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Invisible Luggage: An Art-Based Ethnographic Study of Material Memory among Russian Antiwar Immigrants

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Let’s play a game...

What would you take to a deserted island?
Take a few minutes to pause and visualize your luggage.

Each of us has special objects we keep — or that keep us, along with our memories. The performative power of mnemonic objects is so strong that it transforms the space and time inhabited by their owner. In forced migration, the objects that connect people to home — or help shape the feeling of home — become especially important. When entering a new country, people bring only the bare essentials. Yet even in a carry-on or day-backpack, there’s always space for that one “irrational” item that preserves a connection to a past life — that becomes their invisible luggage.

Invisible Luggage is research adedicated to the stories of people facing the difficult choice of migration, reclaiming identity, and searching for home and a sense of belonging — told through objects of mnemonic memory.

My name is Julie Kaliuga, and I am a cross-disciplinary artist-researcher who create and run this project from independent community collaboration to honored scholar project at UC Berkeley. You are holding a photo book of Invisible Luggage Installation. It is both a small milestone and a manifesto for the future — the result of a great deal of work and yet just another step on a long journey.



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Drawers

Methodology

Context

Studio Work

Alla's Drawer
Lera's Drawer
Dara's Drawer
Lena's Drawer
Igor's Drawer
Mark's Drawer
Masha's Drawer
Vika's Drawer
Mathew's Drawer
Larisa's Drawer
Rosa's Drawer
Oksana's Drawer
Kristina's Drawer
Zina's Drawer
Sergei's Drawer
Ania's Drawer
Ksenia's Drawer
Yaroslav's Drawer

Invisible Luggage Installation





Methodology



I was using qualitative ethnographic methology with arts-based methods to explore how Mnemonic, non-utilitarian objects carried by Russian anti-war immigrants forced to flee to the United States function as material sites of memory that embody inner protest, cultural displacement, and nostalgia while also serving as acts of reclaiming identity and belonging in exile.

Through object-elicitation semi-structures interviews and thematic analysis, I explore how objects are activated by narrative and ritual use, translating private dissent into durable claims to identity and belonging. Deep conversations reveal how crucial language, hobby, and horizontal connections and friendship are for people, displaced by oppression, to reclaim their identities. The findings specify how material memory works under conditions of forced migration and why seemingly minor things carry disproportionate power in constructing home and belonging in exile.

В этом исследовании я использовала качественную этнографическую методологию в сочетании с арт-методами, чтобы понять, как мнемонические, неутилитарные объекты, которые российские антивоенные мигранты вынуждены были увезти с собой в Соединённые Штаты, становятся материальными «местами памяти». Эти объекты воплощают внутренний протест, отражают культурное отчуждение и ностальгию, одновременно помогая своим владельцам вновь обрести идентичность и чувство принадлежности в изгнании. Через объектно-инициированные полу-структурированные интервью и тематический анализ я исследовала, как объекты оживают в процессе нарративного и ритуального использования, превращая личный протест в устойчивые утверждения собственной идентичности и принадлежности. Глубокие беседы показали, насколько важны язык,



I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with immigrants from Russia who arrived in the US following the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war (2/24/2022), driven by political pressure and persecution. Being myself a part of the Russian anti-war movement, I focused on communities in the Bay Area and Los Angeles. During conversation my interlocutors shared with me how and why they made a decision to leave Russia and what they brought with them as special mnemonic objects. As part of collective art practice they shared with me photographs of these objects as they saw them and as they wished to picture them. My part was to assemble narratives and visuals into a research-based art installation.

увлечения, горизонтальные связи и дружба для людей, вытеснённых репрессивной системой, когда они восстанавливают своё чувство «я». Исследование также выявило, как действует материальная память в условиях вынужденной миграции и почему, казалось бы, незначительные вещи обладают непропорциональной силой в конструировании дома и ощущения принадлежности в изгнании.

Я провела 22 полу-структурированных интервью с иммигрантами из России, прибывшими в Соединённые Штаты после полномасштабной российско-украинской войны (24 февраля 2022 года), вынужденными покинуть страну под давлением политических репрессий и преследований. Будучи сама частью российского антивоенного движения, я сосредоточила внимание на сообществах в районе залива Сан-Франциско и Лос-Анджелеса. В ходе бесед мои собеседники рассказывали, как и почему они приняли решение покинуть Россию, а также что они привезли с собой в качестве особых мнемонических объектов. В рамках коллективной художественной практики они делились со мной фотографиями этих объектов — как они выглядели на самом деле и как они хотели их представить. Моя задача заключалась в том, чтобы объединить их рассказы и визуальные материалы в исследовательскую художественную инсталляцию.



Context

Post-Soviet Russian society is shaped by a complex relationship with memory, often marked by repression and ambiguity. In the work "I Never Talk", Geith writes that "in the absence of a narrative option, Gulag survivors developed creative, non-narrative ways to deal with their memories and experience." This underscores the importance of collecting oral histories from today's anti-war immigrants, particularly those forced into exile. Objects brought during migration carry performative power, activating cultural memory, connections to home, or the reconstruction of home in a new space.

Providing a deep and well-developed context for this work will not be easy, since describing the situation and its dynamics in Russia as of February 24, 2022 requires a separate study. I will focus only on the facts and data necessary for a better understanding of the context in which my respondents lived, worked, and planned their futures at the beginning of 2022.

There are no precise figures regarding Russians' attitudes toward the full-scale attack of Russian troops on Ukraine; Scholars across different disciplines agree that direct surveys on complex and sensitive topics in countries with low levels of civic agency and a strong controlling role of the state — such as Russia or China — are not effective. The numbers that quickly circulate through global media generate heated discussion, yet they have little to do with the reality in which people actually form and express their positions. A similar approach is necessary when examining attitudes toward the war in Ukraine. Researchers from PSLAB, who have been publishing analyses of Russian public sentiment since 2022, propose describing attitudes toward the war as a "continuum." As the conflict continues and political and economic circumstances shift, an individual's position may change or remain in a state of balance between different views.

Moreover, a single direct question rarely allows researchers to understand motivations, complex causal relationships, and the personal contexts that shape responses. For this reason, in-depth interviews are necessary, as they reveal the nuances and contradictions that lie behind simple answers such as "yes," "no," or "I don't know." If we compare, for example, numbers with people's argumentations one could find controversy or hesitations even in seemingly firm anti-war positions. For example, various surveys conducted shortly before or immediately after the invasion in 2022 indicated that more than half of Russia's population supported the invasion. According to surveys by different agencies, the percentage varies between 50 and 68. Those numbers surprised me but were perceived normally among my American friends and colleagues. It happened because predominantly the agenda was focused on what was happening on the Russian-Ukraine border rather than inside Russia.

On the day of the invasion of Ukraine, antiwar rallies began to take place across the country, in some places gathering large numbers of participants, and in others not so many. This fact depended on how close the actions were to Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Literally, the farther from big cities, the less protest potential was manifested. Russians made an attempt to express their disagreement with the fact that in their name a *"fratricidal war"* (Ania, 47 y.o., Saratov) had begun, that it was started by a *"president whom they did not elect"* (Igor, 30 y.o., Ufa), that *"war, in such a literal sense of physical destruction, is simply unthinkable in the 21st century"* (Alla, 30 y.o., closed military town in Siberia). Unlike many years before this, from the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the authorities in Russia acted with lightning speed in adopting repressive laws and enforcing them. One week after the announcement of the "special military operation" (newspeak used by Putin's government to avoid the word "war"), already on March 4 a law on amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation was adopted, where articles on the "discrediting of the Russian army" and the "dissemination of false information" appeared (popularly called the "fake news article"). Open expression of antiwar views became punishable under criminal law, protesters could receive up to 15 years in prison. Calling the actions of Russian troops in Ukraine a war becomes a crime. Using the new law on the dissemination of false information, broadcasting of foreign and independent from the Russian state media is blocked on the territory of the Russian Federation, such as BBC, Deutsche Welle, Meduza (the Russian-language media was officially registered in Latvia), the largest TV channel Dozhd and the radio station Echo of Moscow also ceased their broadcasting for the safety of employees. By March 21, 2022, by decision of a Moscow court, the company Meta (Facebook & Instagram) were recognized as "extremist" for temporarily allowing hate speech toward the Russian military in Ukraine and were finally blocked. More than 150 journalists had to flee Russia. Military censorship and practically an informational blockade by the state began in the country. Nevertheless, in the first days of the war Russians went out to antiwar protests.

According to OVD-Info "during 17 days of antiwar protests more than 14 thousand people were detained, including minors, lawyers, journalists." Law enforcement officers, or as they were nicknamed "cosmonauts," brutally dispersed protesters and applied harsh measures during detention. The organization Amnesty International shared a record of one of those detained on March 6 at protests in Moscow with a policeman, he said "It's over. Putin is on our side. You are the enemies of Russia. You are the enemies of the people." He then said "we're gonna kill you all here and that's it. We'll get another reward for it" as they dragged her by her hair and smashed her in the face with a plastic water bottle." The scale of protests directly correlates with geography: in large cities protests were spontaneous and more massive (Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Yekaterinburg), in small cities, as well as in the capitals of Republics, the protest movement did not take place. This is confirmed by the stories of interviewees, where a clear division between Moscow and the Regions is visible. For example, two interviewees who lived in Moscow at the time of February 2022 said the following

Katya, 40 y.o., Moscow *"I left the children at home and went to Pushkinskaya Square, there was supposed to be a rally there".*

Sergei, 35 y.o., Moscow *"I knew that a rally was taking place, but my daughter had just been born. After conversations with my wife, we made the decision that we cannot take such a risk, if I am detained, there will be no one to help her".*

Lyuda, 33 y.o. Moscow *"My husband and I decided to go to one of the rallies, we prepared, deleted everything from our phones and went. We decided not to agitate any of our friends, at that moment it was already dangerous and we decided that everyone makes the decision for themselves, weighing all the risks. And this is normal. We were going and we were afraid".*

A diametrically opposite situation occurred with my interviewees from Ufa, Ulan-Ude and a small closed Siberian town

Igor, 29 y.o., Ufa: *"I printed an antiwar poster at work. I hid it under my jacket and went. I knew that you cannot drive by car directly to the center, where the rally is, so I left the car and went on foot. But when I came to the place where the rally was supposed to be, there were only "cosmonauts" and an empty, just empty square. I felt terribly depressed at that moment, but I was not ready to take out the poster and hold a single-person picket. I walked around and left".*

Dara, 30 y.o., Ulan-Ude: *"My husband wanted to go to a rally, but no one held them here. Everything was quiet".*

At the same time "indirect" protests begin to take place, the activities of Vesna become widely spread, individual creative performances and metaphorical, as I called it, protest. For example, Sasha Skochilenko, an artist and activist, was arrested in 2022 for changing the price tags in a supermarket to "price tags" with information of actions of the Russian military in Mariupol. Or, for example, single-person pickets with A4 format printouts with stars instead of the phrase "NO WAR". Another creative approach to protests was wearing in public places a volume of L.A. Tolstoy "War and Peace". But these actions were also considered dangerous by the government, one of such picketers was detained. The repressive machine was gaining momentum and could no longer stop, penetrating deeper and deeper into the social fabric of Russian society.

School became one of the most effective institutions of manipulation and pressure on Russians. Interviewees who had children all noted strong pressure from the administration of educational institutions. For some this became the last straw in the decision to leave the country. In this context it is impossible not to mention the demonstrative and widely publicized case of Alexei Moskalev, a single father who was sentenced to a real two-year term in a penal colony for an antiwar drawing by his thirteen-year-old daughter in a school lesson. The girl was reported by a teacher, and the higher administration gave full course to the investigation under the article "on discrediting the army." Interestingly, a similar situation happened in the family of one of my respondents, which will be discussed later in the work. The tightening of control over freedom of speech and mass communication, repressive laws directed against those who disagree with Putin's policies, the merging of the concepts of "state/power" and Motherland, and the distorted understanding of patriotism on this basis, make open anti-system protest in Russia dangerous both for its initiator and participants, and for members of their families (for example, the orphanage where Masha Moskaleva ended up until the moment her mother took her for temporary residence).

The tightening of the regime in relation to dissenting citizens or any other non-systemic groups only confirms the authorities' awareness of their unlawful actions. At the same time, it would also be incorrect to assert that the absence of mass protests directly correlates with mass support for Putin's actions in Ukraine (and not only). As mentioned above, an authoritarian, or structurally close to it, state, it is not possible to objectively assess social moods in society and its attitude toward certain events because of fear of being punished for a different opinion. This context is important for the further content of the research, as it is directly connected with the respondents' decision to leave Russia. In conditions of the impossibility of openly speaking out against the war, respondents, who only yesterday had not planned to leave, were forced to migrate because of fear for their family and for themselves personally due to their open anti-war position, because of fear of being mobilized and forced to kill in the war, because of persecution on religious grounds and unwillingness to inform on members of their community. At the same time, many noted that the decision to immigrate was "the one and only correct" decision in the existing realities. Just like the fear of self-preservation, physical, also the fear of losing oneself in the moral-ethical sense. As Sergei, 30 y.o, Moscow, described it, *"it was an internal unwillingness to negotiate with myself and remain silent".*

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Army

My interlocutors left Russia not by choice in pursuit of improved economic opportunities, but because of direct political persecution and pressure, or the potential threat of it. At present, all participants in the project are in the United States either as refugees or as asylum seekers. Some passed through immigration detention, while others did not, and only one of the respondents was able to enter the United States on a tourist visa.

