

Good and bad landlords in Kiev

I am lucky to have you as a landlady one of the most pleasant women in Kiev, Tatyana Klinchenko. The apartment belongs to her 80-year-old mother Janna, who is the widow of a high-ranking editor in Soviet times. As I have written in the story entitled "My Roof," it is fairly large, solidly built and absolutely in the center of town.

Tatyana comes by a couple of times per month to pick up or drop off things in the closet reserved for her mother, to collect the rent and to compute what I owe for utilities and the Internet. We usually chat for an hour or so. Tatyana is a woman of diverse interests. She is a retired professor of diversity at Kiev Mogila Academy, the country's leading private university, an active reader and exciting intellectual, and a very active Christian. Her mother, on the other hand, is a true product of the Soviet Union: guarded and suspicious, not fully trusting even the daughter who is taking care of her. Tatyana has the patience of a saint to attempt to placate her mother while not unreasonably angering me, the tenant.

Tatyana exudes a deep Christian spirituality that manifests itself rather differently than what you see in the United States. It is a kind of religion that is felt in the soul. She does not ask me if I am saved, she does not quote the Bible, she is not concerned about a person's outward religiosity: going to church and the like. She talks instead about how it feels to be in a relationship with Christ, and has said she has for her countrymen who appear to be lost because they do not know Him.

Tatyana and I signed a contract in March of 2008 for \$1500 per month. It is a lot of money in comparison with what other people pay, but the apartment is also larger and much more central. People here love to tell you that you are paying too much for an apartment. There is even a word to describe this kind of kibitzing: *sovietovatzcya*, the offering of gratuitous advice. However, by the time I signed the contract I had looked at a couple of dozen apartments and think I knew the market. It was a fair price at the time.

The year ending in March, 2009, was wild for every kind of markets in Ukraine. Apartment rents climbed steeply through August, and the value of the dollar fell from 5.10 to 4.50 griven. Janna berated Tatyana for having been so foolish as to sign the contract in dollars. The economic crash started in the fall. By November the grivna had fallen to 7 to the dollar. By March it was 8.5. Apartment rents started falling. The dollar contract looks really wonderful. Janna is now telling Tatyana to force me into a long-term commitment. I am not going to do that, but I am willing to continue at 1500 per month, something over what I expect to be the market rate, because I appreciate Tatyana so much as a friend and a business partner. She has offered to do some repairs to the apartment; many things could be done, but cosmetics are not important to me.

And now for the rest of the story. Bad things that can happen with landlords in Ukraine. Actually, I am going to recount an experience that was highly educational but did not hurt me at all. It is about a very sad human being whom life forced into many uncomfortable positions, and who reacted by compromising his moral principles. You could say I was the victim -- he treated me unscrupulously -- but there is evidence that his conscience bothers him.

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The language school arranged an apartment for me my first month in Kiev, September of 2007, at Chervonoarmiska 101. Chervonoarmiska or "Red Army," is the name of a major North-South boulevard, one of the many reminders of their Soviet past.

I responded to an ad in the Kiev Post newspaper to find my second daily-rate apartment. Irina Popovich of Key Realty set me up in a place at Chervonoarmiska 114, right across the street from the first. I used her again for yet another daily rate apartment when I returned in mid-December. At that point I was ready to commit to a long-term rental. I like the apartments she had found. Though I talked to other agents, I was inclined to work with her.

Irina is a slender woman in her 40s, hyperactive, twitching like a wasp. She is one of the few Jewish people I have met here. She did not advertise the fact, but as she looked Jewish, had a certain kind of intensity, and vacationed in Israel I brought the subject up and it turned out I was right. She was extremely businesslike in showing the apartments. We looked at three in a day, Chervonoarmiska 132, by the Libidska Metro; in Podil; and at Chervonoarmiska 38, by the Lva Tolstova Metro. Chervonoarmiska 38 was clearly the best of the three. It was a marvelously furnished 100 m² (1000 ft.²) second-floor apartment for \$2,500 a month. It was expensive, but the stock market was doing well, I was feeling rich, and it was gorgeous.

More than that, I liked the idea that the landlords were British. Alex H. and his wife Marina. Alex's parents had emigrated from Ukraine when he was a child. He is a British citizen and speaks accentless English. He has spent much of his adult life in Ukraine, returning for his first stint as a manager for Unisys. Marina, his second wife, is Ukrainian.

Alex is a very voluble chap. Physically small, he dominates the conversation, rarely letting his counterpart get a word in edgewise. I learned he had been working at Wisconsin International University until recently, and that the separation had not been cordial. I learned that his mother-in-law was in failing health. I learned that as he rented this nice apartment to me, he, his wife, and his wife's daughter were living in a significantly smaller flat on Baseina. Incidentally, the building in which Golda Meir was born. He described his wife's mother and his wife's daughter as shrews, harridans, and impossible to get along with. I met the daughter and would have to agree on that one. My observation was that the transmission had not skipped the intervening generation. He was a sad, henpecked human being.

