

Diary of an Uzbek Gastarbeiter

Mumin Shakirov 18 March 2009

About the author

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Shukhrat Berdyev, a schoolteacher from Uzbekistan, is 48 years old. He was born in a suburb of Shakhrisabz, a provincial town 400 km from the capital Tashkent. Before the collapse of the USSR his life followed a predictable script: happy childhood as a pioneer at the Lenin collective farm, studying at the Tashkent pedagogical institute, teaching psychics in a rural school, marriage, three children, membership of the Communist party and a future career as a party worker.

Everything changed after 1991, when the Soviet Union disappeared and the former Muslim colony of Uzbekistan became independent. If life in the Uzbek provinces was bearable in the early years of independence, by the mid-1990s everything had collapsed, from industry to agriculture. Destitution forced millions of peasants to leave the republic. The majority went to Russia. Among them was Shukhrat Berdyev. He began writing a diary in August 1998, when he came to Russia for the first time after the collapse of the USSR. What follows are highlights from that diary.

18 August 1998. Moscow. Market at Tyoply Stan

Almost 20 years have gone by, and I am in Moscow once more. For the third day running I've been sleeping under an enormous, filthy KAMAZ lorry. I made a bed out of wooden boxes, and bedding out of pieces of cardboard. The place reeks of machine oil, and my head is next to the stinking exhaust. There are puddles and rubbish everywhere, but I'm incredibly lucky to have got this place where I can take a breather and rest up. A lot of unskilled labourers are sleeping out in the open, and dashing for shelter when it starts raining.

My fellow countrymen from Shakhrisabz received me well: they found me a job as a loader, gave me some money and warm clothes. I can sleep until six in the morning. Then the truck heads back to the Moscow Oblast for potatoes, and I have to unload containers of bananas. I don't have any registration, but you don't need it on the territory of the market: the cops don't touch us there, as they've been paid off by the market's director.

During the day the police just hang around doing nothing much. Then, when evening comes they start shaking down the market traders. At night they hit the vodka bottle and chase women. For the first two nights I couldn't get to sleep under the lorry because of the cold, but on the third day I slept like a log, despite the rain and wind.

I dreamt about my first trip to Moscow in the summer of 1980 after the Olympic Games. There were three of us, all students from the Tashkent pedagogical institute. We'd saved up our scholarship money and gone to Moscow as tourists. We lived at [VDNKh](#) at Zolotoi Kolos

hotel, walked around the city, rode the metro, and saw Red Square, the Kremlin and Lenin in the mausoleum.

The walls of the Kremlin made the strongest impression on me. I'd never seen red brick walls like the ones in Moscow. I was woken by the roar of the engine - the driver hadn't even noticed me lying under his lorry. I had to jump up and drag out the boxes so that the truck could move. The market was already humming, and a new working day had begun. I hadn't washed for almost a week and stank like a dog, but I said to myself: "Patience, Shukhrat, you've got hungry children and a wife back home!" Back then, ten dollars a day decided my fate and saved my family from hunger.

25-26 August 1998

At midday the director of the market, an Uzbek, told me to come and see him. He'd noticed that I was a good carpenter, and made me an offer to go to the [Leningrad Oblast](#) to build a house with a team of three people. He had to help a friend. The job would pay well, he promised, and the working conditions would be decent. I agreed on the spot. Never again did I want to see that filthy, stinking market, where we were all treated like slaves. We were paid pennies, and we sweated blood from morning till night in unspeakably dirty conditions.

That night, I got on to a train with my fellow countrymen from Shakhrisabz, Safar and Khaklod. In the morning we were met in Petersburg by a guy called Oleg. He drove us to the oblast, to a village called Yesinos. They were building a large country house there, and they needed more labour. The owner, Viktor Petrovich, a cultured man with glasses and a beard, met us with a smile: he fed us, let us rest and found a place for us to live in the brick house where the other workers lived. Wherever he went, Petrovich was accompanied by well-built young men, silent and gloomy, who followed all his orders. The owner of the house was clearly someone.

He laid out the conditions straight away: we would work five days a week, with two days off, we would be fed at the company's expense, be paid in dollars, and were categorically not allowed to leave the territory of the building site. We agreed happily, because after the market at Tyoply Stan, Yesinos seemed like a sanatorium.

