

Lena's Dilemma

Kryvyi Rih in Ukraine, where Lena was born, went to school, and got her first job, is an industrial town that has the odd distinction of being the longest in Europe. It measures 126 kilometers from north to south along minable ore deposits, but only 20 kilometers in width from east to west. The ores are iron and brown coal, with a generous sprinkling of quartzites. They can be found on the surface but also buried deep below the surface, giving rise to both strip mining and deep mining on one hand, and to steel production on the other, with serious leftovers in the form of pollution everywhere. The minerals can also be found in the waters that flow in the Inhulets and Saksahan rivers that join at the southern end of the town, and, according to the town promotional material, giving those waters special medicinal powers. However, on the whole, there is substantial degradation of the environment which was reported in a government study from the Kherson Oblast in 1998 (report #19) and which referred to the situation as 'ecological stress'. The report was not widely circulated among the population who did not need to read about it to see for themselves the damages of pollution and leaching brought about by the extensive mining and manufacturing. But those damages did not strike Lena as controllable until she came to the United States.

Lena came to Columbus in Ohio in March 2007 to be an 'au pair' to neighbors of her cousin Angela who had married an American and had emigrated from Lviv to Columbus in 2000. Lena was twenty-four and she committed herself to a stay of two years. She had never travelled outside Ukraine and, for her, the change was momentous for it was not only a matter of geography but also of culture and technology, neither of which she could have or did anticipate. Her preparations for her stay, careful though they were, did not take those factors into account, but centered on what she knew would be expected of her.

Her duties as an au pair were to take care of two children, Nels and Anna Carlson, aged 4 and 2, and to do some light housework. Of her skills with young children she was very confident: she had spent over six years as Activities Coordinator for a Youth Center in Kryvyi Rih teaching singing, dancing, and all sorts of crafts to preschoolers. Her charges at the Center were well taken care of, clean, well-fed, loved, encouraged, and rewarded. She paid attention to their fears and to their strengths. It had been a part-time job while she attended Business School from 2001 to 2005 but, afterwards, it turned into full time occupation in which she found completed satisfaction as the little ones repaid her with their trust,

whole-heartedly, as only children can. And as to house cleaning, Lena figured out from the American television shows she had seen that it would be so much easier than the manual tasks she performed at home that she did not give it a second thought.

Basically, the main thrust of her preparation consisted of learning English. She started her lessons in Ukraine with a private tutor immediately after she committed herself to the job; she did not want to be at a disadvantage when talking to her charges or her hosts. Soon, she had every reason to believe that the progress she made was substantial since Angela and her American husband, Ron, as well as Angela's daughter, Marta, who attended a public School in Columbus, all sincerely complimented her, and Ron even made her practice with him. To improve and to avoid any improper usage, and in particular lapses into slang -- considered social anathema by the rigid grammarians of the foreign language academies in the old USSR -- once she was in Columbus, Lena continued her studies of English at the Delaware Career Center where, at the end of a year, she obtained a certificate of completion. Later on she changed her mind somewhat about slang since the lyrics of the songs she liked best, even those of her favorite band, the very German Rammstein, had so much slang and such deep slang that her curiosity got the better of her pre-conceived notions.

In spite of these preparations, Lena was apprehensive when she arrived. The unexpected in this vast and dynamic land was sure to rear its head, for good or evil. Quickly, though, she realized that her apprehensions were unfounded as she was met with good will and affection everywhere. And it did not take her long to familiarize herself with the currency, the stores, the products, or the fashions of Columbus. In Angela and Ron she found an understanding and loving family who opened their hearts and home to her: they gave her a room of her own so that she could have all the privacy and comfort of home-away-from-home and not be at the exclusive mercy of her host family. And still, the apprehension that engulfed her at her arrival persisted, progressively worsening, constricting her thoughts and feelings into a knot deep inside her. Eventually it turned into a prolonged condition. Lena tried to cope with it for some time but after a few months, at Angela's prompting, she consulted a physician.

After her examination, the doctor told Lena that she was suffering from amenorrhea and informed her that it was quite serious because it could potentially put her at risk of loss of bone density. The doctor explained that what caused amenorrhea was either improper nutrition or strenuous exercise, or

extreme stress. Lena ruled out nutrition; she was eating very well: fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, fish in quantities sufficient to satiate the most voracious of appetites. The doctor remarked that she was very slim but, on the whole, she took Lena's word that the young woman was not starving herself, just had a high metabolic rate. On the matter of exercise, it was true that Lena was working hard but she assured the doctor that it was not out of the ordinary for her since in Kryvyi Rih she was taking care of fifteen tots at a time and coped very well. That left stress as the most probable cause of the illness. And stress was hard to pin-point and even harder to get under control. The doctor asked if Lena wanted to talk to a psychologist or a psychiatrist. But Lena could not afford to pay somebody for introspection. She would have to see for herself how best to re-gain control over her fears.

