



MY ROAD TO KYIV

The distance between Orlando, Florida, and Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, is 5,586 miles. The flight time on the most direct route is 11 hours and 36 minutes. Of course, there are no direct flights between Orlando and Kyiv; one has to change planes at least once, in New York City, Newark, or Philadelphia, or twice, with an additional stop in Frankfurt, Warsaw, or Istanbul.

In my case, the journey from my family home in Orlando to Kyiv, where I served in the US Embassy in 2012–2014, involved a long and circuitous route through Washington, D.C., Moscow, Tallinn (the capital of Estonia), Maseru (the capital of Lesotho), and Beijing. Since this book is largely based on my reporting from Kyiv, as well as that of my embassy colleagues, some personal background is appropriate, though I do not pretend to be a person of any importance in these events.

I grew up in Orlando with my sister, Rebecca, near the fantasy land that is Disney World, and the real world beyond central Florida seemed so distant. But even as a child, I wanted to understand what that world was. The stream of relatives flowing through our house from my mother’s native Iceland opened windows to a world beyond Mickey Mouse and the Magic Kingdom. I remember the glossy publications my father, who worked for the US Department of Defense, brought home, with ominous titles like *Soviet Military Power: 1987*. Bold graphics proclaimed that “they” had many more soldiers than “we” did. In

my early teens I learned that the United States and the Soviet Union targeted thousands of nuclear missiles at each other. While I was still in grade school, my father took me to see a “boomer” (ballistic missile submarine). Our navy guide escorted us to “the forest”—a large compartment housing floor-to-ceiling vertical cylinders, like the trunks of huge steel trees, each containing a nuclear missile. Threading our way through the forest, I suddenly realized that the destruction of my comfortable world was a real possibility. That feeling has never left me.

As a high school junior in 1992, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, I received a letter from People-to-People Student Ambassadors announcing a student trip to newly independent Russia. I still thought of the now defunct USSR as the globe-spanning monster I had encountered in my father’s Department of Defense magazines. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s efforts at reform made for some hopeful headlines in the *Orlando Sentinel*, but their actual impact was beyond my suburban teenage grasp. After all, most of official Washington had been suspicious of the new Kremlin boss and inclined to mistrust his sweeping policy declarations. Now both Gorbachev and the Soviet Union were gone. Pundits announced the end of history. We had won the Cold War. Russia, defeated, was lurching toward who knew what, and I wanted to see it with my own eyes. When my fundraising efforts to pay for the trip fell short, my parents dug deep into their limited resources and bailed me out.

The experience changed my life. On this first trip, at age seventeen, I struck up a friendship with the beautiful young girl I would one day marry, and decided what I wanted to do with my life.

In the early 1990s, hope and despair hung in the balance in post-Soviet Russia. Despair soon tipped the scales. In Moscow, I met a furloughed college professor working in a factory after his department had collapsed. The factory owners withheld wages for nearly a year as inflation soared. Most Russians struggled to survive, while ruthless, well-connected insiders amassed vast fortunes by stealing state assets. After a year of IOUs, the professor-turned-proletarian was paid his salary in tampons. “I was very happy,” he told me. “At least I could sell the tampons and buy food for my family.” What would my family in Orlando have done?

The trip was an eye-opener. Everyone back home was convinced that the hardships in Russia, Ukraine, and other fragments of the former Soviet Union were merely bumps on the road to Westernization, meaning democracy and

prosperity. That, or the just penance history was imposing for the decades misspent under godless communism. American academics and think tankers launched the field of “transitology,” writing prescriptions for accelerating the recovery of the former Soviet states from the disease of communism. The rampant corruption and criminality shredding the social fabric were largely dismissed as the healing pains of convalescence. Time proved this wrong. It was not a temporary bug—it was the new system.

