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Alma-Ata or Tashkent?

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan March 1996

Adam Smith Albion

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more of Turkey, I will abroad to Central Asia.

So I serve notice that the second dozen of these Letters will start out on a new foot; that I leave the Black Sea basin behind, warmly bidding the ghosts of Xenophon and Ovid farewell for now, and bringing my own *Epistulae ex Ponto* to a close.

I had postponed the move long enough. Departure from Trabzon was overdue, yet I kept delaying. When at last a mood of decisiveness came over me, therefore, it was not a chance to be squandered but to be acted upon at once. I was not prompted to do this by any sudden sense of disaffection with Turkey and environs. Far from being dissatisfied with Trabzon I had come to regard it as home. Nor was I under any illusion that I had "done" the Black Sea, exhausting it of all its secrets and surprises. On the contrary, increased familiarity with the Pontic region had only brought me face-to-face with my own ignorance and misconceptions, to which I have testified in these letters time and time again. Moreover, the Black Sea had often brought me good luck, of which these letters also abound in examples. In that sense, it has lived up to its classical name Euxine, "friendly to strangers." Having fortune on your side in some of the world's trickier places is not a thing to be sniffed at.

On the other hand, my landlord's mother regularly enacts a ritual designed to remind me that I will lose my good fortune if I take it for granted. Approximately every three months she finds a day when I am out, lets herself into my apartment and shifts all the furniture around. The point of this quarterly exercise is to ward off the Evil Eye, lest routine breed complacency and tempt Fate. Her lesson was not lost on me, as I debated whether to sit comfy in Trabzon or propel myself elsewhere. Both luck and opportunity favor those who meet them half way.

I do not mind admitting to a superstition of my own: a secret conviction that Fate has been angling Eurasia into my ken for a long time. I am driven to Central Asia in part by powerful associations conjured by its name, although those associations are wholly personal and may prove to have no more objective validity than Columbus' inexpugnable self-assurance that in Hispanola he had found the Indies. The groundwork was laid, improbably, in February 1990, when terrific jet-black clouds gathered over Prague. I watched this famous thunderstorm build up from my living room, and I will not be alone in remembering it. First the storm advanced on the city from a distance, blanketing it like a besieging army. Spires and cupolas were plunged into Cimmerian gloom, stripped for once of their proud self-

importance. To my mind, Prague's baroque fancywork, which made a virtue out of being attenuated and fragile, was exposed as deridably puny in the face of weather on a scale to which Europe was unaccustomed. Then the sky broke with a roar and hammered down like a fist pounding a toy town.

The moral to this story might simply have been the disproportion between Man's art and Nature's jackboot, if I hadn't blended into these impressions one of my favorite reveries. For I used to enjoy dreaming about the Mongols (indeed, about *being* a Mongol), imagining the comprehensive take-over of Europe by Genghis Khan and his family. (In my version, for instance, the Krakow trumpeter never manages to sound the sennet in time and the town falls.) As rain lashed down that afternoon, the pathetic fallacy was brought to bear on my daydream and its maunderings. Weren't those hordes of horsemen scudding across the sky? Wasn't it raining arrows? Games like these are common fare for any willfully poetic imagination. A new thought, however, got lodged in my spiritual makeup. As I fantasized the steppe peoples' power and mobility, in time something called Central Asia emerged as my imaginary counterpoise to *smallness*. In particular, Prague in its worst aspects: dainty, painfully delicate, so petty that sometimes it simpered, and so self-consciously precious that it could out-do a Victorian Miss or the heroine of a Gothic novel.

Those indomitable Chinggisids and Timurids, on the other hand, products of a geography that was rugged and brutal but could never be mocked, pointed the way to a wholly different way of living, the apogee of which need *not* be conquest and destruction. I began to think: would they not have issued out of vast spaces where huge clouds and winds and mythic darknesses did *not* seem disproportionate or overwhelming? In fact, to someone who had struggled with the inhuman agoraphobia of those empty steppes, not to mention the mountain fastnesses, wouldn't Western urban life seem rather — trivial?

In fact, didn't life *out there* cut closer to the bone? And wasn't that what *I* was looking for, fleeing an idjet existence in the West? In which case, could there be a better way of stripping off the contrived apparatus swaddling the spirit than to wrestle with the challenge of Central Asia?

I *do* have a sense of humor about myself, and I cannot re-read my diary from 1990 — from which some of the last three paragraphs are lifted — without smirking a little. I have shed my *naiveté* about geographical determinism, but first impressions never completely fade. Those fighting words still resonate; the associations are still there. I know they will inform these letters even against my better judgement. I have given fair warning.

