



# PERM NEWS

Оксфорд и Пермь — города-побратимы

Oxford Perm Association

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## **My Perm – A Sentimental Journey An Honourable Citizen of Perm: Professor Tsymmerman**

A few months ago Facebook delivered a message to me from someone I didn't know. The message said: "Professor Tsymmerman is going to turn 95 this year and we, his pupils, want to make a film about him to celebrate the big date. The professor named you amongst his favourite pupils, could you, please contribute to the video?" Of course, my reply was positive and enthusiastic and then I had to sit down and think what I could say about my clinical teacher?

Yakov Saulovich Tsymmerman is so much more than my scientific advisor and the Head of the Medical University department where I used to work. He is a role model, and a friend, and an inspiration. It is not accidental that on my every return to Perm I come to see him, and that on the wall of my office, here in England, I have his portrait. He has had a unique and lasting influence on my life, and, I am sure, on the lives of all his pupils, who proudly call themselves "The School of Tsymmerman".

The Russian history of the last century was mirrored in Professor Tsymmerman's life.

He was born in Kiev in 1922, and had a happy childhood, until in 1937 his father was arrested and sent to the Gulag. His mother with 15-year old Zhenya (his family still call him that, but it is another story), had to leave Kiev to escape being arrested herself. They went eastwards, towards the Urals (a bit like Dr Zhivago's family did in Pasternak's novel), where they didn't have any friends or relatives, but where



they could hope for some relative safety. There, in Izhevsk, he met his future wife, Augusta, who went to the same school and dreamt of becoming a doctor. In 1940 he finished school with top marks and went to Moscow to study engineering at university, while Augusta went to Leningrad to study medicine. In 1941 WWII reached Russia and the young student Tsymmerman volunteered for the front, and as a private took part in the Battle of Moscow (December 1941).

He was wounded in 1942 and during his recovery in several hospitals, trained as a paramedic, and went back to the front as part of the medical forces, saving lives of hundreds of wounded soldiers and carrying them to safety from the field of battle. In January 1943 he took part in 'Operation Iskra' that broke the encirclement of Leningrad, where his future wife Augusta was trapped in the starving and freezing besieged city.

Yakov Tsymmerman met the end of WWII in Latvia, as a lieutenant of the Soviet Army, and after demobilisation went back to Izhevsk, to study Medicine and to be reunited with Augusta, who, by then, was quite a few years ahead of him in Medical School.

I don't know whether the field of Engineering lost much because Yakov Saulovich did not return to it, but the field of Medicine definitely gained a lot.

After graduating from the Medical School with honours, he worked as a GP, before moving to Perm and choosing his main scientific subject – Clinical Gastroenterology, to which he dedicated all his life. Professor Tsymmerman was a Head of a Department of Therapy and Clinical Pharmacology in Perm Medical University for over 28 years, from 1969 to 1997. From 1997 to 2012 he continued working in his department as a Consulting Professor, and now he is an Honorary Professor of Perm Medical University. His scientific school includes over 40 successful PhD students, over 700 original articles, published in Russia and abroad. He is sole author of 21 scientific books, mainly concentrating on the latest problems in gastroenterology.

Even retirement from active lecturing and consultancy work did not stop Professor Tsymmerman's scientific vigour. On my every visit, he always shows me his latest published books and gives me his latest articles to read, all of them extremely topical, many of them – quite brave and controversial. I suppose, you can afford being brave, and speak your mind, when you have a life behind you, like Yakov Saulovich has.

As for the film – I decided that I better just go to Perm, give my dear Professor and his beloved wife of almost 70 years, a big hug and say to the camera all the good things I know and cherish about them both.

There is a new unfinished article on Yakov Saulovich's desk – I wish him to finish this one and to write many, many more.

*Julia B. Grantham*



## **Crimea – the crisis in 2014 and what has happened since**

I spent ten days in Crimea in April 2017. I was able to lecture – and ask many questions – in two universities, to discuss events with different groups including Crimean Tartars, to travel to famous historical areas and to meet businessmen, recent immigrants and Russian tourists.

The Russian Empire took over Crimea in 1783, capturing it from the Ottoman Empire. It was part of the Russian Empire until 1917 when it was inherited by the Soviet Union. In Soviet times Crimea clearly captured the affections of the people. It was considered a very healthy region, so sick children

were sent there to sanatoria, and children who were outstanding in academic subjects or at being helpful citizens were sent off to youth camps. Perhaps it is akin to the Lake District in England as a romantic, beautiful special area – but much more diverse in its peoples.