18-19 November 1998

We're leaving the village of Yesinos. The house was finished in three months and the owner is pleased with our work. Viktor Petrovich organised a farewell dinner for us, we made pilau and had something to drink, and he gave all of us generous presents, including for our wives, mothers and children. He paid us for our work and gave us money for the journey to Tashkent. Everyone was very happy.

But before we went to the train station, Petrovich took me aside and told me the unpleasant news that the director of the market at Tyoply Stan who sent us to Petersburg had been killed.

I didn't ask who'd killed him and why, it's none of my business. But it was sad that a person who'd helped me find a job, especially a fellow Uzbek, had been killed. In the evening we were taken to the station and put on a train to Moscow.

In the morning we arrived in Moscow. Someone was waiting for us on the platform who put us on the Moscow-Tashkent train. These people followed Petrovich's instructions diligently and to the letter. I realised that the owner of the house in Yesinos was a big mafia boss and a very influential person. When we said goodbye to him, he promised that he'd ask us to work for him again.

20 May 1999. Kemerovo Oblast. Belovsky region. Vishnevka village

The academic year at the collective farm went by quickly, the schoolchildren were eager to go on holiday, and I'm back in Russia. I didn't go to Moscow, it's full of crooks and conmen. My fellow countrymen invited me to Siberia, saying that there was work in the private sector and decent housing. So I came to the village of Vishnevka in the Kemerovo Oblast.

I took to Siberia straight away. I remember working in construction brigades as a student. We earned 600-700 rubles a month on the [BAM railway](#), which was more than a professor in Tashkent earned. We laid heating mains and cables in the Chita oblast. Now I'm building a house and bathhouse for the chairman of the village council Timofei Spiridonov.

Yesterday the oblast governor Tuleyev himself came to our region. He's very impressive! I was standing 20 metres away from him, and I heard every word he said. It was clear that he was a real boss and that people are scared of him. He's got cunning little eyes and a mobile face. It's as if he can see right through people.

A week ago I met a beautiful woman, a laundress from the hospital, Alla Petrovna. She needed building materials, and an old club in the village was being demolished. My assistant Makhmud and I brought her old bricks and boards. She didn't give us any money, saying that she would pay us when she received her salary. In exchange, we asked her to wash our things, and she agreed. So we became friends.

I took a liking to Alla Petrovna straightaway. She's a tall, blue-eyed, statuesque woman with two small daughters, and no husband. I helped her around the house, hammering in nails or plastering the wall, and she started inviting me to have tea with her. The people in Siberia are gentler than in Moscow, and they respect people who work. In Moscow we were called "wogs" and "black asses", but in Vishnevka they call us by our names. Everyone calls me Shurik, not Shukhrat, and my friend Makhmud is called Matvei. Ever since then I've been Shurik in Russia.

1 June 2000. Kemerovo Oblast. Belovsky region. Vishnevka village.

I'm in Siberia again. I'm living at Alla Petrovna's house. As soon as I arrived in Vishnevka, I had a heart attack. Alla Petrovna called the doctors and looked after me, and a week later I was on my feet again. I was diagnosed with coronary heart disease. Since then I've been

living with her. In Russia this is called a civil marriage. The locals in Vishnevka are fine about this, they don't have enough men here. They're all drunks. Around here, there are only miners, Uzbek and Tajik workers. So they welcome gastarbeiters from Central Asia.

Yesterday Alla Petrovna's elder daughter Marusya celebrated her birthday. I gave her a large fluffy teddy bear and a box of sweets. I'd told my wife Gulsara about Alla Petrovna straight away. What was the point of hiding it from her, when she rings almost every week to find out how things are? I explained to her that I'd been seriously ill and that Alla Petrovna had saved me. Gulsara was understanding. Incredibly enough, the women began talking by telephone and even became friends. They know the names of all the children and their birthdays. That's how unexpected life can be sometimes.

Now I'm the man of the house for Alla. During the day I work on the building site. In the evenings I do jobs around the house, grow cucumbers and herbs, and even milk the cows. Alla Petrovna and I often talk about life, we look at her family albums, I tell her about Uzbekistan, and she tells me about the difficult life of a single mother. My Russian has improved a lot. Not the way it was 15 years ago in the Soviet army, when I was a conscript soldier on a rocket base in Ukraine. But still, I can understand almost everything, though I speak slowly and make mistakes.