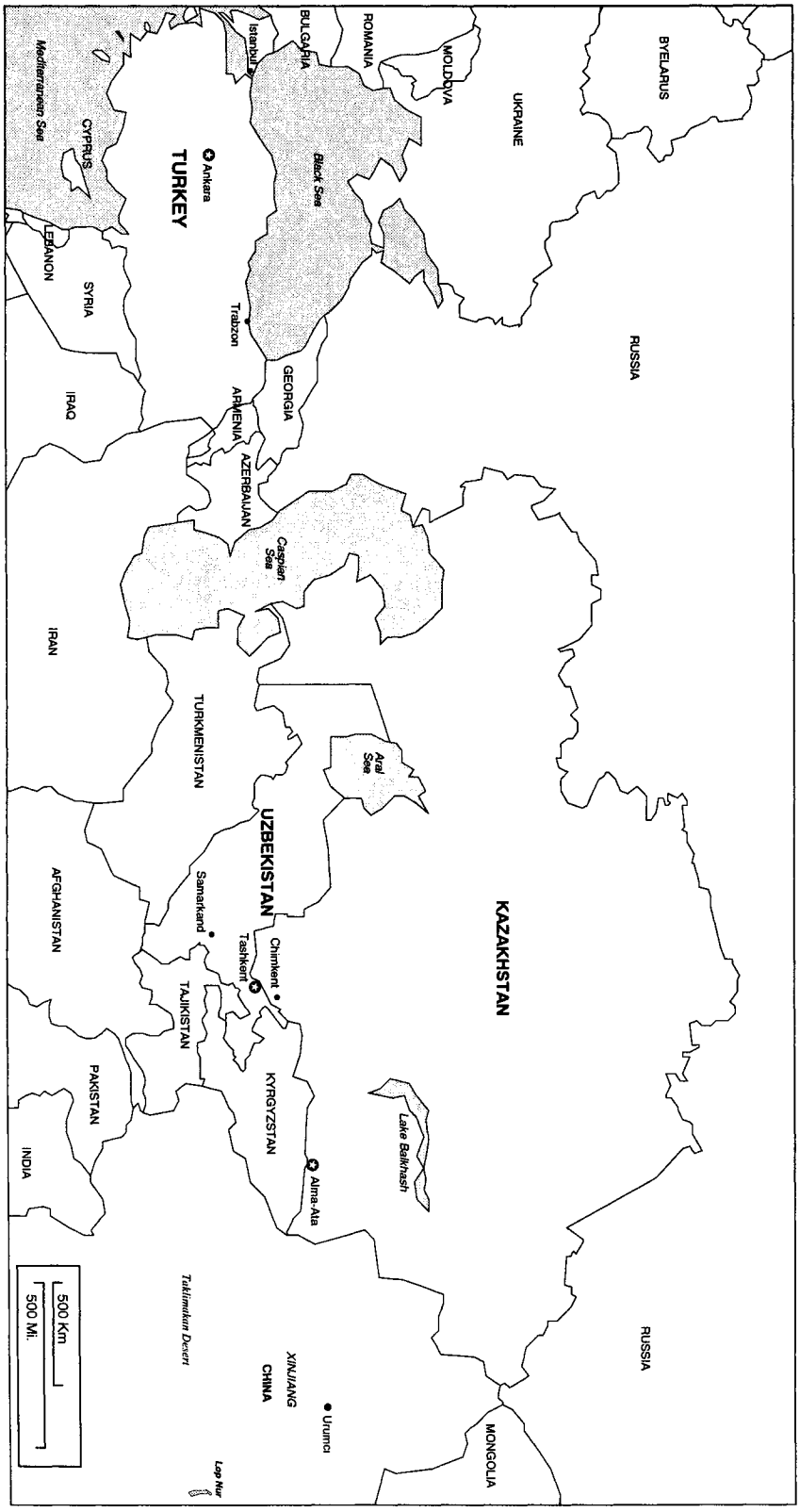
Is this fixation really that different, though, from the fascination exercised by the American West with its open spaces, celebrated as a catholicon for deepening one's character and expanding one's vim and vigor? Admittedly, more Americans seek rugged picturesqueness than asceticism through bleakness. The inhabitants of Arizona may not share my enthusiasm for being punished and tempered in the Kyzyl Kum Desert. And the idea that adversity is improving is hopelessly old-fashioned. Yet no one cocked a snook at stylites or Franciscans. There was a time when ascetics were not considered masochists. Nowadays self-discipline is deviant behavior. Ah, there are no saints any more.