In 1954 Khrushchev declared that it should be transferred from the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. This decree was never fully ratified, but no-one took much notice anyway, since the various republics were all part of the Soviet Union. So the problem only became clear in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. In the hurried private negotiations among the then heads of the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian Republics the status of Crimea was ignored. By default, it became part of Ukraine, a new country which had never been independent before – and Ukraine had plenty of problems of its own. Crimea was largely forgotten and allowed to slide into poverty.

There are about 2 million Crimeans in a country somewhat larger than Wales – which has about 3 ½ million. The vast majority are Russian-speaking; today about 65 % identify themselves as Russians, 15% as Ukrainians, 12% as Crimean Tatars and the remaining 13% represent many nationalities. The events leading up to the takeover of Crimea by Russia in 2014 are controversial, but my concern is with the views of the hundreds of Crimeans to whom I spoke – representing all these groups.

The corrupt but legally elected Ukrainian President, Yanukovich, provoked many protests from the 50% of the population who were against him. They wanted Yanukovich to negotiate with the EU. He did so – but the trade deals that were offered were poor value compared with the traditional trading and energy deals offered by the Russians. So he hesitated, negotiated with all sides, and finally, in a coup by his opponents, was forced to flee. An anti-Russian acting government took over. Whether the coup was illegal or not depended on your point of view. On their first day the new acting government announced that Russian would no longer be a legal language for official Ukrainian activities, though it was the first language of millions of their citizens. They withdrew this decree a few days later, but the damage was done, partly because the decree was ‘supported’ by roving bands of militias with neo-Nazi proclivities. For example, less than a week before the coup, several buses had taken Crimeans to a peaceful protest in the capital, Kiev and were returning home. . .

‘On February the 20th, in the Cherkassy Oblast, a mob of armed insurgents stopped several buses with citizens from Simferopol. The passengers were beat up and dragged out of the bus’

Interviewee: ‘They were hammering the buses and pouring petrol on them, at one of their checkpoints they were executing people with shotguns, the buses there were all burned, they were throwing buckets of petrol on our bus and setting fire to it. When people fled the bus they were killed with baseball bats. We could have resisted, of course, but they all had firearms which they were not hiding.’

Another Interviewee: ‘They stopped the bus and they forced people out and then began shooting and pouring petrol. We were all beaten. They broke my arm and my collarbone with a rebar. I am only a citizen of Crimea. I am just from Crimea, do you understand. They think we are non-humans only because we speak Russian!’

Then came the coup in Kiev, and understandable fear in Crimea. What was going to happen? The situation was very tense and the local authorities appealed to Russia for help. For several days the University was closed because everyone was trying to avoid violence. Then Russian special forces appeared, discreetly at first, in the capital, Simferopol. They had been ordered by Putin to take control of the peninsula. These were the ‘little green men’, or the ‘polite people’. My question, three years later, to the people I met was: ‘So when these special forces in camouflage though no official insignia appeared in your streets and started to take control, how did you feel? Were you frightened?’

Sometimes there was a puzzled silence before a mass of exclamations: ‘We weren’t *frightened* of them. We were frightened before they appeared. The atmosphere was so tense, and the information from Kiev was so chaotic and violent. We were happy when these men appeared.’ In Sevastopol, one teacher told me ‘The situation was very dangerous. It was quiet – no fighting – but we had thousands of troops all around us from two countries which had been co-operating quite reasonably – but then ‘our’ country, Ukraine suddenly declared that the Russian forces were ‘the enemy’. Why? At that point it only needed some drunken idiot with a Molotov cocktail throwing it into either barracks for the whole



of Crimea to go up in civil war. So when the ‘polite people’ took control we saw that they could deal with violent madmen. War was not going to happen.’

After a few days, the Russians basically knocked at the doors of the Ukrainian barracks and said, ‘Look chaps, there are buses outside ready to take you back to Ukraine. If you want to go, we will ensure a safe journey. If you want to embrace Russia that’s OK too. But we can’t have Ukrainian troops here now that you have declared yourselves an enemy country. That’s politics. No hard feelings.’ And though some Ukrainian soldiers resisted, we should remember that during the whole operation, no-one was killed. This was a peaceful, safe, transference of power.

