

(This story is a memoir based on recollections of actual events. Events and conversations have been recreated to the best of the author's memory. The names, details and identifying characteristics of some people and places have been changed to respect the privacy of individuals.)

Steppe-ing Outside the Boundaries

By John Mendzela

Frankfurt Airport, Saturday morning, February, early 1990's

What a relief to sit down! Mike's large party split up and scattered around the waiting room. He mentally ticked off the road, and the hassles, to this point.

The first challenge had been convincing the Washington bureaucracy to approve the "Central Bank Accounting Workshop". After the break-up of the centralised Soviet system, hyperinflation had taken hold in all the now-fragmented economies. New central banks, facing entirely new challenges, struggled. Weak accounting functions were a big part of the problem and urgent technical assistance was needed.

But the inefficiency of sending disparate individuals to the 15 FSU (Former Soviet Union) countries one at a time, as part of big missions with broad agendas, had become obvious from formal reports to headquarters and informal client feedback. Worse, some "experts" were poor communicators who struggled to convey basic concepts that they took for granted to people with very different experience. Bringing people from all 15 countries together to workshop with the most effective consultants available made obvious good sense.

Bureaucracy was however dismayed by the idea of hosting the workshop in an FSU country. Such a novel venture would fall outside the normal mission pattern. It would demand new and multinational approaches. Cost and risk would be high. Couldn't everyone just come to the facilities in Vienna? Patiently and repeatedly, Mike and his key colleagues James and Simon had explained that it wasn't working professionals who came to Vienna, but well-connected "shoppers" who often had no background or interest in the topic. The only way to bring the working professionals together and help them learn fast was to travel to their world.

Reluctantly, permission was granted to explore further, if a willing host country could be found. James and Simon had got on that job, and quickly found a volunteer host – the Central Bank of Surkistan. And every single FSU central bank was keen to participate! And, luckiest of all, Flugluft had just begun the first reputable scheduled air service to Surkistan, flying there twice a week – so expensive charter flights would not be needed. Having exhausted ways to say no, the conservative hierarchy that ran "technical assistance" gave in (though they still predicted disaster). The workshop could go ahead!

Fax machines and telephone lines had run hot over the next few weeks, on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Once the project was underway, plenty of people took an active interest. The final "mission" was 17 strong – six professionals and three secretaries from headquarters, five seconded experts from Western central

banks, and three self-invited “observers” from other international organisations. The official leader Bill, a career economist, was a happy choice – he saw his role as dealing mainly with representation and protocol, and was happy to leave workshop organisation and leadership to Mike, James and Simon.

Planning and preparation had been thorough. The host central bank was confident about on-site logistics. All technical terms in accounting and management had been carefully translated to their closest Russian equivalents. The project team filled an extra suitcase with paper handouts for the workshop, plus two personal computers converted to word processing in Cyrillic. Three interpreters from Moscow would join the team in Surkistan to provide skilled simultaneous translation throughout the workshop. Bill had a large supply of US dollars to cover unexpected expenses, far more than should be needed.

Bringing everyone physically together for a planning and discussion day in Frankfurt before the flight had worked well too, creating a unified and informed team. One minor problem – an observer who had not yet received his entry visa – had been resolved by phone with a promise that a visa would instead be arranged on arrival.

Mike mentally ticked off his personal arrangements. His large standard-issue suitcase was fully packed, with plenty of warm clothing to combat the steppe’s severe winter. Passports, money and tickets were safely in his pocket and important notes were in his briefcase. An extra stash of US dollars was carefully hidden in a suit pocket at the bottom of his suitcase.

Checking in with that, plus the identical suitcase with workshop materials and equipment, hadn’t been easy. A special security counter had been created for the Saturday morning flight to Samaty. Body searches had verged on the intrusive, and every piece of luggage had been pushed through a special scanner. And no access to lounges – instead the airport authorities had led Mike’s party and other “business class” passengers to this quarantined waiting room. Now it was early evening, and the flight was already over an hour late...

After what seemed an eternity, an airport employee guided everyone past a series of locked doors and security guards and onto a bus. The bus ground wearily to a far corner of the airport, and stopped beneath a Boeing 737 in the livery of Flugluft’s package holiday subsidiary. Luggage was scattered haphazardly on the tarmac. The same employee announced that before passengers could climb onto the plane, they would need to personally identify their luggage as a “special security measure”. And we should hurry, because it was now two hours after scheduled departure.

The “special measure” proceeded briskly. Each passenger found his or her suitcase, which was whisked away and loaded on as its owner climbed the stairs. Mike quickly found one of his suitcases, but not the other. Soon no luggage at all was left on the runway – just Mike and another passenger not from his party, both missing a suitcase. The airport employee hustled them up the stairs anyway: “Please hurry, we will bring your suitcase in a moment!”

Mike found his seat, and reported in. “Bill, one of my suitcases is missing. I don’t know which – my personal one, or the workshop suitcase with all our materials and equipment. If we don’t have the workshop suitcase, there’s no point going.” Bill reacted quickly, and told the head steward that suitcase must be found before take-

off. Mike stood firmly in the open cabin door, ignoring glares from the cabin crew.

That same airport employee appeared again and hustled up the stairs. "Okay, sit down please sir, the flight must leave now." Mike didn't budge. He explained how the missing suitcase contained essential equipment for important official international work in Surkistan, and he could not travel without it. "Okay, then you can leave the plane and travel on the next flight." Mike still didn't budge. "The next flight is four days away, and you know that. If I leave this plane, then 16 other people will leave also. And on Monday Flugluft can explain to Washington why our mission failed." Mike folded his arms and stood tall. "So you must find that suitcase."

The employee clattered back down the stairs, talking urgently on his walkie-talkie. Bill came forward for an update. Mike explained. "Bill, how far can I push this?" Bill thought for a moment. "Mike, push it as far as you think you need to. You guys organised this project. So it's your call".

Bill returned to his seat. Further down the cabin, growing rumbles of discontent were apparent. Mike stayed in the cabin door, trying to look composed and confident. The other passenger missing a suitcase stood up and joined him. "Hello, I'm Hans. Maybe you can get them to find my suitcase too?", he timidly suggested.

A new vehicle appeared at the foot of the stairs. Another red-faced airport employee ran up to confront Mike. This one looked and acted more senior, and was barely polite. "Mr Walsh, you must either sit down or leave this flight. Immediately." Mike looked straight at the man, and repeated his litany.