In point of fact, Lena had cause for worry and that worry came from her Ukrainian connections. She missed her family acutely, particularly the conversations at the dinner table where both sets of grandparents would gather in impromptu discussions always ending in songs. She missed her brother, Sasha, who was eight years younger and who was studying transportation at the university in Kryvyi Rih. She missed her fiancé, also called Sasha, who was waiting for her and whose patience, she feared, might be running out. But these feelings were not unexpected. She had discussed them with her family and her fiancé before leaving Kryvyi Rih. Even before her departure she had braced herself for that. What she had not taken into consideration was that her contacts with her loved ones would be limited to expensive telephone calls. Before leaving she had figured that, communication technology touted as the most pervasive of all modern advances, she'd be able to, at least, exchange letters with them. However, her letters laboriously sent by post were vanishing into an abyss too deep for her to track down. On the phone, people re-affirmed that they had not received anything from her. They warned her not to put money into the letters as that was often an open invitation for postal workers to expropriate both the letter and the money without leaving any trace of their misdeed. But she had never added any money in her letters: she knew better.

In desperation she asked her brother to set up at her parents with internet access for e-mail; as for the two Sashas, she expected them to take the initiative to set themselves up, given that they had a better understanding of the technology.

It was not an easy solution to the problem. For one, her parents did not own a computer and for another, the internet access in Ukraine, easy and inexpensive within the country, was anything but easy

and inexpensive beyond its borders. Her parents would have to go to an internet 'café' armed with IDs and passwords to even plug into the system. Her brother set them up with those but could not find an internet service provider that could access addresses beyond Ukraine. On the telephone he told her that he couldn't even do it for himself and he was in an environment that was as 'high-tech' as they came.

The lines of communications were easier with her fiancé but their relationship was a little strained since he did not share her enthusiasm for the United States. He was quite happy where he was. He had completed his studies and was seeking to establish himself among his family and friends and was not at all seduced by the temptation of another world, no matter how open or promising.

By November Lena thought the situation had reached an impasse. She needed far more responsive and sustained contacts with her kin than she was getting. She wanted the chance to tell them about her stay in Columbus and the opportunities that she found in America. She wanted to tell them about the pumpkin festival to which she had taken Nels and Anna, and about the Chinese food she had learned to love. She wanted to explain to them, in great detail, the oddities of the public transportation in the mid-west. She wanted them to laugh with her or sympathize with her. She wanted to keep fresh the approval with which they had greeted her announcement that she would spend time working in the US. What became evident was that the long separation had erected a barrier of experiences not shared, and words whose meaning was no longer anchored in a common past; and it was a barrier she wanted to demolish thoroughly. She was sure that once she saw her family and fiancé and once she spoke with them, all would be well but she had to return home if only for a few weeks. The Carlsons raised no objections and Lena travelled to Kryvyi Rih to spend Christmas with her family.

That month long break helped to put her feelings and thoughts into perspective. She managed to set up her parents with a hook-up to an international internet provider. That after all proved to be not very hard to do: one just had to know on whose door to knock, and what price to pay. The process entailed some personalized phone calls and a little bargaining, but it reminded her how much she missed her country and its free-wheeling customs. And it also reminded her how much she liked America and its egalitarian pricing structures. She tried to explain America, her small Columbus America, to her family and friends. The ubiquitous pizza was easy to describe and so were the parks and playgrounds where she took Anna and Nels. Other things, however, did not lend themselves to so easy an interpretation.

The idea that young people could drive their own cars rather than take public transportation was harder to get across as it was a matter of statistics and, primarily, of statistics related to young people's wages; and the idea that people would congregate at huge malls was also hard to express credibly. But the hardest thing to do justice to was the absence of pollution, at least of the acute pollution that afflicted Kryvyi Rih.

It was a list of opportunities that made Lena proud. And having attempted to make that list, Lena came to the conclusion that, amenorrhea or no amenorrhea, she wanted to spend more time in America. Not surprisingly, those were not the words her parents, her fiancé or her brother wanted to hear. They listened and offered support and sympathy, but did not seem persuaded that this was the best option for her. They wanted her to have her future among them. Indeed her fiancé was counting on it. Lena began to suspect that those divergent plans carried in them all the seeds of future conflict, and that suspicion put more stress on her. Not the raw and full-fledged stress caused by apprehension when she left Ukraine in March 2007, but a quieter and more reflective stress, which made her think of the interests of all the people involved, included her own. However, she could not come up with a solution to the conflicting interests and that made her sad.

