



*Life of the others -
stories of migrant women living in the Czech Republic*



European Contact Group in the Czech Republic

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The European Contact Group in the Czech Republic (ECG) is a non-governmental organisation that promotes equal opportunities for men and women. We fight against racism and discrimination against minorities, migrants and refugees and challenge ingrained stereotypes and prejudices in the Czech Republic and in Europe.

Our focus:

- **women and labour market**
discrimination in the labour market, unemployment, home-based work, requalification and integration into the labour market after maternity and parental leave
- **migration and integration**
problems and challenges linked with integration of migrants and minorities into the majority society, different models of integration, community development, self-support activities of migrants
- **equal opportunities between men and women**
raising awareness, education, publication and campaigns

Our activities:

lectures • seminars • interactive trainings and workshops • international conferences • multicultural groups • sociological researches • analysis • information and awareness campaigns • study visits • networking • publications and campaigns

We are a member of **the Czech Women's Lobby**, a platform of non-governmental and non-profit organisations promoting women's rights in the Czech Republic and internationally (www.czlobby.cz).

LIFE OF THE OTHERS – STORIES OF MIGRANT WOMEN LIVING IN THE CZECH

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About the photographer...

Svetlana Mazepina was born in Russia in 1964, in the big industrial town of Saratov. She has been photographing since she was 15. At university (in the field of geology) she took an interest in photographing the natural beauty of the countryside. She made her first collection of photographs during her travels in Siberia, the Far East and Caucasus. Later she worked as a remote photo-correspondent for several magazines and newspapers. She has lived and worked in the Czech Republic for seven years. At present she is a freelance journalist.

"I've been taking photos of people for twenty years. Of course, mainly of my relatives and friends, but it was a special experience.

This experience together with my affection of photography brought me to the project 'The lives of the others – stories of migrant women living in the Czech Republic'.

Everything began over a year ago when I received a letter as if it had been a coincidence from a non-governmental organisation called the European Contact Group in the Czech Republic (EKS). I was invited to participate in a project called "Frankly" a part of which included writing a personal diary. Topics that came up within the project appealed to me. The position of a woman within a society, relationships between women and men, the influence of tradition and stereotypes on one's destiny and the destiny of the others – all this had disturbed me and occupied my mind for years. And so I set to work with joy.

The authenticity and persuasiveness of the diaries that came of this project addressed all EKS members so much that they decided to publish them as a separate book in their original version. However, I felt I had to meet the diaries authors, or at least see their faces and look into their eyes, as I believe there is some truth in the saying that eyes are the mirror of the soul. Therefore I came up with the idea of complementing the project with a photo exhibition of portraits of these migrant women.

Members of EKS were interested in my offer and finally in May 2008 the opportunity to realise the project arose. I lived through several months full of work shared with the organisation members and the participants in a wonderful project 'The lives of the others – stories of migrant women living in the Czech Republic'. As an amateur photographer it was like a gift from destiny. Of course I was nervous but thanks to the support of our team and the trust of my models, this project could come true.

I believe it will help people in the Czech Republic learn more about foreigners and accept foreigners who are living in their country. I truly hope that the diaries and the participants' answers will help female foreigners (and others), who may be going through some of the episodes described in this publication, so that they may find a new place in life and in a new country or at least as the Czechs say I will cross my fingers for them."

Svetlana Mazepina

Introduction

The catalogue that you are holding is meant as a complement to the exhibition called “The lives of the others – stories of migrant women living in the Czech Republic”. This itinerant exhibition, organised by European Contact Group in the Czech Republic (EKS), is going to be placed in other Czech and Moravian cities after its opening in the capital of Prague.

This publication does not presume to be a catalogue in the literal sense. It reproduces portraits of women who took part in the project and at the same time publishes diaries in their full length and fragments of interviews that are organised into four thematic fields. These fields are: life “back home” – in the country of origin, relationships between men and women in the country of origin, life and relationships in the new country and the last additional topic is migrant women's message for the Czech public.

The exhibition itself is a continuance and a logical outcome of the previous EKS' project “Frankly”. The objective of this project was to have the women speak spontaneously. Let them tell their life stories and give space to those who wished to talk about their lives, personalities, families, relationships, work and so on, how they were and are living through the experience of leaving their homeland and seeking a new place in another country.

This approach is based on so called ‘oral history’ emphasising the history written and heard from the people and enabling to enter a private space offering a new, rather intimate view of people, women and men's lives.

The addressed women responded in a positive way to our invitation to write about their lives and each of the topics. The

fact that we were interested in their opinions, experience and life stories, was very important to them. Expressing all this to us was to them a sign of equality; their opinion mattered as well, they could be part of setting the conditions under which they are living. It was, however, an expression of our respect towards them; the experts who have their say and who are able to share their experience with others.

Many of the authors were going through a process of re-establishing their relation towards themselves and as well towards the world around them. It helped them to form a new way of communicating, defining newly experienced events with respect to the members of their families, husbands and children.

With this means of written retrospective they were able to reflect on the difficult periods they underwent and yet managed to move forward, overcoming huge obstacles in the majority of cases. In all cases family had a fundamental role for them, they were proud of being wives and mothers; motherhood was one of the most significant roles they identified themselves with.

They were aware of the importance of a professional career, their work and work and care for others. Work was described in some cases as the essential aspect of life – it had a significant influence on their life and self-consciousness. They expressed the importance of self-achievement and self-development in their own life.

There was a certain therapeutic element related to describing one's life experience that was discovered by the authors. They were able to name experiences, feelings and facts that had been long unspoken, unseized – like in “lost unfulfilled dreams” and disappointment, or similarly they could name, make visible and put into existence everything they had done, opposed, all the

success and obstacles long forgotten or which had become simply matter-of-fact with time, and therefore invisible.

And thus their lives were getting more real. Everything they lived through was getting more powerful in their self-reflection. Overcoming the obstacles and difficulties helped increase their self-assessment and see themselves in a more positive way. This life authenticity helped them make clear what is important to them in the near future, clarify priorities and choose the “right direction” for themselves and their families.

Last but not least, when defining what they gained from this project they mentioned the opportunity to realise the belonged to their own culture and differences that came out during the integration into a new society, becoming conscious of their difficult role within cross-cultural identities and aiming to seize it and pass it on to others.

This project embraces an emancipation character too as most of the authors decided to publish their stories and work out such issues further, standing out from their position as an immigrant often viewed as inferior by the majority of society and participate more in improving conditions for other migrants and promote and show that they have the capacity to do so.

Let them speak with their own words...

“Your offer came in such a phase of my life that I did not hesitate and decided to write about my life, about everything I went through, so I sat down to writing. It had a symbolic value for me, an end of one period of my life, I turned sixty not long ago. (...) I was doing it for the project but for myself too, a kind of analysis. I've lived fully, there's nothing I should hide...”

Anna, Byelorussia

“I am trying to analyse and express my view of most people and their basically identical way of life. Our grandmothers, mothers and partially my generation lived that way too. So I am trying to understand myself and maybe help my daughters free themselves of social stereotypes. (...) So, I would like to awaken women and try to get them out of the vicious circle of old-fashioned traditions and dangerous stereotypes. To do so, a woman has to learn to respect and accept herself first of all, consider herself a persona, gain real freedom of mind and equality...”

Svetlana, Russia

“I think this will not only help me but all people that will read what I've written. They will know what it feels like to live in another country, to live here, I want people to know that... I enjoyed writing about our traditions, life style in Kyrgyzstan; I wanted people to know, read about it. I enjoyed writing about my childhood too; I like my childhood reminiscences...”

Elvira, Kyrgyzstan



Elvira Jumaeva, Kyrgyzstan





Jana Litvinova, Byelorussia





Maryna Hordiyenko, Ukraine





Sihoko Finda, Japan





Vera Lapshina, Russia

Anna Surmac

- born in Byelorussia in 1974
- graduate historian, archivist
- forced to leave the country due to political reasons
- in 2001 received asylum in the Czech Republic
- in 2006 received citizenship
- currently living in Czech Republic and USA
- co-operated with the Byelorussian editorial office of Free Europe Radio, with Skaryna organisation organising national life for Byelorussians in the Czech Republic, co-founder of the Association of Refugees in the Czech Republic

My first 60 years

I was born in the western part of Byelorussia close to the border with Poland. It was shortly after the biggest holiday of our village, St. Anna's Day, Jesus' grandmother. All villagers prepare for this festival through out the whole year and those who left their home always come back. St. Anna is worshipped as the patron saint of our village. It is said that it was her who saved the inhabitants from being shot during the Second World War when German soldiers had encircled the village, leading people out of their homes and intending to execute them but suddenly the order was revoked. I was born a month before this festival so I was named Anna, Hanna in Byelorussian. I was the first, longed-for child. My birth meant a victory over all the death to my parents. Both of them survived the war, returned to the place where they had been born and within a year of the war were married.

My parents went through a lot of suffering during the war. My father was a soldier of the Polish army that suffered the first strike of the German Armed Forces in September 1939 when Hitler's army attacked Poland and the bloody Second World War began. Poland's defeat came next and my father's life turned into being dramatic as well. He was taken captive by the Germans together with my mother's brother who was originally from the neighbouring village. My father and my uncle had to endure all the suffering of German captivity, camp and in the end they were sent off to Koenigsberg to carry out agricultural work. The German army needed food-stuffs and German farmers needed free labour. In 1943 the Germans deported even my then 18-year-old mother from enemy-held Byelorussia to Germany for forced labour. It was there where they got to know each other better and began going out. My father and my uncle were sent to the front line of the criminal battalion, the first one to have been sent against the German defences when the Soviet army had come to eastern Prussia in 1944. My father was seriously injured in the combat. He was found bleeding in snow by a good-hearted Russian soldier whom my father remembered for the rest of his life. My father was undergoing medical treatments long after the war. He returned home to a deserted house as a disabled man on crutches where his lonely, heart-broken mother awaited. My grandfather did not survive the war.

My mother came back home and only rejoined my father in 1946. Though beautiful and young my mother married a disabled man without hesitation. By doing so she took on the burden of both a woman and man's housework. Her friends were asking why she was marrying a man who was not destined to live long. However, her love and strength of spirit won over my

father's disease and suffering. My dad lived up to 74 and died with a German splinter in his leg.

These were hard post-war years. Almost half of the Byelorussian population perished in the war. A front passed through our country twice as a fireball – when the Germans were making their way into Russia and back. One hundred and eighty-five Byelorussian villages together with their inhabitants were burned down and never resurrected after the war. A symbolic cemetery has been. A monument of the burned down villages with a bell built next to Minsk in the remembrance of the tragedy of the Byelorussian nation who paid a high price for this victory over Fascism.

There was poverty in Byelorussia, desolated by the war. People were not paid money for working in a kolkhoz. Sometimes they would get some corn, other times nothing. Our mother would make over old clothes; there was no money to buy shoes for us so we walked barefoot till autumn. We were very happy when spring came, the ground melted, mom would let us take off the old shoes and allowed us to walk barefoot, we were always so happy. Now with dozens of pairs of shoes I do not feel that as happy as I used to then.

There was lack of food; I did not know what white bread was. We were eating brown bread made from rye flour on green leaves. My mother baked it. The loaf of bread was lying on the table, covered with a tea cloth. Potatoes too, they were cooked, fried, used for making pancakes. There were no sweets whatsoever, only when we started going to school, my mother sometimes managed to gather some eggs. She would give them to us, we would go to a shop where we could get some “candy cushions” for them. They were candies filled with black thick

filling. We never ate eggs ourselves because they were the only food we could get money for in the shop and buy the necessities for the household like soap, salt or matches.

There were no fruits either, there were no orchards left in Byelorussia after the war and newly planted apple, pear and cherry trees were not bearing fruits yet. We were collecting mushrooms, blackberries and cranberries in summer and making jam from them without sugar though because there was no sugar either. We ate meat only at Christmas when a pig we had been keeping the whole year was killed. My mother used to make a lovely sausage. We usually stored the sausage and ham for summer when hay and harvest were starting. It was hard work so meat was usually saved for men who ploughed the ground and scythed the hay. I still remember how hard it was to watch my dad walk after the plough with his hurt legs.

I was born in a place where Lithuanian Principality was founded in 13th century, our Medieval state which was one of the developed European countries with of one the most progressive constitutions of that era in force on its territory. My country used to be called a country of castles because there were numerous cultural centres and big cities. Two world wars that passed through the Byelorussia territory wiped out all the historical sites, almost entire cultural heritage that the Byelorussians had been forming for centuries. Therefore me as well, I grew up in primitive conditions, though in the 20th century. We lived in a small cottage where the floor was only hard packed soil, with no electricity, nor radio. In the evenings we would light lime torches, later my mother got hold of a kerosene lamp. It was like a holiday, even though there was a shortage of kerosene and no money for it either.

I remember that a radio appeared in mid 60's. We hung a black paper "plate" – our first radio – on a visible spot. For many years radio represented the main source of information and means of cultural education for me. In the Soviet Union era radio was above all an instrument of ideological influence. But I was not interested in politics then, I galloped information concerning culture in the first place. We knew about everything going on in the world thanks to the radio which was a very important aspect of forming my personality, it gave me the feeling that I am a part of the big world.

Electricity appeared approximately in the same period. First a small water turbine producing electricity was built on our small river. It was a primitive system, light was changing all the time, there was no transformer and the light would go out many times during a night. Despite that it was a big step forward.

There was only one book at home – Robinson Crusoe with colour images, it is still my favourite book nowadays. My family had had a good home library before war. My grandfather was a Russian Army officer; he was a well-educated man who loved literature. When Hitler's army members had ordered the citizens to hand in all books during the occupation, my grandfather did not obey. When a German officer with his soldiers came to search the house and found books there, he explained to them that he had not been able to have them destroyed as they were very precious old books. The officer looked at the books and left without a word. But my grandfather died in the war and the books disappeared. So we were learning to read with Daniel Defoe's novel. My parents could not get good education because war intervened with their youth. Nevertheless, they were always occupied with their children's cultural development.

My dad used to tell us: "Kids, we did not have a chance to study so at least you show some effort." It is necessary to mention that independently of the material situation of the family, or place where they live, a town or country, the Byelorussian parents' task number one is and has always been providing their children with education. Studying – is every child, every young person's wish, it is a cult word for us. And at the moment our country is being governed by a dictatorship striving to impose restraint on university education for young, open-minded people. However, young people left for the world in seek of university education. Most of the population has a secondary education; not very low number of young people has not graduated from secondary school for various reasons.

Since we were small we were always taught to work and we had to help our parents with everything. We did not have a grandmother, or a grandfather, when our parents had to work in kolkhoz we had to look after ourselves on our own. Kolkhoz in our village was founded after the war when Byelorussia was annexed to the Soviet Union. Since my childhood I managed all the household chores, I wanted to help my mother as much as I could because her life was very hard. Since we were small we were working on a field. The Soviet power thought out a system of exploitation of all inhabitants, including children.

We lived in a Grodnensky region with Grodno being its administrative centre. It is one of the most beautiful and ancient Byelorussian towns situated near Polish border. It used to be a big industrial town in the Soviet Union era; nowadays it is famous for its big plant producing nitrogen fertilisers. When I was small a tobacco factory was the most important economical centre in the Grodnensky region. All the locals worked for it, all

the kolkhozes in the area had to plant tobacco. This tobacco left gloomy memories in my mind. Work with tobacco took all our time from spring to autumn. We planted seedlings in spring, weeded, spud, everything with hands, long days exposed to the heat of sun. But late summer was the worst, the tobacco used to grow to our height and we had to break its big leaves, string them and have them dried. It was very difficult to process this kind of tobacco we were planting. It had heavy leaves covered with viscous grease that made our hands and faces dirty similarly like pitch. We had dirty hands and faces because you could hardly wash the filth off even if you used soap. The leaves had to be broken from below, we had to crawl in the rows, break the leaves and carry it to an open space where people who were stringing them were sitting. It was hard physical labour, we were carrying heavy things all the time, it was pretty hard for our weak, children's bodies. And when the tobacco leaves had dried, they were stored in a barn and then we were sitting all winter putting them in packages. We evened each leaf and put them in special boxes. When they were full we tightened their content with strings into a package as it is done today with straw on fields. My father, like all the others would take these packages to the factory. And of course they were always trying to rip people off, reducing the weight, quality so in the end we were getting very slim salary which did not correspond to the workload. But these were the only earnings our family had, the only source of income. Everybody lived this way and there was no child in our region who wouldn't work for this tobacco factory. We must have breached in so much dust from this tobacco in childhood which must have affected our health for the future too – but who cared then? The factory supplied

the whole Soviet Union with tobacco and Byelorussian children paid for it with their own health. Only several years later another kind of tobacco-plant started to be cultivated, multan, which is much lighter and more pleasant to process.

I don't know what happened but one day they stopped producing tobacco in our region. An order came that we were supposed to start planting sugar beet, so I spent the rest of my childhood on a sugar beet field. Every family was allotted piece of land, 25–30 hundredths designated for beet root cultivation, everything was done manually. We would plant it, harvest it, and clean it. It was our permanent work, from spring to first frost.

So I experienced the upbringing in the Soviet working camps called kolkhoz from their beginning to their end. But all that time I had to study as well which was the most important thing for me and my parents.

I started the first grade in our village school where children from all the first four grades were taught together. We had two teachers who I still remember now with a lot of love and gratefulness. After finishing the first four grades at the elementary school I had to change school for secondary one which was in a neighbouring village several kilometres away. I walked two kilometres back and forth for seven years, sometimes in snow up to my knees, other time in rain or autumn chill. But I did not mind, I liked going there. I liked studying and learning new things, I loved the simple village school and my teachers. This school had been taught in before our country had to succumb to the Soviet power. It was not a typical Soviet school with propagandistic communist management. It was a school in terms of classical education, we were taught to read and write but the teachers

taught us the moral principles as well and they were the role models themselves for us, they liked us and respected us, they did not insult nor humiliate us. We felt free in mind and strived to study hard. Our village school was a kind of cultural centre and thus gave us a lot good in this sense too. When I think about my life and what gave me the most with respect to education I must admit that it was exactly this school. We were taught in Byelorussian and until nowadays it is a Byelorussian school which is rare in the country where Russian language rules, being supported by the governing authorities and where the country's President doesn't speak his mother tongue.

Now I remember my childhood with joy and gratefulness. My fate indulged me with great family that always supported me. There was equality ruling in our household but not in today's sense. Men knew what their role was and women too. Men were doing their work and women theirs. It is true though that my mother had to carry out man's work sometimes as well because my father was ill. But there was neither patriarchy nor matriarchy in our family, my parents would discuss and solve everything together.

We ran almost a bio-farm, we had to obtain everything ourselves and my parents were able to perform any type of work – plough, crop, scythe, moan, cut wood, raise farm animals, bake bread, spin, weave and sew, process milk and meat. In fact my parents built a new house on their own and we moved from a clay house to a better equipped dwelling. Number of such people is dropping and humankind is losing the ability to survive under natural conditions formed in centuries. I am said to see it, after all our civilization is so fragile that even a simple electricity outage can cause a catastrophe.

