

The American Embassy – A Bulwark of Peace and of Democracy (2002)

The American Visa – A Bright Dream of Humanity

Written by Elena Kolmanovskaya
Translated by Patricia Zimmerman

In order to go to a capitalist country, it is necessary to receive a visa in the corresponding embassy. This banal truth is well known to us since that time, when the most difficult steps on the path abroad, were not by any means this simple step, but were receiving a foreign passport from your native state. But there is, thank God, still one country which considers itself to be paradise, that is the focus of the wishes of all mortals (that is to say, not its citizens), and its embassy – purgatory and Judgment Day. I think that all victims have already guessed that we are talking about the US Embassy in Russia.

In the winter of 2002 it became necessary for me to go to America on urgent business. And on sad business – my dear aunt, who had lived there for six years, was in the final stage of cancer, and she very much wanted to see me and, if possible, to say goodbye. I have rich experience – I have been abroad many times – to America, to France, to Germany, to Italy, to Spain, to Poland, to the Czech Republic, to Austria. Incidentally, last summer my documents were stolen in one of the EU countries, so that at the end of 2002 I had a completely new foreign passport.

So here, having received a letter from the American hospital, in which the doctor described the condition of my aunt and asked all, upon whom the decision depended, to help me arrive as soon as possible to the United States. I began to collect my documents. At first, it became clear, that since October 2001 the US Embassy in Moscow had changed their manner of handling visas – now everyone seeking charity must give the documents not to the embassy, but to a specially authorized service, which carries your documents and returns to you either the visa or an invitation for an interview. Naturally, you are obligated to pay for this service, besides the payment for the visa examination and the visa, if they give it to you. The visa may be received either from the visa service MARP or through ELF-91, the exclusive agent of the American corporation, Federal Express.

Elf-91 accepts your documents in several places. I went to a book store, Biblio-Globus, and stood for one and one-half hours in a crush of people on a stairway and gave the documents – a questionnaire, passport, certificate of income from work, a letter from the hospital. While I was standing, my suspicions became clear, and I found out that this service works only in Moscow. Others, from outside the city, must come to the central ELF office, but they pay as much as in Moscow. By the way, amusingly, in December my American relatives, having broken from Russian reality, said to me by telephone: “They say everything there has at last become civilized – you can send documents to the embassy and receive visas by mail.” I had to explain to them how it really happens.

As a result, I gave the documents and after one and one-half weeks received a summons for an interview. I came to the embassy and once again was overjoyed by the organizational talent of the Americans. White people don't like to soil their hands, therefore all three lines of guards were Russian. Only one American stays on the inside entrance of the building, to whom they entrusted a delicate operation - a personal electronic security check (You need to turn off your mobile phones and leave them). Inside, in the waiting hall, again Russian staff. Americans sit enthroned behind a window, a step below, to whom one must bow.

Conversation with the consular officer – a blonde lady from the state of Idaho or Texas, speaking Russian poorly – went like this:

- To whom are you going in the States?
- To my aunt, you have a paper from the hospital.
- Is she ill?
- Yes, very seriously, my mother is already there.
- What is your mother's last name?
- The same as my aunt, Levina."

Looking in the computer...

- How can you prove that she is your mother – you have a different last name?
- I can bring her passport, where I am listed or my birth certificate.
- CNo need, thank you. Haven't you ever been in the States?
- I was twice, it is written on the questionnaire.
- When was the last time?
- I left the US at the end of 1995.
- A a a, that was long ago.

She attempts to search unsuccessfully – evidently, the data base is simply not deeper than the past five years.

- Have you been anywhere outside the country?
- Yes (giving an account of countries).
- Well, there aren't any visas in your passport?
- I have a new passport, given to me this autumn, because the old one was stolen in Europe during the summer.

During the conversation the lady does not look at me, she is shuffling papers, marking something in them.

- No, we can't give a visa to you. You have a small income and you can't prove that you have been in other countries.
- But my income was enough for my mom's trip (I was her sponsor, and my income of about 17,000 rubles a month is stated in the papers, for our country that is not a small salary?
- Yes, but your mother is in another class, she is a senior citizen.
- And so, you are not giving me a visa? That is to say, I will not be able to see my dying aunt?
- Maybe in the future you will have a change of circumstances... In the next room you will get back your twenty dollars. The conversation has finished.
- I used to hold a better opinion of the United States...