Forced migration differs from, for example, labor migration or family-based immigration and reunification in that people leave without knowing where they will ultimately settle or how soon they will arrive at their final destination. Decisions are made under conditions of significant personal risk, instability, and uncertainty. In most cases, people are unprepared for relocation organizationally, economically, and emotionally. Refugees often have to urgently give away or sell their possessions, leave property under the care of relatives or friends, close their businesses, or appoint someone to manage them for an indefinite period of time. All respondents used the phrase "the planning horizon has narrowed" to two weeks or even a couple of days describing their life pace. People did not understand how to make plans in this new reality, whether it was even possible to do so, and, most importantly, whether it made sense to plan at all. Despite this, life did not stop. Instead, it became more spontaneous, more rhythmic, and therefore more anxious. Respondents recall being constantly immersed in the news flow about the progress of the war, searching for information about potential destinations for relocation, and preparing the necessary documents.

Vadim, 30 y.o., Moscow: *"We bought random tickets [to Cyprus]so… which we later had to cancel. ... Anyway, it was a complete mess, to put it briefly. And, naturally, I didn't speak to anyone — not my mom, not my sisters, nor any other relatives. I simply sent a message saying I'd left while I was already on my way to the airport. All in all, the feelings I had were absolutely wretched".*

Some of the interlocutors had never previously held international passports. This corresponds with information from open sources citing the Ministry of Internal Affairs: in 2022, Russian citizens obtained more than 5.4 million international passports, which was 40% more than in the previous year. Migration from Russia in 2022 exceeded 1.5 million people, with two major peaks — immediately after the beginning of the war (February – March) and after the announcement of general mobilization in September. Such public behavior indicates low support for the war among the population, as well as an unwillingness both to kill and to be killed in a foreign war.

At the time of writing this work (March 2026), the war has been ongoing for more than four years, and the landscape of migration and the motivations behind migration continue to change under the influence of economic and political factors, both external and internal. It should be openly acknowledged that the attitude of host states toward Russian refugees differs from their attitude toward refugees from other countries. This is primarily expressed through the imposition of economic sanctions on Russian citizens in general, restrictions in banking services for residents of the Russian Federation, and the unpopularity of launching special migration programs to grant asylum to anti-war Russians. I consider these to be external factors.

Internal factors, in turn, relate to the situation within Russia, which has increasingly begun to affect citizens' ability to move freely beyond the country's borders. As mentioned earlier, Russians are subjected to growing pressure for any form of protest, even the most minor (an assessment made from the perspective of 2026). Mobility has been significantly restricted by amendments adopted in April 2023 to Federal Law No. 53 "On Military Duty and Military Service" and related legislative acts. These changes were aimed at the digitalization of draft notices: a summons is now considered delivered at the moment it is published in a special electronic registry, and monitoring this registry is the responsibility of the individual. Failure to appear at a military commissariat within twenty days may result in a ban on driving vehicles, obtaining loans, and conducting transactions involving real estate or vehicles. In addition, from the moment a summons is issued, a ban on leaving the Russian Federation comes into effect, and the individual's international passport must be surrendered within five working days. It should also be noted that since the beginning of 2024, the conscription age in Russia has been raised to 30 years (previously 27 years). By 2026, conscription became year-round, compared to the previous system of two periods: the spring draft (April 1 to July 15) and the autumn draft (October 1 to December 31). As a result, young men of conscription age often find themselves in a legal trap: once a summons is issued, their ability to travel abroad and avoid conscription is effectively blocked.

Military service in Russia is mandatory and is stated as a constitutional duty of citizens (Article 59 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation). In conversations with informants, the topic of the army and attitudes toward it frequently emerged. For example, Larisa (42, Moscow) supported compulsory military service before the outbreak of open military hostilities.

"Compulsory service in peacetime is not an issue — let one go, let one serve in the army; I believe all boys should serve. But not to kill, and... NO."

Informants who served in the Russian army, in contrast, expressed negative opinions about war in general and about army in particular.

Vadim, 30 y.o., Moscow: *"I served in the army, whereas my colleagues did not. And people who haven't served tend to hold idealized notions about military life, honestly. They harbor all sorts of patriotic, propaganda-fueled ideas: that "our" army is a valiant force, while the "enemy's" army is inherently bad. Or that war itself is... well, just like it is in the movies — with all of us charging forward, shouting "Hurrah!" and so on. And, by and large, I gather that these people held similar notions regarding conflicts as well".*

General mobilization started in September 2022 served as a

second impetus for another wave of forced migration among, predominantly, male population.

Fiodor (37 y.o., Moscow): *"The announcement of this mobilization, if I'm not mistaken, was on September 21st. By the 23rd, I already had a ticket, because I was afraid the border would close. And fundamentally, the very idea that I would have to run away from someone — that, theoretically, I would have to join the ranks of this "valiant" army — was probably the final straw for me. And deep down, I suppose, had it not been for that, I wouldn't have left at all. But that really was the last straw".*

Respondents categorically rejected the possibility of participating in military actions. These two excerpts are particularly interesting because, in both cases, the men use the adjective valiant (doblestnyi) in two opposing connotations. In the first case, it reflects the romanticization of war, the army, and the image of the soldier; in the second, it implies a meaning entirely contrary to the word's conventional sense. For the purposes of this study, this is an important linguistic detail that reveals differing perceptions of the army and, by extension, of the war among various segments of the population.

The word itself can typically be applied only to an individual possessing a specific set of qualities, such as courage, bravery, selflessness, and nobility. By employing such a powerful word, respondents are not describing their attitude toward the army as an institution but rather toward a particular community of people. Vadim explains what he sees as the mistaken belief among supporters of the war: that the Russian army is valiant—that it courageously fights the enemy for a just cause and therefore cannot be in the wrong; in this view, all of its soldiers are heroes. This forms part of a broader propaganda narrative in which any participant in the war is automatically considered a hero. Within this framework, one senses a certain dilution of meaning and a "conveyor-belt effect," since neither the goals of the war nor its causes or enemies are clearly defined. In such circumstances, it becomes difficult to demonstrate genuine heroism, bravery, or self-sacrifice, and thus mere participation in the war is framed as an act of heroism.

For Fiodor, the phrase "valiant army" carries a negative connotation. It functions as sarcasm directed at the pro-war position described above — an expression of criticism and rejection. Opposing the ideals of "courage and honor" are cowardice and moral weakness. In this instance as well, we observe a description of a community of people — of the army as a social group — rather than of an institution. The respondent cannot imagine becoming part of an organization that contradicts his internal moral principles, which ultimately leads to the decision to emigrate. What we see here is a de-romanticization of war, expressed through the perception of the army's actions as immoral, inhumane, and dishonorable. At first glance, this example might appear to illustrate a clear and easily understandable division between "good" and "bad" "Russians." Nevertheless, the situation is not as polarized as it may seem.

I intentionally place the word "Russian" in quotation marks because in English there is one word for Russian citizens and Russian as an ethnicity group while Russian citizens contain a wide range of nationalities and ethnicities. It is vital as the ethnic imbalance within the active Russian army is enormous, including among irrecoverable losses. According to data published by Mediazona, among those killed in the first months of the war, representatives of national republics — particularly Buryatia and Dagestan — were disproportionately represented. One of the reasons for this lies in the economic conditions in these regions, where the army has long functioned — and continues to function — as an important socio-economic mobility channel for young men. Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, contract service in the military in these regions was often regarded as a viable alternative to employment involving unskilled labor. Dara,30 y.o., interlocutor from Buryatia, Ulan-Ude, described the situation in the republic in the following way:

"There are many units stationed there, and here in Buryatia, one in every five people — well, one in every five men — has served in the army under contract. I have so many acquaintances and former classmates who are currently serving under contract. But right now, I don't know if they are alive or not. I also have a great many acquaintances from college, too. In fact, it feels as though our entire region of Buryatia is practically a military town…"

According to her account, a young man in Ulan-Ude — the largest city in Buryatia and its capital — has only a few possible paths after finishing college: working as a security guard, a taxi driver, taking rotational work in other regions ("Yakutsk, Vladivostok, Neryungri"), or signing a military contract. The army was not perceived as something specifically military but rather as an ordinary job with an undefined, sometimes nonsensical, set of tasks: "… they made identical snow piles, scooped water out of puddles with shovels, painted bricks, stood in formation, that's all." The salary before 2022 ranged from 50,000 to 60,000 rubles ($675–810 monthly). For comparison, the median salary in Buryatia in 2021 was just over 21,000 rubles per month ($283.7 monthly). At the same time, the region was experiencing one of the highest levels of unemployment in Russia and a significant outflow of population (and, as a consequence, low birth rates). Dara shared a memorable story from her life:

"I remember this situation. I ran into him [a classmate], and I asked him what he was doing. He replied, 'Guess.' I was confused — what do you mean, guess? How could I guess? I said I didn't know. He laughed and answered, 'I'm serving on a contract, that's what!'"

This story illustrates how military service functioned as a simple and understandable choice for young men and was associated more with material and social benefits than with political convictions or patriotism. Therefore, when the full-scale war began and contract soldiers were offered 150,000 – 180,000 rubles ($2,027 – 2,432 monthly) rubles per month (by 2026 this amount had risen to 210,000 rubles, which equivalent $2,333), many residents of the republic saw this as an opportunity to improve their difficult economic situation rather than as an expression of support for the war. In addition to these monthly payments, a system of "bonuses" for signing contracts was introduced. Like the salaries, these payments increased substantially during the war — from 200,000 ($2702) in 2022 to 1,600,000 rubles ($17,777) by 2026. This dynamic indicates the unpopularity of the war among Russian citizens and the absence of genuine ideological support for it. Unfortunately, there are many regions in Russia similar to the Republic of Buryatia.

Yaroslav (30 y.o.) from Ussuriysk, the second-largest city in Primorsky Krai, who enrolled the army immediately after finishing school, recounts:

"I went straight into the army after school. You have to understand the context. Ussuriysk is not the most prosperous city; in fact, it's a small town. It used to have around 120,000 residents — now probably even fewer. Apart from going to work at a factory and drinking in the evenings, there wasn't much else to do. Sometimes you could go to China if you had money; if you didn't, then you couldn't. Young people were largely left to themselves, and if you didn't want to get punched in the face, you had to be able to punch back. Naturally, sooner or later everyone had encounters with the police. I was no exception, and the police told me: you're the right age, so here are your options—because of what you did, you can either go to prison now or go to the army. This was long before the war started, and even then this system was already in place. Naturally, I chose the army".

The system built in Russia under Putin over several decades has not contributed to the development of the regions, thereby producing vast populations dependent on state subsidies. In On Revolution, Hannah Arendt describes poverty as an irresistible force, "since its source lies in the biological needs of human beings." She recalls the march of the women to Versailles, which became a legendary symbol of the French Revolution, and cites Lord Acton's assessment of the event. In his view, the women's actions "gave the strength of a diamond drill to ideas they neither understood nor supported." I see a similar dynamic between the gradual impoverishment of entire republics and the active signing of military contracts by men placed within difficult conditions of survival. For many of them, going to war becomes the only available means of addressing the economic needs of their families rather than an expression of solidarity with the political course, military actions, or the crimes associated with them.

As the financial compensation for contract service increased, so too did the duration of the war and the population's awareness of the horrors taking place there. As in Yaroslav's example, other interlocutors shared experiences of how their relatives were threatened with being sent to the front. For many Russians, the war in Ukraine ceased to appear as an honorable mission that people voluntarily joined; instead, it became a tool of pressure and punishment. For example, Larisa (43, Moscow) described how her son was threatened with being sent to the front for refusing to attend college:

"…my son enrolled in a college that trains specialists for the military-industrial complex. I told him, you will not go to that college anymore. He asked why. I said, because there they will teach you things that kill Ukrainians. I said I am against that. So we stopped going to that college. The homeroom teacher kept calling and calling and calling. I kept postponing the conversation. Eventually they summoned me to the college. I told them he was sick, or going through adolescence, and so on. And then they started threatening me. 'You understand that if we expel him, he will be sent to the special military operation.'"

War is presented here as an instrument of pressure and intimidation. It serves as an indirect expression of a negative attitude toward war and its stigmatization. Despite propaganda, recruitment campaigns promoting military service, and the internalization of such messages through the school system, the army in contemporary Russia does not command respect. Rather, it tends to evoke sympathy for conscripts and indifference toward contract soldiers. Within society, a normalization of duality is taking shape: for instance, students at technical colleges may be actively involved in the military-industrial complex, yet direct participation in war would remain an unpopular choice.

This ambivalence is also reflected in the actions of teachers, for whom the army is not seen as a reward for courageous young men who have distinguished themselves, but rather as a place of exile or punishment, comparable to imprisonment. One may draw a very tentative analogy between the stigmatization of prison and the stigmatization of war in contemporary Russia. These concepts have grown closer in character not only because of the large-scale recruitment of violent offenders from prisons, but also because contracts are effectively indefinite and those who return carry the social stigma of being "Heroes of the Special Military Operation." Much like former prisoners, they are not eagerly invited into employment, admitted to universities, or granted credit. The army and war have thus come to resemble punishment rather than a constitutional duty—an economic compulsion to sell one's life rather than a patriotic impulse to sacrifice it for the homeland.

