

Karl-Marx-Allee and Kreshchatik (2005)

I stay in Kyiv for eight nights at the Maidan Square, which is divided in two by Kreshchatik Street.

I mainly hang around the Kreshchatik. I go to a few other places, but the reason for my trip, the parade street, holds my interest. One guidebook states that the shiny shopping malls under the Independence Square are not representative of Ukraine. It may be the case, but I am not trying to make an objective representation of the place.

My uncle and aunt met at Kyiv University. From my family only my parents attended their wedding. I ask relatives and some family friends, who studied in Kyiv or went to the wedding, if they have any memories of the Kreshchatik. Their memories are hazy. Some offer to look for postcards or books they have of Kyiv. Everyone remembers that at the time of the wedding there was a lot of snow and my mother was heavily pregnant. I search through my mother's diaries to see if she wrote something about Kyiv. There are a few sentences: It seemed to her that the Soviet women she met at my aunt's wedding had trust in their status, and fought with their own weapons. They were not trying to be something they were not – and achieved respect and equality as women, workers and mothers without pretending to be like men.

May 2005: The Ukrainian government has temporarily lifted visa requirements for EU citizens. In return similar improvements from the side of the EU in regard to Ukrainian travellers are expected. The Ukrainian government has a three-year action plan in order to move closer to the EU.

I'm sitting on the windowsill of my room on the tenth floor. The room is absolutely beautiful, and the view is even better.

After four p.m. the change of hour is noted by an electronic tune, live music starts around seven in the evening, by eleven it has died down. The lighting of the buildings is turned on around ten and switched off around one.

The hotel used to be called the Moscow, now it's the Hotel Ukraine. The hotel's leaflet says: "It has been regularly receiving great numbers of guests, among them renowned spacemen, actors and athletes, politicians and businessmen, people's deputies (MP'S), and tourists from all over the world."

Showcase, stage, catwalk, people's recreation zone.

Administrative buildings are located on the even numbered side of the street; on the other side are apartment buildings.

People are reading thick books and glossy magazines, doing crossword puzzles, writing, drawing, looking at photographs, telephoning, drinking beer, eating ice cream and working on laptops.

Loudspeakers line the street. When the music is off, during a weekday, I notice that the birds are especially noisy.

Two blond girls sit next to a fountain and play cards. A group of guys tries to approach them, but they ignore this. Once the men leave, the girls give me a relieved look. Soon, two women sit between the card-playing girls and me.

The social space is smaller than what I'm used to; benches often face each other with a small distance in-between and strangers sit on the same bench close to each other. The same goes with queuing: I'm used to keeping a distance and people think I am not in line and walk past.

It starts raining hard. I follow the crowd to the McDonalds close by. The place is totally packed. I get some fries and try to find a place, but there are no free seats. After a while a teenage girl with a quiet friend asks whether I want to eat with them. For a while we eat in silence. Then she asks whether I am from America or from England. I tell them that I am from Finland. She asks where I am staying. She looks slightly unenthusiastic when she hears the answer. "Don't you like Hotel Ukraine?" I ask. She says that it is just a normal hotel, nothing special. When I explain about my work, she asks if I do it professionally. She thinks that I should have come a bit earlier, in May, when the Eurovision song contest took place. At the time they had many visitors. I ask what she thinks of the Greek winner. She isn't impressed. After a bit she and her friend have to leave for the theatre.

During the "orange revolution" a camp of tents was erected along the street to house protestors from all over the country. Some lived there for two months. Now what's visible to me from the "revolution" are mainly the T-shirts and scarves sold by street vendors. At the central department store, I randomly choose a packet of orange and green underwear. I don't realise that it is a special package with orange for revolution and green for Eurovision. At the checkout counter I notice that I need a larger size. The saleswoman lets me exchange the underwear, but apologizes that there's only two green pairs left. The airport duty free has a whole section of books on the "orange revolution" in English and Ukrainian. The glossy books show close ups of people in the Independence Square in freezing cold temperatures.

On the first weekend I'm here, there's a parade defending the right for freedom of religion. During the following weekend pink flags wave on the square in a concert of European Socialists coinciding with a meeting of World Economic Forum (WEF). The congress is held in the old Lenin Museum, what's now called the Ukrainian house, at the end of the Kreshchatik. A large banner of the WEF hangs outside the building. Later I read on the WEF website that "the participants are impressed with the remarkable reforms the new government has already undertaken and their expectations are now high [...] The Ukrainian government must seize this window of opportunity to deliver reforms in a fast, decisive and comprehensive manner."

Clothes in newer shops cost from 40 EUR up. The shops are crowded, but I haven't seen anyone buy anything yet. On the plane back there's a woman with a "Shoes from Grand Gallery" shopping bag. I can afford the food on the street, but most people seem to look at the prices carefully.

The signs on the glass entrances of the underground shopping malls forbid many of the activities on the square above: no photographs, video taping, smoking, drinking or dogs. A lot of people gather directly outside the entrances. One day I see a boy videotaping his friend smoking and drinking inside the mall.

