

MISHA, MY TRAVEL GUIDE

I met him in the bustling city of Leipzig, East Germany.

For a few days I had wandered the streets, exploring artists' secret galleries, sampling Saxony's rich and starchy cuisine, listening to foreign sounds, delighting in a new experience for my senses. As a foreigner, everything was new and exciting. But then, I didn't know much about the streets I walked upon—I needed someone to tell me.

I experienced and learned much...But I had not yet tasted a drop of what Mishael had to teach me. Not until he took us for a stroll around the city by night, exclaiming with wonder at the deep history—both tragedy and victory—of this place.

We were afoot, and Misha seemed to walk with a dance in his step. His tall, lanky body wore a jacket to shield from the cold, but on his face, the warmest smile made you forget the blustery weather. He told us stories of the war, showed us marking stones on the ground—marble slabs bearing the names of Jewish families who had died on their doorsteps during some of the darkest days in world history.

We ate ice cream where he said it was the best in the world—a single scoop more delicious than any other gelato I had tasted. We drank at the vodka bar, where the price of a meal and drink was worth the good conversation and laughs that it led to.

On those wide, paved sidewalks, he would skip to the next corner, marveling at this building and that one...this quiet corner, or that bustling, busy street.

I learned that Misha was not even a native of East Germany, but had come here some years ago to work and had been charmed by this place where he worked in an art store in the town central.

Misha played some guitar, he informed us, and took us back to his flat to show us his paintings, his collections, his pieces of art—on the strings and on the canvas.

“Listen to this piece,” he would say, playing Bach off a classical CD. His fingertips would rise and fall with each crescendo.

His eyes would shut for a second and he seemed to be catching a whiff of magic in the air. Hours passed, but I didn’t notice. I was carried away with the sounds of his narration, accompanied by classical music, then some modern aria, then some silence.

“You can feel the composer’s solemn mood here,” he would remark, his face growing dim, straining with emotion, and then brightening at the next upscale note.

Then his eyes would open and pierce the silence with their dark gaze into something only he could see. And as he would recite his personal translation of the Great Masters, it seemed as if he had sat with Mozart and Beethoven themselves, one night, long ago in Germany. As if he recalled their moods that evening, and understood their reason.

We left his flat and walked home just before dawn, when the music of the night had left us in a daze that was caused not only by the vodka’s searing heat.

That weekend, Misha took us to visit another town some ways away—the home of the Reformation leader Martin Luther and his stories, Wittenburg.

Here, his passion came alive again...when we stood at the gate that bore the 99 Thesis, when we stood reverently at the church where Luther’s pew could be seen, and where I thought I imagined the Reformist on stage, jumping from this step to the next, his hand motions making the case for his words.

We saw his tombstone, simple as expected, and his few portraits and statues. I imagined how Luther would have laughed a hearty laugh, had he been alive today to witness how many pilgrims would flock to reverence him—a simple, yet iconoclastic man who changed the course of religious history in his day. And the whole day was interjected with Misha’s smile, his storytelling, his thoughts aloud.

When I envision an artist, I picture someone like Misha—with passion flowing through his veins, and the mark of creativity left on everything he touches.

I remember how he said to us in the vodka bar that night, how he wished only to find the other person who could complete his heart, to share his passions, to share his life.

But we knew that although Misha would always be able to find friends and effortlessly charm women, it would have to be someone as special as him who could be his other half, and who could fill that role.

And perhaps, he knew that too...I saw the mixed colors in his paintings, his strokes of emotion carefully placed on the canvas with selective shades that mirrored his heart. I saw, in his art, the journey he was taking—alone, in wonder at the world around him. Alone, yet living in every moment as all should.

He traveled through his thoughts, his art and his songs. The way he spoke of God was as a Spirit of Love, that Being which permeated even the lonely corners of his heart, so that even on those cold nights, he knew he wasn't really completely alone.

He traveled into the hearts of people around him, and with each step, you savored the taste of pleasure as well.

That's what it was like, having conversations with Misha. It was like you didn't need any other travel guide or travel book to make things clearer, to open up your eyes to see beyond the place into its secrets.

Good ice cream, good vodka, good company. That was all. That was enough.

--Nyx Martinez