd have liked to have you in the Party. But you know yourself that you're a Jew and might bugger off to Israel any moment' 'But I'll never do any such thing,' answered my father. 'Of course you won't, we all know that, but in theory it's possible, isn't it? Just think how stupid we'd all look.' And so my father never got past being a candidate for membership.

The new era dawned. Now the free ticket to the big wide world, the invitation to make a fresh start, was yours if you were Jewish. Jews who had formerly paid to have the word 'Jew' removed from their passports now started shelling out to have it put in. Suddenly every business wanted a Jewish

world. Many people of various nationalities suddenly wanted to be Jews and emigrate to America, Canada or Austria. East Germany joined the list a little later on, and was something of an insider tip.

I got the tip from the uncle of a friend who sold photocopiers he imported from West Berlin. On one occasion we visited him in his apartment, which was already completely empty because the entire family were shortly to be departing for Los Angeles. All that remained was a large, expensive TV set with integrated video recorder, which still sat squarely on the floor in the middle of the room. The uncle was reclining on a mattress, watching porn movies.

'Honecker is taking Jews in East Berlin. It's too late for me to change course, I've already moved my millions to America,' he told us. 'But you're still young, you don't have anything, Germany's just the job for you, it's crawling with layabouts. They've got a stable welfare system. They won't even notice a couple more lads.'

The decision was taken spontaneously. In any case, it was far easier to emigrate to Germany than to America: the train ticket cost only 96 roubles, and for East Berlin you didn't need a visa. My friend Mischa and I arrived at Lichtenberg station in the summer of 1990. In those days one was still given a most democratic reception. In view of our birth certificates, which bore in black and white the information that both of us had Jewish parents, we were issued special certifications by an office specially established for the purpose in Marienfelde, West Berlin. These stated that we were recognised by Germany as citizens of Jewish origin. With these papers we then proceeded to the East German police headquarters on Alexanderplatz, and there, being recognised Jews, we were given an East German identity card.

In Marienfelde and at the Berlin Mitte police headquarters we met like-minded Russians, the vanguard of the fifth wave of emigrants. The first wave was the White Guard during the Revolution and the Civil War; the second wave emigrated between 1941 and 1945; the third consisted of expatriated dissidents in the Sixties; and the fourth wave commenced with Jews who migrated via Vienna in the Seventies.

The Russian Jews of the fifth wave in the early Nineties were indistinguishable from the rest of the German population by their creed or by their appearance. They might be Christians or Muslims or even atheists; they might be blond, red-heads or dark-haired; their noses might be snub or hooked. Their sole distinguishing feature was that, according to their passports, they were Jews. It was sufficient if a single member of the family was Jewish, or a half or quarter Jewish, and could prove as much in Marienfelde.

As with any game of chance, a good deal of cheating went on. Among the first hundred were people from every walk of life: a surgeon from the Ukraine with his wife and three daughters, an undertaker from Vilnius, an old professor who had done the calculations for the metal casings of the Russian sputniks and told anyone and everyone all about it, an opera singer with a funny voice, a former policeman, and a whole bunch of younger folk, 'students' such as ourselves.

A large aliens home was established for us in three prefab blocks in Marzahn that had once served East Germany's security service, the Stasi, as some kind of leisure centre. There we could now enjoy our leisure till further notice. The first in line always get the best deal. Once Germany had definitively been reunified, the newly arrived Jews were evenly distributed around the federal states. From the Black Forest to the woods

of Thuringia, from Rostock to Mannheim. Every state had its own rules governing their admission.

In our cosy home in Marzahn we heard the wildest stories. In Cologne, for instance, the rabbi at the synagogue was asked to assess just how Jewish these new Jews really were. Unless they got a signed testimonial from him, there was nothing doing. The rabbi asked one lady what Jews ate at Easter. 'Gherkins,' said the lady: 'gherkins and Easter cake.' 'What makes you think they eat gherkins?' demanded the rabbi, agitated. 'Oh, right, now I know what you mean,' returned the lady, beaming. 'At Easter we Jews eat matzos.' 'Well, fair enough, the fact of the matter is that Jews eat matzos all year round, and that means they eat them at Easter too. But tell me,' enquired the rabbi, 'do you actually know what matzos are?' 'Of course I do,' replied the lady, delighted, 'they're those biscuits baked to an ancient recipe, with the blood of little children.' The rabbi fainted clear away. There were men who circumcised themselves purely to avoid questions like these.

We, being the first arrivals in Berlin, didn't have to undergo any of this. Only one prick in our home came to grief, and that was Mischa's. Berlin's Jewish community discovered our settlement in Marzahn and invited us to dinner every Saturday. Their attentions were lavished on the younger emigrants in particular. Cut off from the outside world, and lacking a knowledge of the language, we led a fairly isolated life in those days. The local Jews were the only people who took any interest in us. Mischa, my new friend Ilya and I went every week. A large table was always set, with a couple of bottles of vodka waiting for us. There was not much to eat, but everything had been prepared for the occasion with loving care.

The principal of the community liked us. Every now and then he'd want to give us 100 marks, and insisted we visit him

at home. I didn't accept the money, because I realised that what was involved was not friendship pure and simple, though I found him and the other members of the community likeable. But they were a religious community in quest of new members. Once you enter into a relationship of that kind, sooner or later you are expected to give something in return. So on Saturdays I stayed in the home, roasting chestnuts in the gas oven and playing cards with the pensioners. My two friends, however, kept on going to the community gatherings and delighting in the presents they were given. They became friends with the principal and lunched at his home on several occasions. One day he said to them: 'You have shown yourselves to be good Jews, so now you have only to be circumcised and everything will be perfect.' 'Forget it,' Ilya shot back, and was gone. Mischa, who was of a more thoughtful disposition, stayed. He was tormented by his conscience on account of the cash he had accepted and the friendship of the principal, so now it was he who atoned for all our sins in the Jewish hospital in Berlin. Later he told us it hadn't hurt at all and even claimed it had heightened his sexual prowess.

For two weeks he was going about with a little tube peeping out of a surgical dressing. At the end of the third week, half the male residents in the home assembled in the washroom, hardly able to contain their curiosity. Mischa presented his prick to our view—as smooth as a sausage. With pride he expounded the nature of the operation: the foreskin was removed by laser, absolutely painless. But his prick left most of those present disappointed. They had expected something more, and their advice to Mischa was to let this Jewish business alone, advice he subsequently took. Some of the residents in the home were uneasy about the future and returned to Russia.