She cried all the way back from the Borispil airport in the capital to Columbus in rivulets running down her cheeks like the Dnieper river cascading over the rapids beyond Kiev. She couldn't stop herself. She cried for her grandparents, her parents, her brother and her fiancé. But she also cried for herself when it dawned on her that not only did she want to spend more time in America but she wanted to live there with her parents, her brother, and her fiancé. The barrier she had wanted to pull down had now risen to a new height. But as she acknowledged it, this time, that fact did not discourage her. She dried her tears and applied herself to finding a compromise between her dreams and reality.

The reality was that her parents were too set in their ways to emigrate. They would not be able to wrench themselves away from their own loved ones in the name of opportunities for their daughter. They might have been willing to do that for the sake of both their daughter and their son but that would come at a great sacrifice: social and financial independence, friendships, and comfort. Could she ask that of them? Could she ask that of her brother and of her fiancé? Those two would not only face the same problems as her parents but also the problems of finding a job for which they qualified and which would provide them with a dependable salary.

And before she asked anything of anyone, it seemed prudent to put her dreams to the test. Precisely what test she would have to figure out once she was back into her routine in Columbus. But only then would her course of action be clear. She felt confident in her approach, and that confidence bolstered her spirits. The amenorrhea disappeared. She had perhaps not found a way to entice her loved ones to America but she had found a way to control her stress.

As it happened, the only test Lena devised was to see if she could live and survive by herself in her new country. In the summer she went on a trip to the Grand Canyon for about 10 days, by herself, without Angela or the Carlsons or any of the new friends she had met in the English-as-a-Second-Language classes. The countryside was magnificent, grander than she had ever imagined. She visited Las Vegas and sampled the endless parade of people on display for their looks, wit, and skills. It was a marvelous trip but it could not mask the loneliness that tugged at her hearty whenever she thought of the five people who were waiting for her back in Ryyvi Rih. She needed them. If she could not persuade them to join her, there was nothing for it, she concluded, but to return to Krivyi Rih and find her happiness there.

But before she surrendered to her fate after her commitment to the Carlsons was up, Lena made two last ditch efforts.

The first one was to invite her brother and her fiancé to Columbus to see for themselves what America was like. It did not work. Both were busy and reluctant to incur the substantial expense of such a visit. The second was to find a more permanent position that would alleviate their fears of being stranded in a strange country without income and with few resources. But the timing for that was all wrong. The economy, in America as well as in the rest of the world, was tanking. Employers could not find the money to keep old faithful workers on their payroll, let alone hire a new hand whose visa and thus credentials for legitimacy could be challenged in multiple ways.

Lena bought plane tickets to return to Ukraine in April 2009. Whether that was going to be a permanent stay or a temporary one, she could not tell. Her friends were confident that she'd be back. But Lena was focusing on her new life in Kryvyi Rih. How would she fit in?

Two years is a long absence. She had matured. She had learned to control her apprehensions. She was tougher. But she did not harbor any illusion about picking up her life where she had left. She had changed, as also had her fiancé and her brother and all the people she used to hang out with in Kryvyi Rih. It was not only that her character had changed but her tastes, her habits, and her expectations and in addition she had far more money at her disposal than when she had left Ukraine.

Ever forethoughtful, with the one exception of her splurge on the Grand Canyon trip, Lena had carefully saved all the money she had earned in Columbus from the Carlsons and from the numerous people whose houses she had cleaned in her spare time. She wondered at the reception all that careful husbanding would get her, back home. If that hard earned capital did not convince him and her brother that America was the land of opportunity, nothing ever would. She hoped she would have money enough to buy a small apartment in Kryvyi Rih with her fiancé. It was now a matter of finding the right place that would suit them both, close to their families, and in neighborhoods that favored varied activities for children and adults.

The one main disadvantage in Kryvyi Rih was the pollution, both air and water. After her stay in America, she did not know how she would be able to tolerate the car fumes, the particulates that spewed from the Kryvorizhstal steel mills, or the dust from the coal mines. She had never heard of the expression 'ecological stress' but she knew what it meant. She pictured her city with the environmental equivalent of amenorrhea, incapable of sustaining the cycle of life. But what to do about it was not self-evident.

Lena knew what efforts the Americans made to insure they had clean air and clean water: regulations, standards, laws suits, pamphlets, community drives, and then the massive influx of technological solutions. There were no similar regulations in Ukraine though people considered pollution and how to control the damage done to the environment as one of the top priorities of the government. From the talks, she remembered that the lack of resources was the critical stumbling point in trying to alleviate that damage, and that made the pollution problem far more complex than her amenorrhea. The Ukrainian-American community in Columbus, well aware of the intractable problems facing Ukraine's pollution-control efforts, shook their heads in unison. But they could not warn her of the magnitude of the task for, in the two years Lena had spent among them, she had managed to surprise them by her

determination and her fortitude. And they hoped she would surprise them again. "We shall see" she told them as she left, making no promises.