For example, Oksana (45 years old, from a small town in southern Russia) describes the moment when her husband had to leave the country:

"…they urgently needed people with combat experience, because when my husband was twenty he had been drafted during the Second Chechen War and served there as a communications specialist. That is, he maintained communications—he was responsible for setting up the lines and everything related to that. Then, roughly speaking, about two weeks before the mobilization—October 9, 2022, if I remember correctly—my husband was called to the HR department. It was a Friday evening, I remember it very clearly. They told him he needed to come in and sign some kind of order. He went in, and they handed him a summons. A summons to the military commissariat, where he was required to report on Monday morning at the district center, with his belongings and everything else. After that I understood that, well, that was it. Life would never be the same again. We had only twenty-four hours. All the airports in southern Russia were closed. The closest open one was in Mineralnye Vody, and it

took almost a full day to get there."

I do not possess the expertise necessary to compare the Second Chechen War with the present one; however, I would cautiously suggest that among many former Russian servicemen, the understanding of the actual nature of contemporary warfare may remain limited.



Invisible Luggage

Digital Collage, 2025

Objects

Participants gladly showed what special things they had brought with them and told stories connected with these objects. In some cases, rare ones, interviewees could not at first clearly determine what exactly "so valuable" they had brought with them. Only in the process of conversation were they able to identify this object and suddenly begin emotionally telling the story connected with it.

Earlier we examined Gell's concept of the agency of objects and their interaction with one another. In the research we study the agency of objects and how their perception changed in the process of migration, how interactions between interviewees and their objects changed before migration, during the journey, and after settling in a new state.

Objects can conditionally be divided into several conditional groups: physical objects, sensory objects, objects connected with religious and spiritual practices, hobbies/interests/friendship, and language. This division is proposed exclusively in order to examine in more detail how relationships with objects, their perception and meaning in the lives of interviewees change. Each of the groups does not exist in a vacuum and objects possess various characteristics simultaneously. For example, children's вещи brought along were at the same time practical clothing used in everyday life, and when the baby grew up, they acquired a new status of a commemorative object that connects with moments of the past, when the interviewee, still being in Russia, received a certificate to a popular clothing store from friends and was preparing for childbirth. The smell of these things, the possibility to touch them, to go through them once again create a physical connection with that life which the war destroyed. Objects in the groups can combine several performative properties and this division is highly conditional.



Physical Objects

Separating the group "physical objects," I may contradict myself. Beginning from the premise that everything ultimately embodies itself in physical form: from memory to friendship, it turns out that everything around us is physical objects possessing performative properties. In fact, our life is highly fetishized, however we easily sell and buy clothing, participate in book crossing and clothes swaps, give old sofas to recycle or carefully place on the roadside items that may still serve someone. Not everything that surrounds us possesses special meaning, but why is it sometimes so difficult for a person to part with certain objects to such an extent that instead of practical clothing half of the only suitcase is occupied by the mother's wedding dress. I will attempt to understand what endows objects with agency, animates them and transfers them from the category of "commodity" to the category of "keepsake," "memory token," and gives them a new life and biography. This is not a one-directional process; objects also influence their owners and through owners the people around them. In the group "physical objects" I placed photographs, family archives, jewelry, drawings, diaries, clothing. It can be said that everything that cannot be attributed to the category of religion and spiritual practices fell into it.



Religious and Spiritual Practics

Objects connected with religious and spiritual practices, in my view, must be выделены into a special group. They possess strong magical properties of protection, assistance, and connection with the immaterial world of gods, spirits, and ancestors. In the research, this category included: baptismal sets of the entire family, the Horologion, a great-grandmother's Bible written in Old Church Slavonic, poppy seeds charmed by a shaman, earth from under the foundation of a house, a kippah, mother's rosary beads. A person's system of beliefs may be either an inseparable part of socio-cultural heritage or a conscious individual choice made at a more mature age. It is important to consider them separately and through their material embodiment to see the interaction of people with their identity.

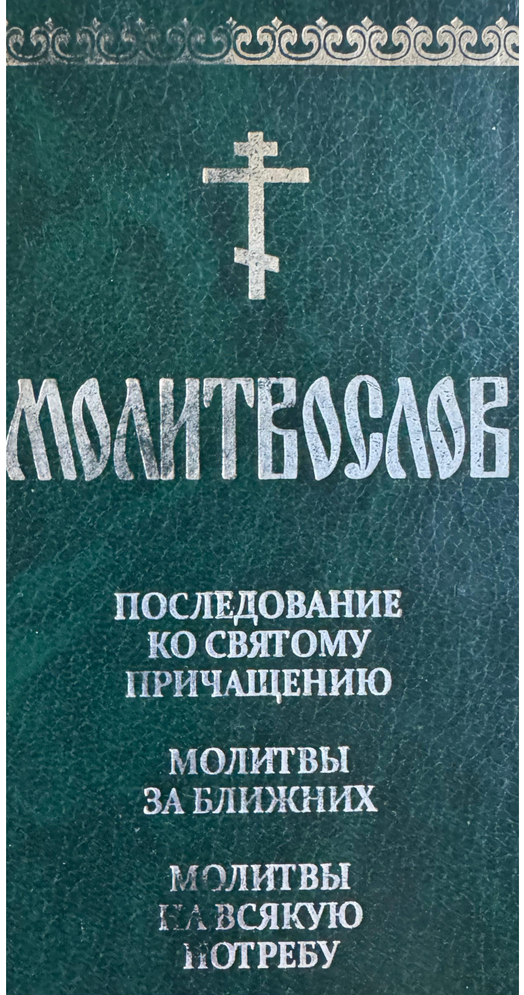
In this work I will partially use a semiotic approach to the analysis of objects, since in the course of developing the work I saw that in some cases precisely symbols of faith, such as an Orthodox cross or a kippah, for example, were necessary for the formation of a new identity. In some cases, these objects will highlight problems of racism in contemporary Russia, when the choice of religion becomes a form of rejection of one's identity and an attempt to become part of the culture of the titular race. In other cases, they will open the rich and diverse world of shamanism in contemporary Russian society and how forced migration forms an environment of tolerance and acceptance of "other" spiritual practices. Representatives of different confessions allow the possibility of participation in each other's rituals if it brings collective luck in crossing the border, searching for housing or work. Thus, for a time an organic environment is formed in which interaction of practices is not only not impeded, but encouraged.

Sensorium

The sensory category is highly conditional and rather is a development and supplement to the group of physical objects. However, it is necessary to outline it, since smells and tastes are an important component of the work of memory, intergenerational connection and part of the cultural code. In social art practice, interactions with tastes and smells as part of the building material of identity are very common.

Hobby and Friendship

The forth category "Hobbies and friendship" was not initially intended and was formed in the course of research, when it became obvious that some things were taken precisely as an opportunity to continue engaging in something that was not part of permanent work and



that brought pleasure to interviewees. This was part of their personal development and the circle of interests and connections they created outside family and business relations. Thus, objects might not be directly connected with family history, archives or spiritual practices, but represented an important part of a person's everyday personal life and expanded our understanding of how free time was organized, how horizontal social ties were built and developed through shared interests. In this part of the research I will analyze the materiality of friendly rituals and personal hobbies and how war and emigration influenced their perception. For example, Igor brought with him a gift set of dice, since during the pandemic he became interested in board games. Over time, Igor formed a group of friends with whom they gathered every Tuesday and played Dungeons & Dragons. Knowing his passion for the game, friends gave him an exclusive set of dice specifically for this game in a beautiful wooden box. As Igor himself recounts, he took them with him and for a long time tried to find a safe place in the car so that the box would not be damaged or scratched. Another interviewee, Rosa, brought with her a professional camera. Like Igor, she found a new hobby during the pandemic and focused on photographing animals. Before the war Rosa was a volunteer at a dog shelter and began taking professional photographs for pets seeking owners. Already in emigration she uses her skills to help a local shelter, which psychologically helps her not to "go crazy" (Rosa interview). The possibility to continue engaging in one's hobby — photographing, playing board games, running, painting — is a reconstruction of the normal course of life before forced emigration through familiar and previously repeatable actions and rituals. Through analysis of these objects or actions it is possible to see the process of adaptation and formation of new connections or, on the contrary, rethinking the meaning of friendship. There occurs a materialization of the time that people devoted to themselves. For example, Lera's diary brought with her is connected precisely with moments of being alone with herself; it is directly connected with a place, with a home to which there is no longer a possibility to return. Entries in the diary transport one to the past, when "you turned on Dud', poured a glass of wine and could simply be with yourself."

Language

Language, which materialized in books in Russian, forms the last group of objects that I will consider separately. Linguistic anthropology is a vast and productive field, especially in the context of migration studies, saving or reconstruction of identity and generational and cultural memory. Demand for books in Russian outside Russia began to grow rapidly starting in 2022. This was facilitated by several factors beyond migration itself. As Felix Sandalov, CEO of StraightForward Foundation, notes, persecution of writers and journalists and their forced migration formed both demand and supply for the emergence of "publishing houses in exile." This trend became a kind of protest action against the prohibition of activity and increasingly intensifying censorship at home, as well as an opportunity to help each other survive in difficult conditions. Many interviewees at the moment of departure possessed their own libraries. For example, Lera asked her parents to take her entire library and took only one book by Aksyonov with her on the journey. Elena, an artist from Moscow, took several books for children in Russian, and for herself took the memoirs of Countess Wrangel, which described the "White emigration" of the early 1920s. Mark, a resident of Saint Petersburg, managed to buy the last book by Boris Akunin "Peace and War" on the eve of the author's ban in Russia.

"То есть, 19 декабря утром эта книга была в магазине, а 20 декабря все. Акунина в России больше не купить".

"That is, on December 19 in the morning this book was in the store, and on December 20 that's it. You can no longer buy Akunin in Russia."

He carefully took the receipt with the date and the book with him on the journey to America, although he "has not read electronic books for about 10 years." Mark honestly admitted that he still has not read the book; for him it is not so much a book as an objectification of Russia as a country.

"Для меня, знаете, эта книга, я ее, честно говоря, до сих пор не прочитал. Вообще ее никто не читал. Там еще, кстати, я заметил. Для меня эта книга, это, собственно говоря, вот наша страна, умная, красивая, интересная, и она запрещенная."

"For me, you know, this book, I honestly still haven't read it. In fact no one has read it. There, by the way, I noticed. For me this book is, in fact, our country, intelligent, beautiful, interesting, and it is prohibited."

Objects & Stories

Alla



И я взяла только те фотографии, которые у меня были на тот момент. То есть это все, что от папы осталось. То есть это его фотоальбомы. И я в его фотоальбомах искала что-то похожее, что я могу взять с собой. И поэтому в его фотоальбомах было намного меньше подходящих мне вещей. Но там была фотография меня маленькой, где мне 5 лет, и она у него стояла очень долго в рамочке. Я была уже большой девочкой, а у него все еще стояла вот эта фотка. По большей части потому, что у него не было моих нормальных фото, когда я была взрослая. И когда мне уже было, ну, сколько-то лет, он сказал, ты мне вообще фотки-то обнови, мне принеси хоть какие-нибудь свои фотографии. Мне, конечно, нравится эта фотка, но ты вроде как уже переросла, дай мне что-нибудь новенькое. И я взяла вот эту фотку маленькую, которая у него долго-долго стояла. Это фотография, где мы с ним вместе тоже. Я тут совсем себе не нравлюсь в каком-то комбинезоне, свитере, какой-то замученный, не приодетый ребенок, но папа тут красивый. Мы возле какой-то клумбы, раньше люди фотались у клумб. Поэтому, да, это одна из тех немногих цветных фоток. Я решила, ну и ладно, возьму ее, пусть я тут и в каких-то ужасных штанах, как будто они ватные, хотя это лето, я не понимаю, почему меня так тепло одели.

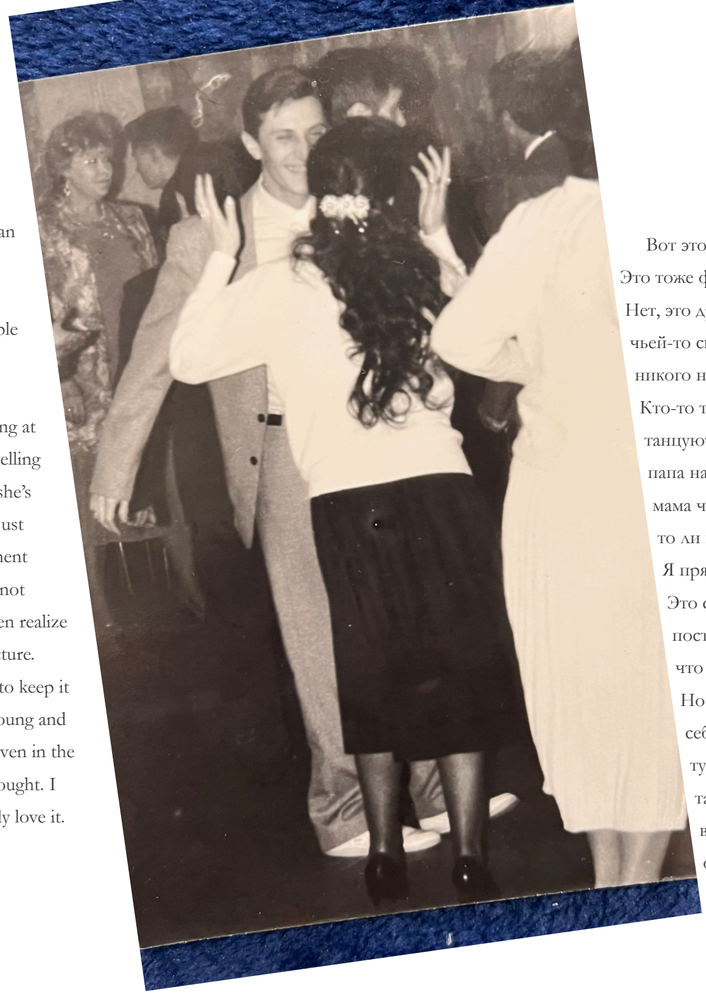
I only took the photos I had at the time. Basically, it's all that's left of my dad—his photo albums. I looked through them for something meaningful I could take with me, but there wasn't much that fit what I was looking for. There was one photo of me when I was five years old; he had kept it in a frame for a very long time. Even when I was all grown up, he still had that same photo out. Mostly because he didn't have any decent photos of me as an adult. When I was older, he eventually said, "You should really update these for me — bring me some recent photos. I love this one, of course, but you've outgrown it; give me something new."