At that time, no one could understand why the Germans were choosing to accept us, of all people. In the case of the Vietnamese, say, whose home was also in Marzahn, not far from our own, it was perfectly understandable: they were the migrant workers of the East. But Russians? Perhaps police headquarters on Alexanderplatz had misunderstood something when they processed the first Jews, got it wrong, and ever since the worthy officers had been carrying on regardless, rather than admit their mistake? Much as they did when the Wall came down? But, like all dreams, this one was soon over. Just six months later, no more admissions were being made on the spot. Applications now had to be made in Moscow, and then you'd have a year or so to wait. Then quotas were introduced. At the same time, all Jews who had immigrated up to 31 December 1991 were granted refugee status and all the rights of citizenship except the right to vote.

These Jews and the Russian Germans constituted the fifth wave, though the Russian Germans are another story entirely. All the other groups taken together—Russian wives or husbands, Russian scientists, Russian prostitutes, students on scholarships—don't add up to a single per cent of my countrymen living here.

How many Russians are there in Germany? The editor-in-chief of Berlin's biggest Russian newspaper puts it at three million. And 140,000 in Berlin alone. But he is never quite sober, so I give no credence to what he says. After all, three years ago he was already putting the figure at three million. Or was it four? But it's true that the Russians are everywhere. The old editor is right, there are a lot of us, especially in Berlin. Every day I see Russians in the street, in the underground, in the bars, everywhere. One of the women who works on the tills at the supermarket where I do my shopping is Russian.

There's another at the hairdresser's. The salesgirl at the florist's is Russian too. Grossman the lawyer, though you would hardly believe it, originally came from the Soviet Union, just as I did ten years ago.

Yesterday in a tram two youths were having a loud conversation in Russian, thinking that no one could understand what they were saying. 'I'll never do it with a 200mm. There are always lots of people around him.' 'Then use a 500.' 'But I've never worked with a 500.' 'Fine, I'll call the boss tomorrow and ask for the instruction manual for a 500. But I don't know how he'll react. You'd be better trying with the 200. You can always try again.' Right.

Presents from East Germany

For a long time, my parents and I lived behind the Iron Curtain. Our only link to the West was the TV programme 'International Panorama', which went out on Channel One every Sunday right after 'Agricultural Round-Up'. The presenter, an overweight and always mildly stressed political analyst, had been on the road for years on important business: explaining the rest of the world to my parents and millions of other grown-ups. Every week he set out to spotlight on screen the whole range of contradictions inherent in capitalism. But the man was so fat that you could hardly see the foreign parts behind him.

'Over there, behind the bridge, the hungry unemployed are sleeping in old cardboard boxes, while up on the bridge, as you can see, the rich are driving by on their way to their places of recreation!' Fatty would report in a programme on New York—City of Contrasts. We stared at the screen as if we'd been hypnotised: up at the top you could see a bit of the bridge and one or two cars crossing it. These mysterious foreign parts didn't look particularly appealing, our man couldn't be having an easy time of it over there. But for some reason

the political analyst didn't want to pack in his job, despite all the misery and squalor of the Western world, and kept on going back year in, year out. If the countries he happened to be visiting were poor, he praised the values of collectivisation and solidarity. Reporting from Africa, for instance, Fatty would say: 'Over there, behind my back, monkeys are attacking people, and monkeys are invincible because they stick together.'

Our family had another semi-legal source of information about life in foreign parts: Uncle Andrei on the third floor. He was a big cheese in the union of some secret works and it was no problem for him to travel to union meetings in Poland or even East Germany. Which he did at least twice a year. Every now and then Uncle Andrei and his wife came round to see my parents, invariably with a bottle of foreign schnapps. They barricaded themselves in the kitchen and our neighbour told them what it was really like abroad. Needless to say, the children were not allowed to listen. I was quite good friends with Uncle Andrei's son Igor; we were in the same class. Igor wore all kinds of foreign things: El Pico jeans, brown running shoes, even sleeveless T-shirts, which you could not get at home. Though Igor was the best-dressed boy in our class, he didn't boast about it, nor was he mean. Whenever I went to see him he'd give me some little thing or other. Before long I had a whole collection of what I called 'presents from East Germany', consisting of beer mats (the point and purpose of which was utterly beyond me), a bag of gummy bears, an empty Orient brand cigarette pack, an audio cassette, a stick of Lolek and Bolek chewing gum, and a transfer featuring some cartoon characters I was unfamiliar with. Igor wanted to be a union official one day like his father.

Once my father helped Uncle Andrei repair his Volga. In exchange he received a bottle of blue Curaçao, partly empty. The blue fluid had a powerful effect on my father's view of the world in those days. Not that he drank it. But by the blue light of the bottle, which stood on our bookshelf for quite some time, he grew more and more suspicious of the political analyst who presented 'International Panorama'. The presenter himself began to change as well. He became more thoughtful, and was increasingly at a loss for words to describe foreign places. In 1986, under Gorbachev, he suddenly disappeared from the TV screen. Doubtless he stayed for good in some land of contrasts or other. Not long after, the Iron Curtain came down, everything changed, the blue Curaçao gradually turned grey, and the world began to show its true face.

Father's Advice

In Russia we treasure every new idea and every scrap of ancient wisdom as our national heritage, something to be handed down from generation to generation.

The notion that I should move was my father's. It was 1990 and the Gorbachev era was gradually drawing to a close, though he didn't realise it. My father did, though. One sunny day over a beer he announced: 'Great Liberty has returned to our country. People are celebrating her arrival, the singing never stops, and neither does the drinking—with a vengeance. But Liberty is only passing through. She never does stay in Russia for long. Son, grab your chance. Don't just sit around drinking beer. The greatest of all freedoms is the opportunity to get out of here. Best get a move on. Once Liberty has made herself scarce again, you'll have all the time in the world to stand around wailing: "O blessed moment, stay, you are so fair!"'

My friend Mischa and I went to Berlin. Mischa's girlfriend flew to Rotterdam, his brother moved to Miami, and Gorbachev went to San Francisco. He knew someone in America. For us, Berlin was the simplest. You didn't need a visa to go there, not even a passport, because at that date it wasn't yet a part of the Federal Republic. The train journey cost only 96 roubles. It wasn't far to where we were headed. To raise the money for the ticket I sold my Walkman and my cassettes of Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Mischa sold his record collection.

I didn't have much in the way of luggage: a smart blue suit that a pianist had handed down to me, 200 Russian cigarettes, and some photos of my days in the army. With what was left of my money I bought a few souvenirs at the market in Moscow: a Russian doll lying pale-faced in a tiny coffin—I thought it was funny—and a bottle of Farewell brand vodka.

