

#53 Marina Sonkina's Russia

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ESSAY: Putin's Potemkin village
by Marina Sonkina

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Marina Sonkina

Every two years, Russian-born fiction writer Marina Sonkina of Vancouver takes her SFU and UBC students for a field trip to Russia to enhance their appreciation of the literature, art and cultural history they have been studying — and it keeps getting easier.

Travel agencies in Russia provide first-rate service when it comes to organization: comfortable buses run on time; guides show up as planned; hotels provide excellent and friendly service; restaurants serve high quality meals. The number of first-rate classical music concerts, palaces (in St. Petersburg especially), museums, and exhibitions exceed expectations.

And each time she visits, Sonkina is surprised by the changes.

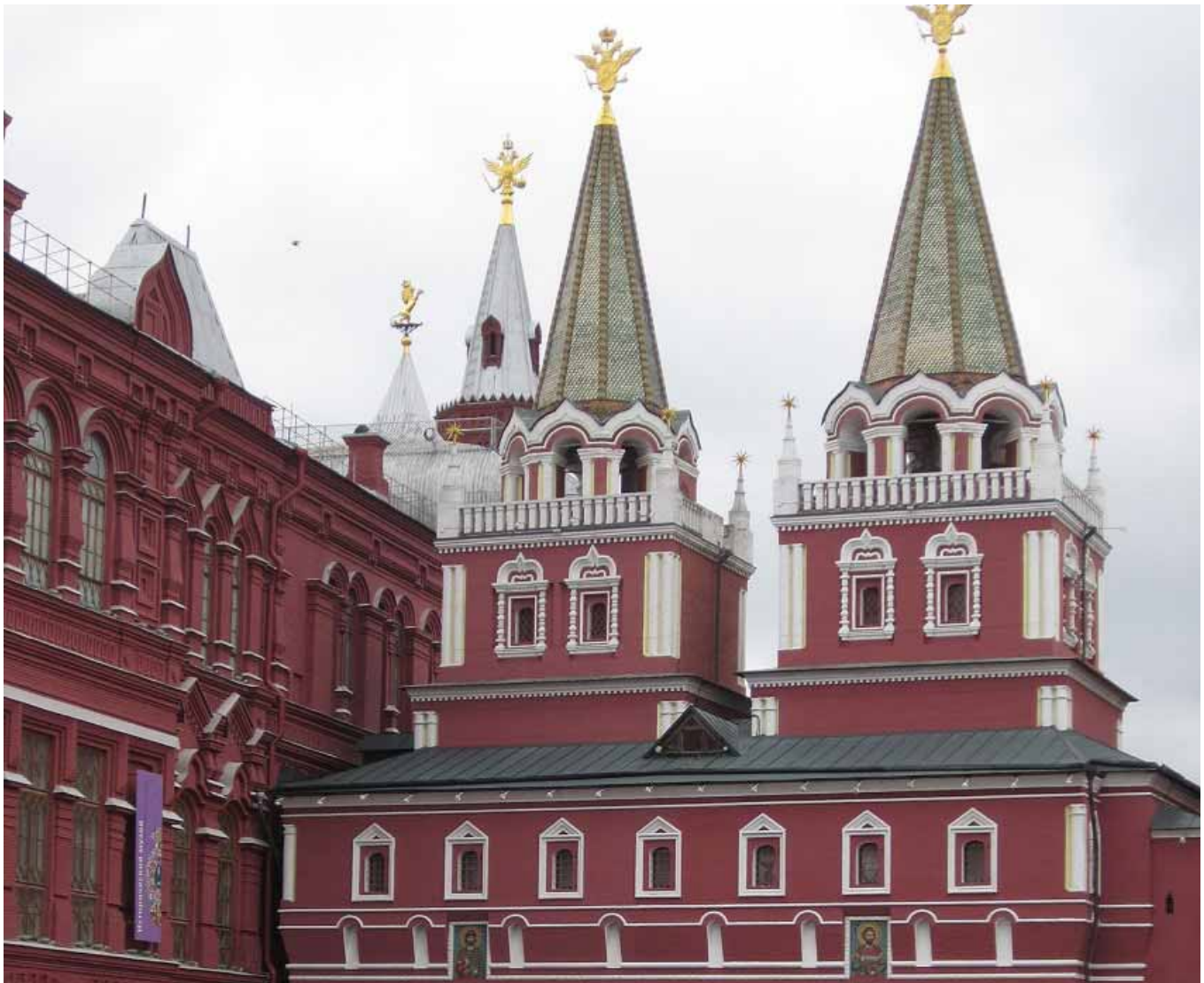
“I was told,” she says, “that if you take the whole budget of the country as 100 per cent, Moscow gets 80 per cent, St. Petersburg gets 5; the rest of the country ... well, it gets the rest. Even if this estimate is a conjecture, it accurately reflects what people feel about the distribution of wealth in their country.”

