

## Welcome to 'The Dacha' ...May 13, 2007

*Story & Photos by Pamela J. Karg*

I live with two strange people. However, it's OK. It's a good experience. (Svet suggested this opening and I've learned in 12 days to do as she says.)

Lucky for my former landlady, she was able to sell her apartment and will re-pay a small loan I made to her family last year as well as save for the future.

The new owners want to do some remodeling before moving in, so I moved out April 30. However, I didn't have a confirmed place to live; as I wait to hear about one place, I moved in with Svetlana Asatryan, 27, and her brother, Roman, 21. I'll live with them at least during May and maybe even into June in what I'm calling, "The Dacha."



Dacha refers to summerhouse or cottage. It can be elaborate or simple. It's a place for the family to get away from the hustle, bustle, heat and smells of the big city. They often are family homes, passed down from generation to generation. The Asatryan home is now dubbed "The Dacha" while I camp out. It's up the hill and "out" of the city in another district called Avan. (Nothing is really "out" of a city of 1.5 million people.) While I heard lots of traffic, kids and a small river running outside the windows of my previous apartment, I woke up my first morning here to the sounds of slower, smaller traffic; kids walking to school; cows and chickens. I nearly felt like I was back home on the farm in Wisconsin.

Svet and Roman have three rooms: the kitchen, the bathroom and the other room. When Svet had her clotheslines up this winter, we joked that "the other room" included her bed and the bookcase in the den, Roman's bed and the sewing machine in the sewing room, and a rollaway bed for me in a room that included the gas stove, the table, the armoire and the door. I was sleeping in the lap of luxury!



*Two views of the main room where Svet & Roman sleep, study, eat & entertain*





Seriously, minus my rollaway on my occasional overnights in the toasty, gas-heated room, that's all the furnishings the room includes. There's no TV, sofa, recliner, end tables, floor lamps, dressers, full-length mirrors, china cabinet, desk—there's no room! Everything Sveta and Roman possess fits nearly into the armoires or cupboards. On the nights I did stay over, my roll-away was partially under the

table (turned sideways) and the small space between the three beds enabled us to set up a stool on which to put my computer so we could watch movies!

The kitchen is much the same—cupboards, a small sink, an oven on the countertop that Sveta's mom sent, a dorm room-sized refrigerator and the table under which are tucked two stools. The bathroom is one of the largest I've seen anywhere here, which is good since it doubles as Svet's laundry room when it's time to soak and scrub the clothes by hand to impeccable cleanness.

The entrance hallway includes a smaller armoire and enough space to store my bed. They have water and electricity 99 percent of the time. Having a gas line for heat also means they have hot water when they want it! There's a basement, where Sveta stored the sack of potatoes she bought at the market last fall, as well as the preserves her mother sent from the family garden. The large porch enables Svet to hang her clothes, despite the unusually wet spring here. A small yard features apricot and other fruit trees, grape vines, daffodils, nettle (I pull it; Svet cooks it) and we're going to plant some seeds I brought. All the walls need serious plasterwork and paint. The old wood-framed windows need more energy efficient replacements. The beds double as additional seating for dinners of more than four or sofas when people are just visiting.



While I discovered there are four other rooms behind a locked door, filled with furniture and other personal belongings, the three open rooms are enough space for Sveta and Roman. It's old, small, cozy and amazing. These two young people have more than most people I know here or in America! They have love, good humor, joy, hard work—and now a roommate old enough to be their mother (who promptly ended up with the flu after arriving so they could “mother” me!)

Sveta did convince the landlords—distant relatives who live in Moscow—to open up an additional room in the house. Describing it as a summer porch off the outdoor porch would be the best way to explain my new space. It's wide enough for my rollaway and three-times as long. It also has two nearly floor-to-ceiling shelving units and a window in front of which sits the small desk I bought last fall. What isn't on the shelves or tucked under my bed is in boxes or suitcases in the basement.