My parents had a hard life but lived it together and taught us to respect family, work, progress, taught us to be responsible for one's life and life of the closest people, to respect the others and not do any harm to the others. And the crucial thing – they gave me freedom of choice, acting and thinking. Therefore I can firmly say that there is nobody who could have an absolute power over me, that even in the worst moments of my life I did not let anyone humiliate me, I never kowtowed to anybody, never humbly pleaded anyone. In my life I have never appreciated things that had fallen right into my lap and were easy to loose but those I achieved with my own effort. This is my fortune that I have acquired in those difficult 60 years. I raised my son with the idea of spiritual freedom. When he was 21 and about to start his independent life in New York, he had been prepared to come across obstacles in harsh environment of this mega city. Once I asked him what had helped him survive there and to my great joy he said it was the feeling of freedom.

It is only freedom that gives one the possibility to become an independent personality responsible for his or her life. I respect the American society where freedom of an individual stands above all other priorities. I refuse dictatorships taking away people's freedom imposing their primitive notion of the world upon them. Unfortunately this occurred in my homeland, Byelorussia which I was forced to leave because of that. The majority of life I had spent in my homeland had been under the Communist regime; I had felt the destructive influence it had on people, on the spiritual life of the society. This experience will make me oppose this dangerous ideology for ever wherever I may be.

In autumn 1965 I was accepted to the Faculty of History of the Byelorussian University in Minsk. I had to leave my native region

and my parents for the first time in my life. My country life had finished and a big city was awaiting me. But it was namely the country life that had taught me self-reliance in many respects, toughened myself in physical and the mental way. I am grateful to have been brought up in the country. I got to know the life style of our ancestors and of millions of people around the world nowadays. The life there seems more moral to me than the life in a city where people disrespect one another, when one is lost like a grain of dust. In a village people know themselves from the birth up to the death, everyone is responsible for his or her behaviour in the eyes of the others, people know what a piece of bread is worth, they do not think that steaks grow on trees. People in the country live in accordance with the nature and animals.

My years of studies were not fundamental in my life. I was a student with average results, I was not among the best ones like at primary and secondary school. Only after some years I realized that it was good. Our faculty was a factory producing ideological personnel for the Soviet party apparatus. The history explained was in biased interpretation in order to get the Byelorussian nation rid of their historical consciousness so that they would think that the happy life had been brought in by the Russians and that up to then they had only been a backward nation. The lectures were held exclusively in Russian and it caused me hard work to keep up with the other students considering that I had only attended Byelorussian schools before.

I got married in the 4th year. I must point out that I was not the first one amongst my female classmates. Students would get to know each other in the first years and by the end of their studies, in the 4th and 5th year weddings were held. My husband was in

the military service and together with his friend who was going out with one student came to our dormitory on one weekend and mixed up the doors and knocked at mine. So that is how our romance started and two and half years later when he had finished the military service and began working as an assistant director in a film studio we got married. My husband's family was living in Minsk, we were given our own room and I moved there from the dorm. It was the end of my student life.

There were five of us living in that apartment, my husband's parents and his younger sister. I was received well, my mother-in-law taught me to run the household in a city, and she was like a second mother to me. We were sharing a three-bedroom flat with a kitchenette and a tiny bathroom for seven years in harmony. Small disputes with my mother-in-law were very rare. However, our common life with my husband was not ideal; our views were poles apart. We were trying to improve our relationship but we failed. We spent together 13 difficult years. Even moving to our proper apartment in 1976 did not strengthen our relationship. It was wonderful to live in our own place; we lived happily for a while. Our son Alexander was born in October 1976. I was 29, I had been longing for a child so I was very happy then. I drew all my attention to my son.

The only thing I wanted to do was to have my son baptised which was not possible in those days. My parents were Orthodox Christians and I was brought up to respect my faith and Christian traditions.

Even now in Prague I go to the Orthodox Church on Resslova Street every Sunday. This shrine is very important for me because it connects the Czech history with the Byelorussian one. There is a museum of the Heydrich's era nowadays. It was a place where

Czech parachutists who had assassinated the Deputy Protector of Bohemia and Moravia Reinhard Heydrich found their asylum and later died. Not only the Czech heroes paid for the act of protest with their lives but also the Czechoslovakian Orthodox Church, which was eliminated, its clergy executed or sent to concentration camps. The village of Lidice was burned down at that time as well. A year later, in 1943 German occupation resistance fighters carried out a similar act in Byelorussia. The head of the occupation power Wilhelm Kube was assassinated in Minsk and in this case too a bloody revenge against the local citizens followed. Whenever I pass by the memorial plaque commemorating the Czech heroes in the church I remember these two events.

The Communist regime persecuted the faithful in various ways, sought to impose their ideology instead of believing in God upon them. Churches were closed down, people prayed in secret, had their children baptised secretly. We could baptise our son only when he was a bit older. I could not be presented there because I feared I would lose my job. So we schemed with my mom as if she had done it without my permission when my son was over at her place on summer holiday. That was the reality of those days; people were treated in a really inhuman way.

When my son was one year old I returned to work and the range of my worries significantly enlarged. I had to raise my son, run the household and go to work. My husband did not really help me so I had to ask my mom for help. We were getting apart and when my son was three we finally divorced. Luckily my mother-in-law obliged by agreeing to move into our flat so that my son and I could move into hers. So we long lived next to

each other, on one street and were in touch. I never prevented my son from seeing them; his father would often come over so we lived almost like a family, though in different apartments. We celebrated holidays together. When my son was 16 I told him we had been divorced, he was very surprised. We are still friends, though remote, my husband's second family is my family too and we keep in close contact with them. I told my parents about the divorce first two years after that, I did not want them to be worried. When they found out my mother said: "If you have been on your own for two years and you have been handling everything well, we don't have to worry about you now."

Work has been an important aspect of my life. But I am that kind of a person for whom work means more than only earning money. I have never worked in a place I did not like; I never had a job I did not enjoy. I studied history, i.e. teaching of history. It was not a coincidence that I had chosen this job. I liked history already at school and I have kept up my interest in explaining the past for my entire life. When I graduated from university, I decided not to teach because it was not the right thing I wanted to do. I wanted to dedicate myself to research work, so I started working in archives. I was admitted to the lowest technical post, however, soon I started studying other more interesting mechanisms of the archives work, I acquired decent professional overview. I may say I am grateful to have had a chance to work in archives. I worked for the State Byelorussia Archives that keeps both, the historical and the contemporary documents. It is a great source of truthful information about the past and the present. My head partially became a huge information bank regarding life in the city and all Byelorussia

in the end, I knew where different organisations were, what they were dedicated to, how this or that organisation and the whole country are governed, how things worked in the past and how they are working now. I learned to work with documentation, to put it together correctly and I was a lecturer at university in this field for several years too. It was in the archives not at university where I got equated with the history of our nation and our country as it really was and which had been hidden from us by the Soviet authorities. This started off my career. I began at the lowest post and ended up at the highest in the archives.

In 1982 I was offered a position as the director of the Byelorussian State Archives – Museum of Literature and Art. It was an expert's job. I had been doing administrative documentation and now I was supposed to work with creative documents, be in close contact with the Byelorussian cultural elite whose personal archives were put together and stored by us. I was a head of these archives for 10 years and it became the most important period of my life. It was in the archives where my personality of scientific researcher, Byelorussian patriot and publicly active woman was formed. I started working at this position in a period called new Byelorussian renaissance. In the period of big changes that slowly started to undermine the Communist system and the whole Soviet Union. The process of democratisation set about developing, the society was heading for a change.

The Byelorussian creative and academic intellectuals were just the people who started off the changes, they commenced recalling the national culture, our language, saying the truth about our national history that it had once been a sovereign country with its own culture, that Byelorussian territory was occupied by the Russian Empire and that its nation was obliged

to forget its past and identity, that Byelorussian culture and Byelorussian language are original and that Byelorussian is not a garbled version of the Russian language. I learned the truth never told by any of our university professors because they did not want us to become Byelorussian historians but Soviet propagandists. I got to know people who suffered during Stalin's repressions for refusing to succumb to the Soviet authority or for expressing their opinions in public. This changed my life perspective, my relation to the system in which I had been living for so long. Without hesitation I joined the people who were standing up against the Soviet power and who were striving for new national rebirth. I knew this was my way too as I had a lot of knowledge and thus could be helpful to the democratic movement. In 1988 I took part in the convention of the Byelorussian intelligence where a national front, an organisation that headed the democratic movement was established. I became its member. I also co-operated with the organisation for the Byelorussian Language Society dealing with resurrection of the national language which had almost been wiped out during the Soviet Union era.

The Byelorussian emigrants in the whole world started to greatly support the democratic national movement of the second half of the 90's. After the iron curtain had fallen it came to light that during 200 hundred years the best sons and daughters of almost every generation had to leave Byelorussia. They were participants in the anti-tsar movement, political leaders, who were fighting for the country's independence, people who opposed to the Soviet government and everyday people who left the country to seek work across the ocean. Large numbers of Byelorussians left the country in the consequence of the two

wars. They settled down in various countries around the world, they formed their cultural centres in the U.S.A., Canada, France, Australia, Argentina etc. They preserved their language, published literature, organised national cultural life and never forgot about their country. They were hoping for many years that the Soviet Union would fall and they would be able to return home. It was exactly them who supported young democratic movement in Byelorussia morally and otherwise, they pointed out the situation in Byelorussia to other Western countries' governments and tried to get their support for the Byelorussian democrats. I was familiar with names of many people from the archives documents. They were famous political and cultural figures before the war but then as if the earth had swallowed them. I learned that many of them were still alive and supported Byelorussians living abroad. As an archivist I considered it my duty to summon documents about Byelorussian emigration's activities for our next generations. I got in contact with various people who began sending me their personal archives to Byelorussia. So our prolific co-operation and a new phase of my life began.

In 1990 a group of Byelorussian intelligence representatives established an organisation called World Association of Byelorussians "Backauscyna" (Motherland). It was the first time in Byelorussia' history when an organisation co-operating with emigration, getting in contact between them and the homeland was formed. We wanted to give their country back to these people and provide Byelorussian population with the opportunity to get to know the world through their compatriots living in different continents. There are 3.5 million of Byelorussian emigrants in the world. Not all of them have preserved their language though, but many recalled their roots thanks to our

work. We were striving for a unity of the Byelorussian nation. We wanted to reunite those living at home with those living abroad in the difficult period after the fall of the Soviet Union and arrival of the Byelorussia' independence, in the period of building a new country. We did a great deal for that. In 1993 our organisation held the first meeting of the Byelorussians from the entire world which 1500 people from Byelorussia and representatives of Byelorussian organisations abroad attended. Many of the foreign visitors came to the country first after they had resorted to emigration. It was an emotional encounter with their homeland, places where they were born, their relatives. It was the first gathering of Byelorussians living abroad in their homeland. I was a chairwoman of the organising committee that set up and prepared this event, I chaired the meeting. At the end of the conference I was elected the chairwoman of the leading body – Union of Byelorussians of the world Council. Then I had to lead the activities of our organization which cost me a lot of time and effort. I had to juggle this work and my duties in the archives. However, my superiors in the Main State Archives Directory did not favour my active social activities. I was told to choose which of these two activities I want to carry out. I had been working in the network of state Byelorussian archives for 23 years, I had become a well-experienced specialist, and nevertheless I gave priority to my social activities and left the archives. I took an active part in the democratic movement. We were hoping that changes that would occur in Byelorussia would prevent us from going back to history, that our nation would be able to form a democratic state in the end and that the period of oppression was over. I sat to work with joy; it was not anything extra demanding for me. In 1994–1996 I stayed in various countries,

even in Australia, everywhere where the Byelorussian centres operated. Byelorussians would often come from abroad, we would exchange information, publish books, organise conferences and celebrate festivals. Our work was fruitful. We could see presence of our nation spread outside Byelorussia around the world. However, we were not rejoicing for long. The former party personnel were not willing to give up. They managed to consolidate their forces and retrieved its power in Byelorussia. In 1994 Alexander Lukashenko became the president who could not have gotten to the power without Russia's support; Russia could not reconcile with Byelorussia developing towards independence. Byelorussia was solely a free corridor for business with Western countries for Russia. Since this moment a dictatorship began forming up. Alexander Lukashenko eliminated all democratic freedoms step by step and began to bring the country back to the Communist era. Democratic authorities attempted to stand against communism but all protests were harshly dispelled by the police. Our organisation expressing standpoints of Byelorussian emigration abroad also stood up against A. Lukashenko's politics. We declared that openly at the second meeting of Byelorussians of the World taking took place in Minsk in July 1997. The Byelorussian authorities impeded this venue, they did not want to provide place, called on people not to come to Minsk. When they failed they tried to take over the meeting's organisation but we handled to forestall that. Lukashenko wanted Byelorussian emigration to support his politics and state authorities achieved to win part of its organisations operating on the post-Soviet territory over to their side. However, the western emigration severely criticised dictatorship in Byelorussia and Byelorussia' state authorities failed to come in

accordance with them. We became an opposition organisation and we expressed our negative relation towards Lukashenko's government in documents that were adopted at the meeting. This was an open protest which was not forgiven by the regime. Right after the end of the meeting Lukashenko informed us that he would take measures against us naming specifically our honoured president Radim Gorecky and me as the Council Union's chairwoman. We were both elected as leaders of our organisation and now we were labelled the country's enemies. Nevertheless, we did not change our standpoint and our work in order to comply with the regime but we actively participated in all events organised by opposition forces against the President's dictatorship. This went on for two years until the regime got stronger and got down to persecute its opponents. At the end of September 1999 I succeeded in leaving the country in one day carrying a small bag and a passport. Since then I have not seen the country in which I was born and in which I worked most of my life. Nowadays I am living in two worlds, a real new one and a virtual one of my previous life; I still keep in touch with people and organisations. I never thought I would end up like an emigrant like those I worked with. The president of our organisation Radim Gorecky stayed in Minsk and they soon got even with him. Strangers were awaiting him by his house when he was coming back from work and they brutally beat him up. He suffered fractions of his skull and had to undergo a major surgery.

Living in emigration

Thanks to the fact that there was no visa needed to enter the Czech Republic from Poland, I left Minsk for Grodno where I took

a bus to the border into a town called Belastok. My Byelorussian friends helped me there at the beginning. A lot of Byelorussians live in this town and its surrounding because it was annexed to Poland only after the war. But I wanted to go further from Byelorussia, so I set out to Prague.

Already then I loved Prague, I knew it from my previous visits. I first went to Prague in 1984, for the second time I came for an academic conference of Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian Emigration in Czechoslovakia of Interwar Period. Together with professor of Czech studies Irina Shablovska we stayed at ambassador Mr. Vojtenkovsky's and we told him about the initiative of the ex-foreign minister Petr Kravcenko to erect a monument to Francisko Skaryna, a Byelorussian enlightener. When this monument and the memorable plague were being unveiled for the first time in the history, Byelorussians living in Prague participated in the ceremony; they were co-operators of Radio Free Europe that moved from Munich to Prague in spring 1995. After the ceremonial unveiling we gathered and established a Byelorussian organisation Skaryna that operates in Prague up to now.

Afterwards I started going to Prague quite often because of the contact with the organisation Skaryna. I was also doing a research work; I was preparing and publishing academic publications about history of Byelorussian emigrants in Czechoslovakia. Therefore when I was forced to choose a place for seeking asylum I opted for the Czech Republic without any hesitation. First I thought I would not stay here long as the situation in Byelorussia would have certainly improved, I thought the regime could not survive long and I would be able to go back home. But in the end I had to make a decision so one autumn day

in the morning I left my friends' apartment in Prague and went to Vysni Lhoty that every refugee in the Czech Republic knows very well. I clambered up the hill with a lot of effort, exhausted, hungry with a bag in my hand, I proceeded to the gate. When a guard asked me what I needed I had to articulate words that entirely changed my life: "I am seeking political asylum in the Czech Republic." The gate opened and I stepped into a new life. What is going to happen next, how am I going to earn my living, is it really impossible to go back home? These questions were frantically circulating my head. At the beginning I did not feel any fear in the centre, on the contrary I felt calmer and safer there. I found more difficult getting used to the rules that were applied there. All of a sudden for the first time in my life in which I had been a respected woman with certain social status I turned up at the age of 52 in a situation where I had to queue, holding a bowl, to get some soup. I was physically exhausted so I asked my new friends, young family from Byelorussia to pick my meals for me in the canteen. However, they noticed that in the canteen and said: "Have her come on her own." So I had to go, hunger is hunger.

I got used to the queues and a new social status. We spent five weeks in this detention centre with absolute quarantine, behind closed doors. I had a lot of free time so I immediately started to learn Czech. I borrowed a Russian – Czech dictionary in the library and started to get acquainted with the language. I spent hours sitting with the dictionary every day which helped me orient and get the picture of the specifications of the Czech language, all its structure. I think it gave me some basics for further successful acquisition of the Czech language.

For the first time after many years I had time to read for fun. However, I could only read books available in the local library.

I was very happy to have found a Russian translation of Homer's epic poems Iliad and Odyssey which I was able to understand. Last summer spent in Byelorussia I visited Turkey for the first time. We were going on vacation with Byelorussian children; our organisation raised money for them to stay there in order to convalesce. We stayed on the Aegean Sea coast in places much connected to the events Homer wrote about. Of course I had read the epic poems, after all I studied history but then it was different kind of reading, more profound and more significant in my current situation. Great Homer's pieces helped me rise above the circumstances, cheer up and mobilise my strength to overcome the incommoded situation.

Everybody waited impatiently for the end of the stay there and for being sent to another centre from which you would actually be allowed go out. In the end my time came as well. When we got to Bělá-Jezová I found out that the centre was in the middle of a wood and the closest village was four kilometres far away. Instantly my joy for being free was gone. The centre was placed in an old Soviet Army headquarters and the appearance of the building absolutely did not evoke optimistic emotions. I was meant to stay there for long seven months. But today when I recall it I appreciate my stay there. Right these seven months among tranquil woods helped me gather my strength and get to used to a new lifestyle. I got to know many new people there, I made friends there, we still in touch up and keep supporting one another.

When I was small I hardly ever went to the woods, it was an unknown world for me. I learned about the life in woods first in the camp, I learned to distinguish trees and plants. There was

not much snow that year and the wood lived its own life. I often went there, I would pick up little tree branches and cones. My mind was longing for some beauty, I wanted to decorate my little room. I used to make vases from cones, put blackberry twigs into it that stayed green even through out the winter. Then I got coloured strings which I could cut into pieces and used them for making little bows on the blueberry twigs. Original bouquets were springing out of it. I was making them for my friends in the centre as well. Then I was making cloths for table of hopsack and I was sewing window curtains. Simply I tried to make my life as pleasant as I could. I always liked that. I really enjoy looking after household, home comforts and doing household chores. We were given the necessities in the centre; we did not have our own money at all. As refugees, we had to look for other source of income and extra food ourselves. In spring we would set out to woods, we were collecting a special kind of black mushrooms that was growing on tree stumps. However, it was necessary to cook these mushrooms for half an hour three times to make sure it were safe for consumption. Men would go fishing to an overgrown pond. From the beginning of summer all women used to pick blueberries and then they used to sell them to the traders at the centre gate for very low prices. But it was still money, our own money for which we could buy what we needed. Some financial resources were also necessary for trip to Prague in order to proceed with the asylum process.