23 June 2002. Moscow Oblast.

Kazan Station. There's half an hour left before the Moscow-Tashkent train leaves. My hands are still shaking, and my left eye is twitching. I realize that I was born again three days ago. If it hadn't been for the old man from the house next door, we'd all have died. The entire brigade would have burned to death. How many times did I tell the guys not to talk to strangers, especially not drink alcohol with them? They didn't listen and paid dearly for it.

But everything began so well! For the first two months we worked on the construction site of a residential building and we were paid on time. Ten days before leaving for Tashkent, I got a good order through a foreman I know. Each one of us could have earned \$500 a week. We had to dig a kilometre-long trench for laying gas pipes in the Moscow Oblast. We worked like moles, from morning till late at night, to get the job done on time. The pipeline passed through the gardens of rich people's houses.

There we were, progressing metre by metre, when this strange Russian guy with drinks and snacks began coming to the site. He introduced himself as a local resident and gave the workers beer. After a week, he'd gained our trust and knew everything about us, our names, where we were from, when we would finish the job etc. I didn't notice what was going on, because during this time I was supervising work on a different site. And my fellow Uzbeks let their guard down, they started boasting and told this guy the most important thing - when and how much they would be paid for this job.

When I saw this Russian for the first time, I liked him too, at first. He was very open and friendly, and offered work. But then I started asking myself, why's he coming here every day, giving the guys beer? I didn't come up with an answer.

It all became clear the day before we left this village. We packed up our things in the barn where we lived and ate. At midnight this guy appeared on the threshold with a pistol in his hand. He pointed the gun at us and ordered us to give him all the money. We were all terrified, but nobody moved. Then he put the silencer on the pistol and started shooting at the lamps, screaming: "I'll shoot the lot of you!" It got dark. We realized that he would kill us, and no one around would hear the shots or our cries. Our house was on the outskirts of the village, right by the forest. We silently laid out the money, and he took several thousand dollars, closed the door from the outside and blocked it with a spade. We thought that he had gone away, but we smelt petrol and heard him running around the barn with a petrol can. Then everything burst into flames, and we realized that the barn was on fire. The guys screamed and kicked at the door, but it didn't budge. The window in the barn was very small, and no one could crawl out through it.

We thought it was all over for us. That we were going to be burned up like matches. But unexpectedly, we were lucky. An old man from a distant house happened to notice the fire. He ran to help us and opened the door. We rushed out and a minute later the barn was burning like a torch. The fire brigade, the police and the ambulance appeared, two of the guys were taken to hospital as they'd almost suffocated from the smoke, and the rest of us were taken away for questioning. In the morning the police let us go, promising that they would find this criminal. None of us believed them. We gathered together our last money and bought a ticket for the Moscow-Tashkent train. I swore I'd never go to Russia again.

13 September 2004. Moscow. Kurkino.

We haven't been paid for three months. We are only given daily expenses, and not even this is regular. Initially we were given 100 rubles a day for food, but now we only get 300 rubles for the whole week. This is only enough to buy bread. We went on strike twice, but it was pointless. The boss intimidated us and sent us back to the building site. We plastered all the walls of a 12-story building on time. When we finished the last floor, the foreman Vitalik said that the work was over and that we had to leave the site immediately. When asked about the money, Vitalik said that the firm we had made the agreement with had broken the contract with the client. The brigade workers began to grumble, and my fellow countrymen from Shakhrisabz blamed everything on me, as I'd found this site in Kurkino through an employment agency. I tried to tell them that I was in the same situation as they were. We held a meeting and decided to go to the office of the construction company which had sent us to Kurkino.

We found the director, Semyonov, with difficulty, but he didn't even talk to us and just told us to get lost. Two guys from the brigade tried to talk to him aggressively, but Semyonov called security and threw us out of the office. It was terribly upsetting. We'd slaved away for three months for no pay. I was the most worried of all, and decided to find out the truth from the employment agency which gave me this "unfortunate" order. But they didn't even listen

to me there. The woman who sent us to Semyonov pretended that she'd never seen me before. I later discovered that we'd simply been sold like slaves, that she knew from the start that we wouldn't be paid anything. Now we're living in a store room – they haven't thrown us out yet – and eating what's left of the food.