So I took that little photo that had sat there for so long. It's one of us together. I don't like how I look in it at all — I'm in some jumpsuit and a sweater, looking like a tired, poorly dressed kid—but my dad looks handsome. We're standing by a flowerbed; people used to take photos by flowerbeds back then. It's one of the few color photos we had. I thought, 'Oh well, I'll take it,' even if I am wearing those awful pants — they look like they're padded, and I have no idea why they dressed me so warmly for summer.





This is actually my absolute favorite photo. It's also from... wait, no, it's a different one, also from someone's wedding. You can hardly see anyone clearly; my mom has her back to the camera. There are people dancing all around them. They're in the middle of a dance, and my dad is looking at her, laughing. My mom is telling him something, or maybe she's singing — I don't know. I just fell in love with it the moment I saw it. It's a candid shot, not posed at all. They don't even realize someone is taking their picture. But it's so great that I had to keep it for myself. They look so young and happy here. And I wasn't even in the picture yet—not even a thought. I don't know why, I just really love it.



Вот это вообще моя любимая фотка. Это тоже фотография, скорее всего... Нет, это другая фотография, тоже с чьей-то свадьбы.Здесь вообще почти никого не видно, мама тут спиной. Кто-то танцует, какие-то люди вокруг танцуют. Вот они что-то танцуют, папа на нее смотрит, смеется. И вот мама что-то там ему то ли объясняет, то ли может быть поет, то ли что-то. Я прям ее когда увидела в любви.. Это случайная фотография, она не постановшая. Они даже не видят, что их кто-то фотографирует. Но она такая классная, что я себе ее сохранила. Они прям тут молодые, счастливые. И там еще меня совсем нету даже в проекте. Но вот не знаю, очень она мне нравится.

Lera

Не туристы и не местные.
Не свои и не чужие.
Будущее неизвестное,
Все сначала, все впервые.

Планы все невыполнимые
Там теперь, за океаном.
Там родные и любимые.
Тут - пол-сердца с чемоданом.

Там - дом сердцу дорогой,
Счастье, молодость и воля.
Тут - от старой жизни той
Пара платьев с комом в горле.

Боль утихнет, все наладится
Через месяцы и годы.
Вытерпим все неурядицы
Ради жизни и свободы.

12/22/2022

Not tourists, yet not locals either.
Not quite our own, nor strangers yet.
The future is a blurred horizon,
A brand-new start, a world reset.

All the plans we made are broken,
Across the ocean, far behind.
The ones we love are over there,
While here, half a heart is all we find.

There—is the home our hearts still cherish,
Our youth, our freedom, and our joy.
Here—the life we left is just
A few old clothes and a lump in the throat.

The pain will fade, the dust will settle,
Through months and years, we'll find our way.
We'll brave the storms and the struggle,
For life and freedom, come what may.

12/22/2022

Если, допустим, те вещи, которые я покупаю здесь, которые нам дарят, они переходят дальше, то те, которые я оттуда привезла, я не хочу не сюда. Я хочу вот потом лет через энное количество достать их и посмотреть и вспомнить, короче, как был наш приезд, как мы жили в России, как Егорка там в этих вещах в России ходил. Это не о купленных, я сейчас говорю о тех, которые... Это лёгкая грусть. Что-то связанное... Наверное, не очень правильно говорить, что была какая-то прошлая жизнь и есть настоящая, но что-то вот про вот это, что как будто что-то из прошлой жизни, что-то такое, какая-то ниточка связующая меня с тем, что было. Потому что иногда кажется... Сейчас я ещё не работаю, и у меня там нет какой-то супербурной жизни, но уже сейчас иногда мне кажется, что того всего, как будто бы не было, или как будто это было вообще в другой жизни. Тактильно, визуально... Ты знаешь, да, я сейчас понимаю, что хотя бы раз в неделю я из ящика могу достать и перебирать их, посмотреть, погладить как-то, посмотреть, может быть, ещё что-то туда сложить, проверить на месте ли они какие-то такие свои.



If, let's say, the things I buy here or the gifts we receive — if those just move on and get used up — then the things I brought from there... I don't want them to just blend in. I want to be able to take them out years from now, look at them, and remember. To remember our arrival, how we lived in Russia, how Egorka used to run around in those clothes back home. I'm not talking about things I just bought; I'm talking about... it's a quiet kind of sadness. Something connected to... it's probably not right to say there was a 'past life' and now a 'present one,' but it feels like that. Like those things are from a past life—a thread connecting me to everything that was. Because sometimes it feels... since I'm not working yet and my life isn't exactly 'busy,' it already feels like all of that never happened, or like it happened in a completely different lifetime. Tactilely, visually... You know, I realize now that at least once a week, I'll pull them out of the drawer and just go through them. I look at them, smooth them out with my hands, maybe add something new to the pile, or just check that they're still there. My things.

Вот эта неделя, она была очень тяжёлая. Это я тоже прям помню такими моментами. Что, допустим, я мыла квартиру, в которой мы жили на тот момент с мужем. Не стала даже швабру брать. Мне хотелось вот прям руками касаться всего в ней. Там, пол этот мыть, выдраивать. Я просто мыла и тоже рыдала. Я прям помню тот момент, как я мою эту квартиру и рыдаю. И здесь столько моментов мне и прошло счастливых. Егора сюда принесли с роддома. И вот мы вынуждены уезжать. Вот.

That week... it was so incredibly hard. I still remember it in these vivid flashes. Like, for instance, how I was cleaning the apartment where my husband and I were living at the time. I didn't even want to use a mop. I just wanted to feel everything in there with my own hands. I wanted to wash and scrub every inch of that floor. I just cleaned and sobbed. I can still see myself in that moment, washing that apartment and crying my eyes out. So many of my happy memories happened right there. That's where we brought Egor home from the









Dara

Я взяла все свои украшения, несколько фотографий. Мы буддисты, и мы взяли еще с собой землю. Шаманка сказала, чтобы мы взяли землю из дома, из-под фундамента, потому что это земля, на которой ты родился, рос, жил. Я вышла замуж, значит, я не своей семьи уже ребенок, я уже принадлежу к роду мужа, и поэтому мне нужно от его рода просить поддержку.

I took all my jewelry and several photographs. We are Buddhists, and we also brought some earth with us. The shaman told us to take earth from home — specifically from under the foundation — because it's the land where you were born, grew up, and lived. Since I'm married, I am no longer just a child of my own family; I belong to my husband's lineage now. Because of that, I need to ask for support from his ancestors and his side of the family.





In Buryatia, a shaman blessed some poppy seeds for us to use when crossing the border. She told us they would help us pass through unnoticed. The first time we tried to cross, it didn't work; the border agent put a cone right in front of us. That day, maybe because of the nerves or the lack of sleep, we had forgotten to sprinkle the seeds inside the car and on ourselves.

The second time, we made sure to put the poppy seeds in our pockets and shoes, and we scattered them all over the inside and the roof of the car. My husband even sprinkled some on the heads of our fellow travelers, some guys from Ossetia. When they asked what he was doing, he just said, 'It's our shamanic business.' They got excited and said that in a situation like this, every little bit helps.

It must have looked so strange—you couldn't see the seeds in the dark, just my husband's frantic hand gestures. He was grabbing things out of a bag, throwing them at the car, and whispering something. We felt certain: this time, we'd make it. And truly, when we reached the border, there was this moment where the officer turned away for just two seconds, and in that window, we crossed into the US.

I don't know—maybe it was a coincidence, or maybe it really worked. It felt like he was looking right at us but didn't actually see us. Then he looked away—someone called him or something—and we were in. It was incredibly surreal. They watch every car so closely, yet it was as if he couldn't see us for a moment. Maybe we just imagined it, but we believe it helped. We believe the shaman gave us a shield that made us invisible for those few seconds. We have deep faith in Buddhism and Shamanism; we believe our ancestors help us and that the spirits are always by our side.

В Бурятии шаманка заговорила нам мак, который мы должны были использовать для прохождения границы. Шаманка сказала, что этот мак нам поможет пройти незамеченными. Когда мы проезжали границу в первый раз, мы не проехали, у нас не получилось, офицер погранконтроля перед нами поставила конус. В тот день перед границей от волнения или от недосыпа мы забыли посыпать себе в машину и себя маком, который нам дала шаманка.

Во второй раз перед границей мы насыпали мак в карманы и обувь, рассыпали мак в машине и поверху машины тоже. Мой муж посыпал маком на голову наших попутчиков, ребят из Осетии. Они спросили, что это, и мой муж объяснил, что это "наши шаманские дела" Попутчики вообдушивились и сказали, что в этой ситуации все поможет.

Но это очень странно выглядело, так как мак в темноте было не видно, но активные взмахи руками мужа были заметны. Он просто что-то брал из пакета, кидал на машину и шептал. Мы были уверены, в этот раз мы точно проедем. И действительно, мы когда подъехали к границе, и такой момент был, что офицер погранконтроля куда-то отвернулся на 2 секунды, и в этот момент мы проехали границу.

А я не знаю, может быть, это совпадение, а может быть, это и это сработало. И такое ощущение, что он как будто на нас смотрит, как будто бы не видит нас, его кто-то позвал, он отвернулся, и мы заехали. Это было очень странно, как будто бы он нас не видел. Я не знаю, или как будто сквозь нас, или мы сами уже с придумали, но мы верим, что это нам помогло, что шаманка нам дала щит, и мы там на доли секунд стали невидимыми. Вообще мы в это очень верим, в буддизм мы верим, и в шаманизм очень верим, что есть такое, бывают такие, что предки помогают нам, и духи они всегда с нами.

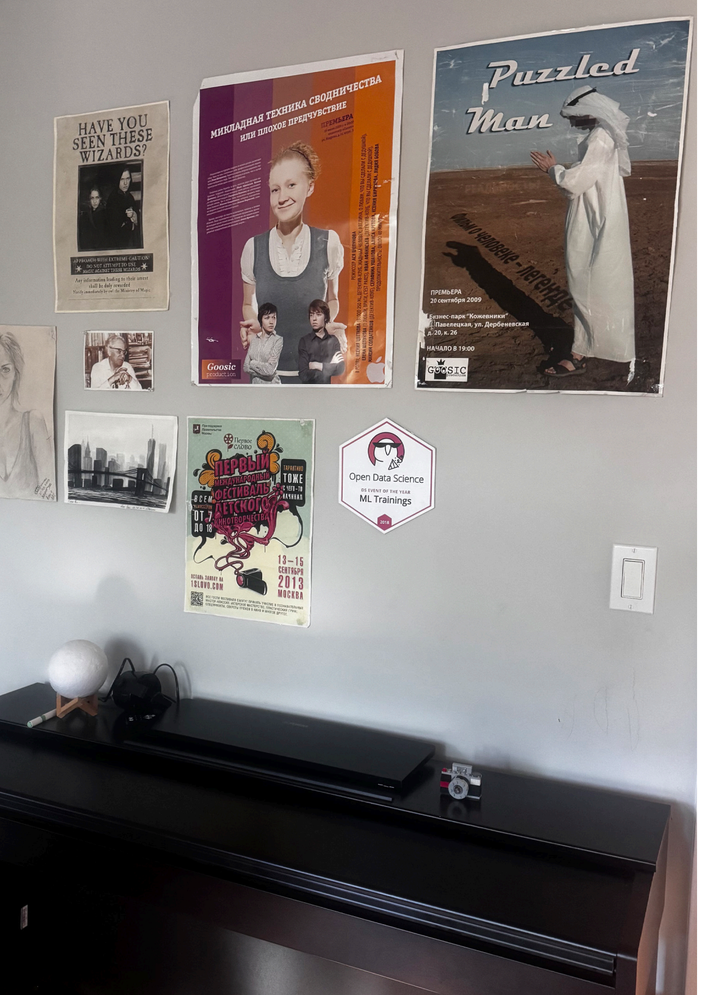


Lena

Мишка, он... Сейчас покажем тебе Мишку. Мишка, слушай, я не знаю. Это Мишка, который был, по-моему, моей бабушке. Он у меня, этот Мишка... Да, он вот такой вот, просто вязаный Мишутка. У него нет глаз, у него ничего нет. Я не помню, он просто всегда у меня был. По-моему, это моей бабушке Мишутка. Я почему-то его очень люблю. Я не знаю почему, я просто очень люблю твою Мишку. И я его привезла. Я думала сначала, что моему ребёнку... Когда он приехал, я Давиду его не отдала. Я его положила себе, и я не знаю. Не могу понять. Ну вот что-то он мне напоминает. Такой какой-то уютный. Вот дом, наверное, мой напоминает. Такой уютный. И что-то очень такое семейное, моё. Чего здесь не найти

Aa teddy bear, he .... Let me show him to you. I don't even know his whole story, honestly. I think he was my grandma's. He's... He's just a little hand-knitted teddy bear. No eyes, no nothing. I don't really remember... he's just always been with me. I'm pretty sure he was hers. I just adore him — I can't even explain why, I just really love this little guy. So I brought him here. I originally thought I'd give him to my son, but once he got here, I kept him for myself. I don't know, there's just something about him. He's so comforting.