We had a lot of spare time in the camp which I did not waste as I carried on with my education. I started to learn to use computer which I had not been able to work with at all. A friend of mine agreed to teach me so I started going to their little room where he was living together with his wife and daughter to computer

classes. This helped me later get out of the centre and find a job in Prague. Through out the whole time I was staying in Prague I kept in touch with Radio Free Europe office and the head of the radio suggested that I should prepare my own program about Byelorussian emigrants living around the world. I left the centre and began living in Prague, first at my friends' place and later I rented my own place for the money I earned.

Eventually I received political asylum in spring 2001 and my life got better. I was granted a participation in an integration program and I could count on getting some place for living. I did not intend to wait for the Ministry of Home Affairs to find it for me; I started to look for it myself. I wrote to all municipal parts asking them for allotting a flat and already in autumn of the same year I received an offer from Prague 7. Words cannot express how happy I was that I am finally going to have my own place. I was not young anymore and I really needed to live a normal, calm life. And it is only possible when one has a place where he or she feels at home.

At the beginning of summer 2002 after having arranged all the papers I could move to my little flat. Everything was clean; there were only empty walls everywhere. Once I met a friendly lady in the hall and she told me: "I am Magda and you must be our new neighbour." Magda was a bit older than me, she was born in Prague and she lived in our house for 50 years. We quickly became friends, it turned out we had a similar perspective of life. The first day in the evening we got to know each other Magda brought me a side-bed table and a board from which we made a table, then we pulled one armchair to it and my flat did not look that poorly anymore. Soon a friend from the radio brought me an

extra bed from his home. So I was slowly getting used to it. I did not plead money for furnishings from anyone, I earned it myself. Even though I was not earning that much in the radio because I only had one program, it was enough for the survival. I was putting money aside to buy furniture. And I felt happy doing so. I was looking around shops with house equipments and furniture, I especially liked IKEA. I always had to measure every centimetre so that everything would fit into my place. I achieved to arrange my home the way I wished, my room has been fully equipped; it is cosy and comfortable now. I like my little Prague spot, I have everything I need for work and for relaxation there and there is even a place for my friends who often come over.

I have to admit though that when I moved to my flat Prague was hit by a catastrophe. I left for work in the morning and could not get back in the evening. As I live on the Vltava river bank our street was inundated by the river. Luckily I live on the third floor which the water did not reach. I had to find a shelter over at friends' place once again and from there I set off to the airport.

In summer 2002 I could finally visit my son in New York. I had not seen him for long three years. Before going to America I went to Poland where I met with my mother after three years in Belastok. My mother is 83 now; when I was emigrating I did not even have time to say goodbye. But I was calm then because she was not alone. My brother with his family lived in our village and helped her with everything. However, in autumn 2004 a disaster happened in our family. When returning home from work at night once, my brother was killed. He was lying with hurt head not far from my mother's house, he was first found the following morning. He was 54. They started to investigate the crime but

soon they the investigation was over. Local prosecution body did not really strive to find the murderer. In Byelorussia the police is pre-occupied with persecuting the opposition politics. Therefore no one has been punished for my brother's death yet. And I was not allowed to be present at his funeral.

I worked over five years for Radio Free Europe. It was not easy, I had no experience with journalism whatsoever but I enjoyed the work much. I was in touch with many Byelorussian emigrants from all around the world and it was easy to find a guest for my broadcasting. In the first year my program reached the second place in the author program's rating and maintained it for several years. It certainly cost me a lot of effort, I stayed at work late every day, I had no weekends off in fact, but I could do my work whenever I wished. This freedom provided me a wide field of activity. All these years I was living simultaneously in two worlds. In a real one where I was physically present, and in a spiritual one which was connected to my homeland where I still cannot return. I did my work for Byelorussia so I never really lost touch with my country.

In spring 2006 I became a citizen of the Czech Republic and now the Czech Republic is my homeland too. I love this country and its people; I am part of the nation. There is not a day I would not be interested in the news, in what the country is going through, I know all the famous politicians and cultural representatives, I know quite a lot about the Czech history and culture.

Apart from that when I came to Prague I joined Skaryna organisation's activities. I was its chairwoman for three years and I assisted with organising national life for Byelorussians living in the Czech Republic who are in majority new emigrants

including the political ones. I spent a lot of time carrying out this work too.

However, I cannot forget that I am a political asylum seeker; I cannot erase that from my life. I have gone through that way and I have experience which I would like to share with those who have also chosen this way. In 2005 we established an Association of Refugees in the Czech Republic (AUČR) with a group of other asylum seekers. It is the first organisation in the Czech Republic that was founded by asylum seekers themselves; they gathered to help other asylum seekers integrate into the Czech society. Together with the chairwoman Marina Sarkisjan we wrote and published a detailed publication named Czech Republic – Our New Home on Prague City Hall's expenses where we told stories of refugees from different countries. I am also an editor of our magazine Zpravodaj (Bulletin) AUČR. Our organisation actively collaborates with other organisations dedicated to assistance for refugees. I consider this work very important and I take part in many projects.

In July 2006 I went to New York for the second time to visit my son and my grandchildren. Then my family grew by one member, so I have now a granddaughter and a grandson too. I spent a half year with them. I was having a wonderful time. People say that one loves his or her grandchildren more than his or her own children. I personally experienced the truth of these words. Grandchildren bring more joy indeed because they come in the period in which we have fewer duties, understand life more and appreciate the gifts given to us by my fate. It is wonderful to put them to sleep, tell them fairy tales or rock them. I am grateful to have had a chance to experience it and to have fulfilled my female role.

I am delighted to have been born as a woman. A woman gives life and brings up children; she has the fundamental role in the process of preserving spiritual values, continuance of generations. Woman in her whole essence is aware of the importance of every single human life and feels profoundly her responsibility for the future. It is characteristic of us to solve problems in a calm way, eliminate problems; women do not unleash wars because they are aware of what price they would have to pay back. I think that the greatest victims of wars are precisely women because they lose their relatives and friends, and it is them who carry the burden connected to overcoming the war consequences. A woman cannot simply limit herself to mother and housewife role in the nowadays world full of conflicts. She wants to participate in this world's development and preserve it for her children's future. This is my life standpoint. My professional, work and personal lives do not oppose one another, they are interconnected. I would not like to live just one of them; it would not be self-satisfactory for me.

However, time works against us and now in one's declining years it is continually getting more difficult to count these roles. When I went to New York for the second time I wanted to spend time with my grandchildren, help my son and my daughter-in-law. Therefore I had to choose between family and work in July 2006, so I left Free Europe. When I came back a half year afterwards I was still going to the Byelorussian office and preparing my book with texts about my relation to the history of Byelorussian emigration for the publication. I hope this book will be soon published in Byelorussia. It is going to be my second book focusing on Byelorussia. My first book was published in 1997 and it was dedicated to the first conference of Byelorussians of the World mentioned earlier. Apart from books my academic publications

were coming out in newspapers and magazines; I wrote them when I was working in the archives. Before I emigrated I used to go to Prague to work with documents from Czech archives and the Slavonic Library, I focused on search and studies of Byelorussia in the interwar period. In 1923–1943 the government of Byelorussian People's Republic's was located in Prague; the republic's independence was declared in Minsk on 25th March, 1918 and it was later destroyed by Bolsheviks. Two Byelorussian presidents lived and died in Prague; they were buried in Olsany cemetery and their commemoration is honoured by laying flowers on their graves on the Independence Day, March 25th.

When I look back I value the time I spent in the emigration and which is still going on. The life in the refugee camp and direct work with refugees broadened my vision of the world that we are all living in. I feel the unity not only with Byelorussia or the Czech Republic but I feel like a world-citizen. I know that we are all humans, that our lives are linked with being present on the same planet, that borders divide people less and less, that we understand one another more and more and that we are aware of our responsibility for our common future. I will have to live on between the Czech Republic and the U.S.A. where my children are. However, I feel absolutely naturally in this wide living space, it provides me more occasions for my intellectual development. That is why I would love to believe that I have lived my first 60 years so far and that I am standing at a threshold of the second part of my life. I hope that God will at least partially allow me to realize my plans for the future. It seems that I am still able to do some good for myself and the others.

Prague, July 2007

Elvira Jumaeva



- born in Kyrgyzstan
- graduated from school of applied fine art
- married, mother of one daughter
- in 2004 came with her family to the Czech Republic, received asylum
- lives in a small town where her salary is constituted of seasonal jobs

Childhood

I spent my childhood at my grandparents'. I am very grateful for that. My mother and my father worked and lived in Frunze (nowadays Bishkek). My grandfather fought against the Fascists in the Great Civil war in 1941; he was held captive, he was an intelligent, respected man. After the war he worked as a teacher, he knew Arabic, written and spoken; my grandmother looked after the children and ran the household. When I was attending the elementary school I waited for my mom to come, it was like a holiday for me. My sisters lived and went to school in Bishkek, I missed them. Time flew after the 8th grade my mom took me to the town and I started going to a school of applied fine arts.

I got a degree in painting, master of wood-carving. Then I went to Moscow to attend to business. I had to earn some money.

Family

I got married in 1992 and soon after our son was born. He was beautiful, we loved him. My husband worked in construction industry but later we decided to attend to business. In 1997 I went to Turkey for the goods, it was on May 23rd. On 29th I got a phone call that my son was in a serious health condition, which he was in an anaesthesiology ward, he apparently wanted to see me. Straight away I set out journey home and on 30th early in the morning I arrived. I felt as if I had been in the world alone, I was worried, I was crying the whole trip and pleading the almighty for help. Something horrible happened. At home all the neighbours were waiting for me, my mother and my husband, I got scared and asked: "How come that all neighbours are at our place so early in the morning? And where is our son?" – "In hospital, in anaesthesiology." I was too weak to ask more. I wanted to go to the hospital right away. I will never forget this day; it was 29th May when I lost my son. I fainted and I did not remember anything after that.

My son was playing with children then. My sister's son pushed him into water, they were of the same age, but you cannot do anything about it now. I have reconciled with everything. The children were playing and my mother went to buy them some sweets. When she got back it was too late. I felt horrible when I saw my sister's son, I was about to break down, why did he push him there? If he had not done that my son would

have been alive. I felt horrible; I accused myself of having gone away leaving my son at home. Many different thoughts disturbed me. My mother was praying to the almighty to forgive her for not keeping an eye on him well. I do not blame her; she did not want this to happen. I know that she feels as hurt as I do. She lived through many misfortunes. The one who gave me life.

I could not pull my self together for long after the accident. I was in hospital for several times, I suffered from depression, I was terrified. I pleaded the almighty for help.

Two years later I got pregnant again and on 26th April 1999 my daughter was born. We were very happy, and our family too. I was keeping an eye on her all the time, I did not trust anyone. I thanked the almighty for not leaving us alone.

But later another misfortune happened to us. In 2000 my husband came home from work and one of his legs got swollen so much that he could hardly stand on it. We went to hospital where we were told that he had needed a surgery as the inflammation was spreading and gangrene could appear. We got scared. My husband agreed on the operation but three days later he got sick again, he was throwing up, he had a fever. A week after we went back to hospital. They infected him in the hospital and thus damaged his health for the rest of his life. Then he stayed at home for 8 months. In the end he felt ashamed of sitting at home waiting, pleading for help so he returned to work. And he got seriously ill again. His doctor told him that he had not had much time left. But he told me all this much later. When I found out I was really worried that I would lose him. My husband decided for natural medicine treatment and these procedures helped him a lot to improve his health. We failed

to prove that doctors in the hospital had neglected something. One gets really tired proving things all the time.

In 2000 I gave birth to a beautiful girl. I was in hospital after Caesarean section. Two days later the baby girl died. I could not believe what had happened, it seemed as though I was not meant to be happy. I cried over a son whom I lost, now a daughter, why? I wanted to sue them but it would not give my daughter back, so in the end I did not do it. I prayed to the almighty to give me strength to endure the pain. I wished all mothers were healthy and none lived through such pain and suffering like me. I wish there were smart people and justice in the world. All people should like one another; after all we were all created by one God. I would like our children to be happy, brought up in peace.

Arrival in the Czech Republic

In 2004 we arrived in the Czech Republic and applied for asylum. Then we were sent to the detention centre in Seč. We were waiting for the decision for quite long. During our stay there my husband was operated, I am grateful for that to the doctors from the hospital in Chrudim. We were granted asylum and moved to Zastávka u Brna where we lived for about a half year. Then we were offered a flat in Luštěnice where we have been living ever since. We really like it here, even our daughter; she made friends with everyone here. We visit each other with our neighbours. The only worry we have is my husband's health. We found an excellent, very responsible doctor in Mladá Boleslav. I hope he will undergo transplantation because it is the only cure for him. And I fear to stay alone without him, only with my daughter.

The life here has only started for us. We are slowly getting used to it. I would like to become self-sufficient, not to wait for help from authorities. We get very little money; we cannot make two ends meet. We would prefer to work. But I cannot make it all – look after my ill husband, cook special diet for him four times a day and take care of my daughter for whom I have to cook separately. I am not afraid of work, I would like to work with ceramics which I love, make unusual objects, make up different such figures that one could see what they represent just by looking at them, I would like to open up; but how, there is no work.

There are different people in the Czech Republic. It is beautiful here in Luštěnice, we feel at home here, we have friends here. We have a neighbour whom I love as if she was my mother, she helps us. We do not feel like foreigners, I am glad that we get on well with everybody. People know each other here, there is no problem.

It is difficult to find a job in the Czech Republic without any specific knowledge or degree. And if you happen to find it, it is hard work – in a bakery, cleaning job or a job at a construction etc. When I think about it I am worried. But I hope everything will get better. We are learning Czech now but when there is no money I am thinking how to find a job. I am speculating how we are going to live independently but these all are temporary problems. The most important thing is communicating with people, getting to know the Czech Republic more, its traditions.

I like the fact that there are animals in the countryside, birds that sing by us in the morning when one is waking up. You listen to birds singing, you look out of the window to take delight in the beauty of this country and your mood gets immediately better. You forget about the tiredness and the problems and you enjoy

the life. I get my daughter ready for school in the morning, I plait her hair, she has breakfast and I walk her to the bus stop. Then I do the housework – cleaning, cooking, and laundry. I prepare everything and after lunch I go to school until 5 PM, I go there three times a week. So the time goes... And in the evening we all go for a walk to the wood. We walk contemplating what is going to come, what changes are awaiting us in the future; we speak about my husband's health problems. We all support, cheer up each other. I tell my husband that the transplantation is going to come soon, that he is going to live long, work as he used to, think about the family, that he is strong, that we are going to handle it all. "We have been waiting for long and now our time has come, the almighty has listened to your plea and you will cure. You will see your clever, well-educated daughter. Do you remember when you were sick, our daughter was crying and saying that when she grows up she will become a lawyer so that she could protect us and all the powerless, old people." I pray so that her wish would come true.

I am thinking why the people the almighty created are so different; why there are such terrible diseases in the world. I am thinking about all different kinds of things. But the will to fight and be patient is winning. However, with my husband's disease I am often scared and I have dark thoughts. But I hope everything will be fine soon. Fairness exists and our situation will get solved soon. We are grateful to the organisation OPU (Organisation for Aid to Refugees) for supporting us in difficult moments. We honestly appreciate help of its members – Anetka, Markéta, Nataša and Julie. I wish the occupational success was growing, common sense was ruling the world and there were more and more such workers. And I wish there were honest,

rightful people in the Czech Republic. I wish there was more joy and people were healthy because life is short.

Life in Kyrgyzstan

The life in Kyrgyzstan was regular, not wonderful nor horrible. We lived and worked, like many others we started doing business. People would come from the country to the capitol to earn money any way they could – in the market, constructions, etc. We were living with Jusup, thinking about the family, upbringing of our daughter. Every family thinks about everyone's good.

The life in a city and in the country is very distinct in Kyrgyzstan. People in the country have their own farm or they plant vegetables, fruits, every one earns his or her living the way he or she is capable of, some breed animals. And children go to school, get to the capitol, go to university. Some stay at home and live with their parents, occupy themselves with the farm, help their parents at home. Some girls marry after the school, usually a man from their village. It is an old tradition, it is like a wedding. If a girl agrees, everything is good. But people say that after the 8th grade girls are 'stolen for wedding'. I find it very bad to live the whole life with an unknown person. According to our traditions if they kidnap a girl she is obliged to stay there, if she runs away it is a shame for her family. I think that old customs should be observed but only somewhere in distant places, in mountain villages. People are used to their way life style there and it satisfies them. They usually breed whole flocks of sheep, herds of horses and other animals. They have their own life. For example when the only son gets married, they live together

with his parents. The daughter-in-law has to get up early and run the household, milk the cow, clean the yard and prepare breakfast for the rest of the family that is still asleep. And men attend to farming.

I think that women and men support each other nowadays. It is very bad for a man to think about himself only and have the woman look after the family and children and the household too. I do not say that such selfish men do not exist. When we were in Kyrgyzstan I was noticing that everyone was always so busy, busy with work, studies, business, always in a hurry. Life goes on anyway. Women and men complement each other. I remember that my father, when he was still alive, used to like ironing his uniform. He would iron it because it was really expensive, he would not let my mom do it. And he was an excellent cook. He would help my mother and was never ashamed of doing something for the family.

However, in Kyrgyzstan a man does not sometimes have to help his wife with anything at all. I am absolutely against it though. I think we are civilised. There is a logical accordance between a man and a woman; everyone knows where he or she belongs. In our country like elsewhere when parents are old children look after them because it is them who brought them up, forgave them and taught them everything. We should look after our parents till the end of their lives. I think that people around the whole world are worried about providing for their families, it does not matter if it is a woman or man. I respect people in the entire world. When we were living in Kyrgyzstan I also understood how foreigners felt in a foreign country. I think people should behave in a country where they

are living according to the local customs but within certain restrictions, there must be mutual respect. As we were created by the almighty to live, work and learn, love, communicate with all sort of people, support one another in difficult situations. At least we are approaching that goal. The civilization is moving forward. Nevertheless, we should not forget about our traditions created by our ancestors around the world. I am very interested in traditions of different nations and I compare the past with the present. It is very interesting because you get a feeling that our ancestors were after all stronger, not only in the Muslim countries but everywhere in the world. I would really like people not to forget about (our) values and history. But young people grow up in a very different way nowadays. Old traditions go away and they go forward. They think distinctly, we are in another situation nowadays.

Irina Kuzmina



- born in Byelorussia in 1971
- graduated from secondary technical school
- married
- worked as a dressmaker in a tailor's shop
- came to the Czech Republic in 2002 due to political persecution
- runs her living similarly like at home, runs a business, owns a tailor's shop in the Czech Republic

Life in Byelorussia and the Czech Republic

Life in Byelorussia is different to the life in the Czech Republic but it depends on individuals.

The same applies to relationships between men and women. It depends on those people.

There are different people in the Czech Republic – good as well – there as simply humans. The relationships they have is what matters.

Message for the public

I do not want to say anything to the Czech. Rather to the foreigners – appreciate the country in which you are living and have merit in forming mutual relationships.