The employee waved his hands dismissively. "Do not worry Mr Walsh, we will send your suitcase on our next flight, or with another airline. You will have it tomorrow. Mike wasn't backing down. "You know as well as I do that the next flight is four days away, and no other reliable airline flies to Samaty. So find that suitcase now, or we will all leave the flight and you will face the consequences." After a brief staring competition, the employee turned away. Like his predecessor, he clattered down the stairs, talking urgently on his walkie-talkie.

Mike waited again. Several burly male passengers stood up and started shouting, in a colourful medley of languages. They began angrily pushing forward, intent on forcing Mike to sit down. The cabin crew formed a cordon around Mike and Hans. Alerted by the growing noise, the pilot and co-pilot emerged to join the fray, shouting explanations in their turn. What would happen next?

Yet another vehicle, festooned with flashing lights, appeared from the airport terminal at high speed. The back door opened. An impressively uniformed official climbed the stairs in an authoritative manner. He addressed Mike slowly, firmly and loudly. "I am Herr Weiss, duty manager of this airport. I understand your problem sir. But this flight must leave immediately. If we delay any longer, the pilots will not have enough permitted duty time to complete the flight. You must sit down immediately, or leave this aircraft."

Everyone around grew silent. Mike repeated his litany once more. Herr Weiss listened carefully. "Mr Walsh, I understand your position fully. But you must also understand mine. Something went wrong with our procedures. We are searching for your suitcase, and I am sure we will find it. Perhaps it is already on the plane. This

flight will refuel in Berlin, and we will check all the luggage again there. I give you my personal word that we will find your suitcase and ensure that your work in Surkistan will be successful. But this flight must leave now. Can we agree please?" He looked straight at Mike, and offered his hand. The onlookers held their breath.

After a short silence, Mike shook the offered hand. "Thank you, Herr Weiss, we can agree. I will sit down now." As Mike turned to find his seat, passengers, pilots and crew all rushed to their places. Before he could even buckle his safety belt, Mike was thrust back into his seat as the aircraft roared down the runway.

The seatbelt sign came off, and the usual routine of in-flight announcements and passenger movements began. Mike sat quietly, grateful just to relax. Someone tapped him on the shoulder. "Hello. I'm Brian Robinson, a mining engineer from Britain. After this flight, I travel to a remote mine to assay its ore deposits. So you had me worried there for a while! But just so you know, their so-called security procedures are a farce. I've got radioactive rock samples in lead cases in my luggage, and they didn't even spot them! So well done to challenge them."

They chatted for a while. Brian explained that the Flugluft flight designation was just nonsense. "They're using old aircraft and second-rate crews, that normally fly holidaymakers to beaches. The only thing business about "business class" is how much money they're making out of it. Lots of Westerners want to fly to Surkistan and the only alternative is Aeroflot!" He shook his head. "This refueling stop will be at Tempelhof, which is really just a cargo and summer charter airport these days."

Berlin Tempelhof Airport, one hour later

It was a short flight to Berlin. Cabin announcements explained this would be a brief refueling stop to ensure that, "in the remote chance of weather or technical problems at Samaty", the aircraft would have sufficient fuel to reach another airport. No-one should leave their seats.

The plane taxied to a stop well away from any building, in darkness broken only by many bright vehicle lights. Was this normal? The head steward quickly led Mike to the cabin door and opened it. Hans trailed along unobtrusively.

As stairs were pushed up, Mike looked out on hectic activity. Refueling was underway and the cargo doors were open. Suitcases were travelling down a portable belt to the runway to be manually arranged in rows by a large crew of workers. Beyond the immediate work cars and trucks, there was an outer cordon of four military-painted vehicles that looked like armoured cars. Well-armed security personnel surrounded the plane!

A woman in a dark green security uniform, with short hair and a pistol on her hip, climbed the stairs. Her eyes flicked over Mike and Hans. She brusquely confronted the steward. "Who's the important one?"

Well that was blunt, thought Mike. So much for customer care! "That's me. But this man also has the same problem. We need your help to find our luggage."

"Very well. You will both come with me please." She led them downstairs to the runway, now strewn with long rows of suitcases.

“Refueling has begun. Time is short. So, please find your suitcase. No talking please.” Mike and Hans followed her along the lines of luggage, and two guards fell into step behind them.

Hans quickly found his suitcase, and opened it for the guards. It passed inspection. With a grateful glance to Mike he re-boarded the plane.

Mike continued searching, to repeated disappointments. What initially looked like his luggage turned out every time to be one of the standard suitcases belonging to someone else. The first luggage to be checked was already being reloaded, and refueling appeared to be finished. Mike was wondering what to do next, when THERE IT WAS! His suitcase, with its distinctive ribbon! But which one was it? The case with the workshop materials, or the one with his personal items?

That was soon answered. The guards looked carefully through the papers and equipment, with Mike explaining each item.

“So, everything is now in order?”, inquired the security woman. Mike explained what had happened. “Now we know we have our equipment. So we can travel to Samaty for our work. I will worry about my personal suitcase later.”

Dismissing the guards, she visibly relaxed. “Now I understand, Herr Walsh. But you must also understand please. We received a message that we must unload the plane, and urgently find a special suitcase belonging to one of the passengers. No further details. So of course we were very concerned, and I am sorry to seem so unfriendly and suspicious.” They laughed a little, shook hands and parted.

By the time Mike was climbing the steps, the cargo doors were closing and the ring of vehicles was dispersing fast. As he reached the top, he heard a voice calling. It was the security woman, shouting from the bottom of the stairs. “Good news for you, Herr Walsh! Another message from Frankfurt. They find your other suitcase.” Mike waved his thanks, quickly briefed Bill, smiled at the other passengers (one and all staring hard at him!), and sank back into his seat with relief.

It was not a joyful flight to Samaty. A dull dinner was quickly disposed of. Like most passengers, Mike wanted to sleep, and tried hard to get comfortable in his rigid “business class” seat. But the pilot, doubtless trained to keep holidaymakers amused, insisted on describing over the intercom all that passed below. Even after the possibly interesting lights of Eastern Europe and European Russian cities had been left far to the west and nothing was visible below except a few pinpoints of light in the endless steppe, he talked on enthusiastically. It was a grumpy workshop team that disembarked in Samaty in the early hours of the morning after a cardboard breakfast.

