

The door code story

When I got to the front door of my apartment building it would not open. This was in early February, as I was returning from work one afternoon. Every building in town is secured by a combination lock. 10 buttons, zero through nine. You push some combination, usually three of them at once, and it unlocks.

Sometimes the locks stick. I have been embarrassed before standing in front of a door that would not open for five minutes until somebody else showed up and simply told me to press harder. That appeared to be the case this time. There is a gruff man, always dressed in black, with a blockish and expressionless face who lives on the third floor. He bulldozed right past me as I was fiddling around at the door, pushed the combination, and rushed past me. He gave me a kind of a "what are you doing here?" look as I grabbed the closing door and followed him through. As I entered the elevator with him I asked him if the code was still 789 and he grunted an affirmation.

He did not look like the kind of guy who is into doing any favors. Next time I went out, I opened the door from the inside and held it open, trying to combination of 789 again. No matter how hard I pressed it did not work. As I was doing so, another guy came home. I asked him and he graciously told me the new code, and waited on the inside to be sure that I got it. I thanked him. As I was doing this, I computed in my head the total number of possibilities: 120. It would not take an exceptionally long time to figure out the door code by trial and error. On the other hand, it does not offer much security.

The back door to the apartment has a better system. A similar 10 key pad, but you have to press the numbers in sequence. 720 combinations rather than 120. Secure combination or not, that door has been fitted with a new lock which takes a key to open. I can no longer open it. Just get the key, you suggest. How naïve you are, I reply. Read on.

Before I continue I should say that the back door opens onto a court which itself is protected by a heavy iron gate. There is an ironwork door within the gate fitted with the same sort of 10 key, 120-possibility lock. The gate itself is secured by a heavy chain and padlock. People who park their cars in the courtyard have keys.

Tania my landlady gave me the front and back door codes when I moved into the apartment in March. She did not know the code for the courtyard, but that door always stood open. No problem! But, by degrees, problems emerged.

The first thing they did was to start locking the courtyard. That was a small inconvenience, making me go out the front door and walk around the corner instead of out the back door and through the courtyard if I was heading south out of the house. It was a small grumble. I asked Tania why, and she said that they wanted to keep bums out of the courtyard. True, there are a couple of old sots who like to hang out there, but they live in the neighborhood and are not bad sorts. Specifically, Costas, a guy who claims some Greek ancestry, and his friend who lives in my building.

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The next thing they did was to put the new lock on the back door, as mentioned above. This meant walking around and through the big iron gate to put my trash in the dumpsters, which stood outside that iron gate.

After that they moved the dumpsters inside the gate. Now it was beginning to get seriously inconvenient. I had my choice of locked doors between me and the dumpsters: the back door, or the big iron gate. As a protest I left the garbage a couple of times by the back door, hoping they would get the message. But you always have a lot of identifying stuff such as mail in your garbage and I did not want to start a fight with people in my building. There is enough backbiting as things stand. There are other dumpsters standing on the street, so I started taking my trash and throwing it in other buildings' dumpsters.

There is a nasty old lady on the second floor who according to Tania had the back door closed. Twenty years after communism she still has a purely communist outlook on life. She does not trust a soul. She has jawboned Tania endlessly about the stupid foreigner to whom she rents. When the hot water was out for a week somehow this woman believed it was all my fault. She knows that Tania installed a hot water heater in the apartment years ago, and envy is a big part of the Soviet mentality.

One day during the hot water outage a couple of workmen showed up at my door and asked to come in and look at the bathroom. This is fairly standard: I let them. Apparently they were looking at the hot water heater to make sure everything was okay. I had tried it early in the water outage and could not figure out how to make it work. I had shut all the valves again, so it was just as I found it. Common sense would tell the old lady that the hot water was working I would not have tried the electric water heater in the first place... it is totally silly to blame me for the problem that was clearly affecting me as well. Common sense has nothing to do with it. Tania tells me that the old lady blames me for the problem, and that the workmen confirmed it to her.

I have seen that old lady precisely once. I was about 5 feet from the front door, on my way out, and she told me in as nasty a voice as she could manage to make sure it was locked. I thanked her for the advice but did not lock it until I was on the other side.

Tania tells me something about information flow in this system. Obviously they all know about me, at least they know that I live here. I of course know nothing about them, and do not really care except to the extent that they cause trouble for me. Obviously this informal information flow allows people on the inside to know when things like door codes change. It also gives them the ability to rag on somebody to get the back door locked or the main gate locked. I have little idea who the powers that be are. One of them is supposedly Nick, a guy who works as a handyman and in the convenience store downstairs. Nick and I have shared drinks a couple of times. But I saw Nick after they changed the door codes and he knew nothing about it. I told him that Tania had heard they would unlock the back door come spring, and he kind of shrugged his shoulders.

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In another incident concerning information flow, I was leaving the apartment yesterday morning at the same time as another of the women in the apartment. She asked me and very rapid Russian about the noise last night. Had I heard it? I had gotten in probably 10 o'clock and I did not hear a thing. One must consider, however, that I live on the eighth floor and noise does not bother me. While we were talking the block-faced fellow came down the elevator. She immediately turned to him and asked him. The two of them walked to the front door, me following about 3 feet behind. They left, and damned if block-face did not shut the door in my face. He is nobody's model of cordiality.

