

‘The Dots Were All There. We Just Couldn’t Connect Them.’

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Courtesy of Matt Rota

The day before Russia launched its war against Ukraine, I was in the seaside city of Sochi in southern Russia, not far from the Ukrainian border, attending an arts festival and enjoying a break from the dark and snowy Moscow winter among palm trees and verdant hillsides.

Sochi is on the Black Sea, as is Ukraine. My colleagues and I had been talking for months about aerial photographs that showed a build-up of troops near Russia’s borders with Ukraine, apparently threatening a new invasion. Was it preparation or intimidation? Nothing seemed to be happening, even as the U.S. started warning of an imminent attack.

I work at The Moscow Times, an independent newspaper founded in 1992 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union that publishes online in both English and Russian. As the paper’s arts editor, I was planning to attend the Sochi Winter International Arts Festival beginning on February 16. A few days before I was to leave, I asked my editor if I should go — would it be

safe for me to be on the Black Sea coast if war broke out?

“You’ll be in a group,” she said, “and I don’t think it will start.” I said, “I don’t either, but the thing is — I didn’t think Russia would annex Crimea in 2014.” She said, “I didn’t think they’d invade Georgia in 2008.”

I recognize now that the dots were all there. We just couldn’t connect them. We couldn’t imagine a full-scale invasion because a full-scale invasion was unimaginable.

And so I went to Sochi, what now feels like a thousand years ago, and spent every night in the city’s seaside Winter Theater watching the best of Russian and foreign culture, a mix of traditional and very untraditional musical and theater performances, with standing ovations and curtain calls and the local babushkas holding the hands of grandchildren while whispering instructions on proper theater etiquette.

I flew back to Moscow on the evening of February 23. The next morning the war began.

Everything changed in the blink of an eye. Within two weeks, I would find myself in a minivan with a driver and six people, three dogs and mountains of suitcases and bags, getting ready to cross the border out of Russia. I would be the last one of the Moscow Times staff to leave the country, part of an exodus that included most of the foreign correspondents in Russia and thousands of Russians.

I was leaving a place I’d lived for more than 40 years.

I hadn’t set out to spend my life in Moscow. After graduating from college in 1978, I came to Moscow to continue studying Russian and become a translator. Except for a few years in the 1980s, I’ve lived there ever since. I worked as a translator and interpreter, as a field producer and reporter in television journalism, a manager of non-profit communication programs, and at The Moscow Times newspaper for almost 20 years. I write a column about Russian language and culture, and since 2015 I’ve been the arts editor.

Along the way, I got married and divorced, danced at weddings and attended funerals, was a godmother and an honorary auntie, bought an apartment and a series of Russian cars, spent my summers at the dacha, sang in a choir, traveled around the countryside with my Russian therapy dog, learned how to make Siberian dumplings, went to every art exhibition and museum, and had favorite seats at the Bolshoi. I have friends I’ve known for four decades and watched as their toddlers grew up and became parents with toddlers of their own.

I didn’t plan to stay forever, but I didn’t have plans to leave. I had the vague notion that at some point I’d sell my apartment and move back to the U.S. But that point always seemed somewhere down the road, off in the future.

On a Thursday a week after the start of war, we had a meeting and conference call at the

newspaper office. By then, there were only five of us in Moscow; some of the staff had already left Russia. We'd try to work in various locations and time zones. It wasn't ideal, but we had learned how to work from our homes during the years of the pandemic.

None of us felt in danger in Moscow. Stores were well-stocked, no one was harassing us, and all of us had subscriptions to VPNs that masked our geographic location so we could keep reading the websites and social media the government was blocking. One Russian friend called and reminded me to stock up on imported medicine and coffee before prices went up. Another told me to buy a year's supply of the imported kibble my dog eats. An expat group on Facebook posted constantly about money — getting rubles out and foreign currency in. The money transfer services had stopped working, but I could use my U.S. bank card to withdraw rubles from Russian ATMs.