Was this legal? The overwhelming impression I got from Crimean citizens who were there at the time was that they did not ask if this was legal. All they wanted was to escape the horrors of civil war in Ukraine. A referendum was organised: Did they want to join the Russian Federation or did they want to stay in Ukraine?

The official result was that 96.77% voted for Russia in an 83% turnout - an implausible result indicating quite unnecessary ballot-rigging. For there was no doubt that a huge majority voted to join Russia. And after sustained fighting in eastern Ukraine broke out in April 2014, and refugees from the Donbas poured into Crimea – as many as 200,000 of them – 84% of Crimeans were certain that they had made the right choice.

However there was one group of people, the Crimean Tartars, who feared what was happening. As a ‘people’ they were deported in 1944 and began to return nearly 50 years later, when Crimea was part of Ukraine. So most were youngish groups who had been born outside Crimea. They wanted to claim land that had belonged to their ancestors and now belonged to new Russian and Ukrainian settlers. There were painful disputes. They squatted, started building, started businesses and were treated badly by their neighbours. In the 2000s they were mostly left alone to do what they liked. They became the entrepreneurial service class – restaurants, hotels, small businesses, taxis, etc. Many became prosperous and built beautiful Tartar houses for themselves and more houses for their extended families. There were rich Tartars and poor Tartars.

The official leader of the Crimean Tartars decided that people should abstain at the referendum since he did not trust Putin to treat the Tartars well. Also all the successful businesses which the Tartars had set up were with Ukrainians, and through them with Europeans. If they became part of Russia those business networks would be destroyed. So many Tartars abstained, though not all. Of those who did vote, a small majority – but still a majority – of Crimean Tatars voted to join Russia.

Once the referendum result was announced, the [Supreme Council of Crimea](#) together with [Sevastopol City Council](#) officially asked to join the Russian Federation and were recognised the same day. On 18<sup>th</sup> March a Treaty was signed between Crimea and Russia, and it was ratified by the Federal Assembly on 21<sup>st</sup> March.

This action was seen as restoration of Crimea to its rightful country by Russians, as illegal annexation by ‘Western’ countries, and as a precious opportunity to secure peace by the vast majority of Crimean people. Three years later it was almost impossible to find anyone who wanted to go back to being Ukrainian. The real oppositionists had left and most – but not all – of the remaining Crimean Tartars were reconciled to the new situation..

However, in those three years, Crimea suffered. Ukraine forces and independent militia groups cut off electricity and water at various times and sabotaged infrastructure. Russian goods were prevented from reaching Crimea easily, leading to high prices. Western sanctions meant the disappearance of foreign visitors and hence of the important tourist trade. Despite the fact that most Crimean had friends and family in other parts of Ukraine, many Ukrainian connections were severed.

These problems are being tackled. The Kerch bridge linking Crimea to the Russian mainland will be completed in 2018. Most people hope that prices will go down and the economy will improve when it is a regular route.

As a temporary solution, planes and ferries were hugely increased to get goods and equipment to Crimea. For example, in the Ukrainian-imposed blackouts they were able to ferry in mobile generators fairly quickly. Government money and propaganda encouraged Russian citizens to go to

Crimea as tourists. Grants provided for Crimeans to come cheaply to Russia for necessary contacts such as university conferences and business meetings.

However we should not forget the cultural differences. Crimea is a 'southern European' country, with a relaxed attitude to corruption and administration. Russians arriving to give support were shocked at the lack of hard work by Crimean officials. What had happened to the money provided for essential infrastructure? Very little indeed! Naturally there were regular complaints by citizens. Putin came visiting last December and was furious at the local administration. He said that he would kick them all out if they did not change their ways, start working and carry out their obligations. This was very undemocratic, I suppose but they did start spending the money on official projects. They will never be the most energetic of people, but they are learning to respond to a brisker and less corrupt environment.

Despite the difficulties and the cultural differences, only a tiny and shrinking minority of Crimean citizens want to leave Russia, but they also recognise that they are not quite 'Russian'. Almost all Crimeans identify as Crimeans before anything else. (So, for the Muslim population, it is important that they call themselves *Crimean* Tartars.) According to their own view of things, the people in Crimea happen to live in Paradise which is a strong reason for being cheerful whatever happens. They *like* their home.