Mischa and I met at the station. He didn't have much with him either. At that time a lot of Russians were on the move, trying to sell this and that, and half the train consisted of romantics like ourselves, looking for adventure. The two days of the journey just flew by. The vodka with 'farewell' on the label was drained, the cigarettes were smoked, and the Russian doll vanished in mysterious circumstances. When we alighted at Lichtenberg station, it took us a few hours to get our bearings in our new surroundings. I was hungover and my blue suit was crumpled and stained. Mischa's leather waistcoat, which he had won off a Pole playing cards in the train, was also in urgent need of a clean. Our plan was simple: meet some people, establish contacts, find somewhere to live in Berlin. The first Berliners we got to know were gypsies and Vietnamese. We quickly struck up friendships.

The Vietnamese took Mischa along to Marzahn, where they were living in a home for aliens. There in the midst of the Marzahn jungle they raised him, just as Tarzan once grew up in the movie. The first words he learned here were Vietnamese. Now he is doing media studies at the Humboldt

University of Berlin, and takes offence whenever I call him Tarzan.

Back then, I went along with the gypsies and ended up in Biesdorf, where they were living in what had been an East German army barracks and had now been converted into a home by the German Red Cross. At the entrance I had to surrender my Russian ID. In exchange I got a bed to sleep in, and a foil-wrapped meal with the legend 'guten appetit'.

The gypsies felt just fine behind the barbed wire of the barracks. Right after lunch they would all head off into the city to do their business. In the evenings they would return with a sack full of cash and, often enough, an old car too. They never counted the money in the sack, they simply spent it at a pub in Biesdorf. It paid for drinks for the whole night. Then the tougher among them would get in the old car and crash it into a tree on the big yard behind the barracks. That was the climax of the night's fun. After a fortnight I was fed up with the gypsy life. I decided I wanted a steady bourgeois existence and moved to Prenzlauer Berg, where I found a tiny empty flat in Lychener Strasse, with an outside toilet. There I led a squatter's life till later I got married and rented a big apartment in Schönhauser Allee, and my wife had two children, and I learned an honest profession and began to write.

A First Apartment of My Own

For an eternity I had been dreaming of an apartment of my own. But it wasn't till the fall of the Wall that my dream came true. In the summer of 1990, once my friend Mischa and I had been recognised as members of a Jewish minority who had fled the Soviet Union, we ended up by a circuitous route in the enormous aliens' home that had been established in Marzahn. Hundreds of Vietnamese, Africans and Russian Jews were quartered there. The two of us and a friend from Murmansk, Andrei, managed to secure a one-room furnished apartment on the ground floor.

The home was all life and bustle. The Vietnamese discussed their future prospects in Vietnamese, not yet knowing anything about flogging cigarettes. The Africans cooked couscous all day long and in the evening sang Russian folk songs. Their knowledge of the language was amazingly good. A lot of them had studied in Moscow. The Russian Jews discovered six-packs of beer at 4.99 marks, traded cars among themselves, and made their preparations for a long winter in Marzahn. A lot of the residents complained to the staff that the people sharing their apartments weren't really Jews; they

ate pork and went jogging round the block on Saturdays, which a genuine Jew would never do. These complaints were an attempt to get rid of their neighbours and have the assigned Stasi accommodation all to themselves. It was a regular war for space. Late-comers had a particularly hard time of it: they had to share their apartments with as many as four other families.

The three of us weren't especially charmed by life in the home and cast about for an alternative. In those days the Prenzlauer Berg part of Berlin was considered an insider tip for people looking for a place to live. The magic of those times when the Wall first came down hadn't yet come to an end there. The locals were heading for the West in droves and their flats were available, though they were crammed full of everything imaginable. At the same time a veritable counter-wave was arriving in the area from the West: punks, foreigners, members of the Church of the Holy Mother, weirdos, every kind of adept at the art of getting by. They moved into the flats, tossed the model railways that had been left behind on the garbage dump, stripped off the wallpaper and broke through the walls.

The housing authority had no idea what was going on any more. The three of us roamed from one building to the next, staring in at the windows. Andrei became the lucky owner of a two-room apartment in Stargarder Strasse, with an inside toilet and shower. Mischa found an empty flat in Greifenhagener Strasse, admittedly with neither a lavatory nor a shower but with a music centre and huge speakers, which suited his interests far better. I moved to Lychener Strasse. Herr Palast, whose nameplate was still on the door, had been in a distinct hurry. He had left almost everything behind: clean bed linen, a thermometer by the window, a clean

fridge, and even a tube of toothpaste on the kitchen table. A little late in the day, I'd like to take this opportunity of thanking Herr Palast for everything. I'm especially grateful to him for the continuous-flow water heater he constructed himself, truly a technological miracle.

Two months later the days of squatting on the Prenzlauer Berg were over. The housing authority awoke from its torpor and declared everyone living in the buildings at that moment to be the rightful tenants. They would be provided with proper tenancy agreements. For the first time, I stood in line with two hundred others, all of them punks, freaks, holier-than-thou locals and feral foreigners. According to the rent agreement I would be paying 18.50 marks a month for my apartment. And that was how my dream came true: a room of my own, all 25 square metres of it.

My Father

When my mother and I left Moscow in 1990, my father was overjoyed. He'd killed two birds with one stone. For one thing, he was proud to have found his family a berth in the safety of exile in these difficult times. It had involved a certain amount of self-sacrifice and, all in all, had not been easy. Not everyone managed it. For another thing, after thirty years of marriage he finally had some peace and quiet and could do as he pleased. He was an engineer, and when the company he worked for went belly-up, as almost every small business did in the post-Soviet period of early capitalism, my father quickly hit on a solution. He drove around the city and discovered two tobacconists that charged very different prices for identical items. So in the mornings he'd buy at the one store, and in the afternoons he'd sell at the other. For a while he got by nicely in this way.

He reacted like a child to every novelty the market economy brought with it, without ever being especially surprised or regretful. When the crime rate soared to ever greater heights, he boarded up all the windows. He transformed the corridor into an arsenal: crowbars, knives, an axe, and a bucket for

enemy blood, were all at the ready. In the bathtub my father hoarded food stores. He converted the kitchen into a lookout. Most of our items of furniture he chopped up into small pieces, one after another, in case there should be a sudden energy crisis. Whatever the news on TV, the confusions of the Perestroika era left my father cold. In the long run, though, his fortress became his prison. In 1993, worn out, he decided that he too would move to Berlin, in order to reunite the family: 'Familienzusammenführung' was the long German word noted in his passport.

Once here, he fell prey to depression, because after his long and arduous struggle he had nothing to do any more, surely the worst thing that can happen to you at sixty-eight. Simply to enjoy the sweet fruits of advanced capitalism went against the grain. My father longed for new tasks, for responsibility, for a life-or-death struggle.

