

ex-husband. She remembered calling her when she had been doing a story in St Petersburg. Everybody had told her to get in touch with this famously dogged journalist, a real pest they called her – that was a compliment in the profession. Lira had received her in her agreeably untidy office at the magazine, and they had had lunch together and got along well... “You must get hold of her in Paris, you must protect her. You can blow me up later! Go to Paris now! Stay with her! I’ll call you. Yes, I know, it’s all my fault...”

She hung up.

“I’m blind, Charlotte, I can’t see anything.”

“It may just be temporary, you must just wait. This is a very good hospital. Where’s your hotel? I’ll go and get your stuff.”

“12 Bucknall Street.”

The hotel entrance was plastered with the logos of travel agents and guides for tourists on modest budgets. The receptionist informed Charlotte that she was not the first person asking to see Lira’s room.

“310? The embassy people have already been to collect her stuff. They said she had had an accident, what happened?”

“The embassy?” Charlotte asked.

“They were Russian, anyway,” the man said.

She ran up the stairs. The door was ajar, as though someone was still in there, but it was only the chambermaid, who gave an embarrassed smile, indicating that she had nearly finished. The journalist looked around and saw that they had taken everything, the computer, the clothes as well, to make it seem as though they were taking care of her. The chambermaid went, taking the attackers’ fingerprints away on her dusters. On the white bathroom tiles was a small plastic bag, with a few forgotten items of make-up. Charlotte gazed at some deep purple eyeshadow, which must have brought out the colour of Lira’s eyes in the evening. She didn’t take it.

ACID ATTACK ON RUSSIAN JOURNALIST IN LONDON STREET

The Guardian, 17 August.

Lira Kazan, a journalist on the Russian weekly magazine Mir, was the victim of a savage acid attack the day before yesterday as she was returning to her hotel in Bucknall Street. She was taken to A & E at University College Hospital. Doctors confirm that her life is not in danger, but are unable to say as yet whether her sight can be saved after severe burns to her eyes. The attackers’ methods have led the inquiry to suspect a Russian connection. In the last few years London has become the scene for settlements of scores between various interest groups in Moscow. Scotland Yard, however, did comment as follows: “Normally the Russians don’t just threaten, they kill.”

Kazan, 41, has already been subjected to threats in St Petersburg, particularly since she began to take an interest in the growing empire of oligarch Sergei Louchsky. During the last few years the billionaire has been busy distancing himself from earlier underworld connections, and he has recently floated his group on the London Stock Exchange.

The attack on Lira Kazan has only confirmed once again that, for a Russian journalist, it is dangerous, and sometimes deadly, simply to do your job. There is now a long list of similar victims, well known to Lira Kazan, who has recently written an article on the subject. What is new and of particular interest to this newspaper is that they are now being tracked right to the heart of London.

Charlotte MacKennedy