"I have shed my *naiveté* about geographical determinism, but first impressions never completely fade."

Between the idea and the reality...falls the Shadow

This letter describes my first scouting mission to Central Asia. It may read as one long scramble across an obstacle course. My resolution to set off at once proved easier said than done. Snags, red tape, consulate officials and overzealous policemen all feature prominently in the pages that follow, plus obstacles of my own making. As if these were not kill-joys enough, I have been debilitated by a frustrating (hepatitis) disease that I brought home from Eurasia, that is responsible for the caesura between ASA-12 and 13.

I bought a Turk Hava Yolari airticket for Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, in the late autumn of last year. I left myself twenty-five days' leeway in which to secure a tourist visa from the Uzbek consulate in Istanbul. I had been assured this would be ample time, although the application process was rather round-about. I submitted my visa request to a Turkish travel agency, Sunpak, which booked me a room at the Intourist hotel in Tashkent. The hotel formally confirmed the reser-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Aral Sea
UZBEKISTAN
KAZAKHSTAN
Samarkand
Chimkent
Tashkent
AFGHANISTAN
TAJIKISTAN
KYRGYZSTAN
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Taklimakan Desert
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vation by writing to the Uzbek Foreign Ministry. Conditional on the Ministry's approval, I could be invited as a bonafide tourist in Uzbekistan. A letter to this effect had to be sent from the Ministry to the consulate in Istanbul. Only on receipt of this communication from Tashkent would I be considered eligible for a visa .

Unsurprisingly in retrospect, no news had come from Tashkent after twenty-five days. I was forced to delay my flight twice, waiting on the Uzbeks who sat on my passport for over a month. On the eve of having to push forward the flight a third time, there was still no end in sight. I marched up those by-now familiar stairs on Cumhuriyet Ave. and let off steam by shouting at the consul a bit. He snapped back that I would receive a visa whenever it suited *him*. Having intelligently precipitated a personal animosity, I could envisage the happy day receding into an incalculable future. I snatched back my passport, stomped down the stairs and issued into the evening air, alternately flushed with just indignation and beating my brows over the idiocy of having burnt my own bridges.

My first plan was to board the airplane despite everything and cast myself on the mercy of the border guards in Tashkent. I weighed my chances of talking or bribing my way through passport control. Uzbekistan's reputation as the most repressive of all the ex-Soviet states bar one, Turkmenistan, put paid to that idea. (However, my friend and competitor, Dr. Yutaka Akino,[1] recently entered *and* exited Xinjiang without a Chinese visa — a veritable three-bagger in our informal rivalry, a brilliant act of juvenile boldness probably requiring me to match it with one of my own.) In contrast to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan sounded a softer touch. As portrayed in the West, it was Central Asia's most progressive country, and my flight touched down in its capital Alma-Ata. My last act at Istanbul airport was to inquire at Kazakh Air whether Americans needed a visa. I was assured the requirement had been waived. I suspected I had been misinformed, but I boarded anyway.

Battling my way into Alma-Ata

I arrived in Alma-Ata at 8:00am on a freezing morning and jumped ship. The city has a grand situation, 3,000 ft. up in the foothills of the Trans-Alay Alatau mountains. As I shivered on the ice-covered tarmac the peaks swept out a great half-arc to the south. Passport control was conducted in slow motion, indistinguishable from water torture. Needless to say, Kazakh Air *had* misinformed me. Not only was I short a visa; the Kazakh guards were deeply disturbed by my lack of a stamped and notarized invitation from a local institution, one copy of which should have been processed prior to my arrival by the Foreign Ministry.

The responsible officials seemed unsure what dungeon to throw me into. They couldn't hand me back to the Turks, because the airplane had left during the interminable passport formalities. Meanwhile the other passengers had passed through the control gate. I was left to wander around the hall trying to provoke conversation out of the Russian soldiers who were eyeing me, petrified with boredom. They loosened up after my first round of off-color jokes, then began to thaw when we shared tea in the guardroom. In short, for distracting them from their ennui for three-quarters of an hour I was duly rewarded with a slap on the back and a three-day transit visa for $30, which I was advised could be extended by the police.

"Tempers kept popping, now here now there, igniting around the hall like marsh gas."

If I imagined I would now stride through the gate, whistling an air, onto the streets of Alma-Ata, I was cruelly deceived. Once past passport control, I slung my bag over my shoulder, rounded the corner and scanned the way ahead. With my mouth popping open I slowly set the bag down again.