*Karen Hewitt*

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### **Newsletter and web site**

**Would all members please note that articles, including book reviews and letters are always welcome for this Newsletter. The submission deadline for the winter issue of Perm News is 20<sup>th</sup> January** but it greatly assists planning if you let the editor David Roulston know if you plan to submit an item (normally a maximum of 600 words plus two images) or to discuss an idea for the newsletter or web site [www.oxfordperm-assoc.org](http://www.oxfordperm-assoc.org). The web site is updated regularly and contains a complete set of all newsletters from 2001; the site has a complete [Perm News Index](#) so readers can see at a glance when specific articles were printed. Readers with on-line access may note the use of hyperlinks in Perm News; this increases considerably the scope of articles to readers with internet access who wish to pursue references in more detail. The editor is grateful to Sue Gregory for her invaluable proofreading and general help with each issue of Perm News.

## Reports on Recent Events

The **Discussion Group** had its third meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> June at Karen's house. We continued discussing an article by Robert Parry (a well known US investigative reporter) and Karen reported on her recent visit to Crimea and the referendum. **The next meeting is planned for Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> October** at which we will discuss articles by Stephen Cohen, Board member of the American Committee for East West Accord and Mary Dejevsky who writes for the Guardian and the Independent on-line. If any members who have not signed up but are interested in joining the discussion group, please email Karen or David (details on page 5).

The **summer garden party** was held at Karen's house on 12<sup>th</sup> July, when we once again had ideal weather and enjoyed good conversation, games and delicious food.



**Karen Hewitt** gave a fascinating talk on 'Crimea: What Happened, What Is Happening, and Why this Matters to Us. ' in St Aldate's Meeting Room at the Town Hall on 29<sup>th</sup> June

**Judith Pallot** gave a most interesting talk on ' Exiles, Prisoners and Locals in the north of Perm Region.' on 5th July in the School of Geography and the Environment.

This year six people went to **Perm in September**. Unfortunately two were forced to withdraw at the last moment. The group seem to have enjoyed a very full programme, and will be sharing some of their memories at the Perm Association Party.

### **East Oxford United Football Club: A brief update**

Many of you will be well aware of the planned visit to Perm of a group of boys from the EOUEFC which makes a point of welcoming children from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of you donated to make this unlikely project possible, both by individual donations and through attending the Vodka Tasting Evening. The visit to Perm really did happen: 17 boys and 6 adults left Oxford on 28<sup>th</sup> July and returned on 14<sup>th</sup> August. The planning was not without difficulties: shortage of money, visa anomalies, ticket changes and worried parents. But the club *did* raise sufficient money and set off in grand style with a bus to Heathrow contributed by the Oxford Bus Company. What happened when they reached Perm will be the subject of Hassan Sabrie's talk on 12<sup>th</sup> October in the Town Hall.

## **Forthcoming Perm Association Events**

**Thursday, 12th October, at 6p.m. at Oxford Town Hall in the Judges' Room.** Hassan Sabrie, Chairman and Founder of East Oxford United Football Club will be talking about what happened in Perm when 17 boys and 6 adults arrived there for two weeks in August. His view of Perm is fascinating, sometimes surprising, and unusual.

**Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> October: Discussion Group meeting.** See above for details

**Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> November from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. in the Old Library at the Town Hall** there will be a special Oxford International Links Promotion evening to which anyone interested in any specific link or in twinning in general is invited. This should be fun – lots of different groups will be represented – and refreshments will be on offer.

**Wednesday, 15<sup>th</sup> November at 7.30 at Rewley House.** The annual Perm Association party for the Perm university teachers. Please put this date in your diary.

### **Karen Hewitt and a USA Russia email site**

Johnson's Russia list (based at the George Washington University) is a weekly email list of articles, papers, etc. which provide insight into a wide range of US - Russia interests. For the group email of 25 August 2017 the editors decided to select their choice of top 30 articles from the year 2015. The list starts with reports by/on Putin, Medvedev, Lavrov (Foreign Minister), Russia Direct (interview with Richard Sakwa (University of Kent), Moscow Times, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs (report from Moscow), Russia Direct, Irrussianality - Paul Robinson (whose articles appear in our Discussion Group references)

Members will I am sure be interested to know that number 9 in the list is by Karen Hewitt - her report from 17 December 2015 on 'What is going on in Russia? The views of ordinary Russians'. This was a greatly expanded version of her article which appeared in [Perm News October 2015](#) page 7. You can read Karen's complete article as published in Johnson's Russia list [here](#). Members who attended her talk on 29<sup>th</sup> June will be familiar with her first hand experience, and can read more in her report on page 2 - 4.