I had just set up my my banking connections with Ukraine. The first transfer from the United States was \$4500 to cover the finder's fee and the last months rent. The first months rent I had in cash.

Irina Popovich fussed over this contract like a baby, calling me every few minutes and making sure that I reviewed every document. She was especially attentive to the real estate commission of course. I have worked with realtors before and found that although

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she was a bit extreme, she is certainly not without precedent. All in all, one feels more comfortable with an agent who is making sure all the bases are covered.

We got together to sign the contract at Key Realty's offices at 8 Malo Pidbalna street, just off Maidan. We all reread the contracts at the closing. They appear to me to be boilerplate. Alex suggested that the contract was asymmetric: he was obligated to rent to me for a year, but I could terminate the contract on one months notice. He proposed that we make it one month each way. I looked him in the eye, and let sentiment overcome my better judgment. I agreed. After all, he is an Englishman, and the English or the authors of the doctrine of fair play. Irina remained silent.

It was a lovely apartment. You can see photos of it on my website. I move down the first of January and he called me at the end of January with some shocking, surprising, awful news! Absolutely out of the blue he had received an offer he could not refuse, to sell the apartment for \$530,000. He was terribly sorry, but I would have to vacate by the first of March. But do not despair! The buyer is a real estate agent, and is part of the deal he will find me a new flat for free.

There was not much I could do. I had tickets to return to the United States for three weeks at the of February to wind down my affairs there. My friend Mark would hang onto my suitcases, and I simply would not pay rent for three weeks. That offset the three weeks rent that had gone to Irina Popovich as the real estate agent. I was working at this time that the Phoenix school and I told them the story. They told me it was pretty common, the "rental deposit" scam. They were not shocked, and they said there was not much I could do. There was a uniform conviction that of course I had been lied to. Get used to it -- it happens all the time and Ukrainian business. You have to be very careful in how you write a contract, because goodwill and personal reputation count for absolutely nothing in this country.

Friendship does not come naturally to Alex. He is an awkward person. Nevertheless, during the month of February he did what he could to ingratiate himself to me. He introduced me to a couple of other teachers at Wisconsin and restaurants. Like many Ukrainians -- and unlike Americans -- Alex is inordinately pleased with his automobile. He offered to drive me places when it made far more sense to take public transportation. He allowed me to come on over to his house to help set up WiFi. He insisted, over my protestations that it was totally unnecessary, on meeting me at the airport and driving me to my new daily rental hotel (not obtained through Irina Popovich!) when I returned from the United States.

I used several agents to look for apartments. The most attractive place happened to come through the agency to which Alex had sold the flat. I agreed to take it and reminded them of their deal with Alex. They rather brusquely told me to screw off. The agent I was working with worked on commission. Of course it is impossible to imagine an agent that does not work on commission! He was making an excuse to get rid of me. I reflected on this fact and the fact it really was a nice apartment. I called Alex and told him that Dim Realty had not come through with their end of the deal. What was the deal? Alex again

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again expressed extreme surprise and propose that we split the commission for the new apartment. \$700 apiece. I forget exactly how it happened, but the next time I brought it up he said to split it again. 350 apiece. Eventually, in the third phase of his mousing out, I got nothing. By that time I was quite tired of Alex H. And happy in my new apartment.

Signing the new rental contract with Tatyana went smoothly. The only back-and-forth was over the duration of the contract, and that only one month. She wanted a shorter contract, probably in view of the fact that the rent was reasonably favorable given the market. I consented to six months and we had a deal.

Alex and his family intended to move to a large new detached house in the suburbs, about 350 m² if I recall correctly. It was under construction in March; he was supposed to move in and summer. I cannot help but wonder what happened. Certainly that house is worth much less today than he paid for it; he bought at the top of the market. That prime apartment downtown is sure to have held its value better. It is quite possible that the builder did not even finish the suburban manse before the banking crisis hit, and it is possible Alex still lives on Basina street waiting for them to finish it. But, if his luck held (?) he has the joy of sharing a suburban house with his mother-in-law, his wife, and his daughter.

I suppose I could ask. Alex and I have several mutual acquaintances. He confessed to one of them that although he hates himself for doing so, he has abandoned his British principles in favor of the Ukrainian lack thereof, taking which you can get, without scruple. That much is evident.

That is the end of the saga with landlords. One not so evil as merely pathetic, and one wonderful landlady. Both of them significantly easier to deal with than my last landlord in the United States. I have to learn to count my blessings. I learned from both landlords and both transactions, and I'm still enjoying Ukraine.