

## **Outside is America**

*As a youth growing up in Western Siberia, Alec Rukosuev took action with wife Lera to decide their fate. The ticket out was triathlon, and thanks to the help of a Florida couple, Rukosuev was able to blossom as one of America's top triathletes.*

By Jay Prasuhn

*Across the mud huts where the children sleep, through the alleys of a quiet city street  
You take the staircase to the first floor. Turn the key and slowly unlock the door  
As a man breathes into a saxophone, and through the walls you hear the city groan  
Outside is America  
Outside is America  
-U2, Bullet the Blue Sky*

Alec Rukosuev stepped off the Aeroflot flight and set foot for the first time in the land of opportunity: America. Moving on to an Amtrak station, he stood in the station with everything in his life: a small bag of cycling clothes, a cheap bike and his wife, Lera.

A middle-aged man approached Alec. "Do you have a dollar?" the man asked the Russian. "I could barely speak English, and tried to tell him, 'All I have is a dollar.'" After spending \$800 for two tickets to D.C. and a pair of train tickets to Orlando, Rukosuev stood and assessed what he and his wife had: \$36.

It was January of 1992, and the Rukosuevs were officially defectors. It was the start of a new, exciting and beautiful life, a life that would see Alec, now 34, develop into triathlon's definitive rags to riches story.

Alec Rukosuev's youth was spent amid the lowest chasm of existence. The gray skies that weighed on the industrial town of Omsk in Western Siberia hung like a damp blanket. The winters in the region, just north of Kazakhstan were biting cold, with slate skies dusting the terrain white. Summers were humid, stagnant and oppressive. The million living there wore the look of hopelessness. But they knew no better, and soldiered on to textile or agricultural jobs, and back to tiny hovels at day's end in a miserable existence.

But in 1977, a rail-thin 10-year-old Rukosuev lived the high life with his father Oleg and mother Galena. For Omsk, he was the nouveau riche, the upper crust of a dismal society. "My father wanted the best of everything, the biggest apartment, best clothes—it was socialism as good as it gets," Rukosuev recalls. "My friends lived in little studios and looked at me as the rich boy."

Suddenly, "life flipped over on me." His parents divorced and he was thrust into a world of dismal misery. Low on money, his mother rented not an apartment, but rather an office in the bowels of a stadium, Galena, Alec and brother Eduard made the best of what little they had. No kitchen. No bathroom—they had to use a public restroom to clean up in the morning. And there were no new clothes, just the same ones they had worn the day before. "They were real grey days, but I had hope I was gonna make it somehow. I always hoped to get a break."

After a year at the stadium, the three moved on to only slightly better conditions; an apartment with a bathroom and kitchen, but shared with two other families. In their refrigerator: bread and jelly. The families put their shoes under bedposts at night to prevent their theft. Rukosuev never looked down on his peers when he was better off, but he now understood their pain. And yet he knew he would never settle for it.

Rukosuev joined the Russian Federation swim team in 1988 with the hopes of breaking records and, somehow, moving along in life. The bread and jelly was replaced by meats, pasta and potatoes. As he progressed in the program, however, he realized that while he was a star locally, he was rank-and-file nationally. “It was a dead end road,” Rukosuev says. “I was 21 and by Russian standards, too old to swim.” At least he had one thing that took his mind from the future: a cute girl in the women’s program named Lera. “When I met her, she was a national 200 backstroke star,” Rukosuev says. “I was a guy barely making the team.” The two dated for six months before they married and she moved in with he and his family. “He was the only guy I ever dated,” says Lera, 31. “I guess I got lucky.”

A friend turned Alec on to an Omsk triathlon in 1988. Rukosuev entered, took a four-minute lead out of the water and won. “Every day he saw me at the pool after that, he’d say, ‘Why are you still wasting your time with swimming? You should do triathlon,’” Rukosuev remembers. “In ’89, I was at the end of my swimming career, so I said I’d give it a try.”

The national tri fed had a standardized fitness test for its athletes: a 1.5k swim followed by a 10k run. Those who did it under 53 minutes made the team. As a special newcomer, Rukosuev was exempt from the requirement, but did it anyway. Time: 51:30, best by a minute, the only time under 53 minutes. His improvement was exponential; in his first Olympic-distance race for the program, he went 2:13. Six months later, he went 1:54. “It was like a miracle to fall into triathlon,” says Rukosuev. “I was searching for something, but I didn’t know what.” He embarked upon his first trip with the team—his first trip ever—out of the Soviet Union, to Sweden in 1990. It was an eye-opening experience.

“I went to a cafeteria, got my food and put it down,” Rukosuev says. “Before I ate it, I started to cry. It was an ordinary cafeteria, but it was the best food I had ever seen.” The bounty was contrary to what the cherrypicked media had persuaded the masses to believe, that life outside the country was dire and poor, that they led prosperous lives as Russians. “Those bastards on TV had been lying to us the whole time.” On top of that, KGB intimidation. Officers at the training center reinforced the repercussions of defection in the form of midnight knocks on door from officers with verbal reminders. Lera was very vocal in her anti-communist ways, and as a result, missed the 1988 Seoul Olympics—no matter that she was Russia’s second-fastest backstroker. It was too much of not enough. Russia was no longer home.