У меня были всякие плакаты, на стене в Москве у меня висели. Я тоже попросила друзей их собрать. Это те проекты, которые я делала в Москве, вот это всякий там фильм, который я снимала. Ещё один фильм, который я снимала, какие-то фотографии там моего дедушки, фестиваль детский, который я делала. Всякие картины, которые мои друзья нарисовали. Вот такие вещи я попросила мне переслать.

То есть, я снимала фильм, и сто человек пришло его посмотреть, друзей. Это была тусовочка наша. Только для своих. Вот эти плакаты, это для меня самое важное, потому что это история, это то, что я делала.

Изменилось ли твое отношение к постерам после миграции?

Да. Немножко изменилось. Они как-то другой приобрели оттенок, оттенок ностальгии. Это всё вещи, это какая-то моя гордость такая, да. Это то, что выставляется, когда к нам приходят гости, и они спрашивают, а что это? И люди говорят, что это их лица на этих плакатах, лица моих друзей, общих знакомых. Это было всегда, как выставка наших достижений.

А когда я сюда приехала, это приобрело такой ностальгический характер. Это уже не является частью сообщества, это просто для меня. Если кто-то ко мне тут приходит, они не знают, кто эти люди, что это вообще такое. И если раньше эти афиши висели на видном месте, то теперь это очень интимно и только для меня. Они весят у меня в спальне.

I had all these posters; they were hanging on my wall in Moscow. I also asked my friends to collect them. These are the projects I did in Moscow — like, there's a film I shot. Another film I shot, some photos of my grandfather, a children's festival I organized. All sorts of drowings my friends did. Those are the kinds of things I asked my friends to send over to me.

Imagine, I filmed a movie, and a hundred people — friends — came to watch it. It was our little 'get-together.' Just for us. These posters are the most important thing to me because they're history; they're what I actually did.

How do you feel about the posters now, after the migration?

Yes, my attitude has changed a bit. They've taken on a different tone—a nostalgic tone. These are all things that are my pride and joy. They used to be on display when guests came over and asked, "What is that?" And people would recognize themselves on those posters — the faces of my friends and mutual acquaintances. It was always like an exhibition of our achievements.

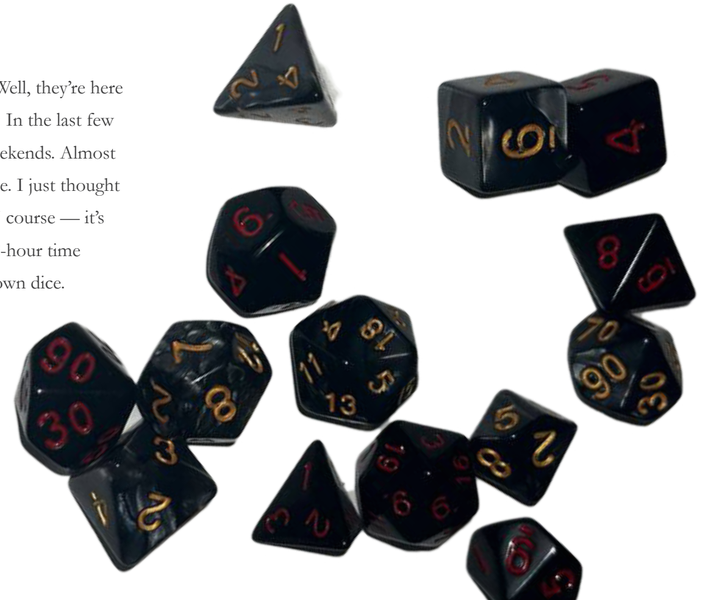
But when I arrived here, it took on this nostalgic character. It's no longer part of a community; it's just for me. If someone visits me here, they don't know who those people are or what any of it is. If those posters used to hang in a prominent place before, now they are very intimate and only for me. They hang in my bedroom.



Igor

Это игральные кубики. Я взял с собой игральные кубики. Угу. На память. Ну они у меня здесь лежат сейчас. Лежат. С собой и взял на память. В последние годы я... Компания друзей моих... Мы в основном все играли по выходным. Почти каждый выходной мы играли по настольной линии. С этими, собственно, кубиками. Я просто подумал, что когда мы будем с ними созваниваться, играть по интернету. Мы делаем это редко, конечно. Собраться в одном городе гораздо проще, чем заменить 13-часовую разницу в часовых поясах. Вот. И я думал, что буду играть с ними, со своими кубиками.

These are dice. I brought dice with me. Yeah. As a keepsake. Well, they're here with me now. Just sitting here. I brought them along as a memory. In the last few years, my group of friends and I — we mostly used to play on weekends. Almost every weekend we would play tabletop games. With these very dice. I just thought that when we call each other and play online — we do it rarely, of course — it's much easier to get together in the same city than to deal with a 13-hour time difference. So I thought that I would play with them — with my own dice.



Mark

Борис Акунин. «Мир и война» книга называется. Издательство «СТ». Это то самое издательство, которое с самого начала печатала Акунин. И в конце декабря 2023 года на Акунина обозлились и начали его запрещать. И я почувствовал, что все плохо, и пошел в магазин. Вот видите, даже чек лежит. И здесь есть дата, по-моему. Да, 19 декабря в 10 утра. Значит, я сделал фотку полки, на которой стояли эти книги. И я пришел в этот магазин на следующий день. Все книги остальные стояли на местах, а Акунина не было. То есть, 19 декабря утром эта книга была в магазине, а 20 декабря все. Акунина в России больше не купить. Для меня, знаете, эта книга, я ее, честно говоря, до сих пор не прочитал. Для меня эта книга, это, собственно говоря, наша страна, умная, красивая, интересная, и она запрещенная.

Boris Akunin. The book is called World and War. It's from the 'AST' publishing house—the very one that printed Akunin from the start. At the end of December 2023, they turned against Akunin and started banning him. I felt that things were going badly, so I went to the store. Look, even the receipt is still here. There's a date on it, I think. Yes —December 19th, 10 AM. I took a photo of the shelf where these books were standing. I came back to that same store the next day. All the other books were still in their places, but Akunin was gone. So, on the morning of December 19th, this book was in the store, but by the 20th—that was it. You can't buy Akunin in Russia anymore. To be honest, I still haven't actually read it. For me, this book is essentially our country: smart, beautiful, interesting — and banned.



Masha


8:23
Search
Папин плов
Баранина, баранина +
говядина или курица
2-3 средних луков
0,8 - 1 кг моркови
Зира (кумин) 1 ч. л
Красный перец (с
150-180 гр. растит
(рафинированного
1-2 головки чесно
3 стак. риса
½ стак. нута
Промыть рис в холодно
залить горячей водой
1-2 часа.
Залила и можно резат
морковь, лук.
Если пло
часов.
Масло п
луковиц
выброси
Добавит
слабой к
Памяти 1933.



Мой пра-прадедушка, который умер в 1913 году, фото прижизненное.

My great-great-grandfather, who died in 1913 — a photograph taken during his lifetime.

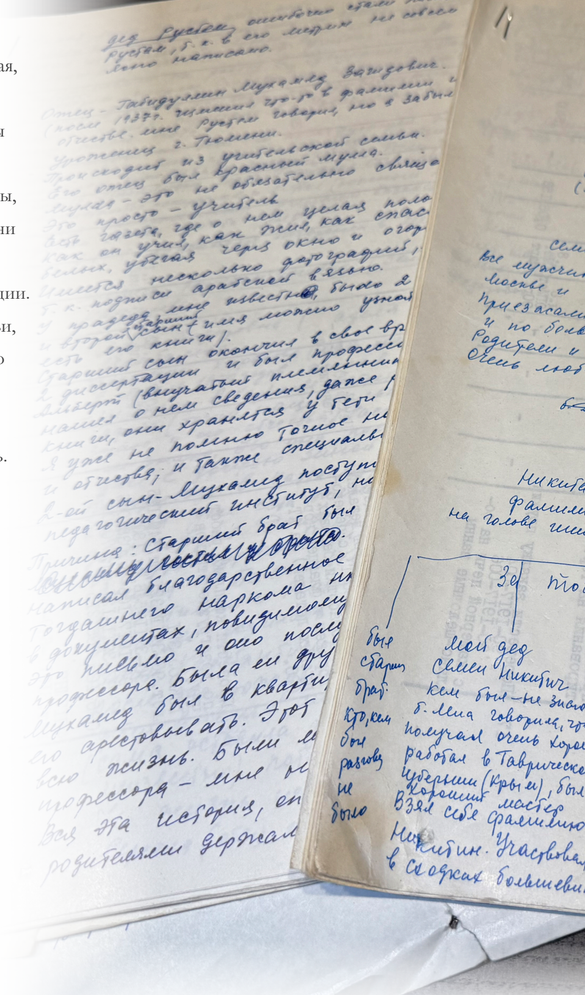


Мой дедушка и его родители, заслуженные учителя Казахской ССР, прадед был директором школы, прабабушка - учителем русского языка. Это по папиной линии.

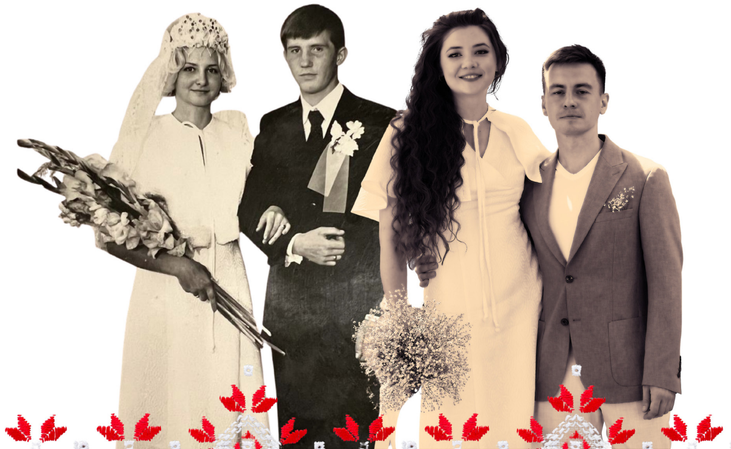
My grandfather and his parents were honored teachers of the Kazakh SSR. My great-grandfather was a school principal, and my great-grandmother was a Russian language teacher. This is on my father's side.

У меня есть чашка от прабабушки, голубенькая, у нее золотая каемочка, и блюдце такое же. Они идеально подходят друг другу, просто для красоты стоят. Еще у меня есть рукописи моих бабушек, обеих, и с маминой стороны, и с папиной стороны, я их просила написать историю семьи, все, что они знают и помнят о прадедушках, прабабушках. Я, наверное, ценю их ещё больше сейчасб в эмиграции. У нас сейчас нет другого источника истории семьи, кроме вот этих записей. И родители мои не особо хорошо помнят, и общаться мы перестали из-за войны и разных взглядов нв нее. А бабушки написали правду и это у меня это всё сохранилось.

I have a cup from my great-grandmother, light blue with a gold rim, and a matching saucer. They go perfectly together and mostly just sit there for beauty. I also have handwritten manuscripts from both of my grandmothers—on my mother's and my father's side. I asked them to write down the history of our family, everything they knew and remembered about our great-grandparents and earlier generations. I probably value these even more now in emigration. At this point, we don't have any other source of our family history besides these writings. My parents don't remember much, and we've stopped communicating because of the war and our different views on it. But my grandmothers wrote the truth, and I still have all of it preserved.



Lyuda



Я забрала мамино платье подвенечное, свадебное платье, в котором она была. Вот. Я на самом деле его забрала из маминого дома еще пару лет до этого. Я его забрала, потому, если честно, это единственная такая вещь, которую я не могла прям оставить. Для него обязательно нашлось место в чемодане.



I took my mother's wedding dress — the very dress she wore. There. Actually, I had picked it up from her house a couple of years prior to that. I took it because, to be honest, it was the one thing I simply couldn't bring myself to leave behind. I absolutely had to make room for it in my suitcase.

Я помню момент, что мы думали, что нам точно нужно взять. И первое, естественно, было, это наш фотоархив.. Я доставала фотографии из рамок, которые у нас стояли по дому, формировала фотоархив, который мы взяли с собой. Это был очень важный момент. Я видео даже записывала, как я последний раз хожу по дому, снимаю там все. Я ходила... Я просто по дому ходила, снимала все комнаты, как всё там изменилось. Что там мама готовила на наш прощальный вечер, вот такое.

Это было в опустевшем доме, но при этом там до сих пор была куча народа.

I remember the moment when we were figuring out exactly what we absolutely had to take with us. And the first thing—naturally—was our photo archive. I went around taking photographs out of the frames displayed throughout the house, assembling the collection of photos that we would ultimately take along. It was a deeply significant moment. I even recorded a video of myself walking through the house one last time, filming everything there. I just walked... I simply walked through the house, filming every room—documenting how everything had changed. I filmed what Mom was cooking for our farewell dinner—things like that.

It took place in a house that felt emptied out, yet, at the same time, was still teeming with people.



Mathew

Вещь – это вот этот термос, применялся он, живя в России, мы ходили постоянно всей семьей на каток, сын у меня занимался хоккеем еще, как раз вот в сентябре, с первого сентября, полтора месяца он занимался хоккеем, до отъезда из России, и этот термос с нами на всех этих катках присутствовал, чай горячий пили. Когда берешь его в руки, вспоминаешь уют московского катка, когда холодно, хочется пить, открываешь, у тебя чай горячий, сразу согревается, уютно.

