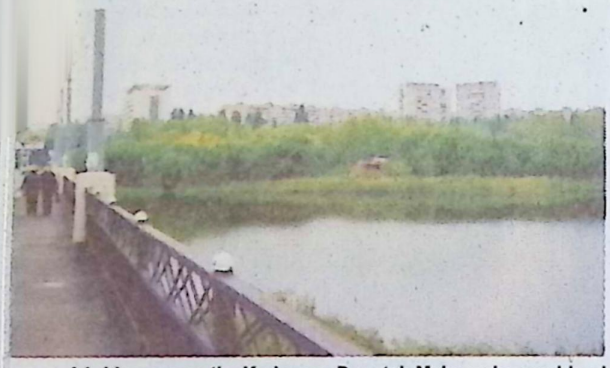
Saying Goodbye

ANDREW EAGLE

At 2 pm I glanced down the hall to the room they call the new big, in which I taught the teenagers of an evening. The language centre in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine, was always growing, with a plan to convert the cellar into classrooms. The continual renovation made the term: new big. The room was decorated, with serviettes waiting to be cake-smeared and lollies for unwrapping. It was my last day.

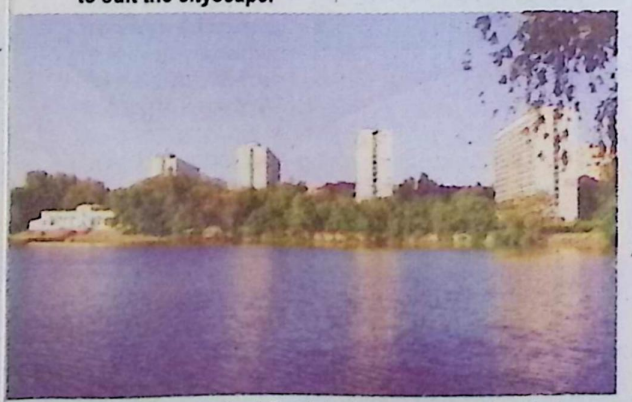
Thinking of my camera, two blocks away at home, I slipped into hat and coat. All eyes were upon me as I exited the cloak room. I wasn't supposed to know about the party. "I'll be back for my lesson at 6 pm," I said casually. Mouths dropped – I would miss my party – Marina realised first, of course, that I was joking.



A bridge across the Karlmeus. Donetsk-Makeyevka combined metropolitan area is home to around 2 million people.



The Karlmeus River is artificially widened in Donetsk to suit the cityscape.



Donetsk is a typical Soviet-planned city on the Karlmeus River in eastern Ukraine.

But it was Lena who donated her weekend to my first days in Donetsk almost a year earlier. In the cupboard of the Soviet apartment they'd chosen for me she'd left a jar of homemade plum jam with fruit from her mother's village garden. She pointed it out when we arrived on the first evening but didn't say she'd made it – by the smile in her eye I understood. It's a nice thing to have done for a total stranger. Meanwhile the institute had stocked the fridge with groceries and the receptionist Tanya had the jug boiled as I walked in the door.

I remember Lena at the airport – she had a 1960s hairdo and behind-the-iron-curtain clothes – feminine, becoming and quite different to western styles. I remember as we'd driven past the White House, the seat of city government, how Peter the driver said, "That's where the thieves live."

At lunch on the following afternoon, in a café by the Karlmeus, when I asked what Lena's ex-husband did, she replied, embarrassed, in her suave, winter-coat-thick accent, "We don't ask what people do in Ukraine." It was my first lesson. "There are many Ukrainians," she said, "who have money but are technically unemployed."

She's a mother of two but can never remember their ages. She started to explain how it was, life in and after the Soviet Union. "People should only create and not destroy," she said, "This is our history." She was worried about her children's futures in an uncertain, capitalist Ukraine.