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Opinion

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Hard to Give Away the Bride Without a Visa

By Paul Keegan

Last year, I met a beautiful Russian ballroom dancer named Tatyana on a blind date in New York City. On Christmas morning, I hid a ring inside a matryoshka doll. On June 17th, we will be married in Queens, New York.

But a few weeks ago, our dreamy courtship turned into a nightmare. Tatyana's parents, Viktor and Lyudmila Rybushkin, traveled 19 hours on a train from their home in Volgograd to Moscow for a visa interview at the U.S. Embassy. It lasted five minutes. The man behind the glass at window 12 asked a few questions, glanced at our wedding invitation and handed them a form-letter refusal.

During their 15-hour bus ride home, Lyudmila wept while Viktor, 59, which is the average life expectancy for Russian men, took extra doses of the pills for his high blood pressure. For days, Tatyana was in shock, unable to cry.

The visa application fees alone cost nearly a month's salary at Viktor's factory job, at which he earns 7,600 rubles (\$248) per month. Train and bus fares for the four-day, 2,200-kilometer round trip set them back another 3,000 rubles. The U.S. government requires personal interviews for all visa applicants but has only four consulates in Russia, a country that spans eleven time zones.

Compare their trauma to my experience when Tatyana invited me to meet her parents in Volgograd last summer. I sent a FedEx package to a travel agency in New York along with a check for \$140 (a fraction of my monthly income). My Russian visa arrived in the mail in just two weeks.

Since I'm a journalist, I thought I'd ask James Pettit, the U.S. Consul General, a few questions about American visa procedures. His press attache declined the interview request, but directed me to the embassy web site, which says, "The U.S. Embassy wants Russians to visit our country and we are committed to making it as easy and convenient as possible for them to do so."

The form letter handed to Tatyana's parents by the man behind window 12 said they were being refused under Section 214(b) of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, which requires embassies to presume that all applicants intend to immigrate unless they can show "strong social, economic and/or familial ties" to their home country.

Beyond that, no specifics were offered. Did Viktor and Lyudmila fail the "family ties" test? Perhaps, since both sets of parents are dead and their two children already live in the United States with green cards they gained based on achievement (Tatyana has placed among the world's best ballroom dancers and Viktor Jr. is a championship diver who performs with Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas). Then again, maybe not, because Lyudmila was also refused six years ago after proposing to visit for a month without her husband and her mother, who was an amputee critically ill with diabetes.

Perhaps they didn't qualify economically. If so, then the vast majority of Russians don't either. Viktor's monthly salary of 6,700 rubles is near the national average. They also own considerable assets many Russians don't have: a two-bedroom apartment, a 2005 four-door Lada Samara, a garage to house the car and their beloved dacha on the outskirts of town -- a small farm with apricot, plum and cherry trees, dozens of different vegetables and a two-story house Viktor built himself with cement and scraps of wood (he also drilled a well, making him the envy of neighboring farmers who only get running water twice a week from the government).

The Rybushkins' success story made me wonder how long the embassy believes it would take a 60-year-old Russian factory worker who speaks no English to earn enough money in New York City to buy his own apartment, summer home, car and garage. My guess is never. We could certainly never offer him such an affluent lifestyle. Tatyana is a dance teacher, I'm a freelance writer, and we rent a small, two-bedroom

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apartment in Queens.

Perhaps Lyudmila and Viktor were refused because of their age: She is retired and his pension starts in July, when he turns 60. But both will be eligible for green cards when Tatyana qualifies for U.S. citizenship in less than a year. So why would they try to risk immigrating now?

They don't want to immigrate, of course. They just want to go to their daughter's wedding. Why won't the embassy believe them?

On May 4, the embassy finally gave specific reasons for its refusal. Responding to an inquiry made by Senator Hillary Clinton of New York at our request, Vice Consul Michael S. Flores wrote that the Rybushkins have "close family ties to the United States and weak economic ties to Russia," as Lyudmila is retired and Viktor's income is low. Curiously, he didn't mention their apartment, car, garage or dacha. The couple also failed to show a "history of international travel" followed by a return home, he wrote. Yes, exactly. That provincial spirit is precisely why they don't have the slightest interest in living in a strange foreign land like America.

A week later, our hopes soared when Daniel Retter, an immigration lawyer, agreed to send the embassy a six-page letter on behalf of the Rybushkins, pro bono. Retter has had a consular practice in Moscow since 1990, and his letter was quite persuasive, detailing many new economic and family ties the embassy was not aware of -- including the fact that Viktor's income will jump by 45 percent in July because he will remain at his factory job when his monthly pension of 3,000 rubles takes effect. (If he didn't return to Russia, he would lose both his salary and his pension.) The letter also described the 44 family members to whom the Rybushkins are extremely close -- aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and a dear brother -- and pointed out that some destitute cousins rely on them for clothes, food and money. I even signed a legal affidavit offering to post a bond ensuring their return.

But Flores replied a few days ago with another refusal full of boilerplate text that offered no cogent explanation and, most surprisingly, didn't even acknowledge the new information we had provided.

As our wedding day approaches, we have one last hope. At Retter's suggestion, the Rybushkins have agreed to re-apply. They have composed a letter detailing all the new information Retter had previously disclosed to the embassy, along with documents showing they have opened a bank account in Volgograd with \$2,000 that we have provided to help them plan for the future. The Rybushkins also wrote about their deep family ties, explaining in their own words why they can't imagine living out their years anywhere but Russia. How could the embassy not believe them this time?

On our good days, Tatyana and I like to recall our visit to Volgograd last summer. Her mom whipped up a feast of okroshka (cold vegetable soup), pirozhki (small pies) and stuffed green peppers while her dad poured shots of vodka and told stories about his days in the Soviet Army. We toasted the end of the hatred between our countries and the miracle that we were all sitting together happily, like one big family. After dinner, Viktor played his accordion-like bayan while Lyudmila sang and Tatyana danced.

Today, even after our visa ordeal, Tatyana and I still have faith in America. We believe that Mr. Pettit will review all the evidence and put his faith in two honest, hardworking people whom we love deeply and who have solemnly pledged to return home after our wedding. Perhaps we are naive. Or perhaps the alternative is simply too sad to consider -- that on June 17th, on what is supposed to be the happiest day of our lives, Viktor and Lyudmila will have dinner by themselves in their small apartment. And Tatyana will walk down the aisle alone.

Paul Keegan is a freelance writer living in New York.