I wasn't afraid of being arrested. I thought the worst that could happen is that foreign journalists would be deported on short notice. So I made some preliminary preparations. I called my veterinarian and had him microchip my dog and tell me what documents I'd need to leave with her. Every day I asked my American friends what they were doing. Most were staying. The ones who were leaving were struggling to get out, since within a few days most direct flights to Europe had been canceled. One American who was married to a Russian had planned to stay, but their daughter had called them from New York in a panic and made them promise to leave. They had managed to get air tickets from Moscow to Tallinn, Estonia, for March 8, but the trip would have three layovers and would take them about 30 hours — three times longer than it would have taken to drive.

Our inner lives may have been filled with turmoil, but Moscow itself seemed to go strangely silent, as if it had pulled up its sidewalks and slammed shut its doors and windows. In the park across the street from my apartment building, the playground ice slides that had been filled with chattering, happy children were empty and soundless. On our morning walks with our dogs, my friends talked about everything but the war — I don't know why. Did they believe, as one neighbor said when the sanctions began, that “Biden just won't let us live in peace” and didn't want to offend me by criticizing my president? Or did they mistrust me? To my shame, I had a flashback of Soviet-era fear, remembering when friends or colleagues could denounce you to the authorities. I talked about television shows and the weather, just in case.

The strangest part of that last week was the sense of navigating between two realities. There was my reality of a brutal war being waged against Ukraine and foreigners making frantic travel plans. And then there was my neighbors' televised reality of children handing flowers to Russian soldiers in the warring republics of the Donbas, thanking them for saving them from genocidal Ukrainians. In their reality, NATO was bombing Russian soldiers and the “drug addicted, neo-Nazi” leadership of Ukraine was being run by the Americans. Once someone laughed about “fake” videos of Kyiv being bombed — “as if we could do anything like that.”

I only discussed my situation with one neighbor, who had hurriedly sent her college-age son out of the country and had begun making plans to leave with her daughter. She hadn't told anyone at work or in the neighborhood that she was leaving. “You never know,” she said on the stairs, rapping her knuckles on the handrail in the old Soviet code that meant an informant.

On Friday, March 4, the eighth day of the war, the Russian Parliament passed a law on the media. “Fake news” about the war would be punished by up to 15 years in jail. The law’s definition of “fake news” clarified that the war could not be called “a war.” It had to be called a “special military operation.” The terms “invasion” or “aggression” were also prohibited. Anything that “discredited” the armed forces was illegal, but what “discreditation” consisted of was not specified. Only Russian government and state-media sources could be used by non-state media.

At the newspaper, we reported on the law and expected that it would be signed into effect that night. We didn’t think, however, that it was applicable to Western media like us; The Moscow Times was registered in the Netherlands.

That night I woke up like a shot at 3 a.m. In my kitchen, I groped in the dark for my television remote. My cable service had CNN, BBC, EuroNews and several other foreign news channels. The law was only a few hours old, but my TV screen lit up with an announcement that CNN was no longer available. BBC and the other news channels were still on the air, but when I flipped through my Twitter feed, it was a list of closures. Znak, an independent news outlet based in Yekaterinburg — one of the last internet publications still publishing — had closed. BBC, ABC, CBS were leaving at least until they assessed the situation. Apparently, the law would apply to non-Russian media, too.

I panicked. I got on my computer, turned on my VPN and went into the administrative section of the newspaper to scrub the site. Section titles like “Russia Invades Ukraine” became “Ukraine.” I took the words “war,” “attacks,” “invades” and “invasion” out of every header. If I couldn’t think of how to rename an article, I killed it. My last language column was called “The Language of War” — I took that offline. I took off bylines. I wrote a borderline-hysterical note to everyone that we should close down until we all left the country. And then I drank more coffee and kept scrolling through the articles, looking for forbidden words.

It was time to leave. But I still wasn’t sure. Maybe I was being alarmist. Maybe it wasn’t that bad. I called my old friend, Yevgeniya Albats, known as Zhenya to her friends, a journalist and writer who always has a handle on the truth — and isn’t afraid of it. At her apartment, Zhenya made tea and opened a bottle of wine — because you never know what you need, she said — as I went through my panicked reasoning. Was I in danger?

Zhenya had just spent a couple of hours that morning discussing the new law with a lawyer specializing in media regulation. Theoretically, she said, it was the owner or editor who would be fined or punished for a violation, not the writer. So I was probably not in any real danger.