Here Marina Sonkina elaborates — Ed.

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Moscow, my own city, now of more than 20 million, I found most extraordinary and unrecognizable: never mind that all the streets have been renamed—back to their pre-Revolutionary nomenclature—but I couldn’t decide if what I was seeing was Disneyland, theatrical sets or a Potemkin village.

Every old manor is repaired and repainted (and there are hundreds of them), with all the ornaments highlighted in pink, pastel yellow, bright blue or white. The streets are spotless, not a scrap of paper; the most elegant cafés and restaurants competing in beauty and elaborateness of their décor and cuisine are full. Gingerbread, toy-like, gaudy, wedding-pie churches have mushroomed on every corner, the bells chiming every hour.





Entrance to Red Square. Marina Sonkina photo

There are around 200 stationary theatres in Moscow with repertoire ranging from Ancient Greeks to Stoppard to Russian underground playwrights. And they are packed with very enthusiastic audiences.

Bookstores catering to both low and high-brow tastes are abundant and carry books in all genres: from pulp fiction to American best sellers, quickly translated into Russian, to philosophical and religious tractates to poetry to reprints of the old editions. The traditional respect for hard copy is still honoured: few books are published as paperbacks. Russia had a long-standing tradition of excellence in translation. Any voice of importance in world literature gets noticed and translated—no matter in which language it expresses itself. An extra suitcase for books that I carry on my travels to Russia is quickly filled up.

At the time of our visit, Moscow mounted several major exhibitions: I managed to get to Raphael brought from Urbino and Melan (nine portraits and several sketches). People think nothing of lining up for six hours. I was lucky to be able to buy two tickets for myself and my friend “on the side” for a slightly higher price.

“To get to Moscow! To get to Moscow!” pined the three sisters from Chekhov’s play of the same name. A century later, the capital, like a remote super nova, is still luring provincial dreamers, artists, savvy entrepreneurs, financial moguls, and jobless and impoverished migrants from former Asian republics content to sleep on seedy mattresses in shacks and do the manual jobs shunned by Moscovites.

I say ‘remote’ because technically at least you still need to have a registration mark in your passport allowing you to live in this city. That hasn’t changed since the Soviet times. There was still another visible change. In the Nineties, the time of the greatest economic and political turmoil, Moscow was inundated with “unbeggary” looking beggars: middle-aged and mostly female teachers, doctors, secretaries, who instantly lost their jobs, savings and any mooring in

the society that overnight tried to move to a market economy.

There are no beggars in sight anymore. The few that I saw look much younger and expose frightening maimed limbs. Are these the scars of wars that Russia led in Chechnya, Georgia, and now Ukraine?

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With all its glamour, Moscow, of course, is no more Russia than New York is America.

I was told that if you take the whole budget of the country as 100 per cent, Moscow gets 80 per cent, St. Petersburg gets 5; the rest of the country...well, it gets the rest. Even if this estimate is a conjecture, it accurately reflects what people feel about the distribution of wealth in their country.

And yet, with all its festive glitz, in Moscow, the proud capital of the largest country on earth, there is a feeling of one hand directing the show (and you can't get rid of the feeling that it is a show), one central ideology willing the demonstration of opulence into being: that of inflated patriotism at the expense of 'the other'; of blatant nationalism based on the myth of Slavic superiority.





Street scene, Moscow. Photo by Marina Sonkina

It was scary to discover how rank-and-file admire Putin. Scary to hear (taxi-drivers being my random source of information) what people think of Ukraine, Crimea and European sanctions.

