

May 19, 2009

Hi guys-

Here's the Eurovision/Moscow piece and some pix. Thanks, P
Pix: 1-Press center at Olimpiiski arena, 2-outside concourse of Olimpiiski arena, 3-kids at pressroom information desk

Caption:Moscow Confidential:
The Nitty-gritty on the City and Eurovision 2009
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I was engaged to be married to a very beautiful and intelligent Russian girl some few months ago, but, unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, the wedding didn't happen. I had known her, on-and-off, for a few years, but never really knew her inner-life as many couples get to understand each others' core-selves and temperaments. What I can tell you about her, and many of the Russian kids I met during my five-day blitz of Moscow to cover the 2009 Eurovision song contest, is the following information: They are cool under fire and wise beyond their years, fiercely independent, stoic but loving, and, above all else, capable of surviving and thriving under intensely difficult social situations.

Ivan, a kid I met in a coffee shop downtown, told me during our conversation to be careful and always have with me my passport, American identification, papers from my hotel confirming that I'm a guest there, and visitor information card from the airport in case I travel outside the city. He emphatically told me, as I am somewhat animated when speaking, that I must "keep within myself" when walking on the street. "Don't be so open with people," he said, "you'll bring too much attention to yourself." After a couple of days in the city center, I began to understand what he meant.

Moscow is largely an underground city, as the car-traffic streets are enormous and it is freezing outside much of the year. Almost all intersections are crossed underground. Many of the passages are very long, with innumerable retail kiosks lining the walls, selling everything from mobile phone cards to lemon pies to military surplus gear. The Olimpiiski arena, where this year's Eurovision contest was held, is about half a kilometer walk, underground, from the Prospekt Mira metro station.

In this passageway and almost everywhere else in the city, hundreds of gabardeened police officers, lined-up like casino slot-machines, give the hard, scrutinizing, jaundiced eye to all pedestrians, apparently looking for anomalies in conduct, or self-conscious mannerisms of those without proper visitor/citizen documentation on their persons. Also, there appears to be no "probable cause" for interrogation from officials. You can be stopped and grilled any time, for any reason, because you don't conform to the officer's idea of proper wardrobe, deportment or attitude towards society. Many times during my visit I witnessed officers arbitrarily pulling people out of the crowd for interrogation. There is a constant feeling, among the Russians I talked to, that anything can happen at any time in the city, usually with negative consequences to the individual.

When one is brought-up and constantly exposed to such a culture, artistic expression becomes a detriment, not an asset, to one's character. Inner strength is developed to control one's temperament and

disposition, but subconsciously the brain finds ways to channel its artistic side under any circumstances. Women, of every economic station, dress with understated yet haute personal presentation. They wear the best they can afford, always, and apply their make-up with Raphael-esque like care. Creativity for both sexes, gets channeled into learning, especially in mathematics and the sciences. It is fascinating to speak with Russian kids, as they have remarkable technical skills with computers and gadgets, are culturally aware of arts and sciences, and speak at least one other language (usually Georgian or Moldavian). However they have great difficulty writing an original story, articulating personal opinions, painting or drawing with expression or composing a really catchy musical tune. When my former fiancée told me she loves Russia but will never go back, I only now begin to understand her inner mindset. Make no mistake, Moscow is a fascinating city. Drop-dead gorgeous, gigantic onion-domed cathedrals and buildings are everywhere. Parks are perfectly manicured and picturesque to a fault. Museums, shopping and entertainment are on practically every corner of the city center. It is beautiful, but it is a dangerous place to be. And the daily grind of being constantly under the microscope will wear down even the strongest among us. This is for sure. It is a fixed game that the little guy can't even try to win. A deadly, gorgeous fixed game.

Caption: Pressroom Eurovision 2009: Moscow rocks and pops, public opinion flops!

I was sitting with a German journalist during the Eurovision final and chatting with lots of guys from everywhere in the space-center-like pressroom at Olimpiiski. The emotional reaction to the performances by the hundreds of reporters in the place bore little resemblance to the final telephonic voting outcome. The real heart-thumping, get-on-your-feet performances came from Sakis Rouvas with *This is our Night*, and Ukrainian bombshell Svetlana Loboda with her jaw-busting performance of the song, *Anti-crisis Girl*. There were real applause and whistles for most contestants, but Sakis and Svetlana grabbed the big screen by the throat in the pressroom and controlled it to their likings. There has been some flap with Sakis since his return home about his seventh place ranking in the voting procedure. Well, listen kiddies, I was there at the rehearsals and in the next room at the final, glued to the huge screen with skads of reporters behind me. Sakis Rouvas could not have given more of himself to try and win the contest; no living human being could have. He was revved-up, cool, confident and an absolute flying tiger in his delivery and stage show. He used every calorie of his larger-than-life personality in the piece and delivered an undeniable wallop to the viewers. We sat there with our mouths open during his time on stage. It was his hour, completely. Svetlana Loboda knocked the wind out of the place with her synth-rock burner, *Anti-crisis Girl*. From her soaring, Dio-esque vocals to her raw-power pole-dancer moves, she could not have been stopped by the entire Red Army during her show. The highlight of her song included a fierce drumkit-break, where she practically slammed the heads off the traps like a young Tommy Lee. I was nearly in tears. The journalists around me seemed sure the voting would come down to a horse race between Sakis and Svetlana. However, during the voting, as it became clear that the Norwegian singer Alexander Rybak with his song *Fairytale* was going to be the obvious winner, some funny stuff happened. Perhaps because we were older guys in the newsroom, perhaps because Rybak's performance was so sappy, vanilla and adolescently sentimental, no one had paid much attention to him. We had to run to the computers to find out his name, as no one in my company had given him a second thought. Perhaps you can fool 99.9% of the people all the time, but you can't fool me when it comes to rock and pop music. Rybak will be forgotten next month. They will build cities to remember Sakis and Svetlana in the future. Maybe because Moscow is such a pressure-cooker of a town, with constant surveillance and security everywhere, that when emotionally super-charged acts like Greece and Ukraine play, there is an uncontrollable, titanic release of repressed feelings, as one cannot "keep within themselves" forever. That's what it seemed like to me, there in the pressroom, after several days exposure to the beautiful, albeit

complex Russian culture. All I know for sure is it is a place where you will develop a rich, inner life, whether you like it or not. And all you can do with it at that point, is use it carefully with the others around you.