I had walked smack into mountains of luggage, crates, boxes, plastic bags and canvas sacks as high as a man. My first reaction was to disbelieve this horrific sight and look for another way out. I was at the back of the 120-foot-long customs hall. As far as I could see there stretched an unbroken crush of baggage and people, who generally *sat* on their goods since there was virtually no floor space to put their feet. Some, clearly at the end of their tether, were uselessly pushing and pinching one another. Others were sitting in a torpor as if they were too lethargic to lift their heads. Tempers kept popping, now here now there, igniting around the hall like marsh gas. I took my place at the back among my fellow passengers from Istanbul who

1. See ASA-5

had not advanced one inch, although the foremost ones had over a two-to-three hours' headstart on me.

I had died and gone to Dante's *Inferno*: the *malbowge* of suitcase traders who had bought *too much stuff*. Toward the front of the crowd were passengers who had flown in the previous night from Pakistan and India. Occupying the middle were arrivals from Russia, and Uighurs and Chinese Kazakhs from Urumci in Xinjiang. And clogging the rear were my party from Turkey, who had made their purchases in Aksaray and Laleli in Istanbul. I had observed those transactions in Turkey many times, huge bales being toted off to foreign destinations. I had never dreamt, however, that the end of the tunnel looked like this.

Gingerly I maneuvered myself forward about three yards, tiptoeing around hands and feet, chary of dislodging anyone too far. I was to become less discriminating later on. I worked my way in among a party of Uighurs, with whom I found I could communicate, more or less. Alma-Ata airport was always a bottleneck, according to them, although this was the worst jam they had seen. There were a number of reasons for the pile-up. *First*, it appears that Kazakh Air restricts the amount of baggage that can be checked, like any normal airline, but perversely does *not* impose any realistic limits on hand-baggage. Hence commercial flights disgorge huge loads that one would expect to see shipped by cargo planes. Furthermore, my Uighur informants blandly admitted that they had cut a deal with Kazakh Air clerks at Urumci Airport to allow them to stuff the aircraft even fuller. They had paid under the table to take over extra seats for their excess baggage, even though it meant some passengers with valid tickets were bumped from the flight. Presumably the unlucky ones were told the flight was overbooked? The Uighurs shrugged — the inconvenience of others did not concern them.

Second, Kazakh customs officials put *every* piece of baggage through an X-ray scanner and then laboriously opened them anyway, one by one. There were only two men on duty that day, and I could easily imagine that they were not models of speed or assiduity. However, I never actually observed them working, but only gleaned the procedure from the Uighurs, because,

Third, afore-mentioned X-ray scanner had broken down during the night and there was no one on hand to fix it. Naturally, to do without it until the repairmen came or it could be replaced was unthinkable. Improvisation was not an option. The customs officials did not even entertain the notion of changing the procedure, so hundreds of people were made to wait for hours on end in a cold room without facilities, and no escape in sight.

It was noon. I had grown bolder, or perhaps only more desperate. By stepping on the torpid ones and steering clear of anyone who still had some fight left in him, I had managed to make a little headway. But to fight past *all those people* from there to the front... that could not be done. Or so I thought. Four Han Chinese, men in their thirties carrying shoulder bags and briefcases, were my lifeline out. Their patience had clearly run out. I saw them confer in a huddle and nod. They faced forwards and began walking... up. They overcame obstacles by climbing or trampling them. In single file those four began ruthlessly to stamp on whatever stood in their way. Shouting, kicking, using their bags as shields, they literally mowed down the opposition... They were animals. I had never seen behavior that crass before.[2] Yet I should not be judging them, for I saw the main chance and I took it. I fought my way to their single file and as it passed I slipped in between the front two men and the rear two. Thus, shunted along in the middle, I was convoyed through the crowd the way that submarines convoy battleships. I know I stepped on at least one man's shoulder, because he cursed me in Russian but as he made a grab for my leg to pull me down and I kicked his hand away. Somewhere along the way my watch went missing — it must have got stripped right off my wrist. My leather jacket got torn around the waist.

"Shunted along in the middle, I was convoyed through the crowd the way that submarines convoy battleships."