And then the mood changed...

Samaty, Sunday morning

After 12 hours travel from Frankfurt, it was good to be on the ground. It was 2 AM local time. Staff from the host central bank bustled about, helping the project team clear passport and customs quickly. One man spoke enough English to explain that transport and comfortable hotel accommodation had been arranged for everyone. The problem of one team member’s missing visa was temporarily resolved, by not stamping his passport - the proper paperwork could be done later in town.

An excited and happy team piled on the bank's own bus. Thirty minutes later it pulled up before an imposing stone mansion, set in extensive and well-kept grounds. But the sign outside looked strange – Cyrillic characters followed by an exclamation point and what looked like a hazard symbol! Was this a hotel? What was going on?

They were met by the manager, who spoke excellent English. He explained that his “hotel” had actually been a luxurious sanatorium for exclusive use by senior Party officials under the old regime.

Snowflakes began falling. Exhaustion took hold. Bill quickly directed everyone to go straight to their rooms and get some sleep. Tomorrow (really today) was Sunday, so there would be plenty of time after breakfast to visit the conference venue and prepare to open the workshop on Monday.

Mike was led along long marble corridors, past impressive artworks and tapestries, to a luxurious room. Senior Party officials had certainly lived well! He set an alarm for 9 o'clock, climbed into bed and fell deeply asleep.

The alarm buzzed noisily. Mike sat up, feeling groggy. Where was he?

Opening the curtains revealed a magical scene. Heavy snow had fallen during the night! A thick white blanket covered the ground and topped elegant hedges, trees and fountains. Not a soul could be seen outside.

Or inside either. With no signs anywhere, it took Mike several attempts to trace his way back to reception. The marble corridors echoed loudly. His “Alice in Wonderland” feeling was heightened by passing through several large open areas populated by gymnastic apparatus or human-sized chess boards. It was a relief to locate a normal-seeming breakfast buffet and rejoin his comrades.

Bill reminded everyone of what came next. “The bank's bus will be here at 11. Mike, Simon and James will meet the interpreters, travel to the conference centre, and check everything out. The rest of us can stay here and relax.”

But it was almost 12 before the bus rolled up, without the interpreters. Their Aeroflot flight had apparently been diverted – with good luck, they would arrive tonight. And the trip to the conference centre in Samaty city centre was far from smooth. The narrow potholed road was slippery with mud and crowded with antiquated motor vehicles, horse-drawn carts and pedestrians. The bank's driver, who spoke a little English, explained grimly that “Traffic good today! Much more bad tomorrow!”.

90 minutes later, they arrived at the 18-story hotel that housed the conference centre on its top floor. The manager proudly toured the facilities. Everything looked fine: a large tabled audience hall for participants, a theatre seating area for observers, projection facilities, microphones, speakers, translation booths, adjoining restaurant and cafeteria. All the FSU participants had rooms booked at the hotel and many had already arrived. But the interpreters were now almost a day late.

They regrouped privately. James spoke first. “The facilities are fine. But there is no way our group can come in here on that bus every day. We need to move everyone to rooms here, so we don't need transport.” Mike agreed. “Let's see what's

possible....”

Communicating through an unskilled local interpreter wasn't easy, but the hotel manager glowed when he learned that he could gain many new customers. Then he looked crafty, and spoke rapidly to the interpreter. “Okay, he has rooms. But is necessary to pay in US dollars. And he does not have many good rooms, mostly just small rooms for local people.”

Tense negotiations followed. The final offer comprised just two “suites” and three “deluxe” rooms. Everyone else would have to take “standard” rooms. Prices were extortionate, even after bargaining. And payment would need to be made in US dollars, in cash and in advance.

Inspection of the rooms was discouraging. Amenities were minimal, beds were Soviet standard, and the cleaner's idea of cleaning was to spread dirty water around with a mop (even under observation by prospective guests!). The only advantage the “deluxe” rooms offered was more space. The “suites” each had an additional meeting room, and were located on the seventh floor – the only floor helpfully serviced by both the odd-number and even-number lifts.

They conferred again. Simon summed up the situation. “Yes, it's ugly. But what choice do we have? Either we move in here or the workshop is likely to fall over. And we can say we're getting alongside the participants! What's the next problem?”

That solved itself. A trio of tired interpreters arrived, still carrying their suitcases. Sergei, Andrei and Pavel were tired but jubilant. “Aeroflot cancelled the direct flight, so we found another route. We stayed overnight in a hangar at Zirkutka mining town. No heating and VERY cold! So no problems, just business as usual with Aeroflot!” With their expert help, all the remaining logistic issues were resolved including a “volume discount” on the rooms.

Back at the sanatorium, it wasn't hard to persuade Bill that moving to the hotel was essential. He gathered the full group and overrode questions and opposition. “Our priority is getting the job done, not personal comfort. We'll allocate the rooms for that. Mike will need one suite, and the interpreters can share the other one. Simon, James and I get the deluxe rooms. The rest of you will have to make do with standard rooms. No-one stays here. Sorry, but that's how it's going to be. And remember my briefing in Frankfurt! There will be local people around, so stay away from compromising situations, keep strangers out of your room, and don't talk politics with anyone you don't know....”

A surprised hush descended. Bill was the boss, but he was taking a downgrade – that just didn't happen in the hierarchical world of Washington bureaucracy. How could anyone argue after that? And the interpreters were not only surprised but delighted – giving them the best accommodation wouldn't have happened in the Soviet world either!

Sunday evening was spent packing, travelling, checking in, unpacking, and preparing the conference centre and materials. Checking in was laborious, especially for the person with the missing visa. Payment at a separate desk was even worse. For unexplained reasons, the hotel could only accept a limited amount of foreign currency each day. Sergei negotiated a compromise whereby everyone could check

into their rooms now and pay their bills one at a time over the next few days.

Not having his suitcase made unpacking easy for Mike! By 11 PM, he was hosting a bottle of local vodka with Simon, James and the interpreters. Everyone had arrived or was expected by the scheduled start time. So far so good!

Simon loaned Mike an expensive suit and a tie. Everyone laughed at the resulting misfit – short sleeves, short legs and tight shoulders. All was now ready for the next day, and the others left. Time for sleep...

