

BECOMING A SOVIET CITIZEN

By RUTH L WEISS HOHBERG

I must have been seven years old. My parents were summoned to the police office one day in the Uzbek town of Altaryk where we lived. Mother and I were taken down a corridor to a room; my dad was directed to the opposite hallway. In typical Soviet style we had not been told and had not the faintest idea why we were there; being separated on arrival didn't bode well.

A uniformed, neat-looking matronly woman did the honors. She introduced herself in a friendly, warm way leaving me with the impression that she had something important to impart, and that it was a good thing. She already knew much about us with respect to our place of origin and former lifestyle. Her voice was pleasant, her manner kind and confident. Her uniform was sufficiently intimidating for me to feel that she was not to be toyed with. Her manner of speaking suggested she was very sympathetic with our lot of being uprooted and now so far from our home and family, and living in such strained conditions. Patting my head gently, a motherly look in her eyes, she flattered my mother "What a cute little girl, and such lovely wavy hair." She won me over instantly. Here was someone who cared about us I thought.

She asked Mother many questions probing into her attitudes, consistently congenial and calm. All this time we had no idea where my father was, nor how he was being treated. We were worried. I had no notion why we were in this office, nor where the encounter was headed. In a little while the intent came to light. From what I had heard in conversations between my parents, it was like a hammer shattering all of my mother's hopes: we were being "asked" to take Soviet

Passports. To my mother a passport was a sacrosanct document, and citizenship of her country was most important. Relinquishing her Polish citizenship and becoming Soviet, overwhelmed her with fear of never again returning to “civilization”. It was unthinkable. She resolved to make an attempt to refuse the opportunity to “volunteer” to accept.

I on the other hand was excited at the prospect of being part of the “great USSR”, rather than a “foreigner”, especially so when listening to the police woman’s fantasy word-picture of my future as a Soviet citizen. When we finally came away from this meeting I shared my unsolicited positive opinion with my despairing mother. I felt my parents should jump at the chance. I’d had enough of **EX**clusion; this offered what I perceived as actual **IN**clusion. I so longed to be an accepted part of things, rather than being outside, not knowing what others seemed to.

The other option outlined for our family unit was to accept the punitive measure of being separated and sent to various parts of the country, perhaps never to see one another again. We were to be persuaded one way or another to accept the “generous offer”.

My mother had been keeping me out of school, I suppose in an effort to keep me uncontaminated with the ideology while she hoped that we would return “home” and life would seamlessly resume where we left off. I would again be the middle class child receiving the appropriate cultural and educational benefits she had envisioned when I was born.

There was no indication at the time that the war would be over in the foreseeable future, or that we would be free to return to Central Europe and our previous life. It appeared that I would grow to adulthood in the midst of the Soviet atheistic society and the primitive Central

Asian Moslem community, where the language and customs were so alien to her. It looked like the piano and dance lessons, theater outings, mountain hikes, and appropriate friends and partners were not destined to be part of my life as my parents had imagined.

From mother's conversation with the police lady I gathered, and the woman understood that there was no greater threat than to be separated. This issue became a full-time mental tug between the two women. Mother and I made daily appearances at the police office. She was allowed to stay with me for a time because of my age, but eventually had to go to prison too for a short time. A young woman watched over me. My father worked during the day and spent his nights in the jail, stopping by on his way to pick up food we had prepared for him. At some point Mother saw the "handwriting on the wall", (I quote this in spite of the prohibition to refer to the Bible at that time), and capitulated.

We spent much time at the police office. Mother tried everything except bribery (we had no money) to stand her ground; to resist veiled and direct threats of separation. She stalled, she avoided, she evaded. After several weeks of jockeying it became clear that the "little woman with the Polish passport" was not winning. We became Soviet citizens.

EPILOGUE

As immutable as passports seemed to my mother at the time, things did change. The war ended, and Stalin's need to keep all those millions of people within his borders passed. The government offered repatriation to those that were interested. My parents leaped at the opportunity and exchanged their Soviet passports for those of Poland. That is another story.