About the fifth row from the front, I disengaged from the file and sheared off. (They, however, con-

2. My sister, however, who has had far more experience with Chinese than I, describes how she was standing once at the end of a hopelessly long line at Guangzhou train station, when three men offered to help her. For a tip, they bludgeoned their way to the front, beat up the man standing first in line and cast him aside, paid off the policeman to look the other way, and installed her right in front of the window, ready to buy her ticket.

tinued all the way through, stepped over the X-Ray and contrived an exit.) At that moment I felt an elbow dug into *my* ribs. A large, red-headed woman was shoving *me* aside and not giving any quarter. I cried out. This is how I met Miranda Spottiswoode, a bluff, bully, immensely likable Englishwoman living in Alma-Ata with her very English family. Her husband is Director of Audit at Arthur Andersen, while she runs an English-Kazakh arts exchange and promotion company called Axis Art. She had come from business in Urumci, where she had been studying the work of Uighur circus performers.

"I've bloody well had enough of this," she shouted, and pretty much dragged me by my collar to the metal barrier. In terms that brooked no delay, she informed the guard that she and *her assistant* had pressing business with the Minister of Culture — she dropped names — and if we were not shown deference, heads would roll. Imperious Westerners still command clout in the ex-USSR (I myself skipped a long line at Moscow Airport last August by holding a U.S. passport aloft and shrugging at the irate Russians) but no one can muster a tone of command like a woman born and bred in the Home Counties. We were ushered through with alacrity. No one noticed that Miranda and her assistant had arrived from different destinations.

"A large, red-headed woman was shoving *me* aside and not giving any quarter. I cried out."

The foregoing is a faithful account of how this writer cleared passport control and customs at Alma-Ata airport.

Battling my way out of Alma-Ata

Edige Nurpeisov, the doggedly determined office manager of Arthur Andersen, deserves his place in the pantheon of my heroes. His "secondment" to me as part of the operation to extend my transit visa lasted much longer than anyone had anticipated. I owe a great debt to him: an upright and distinguished man in his 50's, with a face as stonily serious as a Sioux's, he had better things to do. For three days I practically monopolized his time, as he was my Virgil through the Kazakh underworld of police bureaus and red tape. By the fourth day he had pulled off a visa for me. By that time, the original transit visa had expired but I presumed the new one superseded it. Alas, this presumption was to have consequences.

Meanwhile, I explored Alma-Ata (Almaty, in Kazakh) and even grew fond of it. Three years ago it housed 1.2 million people, but since half a million Russians emigrated from Kazakhstan in 1994 the population may have dropped. The city is 20 sq. km in area, and the wide streets are built on a uniform rectilinear plan. Since most streets are identical and thickly lined with trees, with relatively few shops or restaurants to distinguish them, I got lost in the grid quite easily. (It is surprising how much one relies on storefronts, posters, billboards and other capitalist paraphernalia for orientation in a city. Imagine trying to distinguish the streets in Manhattan if one could go for blocks without seeing a single sign.) The original settlement here was a Russian fortress built as a frontier outpost in 1854 (named Verny in 1855), and the city's regular pattern is a legacy of the military mind that sees order in perpendiculars.[3] It was named Alma-Ata, which means "Father of Apples," in 1921 after the apple orchards for which it is famous.

From south to north the streets run downhill, and I noted irrigation ditches alongside most pavements. I wondered if this might be an above-ground sewer system such as I've seen in China, but in all other respects Alma-Ata appeared so hygienic[4] and carefully engineered, more European than Eastern, that I doubted it. Another possibility was to channel away flash floods running off the mountains. This did not strike me as very probable either, since the mountains were at least 20 km away. However, when I visited the well-known Medeo ice-skating rink in the foothills, I did see a 140-meter dam erected, I was told, as a precaution against floods and mudslides that bring down talus and boulders.

Cerruti and Boss have boutiques on Zhibek Zholy, Alma-Ata's pedestrian shopping boulevard, and Adidas has opened on nearby Prospekt Seyfullina, but I did not have the sense of a capitalist explosion happening around me. I guessed that the goods in Central Department Store were essentially unchanged, although some prices might be steep in a country where the official min-

3. In that sense, Alma-Ata resembles Split, which grew out of Diocletian's fortress palace.
4. An ironic observation, taken from the notes I took in Alma-Ata, since I later came down with the hepatitis that I caught there.

imum monthly wage is $35. The surest sign that Kazakhstan is drumming up Western business is the gleaming new five-star Marco Polo Hotel, situated behind the Alma-Ata circus. The only sounds in the hotel's central lounge are the ping of signals in the glass elevators and the muted undertones of deals being brokered in English. Most of the business being transacted in that hotel concerns oil. I can testify to this personally, after having spent an afternoon eavesdropping around the bars and restaurants. By holding a Russian newspaper prominently and looking unkempt, I tended to allay the suspicions of anyone wearing suit and tie and discussing affairs in English. Four executives lunching at the next table completely ignored me as they hammered out a memorandum of understanding on the make-up of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (and whether it should be called "Consortium"). They should have discerned I wasn't your everyday Russian off the street — for one thing, the hot chocolate I was drinking cost $4.75 a glass!