But the room was too hot. It must be 30⁰ in here! Mike got up again and looked for the heating controls. There weren't any, either on the very hot radiator or on the wall. Puzzled at first, Mike remembered the hotel manager saying that the rooms would be very comfortable and warm, because the hotel was part of a district heating scheme. So of course there was no heating control, even at reception. It was all or nothing!

Mike opened the window to let in some cooler air. Not far away, the large uninsulated pipes of the district heating scheme ran alongside the hotel and down the street. They literally steamed copious amounts of heat into the sub-zero night air. What a waste! And leaving his window open would add to that. Well, that's what you get when you don't price things properly, Mike mused. As the room temperature grew more comfortable, he drifted into deep sleep.

Monday

Activity kicked off again after an early breakfast. A large group from the host central bank arrived to help with photocopying and other preparations. They were led by Alexei, who spoke excellent English and introduced himself as "Head of Protocol". He flourished a letter of authorisation signed by the bank's president. "Of course, you will need me as your local liaison person. I will personally arrange everything you need, even the visa. My fee is 100 US dollars each day, in cash please – very good value!"

That hadn't been part of the agreed arrangements! But Mike was in no mood to argue, especially in a poorly-fitting borrowed suit.

One delegation, the two participants from Armenia, was still missing. At least that postponed a tricky diplomatic problem – them being technically at war with the participants from Azerbaijan! Time to begin...

Bill and the host central bank's president opened proceedings with an hour of official greetings, welcomes and thanks. Mike watched the impressive interpreters as they simultaneously translated back and forth between English and Russian from their technical booth, working in 20-minute shifts with their output flowing through to the headphones everyone was wearing. Mike batted next, outlining the program and logistics for the week. Then James gave the first technical session – an overview of the issues that would be discussed.

The buffet lunch was a little quiet. But participants began to introduce themselves to each other and the overall mood was strongly positive. Before leaving, the bank's president asked whether he could send 20 extra staff along to watch, a new group each half-day. Mike quickly agreed. Why not, they had plenty of room in the area set aside for observers.

The afternoon session - fundamental accounting concepts - started well, but soon grew subdued. Participants looked at one another quizzically. A few muttered. Despite all the efforts back at headquarters, something was still being lost in translation. The presenter broke off his commonsense explanation of how business organisations calculated and tried to maximise profit ("profit" had been simply translated into the corresponding Soviet term of "economic surplus"). And how that was a good accountant's main task. "Before we proceed further, are there any questions?"

A hand slowly went up for a microphone. That participant spoke with an effort, in heavily accented and broken English. "Why you want maximise surplus?"

Nonplussed, the presenter explained that every business organisation naturally wanted to maximise profit. The participant who had spoken, and others, firmly shook their heads. Several spoke out: "Nyet!". The atmosphere was tense! What had gone wrong?

Another participant asked for the microphone, and spoke forcefully in Russian. Others vigorously nodded, or laughed. The interpreter smiled as he translated: "You must understand please. What is natural in your system was not natural for us. In our accounting, to make negative surplus was dangerous, could lead to problems and punishment. But to make positive surplus was foolish – the central authorities would take it away. The goal for our accounting was to make surplus equal zero. So for the future, maybe we must change our goal?"

The tension broke in laughter all around. James took over for a few minutes, explaining there would be other translation problems and misunderstandings. This was a workshop, not a lecture to listen to in silence! It was vital that participants ask questions and challenge the speaker. Later in the week, participants would work in small groups on practical problems. Were there any other questions on what had been presented so far?

Yes, there were. The presentation became a question-and-answer session, and overran. So did the next one, and the day ended over an hour late. But no-one seemed to mind. A lively buzz continued over the opening dinner.

Andrei brought more good news to the top table where Bill and Mike sat with the bank's president and Alexei. "The Armenians arrive in an hour. Aeroflot stopped flying over Azerbaijan because of the war. So that delegation came the long way around through Turkey and Moscow. But they can study today's papers overnight. And the Azeris are willing to work with them "strictly on professional matters".

Georgian wine and Russian vodka flowed freely. As Alexei's English pronunciation became slurred, his manner shifted from urbane to ugly. By body language and tone of voice, he treated the bank's president more like a subordinate than his boss. Alexei turned to Mike. "Okay, Meesterr Wellish, you will give me my fee tomorrow."

Mike didn't like Alexei's bullying manner. There was something really unwholesome about the guy, like a handsome but sadistic villain in a spy movie. It was easy to imagine him torturing people in a cellar. Mike decided to stand firm. "Sure Alexei, just bring my colleague's passport with the correct entry visa, as you promised."

Alexei's accent grew thicker. "I am beezy tomorrow, with manny important meetings. I haff no time to go to passport office. You pay me tomorrow. I will bring visa next day."

This time Mike made sure Bill could overhear. "No Alexei, I am sorry. I must follow our rules. We can pay only for completed services. When you bring the visa, then I can pay you. If you are too busy tomorrow, then bring me the visa on Wednesday. I must go to the airport then, and you can help me with my business there."

Alexei bristled, belligerently. "Meesterr Wellish, you may be very big man at home. But not here." After a hard stare and a curt phrase in Russian to the bank's president, he left.

Bill let the drinks continue a while longer, then made a short speech and exchanged toasts with the bank's president. He reminded everyone that we would start early the next morning, with much hard work to come. That gave the non-FSU participants their cue to make excuses and go to bed, knowing the others were likely to carry on for quite a time. A quick debrief with Simon and James in his suite confirmed to Mike that everything was going well, including preparations for tomorrow. He set the alarm and slept like a log...

Tuesday

Day Two began smoothly. Mike opened the proceedings with a short introduction. The first session on accounting for currency went down well. After a coffee break, the second session on valuing foreign reserves presented that technical detail effectively. The logistics around equipment and materials proceeded smoothly, and the interpreters continued their impressive work. The group of 20 observers changed quietly at coffee break. Lunch ran smoothly too. Mike felt able to leave James and Simon to monitor the conference sessions so he could check on other matters.

While waiting for the lift to go downstairs, Mike realised that they hadn't checked the emergency arrangements. There were a lot of people on the top floor! What if a fire started? It would be good to walk down the fire stairs and check how that worked.