When I left the embassy, to say that I was angry – it is to say nothing. But later, I felt – well, I will be able to live without them – to the devil with them, I will meet with my American friends in Europe. Only, it was interesting for me, to see if the embassies of European countries would give a visa to a woman who was refused a visa to America. As I already recognized then, Americans have a deadly dislike of putting their visa in an empty passport. It reminded me of the Soviet idea – before they would allow a person to go to a capitalist country, he had to go to a socialist country. It is necessary to understand that Europe has the role of the “younger brother” to America.

My relatives were terribly upset. My aunt, and more to the point, her husband, decided to be persistent. He went to his congressman, whose office was located near their home. The congressman wrote an inquiry, on which after a while he received a courteous reply::

Thank you for your inquiry. However, please be advised that we do not discuss the details of a visa refusal with third parties.

Ms. Kolmanovska's visa application was rejected based on the insufficient information provided by the applicant at the time of the interview. As you may be aware, under Section 214(b) of the Immigration and Nationality Act(INA), applicants for nonimmigrant visas are presumed to be intending immigrants. In order to overcome this presumption, applicants must prove the existence of strong ties to their own country that are sufficient to compel their return after a short stay. This is done by providing convincing evidence of a combination of permanent social, family or economic ties to a residence abroad. Applicants must also prove that they have sufficient economic resources to make the trip and not work while in the United States, and must convince the interviewing officer that the purpose of their trip is truly represented.

I am very sorry about not being able to assist you in this difficult matter. We understand your frustration, but unfortunately only a consular officer can determine an applicant's eligibility to receive a US visa. A refusal of a visa under Section 214(b) is not permanent and applicants may certainly reapply. We recommend, however, that individuals reapply only if they can present new evidence to overcome the previous grounds for refusal. For most applicants, this would involve new proof of social and economic ties to a residence in Russia. It is important to keep in mind that the burden of demonstrating visa eligibility under our law rests on the applicant, not on the consular officer.

You should think on this tremendous idea – every person who wants to get a non-immigrant visa should be examined as a person who wants to immigrate, and it is his problem to prove that he has strong enough economic and social relations with his country to return! Think – an adult, with normal psychology and with no criminal convictions comes to the embassy, and right away nobody believes him. That is, they suspect him of wanting to deceive the consular officer. But the presumption of innocence? Evidently, it is only for white people.... And under this suspicion, naturally, fall those who have a few hostages (spouses, children), and those who could truly immigrate to the United States, if he might have such a wish. The logic is, in truth, Martian.

Besides, to prove – it means to convince the consular officer. It doesn't mean you should bring a collection of recorded documents, but you should personally convince one person. You should notice that a consular officer – it is not very high and not a very well paid position, it is, most likely, the beginning of the diplomatic career. Therefore sitting behind the glass are not very experienced and wise people, but young boys and girls. And every one personally, and without the possibility of appeal, decides if parents can meet with their children, brothers with their sisters and so on. I do not know if they have any figures about the number of people who are refused visas or if they receive a bonus for more refusals, but even if the consular officers are very nice people, by what right do they decide fate? Because they are Americans? It is a shame and offense for America. I think that the majority of Americans, even in their bad dreams, can not possibly imagine what is going on.

While my relatives fought with the embassy, I decided to prepare my dossier. A surprising business, I need to confess. I gathered letters from the hospital, from a senator and congressman, made copy of my birth certificate (where the last name of my mother is written), my social security number, and my business card, which I had when I worked in Texas, I found photographs of myself in Washington near the capitol, and also my photographs in different European cities. (I hate to make photographs, but for the first time, I understood why it is necessary.) I made a copy of the paper from the police department of the town, where my passport had been stolen. Besides

this, I asked my Italian friend to send me an official letter from his university, stating that I had been in Italy twice by his invitation. He couldn't understand why I need this, but when he understood, he sent it, dying from laughter. The main problem was my income – it couldn't increase substantially in one month. And then, as financial people advised me, I added that my income for 2001 was \$24 000 (about \$2,000 per month). As a result, standing in line for the second time, and paying another 500 rubles for the necessary shipping, plus 45 dollars for the examination, plus 20 for the visa, I submitted a heavy pile of documents (copies).

An American woman, who taught English to my relatives in the synagogue, also decided to help and wrote a letter to a senator. The senator was, as it turned out then, quite another matter, - in particular, senators vote for ambassadors. Therefore, his letter had a much stronger effect. More to the point, the answer arrived very quickly, and said the following:

Ms. Kolmanovskaya stated that she was going to visit her aunt. Ms. Kolmanovskaya intended to stay for three weeks in the United States. She claimed to be employed in Russia on a permanent basis as a marketing director, receiving a salary of approximately \$560 per month. Ms. Kolmanovskaya, whose current passport shows no evidence of overseas travel after 1998, is not married and has no children; her mother is currently in the United States. Given these circumstances, the consular officer was not convinced that she had truly represented the purpose of her trip and had compelling reasons to return to Russia after a short stay in the United States. As a result, her application for a visitor visa was denied under Section 214(b) of the INA.