*David Roulston ed*

## **Book Reviews**

### **Alan Sillitoe's working-class novels, and the Russian connection**

Although Alan Sillitoe wrote the opening pages of *Key To The Door* in 1948, the book was not completed until 1961. Meanwhile his bestseller novels *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner*, which forged his reputation as an original, working-class novelist, had been published and filmed. The one describes the rake's progress and philandering of cocky, young Arthur Seaton during the 1950s Boom when factories were hiring, pay-packets in the industrial heartlands bulged and a large TV in the lounge was becoming the norm. The other reveals the entrenched hostility of Smith, a borstal boy serving time for robbery, who deliberately decides to lose the cross-country race for the All-England trophy to spite his prison governor and deflate his hopes of using Smith's victory to gain a knighthood.

*Key to the Door* spans a much longer time period: from the depths of the 1930s Depression through the war years to Malaya and the beginnings of anti-colonial struggle. This is mainly seen through the eyes of Brian Seaton. From a poverty-stricken household in Nottingham, he has to assist in the daily task of putting food on the table and watch while his illiterate grandfather and father take out their frustrations physically on those – particularly their womenfolk – whom they blame for their misfortunes.

Despite this and life at school that is positively Dickensian, Brian flourishes and amazes his elders with his reading and writing abilities. War's beginning marks the end of the bad old days as factories hire to meet the surge in demand from the military. Not that the war makes the Seatons patriotic: young males are supported if they are dodging the recruiting sergeant or hidden if they desert; Churchill is contemptuously referred to as “Old Fatguts”.

What changes attitudes is the Red Army's victory at Stalingrad and its unstoppable advance on Berlin with Brian listening daily to the names of cities it recaptures and painstakingly marking the advance on his maps of Russia.

The second part of the novel is set in Malaya after Seaton has been conscripted into the RAF and trained as a wireless operator. The reader's interest is cleverly maintained by alternating passages set in the camp or the jungle with flashbacks to Brian at work in Nottingham or with his girlfriend, Pauline, whom he makes pregnant and marries before going out to Malaya. By the time he is to be demobbed, it has become clear to him that the role of the RAF will be to hunt down the growing communist insurgency – something he does not want to assist.

It is easy to understand why this novel – and others by Alan Sillitoe – was so popular in the USSR in the 1960s and 70s. For Soviet literary critics Sillitoe was the genuine voice of the working class and a million hardback copies of this novel alone were published in Russian. If Russians today are put off by the thought of reading someone considered a “favourite” under the Soviets, I would say two things: firstly, Sillitoe is a great story-teller whose Nottingham dialect takes you straight into the homes, pubs and workplaces of his characters. Secondly, he was no uncritical admirer of the USSR. In fact he lambasted the regime for its abuse of human rights during a meeting of soviet writers in 1968 at which President Brezhnev was present...

*Jonathan Saunders*

### **Peter Conradi, ‘Who Lost Russia - How the World Entered a New Cold War’, Oneworld Publications, 2017**

The author is Foreign editor of the Sunday Times and has lived and worked in Russia starting with Reuters in 1988. This book is complementary to Richard Sakwa's more academic text on Ukraine (reviewed in the previous issue of Perm News) and Conradi's journalistic approach makes it very readable.

The book covers the period from late 1980s to 2017. In the first few chapters Conradi gives a very clear historical summary of events surrounding the end of the Soviet Union. He quotes many eminent authorities which give the reader a perspective of world opinions, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1990 who warned against attempts to destroy the country's Slavic core. ‘It was no problem if the Baltic countries broke away.. but the Slavs should remain together .... Ukraine, in particular Crimea, he considered inseparable from Russia’. Warnings from US Ambassador George Kennan concerning the expansion of NATO (of which the connection with the US arms industry is clearly explained) and were dismissed at the time. John Major was even more explicit according to the then British ambassador Rodric Braithwaite; he told Dmitri Yazov, the Soviet defence minister, in March 1991, that he (Major) did not himself foresee circumstances now or in the future where East European countries would become members of NATO. The failure of the NATO Russia Council concept in 2002 is discussed.

The importance of the actions of Sakashvilli, the promises of NATO membership for Georgia, and his attack on South Ossetia, followed by Russia's counter invasion of Georgia are



clearly presented. The second half of the book covers the background of events leading up to the US assisted change of the Kiev government and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Henry Kissinger is quoted frequently, for example: 'The status of Ukraine was key to this, attempting to incorporate the country into NATO, which would shift the Alliance's eastern border just 300 miles from Moscow and would be an unnecessary provocation'. The author examines in some detail the ramifications of various decisions taken by the USA, the EU and Russia, concerning sanctions and the conflicting events in Syria.