It didn't. The emergency exits in both corners were firmly chained and padlocked. Mike went back into the conference and called over the interpreter on the rest shift. "We need to get those exits opened, just in case." Pavel laughed softly and shook his head. "Mike, that is not possible. The manager locks the doors to control who comes here. That is normal. If he did not do that, he would have many crimes and big trouble from the government. So if there is a fire, we go down in the lifts or we burn." Mike opened his mouth to protest, stopped, and shut it again. "Okay thanks Pavel, keep up the good work." So much for emergency management!

The lift grumpily bumped downstairs. Sue, one of the mission secretaries, was busy at hotel reception. Another was waiting not far away. "What's going on?" asked Mike. Sue explained that the two of them were taking turns to individually check in those team members who were still not formally registered and paid for. "Mike, I'm not sure what's going on here. Every time we finish checking someone in and pay over the US dollars, they take the money away and close the counter for an hour or even longer. At this rate we won't finish checking in until tomorrow, or maybe even Thursday!"

Mike recalled the crafty demeanour of the hotel manager, and his insistence on cash

payments. “They’re probably working some scam around converting the money. Don’t worry Sue. Just stick with it and keep the process going.”

He stepped out of the hotel to escape the clouds of harsh cigarette smoke drifting around the lobby. It was freezing, but a queue of at least 50 people waited patiently outside. One of them, who had an air of importance, spotted Mike and approached him politely. “Greetings sir. My name is Pyotr Alexandrovitz Akhmetov. I am local journalist. I speak some English. May I interview you please?”

Mike thought for a moment. Sure, why not? Just stay away from controversial topics. “Okay, we can do that inside. But what are all these people waiting for?” Pyotr seemed surprised. “Of course, they wait to go in to your workshop and learn about business. Each two hours, 20 new people can listen. Anyone interested can come here and wait for turn. It was on radio yesterday. You arrange for that, yes?”

Mike realised that the nature of the workshop and the invitation to send central bank staff along had both been understood too widely! But never mind, it couldn’t do any harm. After a short interview where he kept the focus on workshop personalities and logistics, and away from economics or politics, Mike headed back to the conference.

Simon met him outside. “Still going great in there Mike, nothing to worry about. Let’s go back to my room and take a break – I brought some good coffee along in my luggage. And a water heater!” After a long wait for an elevator, they reached Simon’s floor. Walking to his “deluxe” room at the end of the corridor, they passed the by-now-familiar standard characters – the matronly lady in her small cubicle who organised that floor’s service, and the two muscular men in the first room who played cards continually while monitoring (and doubtless reporting) everyone’s movements.

Simon was still making the coffee when a knock came. He answered the door, and called Mike over. “What do you reckon we should do?” Two attractive young women stood outside, smiling and gesturing that they would like to come in. “Just joking Mike. Remember our briefing! But you have to admire the response time.” Simon spoke a few polite words in Russian, and firmly closed the door.

The rest of Tuesday proceeded smoothly on all fronts. A polite note even arrived from Alexei, to explain that there were delays with the visa but he would bring it tomorrow morning and help Mike at the airport. The day ended with casual drinks and dinner in small groups, and an early night (for the non-FSU personnel at least)...

Wednesday

Mike woke with a start from deep sleep. Who was banging at the door, and why? What time was it? 3 AM! He cautiously opened the door a crack. It was all three interpreters, looking disheveled but fully dressed. And carrying their luggage!

“Mike, please help. They throw us out of our room for not paying the bill. The security guards say we are ‘unauthorised, so we must leave the hotel or be arrested!’”

Mike quickly dressed and made his way downstairs. Sure enough, the night manager was adamant. Their room was not paid for, so they must leave. Mike wearily explained the problems with checking in. Could he make an unofficial payment now and sort things out in the morning? Well, that was not strictly correct, but (eventually, after payment of a small personal “bonus”) was agreed to be okay.

The interpreters were still angry. “Mike, thank you for helping. They only do this to us because we are not important foreigners like you. They check us in so slowly to not reduce the black-market price for US dollars by changing too much. And most of the “bonus” you paid will go to local officials, not the manager, or else they arrest him for records out of order.”

Mike had barely got back to sleep when the alarm rang. It was time to get up and go to the airport. He felt cheerful though. It would be great to get his luggage back, to have a choice of garments and a few more creature comforts.

The bank’s bus and driver arrived on time. But no Alexei. After futile enquiries, Mike enlisted the hotel’s local interpreter and set off. The bus rattled its way to the airport, and they located the Flugluft office. Mike was shown into an office where an energetic middle-aged lady sat at a desk covered with loosely arranged papers. Parcels and equipment filled the room. Thick and harsh cigarette smoke filled the air.

Mike introduced himself and began to explain his problem through the interpreter. The lady interrupted. “Mr Walsh, my name is Mrs Mayovna. I can speak English with you.” She quickly understood Mike’s need. “Okay, the flight arrived a few hours ago. I will locate your suitcase. Please wait here.”

Mike observed busy comings and goings as importers, exporters and Flugluft staff delivered and collected papers and parcels. Languages varied, but he could understand snatches of German, Russian, French and English amongst the stranger-sounding local tongues. At one point, two large men emerged out of the tobacco smoke with the most enormous and frightening dogs he had ever seen, held on tight leashes. The interpreter explained they were “wolfhounds” being sent to “security agencies”. Mike thought it best not to enquire further....

Mrs Mayovna re-entered the office, empty-handed. “I am very sorry Mr Walsh. Your suitcase did not arrive. And we have no record for such a delivery. Maybe it will be on the next flight on Sunday, yes?”

The disappointment was too great. Mike exploded, stood up, and began shouting. Mrs Mayovna interrupted him. “Mr Walsh, you cannot speak to me like that in public. Wait one moment please!” Mike subsided and sat down again while Mrs Mayovna ushered the interpreter from the office and shut the door. “One thing more before we talk.” She opened a cupboard at the back wall, and then a small safe inside. Withdrawing two cans of German beer, she opened both, placed one in front of Mike, and sat down with the other. “First we toast, then we drink, then we talk.”

Anger gave way to laughter as Mike realised the absurdity of the situation. A whole new meaning for “talking things out over a beer”! Listening to the story of the Flugluft flight, Herr Weiss and the lost suitcase, Mrs Mayovna nodded sympathetically. “Mr Walsh, now I understand why you are angry. Flugluft is not operating properly here yet. It is embarrassing for me. I will fix it.” She explained a little of her career, which had focused on managing start-up destinations like this. “And also close-down destinations, Mr Walsh, when we leave countries that become too dangerous. In Africa and Middle East.”