Seek and ye shall find. And so my father hit on the idea of taking his driving test. It gave him something to keep him busy for the next couple of years. Three times he changed driving school. His first instructor leapt out of the car in the midst of moving traffic, swearing in three languages. The second submitted a written refusal to occupy the same vehicle as my father. 'Herr Kaminer looks at his feet all the time whilst driving,' he complained in his letter to the head of the driving school. Of course that was a lie. It was true enough that my father's eyes were never on the street when he was driving but were fixed somewhere down below. But he wasn't staring at his feet, he was keeping an eye on the pedals so he didn't step on the wrong one.

The third instructor was a man of mettle. Once he and my father had spent several hours together in the car and had looked Death in the eye, they were like brothers. This instruc-

tor finally managed to talk my father out of the notion of getting his driving licence.

Another long period of depression ensued, till he discovered 'Die Knallschoten', a cabaret act in the Weissensee part of Berlin, by and for senior citizens. He promptly joined. In their new programme entitled 'No reason to keep quiet'—a satire on problems of the present day, 'fun but with a sting in the tail!'—my father plays the foreigner. I never miss a show and always take him a fresh bunch of flowers.

My Mother on her Travels

My mother spent the first sixty years of her life in the Soviet Union. Not once did she cross the borders of her homeland, despite the fact that in 1982 her best friend, who married a German stationed in Moscow and moved with him to Karl Marx Stadt, repeatedly invited my mother to visit her there. The Party Secretary at the Institute of Mechanical Engineering where she worked would have had to sign the assessment that was needed if she were to make such a journey, and he never did so. 'Foreign travel is an honour and carries responsibility,' he told my mother every time. 'You, however, have not been conspicuous in the field of social or political work, Mrs Kaminer. I conclude that you are not yet ready to undertake a journey of this sort.'

Only when the Soviet Union collapsed was my mother 'ready to undertake a journey of this sort'. She emigrated to Germany in 1991. She quickly discovered one of the great liberties afforded by democracy: freedom of movement. Now she could go anywhere. But how far does one really want to go, and how big is the world to be? The answers to these questions were supplied pretty much of their own accord once my

mother familiarised herself with the tour programme of Roland Reisen, a cheap bus tours operator in Berlin. No buses go to America, Australia or India, that's for sure. But there are still long journeys to be made. You have the feeling you are embarking on far-flung travels yet at the same time you're somehow still close to home. It's practical, economical and fun. Roland Reisen tours, though popular, are often cancelled due to lack of bookings, but even so my mother has now been on around two dozen bus tours to quite a number of destinations, from Spain in the south to Denmark in the north.

In Copenhagen she photographed the Little Mermaid, who happened to be lacking her head once again. In Vienna the tour guide told my mother that Wiener sausages were called Frankfurters there, and moreover that the only decent coffee to be had was in the restaurant by the town hall, and that Stapo was an abbreviation for the police. In Paris the bus driver couldn't find anywhere to park so they sat in the bus all day, driving round and round the Eiffel Tower. At Lake Wolfgang my mother bought genuine Mozart Kugeln, the roundest pralines in the world, which she has been giving me for Christmas ever since. On Charles Bridge in Prague they came close to colliding with another tour bus. In Amsterdam it happened to be the Queen's birthday and lots of blacks were dancing for joy in the streets when my mother arrived in the Roland Reisen bus. In Verona she viewed the memorial to Shakespeare's Juliet, whose left breast has been left small and shiny by the hands of countless tourists. My mother wasn't able to take a trip to London, though, because Britain is not part of the Schengen Agreement and it wasn't till she was in Calais that she realised that she required a special visa for the UK. She ended up spending twenty-four hours photographing every other building in Calais, and next day when the bus

passed through on the return leg my mother climbed aboard for the ride back to Berlin.

The fact that she had not even got close to Big Ben and Tower Bridge didn't trouble her greatly. She now knows the ropes of bus travel, and for her to travel is a more important thing than to arrive.

The Sweet Homeland Far Away

My wife Olga was born on the island of Sakhalin, in the town of Okha—1,000 kilometres from Tokyo, 10,000 kilometres from Moscow, 12,000 from Berlin. In the town there were three primary schools numbered 5, 4 and 2. Number 3 was missing, and rumour in Okha had it that the school was swept into the sea by a snowstorm thirty years ago, because it had one floor too many. Close to the three schools were the town's penal and reform institutions: near school 5 was the law court, near school 4 the mental asylum, and near school 2 the prison. This proximity had a great educational impact and made it easy work for the strict teachers of Okha to tame the local youngsters. They had only to point or glance out of the window to remind their pupils of what lay in store for them if they didn't do their homework on time.

To the delight of the children there was no school whenever a snowstorm beset the island or the temperature dropped under minus 35 Celsius. Then they would all sit at home looking forward to the autumn vacation. For there were only two seasons on Sakhalin: the long winter and then, from the end of July, when the last of the snow thawed, the autumn. With the autumn came large numbers of ships bringing delicious treats such as dried watermelon rind for the kindergartens, so the children would have something to get their teeth into. From China there were dried pineapples, dried bananas, frozen plums and Chinese sandstorms. From Japan there were Japanese Big John jeans, which were invariably too small. Nevertheless, the people of Sakhalin always queued for them. Everyone went on about the Japanese, staggered that they could even survive with such short legs and such fat behinds. But every family had a sewing machine at home and altered the Big Johns to suit their own requirements.

The programme of entertainment on the island was fairly monotonous. In winter my wife sat with the other children in the only cinema on Sakhalin, the Oil Workers' Cinema, watching old Russian and German movies such as *Three Men in the Snow*, *Lost in the Ice* or *Three Friends on the High Seas*. The children were the first generation native to the island, apart from the Nivkhis, the aboriginals of Sakhalin, who were gradually nearing extinction on a reservation at the south of the island. The children's parents were all geologists or oil drillers, and came from all fifteen republics of the Soviet Union. In the autumn the children liked to go swimming. There were two lakes in the town, Pioneer Lake and Komsomol Members' Lake. Pioneer Lake was small, shallow and dirty, but Komsomol Members' Lake was a respectable depth and was clean. There was another place to go swimming too, known as Bear Lake, about two kilometres beyond the city limits, near Cape Calamity. But nobody dared go because of the racoons which had mutated through the influence of the Chinese sand-storms into dangerous amphibians, a kind of Sakhalin crocodile. Apart from the racoons there

were other animals there too: brown bears, foxes, and any number of hares that lived in the big field behind the hospital. There were no wolves any more. The last Sakhalin wolf was shot at Cape Calamity in 1905. It was honoured with a concrete memorial, but at some point in a snowstorm this tipped over and fell into the water. Cape Calamity was so named not because of the wolf but because it marked the end of the trail, time and again, for prisoners who had escaped and were trying to make it to the mainland. Either they disappeared under the ice or they were shot by the soldiers.