In the epilogue, events in 2016-2017 ensure that the book is up to date. The author is critical of both Putin and US leaders at various times and on the whole gives a fairly balanced account of the historical facts thus enabling readers to draw their own conclusions. He says 'The widespread suspicion of the west and its values now felt by many Russians is an alarming phenomenon that did not exist in communist days, despite the heavy-handed efforts of the Soviet propaganda machine. Efforts should be taken to counter this by encouraging more personal contact, especially within the younger generation'.

The above extracts provide a few glimpses of this very readable book. Conradi presents modern Russian history in a very clear manner and the reader is left with a fuller understanding of the complicated interaction of events and I would thoroughly recommend it to anyone wishing to have a deeper understanding of this period.

*David Roulston*

## **Dividing my time between Knyazhevo and Oxford**

Knyazhevo is the village, two hundred and fifty kilometres from Moscow, where my husband, Sergei, chose to move after fifty years of life in the capital. Oxford is where my house is in England and my life involves travelling between the two very different places.

Knyazhevo is one of three villages in a forest that, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, had a combined population of about a thousand inhabitants, farms, a linen factory, school, hospital and shops. Today, as a result of the financial and political policies of the nineties, the former way of life has vanished and little remains apart from the few wooden houses still standing and minimal infrastructure: a single road through the village; electricity supply but no gas; no water supply except for a few wells and a weekly visit from a mobile shop. The handful of permanent inhabitants include us.



The main road through the village

There's not much reason to live in the village unless you're too old to move away or you are looking for a peaceful retirement like my husband or have a house that you have inherited and use as a dacha, coming out from the city at weekends and in the summer.

We moved out here eight years ago, living in a typical Russian village house while we built a new house next to it big enough for our families to visit us and started to acquire various animals. Many local people thought that Sergei, coming from Moscow, would not survive the first winter but he did

and he loves it here. Life can be hard: you need to be self sufficient, physically strong and able to do most of the maintenance yourself. There are regular power cuts and lots of snow to clear during the five or so months of winter.

There are many wonderful things about life in the Russian countryside for both of us: Sergei loves to go hunting in the forest, fishing and picking berries and mushrooms. We go swimming in the river or lake nearby. We are surrounded by forest and it is very peaceful. On clear nights you can see hundreds of stars. In winter there is cross-country skiing or skating on the pond next to our house and we have our own banya. This year for the first time, I lowered myself into an ice hole in the pond on Epiphany (19th January) having warmed myself up in the banya first. Although winters can be very cold, it is always warm inside the house - sometimes too warm for me. The log burning stove is kept going all winter. I was brought up to keep the heating down and put a jumper on. Here I sit in the overheated house with a t-shirt on and snow piled up outside.

As for my journey from Oxford, it usually goes without a hitch, thanks to the truly amazing Russian public transport system (which seems to be taken for granted by most Russians). Compared to the UK, trains are never late or cancelled. Given the length of some of the train journeys (days sometimes) and the winter temperatures this never fails to amaze me. On 7th January this year, for example, my son flew back to England after spending New Year here and, even though it was Russian Christmas day and -30 degrees all buses and trains were running on time.

Of course there are cultural differences that over time I have gradually become more used to: the directness and openness of the Russian people; the wonderful hospitality; the amount of food you have to prepare



The old and the new houses with the banya in between and the forest behind

for guests; the drinking and the toasts; New Year not knowing how long visitors are planning to stay (they decide!); the general lack of planning and advance notice and the concept that most rules are there to be got round.

There are of course some aspects of life I find hard. The bureaucracy can be very frustrating and you feel you are never being given more than the very basic information. Corruption is evident in many aspects of every day life and many quite serious local crimes appear not to be investigated.

I am married to someone who was brought up in the Soviet Union, has never been to England and gets most of his information from state television channels. So there are plenty of opportunities for misunderstandings between us and heated discussions. However, I have learnt over time that it is easier in a cross-cultural marriage to leave a lot unsaid and instead work on trying to understand each other's culture. Getting to grips with the beautiful but challenging Russian language will, I feel, be a lifetime project for me. I am working on it.

*Jessica Vlasova*