Before the beer was finished, next steps were in action. Mrs Mayovna called in a

secretary and dictated a telex to be sent to Frankfurt. She showed it to Mike. Its key message was clear. "We have broken a promise to our client. Hold that suitcase in Frankfurt for him to collect on Sunday after the return flight. DO NOT SEND IT TO SAMATY." They parted as firm friends.

A cheerful core group assembled for a private dinner that evening – just Mike, James, Simon and the three interpreters. Everything was going great, and everyone felt able to relax. Mike told them about his adventures at the airport, and how Simon would just have to wait a bit longer for return of his suit.

Until now Sergei had been the most reserved of the trio, clearly resenting the downfall of the Soviet system and the fact that he could make more money each day interpreting for foreigners than he made each month as a senior government official. He had even started referring to Mike as "Mr Capitalist". But after a few drinks, Sergei opened up. He recounted fascinating stories from his time as interpreter at the United Nations and at nuclear arms talks. "And you know what – all those CIA reports about our military strength that you relied on were rubbish. Our whole economic system was falling apart. Even though we put maximum resources into our military technology and systems, they became unreliable too."

By ten o'clock, no-one was sober. As they left the restaurant, Sergei had another dig at Mike. "So you see, Mr Capitalist, maybe we lost, but we fooled you for a long time." A thought struck Mike. "Sergei, how can you call me a capitalist? You are talking to a man who does not even own the clothes he stands up in!" They both began to giggle hysterically. Sergei actually fell to the floor and rolled around laughing for several minutes. Everyone agreed it had been a great evening.

Back in his room, Mike decided to draw a bath and soak for a while before going to bed. Okay, the water was a bit rust-coloured, but so what? He had the time, and he was tired of that forceful shower making a mess everywhere (no curtain, just rings). Leaning a little unsteadily over the bath, still in Simon's suit, he turned the taps on...

And almost fell in! Unexpected jets of water from the shower pounded on Mike's back. By the time he found the control to switch water to the bath taps, Mike was thoroughly drenched. So was Simon's suit. Nothing to do but hang it up for the night, go to bed and hope for the best.

Thursday

Hope wasn't enough. In the cold light of morning, Simon's suit was a write-off. Mike was running late. He dressed in sweater and jeans and went straight to the workshop for his daily opening overview of progress.

Looking around the conference hall as he spoke, Mike noticed a quizzical look on Simon's face. Why wasn't Mike wearing a suit like everyone else? And where was the suit he had loaned? Embarrassing explanations would have to be made....

Mike began to grin. Confident now that the interpreters had the skill to translate humour, perhaps he could turn problem into opportunity. "As many of you know, my personal luggage failed to arrive on Sunday. And so each day I have stood before you in a suit borrowed from Simon. But today is different." He recounted last night's exchange with Sergei and what had happened in his hotel bathroom. "And now I can only say that Simon will never see his suit again. But I promise to pay compensation!"

The audience, even Simon himself, enjoyed the story – a great start to the day.

The rest went well too. The week was almost done. Everyone could now safely dive into the duty-free liquor they had brought in. The evening's plan was that each of the eight workshop presenters would bring a bottle – ideally their iconic national tippie – and meet in James' room to toast success.

The party duly assembled. Each new arrival tipped the floor supervisor to wink at breaching the “no outside alcohol in the room” hotel rule, and nodded to the security men playing their endless card game (by now, they nodded back!). Toasting proceeded through German beer, French champagne, Irish whiskey, Austrian schnapps, Scandinavian aquavit and several different local vodkas. And once all those bottles were open, why not continue and finish them?

Mike remembered the rest of the evening only as intermittent episodes. Goodwill prevailed at first. Stories and jokes got funnier as alcohol levels climbed. Then a confrontation erupted. One presenter began making obnoxiously racist comments, revealing a dark side to his personal politics. Another objected angrily and told him to shut up. Others quickly employed diversionary tactics to stop the two protagonists coming to blows, but the team glow had now faded. The party faded out into lengthy bilateral conversations, with individuals exiting one by one as the bottles emptied.

James had asked for a private word after the others left, so Mike duly lingered. He had a creative conversation with Patrick, as they worked out a scheme to help Mike uncover the fraud he suspected at one central bank. Patrick would pose as a computer software expert and trace transactions that were not being reported. Then Mike would confront the culprits. An exciting adventure! Patrick was the first speaker tomorrow and wanted to leave, so they agreed to talk further tomorrow.

Finally the door closed once more. Mike and James were (figuratively) the last men standing. “What did you want to talk about, James?”, Mike enquired. “Can it wait ‘til morning? I’m stuffed!” James looked frosty. “No it can’t Mike. In the morning we need to work together, and we will. But first I want to tell you honestly what I think about your stunt at Frankfurt. What a pathetic display of egotism that was!”

Mike blinked a few times. “What are you talking about, James?”

“Holding up the plane like that. You put yourself ahead of all those other people. Who knows what they needed to do? Maybe someone was going to see their dying mother, and never got there because you made the plane so late. What a jerk!”

Mike blinked again. “James, have you got the story straight? I didn’t hold up the plane for me. I held it for the sake of our work. Yes, I decided that was more important than anything else. But as soon as I knew we had our equipment, I backed off. And I’ve been living in one set of clothes all week as a result.”

James didn’t soften. “So what gives you the right to make decisions like that - what’s important and what’s not? Who do you think you are anyway?”

They stared at each other for a few moments. Mike spoke first. “James, I don’t know what this is about. But I’m going to end this conversation and go back to my room.”

James glared at him. “Fine. Go ahead. I’ve got no more to say anyway, and we need to keep working together. But I’m glad I told you what I think.”

Mike left without another word. What was that all about? Surely someone had to make the tough calls. Or was he really an arrogant jerk? Mike decided to forget all about it – James probably would too. Anyway there was lots to do tomorrow...

Stumbling into his room, Mike checked the time – 6 AM! In his current state, setting an alarm might not do much good. Okay, try something else. He stared at his watch and visualised the hands showing 8.45 – that would give him as much sleep as possible, leaving just 15 minutes to get to the conference room. And he wasn’t scheduled to speak until 10.30.

Friday

Mike woke dazedly after what seemed like a long time. Panicked, he looked at his watch. No worries there – the hands showed only 8.15. Still time to doze...