Crimea was taken back because Russians there were abused by the Ukrainians and asked Russia for protection (much like Hungarians did in '56, or Czechs in '68, I suppose). Many Russians now believe Ukrainians are worthless and confused people swayed away by Americans who stirred up waters there. They elected a fascist government that is threatening Russia the way Hitler did (this reflects the statements many times repeated on Russian TV).

The only reason Europe hates Russia is because “they” envy “us”; because we’re big and powerful and they want to destroy “us” in cohort with the Americans. Putin is good for Russia because he is strong and knows what he’s doing. The implications being (I assume) that he knows what’s best for the country, relieving people of the necessity to figure that out by themselves.

In Moscow, I witnessed ‘elections’ to Duma, the Russian parliament. People voted “with their legs” as the saying in Russia goes, that is they walk away from the polls on the day of the elections. Apathy, disinterest, a sense that nothing ever depends on them, is pervasive.

As for American elections, according to the polls cited by the Newspaper *Vestnik*, the majority of Russians favour Donald Trump. Is it because Trump is fond of Putin and people hope for a better relationship between Russia and the USA? I asked a friend of mine. No, if anything, he said, Trump may destroy the USA, the idea appealing to many Russians.

In my previous visits to Russia I watched poetry bashes in the street, where young people competed as to who could recite more of the classic and contemporary poetry by heart. One girl carried on uninterruptedly for forty minutes before agreeing to step down. I asked a friend of mine if I could still find poetry bashes in the streets. No. There are new laws prohibiting gatherings.

An artist and a book designer with whom I’ve worked with met me in his spacious, centrally located, two-bedroom studio which he rents from the Government at a discounted price as a member of the Artists’ Union. In the Soviet times, he would have this studio for free. I cautiously asked him about politics in Russia.

Victor (not his real name) expressed dismay at the Kremlin’s secrecy. “People know nothing of what’s going on there. Nothing of their intentions, or the way they think,” he said. It was my turn to be surprised: “Was there any time in the history of the Soviet Union when the Kremlin demonstrated transparency?”

Having spent the years after the collapse of the USSR out of Russia, I see today’s Kremlin as a carbon copy of the Soviet one. But Victor obviously didn’t want to give up a taste of freedom he had experienced during *perestroika* and *glasnost*: and so his expectations were different from mine.

What he minded most about the people in Kremlin was their shameless ostentatiousness. He asks, "Why does Medvedev (former President of Russia, current Prime Minister) need a *dacha* (summer country cottage) on the property of 90 hectares surrounded by a seven-meter high impenetrable wall? How come the head of the Anti-Corruption Committee was found stashing 120 million dollars cash and three million euros in his Moscow apartment?"

As for Putin himself, Victor was cautiously evasive. What he most minded about Putin was the way the ruler was imposing his tastes on the whole nation. "Putin is big on sports and military and all you see on television is the promotion of sport and the weapons. Where is art? Who is supporting art?"

The Russian army is now the fourth largest in the world. Percentage-wise, Russia spends on defence more than the US: 4.5 percent of its GDP while America spends 3.5 per cent.

I remember the anti-western propaganda of the '50, '60s and '70s, the constant fodder that rank-and-file Russians had to chew. The vehemence of Putin's propaganda machine matches that of Stalin's in the grotesqueness of its claims. And it does work!

Many Russians believe unequivocally that the US has a hand in every Russian problem: from ousting Yanukovich in 2014 (the Ukrainian thuggish President who fled the country as a result of popular protests) to shooting down Malaysia Flight 17 with 283 people on board. The proof of the latter? The bodies collected after the crash of the plane were decomposed cadavers! The Americans had staged the shooting, having filled the plane with corpses. (Canada, by the way, is exempt as Russians do not consider it to be an active player on the world arena.)

Nobody could accuse the KGB or Putin (its former Director) of squeamishness. There is a whole department at KGB (many times renamed – but no matter) training 'specialists' in deformation, sabotage and disinformation technique. Just as during the Stalin's era, the 'specialists' work hard at concocting scenarios ranging from the phantasmagorical to the macabre and ludicrous. It is people's gullibility that I found so puzzling.