The object in question is this thermos. It saw plenty of use back when we lived in Russia; our whole family would constantly go to the skating rink together—and my son was actually playing hockey at the time, too. He had just started up that September — right on the first of the month — and played for a month and a half before we left Russia; throughout that entire period, this thermos was right there with us at every single rink, keeping our tea hot. When you hold it in your hands, you're instantly reminded of the cozy atmosphere of a Moscow skating rink — that feeling when it's cold out and you're thirsty, so you open it up to find piping hot tea waiting for you; you warm right up — it's truly cozy.




ГУМ-Каток
на Красной площади
ИНГОССТРАХ
Просто быть уверенным
МЕГАФОН
1
ГУМ-Каток
ПСБ

Kristina

Ну, например, парфюм свой беру с собой, хотя я его использую очень мало. Не знаю, может, раз в месяц, но всё равно он со мной. Он мне нравится. Это *Chloe Love*... Да, я его привезла с собой, и я пользуюсь им очень редко ... Он наполняет меня радостью. Дофамином. Ну, вот как есть, бывают такие списки, что делать вместо того, чтобы съесть сладкое. И в таких списках всегда есть вариант понюхать аромат.

Well, for instance, I bring my perfume along with me—even though I use it very sparingly. I don't know, maybe once a month, but it's with me nonetheless. I really like it. It's *Chloe Love*... Yes, I brought it with me, and I use it very rarely... It fills me with joy. With dopamine. You know — it's just like those lists you sometimes see: "Things to do instead of eating sweets." And on lists like that, there's always an option to take a whiff of a fragrance.





Дома, в России, у меня есть небольшая коллекция камушков-минералов, которые мне нравятся. Здесь, в США, я себе купила камень, лабрадорит называют. Он очень красиво переливается. Дома у меня таких, кажется, три. Теперь и здесь такой есть. Вообще, в России у меня всякие прикольные штуки дома есть. Но я поняла, что всё равно можно купить аналоги. И так же радоваться.

И мне иногда даже снится сон, что я приехала в Россию и начинаю искать вещи, которые я бы хотела взять с собой. Но надо сказать, что этих вещей довольно немного.Если я внезапно окажусь в России, то есть некоторые блюда, которые я бы хотела съесть. Не хватает шаурмы.

Back home in Russia, I have a small collection of stones and minerals that I really like. Here in the U.S., I bought myself a stone — it's called labradorite. It has a beautiful iridescent shimmer. I think I have about three of them back home; now I have one here, too. Actually, I have all sorts of cool little things at my place in Russia. But I've realized that you can always just buy equivalents — and enjoy them just as much.

Sometimes I even dream that I've arrived in Russia and start looking for things I'd like to take back with me. But I must say, there aren't actually very many of those things. If I were to suddenly find myself in Russia, there are certain dishes I would want to eat. I really miss shawarma.



Oksana

...У нас еще, слава богу, жив отец мужа, который пережил депортацию крымских татар. Он родился в Фергане (восточный Узбекистан), в землянке, когда его родителей уже выслали во время геноцида татар в Крыму. Он тот ребенок, который это пережил. Он много моему сыну рассказывал про это. Внутри частных семейных разговоров мы проводили аналогии с тем временем и, что происходит сейчас. Очень все похоже.

...Fortunately — thank God — my husband's father is still alive; he survived the deportation of the Crimean Tatars. He was born in Fergana (eastern Uzbekistan), in an earthen dugout, after his parents had already been exiled during the genocide of the Tatars in Crimea. He is one of the children who lived through it. He has told my son a great deal about that time. In the privacy of our family conversations, we drew parallels between that era and what is happening today. It is all very similar.

Папа мужа не из робкого десятка, он немногословный человек, он все в себе держит, но я думаю, что для него наш отъезд был труднее всего, потому что за этот год он потерял жену, сына, и теперь это был единственный сын, единственный сын на три семьи, единственный мужик, скажем так, который уезжал. Он понимал, что остаётся совсем один, что семьи больше нет, что его покидают самые близкие люди, но при этом сказал: *«Сынок, уезжай, другого выхода нет»*. Он настолько мужественный человек, что он не стал ставить нам ультиматумы. Сейчас он болеет тяжелой онкологией, но все равно, когда мы созваниваемся, он старается нас поддержать.

По поводу депортации... Как говорит мой муж, за сто лет ничего не изменилось. Если ты не этнический русский, не Ваня Иванов, а татарин, например, даже если у тебя прекрасное образование, даже если ты доктор наук и так далее, ты не русский, ты “чурка”. Так было и так есть. Понимаешь? В этом плане и депортации тоже. Когда народ веками жил на своей земле по своим правилам, его за сутки взяли, грубо говоря, уничтожили, переселили и так далее. Только тогда это была этническая депортация, а сейчас просто всех вынудили уехать. Поэтому я называю, наверное, не иммиграцией, а депортацией.

My husband’s father is not a man to be easily shaken; he is a man of few words who keeps everything bottled up inside. Yet I believe that, for him, our departure was the hardest thing of all — for within the span of a single year, he had already lost his wife and a son, and now his *only* remaining son — the sole son shared among three families, the only man, so to speak—was leaving as well. He understood that he was being left completely alone, that his family unit was no more, and that the people closest to him were abandoning him; and yet, he said: “*Son, go. There is no other way*.” He is such a courageous man that he never once tried to issue us ultimatums. He is currently battling a severe form of cancer, yet even now, whenever we speak on the phone, he still strives to offer us his support.

On the subject of deportation… as my husband says, nothing has changed in a hundred years. If you’re not ethnically Russian, not some Ivan Ivanov, but, say, a Tatar—even if you have an excellent education, even if you’re a doctor of sciences—you’re still not Russian, you’re just a ‘churka’—a slur for non-Russians. That’s how it was, and that’s how it still is. Do you understand? In that sense, it applies to deportations too. When people had lived on their land for centuries, by their own rules, and then in a single day they were, roughly speaking, erased—displaced, resettled, and so on. Back then it was an ethnic deportation; now people are simply forced to leave. That’s why I would probably call it not immigration, but deportation.

Потому что мы не по своей воле уехали. У нас была прекрасная работа, мы только начинали жить, у нас были дети, у нас были планы, у нас был огромный дом. Он до сих пор мне снится, я хочу туда, я хочу домой, потому что здесь я не дома, я не чувствую себя здесь дома. И меня вынудили уехать. Я не ехала за “better life”. Нет. Я просто не знала, куда мне бежать, у нас не было ни виз, ничего, мы не знали, куда податься.

Because we didn’t leave of our own free will. We had wonderful jobs; we were just starting to really live. We had children, we had plans, and we had a huge house. I still dream about it—I want to go back there, I want to go home—because I am not home here; I don’t feel at home here. And I was forced to leave. I didn’t leave in search of a “better life.” No. I simply didn’t know where to run; we had no visas, nothing—we didn’t know where to turn.

У меня есть молитвенник и две фотографии мамы в молодости, где мы с сестрой с мамой. И иконка. Вот из личных вещей, собственно, все. У меня эти фотографии мамины расстояли на пианино. Когда я собирала чемодан, я поняла, что мне нужно взять что-то, чтобы, ну, как сказать, мою память могла визуализировать. Я не могла взять, допустим, альбомы с фотографиями. Это очень громоздко и тяжелое. Я помню, я вынимала фотографии из рамок и положила их в молитвенник. Мне нужно было что-то, чтобы я могла визуализировать. Это вещи, которые мне греют душу.

Почему молитвенник? Я не могу сказать, что я очень верующий человек. Просто были ситуации, когда кроме Бога никто не мог помочь. Абсолютно никто. И поэтому... Не могу тебе сказать, почему. Это самые дорогие вещи, наверное, я тогда посчитала.



I have a prayer book and two photographs of my mother from her younger days — pictures of her with my sister and me. And a small icon. As for personal belongings, that is, essentially, everything. I used to keep those photos of my mother displayed on the piano. When I was packing my suitcase, I realized I needed to take something—well, how should I put it?—something that would allow me to visualize my memories. I couldn't take, say, entire photo albums; they are simply too bulky and heavy. I remember taking the photos out of their frames and tucking them inside the prayer book. I needed something tangible, something I could look at to bring those memories to life. These are the things that warm my soul.

Why the prayer book? I wouldn't exactly describe myself as a deeply religious person. It's just that there were times when absolutely no one—no one at all—could help me except God. And so... I can't really tell you exactly why. I suppose, at that moment, I felt that these were the most precious things I possessed.

Ksenia


СЕРГЕЙ РАХМАНИНОВ
ВОСПОМИНАНИЯ
БАР. ЛЮДМИЛА ВРАНГЕЛЬ
ВОСПОМИНАНИЯ И СТАРОДАВНИЕ ВРЕМЕНА
ОТКРЫТКА ПРО ЛЮБОВЬ

Я взяла несколько таких милых вещей из архива, вот я взяла книжку прадедушки, взяла детские рисунки, несколько детских рисунков, делали мы ещё отпечатки ручек, ножек детей, я тоже их взяла с собой. Взяла ещё книжку, которую мне подарил мой родственник, потому что она про эмиграцию, мы её читали в дороге, это книжка о том, как чета Врангелей уезжали из России. Взяла несколько детских книжек на русском языке, потому что понятно, что на русском языке, куда бы мы ни приехали, найти детскую литературу будет сложно.

I took several lovely items from our family archives—for instance, I brought along my great-grandfather's book, as well as some children's drawings. We had also made prints of the children's hands and feet, so I took those with me as well. I also packed a book that a relative had given me; since it deals with the subject of emigration, we read it during our journey—it tells the story of how the Wrangel couple left Russia. Finally, I brought along several children's books in Russian, knowing full well that—no matter where we might end up—finding children's literature in Russian would be a difficult task.

Например, у нас есть такое семейное поверье. Если ты спишь и тебе холодно, то закрой одеялом ухо, и тогда тебе будет теплее. Это лагерный лайфхак, который прадедушка передал сквозь поколения, поэтому мне дорога его история. За свою любовь к индийской философии, чтению книг по ней, за самостоятельные переводы текстов, он загремел на 8 лет в ГУЛАГ. Мне эта история очень дорога, и поэтому я взяла его книжку, это редкое издание, оно выпущено не очень большим тиражом.

...Она должна была быть большая. Эта книжка была посвящена сопоставлению индийской философии и христианства, что между ними общего, какие концепции, какие идеи перекликаются. Поскольку эта книжка редкая, она у нас одна на семью.

For instance, we have a certain family belief. If you are sleeping and feel cold, cover your ear with the blanket—and you will feel warmer. This is a "camp lifehack" that my great-grandfather passed down through the generations, which is why its history is so dear to me. For his love of Indian philosophy—for reading books on the subject and undertaking his own translations of texts—he was sent to the Gulag for eight years. This story is deeply precious to me; that is why I have taken his book—a rare edition, published in a very limited print run.

...It was meant to be a substantial volume. The book was dedicated to a comparative analysis of Indian philosophy and Christianity—exploring what they have in common, and which concepts and ideas resonate with one another. Since it is such a rare book, our family possesses only a single copy.

Sergei

Мы были в Калуге, свыкались с мыслью о том, что мы уезжаем. В тот момент я не давал себе возможности грустить или плакать, потому что я был в телеграм-пабликах, изучал, как работает весь механизм перехода через границу и так далее. Я не хотел, чтобы моя жена видела, что я переживаю. Это для меня было важно, потому что я изначально этот план разработал, я за него отвечал, мне надо было... Это не просто я с женой, еще ребенок у меня был 2,5 года. Я понял, мне нужно полностью отрубить ностальгию какую-то. У меня ее не было. Я знал, что мне надо уехать и все. А думать о других вещах буду потом . Сейчас какие-то вещи мне присылают. Уже когда я расслабился. Спустя несколько лет. В тот момент такого не было. Ничего на память не брал.

We were in Kaluga, coming to terms with the realization that we were leaving. At that moment, I didn't allow myself the luxury of feeling sad or crying, because I was immersed in Telegram groups—studying the entire mechanism of crossing the border and everything else involved. I didn't want my wife to see that I was anxious. This was important to me because I had devised this plan in the first place; I was responsible for it, and I had to... It wasn't just my wife and me—we also had a two-and-a-half-year-old child. I realized I needed to completely shut off any sense of nostalgia. And I didn't feel any. I knew that I simply had to leave—and that was that. I would think about other things later. Now, people occasionally send me things—but only after I've finally been able to relax. Years later. Back then, there was none of that. I didn't take a single keepsake with me.

Например, я заказал журнал, который мне купил отец 20 лет назад, называется Игромания. Я специально заказ этот выпуск на Авито через маму, чтобы она мне его прислала в США, чтобы было физическое воплощение, реальный объект. Это был первый журнал, который мне купил отец. Я ему заказывал другой журнал, но он купил этот, после я покупал только журнал Игромания.

For instance, I ordered a magazine that my father bought for me twenty years ago — it's called *Igromania*. I specifically ordered this particular issue on Avito* through my mother so that she could send it to me in the U.S., ensuring I would have a physical embodiment of it — a tangible object. It was the very first magazine my father ever bought me. I had actually asked him to get a different magazine, but he bought this one instead; after that, *Igromania* was the only magazine I ever bought.