Mike woke slowly from his doze, and languidly checked his watch. It showed 9.10! He jumped up, pulled on clothes and dashed to the conference room. Bill was at the entrance, looking anxious. “Mike, what’s going on? None of our speakers are here! The audience is getting restless. Remember we told them to be punctual. And where have you been until now?”

Mike held up a hand. “Sorry Bill, I’ll explain later. I’ll go in and kick things off. You go wake up Patrick – he’s meant to lead off. I’ll waffle until he gets here.”

Mike entered the conference room, where there was indeed a negative buzz. Ignoring skeptical glances, he hustled to the front and began energetically recapping the past few days and introducing today’s program. An interpreter swung into action, and the audience politely settled down.

Fifteen minutes later, Mike had run out of things to say. And none of the team had arrived to help! Blissfully, the main door opened. Patrick entered. Smiling, he came to the lectern. Mike gratefully handed over. Patrick quickly got into his stride, excusing his lateness to “update some of my technical examples”.

The rest of this final day proceeded smoothly enough, which was just as well – Mike didn’t feel capable of coping with much else. At 4.30, he formally closed the seminar and announced arrangements for tonight’s farewell dinner. Mike was about to leave the platform when James and Simon came running down the aisle, carrying a large bucket. “That’s for ruining my suit!”, Simon shouted as they threw the contents over a flinching Mike. But it was only shredded paper, not the drenching he expected. The audience erupted, bringing the workshop to a jovial conclusion.

The closing dinner was at a special location – the banquet and reception hall of Surkistan’s last “General Secretary” (known ironically to the locals as the “People’s Palace”). Mike, still feeling unwell, sat next to Patrick on the bus. “Patrick, thank God you arrived when you did this morning. I was stuffed! How did you manage to look so fresh and speak so well?”

Patrick responded thoughtfully. “I don’t really know. Actually I was out of it too. Bill got the floor lady to open my room door and they more or less roused me from a

coma. When I walked in, I could hardly see. So I mostly followed your voice to the platform, and somehow went on autopilot from there. A miracle I guess....”

Mike had only a hazy recollection of their party conversation. “Patrick, I don’t remember the details of our undercover plan. Do you?” Patrick shook his head. “No. I enjoyed talking about the idea last night, but really I’m too old for that sort of game. Let’s just forget the idea, shall we?” Mike didn’t argue – in the cold light of day, the plan did seem a bit unlikely. And he was feeling worse and worse...

The bus halted outside an impressive building, built in Soviet brutalist style but with a gleaming gilded façade. The interior was no less impressive – wall surfaces were brightly coloured mineral blocks, precious metals outlined huge doors and windows, and massive blown-glass chandeliers of sparkled brightly. Even the huge cloakroom (essential for the Surkistan winter) was luxuriously furnished with carved wooden panels and velvet chairs.

Soon everyone was seated in large chairs at a large table set with elegant plates, ornate silverware and fine glassware. A squadron of waiters stood ready.

But first, speeches and toasting! Bill and the bank president exchanged compliments. The first two rounds of Georgian champagne were downed. Sergei quietly explained to Mike that it was now his duty to lead the food service with the first traditional dish. He must carve off a few choice pieces and distribute them to others in a humorous way. “Mike, I can see you are not feeling good. But after that you can relax, and even leave before the end if you want”.

Two waiters set a large platter with a lid in front of Mike. One grandly whisked the lid away. Mike looked down. A huge boiled sheep’s head, with upturned eyes, looked glassily at him!

Mike’s gorge rose. For quite a few seconds, he struggled to contain it. Finally mastering his digestive system, Mike looked out at the audience and wondered how to begin. Would his humour translate well? What if he insulted someone? His gaze fell on one of the female participants who had been unusually vocal and outspoken. Okay, he thought, let’s go full steam ahead – damn the torpedoes.

“Firstly, I wish to give to Mrs Debrovna part of the lips, to thank her for speaking up to correct our mistakes.” Mike cut a piece off the sheep’s grim mouth, which a waiter ceremoniously transferred to a plate and took over to her. Everyone laughed uproariously. Encouraged, Mike pressed on. “Now it is the turn of our presenters. To you Pascal, who received the most correction, I give an ear.” Mike carved off and delivered one of the ears, to renewed laughter.

Mike looked down at the mutilated head, and his gorge rose again. No way could he do anything with those eyes! Coming to his rescue, Sergei passed the platter along and signaled for the waiters to begin. Mike gratefully sank back into his chair. He toyed with the numerous courses, avoided drinking much, and sneaked out for an early night. Their workshop had been successful on all counts, and it really was time to relax.

Saturday

Breakfast spanned many fond farewells as the FSU participants progressively left for the airport. Then the workshop team went on a city tour organised by their hosts. Surkistan's capital was a study in contrasts. Massive public buildings, often empty and sometimes not even finished, towered over small shabby concrete houses and even a few traditional wood-and-earth dwellings. Potholes and water leaks abounded on roads and pavements.

Shops had many empty shelves, and mostly lacked basic food, clothing and furniture. But luxury items - colourful hand-knotted rugs, large tins of caviar and top-quality Cuban cigars – were plentiful and also (in hard currency at the official exchange rate) astonishingly cheap. So were exotic furs like silver fox and others no-one had even heard of. Shopping became a highlight of the tour, with everyone finding a bargain.

The excursion ended with a trip to the nearby mountains and a large outdoor ice-skating rink. The standard was remarkable! One old man wearing only a wispy beard and a loincloth zoomed phenomenally around the rink, often pulling others along to accelerate them. In the bright sunshine, some of them rented skates and joined in.

Others climbed seemingly endless steps to a lookout point. It was thirsty work! Fortunately a local man was selling soft drinks at the top for 200 rubles, and they happily bought some. But then one of the interpreters angrily drove him away, and explained why. "Proper price is 60 rubles, not 200. I will report him. Team members tried to talk him out of it. "Come on, Pavel. He carried those drinks all the way up here – he deserves a reward for that." Muttering, Pavel eventually conceded

A cheerful group met back at the hotel to enjoy dinner and pack for their dawn departure. The only awkward moment came when Alexei arrived. "Hello Mister Walsh. I am here for my payment for services please." Mike had almost forgotten about Alexei. And his services had been non-existent anyway. But let bygones be bygones. "Certainly Alexei. You have the visa of course, as you promised me."