Jana Litvinova



- born in Byelorussia in 1972
- graduate psychologist and graphologist
- married, mother of three
- was forced to leave her country for political reasons
- in 2005 all her family received asylum in the Czech Republic
- worked in a beauty salon, as an animator, a decorator and a creative artist
- at present on parental leave

Childhood

My name is Jana Litvinova. I was born in Byelorussia, in 1972; then it was one of the Soviet Union republics. My father, Sergej Sergejevich, a surgeon, dedicated all his life to medicine and love to my mother, Larisa Nikolayevna. They met very young, they have known each other since they were 14 years old, and they attended same secondary medical school. It was impossible to ignore my mother's beauty – she is a grandmother now, she is around 70. However, those who remember her from youth she still looks like a fairy even nowadays.

My mother grew up in a small village where university degree was regarded as something useless. Her gentle beauty was

considered the same luxury but my future father could not think of anyone else. When they met he was shorter, very slim, from very poor but proud family. As a joke they made a deal that if he grew up until he went to the military service she would marry him. He did grow up and my mother kept her promise, she refused all her suitors and they have been together for 45 years with my father. I am writing about that because from the first moment of my life and have been perceiving their mutual love there fore I know that wherever my life proceeds all the trouble can be overcome only if people like each other.

My mother came from a "rich" family, before the revolution my mother's father owned a large piece of land. After the war they confiscated even their house where my grandmother with my mother and other children were living, they converted it into a post office, the land fell to Kolkhoz and they intended to send the family to the exile to Siberia. The fact that my mother was very good at school and carried on studying saved the family from the exile – there was nobody in the whole region that could make into university, just my mother.

Relatives from my father's side were against the wedding because my mother was a kulak's daughter and he was from a proletarian family. His cousins did not forget to remind her that my father had made her a favour with choosing her. The fact that my mom had to uselessly prove to others that she was worthy may have helped her become so consistent in achieving her goals.

My father did not want to go to university after the military service. It was my mom who handed in his application together with hers so they could study together. My mom kept "making" him study, they were both good students, they were getting

"A's" but the increased scholarship was granted to my father only because he was a man and because my mother's origin was not good; later he became a chairman of a students' club and then when they started working my mother was earning extra money in a medical school, she was a lecturer there and she found this possibility for an extra source of income for my father too, she worked the same way as my father but it was always him who was considered an eligible doctor and he was the only one with the prospective of building a career. It was demanding for my mom to keep "proving" her capability, so one day she made an unexpected decision – there was a big hospital in construction in a new town, they needed a head physician and an eye doctor; they were giving them flats. My mom told my dad that she would move there with us and if he wanted he could stay where he was working. Luckily, my father joined my mother, certainly he became the head physician and my mother apart from being an eye doctor would always earn some extra money somewhere else, however she influenced her environment more than my father. So these loving people always competed in the professional sphere.

I spent my whole childhood under the influence of women – my sister who was much older than me and she was like an angel of justice to me and she was not there for a friendship, my mother, so beautiful and so busy that it was impossible to bother her with trifles, teachers in the kindergarten and my mother's colleagues in case I ran away and spent a day at her working place.

My father taught me to read at an early age – he did not know how to play with me, we would simply go out together, to the country, pick up field flowers, to lakes or just to woods.

So, once he wrote the alphabet down and I memorised it. The following day I could read and he was not even surprised, he acted as if it had not been anything difficult. Similarly I learned to swim – there was a river Dvin close to our home and children would go to play there on their own. Naturally they had to be able to swim, there was no one who did not, so I started to swim to be like the others.

As there was no grandmother to give hand, there was no one to baby-sit for me so I was sent to school in an early age. My mother got to know a nanny who was living some floors above us, she would often take me home from the kindergarten and only late after my parents would come from work she would take me home. My first friend was a boy – my parents' colleagues' son, no one was looking after us so we would play in the yard, and they would only leave us something to eat. I remember being ashamed of not having a girlfriend. When I was asked who my friend was, I did not feel like saying Sasha, however I did not have a girlfriend for a long time. This Sasha was a bit older, I remember he was allowed to pick me up from school and a lot of children envied me that I was being picked up by a friend instead of a parent.

Children used to begin school when they were seven but then an experiment was carried out in our town, they opened a class for six-year-old kids. My parent signed me up there and I had to part with my kindergarten's friends. I went to the first grade in the same school where I had attended a preparatory school. There were some children from my kindergarten; we were all living in the same house. There were four of us living in the same number in our class. It was still in the Soviet era and our teacher formed us into groups, called "little stars" formed by five kids.

We were supposed to spend time together and later talk about it. Our parents were taking turns in driving us to different places, they were taking photos of us, feeding us and taking back – all squeezed in one car, we were still very small and there were no baby seats then. I both liked it and didn't. I did not like the fact that we had been forced into it. However, I liked being with another father or mother for a while and I enjoyed observing the relationships in other families. We were to congratulate to the person from our "little star" on his or her name day. We would do that but not with much enthusiasm, each of us used to have different friends, these were just artificial relationships.

At the beginning a boy was sitting next to me in the class formed my closest surrounding. The teacher made the sitting order herself. We were lucky, we both liked reading, learning was easy for us and we would read books under the desk and when the teacher was approaching we would warn each other. In the evening we used to go to the library, it was my most favourite place in the town. I used to order unusual books and would bring them to the boy and he would lend me those he had managed to borrow. We did not visit each other because our parents were not very happy that we had become friends. His mother was divorced, he did not have a father and his mother was looking for new suitor all the time therefore my parents did not consider Andrej a good company for me. So we would meet in the library.

When I was 12 my sister gave birth to a son, my nephew. I was really happy, finally a person, who liked me and whom I liked, appeared. My nephew was like a brother, friend to me, and at the same time as if he had been a sort of preparation for my own son. All the girls at school envied us that we had a baby in the family. My sister was happy that I could take Pavel for walks so

that they could go out time to time. We would take Pavel even to a café, to the beach and when we were meeting with our bunch by the school or in front of our house in the evenings Pavel was always there with us.

Adolescence

And the time came when I had to say good-bye to my friends and my nephew. For different reasons my parents decided to move house; they found a way to exchange our flat. I cannot express with words how sad I was because of that moving; I was saying to myself that I had better died then lose the life I was used to. I was pleading my parents to leave me at my sister's but they took me away. I was crying for several days in the new place, I did not like a thing there. On the third day I was so tired of crying that I decided to start a new life. I went out to the new yard and began introducing myself to older children.

My parents understood that I did not want to go to the 9th grade at the new school. I signed up to a medical school which was there. My new girlfriends were now to-be-nurses. Half of the girls were local, some from small villages and I was the only one who came from a distant modern town. All of them were curious about me. But I still was not able to make the new situation up. It took about a moth till I got used to it, I felt like being surrounded by fools all the time.

Local boys were interested in me but deeply in my mind I did not care for any romances, further I made up a theory that there could be no one in this town who would make a good match with me. So I looked down at the local boys. However, older girls interpreted my behaviour their own way – that I despise them

and moreover that me, such a chick take their potential partners, already scarce in numbers, away from them. It even developed into ridiculous conflicts. But in the end we became friends with boys from our year and had a lot of fun with them.

Nevertheless, I was not able to take a liking in this town in those three years before the following happened. We finished school and got our diplomas. All the time I was dreaming of being admitted to medical faculty and leaving this place. My mom and dad wanted me to stay. We had such an argument because of my decision that I could not speak to my dad. I went to sleep over at my friend's place. The last but one day was a holiday, midsummer night. There was a disco on the embankment, we were all having a good time and all of a sudden such a pour-down came that we all just took off our shoes and carried on dancing. I was unlucky, I stepped on a broken glass piece in dark and I cut myself very deep in my foot. I could not walk and everybody started to help me out. But I could not go home because of the dispute with my father. A stranger, young guy took me to my friend's place and bound my foot with his own shirt, so I thought: "Where else would a stranger help me like this?" In this difficult moment I realised that I actually liked the town and that I was sorry to be leaving.

My dad came to pick me up in the morning and without saying a word drove me to his native place, there where his home village, destroyed after the war, used to be. My dad used to go back there; we came to the river of his childhood. Then we got to understand each other, we realised that we liked each other but were not able to express it. He agreed on me leaving and I left a week after. I was grateful to my parents that they had not stopped me even though they were wishing for something else.

My dad wanted me to do medicine very much; my mother on the contrary hoped I would opt for something else. Then I did not let either of them influence me, I took my choice for granted, it was medicine. Marie Curie – Skłodowska was my favourite personality, I even tried to seek parallels in our lives. I recall this with joy, the way this woman's spirit influenced me partially gave a bias to my day dreaming.

Unfortunately I did not obtain enough points to be admitted to the medical faculty so according to the conditions set by the government I started working in a gastroenterology ward in a big hospital in Minsk. I made my first independent steps of my life – my own housing, income and costs that I could balance myself, my own free time, even though there was not much of it but it was mine I did not have to explain to anyone how I was going to spend it.

I was surrounded by different sort of people: my colleagues – girls, nurses like me none of which really stood out, none of them wanted to continue studies, they were all satisfied with what they had. Older women and doctors – they treated me differently. According to the shift plan I was often on 24-hour duty, I assisted many complicated or on the other hand amusing cases at night. One finds out quite quickly what kind of person the other person is by being in constant communication in such talks until the early hours.

I did not get on well with the head nurse, a village woman without a higher education, corpulent and unfortunately not very nice lady for whom I was absolutely incomprehensible. Her relative worked there as well, a girl of my age, a village girl that got to our ward by some one pulling strings. She was afraid of

many things so when we were on shift together I often had to take decisions or finish after her what was necessary.

There were five-minute-talks in the mornings, short meetings of the entire ward where last night events and daily plans were discussed. The head nurse always tried to talk about the shifts as if I had not done something and her protégé had to work instead of me and thus did not make her own tasks. Luckily doctors or assistants on duty always spoke up for me and more or less justly reported what had happened. This supported me in the first month before I found my bearings given the situation. I still needed a lot of time to gain professional confidence. Only by the end of the ninth month in that job and after taking a preparatory course to university and choosing a new faculty for my studies I started to feel indifferent to what people were saying about me and I was pretty confident in my job.

Youth

I was admitted to university which made my parents very happy. However, I took it for granted. My to-be-husband would always repeat that it did not matter to him if I was a cleaning lady or whoever but I remember that seeing my name on the list of admitted people made him very happy. He was happy for me, for my happiness.

Straight from the beginning I was influenced by several people at once, by my psychology teacher and by the head of the department, they both represented two contradictory approaches to defectology with their real enthusiasm and interest which enabled me later to work out my own approach. I never studied because of the marks; I always considered what

I should remember from the lectures, what I could use and what I could forget.

There was a female spirit at the faculty – defectology as a science bloomed thanks to wise men but later it kept developing thanks to painstaking work of women. I thought it was quite natural as the field of educating children and furthermore children with combined or somatic diseases traditionally belonged to women. However, psychology as a scientific field was introduced to me by men; its founders were all men. There were fifteen girls and six boys in our year. During the first year lectures we were in a big group which was later divided into smaller ones for seminars and practical classes. All our boys were older than the girls. Most of them had already done the military service and worked somewhere for couple years.

I got married in the first year and by the end of the fourth year our son was born, which made us happy ever since. My husband and I were looking after our son on our own, he in the mornings and I in the afternoons or the other way round; I had to finish the fifth year and he had to work. I often took my son with me, all the group took care of him. When he grew up a bit and I became a research assistant at the faculty, all of a sudden he was playing directly with our professors, they would make fun that I had the most educated nannies in the whole Byelorussia. It was a difficult period but I handled it because I was giving a lot of love. The problems started to emerge in connection with my husband's political activity; I had to hide many things from our parents and from my colleagues as well. I soon figured that there were many things that I not only had to hold inside but reveal at the same time in order not to harm our relatives.

In the second year of the research work I was pregnant with my second child and his birth was the most important thing for me. My husband was working a lot, his political interests continued to cause a lot of trouble. And it was exactly the necessity to hide things on one hand and be honest on the other that formed my personality. My husband had to go to Prague and I stayed with the children alone. I could not give out the real reason for his departure, not even to my parents. It was very difficult for me, to know what they think and tell them partial truth. I really appreciate their support.

Because we needed money, my husband was not allowed to carry out an ordinary work, I soon started working as a psychologist in a nursery (my younger son was one year and eighteen months then) which my elder son attended and my younger son was admitted to as well. All my women colleagues – “aunties” weighing 200 kg only dreamt of eating and taking things home with them. I was the only one capable of working on PC therefore my boss allowed me to work flexible hours. I would go to various conferences, attend lectures at university and work with students in order to do something useful. I met my future director at one of those conferences. We were sitting next to each other and time to time made a comment on the speeches. He introduced himself and asked me whether I would like work in handwriting. I explained him that my surname was not the safest in the totalitarian dictatorship but he replied that it did not matter to him and in case I wanted to learn something new, it was a deal.

At work, I was already a criminologist; the team was more than conservative. There were only women in my graphology laboratory but this was a tradition. In the past this science used

to be represented solely by men, the first director of our institute was a man, the last but one too. The working methods were continuously getting more complicated and required painstaking work and this was nothing for men anymore, they started changing to other types of expertise like accident investigation or trasology.

However, women graphologists had an advantage, they were all very good looking. Even my colleagues in their 60s or 70s were very pretty and young looking. We often made jokes on this topic, people in the institute were making fun of us saying that instead of expertise we kept witches or what-have-you in the safes. Well, the constant intellectual tension and the diversity of examined material must have caused such results. I was the only married one out of my colleagues. But in fact we were all abandoned. The older ones never started a family, they dedicated all their lives to science and writing, the young ones were divorced, childless, I was without a husband then, he was in Prague and they were all convinced that I had made him up that in fact he had abandoned me. I did not care; I knew what the truth was.

I only missed working with students, I suffered with not being able to be myself, I had to think all the time what and to whom I could say something. I often had a visit from KGB during my lunch break but it became a part of my life and I knew how to act. True, once they were so cheeky and impertinent that I ran out of the door to the hallway and burst out screaming. Unexpectedly a colleague from the opposite lab helped me. The toilets were being locked and the key had to pick up but they were left open during a lunch break as no visitors were let in. So when this agent came at lunchtime as usual and then left for toilet my colleague went right after him and as if he had

not known that someone was inside, locked him in. He was ashamed to scream so he spent several hours sitting silently in the toilet until our economic manager came and importuned him who he was and what he was doing there. This monster never returned but he kept annoying me and my elder son by phone for a long time.

They wanted to achieve our divorce, in that case my husband would not be interested in coming back and it would make him much weaker. They did not succeed; I would not be able to articulate such words.

The decision to leave seemed like the only option to save our children from persecution, my parents from humiliation at work and it was the only way to reunite our parted family, though abroad.

My husband wished for that but I was trying to push this idea away till the last moment. I could not discuss it with anyone. My father accepted my decision, he did not question, he helped me arrange everything regarding the flat. I either gave things as presents or simply gave them away. I had to pack everything within a week, my sister came over, I had taken the kids to my parents; I remember passing the streets of my love and life town together with them. I did not strike me that the farewell could be for so long.

The Czech Republic

After the arrival in the Czech Republic we were first excited to be together, there was no one threatening us, the kids were able to play with their dad in piece, go out for walks. However, I could

sense that this happiness would only take couple days; I was afraid what the detention centre would be like. My husband told me how it worked there but I supposed there were more things he had not even thought of as he was there on his own.

Certainly, my husband was not allowed in the centre with us, through a small, basement window he saw me and I could not believe that a person who loved me and my children could have taken us there voluntarily. I just forgave him without understanding it, I simply reconciled with the situation. I cannot explain that...

The centre was crowded with people of different nationalities, the majority of which were from the "east". Almost all of them without education of course, behaving as if we had been in a correction institute. The official rules were not applied; the camp was ruled by a criminal law. I am not able to write about this either, the right time has not come yet...

I was surprised to see numbers of women who had simply come there from hopeless situation in order to look for a job; in advance they were willing to acknowledge themselves as second-rate people. Everybody usually keeps asking you where you are from, where you worked and at the beginning I was telling the truth, but they could not believe that I did not make up my story; they all thought I was not normal to have left such a job and everything behind.

People respond to the emigration in various ways. I understood one thing very quickly – women are much more adaptable and men without anyone supporting them fall down to the bottom, e.g. alcoholism or they seek a lower-grade company given what

they were used to. Unfortunately I heard that some one even committed a suicide. Clever, in previous life intelligent men join themselves with primitive, vulgar women because it the way for them to feel desired for, to be looked up at, they compensate their social deprivation with sexual satisfaction.

The way my husband and I were seeking information was really different. He was always satisfied with what someone had told him. I could not accept that, I had to be 100% sure, so I collected all information in non-governmental organisations, on the Internet and at last from people's stories.

It was difficult for me to end up at the bottom, in fact underneath it. My children were giving me the sense of self-assurance; my sons were always telling people around only the best about me. Later when I heard nice things about me it was helping me a lot because there was nothing else I could base my confidence on. My husband's role is more or less positive, naturally we are unable to work within our field but his endeavour to keep his former social status was very strong, so together with people of similar mentality they established their own social organisation, he gathered youth, interest of press and compatriots. He regained his self-assurance working in the organisation as its chairman and helping people in need.

When I got to know that I was pregnant with a daughter I understood that the fate is sending me its charming gift after all those horrifying tests, she could not have been born there, at home.

We are five now, I do not have a job, my husband is on paternal leave instead of me as I am trying to find a job. I know, however, that there is something to live for and that I will under

no circumstances lapse into desperation. Because my daughter is looking at me and from the first moments of her life she will be learning from me what it means to be happy.

Prague, August 2007

Malgorzata Olczak



- born in Lower Silesia
 - graduate pedagogue
 - married, a mother of five children
 - briefly worked with children with special needs
 - came to the Czech Republic in March 2007 with her husband who works here as an IT technician
- works at home, looks after her children and the household in the Czech Republic

Life in Poland

Men and women work in Poland. Small children either go to kindergarten or are looked after by their grandmothers or nannies. A lot of women do not work, they run the household and look after the children and cook. On Sundays all the family goes to church. The whole family gathers for Sunday lunch, parents often invite their children with their families for a Sunday lunch. Afterwards they go for a walk, in summer they go to the lake. Poles rarely go to restaurants. They often make barbecues.

Relationships between men and women

From childhood girls and boys are raised to respect women. "Women have preference" everybody is told in Poland, since they

are children. Men let women enter a door first. In the past men used to kiss women's hands upon encounter. It is disappearing nowadays. It is not proper for women to smoke, drink alcohol and use vulgar language on the street. Women in Poland did not have to fight for emancipation. They were given the right to vote in 1918.

Life in the Czech Republic

I have been in the Czech Republic for a short time. I spend a lot of time working at home. Neighbours from our suburb say "good morning" to me even though not all of them know me. I noticed that men do not often give a seat to women in a tram or underground. People do not help to lift prams on stairs either.

Message for the Czech public

The Czechs are not good drivers. They do not let each other give way they drive too fast in town areas. I often drive and I see all this. They hoot when it is not necessary. I would like to say to the Czechs to consider other drivers more.