*Avito is a marketplace like Ebay

Я написал небольшой сборник рассказов про свои моменты из прошлого. Они не связаны с политикой абсолютно, просто какие-то воспоминания из жизни, например, как я деда везу в санаторий. Для меня это, знаешь, когда чувство ностальгии захлёстывало меня, я записывал друзьям аудиосообщения, что я чувствую, думаю, как я по-другому смотрю на все это теперь, когда я не могу вернуться домой. Я понял, что мне нужен какой-то эмоциональный выход, куда-то эти мысли надо направить. Я направил это в написание рассказов. Сейчас я много не пишу на русском языке, поэтому эта практика тоже помогает сохранить навыки креативного письма. Вдруг что, мало ли?

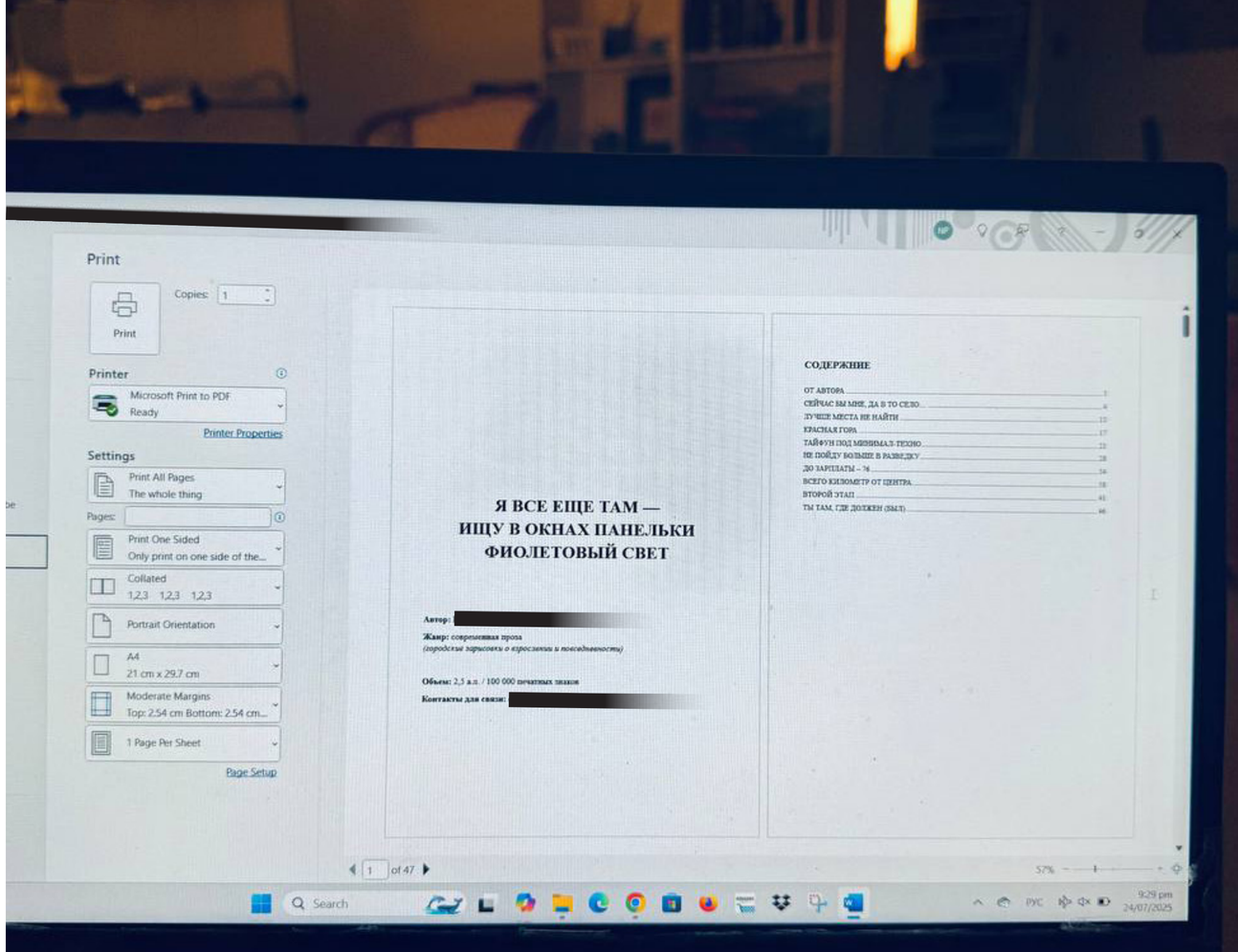
Писал, редактировал, всё сделал. Когда жена выпустит обложку, я, наверное, сначала выпущу в электронном формате. Когда допишу ещё несколько рассказов, хочу перевести на английский, чтобы рассказать о жизни простого человека из России того времени, без политического контекста. Эта идея мне пришла после посещения мероприятий в местной библиотеки. У них, например, есть презентации книг об Украине, они приглашают авторов, обычных людей, рассказать о своих произведениях.

I've written a small collection of short stories based on moments from my past. They have absolutely nothing to do with politics—they're simply memories from my life; for instance, one is about driving my grandfather to a sanatorium. For me—you know—whenever a wave of nostalgia washed over me, I would record audio messages for my friends, sharing what I was feeling and thinking, and reflecting on how differently I view it all now that I can no longer return home. I realized I needed some kind of emotional outlet—somewhere to channel these thoughts. So, I channeled them into writing stories. I don't write much in Russian these days, so this practice also helps me keep my creative writing skills sharp—just in case; you never know.

I wrote them, edited them—I've done it all. Once my wife finishes designing the cover, I'll probably release the collection in digital format first. Once I've finished writing a few more stories, I plan to translate them into English so I can share what life was like for an ordinary person in Russia during that era—completely free of any political context. This idea actually came to me after attending some events at my local library. For instance, they host book presentations focused on Ukraine, inviting authors—ordinary people—to come and talk about their work.

К сожалению, я не вижу этого в отношении России. Мне не кажется, что это несправедливо. Я понимаю контекст и ситуацию. Но было бы круто, если бы приглашали и современных российских авторов, потому что умные люди, конечно же, понимают, что российские граждане не *все* повально поддерживают войну. Но отмена русской культуры в какой-то степени, наверное, мне не нравится. Через свои рассказы, Я бы хотел бы показать, что мы такие же люди, как и вы.

Unfortunately, I don't see the same happening when it comes to Russia. I don't necessarily feel that this is unfair; I understand the context and the current situation. However, it would be great if they also invited contemporary Russian authors, because intelligent people—naturally—realize that not *all* Russian citizens blindly support the war. Still, this "cancellation" of Russian culture—to whatever extent it's actually happening—doesn't really sit right with me. Through my stories, I simply want to show that we are human beings, just like you.



Rosa





С 1 сентября 2022 года были введены уроки Разговоры о важном. На этих разговорах о важном затрагивались периодически затрагивались темы по поводу войны. Я пришла в школу и написала официальное заявление о том, что мой ребенок эти уроки посещать не будет. Спустя несколько месяцев, меня вызвали к директору, которая начала проводить беседу на тему пропусков этих занятий. Я объяснила, что я не хочу, чтобы моя дочь присутствовала на таких занятиях. Я сказала, что они меня не устраивают, они не входят в официальную учебную программу, и, в принципе, какие ко мне могут быть претензии.

Она мне сказала, что да, действительно так, вы правы. Но сейчас Министерство образования стало пристально следить за посещением именно этих уроков. Она сказала: “Ваша дочь может не посещать математику, это ок, вопросов не будет. Но если она не посещает Разговоры о важном, вопросы возникнут сто процентов. Если не сегодня, то завтра или через неделю, или через месяц. В любом случае, с вами выйдут на контакт по поводу этого.” Она мне объяснила последствия, что после этого могут последовать обращения в органы опеки о том, что мы не выполняем родительские обязанности, допуская,что наш ребенок прогуливает школу. Хотя она школу не прогуливала, она не посещала с моего разрешения только это одно занятие. Мне угрожали органами опеки. Хотя у нас благополучная семья, большой дом, дети занимались спортом, посещали кружки. Причин для обращения в органы опеки не было никаких. Но они нашли эту причину.

Starting September 1, 2022, Patriotic Education Classes, lessons were introduced. These lessons periodically touched upon themes regarding the war. I went to the school and wrote an official statement declaring that my child would not attend these classes. A few months later, I was summoned to the principal, who began a discussion regarding these absences. I explained that I did not want my daughter to be present at such lessons. I stated that they did not suit me, they were not part of the official curriculum, and that, in principle, there should be no grounds for complaint against me.

She told me that yes, that is indeed the case, and I was right. However, she said the Ministry of Education has now started closely monitoring attendance specifically for these lessons. She said: “Your daughter can skip math; that’s fine, there will be no questions. But if she doesn’t attend atriotic Education Classes, questions will arise one hundred percent. If not today, then tomorrow, or in a week, or in a month. In any case, you will be contacted about this.” She explained the consequences: that this could lead to reports to child protective services alleging that we are failing our parental duties by allowing our child to skip school. Even though she wasn’t skipping school—she was missing only this one class with my permission. I was threatened with child protective services. Despite the fact that we are a well-to-do family, have a large house, and the children played sports and attended extracurricular activities. There were absolutely no grounds for involving child protective services. But they found this reason.



Моя дочь на школьном уроке рисования нарисовала украинский и российский флаги и написала «Россия плюс Украина – это друзья». Почему она это сделала? Потому что она слышала дома, ей было 7 лет в тот момент, нашу родительскую позицию. Мы с мужем всегда обсуждали тему войны дома. А где нам еще ее обсуждать? Не на улице же, не в магазине, где, в принципе, нельзя произносить слово “война”. Мы обсуждали всю эту историю дома. Я говорила дочери, если ты где-то услышишь, что будут говорить, что украинцы плохие, что украинцы на нас напали, что украинцы – это зло, никогда этому не верь. Я ей говорила, чтобы она никогда не верила этим рассказам. Я ей показала, как выглядит украинский флаг, я сказала, что в этом нет ничего плохого, потому что тогда уже запрещали все украинские цвета, голубой и желтый были под запретом. И она нарисовала такой рисунок на уроке рисования, у них была свободная тема. Здесь можно сказать слова благодарности учительнице, потому что она не стала показывать это кому-то еще в школе, как в истории Маши и Алексея Москалевых. Наша учительница так не сделала. Она мне отдала этот рисунок и попросила спрятать его куда-нибудь подальше. Давление по поводу посещений патриотических занятий продолжало нарастать. Я приняла решение, что я забираю дочь из школы, и она переходит на домашнее обучение.



My daughter drew the Ukrainian and Russian flags during an art lesson at school and wrote “Russia plus Ukraine are friends.” Why did she do it? Because she had heard our parental position at home; she was 7 years old at the time. My husband and I always discussed the war at home. Where else were we supposed to discuss it? Not on the street, not in a store, where you basically aren’t allowed to even say the word “war.” We discussed the whole situation at home. I told my daughter: if you hear someone say that Ukrainians are bad, that Ukrainians attacked us, or that Ukrainians are evil—never believe it. I told her never to believe those stories. I showed her what the Ukrainian flag looks like and told her there was nothing wrong with it, because back then they were already banning all Ukrainian colors; blue and yellow were effectively prohibited.

She drew this picture during an art lesson where they had a free choice of topic. I should express my gratitude to the teacher here, because she didn’t show it to anyone else at school, unlike what happened in the story of Masha and Alexey Moskalev. Our teacher didn’t do that. She gave the drawing back to me and asked me to hide it somewhere far away. However, the pressure regarding attendance at patriotic classes continued to grow. I made the decision to withdraw my daughter from school and switch her to homeschooling.



Ania



Четки. Их подарила мне мама. Я не то чтобы очень сильно религиозный человек. Скорее нет. Я верю в то, что есть какая-то высшая сила, которая справедливая и над всеми нами наблюдает и кому-то что-то даёт, у кого-то что-то забирает. Мне так проще жить. Проще верить в то, что Бог есть, чем в то, что никакого там дальше продолжения не будет. Когда мне очень плохо, я читаю молитву и мне становится проще. То ли это такой способ борьбы со стрессом. Хотя, что я извиняюсь? Я верю в Бога.

Четки - это единственная вещь, которая у меня осталась от мамы. Они не несут никакой практической ценности. Это простые четкие из дерева. Дерево какое-то ценное, но не суть. Это ни украшения, ни предметы интерьера. То есть, ты не возьмёшь куда-то на выход. Это просто вещь, которая несёт с собой память. С ними связана интересная, почти мистическая история.

Когда мы уже решили, что уезжаем в Америку, мне приснился сон. Мне редко снятся сны. Мне приснилась мама. Она плакала и говорила: “Аня, возьми меня в Америку”. Я не знала, что это такое, что она меня просила сделать, я не поняла. Пыталась интерпретировать сама, у разных людей спрашивала, что это может сделать.У психологов, у эзотериков, у верующих людей. Все говорили разные вещи. Я поняла, что это чисто моя история, и мне надо самой принять решение, что это для меня. И я поняла, что мне нужно взять какую-то вещь, которая будет о ней напоминать. И вот я решила взять четки. Это единственное, это всё, что осталось от моей мамы. Хотя нет, конечно, много воспоминаний, куча всего хорошего, то, что я помню о ней.

Prayer beads. My mother gave them to me. I’m not exactly a very religious person—mostly not, actually. I just believe there’s some kind of higher power out there—something just—that watches over all of us, giving to some and taking from others. It makes life easier for me. It’s easier to believe that God exists than to think there’s nothing else beyond this. When I’m feeling really down, I say a prayer and it makes things easier. Maybe it’s just a way of dealing with stress. Although, why am I making excuses? I believe in God.

