# A nightmare journey

This story happened to me in late 2022, just a few days before the New Year. I had bought tickets from Larnaca, Cyprus to Antalya, Turkey with a layover in Tel-Aviv, Israel. For obvious reasons, there were no direct tickets without a stopover available for this route. When I arrived in Israel, I went to passport control.

The problem was that I had two separate bookings, which meant I couldn’t seamlessly transit through Israel without entering the country. Instead, I needed to go through passport control, enter Israel, then collect my luggage, immediately check in again for my next flight, leave the country and depart. I did not think it was going to be an issue since Russian citizens don’t need any visa to enter Israel and I’ve had experience transiting in this way before. I’ve never been this wrong before.

When I approached passport control, the officer asked where I planned to stay in Israel. I replied that I wasn’t going to stay anywhere because I was leaving in two hours. They took my passport and told me to wait on the side. After about forty minutes, a Russian-speaking woman came over and asked me again about my situation. I said I was just transiting, that I hadn’t violated anything, and I didn’t understand why I was being detained. She told me it was my own fault for buying such tickets. Ten minutes later, they called me in for an interrogation. There was a Russian-speaking officer from the immigration agency who talked to me rudely and tried to pressure me into admitting that I was an illegal migrant worker. He was convinced that my plan was to miss my connection and stay in Israel to work illegally. My tickets, my booked Turkish accommodation - none of that convinced him. He gave me a paper stating that I was denied entry to Israel. I signed it, and he said I would be deported. Nobody explained anything, and they refused to talk to me any further.

He led me to a room in the airport where several people were already waiting. I sat there for three hours. There were about five to seven other detainees at any given time, and they kept bringing in more. Japanese, Americans, Georgians, Russians, Palestinians. Israeli authorities firmly believed that all these people were desperate to wash floors for €300 a month in Tel Aviv, one of the most expensive cities in the world, where you can’t even get by on €3000. Everyone there had hotel bookings, insurance, return tickets, but nobody cared.

The deportation procedure was such that they could only deport you to the exact same city you came from, on the nearest flight of the same airline that flew you in. You couldn’t choose another destination or departure time, even if you were willing to buy your own ticket. If there was a flight in an hour and you wanted to purchase that ticket yourself, they still wouldn’t let you board it. You had to wait for another flight with that same carrier, which could mean waiting three, five, or more days if the route was unpopular. The story of the Palestinian women I met in the detention room was especially absurd: they had flown from Sydney to Israel via Hong Kong, and now they were being told to wait five days until they could be sent back to Hong Kong, even though they lived just thirty minutes away from that airport and had come to spend Christmas with their family.

I was told I was leaving on a flight at 10:00 the next day. Exactly 24 hours later. Then they took my phone, loaded me into a police van, and drove me to a prison. There, they confiscated all my belongings except cigarettes (I used to smoke at the time) and brought me to a cell. The cell was a room about 30 square meters with twelve bunk beds crammed into it. There were either no sheets on the beds, or they hadn’t been changed in months. A toilet and a sink stood in the corner. It was extremely dirty, it smelled awful, and everyone smoked right there in the room, so the ceiling had become brown from the tar. The walls were covered in ballpen graffiti, and about fifty percent of what I could read were wishes for the death of Jews. Most of these writings were in Russian, Serbian, and Georgian. The only food available was a pitcher of tap water and some sandwiches wrapped in cellophane that suspiciously had their best before date on the same day. They were probably sourcing those sandwiches from a local supermarket right before they were about to throw them away. There was no window glass, just a metal grid, so it was very cold. There was no heating, either. The temperature inside was practically the same as outside - about 12 degrees C and very humid.

The cell population was extremely diverse. I was there with a Moldovan from Ireland, a Ukrainian from Lithuania, an Indian, a Russian, a Georgian, a Serb, a Macedonian, a Montenegrin, a Chinese man, and an Uzbek. They were all decent guys, some spoke a bit of Russian so we could understand each other. We talked to the Balkan guys through the Ukrainian. Only the Indian, the Montenegrin, and I spoke English. The Uzbek and the Chinese man, oddly enough, only understood Hebrew. Still, we found ways to communicate. Messages from the Moldovan to the Chinese man went through a chain of five people. I don’t remember everyone’s name, only that the Ukrainian was called Sasha Verbitskiy, the Moldovan’s name was Edik, and the Serb’s name was Drako Komazec. Most of the time, we called each other by our countries: “India”, “Serbia”, and so on.

I talked most with the Ukrainian and the Moldovan. They were in there for no apparent reason as well. The Ukrainian tried to visit his son, who had been living in Israel for two years at this point. He had everything booked: return tickets, a hotel, insurance. Yet they still put him in jail. The Moldovan had a similar story. The Russian guy had been doing a layover, just like me. He was flying from Turkey to Cyprus with his wife for their honeymoon. His wife was also locked up in the same prison, just in a different cell.

The guards ignored us. We could shout, bang on the door, ask for help - they wouldn’t come. In those cases, people would smoke under the smoke detector to set off the alarm, forcing the guards to show up. They let us call our families once or twice using a landline and occasionally allowed us to fetch hygiene items from our backpacks that were in storage. Some guards were kind, while others treated us like we were cattle and not humans.

In the evening, I managed to fall asleep wearing my jacket and using two blankets. In the morning, they woke me up, let me grab my backpack, put me in a vehicle with the Moldovan, and drove us to the airport. They didn’t even give me time to brush my teeth. They took us directly to our planes, bypassing all security checks. I wished best of luck to Edik and boarded the plane. They seated me in the very last row, 30F, and gave my passport to the flight attendant, instructing her to return it only after we landed in Cyprus. When the officer left, a kind flight attendant asked me if I was alright. I told her my story. She reassured me that everything was going to be alright and gave me a cup of coffee with some biscuits.

I hadn’t seen my luggage since I checked it in at Larnaca before flying out. They never let me retrieve it in Israel. They promised to put it on the return flight, but never did. When I arrived in Cyprus, of course my suitcase wasn’t on the carousel. I filed a lost luggage report, and they said they would call me when they found it and would send it to Turkey - again, probably through several other countries. So I ended up without my suitcase, too.

Cyprus let me enter without any problem, but under my visa rules, I could only stay for two more days. I bought tickets to Antalya, Turkey via Beirut, Lebanon and Istanbul, Turkey and left Cyprus that same evening. It took me more than three months to negotiate the return of my luggage with the great help from the Cypriots working in the airline.