Maryna Hordiyenko



- born in Ukraine
- graduated from secondary pedagogical school
- came to the Czech Republic for a study program
- worked as a cleaner in a printing office in the Czech Republic
- works nowadays as a nursemaid in a kindergarten

My childhood

Hello, my name is Maryna. It is not easy to write about what was in the past; I am 36 years old now. Childhood... To be honest, they were the happiest years of my life, though not always joyful. But if I had known how difficult it is to be an adult I would have never grown up.

I do not remember the time when I was really small very well. My memories go back to the period when I was five. My mother was married, and because of her mother, she married a man she never loved on purpose. My mother got married, because she wanted to please my grandmother. She married a man she did not love and had a child with him – my older brother. She had

a child, my older brother. He was seven when my mom got to know my father. My father was a handsome, interesting young man, sportive, strong, he did not drink nor smoke. He told us many times how he fell in love with my mother at the first glance. A couple of months later my mother got divorced from her first husband and married my dad and flew to the north of Russia. And when my mother's first husband got back from his business trip he found out that there was no wife and son anymore.

When my mom was pregnant with me the three of us lived through a very difficult period. My mother's ex-husband followed her and pleaded her to come back to him. My father's relatives were against the marriage. But my father, whom I respect, did not ask anyone for a solution, he simply took my mom to his place, he was living with his parents and said: "Introduce yourselves to each other, this is my wife. Please respect my choice if some one insults her I will tear his head off." However, all the trouble my mother passed through during her pregnancy got reflected in my health. When I was five, first symptoms of psoriasis appeared. By the way, I was born in May and I was a stubborn, naughty child. My mom worked a lot, dad would fly north to work and our grandmother, dad's mother was looking after us. She had lived with us all her life.

Then my younger brother Vadim was born. I used to be jealous of him because he drew all the attention. My mom was not patient with me; she did not know how to approach me. She would scold me and shout at me. I behaved even worse. Already as a child I was strange, I was my own person. If there was something I did not like I simply left, I did not like to argue.

I remember going to school. We lived on the outskirts of a town; it used to be a normal village twenty years ago. I went

to school in this village. It took me about 15 minutes. So, it was not very far, through a forest. I would always wake up on my own; no one ever woke me up. I set the clock myself, prepared the stuff the evening before and in the morning got up at any hour without a problem. So I was getting up at six o'clock, I was the first to come to school when it was still closed because I was scared to be late. And until this day I am haunted by this fear, that things I am doing will not be done well enough; I am afraid that I will not handle what I am doing very well. I am always scared in advance. I know it is wrong but I have not been able to get rid of this fear until today.

When I was thirteen years old, I looked older; I was a matured, friendly girl. But I was reserved and shy. I had a complex because I suffered from psoriasis and I felt unpleasant when my red scurfy spots came out. My mom used to say crying over me: "Oh, my poor girl, who's going to want you, why didn't I loose you before?" I think that this caused the great deal of my actual bodily harm. For long thus I could not get rid of a horrible feeling of blame for who I was.

My grandmother Grunia was the only one who understood me and supported me. She was a religious, very nice woman. She was like both, a mother and a father to me. I was learning poems with her, I played the accordion with her, she was teaching me how to walk on high heels and when she was 76 she was teaching me to sew. She was very intelligent; she came from a Greek family. She was capable of listening and giving good advice too. In one word – she was wise even though she was not educated. My granny was very patient, and with me too. I liked her very much.

Boys liked me a lot, they were chasing me and I was hiding away from them, I would not answer the door, I was very rude.

My parents were scared that I would become a girl of loose morals only because I looked older and men liked me. But I could not be like that because I was "set" not to be like that; I remembered for a long time that sex was bad. Moreover, sex before wedding. It was something horrible!! My friends were already dating and sleeping with men but I had no idea what a man was. And the first time I saw a man for real, it seemed funny to me, I got really scared.

We always had a lot of fun at home. My dad, my younger brother Vadim and I played the harmonica, the accordion and the guitar. Our family would often gather and we would sing songs, talk and I especially liked my granny's remembrances from her youth, how she got married, and many other stories. These evenings of talking and storytelling united us, I always felt very happy in these moments. Our relatives who lived close by would also often come over. It was my dad's sister, her children and my mother's brother. And in general we often had guests or even friends' friends over; they would come to sleep over. My parents loved guests; they never made any differences between my mom and my father's friends.

Youth

I was a very good student at school, I was good at maths, foreign languages, and I liked English. But I did not obtain a profound knowledge of it. You certainly understand what a village school education was like. When I needed to decide where to go to study I longed for Kiev University, Department of Foreign Languages. But my family made the decisions for me. They took my documents when I was in the eighth grade and signed me up for secondary

pedagogical school. I can never forget how much I pleaded them to put me back in school, how much I disliked it there, hated the town. I was more or less in touch with my classmates, with other boys though I could not find a common topic. I was scared, shy... It was horrible. I wonder if it was really me.

Of course I wanted to go on dates, I was imagining our appointments... romantic ones, with flowers, words of love... I often wanted a man who would be assiduous, who could express strength. I am a complicated person. And maybe I am stupid – I want to say yes but I am saying no, I want to do something but I don't. I am learning to be different, but it does not go very well. I wanted to have a husband with whom we could be friends, who would be a good father to our children, who would be thoughtful to me and the children as much as possible. I have a feeling that if I had a family it would be ideal. I had several proposals but my intuition advised me they were not the right ones. So it was.

I liked a boy at school; he was one year older than me. He liked me as well. I was happy... But I once came home for the weekend and I was told that Vitia (that was his name) had a motor bike accident and he did not survive it. It was horrible. This happened when I was in the first year at secondary school. And there is something interesting: Vitia's mother was in hospital; he often visited her and would always bring flowers, some sweets or fruits. Women who were in the same room with his mother admired him. And he helped his mother with everything at home. He was a very obedient son. He was working that summer to earn money for a motor bike. She said: "I don't want a coffin in my house..." When he went to see her in the hospital for the last time he said that he was going for a ride with a guy who was

selling the motor bike, she did not allow him to go. She said that she had had a dream about her deceased husband who came to her and said he wanted to take Vitia with him. When they were riding the bike they crashed into a pole and Vitia only said: "Mother, forgive me..."

In the second year there was a student I liked – but no success again. I did not know that he was taking drugs, but he died of an overdose. These two deaths turned my life upside down. I did not have any one to talk to about it; I was living on my own. Believe me, I lost interest in everything. So I neglected my studies, I stopped going to the lectures, I was only crying and lying down, imagining that I was lying dead in a coffin, I was picturing my own funeral... They almost expelled me from school so the director called me to his office. I had to tell him about my fears. He listened to me and the first thing he said was that I should move to a dormitory, that I should not stay alone, then he gave me time to catch up on all my work. And after this all the ill-fated thoughts faded away.

The last 20 years I lived on the outskirts of a town, in a forest. Unfortunately the environment has been in disastrous conditions past few years. Wherever you go, there is rubbish, litter, litter... it is horrible. It hurts when I see it because I know that my country will not live a normal life even in 30 years because a change in people's consciousness is needed. And it means that several generations of people who will be given good education will have to grow up. Humans have lost their manners. A man kills another man for a few bucks; a son kills his father etc.

I really like strolls in the forest and sometimes when I feel bad, have a heavy heart, I go for a walk in a forest. In summer I like

looking at the sky at night, especially by full moon, when the moon disc is hanging above the forest, it is wonderful, nice and mysterious, billions of stars scattered in the sky... unintentionally you watch the sky for hours. And then different thoughts come. For example: Who was the great creator of all this? Or at the same moment when I am looking at the sky there might be another creature watching the sky on our planet and it might be asking the same question. And you keep asking yourself: what will life be like in 50, 100, and 200 years? Or maybe the civilization will have outlived its usefulness or even something worse; the planet will have deviated from its trajectory after some blast. After all we are digging ourselves a hole into which we are continuously descending. It is horrible.

My mother spent all her life living for other people; she was always scared what they would say about her. But I used to respond to this that in fact it did not matter to me what people said as long as I was in accordance with my conscience; I am interested in opinions of my friends and relatives not of other people. We were always arguing because of that. And this took a long time. And when the moment had come and we had finally reconciled both of us changed. However, this came much later.

Then hard times hit the country. Enterprises started to have redundancies and I was also dismissed from the nursery. I had to work as a musical educator, then even as a boiler room operator, then I worked at an hygienic-epidemiological clinic as a gatherer of information on epidemics. I did not like that at all but they were about to push me through to college – to study medicine.

But that was nothing for me. Of course I must educate myself but I do not care for medicine and I am too sensitive, when I just see blood I am losing consciousness. But I know I must study. Without education you are nobody.

Greece

In the end a moment of decisions came, I decided to go abroad to earn money for my studies. My parents were not against it, they trusted me, and they helped me borrow money for the trip and I went to Greece, the country of my ancestors. Whenever I recall my first journey to Greece I have a heavy heart. There my real adult life began. Apart from some Rubbles, I only had 50 dollars on me. I did not have any phone number, I did not know how to act, where to seek help. The problems occurred already at the Rumanian border. The customs-officers found something in my passport and wanted money from me, they were threatening me that otherwise they would put a stamp with deportation into my passport. Out of fear I gave them my last 50 dollars and carried on my journey without a penny. Hysterical crying got hold of me on the bus, some guys helped me, and they gave me 15 dollars. You probably know such stories by heart. We arrived in Athens but no one came to pick us up. I had no place to go so the driver offered me help, he said: "Come to Thessaloniki with me, I'll help you find a job." I had no choice so I went with him. He was my first man. And then this "goodie" wanted to send me to a brothel but I refused and he kicked me out. I decided to go back to Athens. I was broke, I had no friends, and it was very hard times.

Later I found a job through an agency. They sent me to Limnos island where I worked for half a year. Then I went to the mainland and to my disadvantage I met with the Tartars. I was picking olives, working in a café but these Tartars wanted to make a prostitute out of me. But what kind of a prostitute would I be, my friends? So they set police against me and I was deported. I was in three different prisons, with all sorts of people. When I was with prostitutes I was listening to everything, by the way I remembered some useful information too.

They sent us to Bulgaria where I spent a couple of months at my aunt's house. She then asked me to leave – they already had a hard life without me. Therefore I went to a little town by the Greek border where I spent two weeks waiting to go back. At the border I fell into the hands of corruptible frontier guards – they are mafia people selling girls to slavery. So just three days later we were crossing the border. One Greek man bought us, so we were made to go to Thassos island (to a brothel). I have never been so scared in my life like then. We successfully crossed the river and the border. Then our new boss came to pick us up, he felt like trying his new girls out in bed... We took a shower, my companion first and me after her. She went to sleep and I told her I was too shaken up to sleep and that I would go for a cigarette. But I do not smoke. I had no things on me. I only had a little backpack with my underwear, a dictionary and a Bible. All the time I was praying to God not to abandon me. Luckily a chamber-maid was just hanging out the laundry and the roof door was open, the key was in the lock. I went out to the roof, I was running back and forth but then I spotted a safety ladder, my salvation. I though

I would not be able to endure the tension, I was so happy that I felt like crying out: I made IT! I am free! I was so scared but I overcame my worries... You clever girl, Maryna! Delight after a victory – how beautiful.

Then I returned home and tried to help my mother. However, I soon decided to go back to Greece because I did not manage to earn money for my studies. I found a job through an agency, looking after a five-year-old girl whose parents got divorced; I liked her as if she had been my own daughter. I also fell in love with her father. I could see how good he was as a man and as a father too, he took care of the family, the kids. It is true though that he did not always have time for them but that is quite a common thing.

Then I worked with another family as a nanny of two children. My employer gave me three days off so that I could spend them with my boyfriend. Honestly before I spent these couple days with him I was willing to live with him, even marry him. But our argument after he had gone to my friend and had told her what and how we did it together (intimately) was the last drop, I could not stand that anymore. He was following me after that, he was coming to the house where I worked and because of him I had problems with my employers. So I changed job, address and began everything from scratch.

At that time I found out about a way to have documents issued. I turned to a lawyer but I only had to pay continually... However, I received the documents in the end and I stayed there legally. After some time I met Haled. He is Syrian, friendly, in his specific way nice as well, reliable and a good friend. I moved to his place. We were together for five years. I changed jobs

many times meanwhile. I had an interesting job in summer. I worked as a hostess, stewardess on board a 4-5-cabin yacht. I was being hired by a travel agency to accompany foreigners on their trips. They were from 3-week-journeys up to 3-month ones, they had different routes, various directions, different styles and languages. I remember being scared in the beginning. I am scared of everything. My brother pushed me to it which was good for me. The work was interesting. Apart from that we helped the captain of the boat too, I was interested in it and was asking about everything (in case something happened to him or he fell over board so that I could be helpful and would know what to do). There were, however, situations that he urged on sleeping with me and when I refused he made a hell out of my life. I responded variously to that. Sometimes I would cry but sometimes I would burst out shouting at him.

It is experience for all my life. One of such August trips imprinted itself on my mind, or better to say I remember some moments as if they had been episodes from a movie. For example how we were fishing from an inflatable motor boat by full moon. Or when I was sleeping on board and a big orange moon was shining above me giving out so much light that the surrounding stars were invisible. The yacht was rocking in the rhythm of surf; waves were breaking over to the coast with a sweet and calm spume that made one sleep tight, dreaming sweet dreams. Or when we landed on the Peloponnesus, close to Mani. It was a small gulf; we anchored and got out to the shore. This place was situated quite high above the sea level. When I was about 200–300 metres from the shore towards the centre of the island I heard the sound of silence. It was horrible; there was nowhere such a silence like there. The silence fell on me and pressed my

years, my head and I felt terrible. The first feeling that strokes my head was that one experiences such a thing only in hell. I got back; I did not withstand the pressure. You see what silence can be like.

Of course, I could speak Greek very well; after all it was my ancestors' language. My father's grandmother was Greek; I and my brother thus look like Greeks. Through out all the time I was never stopped by police and requested documents. I enjoyed the first five years, time flew. I did not miss my home. I liked the fact that I was surrounded my men's attention. It does not happen at home. Greek men are passionate and take everything seriously. If a woman is blond with fair eyes they do not leave her in peace. I had many admirers there too. However, I did not meet the right one there.

At the beginning I was more or less getting on, I had a job and I was getting on well in my personal life, too. But the last two years I was homesick, I missed my family, friends and native places. I got rid of the dreams only after I returned home. Before leaving Athens I had to decide about my boyfriend then, he wanted to marry me but I sensed that I would not be happy with him. He was attached to his relatives, especially his parents. He could not control himself, he was able to shout at me because of a trifle and insult me. But, as my father used to say, imagine living with that person, what will become of him in some time. I imaged it. And I was even pregnant with him. I decided to go for an abortion. Now, after many years I regret what I have done. I know it is a great sin. I often think about it and cry. I do not have a family; at least I could have had a child. But it happened. I went home. It was in 2004.

At home

I arrived home on 30th December, 2004. My dad drove to meet me but I had to take a taxi anyway because I had loads of stuff. I gathered many things in eight years and I felt sad throwing them away.

I noticed how much my father had grown old, I was not recognising my relatives, and everybody grew up and changed. We managed to see my uncle alive. He used to be a healthy and beautiful man but he changed completely. He suffered from attacks and his wife (my father's niece) called us for help. Several months later he stopped getting up from the bed and was only lying down. He had bed sore on all his back part of the body. He died then. Uncle Jura liked us a lot. And my mom liked him a lot. My older brother is only two years younger than my mother's brother; they were growing up together at my grandmother's in the country side. Later when my mom was living in Kiev, Jura was always with her. When he went to the military service, mom threw a party for him. He was like a son to her.

I applied for a stay in Great Britain. I wanted to study and work there. But my documents together with the money I had paid got lost. The company promised to return the money but in two years they only gave me thousand Euros back and instead offered me to go to the Czech Republic. I agreed because there was no other option for me. The situation in Ukraine is bad. In order to get a job I would have to give a bribe of some thousand Euros or have a family business or a lover who would help me out. I am unlucky in this sense. I have nothing and nobody.

I started setting out for the journey, collected information about the Czech Republic, about the people. When I received a one-year visa, I had to tell my groom that I was going to Prague. He did not react at all. He said OK, that he would be coming to visit me. And the love was over.

Czech Republic

In Prague a representative of Kiev Interregional Academy of State Administration branch office came to meet us, he took me to an exchange office to exchange money, he showed me the school and then we went to my temporary residence. It was a hotel in Háje, it was quite OK. The second or the third day they helped me find a job, i.e. temporary work. I worked in a printing house. There were a lot of people from our country, girls, student girls and ordinary workers. Ukrainians. Our boss was friendly and I worked hard as I always do. The next seven months I was working in a Russian salon. After that one of our students called me and offered me a job in a nursery. So I met Misha, we became friends and in the end I fell in love with him even though he has a wife and a daughter in Ukraine. He loaded me with flowers, little presents and everything women like... I was telling him that he has a family, that it is a sacred thing and a daughter who needs her father. In the end we agreed that as long as we are satisfied in the relationship we will stay together. Everything was pretty normal with Misha... but a stolen happiness came to an end soon and in a very unexpected way. Misha had an affair with another woman which meant the end of our relationship. I was so unhappy. When nobody could see me I would cry, I was shedding tears and no matter how hard I tried I could not control myself

and stop it. I was punished my God for being with a married man. So it is. I was making the same mistake as all women – they feel so confident about their men that they stop seeing things as they are. In short, those in love suffer the same thing.

Then I shared an apartment with an elderly lady from Kyrgyzstan. But it was not a quiet place, loads of drunk people coming over, it was a horrible place. I had to patch up with everything and everyone. Then my boss Vitia started to harass me. And he was so dumb that if stupidity had wings he would be flying like a butterfly. I could not control my temper anymore. If I am to leave I will leave. Then Vitia's guest Kair came to my room. We were chatting almost all night. I got up early in the morning and began to pack my stuff. Kair called his friend and asked him to help us move my things. That Czech guy was called Mirek. He was not very tall, but strong and interesting. He was very modest and joyful. I liked him straight away. No way I thought that I would fall for this man a couple of months later. I have no idea how it happened.

I lived in the nursery for two months; I was looking for a flat but could not find any. In the end I went to share a flat with one of our students. We share a room and there is another guy in the other. We get on well but I do not feel like at home there. I feel like living in a corridor. There is constantly some one who needs to pass back and forth, without knocking, I cannot get undressed, I cannot simply sit, without my flatmates, just me. That girl works at night and sleeps during a day. Light and music bug her, one cannot even speak.

Unexpected problems have arisen at work. I was working in Montessori nursery as a nursemaid. There was a new American

girl working with older children. The nursery is American, everybody speaks English. I am the first one from Eastern Europe there. My English is not the best but on the other hand I have certain experience in work with children. The American also works as an assistant. We have same duties; well to be honest I have a bit more of them. My salary was 12,000 CZK for 17 hours and our American worked for 15 hours and was paid 15,000 CZK and moreover, I was helping her in her department. Isn't this called discrimination?

How much I like Prague and the Czech Republic? I would really like to live here. But I am terribly homesick. I have not been home for two years. There is no money for that. I am homesick, morally and physically exhausted. I keep working, non-stop. In winter, in summer, one year after another...