I have mentioned the general dearth of signs or billboards around Alma-Ata, but an exception were the banners hung over one particular intersection near the center of town. In red and black lettering, both Russian and Kazakh, they read:

Allah is Great! Close the Polygons!
Attan!!! Kazakhstan!!!
World March! March of Peace!

I often gravitated to that intersection during the twelve days I was in Alma-Ata, trying to hunt down whoever was responsible for this cryptic message to the universe. At last I found him, admiring his own handiwork. A tall, middle-aged Kazakh man in a knee-length brown robe and a felt *kalpak* hat, he gave every indication of being a little insane. He talked in a flood and not always too coherently. "Polygons" meant "nuclear test sites." My interlocuter claimed to be the President of the anti-nuclear group Attan, specifically intent on halting Chinese nuclear testing at Lop Nur, across the border in the Taklimakan Desert. It is true that, not long before, 200 hundred Kazakh activists *had* protested the continued use of Lop Nur by trying to walk to China from Alma-Ata until they had been stopped by their own police 30 km from the Xingjiang border, and that they had called their action "the March of Peace." But when I asked him whether Attan had been the group responsible, or how he had got permission to fly his banners, I simply could not get answers. How many members did Attan have? "We are millions, millions!" What further activities was Attan planning? "We will never surrender!" Who was funding them? "No nuclear pollution in the Pacific. Chirac should resign!" What, for the love of God, was his name? "Down with the Polygons!"

All this time, I was lodging at the hostel for circus performers. It was situated behind the permanent circus tent and conveniently close to Miranda's office. My passport was being held at the desk. One night I returned from the Lermontov Theatre (the performance had been Abai's "Fire and Ice") when all the receptionists started shouting at me at once. When I heard what had happened, I was wrathful. One of the women had been leafing through my passport that afternoon and noted the two-day hiatus between my first (transit) and second (extension) visa — a period during which I was technically illegal in Kazakhstan. She had called the police. The police arrived and congratulated her on her excellent sleuthing. The cow was now beaming with pride and triumph. "And it's not permitted to extend a transit visa anyway, is it, officer?" she recalled herself saying. Indeed not, the police had replied indignantly: *"Transit visas are only for passengers in transit."* And with that, they had scribbled me a receipt with their address and *taken my passport.*

"Transit visas are only for passengers in transit." And with that, they had scribbled me a receipt with their address and *taken my passport.*

The US embassy wrote me a letter of support but could do little more. It was Edige who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me to sort out this mess. The essence of the problem was that new regulations had been introduced a fortnight before I arrived. Kazakh officialdom was confused itself over what the rules permitted. For instance, the Foreign Ministry and the Foreigners Police had overlapping responsibilities for enforcing visa regimes, yet could not agree whether or not it was legal to extend a transit visa. "Illegal," argued one policemen, on the grounds that a visitor was either passing through a place or stopping there, but could not logically do both.

As if this was not bad enough, one day a faceless superior ruled that even the transit visa was invalid, unless I could demonstrate where I was

transiting *to*. My plan was to enter Uzbekistan under an intra-CIS agreement whereby a visa for any Central Asian country can be automatically parlayed into a three-day transit visa to any other Central Asian country. I explained this, but it did not suffice. I bought an airticket as material evidence of my intention to leave, but that too was insufficient. I now required a Kazakh exit visa, and to get that, I needed to show an Uzbek *entry* visa. I dashed across town to the Uzbek embassy. The ambassador himself patiently explained: he would be delighted to oblige, but his hands were tied — I would need an invitation from the Intourist hotel in Tashkent, pending approval from the Foreign Ministry, etc. — minimum wait, ten days; more time than I could spare.

It was at this point that I began to pull out my wallet. Edige pleaded for flexibility but I just went ahead and bought it. The difficulty was not the sums involved but knowing who to pay. I paid off everyone. The final envelope, containing the equivalent of $7 in Kazakh Tenge, was pushed across the desk in room 209 of the Foreign Ministry building on Tole Bi Street at 10 am on November 8, 1995. My flight to Tashkent left at 1 pm that same day.

"With practically no preliminaries I was granted a one-year multiple-entry visa on the spot for $50."