Decades ago, a post-doctorate student and a KGB informer posing as my friend tried to enlighten me: "You don't understand! The more improbable, the more bizarre, the more the mob will take it as bait! Understand that the mob is bored! Conspiracy theories entertain them! They are low-life, they hate themselves, but creating an external enemy gives them some modicum of respect."

It is this attitude of rulers' unabashed cynicism, and spite for their own nation, that was not accepted by people in 2012 when thousands poured into the streets protesting against the mock elections in Russia. Putin then swapped places with Medvedev to become a President for the third time.

But back to my friend's studio...

"What do people say about sanctions?" I ask.

"We've endured a war, and we'll endure their sanctions. It will kill the West, not us! Putin promised to set up local production of groceries and he will. That's how general thinking goes."

An outsider now, I saw clearly that my blaming Putin alone, holding him alone responsible for

the path the country is now taking was simplistic. A strong, dictatorial fist must, after all, appeal to the hearts of Russians (as well as to the hearts of many other peoples, if we are to count the number of dictators around the world horizontally (that is now) and vertically (that is, historically)).

To a traveler, many customs seem surprising. Many Moscovites have personal drivers even if it costs them the lion's share of their income. Why? Moscow is huge; traffic is heavy; you can be stuck in jams for hours. But what about an ever-expanding subway, Stalin's underground palaces, Communist utopia carved in stone? With its 200 stations and trains coming up every 30 seconds, for sure, Moscow got the most efficient way of negotiating the urban sprawl! However, given the chance, Moscovites would avoid the crowded metro at all costs. It's on a Moscow subway that you see those weary, drained, apathetic faces representing such a contrast with the garnished streets over their heads.

Every Muscovite—and especially drivers—rant against the present mayor's decision to pave all the streets of central Moscow with tiles. (Paving done by hand by hundreds of *gastarbeiters* from Central Asia). What's wrong with that? Everything is wrong! I'm told. Prams get stuck in the cracks as do the stilettos proudly worn by most young women in Moscow. (I didn't see one person with a walker or a cane, never mind a wheel-chair, so obviously, this is not a concern.) With winter frosts, cracks between the tiles are inevitable. They've removed the tiles three times already and will have to do it again, I'm told. Where does the money come from? Mayor's wife owns the tile production industry, so she gets all the contracts.

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On to St. Petersburg

St. Petersburg, the city that has changed its name three times, is vastly different from Moscow in its feel and history. People there are softer spoken. They move at a slower pace, seemingly less under pressure.

There is something aristocratic in the stately and reserved beauty of this very European city. It was the Tsar who has conceived of it; the emperors who held court in it, with magnificent palaces mostly built by European architects.

St. Petersburg is largely immune to the religious fervour of Moscow and so the gaudy décor of Moscow churches and manors would be totally out of place in the graceful ensemble of its streets. And yet, in spite of its physical beauty, the city has a certain aura of provincialism, a sense of second-rated-ness.

As a friend of mine, a well-known scholar and professor of linguistics noted: "When you look at the faces of people who live in St. Petersburg, you have a feeling they've dropped off the moon. They don't know what to do with the city to which they don't belong."





Memorial for Gulag victims. Marina Sonkina photo

I wouldn't be so harsh in my judgment, but what she was referring to is the sad reality of the city's history. Soviet rulers, Stalin in particular, did their best to suppress the proud and free spirit of Leningrad by purging it of its cultural and scientific elite. Krushchev continued the trend: he would send the 'indigenous' inhabitants away to suburbia and replace them with the dwellers of near-by villages and remote provincial towns.

After *perestroika*, the numerous communal apartments where the intelligentsia lived were bought by oligarchs and turned into lucrative boutique hotels. Some of the communal apartments are open for viewing as a tourist attraction. We visited a lady in her sixties, who owned a spacious room, part of the kitchen and bathroom shared with three other tenants. Our guide was indignant about my decision to make this visit—it was viewed as unpatriotic to include these communal apartments into the program.

The lady in question, on the contrary, was happy to talk to foreigners and earn some cash to boot. She was happy also by her choice: between moving to suburbia and living in the core of St. Petersburg, there was no question in her mind what to choose. For my students, this visit was one of the trip highlights as it gave them a glimpse of real people's lives.

