

GULISTAN
KHAMZAYEVA



BEHIND
THE SILK
CURTAIN



GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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KHAMZAYEVA



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BEHIND THE SILK CURTAIN

by Gulistan Khamzayeva

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*Dedicated to Irene Koch, my best friend,
who made my life complete*

FOREWORD

From 2008 to 2011 I have served in Astana as the European Union Ambassador to Kazakhstan, after previous EU postings — out of Brussels — in Vienna, Kiev, and Moscow and before a final posting in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In all these postings I was glad that my wife was ready to join me, supporting me in my function as well as allowing us to have a normal family life.

The author's family has in many regards had a similar life to our own and many of the aspects described in this book are not unfamiliar to us. Changing place of work and of living more than once is an exciting experience, and we ourselves consider that we have been privileged to have such an experience, as it allowed us to get a more in-depth knowledge of a number of other cultures and to have made many good friends around the world. There are of course also a number of more or less hard challenges that come along with this, especially as regards family life.

Gulistan Khamzayeva has lived abroad with her family for most of the recent 20 years and it appeared immediately to me that she was indeed very well placed to describe what it means to live abroad and to serve abroad in a diplomatic service. Ambassador Khamzayev is among the

senior diplomats of his country and Gulistan Khamzayeva has supported him very actively, getting herself involved in numerous activities.

Gulistan very skillfully describes how she, her husband and their daughters organized their lives in the various places, what special obstacles they had to face and how they faced them. It appears clearly that they have used their new life experiences to enrich themselves and to maintain very close links among themselves, probably closer than if they had stayed in their homeland.

The book provides also the opportunity to learn more about Gulistan's native country, as she refers to Kazakh traditions and as she and her family naturally approach new living environments with their specific cultural background.

Moreover, I would like to underline another aspect that comes to my mind when reading this book: Gulistan and Almaz Khamzayev were diplomats for a country that did not exist when they were born, when they studied, and even when they started their professional career. Indeed, Kazakhstan declared its independence in the context of the disintegration of the Soviet Union only on 16 December 1992. As a new country, Kazakhstan undertook to create all the structures that go along with an independent country. This included the creation of a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of a diplomatic service. Under the active leadership of President Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's diplomatic service unfolded gradually over the last 20 years, leading as of now to an impressive network of more than 60 diplomatic missions abroad.

The book at hand is interesting for all those who have lived abroad or who are considering going abroad, as well as for those who are interested in historic elements related to Kazakhstan's nation building.

Finally, the book gave me the opportunity to renew contact with Central Asia, a region that both myself and my wife enormously appreciate. I would encourage you to use this book as a mean to get to know Kazakhstan and its friendly people before possibly travelling there. I can assure you, you will not be disappointed.

Norbert Jousten

EU Ambassador to Kazakhstan

2008-2011 April 2013

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When my first book, *Leaving a Piece of My Heart Behind*, was published in Russian in 2009, my foreign friends, unable to read in Russian, asked me to translate the book. I told them that it was written for my country people, for the Russian-speaking community, for the people with the same background.

It is about women who due to their husbands' job had to leave the home country to follow their husbands, to find their own way in the host country, to adapt, socialize and accept a new environment. I received lots of warm feedback, comments, and messages, and I am still receiving them.

I promised my foreign friends that one day I will write a book for them to know more about us, Kazakhstani people, to get to know about our culture, some of our traditions, way of living, about our perception of the world around us, globalized and fast moving.

I would like to thank, first of all, my family for supporting me with this project. Otherwise, I wouldn't even start it.

I am grateful to my husband Almaz for still accepting my ideas as I always have lots of ideas and for "pushing" me to take more challenges. Thanks to him I am what

I am. Thirty-six years of marriage help us understand each other in a more profound way, leaving no doubt about the sincerity of our relationship.

My daughters are my friends, my supporters, my counselors. They urged me to write my first book, and they strongly support me in writing this book, giving their contribution, advice, and comments. Mother's thanks to my daughters!

Special thanks to David for editing my book, for the excellence he brought to the book. Besides his infinite amount of patience with my book, I want to thank him for his wisdom, impeccable sense of humor, and creativity with the book cover.

I want to mention and thank Irina Shestakova (wife of Ambassador of Belarus to the Italian Republic) and Irene Koch for their support, encouragement and invaluable comments on how to improve the book.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Catharina Creysel for igniting the idea of this book in me. At some point of writing, we both realized that two books are better than one, and I look forward to reading her inspiring ideas in a book of her own.

INTRODUCTION

We were sitting in the terrace one evening. “It won’t be the same in Belgium,” I said. “I will miss our garden, this big magnolia tree. I’ve made so many photos of its flowers! I even painted one on canvas and gave it to Anar because it is her favorite flower. I’ll miss my plants, my favorite cactus. Remember? We bought it in the market in a tiny pot and now it has babies around it like our grandchildren. The cactus and the grandchildren grew up together”.

We had come to Italy eight years before, my husband and I, with no children. Now there were five of us and the kids were seven years old! Time flies so fast! I worried about them –the new school, new environment, new friends, new languages.

“Our grandchildren will have to switch from speaking Russian to English now,” I said.

“I worry about them too,” replied my husband. “But our grandchildren are different from their mothers, our daughters. They’re mobile, flexible, they’ll adapt to a new environment quickly. You’ll see.”

“I forgot to tell you, Almaz, that Francesco called Arlan “*piccolo ambasciatore*”. He looks like you –he’s a little ambassador.” I gazed from the terrace. “It is true. Dayana and Arlan are traditional TCKs!”

“What is that?” he asked, peering into the distance.