All the adults on Sakhalin were paid the northern latitudes bonus, which doubled their pay. They were also entitled to retire earlier. Children on Sakhalin weren't even paid the regular rate. At the age of twelve, on the airfield at Khabarovsk, Olga saw a sparrow for the first time in her life. 'Mamma, Mamma, look at those huge flies,' she exclaimed. 'Those are sparrows, you daft Kartoga kid—not flies, sparrows,' a man snapped back in some agitation. To judge by his appearance he had just served a sentence and was waiting for the next plane south. He laughed, drew greedily on his cigarette and swore. 'Bloody sparrows, bloody country, bloody kids, bloody taiga!'

When she was sixteen, Olga finished school and flew to Leningrad to learn a sensible trade. A few years later she moved to Germany, which is a terribly long way from her homeland, it's true, but even so she has a lot of time for Berlin.

My Wife Alone at Home

My Olga is a plucky person. She lived for a long time in the Chechen capital, Grozny, so now she is afraid of next to nothing. Her parents were geologists and spent fifteen years on Sakhalin looking for oil and mineral deposits. Olga went to school there. In eighth grade, since she was top of the class, she got a reward. She was flown on an outing to the tiny island of Iturup, by helicopter. Shortly after she arrived, the infamous eruption of the volcano, Mount Iturup, occurred. Olga played her part: that is to say, she ran around the island screaming, with the fishing folk who lived there. In the taiga of Sakhalin, Olga was chased by bears and other wild animals on several occasions. Even as an infant she could handle a gun.

When their contracted term on Sakhalin was over, her parents bought a little house on the outskirts of their home city, Grozny. It was just before the war broke out. When the Chechen uprising began in the city, the house was surrounded by Chechen rebels and fired on. Her parents defended their property and shot back with their hunting rifles, from every window of the house, out into the dark Caucasian night. Olga's job was reloading. She had to fight for her life on other

occasions later, too. Now she has been living for ten years in the peaceful city of Berlin; but her appetite for great deeds has not quite deserted her.

I happened not to be at home when there was a sudden power cut. It wasn't only our building that was affected: the whole of Prenzlauer Berg had no electricity. There had been a short circuit, and for an hour the entire district was without power. It was almost like a real natural disaster; bank cards refused to emerge from cash dispensers, cinema shows stopped dead, traffic lights were out of action, and even the trams weren't running. But my wife had no knowledge of any of this. When the flat was plunged into darkness, she simply decided to solve the problem herself. Candle in hand, she descended to the cellar, where the fuse-box was. Outstretched on the floor below the fuse-box lay a man, motionless. 'That must be the electrician,' my wife promptly decided; 'he must have disregarded the safety regulations and the short will have killed or at least seriously hurt him.'

Quickly she ran back up the steps and knocked on all the doors, requesting the neighbours in loud tones to help her carry the electrician upstairs. But the neighbours were all secure in their darkened apartments and had no intention of helping to retrieve the dead electrician. The only ones who opened their door were the Vietnamese on the first floor. But they too were afraid to go down into the dark cellar with my wife. And so she decided to drag the electrician out of the cellar all by herself. She had a suspicion that his body might still be live with voltage, so she borrowed a pair of rubber gloves from the Vietnamese. Then down she went again, heaved the man up, and hefted him up the steps. In her arms, the dead electrician began to show signs of life. When the two of them had reached the second floor, the power came back on. Under the electric light, the half-dead electrician proved to be a boozed-up wino who had found himself a cosy spot in our cellar. Once he had come round, he politely asked my wife if she could spare him any change, given that she was already carrying him around. My wife stood there on the staircase somewhat embarrassed, still wearing the rubber gloves, holding the candle in one hand and the wino in the other. Even the Vietnamese, who usually keep very much to themselves, had a good laugh at her. Nowadays it isn't so easy to satisfy an appetite for great deeds.

My First Frenchman

The first Frenchman I got to know in Berlin was called Fabrice Godar. The two of us and an Arab girl were hired for a theatre project, on a government-subsidised job scheme. He was a cameraman, I was a sound technician, and the girl was a seamstress. The government subsidies were aimed at giving work to the lower strata of the people, who would otherwise hardly have a chance in the job market: the elderly, the handicapped, and foreigners.

The North Berlin job centre had written to tell me to go to a pub, the Krähe, for a job interview at 10 p.m. So I went. About a dozen men and women were sitting at a long table. A fellow with a moustache, a cigar and a glass of whisky in his hand was the ringleader. This wasn't Heiner Müller or Jochen Berg, however, nor was it Thomas Brasch or Frank Castorf. This man had a strong resemblance to Che Guevara and was planning a theatre revolution.

With my Russian accent I got the job on the spot. Fabrice got a job too and we were soon mates. He measured up perfectly to the clichéd picture I had of a Frenchman: he was thoughtless, superficial, open-minded, and fixated on women. We sang the Internationale together and Fabrice told me he was still a virgin.

Some time or other he decided he would take advantage of this government-subsidised project to get rid of his virginity once and for all, and became Sabine's lover. She was married to one of the actors, a man ten years older than Fabrice, and they had a grown-up son. For her it was a little adventure; for Fabrice, however, it was his first great love, with all that that entails. Their relationship came to an end a little later in a truly French fashion. The husband came home from rehearsals earlier than expected. Sabine hid Fabrice in the wardrobe. An hour or so later the husband wanted to change, opened his wardrobe, and discovered the French cameraman within.

A Frenchman in the wardrobe: ridiculousness of such an order ought to be confined to comic movies. In this case, however, it was sad rather than silly. Sabine's husband went to the theatre and informed everyone that, following this incident, he would no longer be capable of playing the principal role in our Brecht play. And this was two weeks before the premiere! All of us went round to Sabine to thrash out the matter together. She was very understanding, and struck Fabrice off her list of lovers. After which, the Frenchman broke down totally. He no longer turned up at the theatre, and grew ever more depressed. One day he couldn't stand it any more and went to a psychotherapist, whom he told everything about Sabine and the wardrobe, saying that he could not sleep since it had happened. The doctor promptly asked him how long he had been unemployed. Quite a time, Fabrice replied, but that had nothing to do with it. The doctor was of an entirely different opinion and prescribed him a new antidepressant with

a long-term effect, developed in Germany specifically for the treatment of people who take early retirement or the long-term unemployed, who have problems sleeping and suffer from depression. 'Come and see me again in six months' time and we'll see how things are getting on,' the doctor said in soothing tones.

The effect of the jab held. Fabrice became indifferent. He slept like a baby and spent the rest of his time watching DSF, the German sports channel, on television. He forgot to go shopping or to wash, and didn't even call his father in France any more, which he had previously done once a fortnight. We were all extremely concerned about him, but did not quite know how to help. One day his father turned up in a big Citroën and took Fabrice back to France. There the French doctors at some specialist clinic managed to counteract the effects of the German injection. Fabrice recovered his health and now works for the post office, like his father.