21 September 2004. Moscow. Kurkino.

We did finally get paid for our work. But only because we turned to Viktor Petrovich for help - our former employer from the Leningrad Oblast. He was very happy when I rang him, and was quite amused to hear that we had been tricked like little boys. I thought I was wasting my time ringing him. Viktor Petrovich had invited me to work for him a couple of times in the past, but I couldn't go to him, as my father died and I didn't go to Russia for two years. I wanted to hang up, but his voice suddenly became serious, and he asked me to tell him in more detail about the director Semyonov who hadn't paid us for the work we did in Kurkino. Viktor Petrovich immediately rang his friend in Moscow and gave us his address. We went to the Taganka and met a person called Alexei. He listened to us and promised to solve the problem. I said we would give him half the sum he got out of Semyonov as a reward. We shook hands, and to our surprise Alexei appeared with the money three days later. That's how the Russian mafia helped us get our wages.

To avoid any more “adventures”, we all went to the train station on the same day and got on a train to Tashkent. We weren't rich, but we were happy. Each of us took \$1,000 home, and in their hearts the men thanked me, Allah and Viktor Petrovich.

2 August 2006. Moscow. Northern district. “Aeroport” region.

Today we finished work early. By midday all the caretakers had shut themselves in their hostel. On “Paratroopers' Day” none of us go outside in the afternoon. It's a dangerous day, and not just for “Asians” and “Caucasians”, but even for Russians. A drunken paratrooper is more terrifying than a skinhead. He's got more energy, less brains and no fear of the police. Something always happens. Some of our fellow countrymen will be unlucky today – they'll get their eye poked out or be whacked in the head. We don't go outside on 21 April, Hitler's birthday, either.

There are hardly any skinheads around Aeroport, but although Misha, the head of the caretakers, hates us Uzbeks, he advised us not to leave the dormitory. On days like these we sit in front of the TV and see who's been attacked by skinheads.

I live in a small room with five other people, with three bunk beds, a wash basin and a table. In the corridor there's a shower, kitchen and toilet. We've even got hot water. The Uzbeks who work on construction sites and live in wagons envy us. “It's a real hotel you've got here,” they joke when they come to visit.

Our work isn't difficult either. We get up at 5 a.m., clean the pavements and yards and trim the trees. The women clean the doorways and windows. The shift ends at lunchtime. At 2 p.m. we go to roll-call at the municipal services office and do odd jobs around the territory.

Enterprising people get other work on the side. They take away rubbish, get rid of building materials when places are being done up, or go and dig gardens at dachas on the weekends. We earn about \$400-500 a month. No one carries large amounts of money, as the cops may take it away from you. We sometimes give something to the drunken students from the automobile technical college next door so they'll leave us alone.

25 February 2009. Moscow. Northern district. "Aeroport" region.

Hooray! I did a three-day course at a local institute. Now I'm a qualified roofer, a specialist at repairing roofs and attics. This will mean I can earn quite different wages. I'm on good terms with the head of the local municipal services department. He promised me a room of my own at a pumping station on Krasnoarmeiskaya Street. The walls are bare and there are cracks in the windows, but I know where to get furniture, plumbing and building materials.

The things Muscovites throw away are sold in shops in Shakhrisabz. I dream of being able to live here with my wife, so that she can earn money in Moscow too and look after me. My health isn't what it used to be, and the work's hard. Sometimes I have heart tremors and my blood pressure goes up. But I've got to keep at it so that my son and daughter can get married. They're studying in Tashkent. I miss them terribly.

A week ago I tried to open a kiosk opposite the transport technical college, so that the students could buy cigarettes and beer from me, and not in the building next door. It didn't work out, although the head of the municipal services office supported me. You have to pay the police, the sanitary and epidemiological department, the fire brigade, the environmental people, as well as taxes, licences etc., plus "protection" money to the mafia. When we added all this up, we worked out that I would have to pay almost \$2,000 each month on bribes, kick-backs, presents and various bills. I would barely have anything left. I went to the head of the technical school and suggested that I should open a retail outlet on the territory of the school, and that he could be my "protection", but he got scared. I'll have to look at other options.

When the head street sweeper Misha gets drunk he scares us gastarbeiters with talk of the economic crisis. He threatens to fire us all and hire Muscovites. But Russians don't work as caretakers, only Uzbeks and Tajiks. Yesterday a Moldavian settled into the hostel. He now sweeps away the snow with us in the mornings. In the evenings he drinks wine, but he treats us well. We don't give him any reason not to.