A refusal of a visa under Section 214(b) is not permanent and applicants may certainly reapply. We recommend that, if Ms. Kolmanovskaya reapplies, she bring in proof of her husband's employment and income in addition to documentation concerning her own salary. While we cannot guarantee that this will prove sufficient, we will gladly afford Ms. Kolmanovskaya an expeditious interview date and time of her choice, and will carefully review her case.

Most of all it pleased me that in one paragraph of this letter it was explained that I had no husband and children (that is no hostages) and, in the following, that it is necessary to bring a certificate of work and the salary of my husband. But that is not unusual, as it turns out, when the letter is written by the method of copy-paste technology.

The letter really had an effect and I was very quickly invited for an interview. So quickly that they called me on Tuesday afternoon to the designated telephone number (of my parents) and, as they were not at home, said to the answering machine that I must be in the embassy on Wednesday morning at 11:30 and that, as they did not have time to make a delivery, I myself must stop by in the morning to pick up the interview pass. I was happy for my 500 rubles and went in the morning to the office of ELF-91 and then to the embassy. After the expected time I was admitted to another consular officer, this time a brunette, who also spoke Russian poorly, and the conversation looked like this:

- You were refused a visa?
- Yes, a month ago.
- And you probably have no change in circumstance?
- A month ago I did not have the necessary number of documents with me corroborating...
- But now what did you bring?
- Here is my social security number and the address of the company, in which I have been working.
- Checking something in the computer.
- Here is a paper showing that I was in Italy. Here is a paper showing that in the summer my passport was stolen in Europe.

- Why are you giving that paper to me?
 - Well, this at least proves that this summer I was in that country.
 - That's clear.
- Not looking at me, shuffling through papers, something is marked in them.
- There is also a copy of my birth certificate – my mother and my aunt have a different last name than I do.
- Pause. Not looking at me, shuffling through papers.
- Well, we will give you a visa. You will receive it in three days.
 - Thank you.

When I was in the embassy for an interview for the second time, I spent an hour in the waiting room and heard as they interviewed other people. For this hour they gave a visa to only one man – the director and owner of a metal factory in Taganrog. They didn't help any hostages or many trips to other countries. The story of an elderly woman produced the strongest impression on me. She told the consular officer that she had been in America several times and now she was going to see her American friends. The consular officer apparently asked her where they had met. She answered that her husband met with David at the end of WWII, that they had traveled to visit David for a veteran's parade, and that David had traveled to Russia. And now her husband had died and David and his wife invited her to visit them for one-half year, to rest. Her story did not convince the consular officer, and her visa was refused with the usual formula: in the next room she would get back her twenty dollars. She went from the window, still not understanding what they said to her. And she turned and said to the spotted- and flat-faced security guard (as I already said above, he was Russian, as are all other personnel, who have close contact with people), "I know nothing about twenty dollars, I don't need money, I need a visa." The guy explained that they did not give her a visa and that she can get her money back. The woman became very upset and then said, "I asked for a visa for half a year, if it is impossible to get one for so long, maybe I can get one for two months? I will go and ask." The guy began to say – "Go away, you are creating a disturbance, the consular officer is already interviewing another person," but the woman all the same went back to the window. And here the guy began to cry: "Guard, guard, go to window number three." I realized that I could not remain silent, that if the guard laid one finger on that woman – let my American visa go up in smoke. And here the guard appeared – a twenty-year old girl, unhappy, sleepy, very thin, her clothes hanging on her as on a hanger. She approached the woman, and seeing her, the woman began to laugh. "Well, daughter, do you have a good job? Do they pay you well?" And she left. When I finished my interview, I approached the guy and asked him to clarify his job duties. He turned over his badge, with the writing inside (as though I did not see before that here it was written B. Zhukov), and said that he does not work here, but is simply standing around. I remembered then that during WWII the Nazi collaborators called forth even more hatred than the Nazis themselves. I trembled for the rest of the day at work – and to this day still feel disturbed - whenever I recall the scene with that woman. It would be interesting to know what the American consular officers dream about at night. And what of our Russian co-workers at the embassy?

When I finally received the visa, everyone congratulated me, as though I had completed an extraordinary feat, like passing a difficult test. But here, in this way, false values are being created in people's minds.