Tashkent: mongols, muezzins and videotape

ICWA Executive Director Peter Martin met me in Tashkent for what I believe were some very memorable adventures. Arrival in Tashkent was the reverse of everything I had expected. With practically no preliminaries I was granted a one-year multiple-entry visa on the spot for $50. All I needed to do was wave a sheet of English at the official behind the glass and claim it was an invitation to Uzbekistan; he took my word for it. In other words, the vetting procedures, the hotel invitations, the Foreign Ministry approval, the blather at the consulate — it all turned out to be stuff and nonsense. Formalities were quick. Uzbekistan, I decided, had been maligned.

My and Mr. Martin's indefatigable hosts in Tashkent were Svetlana and Vladimir. I had met the couple in Moscow the previous August, when we participated together in the Second Congress of Young Compatriots [*sootechestvennikov*]. This story is worth digression. "Compatriots" refers to the communities of Russians — mostly disgruntled and dissatisfied — who find themselves living abroad since the dissolution of the USSR, scattered across fourteen new ex-Soviet countries where they are no longer top ethnos. Fourteen delegations, one from each new republic, of eight to ten people apiece had been invited to the congress in order to represent these communities. A fifteenth delegation was comprised of Lipovans (Old Believers), ethnic Russians from Romania.[5] Although they were outsiders (non-Soviet), an exception had been made in inviting them. They were participating on the grounds that their long struggle to keep their customs might offer special insight into the theme of the congress, "How to Preserve Our National Culture."

Six spots had been reserved for the Lipovan delegation, but one of their members fell sick at the last moment. I was in Bucharest at the time and arranged to take his place myself. Thus I entered through the back door as a Lipovan. I was recognized as an American by the conference organizers when they received my details, of course. Since, however, my participation had already been confirmed through Bucharest, I was fractionated out as *sixteenth* delegation: the Russian delegation from USA, a party of one. Thus it happened that among the national flags hung in the conference hall was the Stars and Stripes. (I have no Slavic blood within me whatsoever.)

It became apparent from the first plenary session that the politics of this group tended toward the super-nationalist end of the spectrum. (Svetlana and Vladimir were notable exceptions.) In a word, this was a convention of Russian chauvinists, come to let off steam in a safe environment, share experiences and grievances with like-minded people, and swap tips on how to subvert their new political masters.

Who was underwriting this affair? The answer became apparent on the second (penultimate) day, when we were invited to choose between excursions to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Education. I mounted the bus to the MFA, that louring Gothic skyscraper on Arbat Street. We were met at the door and ushered into the building without any identification checks at all. Two

5. Discussed in ASA-7.

officials received us behind a large desk flanked by two clerks; one was a state minister for CIS affairs. When he opened the meeting, a torrent of complaints broke loose, all about discrimination of one sort or another that Russians minorities were suffering in the ex-USSR.

A back channel! Russians from the near abroad going behind the backs of their own governments and directly appealing for help to what was technically a foreign power! Of course ex-Sovietologists have surmised this was going on. But what Westerner has actually witnessed it?

Passions were aroused as delegations egged each other on to paint ever blacker scenarios. Everyone was urging a more resolute and aggressive stance on the part of the Russian government toward the countries of which they were unwilling citizens. "We have no right to speak our own language at home, absolutely none," said a woman from Latvia. Begging her pardon, replied the chairman, various binding oversight agreements *had* been signed... "All worthless paper," she interrupted, shrill and undeterred. What do you propose we should do?, asked the chairman. "Cut them off — gas, electricity, petrol, everything. And send troops to their borders. That will bring them to their knees!" (That is a quote: *ipsissima verba*.) The clerks wrote silently. To his credit, the chairman seemed more level-headed than the majority of his guests.

"The conference organizers were pleased, although my political career in Washington may be finished."

The meeting dragged on for three hours; I ducked out of the room after two. But before leaving the building I wandered all the corridors, looked into offices, rode the elevators, read the billboards without let or hindrance, *and* had the front door opened for me as I exited... Is that a first? I don't know. Could I by any chance be the first American to have taken an unaccompanied tour of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow?

The conference closed with a plenary session. I was pressured by the president of the congress to mount the rostrum. People had expressed disappointment that I had made no interventions from the floor during the first two days, she explained, and the organizers were still waiting for my contribution. Would I consent to speak in plenary expressing moral support on behalf of the Russian diaspora in America?