It feels comfortable and cozy, like the main three rooms. I like it very much, not because I needed a place to live and this worked out. Not out of necessity does it feel good to be here. Rather, it feels good to be here because Sveta and Roman are genuine, hospitable, happy, fun and funny, considerate and caring—like most of my other friends. They also know Americans can be a little odd trying to maneuver through their Armenian culture and they're tolerant of those ways while also trying to help you understand why things are the way they are. They both know English so we can have intelligent conversations at normal paces—and they're free to bicker as brothers and sisters do in their native Armenian or Russian languages.

Sveta loves to cook and clean when she's home from her receptionist job at a German-owned bank that does business with the Central Bank of Armenia. Roman loves to eat and leave his things lying around when he's home from school. I just sit in the middle and wait for instructions from either one, though Sveta is mostly in charge. When they do pull me into family discussions, I side with whoever is correct—Sveta when it's about Roman's slovenly habits (I have a younger brother who I helped move from his college dorm one time, so I know) and Roman when...well, I'm not sure if Roman has really ever won a debate yet!

Moving in with Svet and Roman was not an easy decision. I've really enjoyed them since I first met them last autumn when Roman first came to me to ask if I would help him improve his English. Since then, we spend a few days a week together. They are warm people, filled with laughter and very easy-going like many of my friends here. We can play jokes on each other and share our thoughts and feelings. We respect each other's ways and we share a Christian faith that gives us common values.

Yet, I've lived on my own for 10 months, coming and going as I pleased, putting things where I wanted, cooking what I felt like eating, eating as little as I liked and worrying mostly about myself. At the same time, though, I still have pangs of loneliness that no one can cure except me, I know. So when the opportunity presented itself to live with them, I thought long and hard about it. I realize my loneliness has helped me develop a certain amount of patience, something I really needed anyway. So I decided that, on a temporary basis, it would be OK to live with this brother and sister.

I'm able to save money since there are no frills here such as a wash machine, TV or electric stove. There's no telephone—we each use our own cell phones. We can share the rent and utilities, though Sveta insists I will not be paying for just this month or so of living. The weather has finally warmed to the point where we took out the gas space heater, though gas costs much less than my previous apartment heated by a small electric blower. I'm able to explore a new neighborhood and figure out which marshutkas (12-person public transportation vans) go to the places I want to visit. We have a big outdoor porch on which to eat meals and overlook a small yard planted with fruit trees. The UMCOR drivers don't have to go out of their way to pick me up since a few people live in the general vicinity and I'm right near the big intersection where all cars must travel to get to other parts of the city. There's a basement where I can put

my belongings that I don't need everyday, along with a few donated items I didn't get a chance to distribute yet.

I will admit that, as I moved in, I thought back to my first few years out of my parent's house. (Here, young people don't move out of the house until they get married, and then only the girls are likely to move out and into their mother-in-law's house.) Sveta and Roman moved to Yerevan from their home in Alaverdi (12,000 people about 30 miles south of the Georgian border) so Roman could go to college and Sveta could take care of him, as well as find a job.

It's interesting to think about how we spend our first few years of adulthood trying to get through college and land a job. We settle down, start to accumulate worldly possessions and create a world where we get involved in groups, book too many appointments and zip from here to there with little thought. While some people are content, others begin to question everything and set out on a new course.

As I moved in, I took time to read the book, "Second Calling: Finding Passion & Purpose for the Rest of Your Life," by Dale Hanson Bourke. It discusses Bourke's faith journey to determine how God wants her to live the second half of her life. While reading, I realized am coming up to that same half-century mark. I wonder about my life and how it will proceed, whether God intends more one-bed rooms in Armenia or something else. Only God knows, and I am content to trust in Him that He knows what's right for me, where and when.

*Roman, Svetlana and I enjoyed a pan of good, old-fashioned pan-popped popcorn that I brought with me from my weird neighbor, Eydie Ridder. I realize more and more everyday how the simple things can make us smile so much!*