Pause. “On the other hand,” she said, “there’s always the risk of hostage-taking.”

Right. Putin’s Russia has a habit of arresting foreigners in case they could be used as diplomatic chits.

I would go.

Zhenya would stay. “I’ve already said or written everything I think a hundred times over. They

know everything about me. If they wanted to arrest me, they would have done so already,” she said. “Besides, it’s my country. Someone has to stay and tell people what’s happening.”

Before I left, we poured glasses of wine. It was Saturday, March 5, the day that Joseph Stalin died in 1953. We raised our glasses and said the traditional toast: “That one died, and this one will, too.”

Now that I had decided to leave, I had to figure out how. By then, leaving Moscow was difficult. Flights out of Moscow were prohibited from flying over the air space of Europe. People could only fly out via a few cities to the south and east — Istanbul, Yerevan and Bishkek — or take buses from St. Petersburg to Helsinki and Estonia. I wrote and called everyone who might have an idea or could help.

One of our staff members had left Moscow for his home in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. Two reporters had also flown there before making reservations for flights to the U.K. My dog and I would be welcome there. I put it on the list. I wrote an American I’d met in Alanya, Turkey, several years ago: If we flew there, could I find an apartment to rent with my dog? She said yes. On the list. I considered driving my car across a border somewhere, but I wasn’t sure I’d have time to do all the paperwork needed to bring a car across an international border and was even less sure that I’d be up for a 15-hour drive in mid-winter by myself. But a friend had a friend on the Finnish border near Murmansk who could help, so I kept that option on the list, too.

And then a friend in Latvia told me about a transport service she had taken: a van from Moscow to Riga via a smaller Estonian border crossing with fewer trucks to clog things up. One van took you to the Russian border; another picked you up on the Estonian side and drove you to Latvia. Pets welcome. No cages. She could pick me up in Riga, the Latvian capital. In fact, she could help find me an apartment and get me settled. Best of all, there was a van set to leave in four days, Wednesday night, and it would cost 190 euros — 90 for me, 100 for my dog. Riga had a large Russian population and a growing Russian diaspora. My dog would be more comfortable in a van.

That was how I’d go.

I wrote a to-do list: get money, buy storage bins, make extra keys, get a PCR test and a Covid antibody test, call the vet for the departure documents, pull out the big suitcase, move files to Dropbox, decide what to take, pack the family photographs and letters into the storage bins for friends to rescue if something happened to my apartment (what, I had no idea), buy European medical insurance, move the car (to where, I didn’t know), empty the refrigerator, do laundry, set up automatic bill-paying, find out how cold it is in Riga in March.

I had wanted to transfer ownership of my apartment to a Russian friend, or, if there wasn’t time — and now there wasn’t time — to give someone power of attorney that would allow them to do it after I left. But when I called a real estate lawyer, he told me a law had just been passed on March 2 requiring all real estate transactions involving foreigners to be certified by

a special governmental commission. It was unlikely that any transaction would be permitted.

I hoped to at least give someone power of attorney to do things in my name — what things? I had no idea — but when I called a notary to set it up, she politely asked what country I was from, then asked me to hold for a minute. She came back on the line to say that they'd received notification prohibiting them from preparing power of attorney documents that had to do with real estate for citizens of “unfriendly countries” — me — and she was very sorry but she wasn't sure if she could do anything for me at all.

By late afternoon on Wednesday, I was somehow ready: a big-wheeled suitcase filled with clothes I would need at first, a computer bag, a travel bag with food for my dog, a purse and a bag of children's clothes a doting Moscow grandmother desperately wanted to send to her grandson in Riga. I had been told that we'd have to walk between the border posts, so I practiced hauling it all. Heavy but possible.

I closed the windows, turned off the water and gas. I snapped a few photos of my favorite room in the apartment — my study filled with books and art I'd collected over the decades. I put all my car documents on my desk with keys next to folders with bill payments and appliance manuals. A friend was picking me up to take me to the meeting point and would have keys to my apartment.