Vladimir is a Russian-born cameraman for Uzbek TV, and he filmed everything. That first evening in his apartment in Tashkent we watched on tape the edited highlights of the congress, including my speech. My Executive Director had gone to bed by this time, jetlagged. He missed it. I think on balance I am glad he did. I stepped up to the podium and introduced myself as an analyst of Turkish-Russian affairs, stressing I had come only to observe. Then I modulated into a discourse on the tragedy of the Russian minorities as the lost people of the ex-USSR — pointing out that the Turks for instance, conveniently considering the whole of Central Asia Turkic, have washed a sponge over its recent past and erased the memory of any Russian presence at all. It was pretty heady stuff that pushed a lot of buttons. My peroration ended with the words, "So I am happy to have had here the opportunity to hear at last a large, living, loud Russian voice." Some things can go too well. Those closing words — *bol'shoi, zhivoi, gromkii Ruskii golos* — were greeted with a storm of applause on the TV, more than I had remembered. They had been precisely what the Russian audience had been aching to hear. The conference organizers were pleased, although my political career in Washington may be finished. There was a riverboat excursion that evening on the Moskva-Reka, during which the President of the congress raised a toast "to the Russian voice." I understand Vladimir's film has been seen in Uzbekistan, so there's no point in trying to suppress it now. All grist for the mill, should anyone care to blackmail me in the future.

The population of Uzbekistan is 20.3 million, of which eight percent are Russian (and 71 percent Uzbek). The proportion of Russians in Tashkent is higher, in part because of Russian workers shipped in when the city was leveled by an earthquake in 1966. Three hundred thousand people were left homeless. The Russians who helped rebuild more than six million sq.m. of residential housing were offered 20 percent of the new apartments.

The earthquake changed the character of the city completely. The Old Town, to the west, retains an oriental flavor. Men in traditional green or blue *tubeteika* skullcaps sip tea. *Shaslyk* kebabs are grilled on

the street beside piles of watermelons, heaped up like cannonballs. There is a sprawling outdoor market, and the neighborhoods are dotted with mosques and medreses. The New Town, however, to the east, is an intimidating spacescape of concrete blocks and empty, desolate squares. Soviet urban planners tended to pay more attention to where the May Day Parades would take place than to where people would live and play. A wide, two-kilometer avenue running between the Old and New Towns lined with virtually identical buildings may be good to march down, but it is boring to walk. Acacias and plane trees have been planted down the sidewalks. They can mitigate Tashkent's bleakness, but they cannot make it a green city. Tashkent means "Town/village of stone": the name is apt.

Perhaps the best of Tashkent is underground. I thought the subway had a subaquatic feel to it: muted light; soft stucco mouldings resembling sponges or jellyfish; a fondness for decorative roundels like submarine portholes; and a lot of blue and purple murals. Mr. Martin and I rode it for fun for an hour. Back on the surface, we were suddenly enveloped in a sandstorm, a sharp wind laden with dirt and grit. It whipped across Tashkent for thirty minutes before ending as suddenly as it had started. Perhaps it was the *afghanets*, a dry, cold, dusty wind mentioned in some descriptions of Uzbekistan. Even as we ran for cover, I smiled inwardly, for as far as I was concerned it was the Mongols riding through town.

One evening I heard the call to prayer issuing from Tashkent's Old Town and I realized with a start that I had never heard a muezzin in Alma-Ata. Although Kazakhstan claims its population is preponderantly Muslim, there was no functional mosque in the capital, although now one was being built on Pushkin Street.[6] Uzbeks, on the other hand, have held on to their religion most tenaciously of all the Eurasian peoples (except perhaps Uighurs) despite pressure from the Communists to relinquish it. For instance, Tashkent was the site of the (Moscow-approved) "Spiritual Board for Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan" during the Soviet era.[7] It is one of many indexes pointing to the fact that Uzbekistan *is* the spiritual heart of Central Asia. I had been wavering over whether to move to Alma-Ata or Tashkent. I was half tempted by Alma-Ata's mountains and leafy promenades. But a Russian fortress town built to a rational plan presented too sterile a figure, compared to the shape of a muezzin's voice. The evening call to prayer helped tip the scales away from the Father of Apples in favor of the Village of Stone. I shall have much to say about Uzbekistan and its capital in months to follow. ❑

6. Nine sites in Alma-Ata are "registered" as mosques, but believers don't actually congregate there.
7. The Kazakh SSR was not considered a part of Central Asia by the Soviets. The tendency today, however, seems to be to include Kazakhstan with the other four republics (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan).

Institute Fellows and their Activities

Hisham Ahmed. Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Cynthia Caron. With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a $7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

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