The visit created a counterbalance to numerous palaces that are hard to skip in St. Petersburg. The famous Usupov Palace (second best to Winter Palace, housing a famous collection of art, and a private theatre, to say nothing of recreating the scene of Rasputin's murder in the basement suite of the palace) usually would be as packed with tourists as the Winter Palace, but we lucked out. We were among the last people to be admitted; the director of some bank has been given permission to take it over for his daughter's birthday celebration. (Imagine Palazzo Ducale closing for a day for a similar reason!)

Ancient Pskov

As in many controlled societies, on a personal level, people in Russia are warm, hospitable, and will go out of their way to circumvent bureaucratic mire to help you out, especially if you're a foreigner. Official anti-Western propaganda is counteracted by a reverence—if not admiration—for foreigners. This is an old dichotomy going back to the 18th century. Russians are truly proud of their culture and eager to share what they know and love with those who show interest.



City of Pskov. Photo by Marina Sonkina

This pride was most obvious in St. Petersburg and in the ancient, thousand-year-old city of Pskov, 30 km. away from the Estonian border where a slow river rolls peacefully along the plain, creating the lyrical charm associated with rural central and northern Russia. (The last Tsar of Russia, Nicholas the Second, abdicated in Pskov, but it didn't spare him and his family from Lenin's bullets a year later.)

Owing to its northern position, Pskov was never conquered by the Tatar-Mongolians who ruled Russia for nearly 300 years in the Middle Ages. Pskov has therefore preserved some very early icons and churches, most notably the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery, the most beautiful and prestigious of them all.

The Pskov–Pechersky monastery is different from other monasteries: it has never closed. It has a solid reputation for its rich library, learned monks and the tradition of *staretz*—holy fathers offering spiritual guidance. (Think of *staretz* Zosima in Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*.)

During the Soviet times, with the official doctrine of militant atheism, only a handful of churches and monasteries survived looting and total destructions, just as very few priests managed to escape the Gulag and execution. Now there are more than a thousand active monasteries and convents in Putin’s Russia, their number growing as the Church is trying to replace the failed Communist promise of an earthy paradise with a celestial one.

I would be leery of calling the resurrection of church-going as a spiritual revival. It is rather a restoration of a centuries-old alliance between the State and the Church wherein they mutually reinforce each other, sharing the same world view: a cult of authority, fierce nationalism and obscurantism.

Putin, just like tsars before him, found it useful to embrace the institution, but the Church plays no independent role in his schemes. Meanwhile it partakes in the wealth of his cronies through profit sharing and rich donations imparted on churches and their leaders personally. No oligarch would strike a deal before getting a blessing from a church boss. And if you buy a new car, you ask a priest to sanctify it.





Pskov Pechersky monastery. Marina Sonkina photo

It has not always been like that. In Soviet times, many members of the Russian intelligentsia clandestinely turned to the church as a form of dissent. Among them were many secretly baptized Jews. Now this generation feels that the carpet was pulled from under their feet. What once was a form of spiritual refuge and a proclamation of personal independence feels to many like a form of prostitution.

At the Pskov-Pechersky monastery, colourful lapis-lazuli and golden domes climb up a slope in one graceful, light-hearted file, separated from the external world by a graded wall. Their joyful procession gives you no hint as to what is lying beneath: an underground acropolis stretching for more than 200 km. and housing hundreds of burials going back to the 15th century.

There is nothing unusual about burying Christians in caves (think of the catacombs in Rome) but the tourist guide tells us: “The antique or pagan word necropolis cannot be applied to the Caves Made by God. Indeed, it is the city of all the living in the hope of resurrection for the eternal life... With no regard to the earthly rank, the dead bodies—numbering more than ten thousand—remain in tact. Or as the Pskovian Bishop Gennady avowed at the end of the 16th century, “Those who have the honour to be buried in the Caves Made by God will not only escape rot but will also get absolution!”

Covering our heads and putting on skirts (mandatory for women) we were ready to enter the City of the...Living. But a monk with the face of a bouncer, guarding the entrance, blocked our way. He looked at his I-phone and realized he knew nothing of our visit. He was prepared to say “Nyet!” except that we were all foreigners.