After I showed him where all the turn-off valves were and how the door locks worked, he took the first load of luggage down to the car. I sat “for the road” — the Russian custom of pausing before a departure, sitting for a minute and saying a prayer. And then I took my last bags and my dog into the hall and closed the door on the life I'd lived for 44 years.

Before I got into the elevator, I heard the buzzer in my apartment ring — it was my friend ringing from the entryway for me to let him in. I put the key in the lock to open the door and then stopped. Another Russian superstition: It's bad luck to go back after you've shut the door. I let the buzzer ring and left.

As I stepped outside, I looked back at the entryway. In the night, someone had scrawled black graffiti on the pale yellow wall. “Net voine,” it read: “No war.”

Good, I thought. My apartment house, where I'd lived so many decades of my life, was on the right side of history.

At the van I met the other five travelers; I was the only foreigner. We just nodded to each other; somehow asking questions seemed intrusive, too personal. The van had three rows of seats. One person sat up front with the driver, a mother and daughter had the first row; a woman with her five-year-old granddaughter and two French bulldogs had the second row, and my dog and I got the last seat. It was, I realized, the bad row: narrow seat, no leg room, no heat. All of our luggage was piled up around and under the seats. One of the bulldogs — Frosya — lunged at my dog, who lay next to me, shaking. When we set off, Frosya began to moan and whine, while the little girl turned around and kept up a non-stop monologue: “Can I pet your dog? What's her name? Frosya is not very nice, but our other dog is sweet. You can pet her if you want. Is your coat warm? Do you know how to make smiley faces on the window? I can

show you!” After a while, as Frosya continued to moan and tug at her leash to get at my dog, I pretended to fall asleep. The little girl poked me to get my attention.

I burst out laughing. It was going to be one hell of a long trip.

But after an hour or two, Frosya stopped whining and the little girl fell asleep. No one spoke, not even among themselves — out of fatigue or tension, I don’t know. We bounced along the pot-holed, uneven roads of Russia’s provinces, passing long-haul trucks and rickety local cars, as signs for villages and little towns appeared and disappeared in flashes of headlights. I fretted about what I had packed and what I’d left behind, and worried about the border crossing.

I must have dozed off. I woke up about seven hours after we’d left Moscow when the van stopped and the door was opened by a border guard, who shone a flashlight at us. “Show your passports!” We all held up our passports. “Give me yours!” he said to me. I passed it up, he glanced at it and passed it back, apparently unfazed by an American presenting a U.S. passport in a vanful of Russians and dogs.

We drove into what I now think of as The Zone — the border zone with Russian facilities on one side and the Estonian buildings on the other. It was a vast fenced-off area with roads for trucks and cars, booths for guards and several outbuildings. Several long commercial trucks parked off to the side, as if left there while the drivers redid their documents. Everything was lit by tall streetlights.

We piled out of the van. It was about 3 a.m. and bitterly cold — my phone showed 0 degrees Fahrenheit — and the asphalt was covered with thick, uneven layers of dirty ice. In my suitcase-hauling practice, I had failed to take that into consideration. First, we hauled our bags and dogs to one booth. The window opened and I handed over my passport and entry card; the guard handed it back and told me to go to customs. I dragged everything over another expanse of ice to a small building, hauled it inside, piled it all on the x-ray conveyer belt, and answered questions. No, I didn’t have anything forbidden. Yes, I had two computers. No, I had no plants or drugs. The Russian guards were polite. I took my passport and hauled everything outside again, on to the next booth.

This booth, I realized only afterward, was the Important Booth. Here you handed your documents through a window to the guards and waited. I stood outside with one of my van-mates, a middle-aged woman in a thin wool coat. The French bulldog family was delayed behind us. “The other two were taken inside,” my van-mate told me. We stood there for about an hour in the frigid cold. Every once in a while the booth window would open and they’d call one of us over. “What is your work?” “Did you leave the country in the last two years?” And then the window would close and they’d go back to their computers. Later the woman told me they’d asked her, “We see you were in Kyiv in 2013. What did you do there? Who did you see?”

