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“The Debt to One’s Homeland”

by Masha Gessen

“I was not a rat who jumped ship at the first sign of trouble,” Leonid Bershidsky, a well-known journalist and media entrepreneur, wrote in mid-June, announcing his intention to leave Russia. “I am more a sailor who, seeing that the captain had changed course toward a port of ill repute — and with loudspeakers blaring his intent — quietly, and without panicking, lowered the lifeboat and began rowing toward the port for which all of us had originally set sail.”

Zoya Svetova, a journalist from an older generation, responded with a piece pointing out that back in the Soviet era her dissident father considered émigrés to be traitors. “Why are we letting ourselves become disillusioned when we are just getting a tiny bit squeezed?” she asked. If the writer of the original piece really wanted things to get better in Russia, she argued, he should stay and work toward that end.

A debate raged in the Russian blogosphere for over a week. Did the older journalist have a right to judge the younger one? Had things gotten as bad in Russia as the younger journalist claimed, or were they bad but not bad enough to leave? Can someone leave without being branded a traitor? And do those who leave in search of a better life make life worse for those who stay?

Those of us who emigrate — as I did, to New York, late last year — hurt the ones we leave behind, and not just family and friends. Not so obviously, but arguably, when the best-educated, most active people leave, the country’s prospects grow even dimmer: When the regime finally falls, who will be there to build the new Russia? Then again, émigrés can go back home then — as émigrés returned to rebuild many Eastern European countries as the Soviet bloc started to fall apart.

But what about the contribution these émigrés could make right now? Russia’s society is regressing in nearly every way imaginable. Not only is the government’s rhetoric decidedly anti-modern, but so is the very direction of life. Life expectancy at birth is well below the average in Europe and Central Asia. Nearly one third of the population does not have access to modern sanitation facilities — and the number of those who do is slowly dwindling. Political freedoms have been curtailed and media freedom all but shredded. In these circumstances, a good doctor, educator, activist or journalist is worth her weight in gold, and every departure creates a perceptible void.

On the other hand, everyone working in Russia is struggling against the tide of social regress. Doctors work in underequipped clinics, teachers work in underfunded schools, most journalists and political activists are reduced to their own blogs, and all professionals are crippled by illogical, unpredictably applied laws whose sole purpose appears to be curtailing activity. Wherever these people go next, as long as it is outside Russia, they will be able to work more effectively — and do more good.

This reframes the argument. If a doctor goes to where he can treat more people effectively, does the world get better even while the country he left gets worse? If a special-education teacher can work with dozens of schoolchildren in a North American city, is she doing more good than in Russia, where she could only work with a few? At the crux of these questions — and at the crux of the emigration debate — is another question: Does one owe a special debt to one's country of birth?

Once émigrés become immigrants, they face a corollary of this question: Do non-native citizens have lesser rights in or, perhaps, greater obligations to their adoptive country than its native children do? The U.S. Constitution explicitly — and bizarrely, for a country of immigrants — denies immigrants just one right, the right to be elected president. Half a century ago, the Russian-born novelist and political activist Ayn Rand, confronted by a heckler, famously defended the immigrant's right to engage in politics: "I chose to be an American. What did you ever do, except for having been born?"

This year, in a very different context, the U.S. government appeared to claim that an immigrant should be punished more harshly than a native-born criminal. This was in the case of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who is accused of carrying out the Boston Marathon bombing last year. In a notice filed with the U.S. District Court in Massachusetts in January, the government announced its intention to seek the death penalty for Tsarnaev. It invoked as one of its reasons that he had "received asylum from the United States; obtained citizenship and enjoyed the freedoms of a United States citizen; and then betrayed his allegiance to the United States by killing and maiming people in the United States."

Before the case went to trial, the judge ordered the prosecution to drop this claim. Basing an argument on the defendant's immigrant status, he ruled, "highly inappropriate."

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