*Across the field you see the sky ripped open*

*See the rain through a gaping wound*

*Pounding on the women and children*

*Who run into the arms*

*Of America*

-U2, Bullet the Blue Sky

Rukosuev discussed with his wife the possibilities of defecting, and the best chance came in 1991: The ITU World Championships in Gold Coast, Australia. The two took a come-what-may attitude. “When you’re young, you don’t think about it being a huge chance,” Lera says. “I could have lived anywhere

with Alec and been happy, but this was his idea, so I went with it.” The plan was for Alec to take up residence in Australia, then have his wife arrive a few weeks later. He applied for political asylum, but there were no guarantees as to when, if at all, his wife could arrive. The plans were scuttled, and Rukosuev returned to Siberia.

But it was on that Gold Coast trip that he met with American age-grouper Jeff Cuddeback, and his wife Kim. Jeff, a top age-group triathlete who set the men’s 40-44 record at the 2000 Hawaii Ironman in 9:05:33, and Kim were Orlando, Fla., residents who provided Rukosuev and two Russian teammates homestays a year earlier during the 1990 World Championships in Orlando. The Russians had hosted the Cuddebacks in kind when the two visited the OTC in Moscow soon after Worlds.

In the days leading up to the race, the three took a walk down the beach and Rukosuev explained his plight. “Kim and I looked at each other and we didn’t even have to say anything—we just nodded,” Cuddeback, 43, recalls. “We told Alec, ‘If you can get yourself and Lera to America, you can stay with us.’” Despair turned into elation, and the planning began.

In order to pay for the tickets, Rukosuev, who had no job except to train, was crafty when he traveled; he’d buy bottles of vodka in Omsk for 50 cents, take them to races abroad and sell them on the streets of Sweden and Switzerland for \$30. In addition, he’d ration his daily \$30 travel stipend for food and pare it down, eating on just two dollars a day. Some of his teammates ate nothing but whale blubber to save money.

Two months after the plan was borne, he had enough to book two flights. The least expensive flight to the U.S. was to Washington, D.C. in January of 1992. “We made sure we went through customs separately and went to separate agents,” Rukosuev says. “We didn’t want them to know we were married and suspect we were defecting.” It worked—they were aboard, aloft and on their way. To what, they didn’t know. It was a chance, but one that was worth taking.

Back in Moscow at the OTC, his triathlon coach wondered where his prized prodigy was. “He asked my teammates, ‘Is Alec on his long run?’ They were like, ‘Yeah! He’s on his long run—he’s on a flight to Washington right now!’”

### **D.C. to Orlando: 846 miles**

Once off the plane in D.C. with their meager possessions, Alec made a call to Jeff in Orlando. “We’re here, come pick us up.” Not quite a trip across town; Rukosuev wasn’t aware of the distance: 846 miles. “I said no, get yourselves on a train to Orlando and I’ll pick you up there,” Cuddeback recalls. The Rukosuevs were forced to spend all but \$36 to purchase the train tickets.

Once in Orlando, the two walked into the Cuddeback home, put their things down and swiveled their heads in wonderment. “Alec said ‘Ohhhh, the American dream, your own home,’” says Cuddeback. “(In Russia), they had day-old bread, pigs feet and salami. We went to the supermarket and they saw the aisles full of fruit and fresh vegetables, and were like kids in a candy store squeezing everything.” Reality then set in. “Jeff said, ‘OK, what do you want to do?’” Rukosuev says. “I said I was ready to do anything—I’ll wash dishes, pick up oranges, anything.” The two sat down and Rukosuev was pointed. “I wanted to try racing in America before I started really working.” And so he did, training full time and helping around the house. In an effort to make a little money for race entry fees, he and Lera cleaned the homes of the Cuddeback’s friends, and Alec did additional work painting homes.

Rukosuev’s pro career started precariously. “The first couple months, he read Mark Allen’s training book, and just looked at the pictures and asked questions,” Cuddeback recollects. “On the bike, he did

the same seven-mile loop course every single day—he didn't know any roads.”

It was at the 1992 St. Anthony's Triathlon, only two months after he had arrived stateside, Rukosuev decided to use the \$150 he had saved to see how he stacked up against the big boys. Off the bike in 10th place, he charged to the front, passing Brad Kearns with half a mile left. “I had never seen or heard of him in my life until he came up in the final mile of the run, after I had run through about 11 people to take the lead and a certain win,” Kearns recalls. “Then this Ivan Drago guy comes blowing by.”