“*Third Culture Kids*”, I answered. “You know, the book I read”.

It was a remarkable book, “*Third Culture Kids*”, written by David C. Pollak and Ruth E. Van Reken, about children growing up in a multi-cultural environment.

The actual term wasn’t new, introduced in the early 1950s by sociologist/anthropologist Ruth Hill Useem, who studied children exposed to different societies. But this recent book (the revised version published in 2009) spoke to me and my situation. Thanks to the book I found an exact definition of what my family goes through, what we, our children and grandchildren, are. According to the book, TCKs are kids who are taken into another society when their parents move for occupational reasons. TCKs are also called, as in our case, “little ambassadors”, or “kids of the future”, brought up, as the book says, in a highly mobile world.

As for me, I am not a TCK, as I left my country, the Republic of Kazakhstan, for the first time for a long-term post abroad when I was thirty-eight years old. Rather, I am a “cross-cultural adult”. This term, according to the book, is for someone who has lived in another society or has had meaningful cross-cultural experiences for an extended time period.

In any case, my home, Kazakhstan, is a multinational country with over 120 ethnicities, living peacefully with each other. The issue of nationality was never raised in our minds when I grew up there or even today. I remember once in school, when I was fourteen, our Rus-

sian-language teacher started the class by naming some of us and asking us to stand up. Even after we stood up we didn't understand why she had called on us. Then she said: "Please, tell the class what nationality you are, each of you". It took us half a minute to ponder and then say what nationality we were, as we were not used to saying such a thing, in any situation. Finally the teacher said: "I checked your homework and found that Russians in the class made many more mistakes than non- Russians did". That was the only case when we were considered different. Even at that, I am sure none of us related that case to our nationality as we were part of the Soviet Union and home for many ethnic groups which at different periods of time settled in our country looking for a refuge, to explore the vast territory and its resources, whether willingly or under duress (e.g. under Stalin's regime).

Our daughters, Anar, Asel, and Asem and our grandchildren Dayana and Arlan, are all textbook examples of TCKs. Our daughters left Kazakhstan when two of them were fourteen (twins) and one was eight. Two of them as adults remained in a host culture, forming their own families with their non-Kazakhstani husbands. Our grandchildren were born in Kazakhstan, but when they were two and four months old, we took them to Italy. For several years, they didn't know who they were. Once, when they were asked where they were from, they said they were Italians. When they went to kindergarten at the Russian Embassy, they would say they were Russians. They would even proudly say: "We are Russians, and Russians would die rather than surrender to enemies!" This

was a saying they picked up from their Russian playmates. At that point, we realized it was time to talk to our grandchildren and explain who they were.

In our diplomatic circumstance, we lead a nomadic lifestyle moving from one country to another, packing up and settling down in a new place, becoming immersed in a new language, and meeting new challenges. Each country we lived in inspired us to grow in different ways. As for me, I acquired computer skills, and started to drive in the United States. And, most importantly, I gained confidence in my abilities and strength as a person. Great Britain was the shortest posting abroad (less than one year). There, as a teacher of English by profession, I kept myself busy with reading in English and traveling around the beautiful countryside. Spain was the country we all developed a special fondness for. I involved myself in charity and started hobbies. In Madrid, I became a vice president of Damas Diplomáticas (Lady Diplomats), and of the Asian Diplomatic Association. I became an honorary member of an association for disabled children and young adults of Alicante (southeastern Spain) and received an award from the association for my charity work. In Italy I discovered my creative side, painting and writing. And I can definitely say, we left pieces of our hearts everywhere we lived.

Suddenly, we were moving yet again, this time to Belgium. It had been the United States, then Great Britain, then Spain, and then Italy. Our ambassador status has also been accredited for Greece, Malta, San Marino, although we never really lived there, but only visited for

business matters. All the postings were for fairly long periods, except for Great Britain. We never considered them to be temporary places to live. When we arrived to each country, we really settled in as though we were staying for good. They say “there is nothing more permanent than the temporary”, and I couldn’t agree more.

This book is about our multicultural life. It is about us, the lives of our children and grandchildren, about our adaptation to new environments, about cultural differences we experienced, about our nomadic way of life, about people we met in different countries and those who left imprints on our lives, about our worries and feelings, about the joys and challenges, about cross-cultural interactions, about living in various cultural worlds, often simultaneously. These situations have moved me to tell our stories in order to sort out the intricacies of who we are, and to help other people in similar situations to come to grips with who they are. We are not alone, as we live in a globalized world with all its challenges and opportunities. How to deal with this situation is what this book is all about.



Gulistan Khamzayeva is the Chairwoman of the Kazakhstan diplomats' wives community. From 1993 to 2018 Gulistan has accompanied her husband, Almaz Khamzayev, a career diplomat, on diplomatic postings to Washington, D.C., USA; London, England; Madrid,

Spain; Rome, Italy; and Brussels, Belgium. They have also been accredited to Greece, Malta, and San Marino.

Gulistan is fluent in 7 languages: Kazakh, Russian, English, Italian, Spanish, French and German. Gulistan has written extensively about her life as the wife of ambassador in her books, which she has presented in Kazakhstan, in the US, in Italy, in Belgium and in Spain.

Her first book, *Leaving a Piece of My Heart Behind*, was published in 2009 in Kazakhstan and re-edited in 2011.

The new book *Behind the Silk Curtain* is about multiculturalism, adapting to new environments, socializing with people of different cultures, about linguistic integration, gaining experience, and facing challenges, about friends and family, about some of the Kazakh traditions and the country's mentality, about charity and weddings and many other fascinating contexts she was involved in.

