

# The Market

This is an extract taken from *Prisoners in Paradise* by Justin Newland. The story is set in Kaliningrad Oblast, a province of Russia on the Baltic Sea.

As they drove, Kaspar carefully removed his complete botanist survival kit from his rucksack: a journal, a Dictaphone, map, compass, and sample bags.

Their first stop was at a market on the outskirts of Rauschen. It was set up in an open field next to the Bus Station. Some of the stalls were permanent, set in a row of what looked like old semi-derelict garages without doors. Many were set up like a car boot sale, hither and thither, with goods poor both in quality and range.

The music shop was selling Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin tape cassettes, with not a CD or DVD on sale anywhere. The clothes shop boasted an incomplete set of 1970's fashions, flared trousers and all: some stalls boasted a tawdry item or two for sale. People gathered in small groups. They were dressed like a Lowry painting; gray, non-descript, bland. Many smoked. Some talked. Others had nothing to say. Depression doesn't.

Edouard headed for the 'fish stall'. An old woman with ragged gray hair sat cross-legged in front of an up-turned beer crate on top of which was some grease paper with a single piece of battered fish on it. Kasper didn't know which looked more pathetic – the fish or the old woman. The piece of fish bore a deep imprint of the sole of a boot. Kaspar was convinced that someone wearing a pair of heavy walking boots had trodden it on. Incredibly to Kaspar, Edouard actually bartered a bottle of best Stolichnaya Vodka for it. The thought of drinking the vodka that night bought a flicker of a smile to the old woman's wretched face.

"Why did you give her the vodka, she looks dreadful," he whispered in Edouard's ear as they walked back to the car.

"You don't understand, do you?" Edouard said, half in sympathy, half in derision. Kaspar reddened, and shook his head.

"There are many people like this old woman in Kaliningrad. It's the Russians' fault. The Communist system was made by intellectuals," he spat out the last word contemptuously. "But they are atheists. Their problem is that they still want to do good in the world, so they create communism. That way they satisfy some dire moral craving." Edouard kissed the silver crucifix that hung around his neck.

Kaspar still didn't understand, but was too embarrassed to say so.

"While they feel redeemed, the system they created has thrown up more class distinction than was there before Communism," Edouard continued. "Ultimately, nothing changes, only the names.

Instead of the aristocrats, here are the bourgeoisie. Instead of the serfs, the proletariat. There are still many poor people and a few rich people! As always, the poor are very poor – with no education and no transport. “

“So why give the vodka to the old woman,” Kaspar said, bewildered.

“For some people, vodka is all they’ve got. It’s a cross, like this one round my neck.”

“So, the vodka helps them.”

“I mean you don’t take something away from a person if that’s all they’ve got. If you do, they’re gone, they’re nothing. That’s cruel.”

“Even if it’s drugs instead of vodka.”

“Yes, Mien Lieber Kaspar.” Edouard nodded and smiled.

Kaspar was learning about humanity.

They stopped off at the greengrocers, which turned out to be someone’s front room with some rough shelving around the perimeter. Edouard knew the owner, an elderly woman named Natalie. She wore sunglasses, even though it was overcast and cool. Her chin was wrinkled like a pear. As she stood there, she moved her solid weight from foot to foot in a sort of dance. They’d been in her shop for some time, and still she hadn’t greeted them. Finally, Edouard broke the tenuous silence.

“Natalie, hello. Have you any milk?” he asked. Natalie nodded. She went to get a bottle of milk. They paid for it. They left. Natalie didn’t say good-bye.

“Why is she wearing sun-glasses? Is she ill?” Kaspar asked, as soon as they were back in the car.

“She and her family are from Smolensk, in Central Russia.” Edouard lit another Peter Stuyvesant. He pulled on the amber tobacco, blowing smoke rings, as if to send coded messages to the Gods – one ring for yes, two rings for no.

“She’s depressed?” Kaspar asked. He’d seen a lot of depression in Kaliningrad.

“No, not depressed. Quiet. She wears the sun-glasses because ever since she came here she gets migraine,” Edouard corrected. “Her family lived and worked as farmers in a part of Central Asia where there is no natural surface water, only plains stretching as far as the eye can see. They had never seen the sea, or boats. Along with other families from Smolensk, they were re-located here after the War to a small fishing village on the Kurishe Nehru lagoon coast just north of here. When they arrived, they found, drawn up on the sandbanks, rows of fishing boats, nets, tackle, gears, masts, sails, fishing pots – in short, the paraphernalia of fishing. All of which was completely alien to them. You might as well have deposited them on Mars, for all the good it did them!”

“Wasn’t there someone there to teach them how to use all that equipment?” Kaspar asked, flabbergasted.

“No, not a soul. The area had been de-populated.” Edouard said flatly.

“So what did they do?” he asked, preparing himself for the inevitable.

“Well, they’d arrived here in the winter, so what else could they do?”

## Prisoners in Paradise

“What’s that?”

“They broke the boats up for timber and burnt it as firewood.”