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Nizhnekamsk's Notorious German

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By Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

NIZHNEKAMSK, Tatarstan -- The big German turns heads when he walks into a bar. After he sits down, patrons drift over one after the other to shake his hand.

"Uwe, don't lose track of your briefcase," one young man says to him. "What if it explodes all of a sudden?"

It is an off-color joke, given the circumstances, but Uwe Kruger takes it in stride and goes back to setting up his chess pieces on the board he has rented from the bar.

Kruger, 37, has attracted attention from curious residents ever since he decided to move to this industrial town of 250,000 people, 170 kilometers east of Kazan. After all, Nizhnekamsk, an unremarkable city founded 40 years ago and known primarily for its petrochemical plant and polluted air, seems like an unlikely destination for an expat resettling on a whim.

If Kruger, a hulking former professional hockey player from Berlin, was merely a curiosity when he began settling in here four years ago, he has become Nizhnekamsk's most notorious celebrity, being at the center of one of the most bizarre criminal cases ever to hit the city's police blotter.

Kruger was arrested here almost two years ago by Federal Security Service agents on suspicion of trying to acquire 20 kilograms of explosives to carry out an intricate, if improbable, plan to blow up the house he owns in Berlin and cash in on an insurance policy.

The trial, which is now entering its 16th month, has been a strange, drawn-out spectacle, complete with Kruger declaring a hunger strike and, according to the FSB, at one point attempting to escape. After repeated postponements, the trial is scheduled to resume Tuesday.

The court sessions have been closed to the public, which has added an air of mystery to the proceedings, as has the court's decision in December to release Kruger from custody on the condition that he not leave the city during the trial.



Georg Gerligner / For MT
Kruger taking the ice for the Bavarian club Landshut in the 1993-94 season.

Kruger first came to Moscow in 1996, two years after he finished his hockey career with the Bavarian club Landshut. In 1998 and 2000, he traveled to Nizhnekamsk as the coach of a group of German youth hockey players participating in a two-week exchange, and in December 2000, Kruger says he decided to relocate permanently to Nizhnekamsk.

"I wanted to go where I at least had acquaintances," Kruger said.

His decision struck his local acquaintances as odd.

"He said he loved it here, that he loved the people and their way of life," said Yury Fyodorov, deputy director of the local Neftekhim Sports Club, who met Kruger as a participant in the hockey exchange. "We thought it was strange that someone from beautiful, affluent Berlin would come to Nizhnekamsk."

He began traveling back and forth between Berlin and Nizhnekamsk. The local FSB says Kruger popped up on their radar screen in July 2002, when one of his acquaintances reported to the authorities that the German was trying to locate an explosives specialist.

Marat Tukayev, head of the Nizhnekamsk city branch of the FSB, said he could not comment on the case because of the ongoing trial. But in an interview he gave to local journalists shortly before the trial began, Tukayev said his officers had organized a sting operation using an undercover agent posing as an explosives expert willing to blow up Kruger's Berlin home.

"Over the course of several meetings, we obtained information confirming the criminal activities of the foreigner," Tukayev said in the interview, filmed by Kazan-based Efir television. "At one of the last meetings, money was handed over for the acquisition of explosive materials and the exact route for delivering the materials to Germany was laid out, as was the plan for setting off the explosion."

Izvestia, citing regional FSB sources, reported that Kruger had demanded that the would-be bomber buy explosives produced outside of Russia to prevent investigators from tracing them back to Russia and making Kruger a key suspect. The explosives expert was to transport the explosives himself from St. Petersburg to the German port city of Lübeck and stay in a hotel there until Kruger arrived to meet him. The two men concluded that around 20 kilograms of explosives would be needed to do the job, and the undercover agent promised Kruger that they would be of Chinese production, the sources told Izvestia.

In the television interview, Tukayev told reporters that Kruger was prepared to spend about 15,000 euros (\$19,500) for the entire job. Izvestia reported the sum of the insurance policy to be 400,000 euros (\$520,000).

Kruger was arrested shortly before noon on May 6, 2003, near the Nizhnekamsk bus station in a sting operation during a meeting with the undercover FSB agent.

After a six-month investigation, the local FSB turned the case over to Nizhnekamsk prosecutors, and Kruger went on trial in December 2003 on charges of attempting to acquire explosive materials and

planning to commit a criminal act.

Nizhnekamsk city prosecutor Olga Kupova, who is leading the case against Kruger, declined to comment on the case, citing the ongoing trial.

The trial has turned into a seemingly endless string of postponements due to a lack of translators for Kruger, who speaks halting Russian with a thick German accent, his requests for new legal representation, and complaints that his rights were violated in regional detention centers. He went on a two-month hunger strike in May to protest poor conditions during his detention, including what he claimed was unsanitary drinking water and inadequate heating.

Wolfgang Bindseil, spokesman for the German Embassy in Moscow, said they had received a letter from Kruger listing the complaints and that the embassy "had acted accordingly." He would not elaborate.

Michael Grunwald, spokesman for the Berlin Prosecutor's Office, said it was unclear whether Kruger could be prosecuted in Germany. "Currently it is still being investigated what Mr. Kruger's exact plans were and how this behavior can be qualified legally," Grunwald wrote in an e-mail.