I walked back and forth with my dog, jumped up and down to keep warm, and waited. Finally, the window opened, my van-mate got her passport and started walking toward Estonia. After another 10 minutes, I was called up and handed mine. Relief; I could go. I put the computer bag on top of the wheeled suitcase, draped the two bags with clothes and dog food over my shoulders and hung my purse around my neck. I dragged the suitcase with one hand and held my dog’s leash with the other. Estonia was at the end of a long, ice-covered road — about 800

meters, a half-mile, the guards said. “See those lights way off there? That’s Estonia.”

It is very hard to drag 150 lbs. of luggage across a half-mile of ice in the middle of the night in below 0 temperatures with a dog on a leash.

By stopping every 100 meters and switching hands, I finally made it to the Estonia side. The border guards were very kind. I said I was a journalist and they asked why I was leaving. Had I been threatened? Did something happen? I told them about the new law and said almost all the foreign journalists were getting out. They shook their heads sympathetically, stamped my passport and said, “Welcome to Estonia.” No one looked at any of my carefully prepared documents proving my dog was healthy and vaccinated, that I didn’t have Covid but did have health insurance.

My fellow traveler and I climbed in the new van to warm up while the driver contemplated how he’d fit in all the luggage, four more people and two more dogs. Finally, the mother and daughter arrived. Because they’d been pulled aside by the guards, I assumed they were fleeing the country and wondered if they had been politically active. They had been interrogated for more than an hour, the mother told us. They had close relatives in Kyiv, and the guards had questioned them about their family, what they did, what their plans were, where they were going. It seemed that anyone with Ukrainian connections was suspicious. The guards had asked to see their cell phones — a new trick used by the police to find compromising materials and sites, as well as phone numbers and addresses. “But I told them ‘no’,” the woman said. “I told them that if they had an order from the prosecutor’s office, I’d hand it over. But otherwise, no, it was my private property.” For some reason, the guards decided to release them.

At long last, the French bulldog family made it to the van. My dog and I sat in front this time, out of Frosya’s reach. We had spent more than two hours in The Zone, and the entire trip would take about 14 hours.

As we drove off, the first sign we saw in Estonia was a bright blue and yellow billboard reading, “Glory to Ukraine!”

We were not in Russia anymore.

When I arrived in Riga, my friends met me at the van and whisked me into an apartment in a sprawling late-Soviet housing complex of bulky long blocks surrounded by lawns, trees and children’s playgrounds. In Moscow, my large apartment was on the top floor of a 90-year-old building and filled with antiques and art. My small Riga apartment is on the first floor of a 40-year-old building with décor by IKEA. That contrast, it turns out, is perfect.

Latvia has the largest Russian population in the Baltic states, and my neighborhood seems to be home to most of them in the capital. Older Latvians also speak Russian, and young Latvians often speak English, so communication isn’t a problem.

Work is not a problem either. As soon as the staff of The Moscow Times landed — in cities including Amsterdam, Istanbul, Riga, London — we all got back to work. Some Russian

correspondents have remained behind, quietly helping with reporting. New people are joining us; there are a lot of good journalists looking for jobs. We feel like it's important to keep operating, to make sure that those who rely on us can still find us.

And we're making the transition, although many hours are taken up solving the technological problems of the modern home office: too many devices, new cell phone numbers and WiFi routers, with everything stopping when automatic payments from my Moscow bank are no longer accepted or confirmation text messages are sent to a Russian telephone number no longer in use.

In the two weeks between the start of the war and my departure from Russia, I had wept constantly. I cried when I walked my dog in the park across the street, where I knew every bush and tree and patch of grass; when I sat at my desk looking out at my beloved Moscow courtyard; when I bought bread at my local bakery; when I drove a familiar route along the Moscow River, past the Kremlin, and then homeward along one of Moscow's central avenues. I couldn't imagine that it might be the last time I'd see places that had been the backdrop of absolutely everything important that had happened to me in my adult life, where there were so many people and so much that I loved.

But now work, the novelty of a new city, the daily battle with iPhones and computers, keep me in a continuous present tense. I don't think about the future beyond next week; I don't think about the past. Except to realize that even if I can go back to Russia, it won't be the Russia I loved.

Maybe that superstition is right: Once you shut the door, walk away and don't look back.

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