
on holiday to the Black Sea for three months." In the sunny Baltic republics, a room in a private home will cost four rubles a day, even with three or four people sharing it.

Those who try to buy are shocked to find that a little shack called a *khibarka* costs about 5,000 rubles. A comfortable country home with four or more rooms and modern conveniences will sell for anywhere from 15,000 rubles—a bit more than the cost of a new Volga car—to 50,000 rubles. Of course, one can build, provided one can obtain a plot of land, which in theory belongs to the state.

Mushrooms in the Rain

One way to get a plot is to buy an abandoned farmhouse. ARTICLE 73 of the Land Code, which implies that land can be transferred only between permanent residents in a rural community, is an obstacle, but it is not insurmountable. "If you can come to an understanding with the local soviet," maintains a dacha expert, "to help them in some way or simply bribe them, you can get a dacha cheap, from 800 to 4,000 rubles."

All in all, getting housing *na levo* (under the table or through influence) is a well-established practice that lubricates rusty bureaucratic machinery. Trying to sniff out which bureaucrats will accept money is tricky because a bribery conviction carries a sentence of eight years. But if an official openly asks for money, there is probably no problem.

Not all bribe-takers can be trusted, however. A middle-aged lady in Astrakhan, rumored to have contact with an important member of the city's executive committee, asked 800 to 2,500 rubles in return for help in getting an apartment. Said the report in the journal *Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya* (*Socialist Industry*): "In four years some 40 desperate apartment seekers, including professional people and party members, paid her a total of 50,000 rubles in bribes before it was discovered that she had no contacts at all."

After a new Party secretary in Georgia, a republic well known for its citizens' high living and disdain for regulations, denounced corrupt housing practices in 1972, a flurry of investigations ensued. It was found, for instance, that a construction cooperative in Tbilisi that initially had announced it would build three housing units of 160 apartments went on to erect 16 high rises with 1,281 apartments—many were sold for high profits to families who did not even live in Tbilisi. In Armenia, the directors of the semiconductor factory in the satellite-town of Abovyan decided to build new housing "for their workers" 11

miles away in the center of Yerevan, Armenia's capital. All 48 units were assigned to the factory's management.

Local party and government officials, state bank directors, and others often use their influence to build oversized homes (far in excess of the 60 square meters of space permitted for such persons' households) on illegally assigned plots, using stolen building materials and purloined state machinery. They may own several private homes, although legally only one is allowed per household, while still maintaining a state-owned apartment in the city. *Pravda* once reported that in Zaleshchiki, a resort town on the Dnestr River in the Ukraine, "two- and three-story homes are popping up like mushrooms in the rain" with illegal dimensions (average space: 100 square meters) on illegally obtained plots. In Georgia in 1974, it was found that 990 "imposing" mansions were built in the small community of Tskhvarichamia with materials and manpower whose costs, for the most part, were charged to the state. The intended occupants included the first secretary of a district committee in Tbilisi and the deputy director of the Tbilisi restaurant trust.

And so on. Self-aggrandizing provincial officials, and those of the small republics, are periodically criticized and sometimes even removed for their sins. But the travails of honest functionaries also get some notice, as in Leningrad writer Daniil Granin's poignant novel, *The Picture*.

The story deals with a provincial Party boss named Losev, mayor of Lykov, a small town. "Everywhere in his job," Granin writes, "he kept running into the bloody problem of housing. The shortage of living space tormented him relentlessly day in and day out. . . . People waited for flats, for a room, for several years; the queue did not get any shorter. It was a kind of curse."

New housing blocks rose in Lykov, but demand climbed faster. "All the neighborhood kids, who had only just been born, were suddenly shaving or putting on makeup and then getting married, and sitting in his office—plump, doleful madonnas and strapping great lads with moustaches—all asking for flats. Their rapid growth and fecundity mortified him. He was besieged on all sides by queue jumpers; everyone's circumstances were urgent, catastrophic, unique . . ."

This was not the struggling 1950s or '60s. *The Picture* was published in 1980.