We were told in a class that Czech men are good housekeepers and good husbands. I have a feeling though that they do not want to get married. Anyone has children living with a partner together or they simply gave birth to children and broke up, everyone here and there has a lover after a couple of years. Well, I do not know, I have seen exemplary families, too. It is the same nowadays everywhere. We are forgetting about our souls, we have been focusing only on earning more or stealing more... We are forgetting that we are pure guests in this world. You go to sleep in peace, you are planning what will be tomorrow, you are either happy or sad... you are dreaming. However, there can be no tomorrow... Eternity. I somehow started thinking about it often. Then everything that surrounds you turns out to be trifling. Even work, even the salary. But I would like to leave some trace after me on this sinful Earth... It is said that one should build a house, plant a tree, procreate and raise children.

If one handled that his life has not been pointless. I have a house, I built it, I have planted a tree too. The only thing is when am I supposed to procreate and raise children? I question God why is this world so unjust. There are numbers of good families without children pleading to send them a child. And it is the contrary in other families; a woman keeps delivering as a cat. No one wants these babies, nor their mother. Or their parents are alcoholics or something like that... Some of them want but cannot, others have but do not enjoy them. There are so many questions that will stay unanswered for ever. It is a shame.

I have a feeling that I am approaching the end. I think I have said everything, written it all. I am content with my life, I like this country, people are quite nice. If you only consider the number of foreigners who are here in the Czech Republic, in Prague and everyone is from a different country. I thank the Czechs that they stand us here, that they give us opportunity to work and help our families. Some speak well about the Czech people some don't. That is normal. You have to deserve good treatment and respect from the others. If you do not know it, learn it. You do not live in the woods, right? Respect their laws... It is fundamental. Respect yourself. So I would like to thank this country, these people for their patience with us who are so different... For their understanding and help.

I do not know why I remembered our Czech teachers. The first one was Petra. Young and friendly. And Mrs. Hanka – it is indeed a person in the right place. She can get on well with everybody. These people are rare to meet in life. Wonderful lady. I met another girl here in Prague. She is Czech. Beautiful, intelligent, smart. I really like her. She is very energetic, she has a lot of strength and will to assist others. Would you like to meet

her? Go to OPU and ask for Annet. She is my social assistant. I like meeting people like her.

I do not know if my narration helps or not but thanks to that I had a chance to look at myself from above, remember many things, had a laugh or cry when I was writing these lines. It resembles psychotherapy; I think I mainly helped myself with it.

Thanks...

Good-bye

Maryna

Natalia Kolva



- born in Ukraine
- a ballet dancer, graduated from specialized education in the field of director-choreographer
- married, mother of two children
- worked as a ballet dancer in the National Ballet
- in 1995 came to the Czech Republic after a successful audition for a musical, performed in Prague State Opera Ballet

- last five years has been working as a dancing pedagogue
- at the moment on maternity leave

Life in Ukraine

Before my arrival in the Czech Republic, the economical situation was somewhat unstable. But I think that cultures of our nations are very similar. Therefore we found our second home here.

Relationships between men and women in Ukraine

Relationships between men and women are influenced by upbringing in one's own family. However, in general partners

should respect each other in a relationship. People get married very young in our country (at the age of 18–25) unlike people here. And we like children a lot as well.

Relationships between men and women in the Czech Republic

Czech women are more emancipated, they are often more active in establishing relations with men. Despite that, or therefore, they do not rush to start a family before they are 30. Men and women strive to keep their personal freedom within the relationship at any cost. Sometimes even at the cost of a divorce. For example – my son's classmates live in single-parent families. On the other hand I also know beautiful Czech families in my surrounding.

Life in the Czech Republic

I and my family are quite happy in the Czech Republic. Because we carry out work that we like and the housing has been provided for us. And the relation of the Czech towards foreigners is getting better.

Message for the Czech public

With all my heart I wish all Czech citizens treated foreigners the same way they would like to be treated abroad.

Sarima K.

- comes from Afghanistan
- graduated from Faculty of Russian Language and Literature
- married, has one son
- shortly lived in Kazakhstan, Turkey and Byelorussia, later was forced to opt for an illegal escape further into Europe
- twice unsuccessfully sought asylum in the Czech Republic
- later she and her family were granted permission for permanent residence

I was born in the northern part of Afghanistan. The local inhabitants are basically formed by the Turkmen and the Uzbekistani. I am of a Turkman origin; they belong to one of the oldest nations in Afghanistan.

There was no boy in our family. I grew up with two sisters only. A day when a boy is born is considered a festive day in Afghanistan families. He is a continuer of a kin, a descendent, a successor, his sisters and family's protector. Therefore some men, in case their wife for some reason does not give birth to a boy, marry for the second time. Therefore my dad either had to accept that my mom only had girls or get married for the second time, he chose the first. And because I took after my dad and above that I am his favourite he decided to bring me up in his masculine way.

My father decided to try a business in Russia on advice of his close friends. And as he needed help with the household he took me with him. My mother was against it but me personally,

I was happy. I had been interested in other people's lives since I was small. However, I could not picture how I would live there. In the beginning we stayed at my father's friends'. We went to the Far East where I started a new school. The first day I went to the teacher's room with my father and they were really surprised. Because there were no people with dark complexion neither in that village, nor in the town as we discovered later. They were wondering what Afghans were doing on the other end of the world. They asked us to wait in the corridor. Through the door I could hear them arguing about whose class I would go to. Maybe because I was like some exotic fruit to them. An unusual girl – from Afghanistan and above that with good marks. And then a woman came out to the corridor and introduced herself as my class teacher, she showed me the classroom that I would be going to. She made a remark: "Next time come to school without any make-up please." I was surprised and my dad was surprised even more. I was at a loss, so I whispered: "I don't have any make-up on." My eyes and eyebrows are really dark so from a distance it looks as if had make-up. I do not have such a dark complexion but I was the only child like that; in comparison to the others it was like day and night. So establishing relationships was a bit difficult. For me, considering my upbringing and our culture, it was not very easy to adopt in an environment where children could do whatever they wanted to even though there was no democracy in Russia but communism then. Some classmates were calling me names like "chocolate face", others respected me, some where indifferent towards me. Boys were much worse. I was a savage to them. I was brought up in a very strict family. Our father never whacked us, since we were small it was enough when he made an evil look. When we moved the control over

me got even stronger. I soon figured how difficult it would be at school and I often regretted not having a brother. Maybe if I had had a brother I would not have had to lead a nomadic life and my life would have developed completely differently. The Afghans consider it very rare when a son is born. They think that a son is needed in a Muslim family. A family without a son is does not only stay without a descendent but also without a protector. So I was in Russia and I adapted to its society. After several moths I changed beyond recognition. From a tiny quiet girl I became a she-devil. I even had to fight with boys. I held on as much as I could. My dad used to ask me everyday if they were calling me names at school. Naturally I would always reply no. I knew what kind of a scandal might happen at school.

The fact that girls could exchange letters with boys and arrange dates was something unacceptable for me. A classmate came up to me once in the eight grade and threw a note on my desk in which he was inviting me somewhere. It meant a sin to confess that to my dad. I never thought of liking any boy. First of all it was a great sin and secondly the boy was Russian. So I said that to my dad in a gentle manner explaining that I had some sort of trouble in the class. Dad set out to school the day after. Oh Allah, he took off the handle in the teachers' room, it seemed to me that the whole building was shaking with his voice. I felt ashamed going to school in the morning then. I may have acted in a stupid way but I could not do anything else, I had been brought up that way. I simply could not let a boy tell me something or touch my hand. To my surprise (I thought everyone would hate me from then on) my classmates did not change their attitude towards me. After this incident no one teased me anymore, even the teachers behaved differently.

Some years passed and the time of further studies came. I wanted to become a doctor since I was small. It enticed me so much that I was willing to work even without claim for payment as a nurse in hospital. But my dad was categorically against it. According to him female and masculine anatomy is studied too profoundly in medicine. He thought the most suitable job for a woman was becoming a teacher. So I went to school which my father advised me. As I studied on a faculty of Russian Language and Literature I sometimes went to lectures to the Medical Faculty too. I was drawn to medicine so much that I neglected my own lectures. But my dad soon found out and my trips to the medical faculty finished. It hurt; I was so much into it. I think I would have become a good doctor.

A lot of my friends would go to parks or the cinema, where they were meeting boys. I did not experience anything like that. First of all because my dad kept an eye on me very strictly and then I did not have much time left for walks or anything like that. When I came home from school I had to cook dinner for my dad, tidy up, iron the clothes and do my homework.

You might be interested in my private life. As every Muslim woman I obviously had my first love. But one should not speak about it because it is shameful. Even I liked one young man. Time to time we met in the corridor at the faculty, he was obviously inviting me for a date but I had to constantly make up excuses why I could not go with him. I was ashamed of my father controlling me so much. Indeed I had many suitors. But he was the first one who caught my attention, maybe because he was different from the others. Maybe I should mention that he was also Muslim and our relationship got deeper. When a man starts introducing a girl to his relatives it indicates something.

He introduced me to his sisters. It was not official but done as if by coincidence and the day after he said they really liked me which meant family's approval. But who would have thought that the plans we were making would suddenly be ruined?

Once my mother invited me over and said she wanted to speak with me about something serious. Then she announced to me crying that my dad wanted me to get married. He did not think about it up to then because he had wanted me to finish my studies first. I was not shocked because of the act of getting married but I was shocked by whom I was to marry. It was his friend who would often come over, he was working with dad so our families had become friends. He spent all the time since he turned 18 in the Afghanistan army. He was 16 years older than me. What could I do about it? I asked my mother but what could she do about it? Nothing. It was difficult to convince my dad to change his opinion. Telling him about my boyfriend would be my death and shame.

They engaged me with my father's friend. Who could have known how difficult my life would be with him? I told my boyfriend in a cold, hasty way that I was soon getting married. He was surprised and shaken. We did not speak about it for long, I may have not known him well, and to my surprise he gave me a sinister look and left. My husband to be started coming over more often and they tried to leave us alone. My mother and my younger sister came over for that reason too to spend some time. They came from Iran. My father never wanted my mother to move with him so she permanently lived with his sister in Iran. Obviously my mother sorrowed for father's decision but there was nothing she could do about it.

I tried to put my groom-to-be off, I was dressing in a "terrible" way, it means tight jeans, short miniskirts that I was borrowing from my friends, I was putting too much make-up, in short I wanted him to think only the bad things about me. You know, Afghan women who have studied abroad are dodgy. And because I know that I wanted him to think that way about me even more. But I soon gathered that he was not going to give in his intention.

The date of the wedding was announced. The wedding took place in Afghanistan, in Kabul the first time and for the second time in Pakistan where my husband's relatives lived. A month after the wedding we went to Pakistan. I was happy that just two of us had left. My husband used to go away for long periods of time and I was alone which I liked. It was the hardest phase of my life. I was crying so hard that it felt as if I "cried out my eyes". It was difficult to lie in a bed with a person whom I did not know, did not get along with and had absolutely nothing in common with. I would have gone mad if the news that I was pregnant had not saved me. When we went to the embassy in Islamabad I unexpectedly fainted and saw nothing for a couple of minutes. My husband immediately took me to the doctor. I still did not know the Pakistan language, Urdu, so they told the news to my husband first. He was really happy but I was shocked. After giving birth to my son I reconciled with my fate. I wanted to live for the sake of my son only. Unfortunately there were complications during my pregnancy and I had to have a Caesarean. After the operation other problems occurred. When my son was hardly two months old I was hospitalised again. A month after my son got sick too. The temperature in Pakistan was 50°, the climate was ideal for epidemics. My son was in such

a serious health condition and I was told by the doctors that they could not help him.

We left the hospital, the little one was passing out, his body was absolutely exhausted, and his veins were breaking. Even the specialists were at a loss how to help him. As I said before I used to go to lectures at the medical faculty, I learned a lot so I decided to cure my son myself. I understood that there was little time left, that my son was dying in my hands. I took a syringe we had bought in the pharmacy, took off the needle and filled it up with children's hemodez and began to pour it directly into the child's mouth, he drank about a litre of it till the morning. My husband turned out to be weaker than me; he stayed in the yard all night though, scared to come into the house. Moaning woke me up in the morning. It was my son. He came to himself. I told my husband the good news. It was obvious that it had helped him so I carried on with the treatment. I treated him for two days more and he was better.

At that time my husband's younger brother came from Kazakhstan. When he saw that our son was sick he decided to take us back to Kazakhstan. We did not stay long there though. They did not want to extend the visa for the Afghans. Hard times came for Muslims – Arabs and Afghans. It was the period when Bin Laden was staying in Afghanistan. So all Muslims, especially Arabs and Afghans were mostly suspected as terrorists. After seven months spent in Turkey we got back to Kazakhstan. We could not go back home to Afghanistan, to the chaos there. The Taliban led a cruel war there. Neither could we stay longer in Kazakhstan, the visa was expiring. And because I had lived

in Russia for a long time we managed to get visa to Byelorussia. When we were in Byelorussia, the terrorist attacks in America of September 11th happened. Then the situation for Muslims got even worse. People were scared of us, we did not succeed in extending the visa, and we could not go back. What were we to do? Our Afghan friends suggested the only way – go further in Europe, but illegally.

They found people who were smuggling illegal migrants. At a set time we were to come to that house. I felt horrible but even then I could not picture what we would have to go through. But there was no choice. The sun was setting. A woman, Byelorussian and a man entered. They said that they would take us across the border but only on the condition that we handed them our passports and cell phones because we could be caught at the border because of the signals. They broke the phone and tore the passports and threw them away.

We drove in two cars, four people in each. We drove into a dark forest; two guides were waiting for us there. We walked for several hours, it was dark, and we kept stumbling over things. My son was first carried by my husband, and then the men who were walking with us took him in turns. We were walking in a line, one after the other. At dawn we came to a road, got into parked cars and drove on. They took us to some kind of a garage with a basement room. My son was so scared with all that, he did not utter a word. It was already cold, it was September. We did not have warm clothes. Nothing at all. We were guarded by a guy who was holding a stick. I do not know why. He might have thought we would run away. We were all starving. After two days they gave us some food and said we

would carry on. At the beginning we agreed that they would take us there in three days. And on the third day we were still sitting in a basement of a garage. Finally they took us away that night. We were eight all together and they squeezed us all in to one Jeep. They drove us somewhere into the fields; there they passed us on to two cars.

When we approached a village a police guard wanted to stop us. Our driver obviously did not stop so a chase began. The car drove at the speed of 180–200 Km per hour. I thought these were our last moments as the car would turn upside down. But the young man who was driving the car was very skilful and apparently he knew the area very well. There were sirens to be heard everywhere. He stopped on a field, ordered us to lie down and hide in the growth. My son was by my husband. He kept talking to him to calm him down. All of a sudden a car came to the field, we wanted to stand up but the man said we should not move. After a while the car left. When we lifted our heads the car flashed and we saw it was the police. We left. An hour later our car came and took us to some house where another group of people was awaiting us. From the way they spoke I understood we were in Ukraine not in Poland as we had agreed. The following night they drove us to the forest and we walked from there again. We were approaching the border. They explained that we would cross the border once the red light was on. It meant that the guards were swapping and we had one minute. The red light got switched on and we all ran out. At that moment everybody was on their own. If someone had stayed there, no one would have helped him. We all crossed. We ran for a long time, falling over, slipping. It was raining a little bit. In the end they took us to a hut. It was very cold. There were dead

mice all around the place. They said we were staying there over night. The only piece of furniture there was a bed. I slept on it with my son and the men simply slept on the floor.

At nine o'clock in the morning the smuggler came and said we could go in turns to the toilet. Then they locked us in again and said they would come in the evening. They brought us bread and milk. We had nothing for lunch and dinner. They came at night and we set off again. We did not walk for long, maybe for an hour, perhaps a bit more. They led us to some kind of a hut. It consisted of an attic, two rooms and a kitchen where I was surprised to see a regular Russian oven. The housekeeper was Polish. So I understood we were already in Poland. There were two girls from China in the other room and a man from Afghanistan. He said the landlord was an alcoholic. Smugglers give him money for vodka and he hides illegal migrants in his place.

My son was starving so I went to search for some food in the kitchen. But I did not find anything. I peeked out in the yard and saw vegetable plants there. I quietly crept out, dug out several potatoes. I cooked potatoes, found some salt and fed my son. Nobody came for two days. We were very nervous, there was nothing to eat. We were all very dirty and starving. The landlord got nervous too. He started to extort us. We were forced to give him money. We only had dollars. He was selling pastry, bread and yogurt for it. For example he would sell us pastry worth 25 cents for 2–3 dollars. For the week we stayed at his place we spent enormous sum of money.

No one turned up at night; everybody was waiting for the guides. One day they came and took us away, us and that Afghan. We were driving for a long time, I guess 7–8 hours without stopping. In the end they put us up in some kind of a cellar again.

This time it was a cellar equipped for sleeping. We were 12, an old lady with her son from Afghanistan and seven young men from Pakistan and us. Another surprise for me was to find out that we were still at the Polish border and these people had been waiting here for a month. They lived a whole month in that cellar, without light and they were not going outside. They fed us like in a prison. Only at certain times and very little. Only so that we would not die of hunger. We sometimes left our ration for our son. He was too small to understand what was going on. The days were passing and no one was picking us up. It was in October. It was very wet. Once I somehow managed to persuade the landlady to take mercy on my son and let us out to the yard for a while. She agreed under the condition that my husband would work it off in her garden. So my son and I got out to the sun for a while. Twenty four days passed. Our feet were swollen from the dampness. In the end all of a sudden a man came and said the first car was setting out. When we asked why they had been keeping us here for so long he replied that the border had not been quiet. We and one Afghan were in the first go. We drove through forests for a while and then walked until we got to a river. The visibility was good, the moon was big and it was shining bright. When we were crossing the river it came out quite deep. The water was icy cold. The current was very strong, we were almost driven away. The first one was the guide, than the Afghan, me after him and then my husband. Our son was sitting on his shoulders. Another guide was behind him. The smugglers were wearing masks and clothes like border men. We survived crossing the river by pure luck. All of a sudden our son burst out crying. One of the guides rams muck on him and started stifling him. I cried out and my husband snatched him

from his grip. The other smuggler pulled out a weapon and said: "I am fully entitled to kill you here. And no one will make me responsible for that because you are crossing the border illegally." We more or less calmed down our son. We heard dogs barking from a distance. They made us sit down and keep quiet. When it got quiet again we carried on.

We came to the borderline. The smugglers said it was Germany there and that we had to wait for a car to pick us up. Then they disappeared. We were waiting. We were shaking because we were soaking wet. The sun was rising and no car was coming. Then the young Afghan suggested taking a cab. And he walked out to the road as the first one. The time passed and there was no sign of him. In the end my husband decided to follow him. About half an hour later we spotted a police car. They stopped us, requested our documents which we obviously did not have. They took us to a police station. After the interrogation they drove us to prison. A trial proceeded. After that we were informed that we were deported to Poland. We spent a week in a Polish prison. Then they set us free, they gave us visa for one week only. We came out of the prison with no idea where to go. We did not speak the language; we had no money and little hope. So we kept on walking, tired, hungry, dirty and frozen. Suddenly we heard Russian behind us. When we turned we saw a Russian family. We found out that they were in the same prison like us and basically went through the same troubles as we did. They said that in Poland like in other European countries there are asylum institutions. They said we could trust them. They showed us a camp where we could stay. There were many families that went through similar events like us. Eight months later we came

to the Czech Republic in an absolutely legal way. (Borders used to be open for refugees then.) My son started to show health problems, he feared everything. Everything he had gone through must have piled up inside and then showed externally.

