

WHITE LASH

by Marina Khorosh

I clearly remember the first time I witnessed racism. It was the same formative loss of innocence as the first brush with adult tears, brute violence or death. I was walking down the street with a friend in my hometown of Saint Petersburg, Russia, when we passed by a black man, one of the handful of brave non-Caucasians who landed in my city in the late 1990s. My friend took one appalled look at him and whispered something so blatantly racist that I will not repeat it here.

Having been to the U.S. as a child, I had seen black people before. I had also seen Latinos, Arabs, Asians and many others who did not resemble our blonde, blue-eyed Slavic prototype. I did not look at them differently and was surprised when those around me did. I fought for their dignity and the dignity of Americans ("fat fucks"), gays ("fairies") and Jews ("greedy bastards"), the last being a personal insult directed at me, the only Jew in my class. I learned early in life that seemingly kind, non-volatile humans could be racist. Maybe it was the segregated culture, or the aftermath of years of communist propaganda, but it took rare open-mindedness for a Russian to not feel threatened — or even repulsed

— by those unlike them.

Ironically, it was my "Jewish card" that brought me to America in 2003. Although the financial situation in post-Soviet Russia had by then become tolerable, my father still mailed in the paperwork for the Jewish family reunification program that would allow us to join my brother in the U.S. Confused, I asked him why we were leaving. "So that you can have freedom," he told me. "But I have freedom here," I said. "Not the real kind," was his response.

America, or rather New York, felt like home in a way that Russia never had. People came in all colors and sizes, and yet nobody judged them for it — or at least that's how it felt to me. We were sworn in as equal citizens alongside hundreds of other newcomers from across the world. African-Americans and Russians rode the train together and interracial couples gave birth to beautiful babies. We stood together wearing our "color-blind" lenses as only New Yorkers can. To me New York was the benchmark, the ideal, the way of the future.

In Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, the neighborhood where we settled, I would regularly hear a different tune. I witnessed outrage over our taxes going

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toward "freeloading welfare abusers" or minority programs that were taking away our opportunities, backed by statistics about the rise of a non-white America. I would ask what was wrong with a non-white America, only to be called a dumb, clueless liberal. "These people, they are not like us," they would tell me. I was warned that I would soon be living in a country where I no longer had power. I think by power they meant superiority.

I listened to them, but did not question them. In my mind, their words were but antiquated viewpoints that had no place in modern society. Instead, I fled to Manhattan, back to my assumed oasis of equality. To me, this was the real, modern America. The rest didn't count.

But when it came to votes, the rest did count. There was an entire segment of the population that felt scared, threatened and ready to fight for what they saw as their jobs, their land, their "superiority." Just like other demagogues before him, Trump and his camp nurtured this demographic and watched it blossom into the monster it is today.

Nationalism is the result of years of pent-up frustration that sprouted into a major movement seemingly overnight and is now taking the world by storm. First there was Brexit, then there was Trump, and now there is a chance France will follow suit with the emboldened far-right politician, Marine

Le Pen. With the industrial relocation and humanitarian crises of recent years, nationalism became a low-hanging, albeit poisonous, fruit. We just didn't realize how many people were starving for it.

To a textbook liberal, a Trump presidency may seem like the end of the world, a reversal of human rights, or a reason to flee to Canada. However, we lost an election, not our constitutional rights. This was not the result of a government overthrow or even a good ol' electoral rigging. It was simply a group of people being misled by an opportunist. As difficult as this is to digest and however detrimental the potential consequences may be, let us step aside from the emotional chaos for a minute and remember that the country has spoken, and in four years it will speak again. The certainty of this makes us lucky. It makes us America.

As for white supremacy or "whitelash" or whatever else you choose to call this mass rise of open racism, it has been a long time coming. Clearly, the blanket politically correct approach of the last few decades didn't work. It was simply a way of bandaging a wound that was only getting more infected. Today, the band-aid has been torn off. The picture underneath is grim, but at least we can now deal with it. And in four years' time, we will vote again. •



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