On the Web I come across many sites advertising private accommodation on the street. Some sites seem a bit questionable. One page offers an apartment in the building where the Eurovision winner Ruslana lives.

It takes a while to find the Kreshchatik Street Museum. Finally, I find something that looks like a museum above an Internet café. The place is locked. Then someone opens the door. Two women seem surprised that I do not speak Ukrainian or Russian. The younger woman speaks English. She unlocks one room and says that the guide is currently on holiday. The room has a display of B&W photographs, mounted on cardboard backgrounds, and some objects. She briefly explains the different historical periods of the street. The house we are in is one of the only buildings from the pre-WWII period. In 1941 the Soviet Secret Services left radio-controlled bombs in the buildings. The houses along the street started blowing up, killing the Nazi occupiers living on the street, but also civilian inhabitants. In the early 50s they built apartments for rich people. I ask whether the inhabitants of the street are still rich and she nods: very, very rich.

My uncle acts as a consultant between Finnish investors and Ukrainian or Russian companies. One Ukrainian company he was working with has a beautiful head office on the Kreshchatik, but its factory outside of Kyiv only produced five tractors during the last year.

There are lots of cameras on the street. Photographers use exotic animals to attract customers, tourists and teenagers photograph each other, and TV cameras film the parades and large concerts. All the tourist guides feature the area.

I'm photographing an underground passage entrance when a young man comes by wanting to see the photograph I took. I show the image, but explain that one won't see much of him. He is a bit disappointed and wonders if I have any pictures of the parade that took place that morning, in which many of his friends participated. I've already downloaded the pictures.

Taking a picture of the eight-lane street turned pedestrian zone, a woman selling blue flowers walks up to me from far away. She points at my camera and orders me to pay. I say that she is tiny in the photograph, one won't recognise her. She points at the zoom, and shows a sign of a close up. I shake my head. She motions that she has five children and her back hurts from harvesting the flowers she sells. We continue the discussion for a while, but because we can't understand each other, we have to give up.

I'm reading the Kyiv Post in the most expensive Internet cafe in town, at the main post office. It's an interview with a young Dutch businessman who moved to Kyiv. He came here because his older mentors recommended going to a country with an emerging economy: "If you have guts, go to Poland. If you have even more guts, go

to the Ukraine". He says that he likes it here, because people have nothing, but they still do not complain. In the Netherlands people have everything, but still complain.

I'm sitting on a bench on Kreshchatik. A guy sits next to me and asks if I speak any English. I nod. He asks where the city centre is. This is a redundant question. He knows the answer. I still bother to answer his question. Then he gets to the point: "Where are you from?, what are you doing here?" He tells that he's American, and was married to a German, and he's here to make a new start, but it's proving more difficult than he expected. He should learn the language, but easier said than done. We discuss the street a little and he says it would cost at least \$1000 to rent an apartment here.

*I have lived on Karl-Marx-Allee since 2001.*

*Some years ago I discussed the possibility of reading newspapers on the Internet with a friend. We both agreed that it would be strange to get up in the morning and eat your breakfast staring at the computer screen. That's however what I do these days. Around nine or ten in the morning I go to a bakery around the corner. Afterwards I buy a paper from a woman, who stands next to the U-Bahn entrance. At home I make a cup of tea and browse through different websites: the BBC, the Guardian, then Sueddeutsche, Reuters, maybe Der Spiegel or New York Times, and Helsingin Sanomat. The newspaper stays unread unless I have to ride the U-Bahn during the day, which doesn't happen often, as one can bike virtually everywhere. Stacks of unread newspapers accumulate in my room. I'm reluctant to throw them out before I've leafed through them and cut out interesting articles. Today I took out an article about tourism being the largest single industry in the world. The number of tourists in Europe, in the next 20 years, is expected to double.*

*When I look out of the kitchen window I often see someone taking a photo, usually of the fountain or the statue of Karl Marx. Many like to be photographed next to the statue. The fountain attracts a wide range of activities: fashion shoots, wedding pictures, music videos, dance performances, art actions.*

*Cars and bikes race by. Sometimes there's a demonstration passing by, especially on Mondays. The street is more like a transit zone than a place to spend time.*

*On hot days people play in the fountain. Maybe it is because many swimming pools have shut down and the ones that are open became more expensive. Lately the fountain has been off. A few years ago the same happened, as it became too expensive to run. At the time businesses around the square made donations to keep the fountain running.*

*A man regularly comes to sit on the same bench for several hours a day. He has a very cute, small black dog that stays underneath the bench. I can't really tell what the man observes; his head doesn't move that much. Today, for the first time, I saw him talking to someone – a red haired woman with a grey-white, fluffy dog.*

*There are rumours about the people living on the Karl-Marx-Allee. Many say that only people belonging to the communist party lived here. I have read that everyone who*

sufficiently helped in the construction of the buildings got an apartment. In our house most of the people are old and I do not know what they all did before. Most of them are friendly. There is a blond woman who takes her dog out for a walk at least five times a day. She often declares that this house used to be a very beautiful house and makes sure no-one leaves their bike in the hallway. There is a man, who often asks about my practice and tells about his visits to the doctor.