We spent some hard times in the Czech Republic too. My husband and I hoped that the Czech state would be able to understand us Afghans, understand what we were forced to go through in order to live in peace. But nothing is easy in life. I figured that out long ago. We were twice refused the asylum. Therefore we applied for permanent residency permission. We received that. We, my husband and my son are living peacefully now. In the end we even got the documents. It is ridiculous to be asked for so much money and be treated in such a way as an illegal immigrant. If we had known back then what we would have to overcome, if we had known that we were putting our son's life in danger we would never have decided for the journey. I have gone through much in my life, I hope that a peaceful life is awaiting me now.

Sihoko Finda



- comes from Japan
- musician, graduate flute player
- came to the Czech Republic in 1998 after she had married a Czech musician
- at the moment works as a pedagogue and organises music festival Mladá Praha (Young Prague)

Sihoko comes from the town of Fujisawa in the Kanagawa region. She studied the flute at college in Kamakure and accomplished her studies by graduating from Musical University in Tokyo. After finishing the studies in Japan she took courses in playing the flute and teaching of "Alexander technique" in Europe, mainly in Switzerland. She is a member of the flute group Musica Yokohama in Tokyo. She does pedagogical activities above all (Japanese, flute, Alexander technique) and uses her organisational skills in the field of management at various musical events – concerts, international exhibitions of musical instruments, music festivals.

Japan and the Czech Republic

Japan and the Czech Republic are two totally different worlds. Almost everything differs. Therefore it was very difficult for me to adopt, even though I had been to Prague several times before I moved here permanently. I moved to the Czech Republic ten years ago after I had married a Czech musician. Of course I started learning Czech right from the beginning and it was very difficult. We became good friends with my Czech teacher; she even decided to learn Japanese. During the years I have met a lot of nice people; however, there have been unpleasant moments in connection to my nationality, Japanese as well. I found my vocation three years ago – I help organise a musical festival 'Mladá Praha'. I have to travel constantly between Japan and the Czech Republic, though I am happy because I want to show to the Czechs the best of the Japanese culture. And I also want to show to Japanese the pearls of the Czech production.

Message for the Czech public

I really enjoy living in my husband's county. But I would like Czechs to learn to respond to a smile with a smile and I wish they were not scared of speaking to foreigners.

Svetlana Mazepina



- born in Russia
- graduate geologist and journalist
- married, mother of two daughters
- forced to leave the country together with her family due to religion
- came to the Czech

Republic in 2000, her family was granted asylum

- worked as a shop assistant in a gallery, chamber-maid, flyers distributor in the centre of Prague
- at the moment works as a freelance journalist

I am sitting over a blank paper thinking how to start. It is very difficult for a woman to write about herself only. Her life is inseparably linked to her family of origin and to her husband and children. It has its pros and cons. However, it is simply essential not to forget about one's independence and personality. Otherwise woman loses herself and limits her personality. Keeping the house warm but at the same time not retreating into a shell secluded from the outer world is a difficult quest in search of the perfect balance. I have found it.

Childhood - a happy period?!

So let me start from the beginning, exactly from my birth. Some people may find it that I invented this, but I remember my

birth. I recalled it when I was 30 years old when I started being interested in spiritual techniques. There were some moments of my birth that seem as if I had seen them and others that I recalled through my feelings. Therefore I asked my mother for example why I was so cold after being delivered. And my mom said that there had been a difficult delivery in the next operating theatre so they had placed me on a nappy under a lamp and left. I was born in December that's why it was so cold in the hospital. My mother was lying next to me but could not do anything; she was only crying and calling a nurse.

Perhaps that is the reason for being constantly sick as a child, though the living conditions could always have been better too. To be exact, they were horrible in all respect. We were living in a communal flat with my parents and my sister until I was eight. One toilet for twelve people, a kitchen for ten families. We used to go to spa to wash, children often washed in a washtub in the kitchen. By the way, I did not particularly like the spa either - first a queue outside and then little room and horrible air inside. In fact, the means of transportation, shops and even streets were like this.

The city of Saratov where I was born and spent 25 years of my life is a big industrial centre on the downstream of the river Volga. It is situated along the river Volga in several kilometres and the number of its population approaches one million. Because it lies in the typical continental climate, it was very cold in winter, especially when a sharp humid and icy cold wind was blowing. In summer it was usually very hot and sticky, draught often destroyed the entire crop. I do not know why but I hardly coped with this climate. Well, the Russian life as well. From the bottom of my heart I was disgusted with rudeness, cursing, drunkenness

and gluttony that often ended up in horrible disputes and often even fights. However, I loved my home-town and I was proud at its cultural heritage.

My mother was the most important aspect of my life. We did not see each other very often and despite that or maybe because of that I considered her an ice queen, strict and incompact for a long time. She worked in a factory so I started my social life in a nursery as a typical Soviet child where my parents put me straight after turning eight months old. Then a life according to the pre-elaborated socialistic scheme began: school, after-school care centre, summer pioneer camps. It was very comfortable for working parents; children were supervised by adults there. But I, very individualistic by nature that soon formed my own views of the world was suffering immensely in the egalitarian system full of strict rules. And even though I accepted this way of life on the outside, inside I was dreaming about a completely different life. Books served me as an escape from the reality. My grandmother taught me to read and I read my first book when I was five. Then sequence of fairy tales, poems and stories followed which changed into an undirected flow of various literatures. In my case reading was some kind of a pathological passion. I read everything immediately when I came across it. And if a day was not long enough I would read at night. I knew all the libraries in the area because I had read even all the books my friends had at home. And because some books could not be borrowed home, I became a regular reading room visitor. I wonder myself now how I was able to absorb so much of quite demanding literature, well it is true though that I passed a fast reading course in the fifth grade.

Well about the school. I wanted to start attending school as early as I could; I wanted to learn new and interesting things. Before I was going to school for the first time I was so excited and I hardly slept. However, the first day, like all the others, did not meet my expectations. The first disappointment was that my mom did not stay there very long and rushed to work. Then for some reason I was not given the spelling book and on the way home I fell over and hurt my knee quite badly. My first teacher was of the old school. She requested discipline from the children and her main goal was to teach us neat handwriting. It was a nightmare for me. First of all I could already read, count and write a bit so I was bored in the classes. I was clever but restless and a very impatient child. I suffered at school for two reasons: on one hand I was bored and on the other it was very difficult for me to be sitting without moving for long 45 minutes. Above that my handwriting was horrible. And because the teacher used to down-grade us for that even in maths I was getting C's.

In February my father got a temporary housing in a one-family house and we moved to the other end of the city. I changed school and immediately became a good student, I even got all A's in the third grade. We all loved Tamara Fyodorovna. She was young, joyful and she let us fidget, even talk. My mom later complained that my handwriting had definitely gotten worse because the answers not the handwriting was relevant for our teacher. The atmosphere was really friendly therefore we all cried when for some reason they decided to disperse us to different classes after the fourth grade. I do not know till now what kind of experiment it was. All together I changed class five times in ten years. As I was constantly changing children's groups

I learned to orient in them fast and make new friends. It was necessary for me to learn to defend and protect my interests. For example when I got to a new class in the fifth grade and right on the first day I had a fight with a hooligan called Vovka who threw an apple core at me. Without hesitation I threw it back and a fight started. The bell saved me, all the class was surprised that I did not tell our teacher. By doing that I gained respect of the hooligan and part of the class. The other part of the class treated me with certain precaution. I was a skinny, pale little girl. When I first went to a summer camp at the age of seven I had to learn a lot of things: not to let anyone foul me with toothpaste, not to clean the floor for other kids, not let anyone put salt in my tea and sugar in my soup and not to be a victim of other, sometimes quite cruel jokes. But there were happy moments in the summer camps too. For example I liked trips very much.

Adolescence

In the 70s the society prized labour professions. Therefore majority of young people studied at training and technical schools. Graduates from these schools had their posts guaranteed; they had often done their practical training. My mother studied at technical school and then applied for university. But she did not succeed; she had to go to earn money. She fulfilled her dream through me. That is why after finishing ten-grade-school I was attending a preparatory course to university for the last half year. One used to speak about future occupation quite early. I do not remember what I wanted to become when I was small but I met my friend's sister in the seventh grade who was studying at police academy. I have always had a strongly developed sense of justice

and I have always longed for protecting the weak. Apart from that there was a very popular TV serial on at that time called 'Investigation carried by the specialists'. Therefore I had serious intentions to go to the police school. My mother obviously insisted on law school. I had to conform. However, I met this girl again at our friend's birthday party when I was in the ninth grade. Then she had already been employed for half a year. We were talking for two hours and in the end she convinced me not to ruin my life with a boring and an unrewarding job. It was the first time by the way when I heard the word corruption. This girl uttered this word in whisper and with tears in her eyes because she must have lost her illusions about the job on first encounter with a set-up trial. I was very disenchanted and confused. My dream and high achievement faded in hot tears and words of this young investigator.

In the tenth grade agitators from different universities started coming to our school. The most impressive for me was a speech about the profession of a meteorologist. I set down to prepare for the exams. As there were exams from four subjects before me I focused especially on those. I was not worried about Russian language and literature, I knew a lot about it and I loved it. I was interested in physics as well, when my teacher found out I was going to sit for an exam in her subject she adjusted her classes to the preparation for the exam. She started testing me almost every class, so I remembered physics even four years after the school. This helped me a lot. For that I am still grateful. But maths was much more difficult. The problem was that last two years we had a hysterical maths teacher. So this was a clash. I was slamming the door, I spent half of her classes in the hallway, and

she was nagging at me all the time. No wonder that my grades were mostly F's. I have no idea how our war would have ended up if my class teacher had not intervened. As I had A's and B's in all other subjects and our class, which was among the best ones, was in a contest for the best results, I got C the first half year. The year after I pulled myself together and decided to revenge in a different manner. I began to study with my classmate outside school and in the end I got nice B from algebra. She did not give me better mark in geometry though, so I had the only C at the school report. Therefore the faculty of geography was not recommended to me because it involves five years of studying high mathematics. I was supposed to go to geology instead. I burst out crying and left with my mother. I calmed down at home and in the end we came to conclusion that geology might be even better. I took the decision and applied for hydrogeology. And I never regretted. It was one of the best periods of my life.

I was a bit of a naughty child when I was small. I wished I had been born as a boy, especially because my mom really wanted a son and spoke about it quite often. Since my childhood I was climbing the trees, playing hockey and football and was dominant among boys. My friends were mainly the member of the other sex which is still the case today. But of course, I was dreaming about my prince and above that I was quite susceptible. And no wonder because on the contrary to my character I was a nice blond haired little girl with light eyelashes who soon changed into an attractive woman with a classically formed female figure. Further I had long blond hair which I was not allowed to cut till the age of 18. I realised my attraction first when I was twenty but the process of self-acceptance has been going on up to now. In adolescence like my peer I was very

critical towards my physical appearance. I especially disliked my bumpy nose and high forehead. My eyes seemed too small therefore I was putting on make-up since 13. It was terrible for me that it was prohibited at school.

Now, I should go back to the period when I was going to the first grade and we moved house to the outskirts of the town. The provisional house for four families was situated in a small colony. This house was built for workers from the nearby enterprises – bakeries, factory for diary product and ice-cream production. But instead two to three years – as planned originally – these houses had been standing there for fourteen years. We lived there for ten years. Then my mom got a flat (she had been waiting for it for 25 years) and we moved there.

People had loose morals there, they would drink, fight and then hug lovingly but often not with their lawful wives. And that would provoke more drinking and other fights. The lifestyle was partially urban, partially like in the countryside. There was a garden by each house and designated land on the field for beds. Moreover there was a practice of exchange of groceries stolen from the factory.

Our family did not fit into the new environment. First of all, my parents worked elsewhere and then my mom was obsessively honest. My dad refurbished the shabby flat in a city style. He painted the walls yellow, floors were green like grass. Beds and walls were decorated with tapestry with strict geometric drawing in warm colours – red and green. My father who had golden hands assembled number of kitchen cupboards with one of them being above the sink (which was unusual then). To compare I will describe a common inhabitant of our suburb's housing which was popularly called Boryigrad. The base colour from the

outside and the inside was obviously off-white. The floors were traditionally painted brown, at better dark red and in many coats. In richer households there were colourful carpets with tiger or dog images hanging on the walls. There were tablecloths on the tables and pillows on the chairs. And there were rugs made of pieces of various coloured fabrics spread around the place. But there was a modern glossy table with upholstered chair made of light wood in our living. Our dwelling caused a wave of surprise, almost startle. Apart from that this work of contemporary design could only be seen by the selected individuals. From the adult inhabitant it was only our neighbour who deserved this honour and the others had to be satisfied with what their children, who I quickly made friends with, told them.

It is necessary to explain that my mom did not want to move into such a dump. She was born and had lived in the city centre, she finished technical secondary school and considered herself a typical urban inhabitant and led corresponding lifestyle. She got married quite late considering the era when she was 28. Once my mom had a terrible and definite argument with my grandmother and my father managed to persuade her to start all over in her own apartment. After experiencing living in a little room in a communal flat my mom gave up, when she saw spacious two-room house with a garden we moved in. Many years she would not speak about the place out of hatred she felt towards it. She has never forgiven herself or my father to have moved there. My father who was malleable and could be easily influenced was continually turning into an alcoholic. So I lived in these conditions for ten years of my childhood. Even though the girls and the boys in my class were sociable I considered them a bit primitive and talked to them less and less.

Further, our living conditions got worse and I was often sick. It was very humid at home and we had no money to repair the stove. There was constantly water in the basement; it would freeze in winter. The inside part of the damp walls would get covered with ice at night.

Due to my dad's alcoholism, incidents and sometimes even fights were happening. The darkest period of my life full of different tests began for me. The peak was my 16th birthday; I felt incredible despair and hopelessness. A gap of misunderstanding, pain and later even hatred got formed between my father whom I used to love so much and me. We were never close with my mother; above that she changed into a tired, constantly unsatisfied woman who was angry with the entire world because of her spoiled life. I lapsed into fevers on my birthday; an ambulance took me to the hospital. I was unconscious for over 24 hours but in the end I regained consciousness. My mom was sitting next to me, crying. She explained that I had gone through a breakdown and doctors after having given me all those injections could only wait and hope that the young body would cope. It turned out that the flu my physician had been curing for the whole month without a result was a two-sided pneumonia. And above that I neglected it because it was the end of term and we had half-year test at school.

After a month spent in hospital we convinced the doctor to let me go home. I simply could not stand it anymore in hospital with 12 other women, each of them in a very serious health condition, in the room. Basically I could not pull myself together until spring and I was not feeling well. But with the weather warming up my mind was getting warmer too. Getting a new flat was a great motivation for us. And there was a surprise too,

instead of 2-bedroom flat we were given 3-bedroom one (as some director had refused it). It is true though that my mom had to go to the construction site for three moths everyday after work because future inhabitants were obliged to clean building waste otherwise the house would not have been finished on time. And in the end in summer we moved into a new, spacious and light apartment. Yippee!!!! We were so happy even after 25 years of waiting.

Limbo

I finished the school and tried to get to university for the first time. Unfortunately I was not successful. I completed the first exam in physics for A (big compliment to my physics teacher) but I absolutely failed the maths test (I have been crossed with the maths teacher until today).

I obviously cried but I decided to give it another try the following year. When I went to pick up the form I met a representative of a petroleum educational establishment. There was a lack of students at their school and they were fighting for those who did not pass the entrance exams. Well in fact it was not such a bad alternative. The studies took one year half of which was practical training. Those who studied with excellent results could only sit for one exam however, they had to get A. Then they were signed up at the faculty. I immediately agreed. But my mom opposed to it, further the school was on the other side of the town and I had to commute for two hours. The transportation in out town has always been and is still terrible, packed with people. However, I would have to dedicate a whole chapter to that topic.

So I began to prepare for an occupation, poetically called operator of petroleum and gas excavation. We were to do the practical part of studies in the factory processing petroleum about 3 hours far from our town. I and my friends stayed in a room in an old dormitory. At school they generally described the place of work as a place with all the equipment where we would stand in white smock only pressing buttons and controlling the operative procedure. The reality shocked us with its ugliness and hard working conditions. The headquarters were situated several kilometres from a village on a big estate with reservoirs and several buildings. Everything was in a state of disrepair. The pumping plant was leaking everywhere so there were trays and buckets standing around. The gauges on the reservoirs must have worked in the past; however, even the denizens did not remember that. Therefore the content was measured manually – an operator climbed the stairs, opened a lid and lowered a ball onto the petroleum surface and noted down the required data. By the way, the reservoirs were as high as a four-storey house and the stairs and the roof was covered with ice in winter. Add a fresh winter wind to that and the intoxicant gas leaking from the opening and you will picture our practical part of studies.

However, if you think that this is it what surprised us you are indeed mistaken. The technology of processing the petroleum embodied in its progress from my reservoir to another from the station where it was cleaned. So the tubes would open by means of huge valves of a car wheel size. And it was us who had to do it, manually! Well in the worse case with a lever as everything got frozen in winter. We were given high felt boots, heavy waistcoats and cotton-wool trousers. We looked really elegant, when we

looked at one another we were rolling in the aisles for a quarter of an hour and then we cried for half an hour hugging each other. The working hours were particularly unpleasant too: two days the entire day, two days from lunch till midnight and two days from midnight till morning. If you did not catch a bus you would have to walk and above that you would be fired. It was prohibited to sleep at work at night, and there was no time for it anyway, the measuring was carried out every two hours. It was terribly cold everywhere, even in the rooms. We were lucky though that it was the last winter month and once we survived it we could joyfully welcome first warm spring days.

Non-lyrical digression

I would like to interrupt my narration here and express my opinion on the role of a woman in the Russian society. I do not know why but I started to be disturbed with life role of a woman quite early. I will try to make hypothesis. If I were to analyse my life I would say that by majority I was influenced by women. My mother, my sister. My grandmother, girlfriends, nursemaids in the nursery and kindergarten, teachers, female professors, my female colleagues at work. It was mainly them who formed the ideas of a life for me and had an influence on my character. They were very different women but they had one thing in common – their life was split between their profession and their family.

The hypocrisy of public opinion and even the legal system during the communist era consisted of discrepancies between what was written and the reality. For example a woman was to come back to work three months after she had a baby. However, babies

were accepted to the nursery from the age of five months. Not to mention breastfeeding. Can you imagine what a stress mother had to undergo when she had to run home to breastfeed her child during a lunch break? And in the evening bathing, washing diapers and sleepless nights. During the day she needed a nanny; all women: grandmothers, sisters, elder children, were replacing nannies, only the chosen ones could afford to hire one. And the government was declaring its care for mothers in these circumstances.