After high school I stayed close to home, enrolling in Rollins College, a small liberal arts college in Winter Park, Florida, where I majored in international relations and minored in Russian. I spent my junior year in Moscow at the Russian State University of the Humanities, studying Russian history and acquiring some fluency in the language. Then, I spent the first half of my senior year in the Washington Semester Program of American University in Washington, D.C., another strange and exotic capital that captivated me as had Moscow. Continuing on to graduate school at George Washington University, I was fortunate to encounter some great scholars, foremost among them Professor Peter Reddaway, whose profound knowledge of Russian politics, history, and culture enabled him to challenge effectively the transient “truths” of the deluded transitologists. He readily agreed when I suggested spending a semester in Pskov, a medium-sized city in western Russia, to study how ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s grotesquely misnamed Liberal Democratic Party had won the regional governorship. I was seriously interested in the topic, but no less so in spending time in the hometown of Natalya, the young woman to whom I soon became engaged and later married.

My M.A. in Russian and East European Studies was not much help in landing a job in the late 1990s. The fragments of the former Soviet empire offered few business opportunities compared to a booming China, and no longer seemed to pose any national security threats to the United States or our allies. When I finally got a job in the Department of Commerce, calculating antidumping duties on foreign firms accused of selling goods in the United States below market value, I was relieved and immensely grateful, in part for travel opportunities to China, Chile, and Latvia. Yet a career in the Foreign Service remained my lodestar.

I had been taking the Foreign Service exam since my undergraduate days at Rollins and had passed the written exam, which was not particularly difficult. The oral exam was another matter entirely. Under the watchful eyes of

stone-faced career Foreign Service Officers, it involved negotiating with other equally determined applicants on various issues in a fictional country, “solving” hypothetical problems in challenging scenarios, and drafting memos. Although I had enjoyed my undergraduate and graduate student years, I wanted to practice diplomacy, not teach or write about it. The second time I took the orals, I was already working in the US Department of Commerce and less tense. I was one of only three hopefuls who passed the oral exam that day in early September 2001.

Then came 9/11. I was sitting at my desk in the Commerce Department when the Pentagon was struck. All I heard was a low rumble and never imagined that it was something serious. But that day changed everything. Suddenly, the State Department’s Diplomatic Security Service had more urgent business than finishing background checks on new Foreign Service Officers. My security clearance took two-and-a-half years to complete. It wasn’t until 2003 that I actually joined the Foreign Service. After going through basic training, I received my first assignment—to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. After six months of intensive Estonian language instruction in Washington, Natalya and I boarded a flight to Tallinn armed with our newly minted diplomatic passports and visas.

That first tour of duty was followed by another in Maseru, capital of the independent African kingdom of Lesotho, by which time the birth of our infant son, Andrew, had made us a family of three. Then back to Washington for a year of intensive Chinese language training. Meanwhile, Natalya had studied for, and breezed through, her exams to be accepted into the Foreign Service. We were now colleagues as well as husband and wife. Jointly assigned to the US Embassy in Beijing, we immersed ourselves in the life of the Chinese capital and further expanded our family by adopting one-and-a-half-year-old Elena, who looked like a frightened little bird when we first met her. She quickly became an inseparable part of our family.

When Natalya received her second assignment, in the consular section of the US Embassy in Kyiv, I pulled every string I could to get an assignment there, too, so that our family could remain together. Fortunately, Eric Schultz, then the deputy chief of mission in Kyiv, offered me a position in the Embassy’s economic section, focusing on trade and intellectual property rights, hot button issues in US-Ukrainian relations. It wasn’t quite what I was hoping for—I was not an economic officer—but it meant that the four of us—me,

Natalya , Andrew, and Elena—would be together. Natalya had left Beijing three months before I was able to and preceded me to Kyiv. Our family reunion took place on July 18, 2012, in our new four-bedroom apartment, a twelve-minute ride from Kyiv’s central square, officially called Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square). Everyone just called it Maidan. It was to become the focal point of our tour of duty for the next two momentous years.