Some seem irritated about the museum status of the street. Recently someone posted a note on the door saying that they were a sociology student wanting to interview people, who lived on the street during the DDR. When I later go down someone has ripped the note away. The Volkssolidarität has more sympathy. Posters about their meetings and lectures often hang in the corridor, next to the elevator.

I start photographing shop window displays on the street. In the process I notice that many people on the street are sensitive to a camera. It happened a few times that while photographing a store, someone passing by lifted a bag to cover their face.

As I enter the cultural café, he asks if I am the person with the Russian accent who just called. He talks for a long time and lends me a book called "A Future for Karl-Marx-Allee", as long as I return it.

He says that the association supporting the development of the street no longer exists. The association was established to find a concept to market the street after German reunification. They never came to an agreement on the concept.

A company from the former West bought the street cheaply in the early 1990s. The expectation was that within five years all the old people would be dead and the entire street could be sold or rented with higher price. So many shop spaces are unused, as they are expensive and there's not enough customer traffic. The property owners however make money from renting apartments; the street is well inhabited and the rents are high. He asks how much rent I pay. I tell him 767 EUR for 80 m<sup>2</sup> and he thinks it is a lot.

The street was ignored in the last years of the DDR. There were stories about tiles falling off the buildings. He's satisfied with how the street has been renovated. He adds that it's interesting how many different reactions the street triggers: the novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez can't stand it, whereas the architect Aldo Rossi thinks it's great.

I ask whether the association had links with other areas of Stalinist architecture. It has never been a theme for them. Maybe since Stalinist buildings are usually found in separate blocks ... except in Kyiv there's a similar street. He visited that street once in the 1980s, when his wife studied in Moscow. But that street is shorter, only 1.6 km, while Karl-Marx-Allee is more than 2 km long.

The office has a view of Kino Kosmos. The cinema recently shut down after a long fight led by its employees. It is now reopening as a multicultural disco. No-one seems to know what this means in practice - the place doesn't have a licence to play loud music. I am in the office in order to get the rent of a space I am interested in lowered.

*"I expect to stay there only for a year", I tell the salesperson. "You're not supposed to tell me things like that", he says. "Why not? I am exactly the kind of person you are looking for, someone young, who will move out soon. You will be able to make another contract with a higher price in a year." He thinks for a while and answers, "well, I admit that we want the old people to die, but we want the new renters to be between 30 and 40 and stay for two to three years."*

*It's a warm and humid day. As usual, other bikers pass me by. I never attempt to race them. My bike is old and anyhow I am not so sporty. I stop by a temporary art space I have not visited before. To my surprise the person attending the exhibition is someone I know. He shows me around the exhibition and we talk for quite a while. The exhibition consists of small sculptures from different artists. There is a nice sculpture of Strausberger Platz made out of cassette covers. I tell him that I was just in Kyiv on a similar street and that now I am taking more pictures of Karl-Marx-Allee. He recently read an article about the Ukraine and its present mood. The article's enthusiastic tone reminded him of the time of German reunification.*

*I go by a bakery that is part of a chain of Vietnamese run stores. As I pay for the bun, the shopkeeper, a young man with a nice smile, asks, you're not German, are you? "And how long have you been here?" For eight years, I say. "Eight years... that's a long time. You still have a strong accent."*

*At the end of the street an old bank is being used for a yearly art festival organised by a cultural association. The exhibition is on three floors and is quite interesting. There are paintings, videos, sculptures, installations and drawings on various themes. Two people attending the exhibition are out in the sun. I tell them that I liked the exhibition. They say that I should write this in the guest book. I go back inside. When I return they are discussing the building opposite. Some nice apartments are available there. They invite me to the "Finissage" of the exhibition.*

*I cycle to the point on Frankfurter Allee where the Stalinist buildings end. I notice a small hotel at the corner of the last building; it must be the only hotel on the street.*

*We, two friends visiting Berlin and I, go to eat at the nearby butchers. I am there quite often, so they are no longer amazed at the fact that I do not eat any meat. I ask for potatoes, sauerkraut and green beans. My friends order large meat dishes. The seats are taken, so we stand around a table. We talk about a trip one of my friends had taken by train from the Baltic States to Belgrade. He tells us how in Warsaw during a gay pride parade people were throwing eggs at them. The other friend notes how people would move abroad from Finland only five years ago, as there was so little tolerance for homosexuality.*

*We are waiting for the light to turn green. It always takes a while. Once green it stays on hardly long enough to cross the street. My partner says that he has a feeling that recently the streetlights take longer to change than they used to.*

*Some months ago I often went to the Centre for Berlin Studies. I found several books on the Karl-Marx-Allee. I also found a book on Wolf Biermann, where images and songs by him were published. He wrote a song about the Karl-Marx-Allee that argued*

*the street should continue to be called Stalinallee. In his opinion the street did not represent the ideal of Karl Marx or in general his vision of what socialism is. One verse in the song from 1965 reads: "Und weil auf dieser Straße / Am Abend um halb zehn / Schon Grabestille lastet / Die Bäume schlangestehn."*