According to Tukayev, Kruger attempted to escape while being transferred from one detention center to another, though details are murky. Kruger "was able to temporarily get away from our officers," the local FSB head told journalists.

Kruger's Moscow-based lawyer, Sergei Pronin, declined to comment on the specific charges against his client, including the alleged attempt to flee.

Kruger himself is extremely cautious about what he says to the press. Local television journalists are frustrated because he will not let them film him in an everyday setting, forcing them to show stock footage of him being led around in handcuffs by police with every report they broadcast.

He agreed to give an interview to The Moscow Times on the condition that he not be asked to discuss the details of the criminal case against him, saying he feared he could be put back in jail for the duration of the trial if he angered the authorities.

Since his release in December, he spends his days dodging local reporters, staying in shape and frequenting the town's meager nightlife offerings.

Despite his ordeal, Kruger talks glowingly of Nizhnekamsk and says if he is acquitted he would like to continue living here.

"I have a feeling as if I were born here," Kruger, a teetotaler and non-smoker, said in his deep, methodical voice over a cup of tea at the Sherlock Pub, the town's lone Irish pub. "I feel very connected to Nizhnekamsk."

He prefers to speak in larger terms about his adopted hometown, however. He hesitated when asked what he specifically liked about the town before snatching my pen and notebook and jotting down a sort of handwritten official statement in often grammatically unsound German.

"I see Russia and Nizhnekamsk as my fate and as my second homeland at the same time," Kruger wrote. "The time in the Russian jails is one of the greatest presents I have ever received in my life. A terrible type of school, where I discovered how lucky I am to be in this world, that I love my life and, above all, that God is accompanying me on my journey."

Finding a place to stay is not easy for the conspicuous foreigner, who is about 195 centimeters tall. He said he had lived in three different apartments since being released.

"The longest I can find a place to stay is six months," he said. "People know what happened, and a lot of them are scared of running into problems because of me."

His favorite landlady was a babushka, whom the German praised for the Ordnung, or order, that she kept in her household.

Indeed, order and discipline, those stereotypical German traits, are close to Kruger's heart.

"My discipline helped me in jail, and it's helping me now," he said. "Discipline is the only way to escape such a situation. Discipline and patience, above all."

According to locals, he is one of the few morning joggers that can be seen traversing the streets of Nizhnekamsk, where an oil refinery and tire factory join the petrochemical plant in propping up the local economy and fouling the town's air.

Kruger is even loath to discuss any of his specific workout habits, saying only that he is concentrating on "staying healthy, praying, hoping" and building "patience and strength."

Kruger, who came to the Irish pub wearing a black Hugo Boss shirt, designer jeans and expensive black boots, has a pretty-boy image, and there is no shortage of giggling young girls that approach him when he is out on the town.

Katerina, the manager of the Kapris beauty salon just down the street from the city courthouse, said Kruger came in several times each month for manicures and pedicures.

Kruger would not say whether he had any significant others in Nizhnekamsk, only that friends were scarce. He said he currently had two friends in the world: himself and his dog Oskar back in Germany, whose current whereabouts Kruger does not know.

"When something like this happens, friends disappear," he said.

Kruger had a reputation of being a loner before ever setting foot in Russia, according to Jan Schertz, a famous German hockey player who grew up playing with Kruger at the Dynamo hockey club in East Berlin.

"He was always on his own and always played by his own rules," Schertz said by telephone from Berlin.

Kruger grew up in East Berlin and began playing hockey at Dynamo when he was 10 years old. He was

a promising enough prospect to play for the East German junior national team, though after he emigrated with his family to West Germany in 1987, he went on to an unspectacular career bouncing around the German professional leagues.



For MT

He courted controversy in 1999, however, when he went to the German press after gaining access to a file collected on him by the East German secret police, or Stasi, claiming that Schertz had informed on him and essentially ruined his hockey career. Kruger claims he was pushed out of Dynamo because he was deemed "politically unsound" by the sports bureaucracy.

Schertz said he answered the Stasi's questions, as many were required to do, but called the claims that he had been an informer "hogwash." Kruger, however, has not forgotten what he still sees as betrayal.

Television footage of Kruger being led out of a detention center in Tatarstan.

"The Schertz case is not an exception in my life," Kruger said. "A person like me is often envied, and for that reason accompanied by traitors who abuse unwritten

laws. ... Friends don't betray friends, just as one cannot steal in a church."

With more pressing issues currently on his mind, Kruger said he did not pay much attention to hockey these days. He did manage, however, to catch a few games of the local professional team, Neftekhimik, this season.

Kruger was in attendance at Neftekhimik's final game of the season March 21, when they were defeated at home by Dynamo Moscow, losing the Russian Superleague's best-of-five playoff series 3-0. Several of the fans in his section shot glances of recognition at the tall German, dressed in a long, black leather coat, black gloves and a black stocking cap.

A pack of schoolchildren, whom Kruger kept nudging aside whenever they would stand in the aisle and block his view of the ice, seemed less aware of his identity.

"They're pretty good," Kruger said without a trace of emotion after a particularly deft maneuver by a Dynamo player. "Just watching them makes me want to get out there and play again."