Another minor illusion of the Soviet state was an adoration of working women. Newspapers and magazines used to write about great working conditions, bonuses, possibilities of free education including university one. However, the real life was much harder. The deformed sexual equality looked as if woman nature had not been taken into account at all. No one was interested in the fact that some occupations were harmful for women. For example laying sleepers onto railway or tram rails, working with chemicals, carrying boxes in shops. The fact that there was still housework awaiting a woman once she got back home was not taken into consideration either. Making dinner, often breakfast and lunch for the following day for children, washing the laundry, ironing, helping kids with homework and telling a fairy tale before they went to bed. And above that she had to buy food on her way from work or during her lunch break. By the way, then shops did not use to be at every corner like nowadays.

And what about men? The society ascribed the role of providers to them. Their main goal in life was to go to work and protect their homeland. In other words, the women and men roles in the society were in fact strictly defined but in theory the freedom of choice was being declared.

We should not omit the historical reasons for such an “equality” of the sexes. During the World War II millions of Soviet inhabitants lost their lives, especially men. Women and children worked in the back; they had to carry out men's labour too. In order to survive in the hard conditions a woman had to become tough, rough and strong, both mentally and physically.

I am writing about it in such detail to clarify to myself by whom and how we were brought up and what kind of future they prepared for us. What our grandmothers and mothers could teach us, modern women. That taught us we have to rely on ourselves, that life is difficult and if your husband is alive and healthy it is sufficient happiness for a woman. It is understandable. Women were without men during and after the war. However, the fact that boys who were born after the war were brought up in the same spirit I perceive as the greatest tragedy of it all. It meant in the end that pure belonging to the male sex was a privilege. It is not important what you have achieved in your life, what kind of a person you are, where you work, what you do. You are credited for having been born as a man. Our mothers lived in such conditions. The number of female population then exceeded the male one by the way. This caused an unhealthy competition among women and even more demoralised men.

In the end a feeling of elevated self-estimation developed in current men, the change of values occurred and as a consequence a parasite way of life appeared that led to the demoralisation. Why should one strive without a goal? It is not necessary to fight for women they will fight for you, similarly success at work is not necessary, it is enough to go to work and you do not have to support a woman anymore, she can earn her living by

herself, often for her children and her husband too. Women got accustomed to it. Any man is better than none.

The pressure of the society was enormous and they were mainly women who were pressing each other. You are twenty, yet not married? You have to rush before all the men have been taken. Once you catch him, hold him tight. Does he drink? They all do, does he whack you? It means that he likes you. Does he not earn? Be quiet and go earn more money yourself. I have to admit that men are those who suffered most with it. They were deprived of their basic tasks and life achievements. He does not have to fight for a woman, nor defend his homeland, there is absolute equality at work, and in fact a man does not have his specific role within a family. They were confused so they were looking for some kind of a satisfaction in drinking. And the society keeps counting years that have passed since the war: 10 years after the war, 15 years after the war and then the spectacular celebrations of 20 years anniversary of the end of the Great Civil War. So it is, big wounds heal long.

Relationships between men and women were in serious crisis. The deficit of men was overcome and women started seriously contemplating about their lives. They began to respect themselves more. The current state of things did not satisfy them anymore so they started to change into initiative persons. On the contrary men were experiencing shock; they were not ready for such changes. Hidden war between the sexes begun.

Cold spring

I started thinking about relationships between men and women quite early. I had read classical literature so I knew there was

a thoroughly elaborated system of education according to the sex in the 17th and 18th centuries. The preparation for the adult life was elaborated into all details. Family traditions, social status and education had significant roles in the adult life. The situation changed after the October revolution. As the famous revolutionary hymn sang – we destroy the old world from the bottom and we build our new world. It turned out, however, that destroying the old one was easier than building a new one, one needs centuries for that. Apart from that the experience of the older generation was first forgotten and later lost. It concerns particularly the Russian nation. The new nation was left without a kin and origin. The Communists pulled themselves together then but it was too late. A new ideology had to be thought up; it however had little to do with the reality. Regarding women, a war against their nature began. This ideology praised a working woman as its idol and a family became the unit of the society. The regime at work was very strict, for coming late to work one could end up in jail. For example, my aunt came to her place of practical training one day later. As a result she went to a camp of general regime, two-year-nightmare and a stigma for the rest of her life. Not mentioning work clothes in which a woman spent most of her life. Speaking of that I will never forget my school uniform, the most miserable rag I have ever seen.

Certainly people have always loved, married and beard children under any circumstances. There have always been exceptions with respect to the mutual relationships between the sexes. I am trying to analyse and express my opinion on the majority of people and their identical way of life. Our grandmothers, mothers and partially our generation lived this way. So I am trying to

get to understand myself and maybe help my daughters free themselves of the social stereotypes.

There was a reason to name this chapter Cold spring. It is a painting. Spring is usually associated with love, bloom and warmth. However, there are other springs as well, cold, melancholy, resembling rather to autumn. Love in the Russian is exactly like that. Unhappy, short and often with a bad ending. After such a relationship only cold and pain stays on mind.

Some one might say that I only see the dark side of the things. It is true. There fore I would like to wake up women and try to help them step out of the vicious circle of old-fashioned traditions and dangerous stereotypes. And to do so, first of all a woman has to learn to respect and accept herself, consider herself a personality. She has to gain real freedom of will and equality. I want a woman to choose on her own if she wants to become a woman, mother or if she dedicates her life to another activity but mainly I want the society to respect her choice. I want a woman on a same post as a man to get the same salary, to have the same career ladder perspectives as a man. I do not want my daughters to turn up before a cruel decision – family or career. I want them not to be ashamed for her bodies if they do not fit size 38. I want my girls to have enough energy and time to figure what they want in their lives and to be happy for what having chosen the kind of life they want to live.

Well let us get back to the narration about my life. By the end of the practical training I knew exactly that similar work and life style would mean death to me. That is why I set out to faraway Ufa with colleagues from our group. They were admitting students to an institute with similar specialisation without entrance exams for people with excellent results. However, the fate took another

decision in the end. I successfully passed the exam to university. I could write a whole book about the years of my studies, it was the happiest period of my life.

First of all, the faculty of geology was one of the most democratic ones at the university. Secondly, it had certain autonomy. The practical training was starting one month before and was finishing one month later than at the other faculties. Further, it was carried out in the countryside and in distant regions of our country. Therefore we were taught not only the theory but also the practical aspects of survival and safety by our professors. Relations between teachers and students were rather friendly. The practical training in Siberia and Far East was very interesting. Exam season, holiday, loads of new information, passion for ecology, practice and competitions in handball, discos, and parties. A lot of new encounters, friends, impressions and life experience.

I only want to add to this that there was a program for further education at the university at that time. Simultaneously with the main study field one could get a qualification as a translator, journalist, photographer, etc. As I wanted to build a career I devoted to journalism for first two years and two other to technical translation from English with specialisation in geology. I wrote articles for the university but also to the municipal newspaper for all those five years. In the third year I even wanted to change to the faculty of journalism but geology won.

In June I madly fell in love at the first glance. My prince was from another town and we spent the hot summer together in Caucasus. Autumn brought parting and I had to leave for work. I survived parted only for a half year. Only letters, phone calls, and then he came to celebrate the end of the year. Then we

came to conclusion that we could not live that way. However, it turned out not to be so easy to resolve. I have to admit that I felt very unsure in a role of a girl in love for several reasons. It disconcerted me because I had been preparing for many years for a career and I was not going to get married. Apart from that, my future groom insisted on moving to his place and I did not manage to convince him to come to Irkutsk. And I was afraid of carrying on with a long-distant relationship. My boyfriend was very good-looking and women were much interested in him and I was not very confident about my female attractiveness. And moreover it seemed very romantic to give up my career in the sake of a big love. So stereotypes had their go too – a woman surely follows her man. So in March 1989 I flew to Nalchik where I got married.

A mistake or a fate???

I would draw a parallel between my mother's and my life now. My fate was somewhat similar. Moving to a city periphery was a fatal moment for her – and she has not faced it up until now. In my case it was coming to the periphery of Russia (Caucasus) which I bitterly regretted for many years. Then “perestroika” was declared, so my status as an unemployed significantly worsened. The state enterprises were closing down around all the country and in our little spa town the level of unemployment had been very high among women even before. Naturally women were first to feel the results. However, “equality” entered shortly and collective redundancies of men began. I could not use nor my education, nor my ambition. Further I gave birth to a baby girl with beautiful eyes nine months after.

I was happy as a woman. Loving husband, healthy little girl, new circle of friends. Clean air and untouched countryside made me good and gave me energy. But... it is not possible to throw away long years of preparation for a career. Soon I started to regret my decision. Naturally I was accusing my husband too. However, the decision had been taken and I was trying as hard as I could to cope with my status. When my daughter was older, I began helping my husband with his business. I will never forget autumn 1994. Together with my friends we visited a American missionary's lecture called "What is happiness?". Our life changed completely from this night. My husband took up religion. It was one stream of Christianity.

It was a period of tests. By the fate or by our own endeavour and with the choice we made we became incommensurable in our own country. In the end we decided to flee the country. The Czech Republic won in the draw.

Escape and its consequences

Preparation for departure took us half a year. I said good-bye to my family and friends for good. Everyone thought we were going to Moscow to live in a religious community. In fact my husband was highly disappointed in this respect. We chose the Czech Republic mainly because it is an atheist country and people are tolerant of different beliefs. A new witch-hunt began in Russia. Orthodox Church infiltrated the governmental sphere and declared a war to all other religions and religious tendencies. Nationality was another significant factor. The life style in Caucasus is after all very distinct from the Slavonic. And we longed for living among "ours". So we opted for Prague, deliberately and consciously.

We had financial problems connected to the journey then but we were very lucky in another sense. First of all we already had our passports for the journey abroad and secondly the second presidential election had started in our country. Politicians were scared to lose their post so we were left forgotten for a while. Carrying couple suitcase we got on train from Nalchik to Moscow in mid November 2000 and a week later we were standing at the main railway station in Prague at 6 a.m., confusingly looking around.

We had a week to arrange our stay in the country because officially we came as tourists. It was very difficult for us to take courage to apply for the political asylum. Remember that we were brought up in a spirit of patriotism and emigrants were considered as traitors. Apart from that we were aware of all the procedures every refugee has to undergo. It was horrible. We kept on retelling our story of the persecution and all we had lived though, in fact as if it had been an interrogation, it gave us creeps.

But there was no other choice anymore. The stay in the detention centre met our expectation. And it does not only regard horrible food and bad living conditions. The problem was people that were staying there. I was thinking about it quite often afterwards and I wrote several articles about it. A month and a half later we returned to Prague and put up at a place of our acquaintance from the camp. We kept all our stuff at our friends place before going to the camp; he had gone home for a week and meanwhile someone broke in and stole all his and our stuff. So that is how we stepped into the new century: clean, no documents, no burdens like things or obligations. It is interesting, however, I felt zeal above all and I was confident about myself. However, it was not a feeling of

a naive optimist. First, I was calm because I knew there was no threat of persecution here anymore and the jeopardy of our lives stayed behind the frontier. Secondly, I immediately fell in love with Prague. I even had a strange feeling as if I had come back to my country. Well, even now after seven years I am still enchanted by Prague. And the nature of the Czech is very closed to mine. Even though the fools are many and they are everywhere as my mom used to say. However, the Czech Republic is a kind of country where many things are close to me.

I felt in Prague like being in my element, the cultural life is blooming here and I saw a possibility for my personal self-fulfilment. A missed all that in Caucasus for such a long time. My husband, by the way, like all men, experienced difficulties of adapting to a new environment. Our daughter was already 11 and we put her immediately into a normal Czech school. I felt that my role as a mother had been fulfilled and I plunged into a life. Of course, depressions were coming too and never ending questions like why, for what and when is this nightmare going to end? My husband got an offer to work as a housekeeper and in order to support him I went with him. He stayed there for two months and then we left. Then I spent all summer distributing flyers in the centre of Prague and selling tickets to classical music concerts. This activity is basically prohibited nowadays but then it helped a lot of immigrants survive. I would stand the whole day on foot in any weather and would walk home after that to save money for the city transport. The word tiredness was not strong enough to describe my physical state at the time. Everyday I fell into bed like dead and never believed in the morning that the alarm was already ringing. But from the psychological point of view I pulled myself together. In autumn I was given a job as

a chamber maid in a small guest-house. There by tidying the rooms and cleaning the bathrooms I started feeling desperate. I found an advertisement for a position of a journalist in one Russian paper and recalled my other education.

I had two jobs for half a year in fact. I cleaned rooms from the mornings till lunch and then I wrote articles and learned to use PC till the evenings.

Dreams come true

I began as a foreign correspondent of a Russian newspaper and got to the post of the main editor and built a career within four years; I had started from the scratch. I am learning to use the Internet at the moment and I would like to give a chance to my skills in Czech women magazines. Besides that I am thinking about writing a book, I hope I have something to tell.

I think people would be much happier in their lives if they did not focus on the sex of a person but on their talent. Together with that many problems involved in co-existence of men and women would vanish. Questions regarding division of work to female and male would not arise. In principle I think that the modern society is aiming there.

And what is the most important thing. I would like to thank everybody who helped me survive hard times of my life in the Czech Republic. I will not name any one because I would be afraid to have forgotten about somebody. I thank you with all my heart, my friends.

14th August, 2007

Vera Lapshina



- born in Russia, in 1972
- graduated from drama conservatory
- married, mother of two children
- came to the Czech Republic with her family in 2004
- currently collaboration on a broadcasting of

Russian radio program "Let's speak Czech", working in a children studio for maintaining, improving and teaching of Russian language in Teplice, then in children theatre studio in Ústí nad Labem

I was born long ago, in 1972 in a town with an enchanting Russian name Ivanovo. Without any kind of regret I left it and went to Gorkij Drama Conservatory in Nizgorod to study drama. I was appropriately proud at myself when I was admitted – with girls the number of applicants for one place was 46.5!!!

When I had successfully passed all the peripetia of studies I had been working for five years as a "star" in Nizgorod's theatre. During this period, which seemed like eternity to me, I shot one movie (Lawyer). The fame keeps returning because the film is regularly shown on Russian TV channels. Then I moved to Toljata due to family and financial reasons. There because of mutual mistrust between me and the main director I was not the main one anymore but a regular actress in a theatre called "Wheel".

I realised, at the moment when my first son was born, that I finished acting and without much regret I left the scene. This started off my career in advertising business. I passed difficult professional ladder from a regular advertising radio worker for copyright through a marketing department manager in one of the biggest transport company up to a managing creative director in an agency for TV commercials. This was one of the most beautiful phases of my life – in year 2004 my daughter Alice was born. And at this moment we decided (again without any regret) to leave our homeland. Why?

Because I do not like that girls are killed in the school yard, where my son used to go; that buses are blown up in the city centre; that children's playgrounds are filthy; that a drunken Russian has the urge to kill someone and for other examples of "happy" life in our country. I did not expect Czech girls welcoming us in national costumes with bread and salt (even though my husband would have appreciated that) therefore we did not go though a disillusion of the immigrant's life. Although I can say that we were lucky in the Czech Republic – the Russian speaking dispersion treated us condescendingly and now I have broadcasting in the Czech radio every week (Russian broadcasting "Let's speak Russian"), children's studio for maintaining, improving and teaching the Russian language in Teplice, children theatre studio in Ústí nad Labem. It is not that bad within one year, is it?!

Relationships between men and women

While comparing treating women in Russia and in the Czech Republic I came to a conclusion which will not delight Russian

men: Europeans are much happier than us. In Russia women and men are constantly looking for the use of their... well! How shall I put it in the most intelligent way! Generally: they are constantly looking for new experience. It is admirable on one side – our women are indeed the most beautiful ones and take care of themselves most in the world. And no wonder – they have to be ready for potentially interested person. As a result, Russian men are spoiled due to the abundance of the offer and thus female beauty loses its value... And what is the worst in my opinion is the fact that the notion of family and faithfulness is totally vanishing in Russia.

Life in the Czech Republic

I am pleased here in the Czech Republic when I see couples who are not very young and they are holding their hands. They are satisfied with the choice they have made, they are proud of it, they are happy! You hardly see a lady showing by her look that “everything is for sale”. There is no harsh sexual competition in the air when all men you come across assess you as purchasing articles and women you come across as your competitor. I do not know, but I breathe better in the atmosphere of harmony and contentment. I appreciate locals' tolerance towards us who have come to their country. The Czechs do without the “duty smile no. 7” so characteristic of the Americans. But if someone smiles here it comes from the heart. I guess the Czechs only respond to our behaviour. So it means that if we behave like humans in this special and nice country their relation towards us will correspond that.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the project team participating in this publication I would especially like to thank all eleven women who let us look into their personal lives and did not hesitate to share their joyful and sad moments not only with us but with the Czech public through this publication. I respect them for their courage and I hope they will offer a non-stereotypical, authentic insight on migrants' lives in the Czech Republic.

I would also like to thank Anneta Riglová who initiated the whole project and without whose idea and help we would never have been able to compile and publish this book.

Eva Karková
EKS director

PUBLICATIONS



DISCRIMINATION AGAINST REFUGEES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Prague 2008

Results of a unique research on gender-based discrimination of refugees were summarized in this publication. It focuses on important spheres of their life such as integration in the labour market, orientation in the society or learning a new language. It also aims to mediate refugees' experiences and opinions on the process of integration.

Available on CD or in pdf format.



Women and the Labour Market – Combating Unemployment and Discrimination PRACTICALLY & STRATEGICALLY!

Examples of Good Practice from Europe

Prague 2005

A collection of effective strategies and examples of good practice mainly from Central and Eastern Europe. This publication describes trade unions activities, the campaign against discrimination against women in the labour market in Romania, self-employment through micro credits in UK, women's self-support activities in Serbia, the ombudsman office for equal opportunities in Lithuania, etc.
Price: 50 CZK. Available in English and Czech.



WOMEN AND HOME-BASED WORK IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC A Precarious and Underpaid Occupation Concealed within the Walls of the Home, or a Flexible Option Ensuring Life-Work Balance? Prague 2007

The publication summarizes results of a research carried out by the ECG from October 2005 to February 2006. It is the first insight into the phenomenon of home-based work in the Czech Republic and it brings a lot of surprising information about the present problems of women in the labour market.

Available on CD.



WOMEN & WORK NETWORK – Practical Tools for International Action

Prague 2005

This publication describes, through a practical examples, the steps to develop and maintain international activities and cooperation between local women's organisations. It is focussed on practical advice and offers interactive tools for self-support activities, effective planning, organising, communicating and decision-making.

Publication is available in English and Czech. Free of charge.



Women's Values and Spirituality as a Key to Tolerant and Multicultural Europe MEMORANDUM ON MIGRANT AND ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN

Prague 2005

The publication represents voices of migrant women living in Europe. It offers an insight into their daily life and problems they are facing. It also presents suggestions for effective coexistence – all based on practical experience.

Publication is available in English, Czech and Dutch. Free of charge.



WOMEN IN PRECARIOUS ECONOMIES – WOMEN IN MARGINAL AREAS

Prague 2004

This publication is the outcome of an international meeting of women activists in Great Yarmouth, UK. It uses the local reality of Great Yarmouth as a case study to show the impact of structural changes (linked with poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, etc.) on the life of women. It also offers solutions to these problems and describes projects to support women.

Publication is available in English and Czech. Free of charge.