The prayer beads are the only thing I have left of my mother’s. They have no practical value. They’re just simple wooden beads. The wood is supposedly valuable, but that’s not the point. They aren’t jewelry or home decor; it’s not like you’d wear them out somewhere. It’s simply an object that carries memory. There’s an interesting, almost mystical story connected to them.

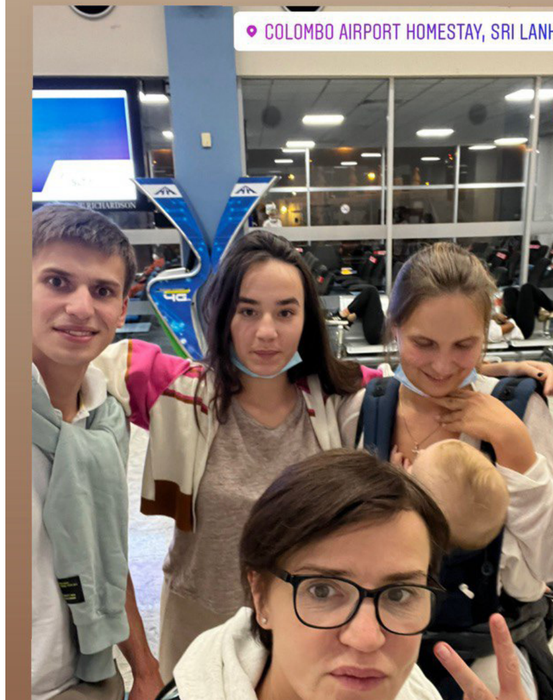
When we had already decided that we were moving to America, I had a dream. I rarely dream, but I dreamed of my mother. She was crying and saying, “Anya, take me to America.” I didn’t know what it was or what she was asking me to do; I didn’t understand. I tried to interpret it myself and asked all sorts of people what it could mean—psychologists, esoterics, and religious people. Everyone said different things. I realized that this was strictly my own story, and I had to decide for myself what it meant to me. I understood that I needed to take an object that would remind me of her. So, I decided to take the rosary. It’s the only thing—the only physical thing—left of my mother. Although, no, that’s not quite right; of course, there are many memories, a ton of good things I remember about her.

Vika

Не было ощущение, что я уезжаю навсегда. Это был конец 2022-го года, и было понимание, что железного занавеса нет, и, если что-то нудно, всегда можно найти кого-то, кто привезет нужную вещь. Если вдруг я буду сильно нуждаться. Поэтому я взяла свою любимую чашечку, из которой кофе всегда пью. Одна кружечка и всё. И сына взяла, что было самое главное на тот момент.

I didn't feel like I was leaving forever. It was the end of 2022, and there was this sense that the "Iron Curtain" wasn't there anymore—that if you really needed something, you could always find someone to bring it to you. If I ever felt a desperate need for it. So, I just took my favorite little cup, the one I always drink my coffee from. One little mug, and that was it. And I took my son, who was the most important thing at that moment.

САМОЕ ДОРОГОЕ ВЗЯЛА С СОБОЙ БЕЗ ОБРАТНОГО БИЛЕТА ПОКА ТАК…



Zina



У меня вся семья репрессированная была, у мужа тоже. И просто это все опять повторяется. Все одно и то же. У меня предки были купцами. Их в революцию раскулачили, естественно. Всех уничтожили. Потом у бабушки мужа посадили, видимо, по доносу, потому что позднее мы получили документ о том, что он умер в каком-то лагере. Позже нам удалось выяснить, что, оказывается, он не просто умер в лагере, а что его расстреляли, что он в каком-то спецподразделении служил, и это подразделение вообще все уничтожило. Какая-то очень темная история. Но в семье мы никогда это не обсуждали. А поскольку я молчать не умею и обязательно где-нибудь выскажусь, то я так поняла, что мне-то тоже как бы тут небезопасно. У мужа то же самое. Его предков вообще сослали на вечное поселение в Сибирь, и всех тут раскулачили, полсемьи уничтожили. Они были староверы, и из-за этого факта там много чего нехорошего происходило. Наша семья протестанты, и на мужа были гонения, и избивали. По политической частью тоже против Путина, против войны. Просто у нас, не знаю, очень опасно, очень сложно было дальше жить здесь.



My entire family was repressed—my husband's, too. It's as if it's all just repeating itself. Everything is exactly the same. My ancestors were merchants. During the revolution, they were "de-kulakized," naturally. Everyone was destroyed. Later, my husband's grandfather was imprisoned, likely due to someone reporting him, because we eventually received a document stating he had died in some camp.

We later managed to find out that he didn't just die in the camp—he was executed. He had served in some special unit, and that entire unit was wiped out. It's a very dark story. But in our family, we never discussed it. And since I don't know how to keep quiet and will definitely speak out somewhere, I realized it simply wasn't safe for me there. It's the same for my husband. His ancestors were exiled to Siberia for life, their property was seized, and half the family was destroyed. They were Old Believers, and because of that, many terrible things happened. Our family are Protestants; my husband faced persecution and was even beaten. Politically, too—against Putin, against the war. It was just... I don't know, it was very dangerous and very difficult to keep living there.



Протестантских групп в нашем городе*, на самом деле, достаточно много. Это адвентисты, это баптисты различные, пятидесятники. То есть все про них слышали, все про них знают. Ну естественно, отношение православной церкви к ним однозначное - это секта. Ну в какой-то момент была какая-то оттепель, и они хорошо относились. Потом правительство начало давить протестантство на корню. Выпустили законы, запрещающие говорить о Боге и встречаться в различных залах, помещениях, снимать встречи. Нам запретили, по факту, собрания. Закон “Яровой”* запрещает проповедовать на улицах. А теперь запретили даже дома практиковать.

То есть если кто-то придет, ненадежный человек, на собрание даже маленькой группы, он может написать донос и всех загребут, в тюрьму посадят. Ну сейчас же не только протестанты. Сейчас, и Свидетели Еговы, и мусульман тоже в каком-то смысле “прессуют”. Все, что не православное, это все не угодно.

Actually, there are quite a lot of Protestant groups in our city* — Adventists, various Baptists, Pentecostals. Everyone has heard of them; everyone knows they’re there. Naturally, the Orthodox Church’s stance toward them is clear-cut: they are seen as a “sect.” There was a period of a “thaw” where they were treated okay, but then the government began to crush Protestantism at its roots. They passed laws that forbid talking about God, meeting in various halls or venues, or filming services. We were effectively banned from holding assemblies. The “Yarovaya Law”** prohibits street preaching, and now they’ve even banned practicing at home.

It means that if an unreliable person comes to a meeting—even a small group—they can file a report, and everyone will be rounded up and thrown in prison. And it’s not just Protestants now. Currently, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslims are also being “pressed” in a sense. Anything that isn’t Orthodox is considered unwelcome.

*Крупный город в Сибири
** Имеется ввиду «Пакет Яровой», комплекс из двух федеральных законов (№ 374-ФЗ и 375-ФЗ), принятых в 2016 году в России [illegible] с терроризмом. Он обязывает операторов связи и интернет-компании хранить данные пользователей (звонки, SMS, переписку, [illegible] до 6 месяцев и предоставлять их спецслужбам. Закон также расширил полномочия правоохранительных органов, существенно ужесточив контроль над религиозной деятельностью в России, введя понятие «миссионерская деятельность» и ограничив места её проведения

*Large city in Siberia
** This refers to the “Yarovaya Package” (Wikipedia), a set of two federal laws (No. 374-FZ and 375-FZ) passed in Russia in 2016, ostensibly to combat terrorism. It requires telecommunications operators and internet companies to store user data—such as calls, SMS, messages, and traffic—for up to six months and to provide this information to special services. The law also expanded the powers of law enforcement, significantly tightening control over religious activity in Russia by introducing the legal concept of “missionary activity” and strictly limiting where it can take place.

Yaroslav

Я взял с собой фото родителей и кипу. Еврейскую кипу, потому что в Москве, когда я жил, я был членом организации для еврейской молодежи. Туда можно было прийти пообщаться с единомышленниками, просто расслабиться, что-то интересное узнать, почитать. Про фотографии... Это полароид-снимки. В детсве я сломал ролительский полароид фотоаппарат, это были 90-е годы, когда он стоил нереально много денег. Сломал случайно, я был маленький и мне было интересно, как там устроено. Папа очень сильно ругался, а мама сказала:"Вырастешь-купишь". И когда я вырос, я им купил.У моих родителей дома огромное количество полароидных снимков, я выбрал эти два. Один, где я с отцом, и другой, где я с матерью маленький. Просто хочу, чтобы они были рядышком. Наверное, это как-то слишком по-человечески. Не знаю, я сентиментальный человек в этом плане. Для меня моя семья и люди, которые мне близки, очень много значат. Это мой способ не забывать.



I took photos of my parents and a kippah with me. A Jewish kippah, because when I lived in Moscow, I was a member of a Jewish youth organization. It was a place where you could go to talk with like-minded people, just relax, learn something interesting, or read.

As for the photos... they are Polaroids. When I was a kid, I broke my parents' Polaroid camera; this was back in the '90s when they cost an unreal amount of money. I broke it by accident—I was little and just curious about how it worked inside. My dad was really angry, but my mom said, "When you grow up, you'll buy them a new one." And when I grew up, I did. My parents have a huge number of Polaroid photos at home, but I chose these two. One of me with my father, and another of me as a little boy with my mother. I just want them to be right there with me. Maybe that's a bit too "human" or sentimental, but for me, my family and the people close to me mean everything. This is my way of not forgetting.



Invisible Luggage

Коллекционируя Голоса и Предметы

Интервью проводились в общественных местах или онлайн. Некоторые участники делились документами, семейными фотографиями или небольшими инструментами; другие сохраняли детские игрушки или наследственные украшения. Процесс документирования включал как устные свидетельства, так и фотографирование — каждая беседа разворачивалась как частный ритуал памяти

Участников приглашали рассказать, что означал для них этот объект, когда они приняли решение взять его с собой и изменилось ли его значение в изгнании. В результате возник не просто архив перемещённых вещей, а коллективный нарратив устойчивости и сопротивления. Эти свидетельства показывают, как изгнание дробит время: каждый объект становится мостом между утраченной прошлой жизнью и неопределённым настоящим, неся невидимую эмоциональную тяжесть, которую ни один чемодан не способен вместить.

Collecting Voices and Objects

The interviews were recorded in public places or online. Some participants shared documents, family photographs, or small tools; others held on to children's toys or inherited jewelry. The process of documentation involved both oral testimony and photography—each conversation unfolding like a private ritual of remembering.

Participants were invited to describe what the object meant to them, when they decided to take it, and whether its meaning changed in exile. What emerged was not merely an archive of displaced belongings, but a collective narrative of resilience. These testimonies revealed how exile fractures time: Each object serves as a bridge between the lost past and uncertain present, carrying invisible emotional weight that no suitcase could contain.



От Архива до Инсталляции

Физическая инсталляция состоит из выдвижных ящиков, спасённых из выброшенной мебели — комодов, письменных столов, прикроватных тумб. Каждый ящик содержит коллаж из фотографий, фрагментов текстов и реплик объектов, основанных на историях участников. Красные нити проходят сквозь инсталляцию, соединяя ящики, как вены или линии жизни, связывая разрозненные истории в одно хрупкое целое. На полу посетители встречают ящики, наполненные оригинальными фотографиями и рукописными выдержками из интервью. Их приглашают открывать, трогать и читать — это приглашение пересечь грань между наблюдателем и свидетелем. Вокруг инсталляции звучит звуковая среда, включающая фрагменты записанных голосов, переплетённые с паузами, вдохами и тишиной. В результате возникает не линейный рассказ, а полифоническая симфония утраты и стойкости.



From Archive to Installation

The physical installation is composed of drawers salvaged from discarded furniture—chests, desks, bedside tables. Each drawer holds a collage of photographs, fragments of text, and replicated objects based on participants' stories. Red threads weave through the installation, connecting the drawers like veins or lifelines, binding disparate histories into one fragile whole. On the floor, visitors encounter drawers filled with the original photographs and handwritten excerpts from the interviews. They are encouraged to open, touch, and read—an invitation to cross the threshold between observer and witness. Surrounding the assemblage, a soundscape plays fragments of recorded voices, layered with pauses, breaths, and silences. The result is not a linear narrative but a polyphonic chorus of loss and endurance.



Между Документацией и Искусством

Проект Invisible Luggage стремится не столько иллюстрировать проблемы вынужденной миграции, сколько создать пространство встречи — место, где зритель может ощутить тактильность памяти и хрупкость чувства принадлежности. Он ставит вопрос о том, что остаётся, когда дом утрачивается: что можно удержать, сохранить в памяти и передать дальше.

Инсталляция открывает диалог между визуальным искусством и антропологией, между документированием и эмпатией. В конце концов, миграция — это не только геополитический факт, но и глубоко человеческое состояние, история, которая продолжает писаться — объект за объектом, голос за голосом, ящик за ящиком.



Between Testimony and Art

Invisible Luggage seeks not to illustrate suffering but to create a space of encounter—where the audience can experience the tactility of memory and the fragility of belonging. It questions what remains when the home is gone: what can be held, remembered, and transmitted.

The installation is opening a dialogue between visual art and anthropology, between documentation and empathy. Migration, after all, is not only a geopolitical fact but a deeply human condition—a story that continues to be written, one object, one voice, one drawer at a time









