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13 Armenians Live Like Prisoners in Moscow Hotel

By Alex Chachkevitch

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Valida Avanesyan waving from a balcony of Moscow's Hotel Yuzhny. She and 12 other Armenian exiles face eviction after two decades in the hotel. **Igor Tabakov**

Valida Avanesyan has been a prisoner in the Hotel Yuzhny on Moscow's Leninsky Prospekt for more than six months.

She stays in a friend's room. When she gets hungry, she asks friends to shop for her and bring her some food. Her only connection with the outside world is the balcony.

She cannot leave because the guards at the entrance won't let her back in.

"I'll keep fighting for a place to live for me and the other people here until the end," she said.

Avanesyan, 59, is one of 13 Armenian refugees who had lived in Yuzhny for two decades and are now being kicked out. The residents were among hundreds of thousands of Armenians who fled Azerbaijan in 1990 to escape ethnic violence that escalated into war the next year.

Hotel Yuzhny became a temporary shelter for more than 100 displaced Armenians, most of whom were eventually provided with permanent housing elsewhere in the country. However, some stayed, purportedly tricked by their informal leader into rejecting offers that he deemed unworthy.

Since then, the residents have sunk ever deeper into a legal quagmire that would give Franz Kafka a migraine. The actions of all parties involved in the conflict are justified to some degree — but the stalemate has resulted in elderly people being evicted with nowhere to go and no time to gather belongings.

The crackdown began June 3, when court marshals attempted to put Galina Mesropyan and Raisa Gasparova out on the street. A spokesman for the nongovernmental Committee for Human Rights and a representative of the residents managed to talk the marshals into putting the eviction on hold Tuesday.

But the armistice will last only 10 days, said Valery Gabisov, secretary for the committee, which has been working with the residents for eight years. He could not say what's next.

The trouble began in 1994, when state-owned Yuzhny was privatized. It has since changed hands several times before ending up with the current shareholders, led by Guta Group, which has a 65 percent stake in the premises.

The owners have not announced what they plan to do with the property, but Yana Kuzina, a real estate consultant with CB Richard Ellis, said they most likely would demolish the hotel and replace it with a residential building.

The neighborhood could indeed yield a gold mine, with a two-room apartment in the area fetching about 5.8 million rubles ($208,000), according to the web site of real estate agency Stolichniye Metry.

The owners have offered to resettle the 13 former refugees to the town of Furmanov in the Ivanovo region, about 320 kilometers from Moscow.

They have also offered an alternative compensation of 1 million rubles per resident, Gabisov said. But with the average cost of a square meter in Moscow at 197,500 rubles ($7,000), the compensation would not be enough for a single room in a shared apartment.

The residents have refused, triggering a court battle that they lost earlier this year when the Gagarinsky District Court authorized Yuzhny's owners to move the Armenians to 11 apartments in Furmanov, despite their refusal to move.

The judge was scheduled to instruct court marshals on how to proceed with the eviction next week. But they never waited for instructions, beginning to remove unwanted residents earlier this month by putting them out on the street — not on a train to Furmanov.

"I guess business is more valuable than people," Mesropyan said.

The marshals forced Mesropyan, 59, who uses crutches to walk, out of the hotel without a chance to pack her clothes, medicine and other belongings, she said. Gasparova managed to sneak into her son's room, not targeted by marshals at the time, and lock herself inside.

Mesropyan was left outside with one set of clothes, a purse and two crutches.

"They don't have the right to kick us out on the street without giving us a normal place to live," Mesropyan said.

She said the early eviction was an attempt to pressure the residents into accepting the Furmanov housing. "Nor can they make us unwillingly sign anything," Mesropyan said, standing in the street near the hotel. She found temporary housing at her friends', but said it was only a short-term solution.

A previous owner of the hotel tried to clear it out in 2004 without providing alternative housing, but residents fought back in the same court that now sanctioned their removal.

The hotel's director, Alexander Markin, declined to comment to The Moscow Times, as did representatives of Guta Group.

The residents, who obtained Russian citizenship in the early 2000s, said they don't want to move because they are Muscovites after 20 years.

"Why would I move somewhere else far away?" said Grigory Khachaturyan, 62, who works as a metals worker in Moscow. "My granddad and mother are buried here. I have my son, daughter and grandson, whom I raised, here. I don't want a second displacement."

Lawyer David Gariashvili, who represents the residents, said providing housing to residents is still the government's job.

The court, however, refused to consult with representatives of state agencies, including City Hall's housing department, in the dispute, he said.

City Hall could put the residents on a program to provide housing if they can prove they have been living in the capital for more than 10 years, Nikolai Kolesin, a spokesman for the city's housing policy department, said by telephone.

But they cannot do that — at least from a bureaucratic point of view. The Armenians have never obtained residency papers because the hotel's private owners have refused to issue them. Several attempts to prove in court that they have lived in Moscow for years ended in failure, Gariashvili said.

In fact, the Armenians are not even refugees legally speaking, because when they fled Baku it was part of the Soviet Union — so no one crossed any borders.

Because of that, the residents cannot turn to the Federal Migration Service for help with housing, Gariashvili said.

"The problem started when that building was first put on the auction table," said Andrei Stolbunov, head of the rights group Spravedlivost (Justice). "The government was supposed to make someone responsible for these people then."

The owners, however, cannot be faulted for trying to clean up their legally obtained property, Stolbunov conceded.

The residents blamed the confrontation on the leader of their group, whom they appointed by consensus upon arriving to Moscow. The leader, Rachik Sarkisov, rejected all offers of apartments in other parts of Russia in the mid-1990s, hoping for housing in Moscow, and he acted without informing the others, the residents said.

Sarkisov left when the crackdown began, the residents said, adding that they believed he was paid off to move out. Repeated attempts to reach him for comment were unsuccessful.

"Back then, if I were offered a place in Chukotka, I would've gone there," balcony prisoner Avanesyan said, referring to the region near Alaska. "But now, with my health going downhill, I can't imagine moving anywhere that far."

Unlike other residents, Mesropyan said any normal place would suffice her as long as the town had an ambulance.

"I'm not asking for a palace here, but I want to be sure that I don't get fooled," she said, adding that she and other residents feared they might not actually receive the promised apartments.

Gariashvili said his main worry was that the case might set a disastrous precedent in which private corporations are able to take on the rights and functions of the government.

"If the government comes and tells me to move because it's planning to lay down a road where I stand, I will," he said. "But if some stranger says he likes my car and wants to take it from me and give me something else for it, I don't have to agree."

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