The Everyday Life of a Work of Art

It was autumn when I first met the Russian sculptor Sergei N. at an exhibition opening in the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts. A man of thirty-five, composed, self-confident and assured. We were both pleased, since it is always good to meet a fellow countryman abroad, and an artist to boot. His eyes alight, Sergei described what he was working on. It seemed that for years he had worked only with concrete. He held lighter materials in contempt, he told me. The work was called Mother Heart and represented a medium-sized seashell with a point in the middle from which several beams radiated out. I recognised immediately that Sergei was a man of great gifts. The Mother Heart posed an immense question to all mankind: Why? A heart of concrete, the suffering of matter and the passion of stone.

We had tea together and talked about art. I asked Sergei what his work meant. He shook his head and said: 'Better if we go and have a vodka!' Subsequently I forgot about the enigmatic shell. It was winter now, and the first snow was falling. Sergei called and told me that he had entered his shell in the big competition for a Holocaust memorial. It symbol-

ised all the pain of humanity in concentrated form, he said, a scream cast in concrete. I could well imagine the shell as a Holocaust memorial. We got together again, as this news clearly called for discussion. We talked about art, drank tea, and then moved on to vodka.

Some weeks later I heard from Sergei that his work had been turned down on the pretext that it was too small for a principal Holocaust memorial. He had nonetheless not given up the hope of finding the right place for his shell some day. For a while after that I would think about contemporary art, especially over a cup of tea, but then I forgot the whole business again.

Spring arrived and the days grew warmer once more. Sergei had been invited to Prague. His shell was to be placed as a memorial to the wholesale rape of Czech women by Soviet soldiers when they invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. Sergei asked whether I thought it would be better to ship the shell to Prague by truck or train. We arranged to meet for tea, and sat together for a while talking about art and even planning to make the trip to Prague together. In the event, though, it didn't work out. A fortnight later, Sergei learned that the deal was off: the entire project was under reconsideration, for budget reasons. Back home I leafed through art magazines for some time after, but then I stopped and returned to everyday matters.

At last it was summer. The trees were in leaf again and the grass was growing. Sergei asked if I could help him transport his shell to Hamburg, to an erotica fair, where it would be expressing the unrequited desire for vaginal contact. We had terrific fun in Hamburg. The men flocked around Sergei's masterpiece, scratching at the concrete. A middle-aged woman stopped in her tracks when she saw the sculpture,

flushed, and looked around uncertainly. A few days later we loaded the shell on the trailer and drove it back to Berlin. We were both hungover and went our separate ways. For a while the memory of Hamburg stayed with me, but then I forgot all about it.

Autumn came round, the days grew cooler, there were fewer people about in the streets. One day, wandering the city aimlessly, I happened upon an adventure playground in Wedding. The children were swarming all over a giant snail that rose out of the sand. Despite its fresh paint, I instantly recognised the Mother Heart of old. Some things you never forget. It looked magnificent as a snail in that playground. The children seemed thrilled with it too. Sergei had good reason to be pleased with himself and the world. I went home with a spring in my step and a song in my throat.

Out of the Garden of Love

In the late Eighties I often met up with other youths in the foyer of the Cinema of Movie Classics in Moscow. We were drop-outs and we all had nicknames. So did the foyer; it was known as the Garden of Love. It was called that because in winter it was warm there and hardly anyone went to the cinema. We met practically every day and talked about the most important matters. The subject that interested us most in those days was not girls or drugs but emigrating. Our biggest heroes were those who had managed to get across the border. Those were people we could somehow identify with, because all of us felt there was somebody after us: the police were after the older lads, and Mum and Dad were after the younger ones.

For one friend we called Prince, though, the subject took on obsessive proportions. He collected every newspaper report about escapees and meticulously stuck them into a scrapbook. He knew them all—the wily East German family that had sewn a hot-air balloon out of raincoats and flown across the border, the Estonian couple who coated themselves in goose fat and swam the 100 kilometres to Finland. They were in the cold water for two days, but after that they were in sunny Finland for the rest of their lives. Prince also knew the story of Sachanevich the painter, who dived off a ship while on a Black Sea cruise and made it to Turkey. He knew about Petrov the sculptor who had sprayed himself with bronze paint and pretended to be a statue awaiting shipment to an exhibition in Paris. Petrov spent a whole week in a crate but he never made it to Paris. A customs official opened up the crate at a stop in Amsterdam, because the stench of shit was overpowering. From it emerged the bronze-painted Petrov, requesting political asylum as a persecuted artist. Vitali, the Prince, dreamt of pulling off a similar coup and was preparing thoroughly for it. But my other friend, Andrei, known as the Pessimist, pronounced all Prince's ideas useless and laughed at him. 'We're in slavery here for ever. No matter how cleverly you plan your escape, the Soviets will fetch you back.'

It was a surprise to us all that Andrei proved the first to make a break out of the Garden of Love and into the big wide world. When the Pope visited Poland, the soldiers on the Polish border with White Russia couldn't keep the faithful back. A special regulation was hastily introduced to cope with them: pilgrims were permitted to enter Poland in small groups, using a list of names but without needing a stamp. In those days, with his beard and long hair, the lean Pessimist looked every inch the religious fanatic. He had no difficulty joining one of the groups of pilgrims. Barely were they across the border when he separated from them and travelled on to Germany, without giving the Pope so much as a glance. He managed to get as far as France, and when he was hitchhiking near Paris he met a Russian who offered to help him. The Pessimist settled in Paris and worked in a Russian book-

shop there. For the past five years he has been living off his painting.

Meanwhile Prince was to be found almost daily on Arbat, the main tourist street, chatting up elderly foreign ladies in pursuit of his latest escape plan. Women from Sweden or Finland were his preference, if at all possible. He had got the notion that in those countries there was a shortage of capable men. Just as he finally began to abandon hope, he met a girl from Denmark, a journalist. She ended up smuggling him back with her to Copenhagen. A little later I was sent a copy of the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, with his toothless grin on the front page. 'This man lost all his teeth on the streets of Moscow,' ran the headline. Prince told me in a letter that the Danish parliament had convened an extraordinary session on his account, and he was accorded political asylum. Recently he founded his own company.

In the meantime, both of my friends have become European, which is to say that they have changed a great deal. We communicate only rarely these days, and then by email.

The Sergeant's Wedding

A friend of mine, a former sergeant in the Soviet army, has been living illegally in Germany for the past ten years. In 1989, that all-important year for this country, he abandoned his post, then still a young sergeant, climbed over the fence, and hid out in the gym of a Mecklenburg primary school near his barracks. There he made contact with some of the pupils, explained his unfortunate situation to them, and exchanged his boots and uniform for a pair of gym shoes and sportswear. Dressed in this manner he managed to get to Berlin. Without any socks.