Rukosuev crossed first, raking in \$3,000. “I was crying,” Rukosuev says. “I just raced with the best and won.” In the hotel room, a friend came by to burst his bubble: he had been disqualified for drafting. And indeed, he was. “It was a heartbreaker,” Rukosuev remembers. “In my experience in Europe, you get three warnings.”

“I drove with Jeff home and was devastated,” Rukosuev says. But, says Cuddeback, “I knew at that point he had the talent to be successful and I told him ‘Don't worry, you can race with these guys.’” Indeed, he would have more chances. Once he learned the stringent rules, the racing came to him. His first money result came with a win at the '92 San Diego International Triathlon. The prize: \$2,000. “I flew back home and held the check the entire way,” Rukosuev says. “To me, it was like a million dollars.”

The Rukosuevs lived with the Cuddebacks for two years. While Alec raced, Lera was in massage therapy school learning her trade of today. The Rukosuevs finally were self-sufficient and could head out on their own. “Jeff and I are still like family, like brothers,” Rukosuev says of the help Cuddeback offered. “Without their help, we wouldn't have made it. I felt like we hit a lottery in them.”

As one of the sport's best swimmers, Rukosuev has been routinely first out of the water and more often than not. Throughout his eight-year career, he has excelled at all triathlon distances, from Olympic-distance to Ironman. He has also dabbled in duathlon, with a top result coming in 1995 when he topped Kenny Souza, Jeff Devlin and Greg Watson in winning Powerman Florida. This year has been typically solid. He finished third overall at the Pan Am Championships and took fourth this spring at Ironman Brazil. And of course, won the Gulf Coast Triathlon for the sixth time in what is unofficially his “home” race. Along the way, Rukosuev has become known as a clown prince—ironic, considering an upbringing that could likely have scarred him into being cold, stoic and solitary. “Alec has a sharp, dry sense of humor, and you don't expect it,” says fellow jokester and pro triathlete Jimmy Riccitello. “It wasn't til the 1994 Goodwill Games in St. Petersburg that I saw how rough those guys had it and I really grasped the depth of his character.”

## **The Sweater**

The sport of hockey runs thick and pure through the veins of Russians, and Rukosuev is no exception. An ardent fan of the famed Red Army teams in Moscow, he was instantly a fan of the Detroit Red Wings, a team with many former Red Army players who, like he, defected to America. And while most sport low jersey numbers, many Russians in the NHL sport numbers in the 90s—numbers that correspond with the year they arrived in the United States.

When the Red Wings won the Stanley Cup in 1997, a friend bought a Wings hockey jersey with “Rukosuev” stitched onto the back and presented it to the Russian. When asked what number he wanted to complement the name, “I said 92—for the year I came to America.” He occasionally sports the jersey to post-race events for kicks. “(Ironman North America president) Graham Fraser is a Buffalo Sabres fan,” Rukosuev says with a laugh, “and I like to wear it at races he's at to give him a hard time.”

While he remembers his past, he is constantly reminded of his future every time he looks out the window of his home in the Orlando suburb of Apopka. “They were Americanized very quickly,” Cuddeback said of the Russian couple. “When they first got here, they lived austere lives. Alec wore the same shorts and T-shirts all week. But when they saw American ways, they liked the good things, the good chairs, leather, things like that. They’ve been here only eight years and are going better than half of Americans are. They were unwavering in their desire to succeed, and they’ve done it.”

In 1997, the transformation was simplified by a line of music from U2. “(German) Lothar Leder trained with me from 1995 to ’97,” Rukosuev recalls. “Every time we saw something not normal, or extravagant, like the biggest McDonalds or some expensive car, we’d say ‘Outside is America,’” says Rukosuev, coining the line from U2’s *Bullet the Blue Sky*. “It was like, ‘only in America.’”

Rukosuev is so proud of his new nationality that he risked a chance of missing Olympic glory. The Russian national team offered him a spot on their 2000 Sydney Games squad. “Alec said no way,” Cuddeback remembers. “He said if I’m going to race for anyone, it’s going to be for the U.S.” So Rukosuev made a desperate rush to gain U.S. citizenship. Immigration rules state citizenship cannot come until five years of U.S. residence; he had four years, eight months. He was called in by the INS for the citizenship test and it seemed he was being given a chance to slide. He passed the test, and the INS officer asked for his green card for formal processing. Upon looking at his card, the woman began to cry. “She said she didn’t know why I was called in, but she felt so bad to say no—but it was fine. I’ve taken bigger punches in my life.”

Indeed, in the grand scheme of things, it’s a miniscule concession. In late September, Lera was sworn in, and Alec’s day comes soon. The couple recently had their first child, Polena, in January this year. And Alec hosts his retired parents for visits to Florida. He concedes his career won’t last but a few more years, and hopes to perhaps coach swimming. “I’m looking into all kinds of business opportunities. I’m wide open,” he says. Adds Cuddeback: “I think his racing success was just the start of bigger and better things. I think he’s on his way.”