Alexei bristled. "No I do not. I have been too busy. And you are leaving tomorrow, so your colleague does not need this visa."

Mike decided to insist. "Alexei, we are leaving very early tomorrow. Maybe my colleague will have trouble at the airport, if he tries to leave Surkistan with no stamp to show entry. So you must bring me the visa, and then I will pay you."

Alexei was furious. "Today is Saturday. Tomorrow is Sunday. Foreign Ministry is not open. I cannot obtain this visa!"

Mike held his ground. "Alexei, you had all week to get the visa, but you did not. But alright, come to the airport tomorrow morning to make sure we have no trouble about this, and then I will pay you." Grumbling and reluctant, Alexei agreed.

Sunday

It was still dark when they arrived at the airport. Mike had two remaining tasks: to check with Mrs Mayovna that his luggage had not arrived on the incoming aircraft they would soon leave on, and to pay off Alexei (if he showed up).

Alexei did. For once, he was prompt and professional. He authoritatively explained to the official at the immigration counter why one team member had no visa, and easily solved the resulting bureaucratic problem. “Mr Walsh, your colleague was never officially here, so he will receive no exit stamp. Immigration in Germany will not care.” He pointed ahead. “See - already he is through immigration and in the waiting room. So everything is fine.”

“That’s great Alexei. Here is your payment for services, as agreed. Please sign the receipt.” Alexei counted the money twice, signed the receipt with a flourish, and stalked away. One task done!

Mrs Mayovna was not in her office. A staff member explained in limited English that she was still “checking the shipments” and would come onto the plane to see Mike.

Dawn broke as they boarded. The oilskin-clad men hosing down the engines and fuselage with steam worried Mike, until a cheerful voice from behind called out “Don’t worry Mike. It’s just standard procedure to prevent ice forming.” It was Brian Robinson, the mining engineer, also heading for home.

Mike sat down in his allocated seat. Brian was just across the aisle, and they chatted. Just when Mike was getting nervous about his luggage, Mrs Mayovna appeared at the cabin door and came over to him. Brian’s face fell into an “Oh no, not again!” expression as she approached! What was wrong this time?

Mrs Mayovna beamed. “Hello Mr Walsh. I come in person to tell you that I sent several messages and your suitcase will be waiting for you in Frankfurt. Please, thank you for flying Flugluft and have a safe trip!”

Mike settled into the long daytime flight, tired but happy. He dozed much of the way.

Frankfurt Airport again

The team disembarked and broke up with handshakes and hugs. Individuals headed towards their various destinations. Mike walked to the Flugluft desk alone, to recover his missing suitcase before heading for the hotel. A message awaited. “Mr Walsh, there is someone here to meet you. Please wait a moment while I call him.”

Mike was puzzled, but in no rush. He sat down with a newspaper. A few minutes later, he looked up to find Herr Weiss standing above him. Perhaps he would get some special treatment! He stood up and shook hands.

Herr Weiss mopped his brow, and looked embarrassed. “Mr Walsh, I am sorry. We have something difficult to talk about. Please come with me to my office, and I will explain there in private.” He looked so upset that Mike grew alarmed. Had there been an accident back home? Or what?

Seated in his office, Herr Weiss relaxed a little. “Mr Walsh, there is no easy way to say this. So I will be blunt. Your missing suitcase is not here – it is in Samaty. We made another mistake. I can only offer my most deep apologies.”

Before Mike could say anything, Herr Weiss held up his hand. “Please, I know what you will say. Mrs Mayovna took extra care to prevent this problem. We received her

messages and we gave clear instructions. But somehow things went wrong.”

Mike didn't know whether to get mad or laugh. No point taking it out on Herr Weiss! He compromised on dismay and disappointment. Of course, Herr Weiss explained, the airline would pay for his hotel tonight, pay full compensation for inconvenience, and bring the suitcase to him in Washington as soon as possible. Relieved at Mike's philosophical attitude about his failed promise, Herr Weiss made another: “Mr Walsh, I will personally receive and transfer your suitcase as soon as it arrives. And I will ensure that the manager of our Washington office personally delivers it to you.” They parted with another handshake.

Washington DC, one month later

That Flugluft manager's first visit, two days after Mike's return home, had not been fun. Instead of Mike's suitcase - which had somehow been wrongly sent to Rio de Janeiro! - the manager brought a cheque for 600 US dollars. He explained that under international treaties that was the maximum compensation Flugluft could pay for lost luggage. And he was already arranging for the retrieval of the suitcase! He scurried away before Mike could say very much.

But set against the overall impact of the workshop, that disappointment was minor. Enthusiastic congratulations and gratitude had poured into headquarters from the workshop participants and from their institutions. It was clear that the friendly relationships that had been created would be both immediate and continuing value. So their project had been hugely successful, and the sceptics had been discredited. A decree was quickly issued that similar “workshops” in similar places would be held for other topics, replacing the Vienna program of “seminars” and “courses”.

Two weeks later, the Flugluft manager had come back. Still no suitcase! He explained, amid much groveling. Yes, the suitcase had arrived in Washington. But somehow it was sent back to Frankfurt and then to Samaty. And it was probably still there. Flugluft hoped Mike and Simon would understand the extraordinary nature of this occurrence, and that they and their colleagues would continue to patronise the airline. Simon pointed out that the compensation had barely covered the cost of his suit and Mike curtly ended the discussion.

Two further weeks on, Mike now awaited a third visit. He wasn't expecting his suitcase – and he no longer cared very much anyway. But the Flugluft manager knocked loudly and bounced in through the open office door. With a flourish, he dragged in the long-lost suitcase!

Together they examined the many labels attached to the suitcase, and the pile of paperwork that documented its odyssey. Ah well, Mike thought to himself, success at last. The manager was cheerful. “Mr Walsh, I assure you that no one at Flugluft has seen such a situation before. It has become a story to use in our training – we call it the “Flying Dutchman” suitcase. You know, like in Wagner?”

He soon bustled away. Mike bent down to open the suitcase. Yes, it was still locked. And yes, his key opened it. And yes, everything inside looked exactly as packed. As far as he could see, nothing was missing or disturbed. The suit at the bottom of the case was still carefully folded.

But there was still one thing to check. Was the stash of US dollars in the suit pocket

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still there? Mike guessed not. Sure enough, it was gone – a minor personal price to pay for steppe-ing outside the boundaries...