The next ten years of his life were distinctly placid. He got a job with a party catering company and rented a small room in a flat shared by Russians. A non-drinker and non-smoker by conviction, and disciplined by his long service in the army, he never had any brushes with the police, nor they with him. What was more, he even rose through the ranks at the caterers', from dish-washer to shift superintendent. After ten years of hard work and thrifty living the sergeant had managed to save the considerable sum of 20,000 marks, under his pillow. That money, he hoped, would provide the solution to what

seemed the only problem he still had to tackle: re-entering society by legalising his status. But how was it to be done? The time-honoured canniness of all illegal immigrants told him a bogus marriage was the thing.

Taking advice, he decided to place a small ad. At first he was reluctant to betray his true intentions, and opted for a perfectly normal, 'typically German' style of personal ad. The sergeant studied the columns for months, to familiarise himself with the 'German way' of phrasing an ad, and at length inserted his one-liner in several publications simultaneously: 'Cuddly bear seeks cuddly mouse.'

The result was astounding. The poor sergeant was in greater demand than 'Elderly gentleman would like to hear from young women', which has been a staple in the Berlin small ads columns for years. Most of the cuddly mice turned out to be women over forty, with an over-complicated bundle of relationships in their baggage, and a stack of frustrations to match. Shy as he was, the sergeant did not feel equal to their problems, and pulled out every time.

Before long he changed his tactics. In the next ad he used the word 'reward', which he felt signalled the true intentions of the groom. Someone in Eberswalde called him, offering him a Russian-German woman for 10,000 marks. The sergeant went over to Eberswalde, where an entire village of Russian-Germans from Kazakhstan, from babes in arms to grandmothers, turned out to witness this quest for a bride. The sergeant, wary and suspicious after his long years of illegal living, pulled out once again. 'Russian women are so romantic,' he told me that evening over a glass of vodka. 'Even if they're only marrying for the money, they want everything to be just right for the groom, and want to be sure they look their best when he goes to inspect the bride.'

A little later the sergeant made the acquaintance of a broker, a Persian from Azerbaijan who assured him he could procure any sham bride he might conceivably want, from girls on welfare to professional working women, if need be, for the sum of 15,000 marks, and five years down the track he would conscientiously dispose of her.

'Two-thirds of the money goes to the woman and I get one-third. Come round and we'll talk it over man to man,' the Persian proposed enticingly. 'My office is in the Forum Hotel. And rest assured—I'm married to a German myself, she's even a lawyer, we work together.'

I smelt a whopper of a rat when I heard this story, and the sergeant changed his mind too when he was already in the lobby of the Forum Hotel, with the money on him, and turned on his heel. By now, the others he shares the flat with are all convinced he will never get married. He is simply too shy, too choosy, and furthermore too broody, they say. Right now he is making another attempt, and goes to a disco in Sophienstrasse every evening. He doesn't dance, he just stands at the bar, scrutinising everyone else. What he hopes to achieve by doing this, he hasn't told me.

Relationships in the Berlin Hothouse

It is often said that Berlin is the singles capital of Germany. But people in the city only laugh when they hear this. No one but some shallow-witted journalist who puts more faith in statistics than the evidence of his own eyes can suppose anything of the sort. The statistics are lies and always were lies. Statistics are used to lying. Berlin is not a city of singles. It is a city of relationships. To be precise, the city is one great romantic hothouse, that instantly draws in every newcomer. Everyone lives with everyone else. In winter the hothouse is invisible, but in spring you see it again. If you make the effort to trace the relationships of one solo person far enough back, before long you'll realise that the person in question, at least indirectly, has had a thing with the entire city.

Take our friend Marina—though any friend, of either sex, would be just as good an example. But let's take Marina anyway, because every evening she sits in our kitchen telling us the details of her private life. This involves us indirectly in her stories too. Marina, then. Last year, when her husband left her for a ballerina whose ballerino, away performing in Munich, had suddenly fallen for his best friend's daughter, who was twenty-three, single, pregnant, and in the deepest depression because her boyfriend had run off with a beautiful Egyptian woman who worked for TUI, the package holidays company, and happened also to be called Tui. But back to Marina: her husband was gone and that meant there was a threat hanging over her whole life and livelihood. For about ten years, Marina had been studying satellite geodesy at the Technical University. She had studied and studied and had got so proficient that she could calculate the gravity of the planets Mars or Venus precisely simply by glancing out the window of a bar. Gravity, it seems, is different everywhere. But she still hadn't written her diploma dissertation. And now Marina urgently needed a job. At lightning speed she wrote her dissertation on some funny pair of twin satellites in orbit together around the Earth, and sent out three dozen job applications.

Presently a construction company in need of an engineer got in touch with her. Marina went for an interview and didn't come home. Her fourteen-year-old daughter was desperately worried and phoned us at midnight. It wasn't till the following day that Marina arrived home—with a new job, and a new man. The interview had been conducted in a garage, she told us later. The young builder had recently caught his wife with another man, and in frustration had moved out into the garage for the time being, with all his stuff. It was serving him as the office of his construction business too. So he'd just been through a rough time, and was looking for someone to help him get back on his feet. It was love at first sight. The interview was short, Marina landed the job on the spot, and they went to dinner together. The young businessman confided his secret dream to Marina: a house on the shores of the Black

Sea, with a veranda and a view of his own yacht. 'How would you feel about sitting on that veranda with me?' the man asked Marina in earnest tones. He was firmly resolved and wasn't going to take 'maybe' for an answer. 'Yes, maybe,' said Marina, 'if my daughter would be welcome there as well.' 'Your children will always have a place on my veranda,' the besotted businessman assured her.

Next day he moved out of the garage and into Marina's flat. At first everything seemed perfect. Marina met his parents, and even his ex-wife, who tore out a handful of her hair at their first encounter. But in the course of time the veranda came to feel more and more cramped. Marina couldn't handle a round-the-clock relationship for longer than a fortnight. The man moved back into the garage. Every day she took him something to eat when she went to work. One day on her way she met a nice policeman. Some person unknown had stolen an umbrella from her car, and the policeman who handled the matter fell in love with Marina there and then, and asked her to dinner. He called her every fifteen minutes, but in the event he didn't turn up to their date. Probably the officer was shot in the line of duty, thought Marina. Meanwhile her daughter had acquired her first boyfriend at school. He was a resourceful lad: he simply gave the daughter a mobile phone, and then bombarded her with red-hot email messages. Marina was distinctly concerned. Time and again she warned her daughter to be careful. No one knows for sure what today's new technology might be doing to you.