“We came from afar to look at your wonderful caves,” I said. “All the way from Vancouver.”

“Are you an Orthodox Christian?” asked the monk in the intimidating voice of the Soviet style bureaucrats.

“Of course,” I said.

“How many times you pray?”

“Every waking hour.”

“What is the name of the Church in Vancouver you go to?”

“St. Nicholas.”

We were finally let in. He was not concerned with the religious habits of my “flock.” As foreigners, they couldn’t be expected to know the true faith. But my unaccented Russian has betrayed me.

The medieval history of the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery is emphasized in the guidebook. We are not told that during WWII, the monastery (as well as the city of Pskov) was occupied by Germans. When it was occupied by Germans, this monastery also welcomed Andrey Vlasov, formerly Stalin’s favourite, who created a 130,000-strong army that fought against Stalin on Hitler’s side. One theory has it that he wanted to fight against Stalin and Hitler alike. Vlasov was hanged after the war, and thousands of his soldiers were executed without trial.

Among other noted people associated with Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery is the famous Russian-American painter, stage designer, sculptor and publisher, Michael Chemyakin. Before being expelled from the Soviet Union for his nonconformist art, he spent two years as a novice in this monastery. His whimsical composition “Children as Victims of Adults’ Vices” is now one of Moscow’s landmarks.

In the centre of the composition we see a boy and a girl walking with their eyes blindfolded. Under their feet is a book of fairy-tales but all around them are the figures symbolizing adult vices: Ignorance, Avarice, Cruelty, Violence, War, etc. The work was criticized by the religious establishment who considered it harmful for the psyche of children.

In the words of the artist: “I conceived and then realized this composition as a symbol and as a call out to save today’s and future generations. As an artist, I’m asking by this composition to look around, to hear and see what’s going on. And while it’s not too late, the people of consciousness should stop and give it a thought.”

These thoughts ran through my mind as the sounds of the monastery’s bells sailed over my head. There is an ancient belief: if you stand under the bells of the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery while they are tolling, and make a wish, it will come true.

I made a wish for Russia. The land where I was born.

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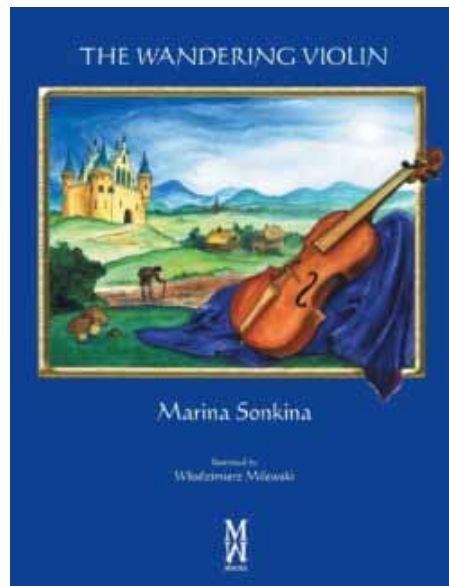




A younger Marina Sonkina in Russia

Marina Sonkina grew up in Moscow, about two kilometres from the Kremlin on a famous street called Arbat, which is more than 500 years old. Pushkin's house was located next door to her school and another famous Russian poet named Bely lived half a block away. Her house still stands near the famous Praga Restaurant at Arbat 2/1 and the Gruerman hospital. Sonkina left her career as a professor at Moscow University to immigrate to Canada as a single mother with two boys, convinced they would be forced into military service for Russia. She found work in the Russian section of Radio Canada International at CBC, in Montreal. One son became a tenured professor of mathematics in Halifax; the other returned to Moscow as a Canadian citizen and has achieved success as an actor featured in *Game of Thrones*. Sonkina's latest collection of stories, *Expulsion & Other Stories*, features Chekhovian tales of survival in the Soviet Union. She has no regrets about her move to Canada.

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Books by Marina Sonkina:

Runic Alphabet (MW Books)

Tractorina's Travels and Other Stories (MW Books)

Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories (Guernica, 2011)

The Wandering Violin (The Violin That Wanted To See The World) (MW Books, 2011). Children's book.

Comrade Stalin's Baby Tooth (MW Books, 2012)

Expulsion & Other Stories (Guernica Editions, 2015)