Landlady Tania is a professor emeritus of diversity at the Kiev Mogilya University. She is also a wonderful, warm hearted Christian woman. She takes pains to attempt to explain the Soviet mentality, and she is also a bit apologetic for her countrymen. They have endured a lot over the years. She assures me that although they are rude and brusque on the outside, many of them are quite hospitable once you get to know them and they invite you into their homes. I appreciate and want to share her desire to see the best in people. At their best the Ukrainians are, like her, more direct, deeper and more spiritual than Americans.

Many secrets were revealed this morning. I was on my way to work, a bag of garbage in hand, pausing momentarily with a thought of just leaving it by the back door. As I was pondering the situation, the lady who had asked about the noise emerged from the elevator. She told me that things were terrible; bums were coming in off the street and sleeping in our stairwells. Though I did not tell her, I have not seen it in our building, and I use the stairs fairly often, whenever the elevator is occupied. Nonetheless, I have seen bums sleeping in stairwells around the city and know it is a problem.

She told me that they had stolen 10 books from her the night of the noise. She may have had them in the stairwell outside her apartment; that would not be an uncommon thing to do. She made sure that I knew the 911 number here, which is 102 for the police. She told me to call them if anything ever looked amiss. Then she told me that the back door is locked to keep bums out -- I would have to take my garbage around the corner to the big iron gate. She also told me that they changed the door codes because they assumed that the bums knew it. And, she politely asked me if I knew the new one.

I assured her that I would be vigilant in reporting any bums. I introduced myself, and she told me her name. Anna. I do not know her apartment, but it will be an opportunity to continue the conversation next time I see her. I'll give her my card and invite her to call if anything comes up, and also to keep me in the loop. I find it reassures that Tania is right -- although people are often suspicious of foreigners, considering us stupid because we do not speak the language terribly well or understand their impenetrable customs, this appears not to be a conspiracy against me.

You would say that there should be somebody in charge. I should know who to talk to, and they should be able to point me to somebody else. That just is not how it works here. It goes by personal relations. One woman to whom I told this story told me one of her own. She got some printing done for her company. The printer they use is in another part

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of town. The company driver simply never found it convenient to get to that part of town and pick up or printing. He does not like the traffic. She eventually went over on her own time and money to pick it up. The moral of her story -- nobody is in charge, and you often cannot hold people responsible for things they obviously ought to do.

As I reflect on Anna's story about her burglary, I need also to count my blessings. I live in the very center of a city of 4 million. The centers of American cities -- San Francisco's Tenderloin, New York's Times Square, Washington's Dupont Circle, Baltimore's inner Harbor, Oakland's Lake Merritt, Los Angeles' whatever - is there a center? -- are far more dangerous than I would care to risk. But here, one block from Independence Square, you have invisible thieves who break in and steal a couple of books. What American thief would bother with books?

I have never heard of anybody being held up on the street, much less being physically hurt in the process. The only people who get themselves murdered seem to invite it in one way or another. Getting involved in business dealings with the oligarchs, reporting about same, or persistently annoying high people in government. If you follow Soviet era wisdom and simply keep your head down you are pretty safe from physical harm.

Political correctness with regard to race is only slowly finding its way into Ukraine. The universities teach that all peoples are equal, but I do not think that the populace believes it. They believe themselves to be superior, and they would probably give a rank ordering to their inferiors. Fortunately we of European stock appear to fit at the top of their list. We are almost like, you know, people.

You occasionally hear stories of racially motivated crimes. Here it is mostly perpetrated on rather than by minorities. There are a lot of underemployed or unemployed skinheads simply looking for trouble. On the other hand, the identifiable minorities are so few that they do not represent anything close to a majority in any neighborhood I have seen. They do not have the critical mass to form gangs if they wanted to.

There are lots of Russians. Big deal -- half of Ukraine speaks Russian as a native language. There are quite a few Moldovans, Georgians, Belarusians, and former Soviets from the Stans, but they hardly stand out as minorities. They are pretty much like everybody else. There are quite a few Chinese students. They are like Chinese students everywhere, studying hard together and infrequently mixing with the natives. No problem there. My eyeball estimation is that the number of Africans has gone down appreciably in the year I have been here. When there is not enough work for the native born, they tend to show everybody else the door.

The only thing I know approaching a black neighborhood is the used clothing market down by Shulyavska. Africans run about half of the shops. Reflecting on the situation, I believe I used to see a great many more African men than women. There were a couple of women in a church I visited, with their husbands. But the majority are men, and there are very few marriages with Ukrainian women.

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Men without women tend to be transient. I assume a number of these guys are heading home .

On the subject of blacks, it is more common to see young black adults than babies. The young adults are presumably the product of mixed unions during the Soviet era, when policy was to invite African students. Those kids, incidentally, appear to be accepted on a par with everybody else. One young woman appears ready to join our Toastmasters club, and another is a member of the Rotary club I attend. Reflecting again, I do not remember seeing nearly as many young men of mixed parentage. I wonder if that is a story?

The bottom line of all this consideration is that there are no minority neighborhoods in Kiev, and for all that the people who live here will tell you that there are some bad parts of town, I rarely hear names mentioned and I could not offer a name myself. Both the racial homogeneity and the freedom from violent crime are very different from any city I know in the United States or Western Europe.