Which Marina's latest man, an Indian computer engineer, was happy to confirm.

The Russian Bride

Over the past ten years, which I have spent in Berlin, I have got to know a good many Russo-German married couples, and I believe I can claim that if there is one universal means of delivering a man from all of his problems at a single blow, then it is a Russian bride. Does your life seem boring? Are you out of work? Are you suffering from an inferiority complex, or acne? Get yourself a Russian bride and soon you won't know yourself.

For one thing, loving a Russian woman is a very romantic business, because there are any number of obstacles to be overcome before she is yours. For instance, you have to submit a declaration of income to the Aliens Office, to demonstrate that you can indeed afford a Russian bride. If not, the lady won't be issued a residence permit. An acquaintance of mine, who as a BVG employee apparently didn't make enough to be able to marry his Russian beloved, wrote dozens of letters to Chancellor Schröder and bombarded the Foreign Office with complaints. It was a tough struggle. But it was worth it: now the man has his bride and has been given a raise into the bargain.

What's more, I know a large number of Germans who had been unemployed and depressed for a long time and then speedily found a job and even embarked on successful careers simply because they had fallen in love with Russian women. But then, they had no option, because Russian brides are very, very demanding, not to say expensive. Not only do they invariably want to look good themselves but they also insist that the man always be dressed in the very latest style, which means he is forever having to buy new, expensive clothes. 'Is this really necessary?' the men ask, in the early days, but before long they submit readily enough. Simply everything has to be just so. For the wedding a Russian bride wants a white dress, a church, a register office, and afterwards a good restaurant with as many guests as possible. Thereafter she will devote herself entirely to family life, though she will also pursue some pretty studies or other at the same time. Such as singing, at a private academy. This is very popular with Russian brides. In Berlin alone I know three women who go to singing school, and it's not cheap!

The Russian bride inspires a man with courage, gives new meaning to his life, protects him from enemies if he has them, and always stands by him, even when he screws up. But in your everyday life with her, caution is advised. The Russian bride is sensitive and requires particular care and attention.

Unfortunately, conflict with her cannot simply be laid to rest with a bunch of flowers. It takes more. If the dispute is serious, the best thing is to run, quickly. When her fury is aroused, the Russian bride is a tigress. So it is most important to know exactly what the legal basis of a Russian bride's status is in the Federal Republic of Germany. The Russian department at Radio MultiKulti frequently covers this topic, in its programme 'A Lawyer Advises'.

'I recently married a young German and moved in with him,' a Russian woman will write from Celle, say, 'and now I have been given a residence permit for three years by the German authorities. If something were to happen to my husband suddenly, such as a fatal car crash, would my right of residence be rescinded or not?' 'In that eventuality, dear lady,' the lawyer advises, 'your right of residence would not be rescinded. But it would nonetheless be better if your husband were to remain alive another year or so.'

Love Rules the World

I was asked to assist the manager of the Palace of Tears nightclub in a Russian affair of the heart. He had fallen in love with one of my countrywomen, in a brothel, and meant to get her out. She, however, neither spoke nor understood any German. When we met up, the woman, Diana, told me that in fact she was in love with another German entirely. I really should meet him, she assured me: Frank was a ventilation technician, and he too had discovered Diana in the brothel. The girl was from a White Russian village by the name of Goziki and had come to Berlin on a forged Polish passport to seek her fortune. Both of them had been absolutely bowled over when they met. It was love at first sight. Frank did not waste time thinking it over and proposed to Diana. He knew he was taking a real risk, since he hardly knew the girl. But where he lived in Spandau he had the experience of a neighbour constantly before him, a construction engineer who had married a Czech prostitute and was getting along famously.

At all events, Diana at first turned down Frank's proposal. She was still very young and wanted to earn some decent money before later maybe settling down to start a family. The knocking shop where she earned her daily crust was not doing especially good business, though. The proprietor of the brothel was hopelessly in love with one of his girls. She was forever getting pregnant, but she didn't much care for the man. The proprietor was gradually losing the will to live. He got drunk every day, and was losing weight. The other girls tried to comfort him—and got pregnant as well. The brothel was turning into a fine hothouse of relationships.

One day the proprietor vanished, leaving the women to fend for themselves. The brothel was closed down. In desperation, Diana called the only regular customers she had: first the manager of the Palace of Tears, then the ventilation technician. In the end she turned up at his place in Spandau. This time she accepted his proposal. The technician took a week's sick leave and a 5,000-mark loan with the Noris Bank. Then off they both went to Goziki in White Russia, to get married. There Frank was promptly confronted with the savage customs of White Russia. Even before they had left the railway station, their luggage was stolen. The bridesmaids accused Diana of betraying her homeland and gave her a black eye. Frank was also attacked by some of the locals, on patriotic grounds. After this, though, everyone became the best of friends. The wedding was celebrated in the village's biggest hall, the primary school gym. Frank bought five crates of vodka for the men and five of port for the women. The merrymaking lasted two days and would have continued but for Diana's father ruining everything. Overjoyed, he went down to the River Goziki to go swimming, drunk as a newt—and never came back. People were kept busy a whole day trying to recover his body from the river. Slowly but surely the wedding festivities turned into a funeral wake.

Once this was over, the newly-weds returned to Berlin.

Diana was detained at the Polish-German border. It turned out that she was banned from entering the Schengen states because of the forged Polish passport she had previously been using. Frank was obliged to continue his journey alone. Every day he phoned the Aliens Office. He wrote to the Foreign Office, the Federal Chancellor, the Minister of Family Affairs, and the Supreme Court. And two months on, he achieved the impossible: the bureaucratic machinery, normally invincible, capitulated to their love, the ban on Diana's entering the country was lifted, and now she is in Berlin once more. And the moral of this story? Goethe was right after all: love really is stronger than anything else.

The Girl and the Witches

Even these days there are many people with a materialist view of life who still have a penchant for the metaphysical. They see a distinct significance in things that others consider unpleasant or beneath contempt. If someone is dissatisfied with himself, he promptly thinks his bed ought to be in a different corner of the room, or foreigners are to blame, or even extraterrestrials. Not to feel responsible oneself, and yet to find everything of interest, is a condition that we owe to metaphysics. We seek a miracle that will resolve all conflict, an immediate, once-and-for-all salvation.

When our Russian friend Marina's husband suddenly left her because he had fallen head over heels for a ballerina, after ten years of marriage, she was in a state of shock. It was the end of the world, she visibly lost weight and couldn't sleep properly any more. We saw a pretty funny side to the story, because Marina had been up in arms at the uncultured habits of her husband for an eternity. He was forever watching TV at home, showing not the remotest interest in intellectual public life. And what happened? One day the lout gave in and went to the ballet, and promptly fell for the first dancer he'd