

Germany–Italy–Russia–Germany without millennium bug

Edward Goldobin

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Initial Conditions

At the end of 1999 I was going to spend Christmas with my girlfriend in Italy. And for New Year we were going to visit my parents in Russia. At that time I was working in Juelich (Germany) which is a small town located in 50 km from Dusseldorf. It was already 22.12.1999 when I started to care about tickets. I've got a fresh German visa for the year 2000 only on 21.12, so I did not start to do anything without visa in my hands.

Ideally I needed the flight similar to this one:

Dusseldorf–Naples	23.12 or 24.12
Naples–Moscow	28.12
Moscow–Dusseldorf	09.01.2000

22.12.1999

I called one of the Travel Agency which I'd found in Internet. On their page they promised cheap tickets. During the day they found for me rather cheap offer from Alitalia: Dusseldorf–Rome–Moscow–Dusseldorf (there were no tickets through Naples already) and sent all information by FAX to me. I had to read the schedule and sign the order, if I agree, then I had to send it back. I received that FAX about 18:00 so I decided to read it carefully at home and reply in the morning. I was not very happy about the offer since the plane from Rome should start at 7:40. My girlfriend lives in 1 hour of driving from Naples, so up to Rome it will take about 3 hours. But the price was really great — only 972 DM! So, I called my girlfriend, to tell about the offer, and at that moment she decided to order the ticket for her in such a way that we will fly with the same flight from Rome to Moscow. She didn't know yet my flight number, booking, etc, and strictly speaking a Travel Agency cannot give information about passengers, but she called a friend of her, who works in Travel Agency and asked to search the flight which I'd booked, so she took the same. It was just in

time, since that was the 8-th day before departure, and the ticket was cheap only if bought 7 days before :-)

23.12.2000

Next day I called the agency to ask about later flight Rome–Moscow, but they told me that after checking with Alitalia, they found out that my booking is wrong. That flight should be a non-stop flight, i.e. Dusseldorf–Moscow via Rome without possibility to stop in Rome for few days. Otherwise the ticket will cost about 3000 DM. :(So, I asked them to look for other possibilities and they promised to call later when they will find something. Surprisingly, nobody called up to 15:00, so I started to worry. The problem also was that even if I would have ordered the ticket now, the only way to get it in time was by courier. But it is quite risky to wait for courier on 24.12. In addition, it depends very much on the time of the flight, so it will make no sense to wait for courier in the morning (usually he comes between 9 and 10 o'clock), if the flight is at 10:00 (it takes 2 hours and 30 minutes for me to reach the airport).

I decided to call our Travel Agency in Jülich. At least I can go directly there and get the ticket if they will find something reasonable. At this point it was already clear that I need 2 tickets: Germany–Italy–Germany and Germany–Russia–Germany. To optimize my route I was looking for such connection that the part Italy–Germany–Germany–Russia will be in one day. So I will return from Italy to Germany and immediately start to Russia from the same airport. This, by the way, means that it can be *any* German airport, not necessarily Dusseldorf. So, in Jülich's agency they understood my "problem" and found the following route:

Dusseldorf–Rome	24:12 mid-day
Rome–Munich	28.12 10:30–11:40

Munich–Moscow 28.12 13:10–18:30
Moscow–Dusseldorf 12.01

There were no tickets already for 9th, 10th, and 11th of January. They booked and I drove to the agency to buy the tickets, in spite I forgot to ask the price. I suspected it could be about 700+700 DM. When I came there and asked about price they told: Dusseldorf–Rome–Munich costs 800 DM, Munich–Moscow–Dusseldorf costs 1600 DM !!! %-(. In total it is about 2400 DM. They explained that such a high price is because the starting and ending airport in each route is different (so called fork-flights). This was crazy. I even started to think to abandon Christmas in Italy and go directly to Moscow to meet my girlfriend there. Therefore, just in case, I asked: “What about ticket just to Moscow and back departing/arriving from/to Dusseldorf?”. Almost all flights were booked. The only one she found was a flight by ”Sabena” (I dislike Sabena, because I had bad experience with them) Dusseldorf–Moscow via Brussels. The worst thing about that flight was that it starts from Dusseldorf at something like 6:30 and arrives to Dusseldorf at 23:30. So, I have a little chance to get from/to home by train. Okay. I postponed the purchasing and decided, first, to call my girlfriend and discuss my not-coming to Italy and, second, I wanted to call to “Russian” Travel Agency to ask about price of the Aeroflot ticket Munich–Moscow–Dusseldorf.

At the end of 1990s there were a lot of “Russian” travel agencies in Germany. They were open by immigrants from Russia and Kazakhstan and offered exceptionally good prices for flights to the Former Soviet Union. I was often using one of them were I was a permanent client. Unfortunately they didn’t provide such cheap tickets to other destinations.

When I called to my girlfriend, she told that I should come for Christmas regardless of price of the ticket. I am in general against throwing money in this way, but I, finally, agreed. Then she told that she bought the ticket to the flight Rome–Moscow for 28.12 (via Milan). That one which starts at 7:40 from Rome and which I am already not going to take. Okay, it was too late to change something. Her return ticket was Moscow–Naples (via Milan) for 9.01.2000.

Then I called to my Russian travel agency, and asked about Munich–Moscow–Dusseldorf flight price, if I fly with Aeroflot. They told — 550 DM!!! :-) Okay, I decided to buy the ticket

Dusseldorf–Rome–Munich in travel agency in Jülich and Munich–Moscow–Dusseldorf in Russian travel agency.

When I called back to the Travel Agency in Jülich they told me that my booking is canceled because they ”misunderstood” me. They ”thought” that I really changed idea and would not like to go to Italy anymore. Instead, they booked for me the flight to Moscow with Sabena. I asked them to give me ticket to the flight which was booked before. As you can guess, there were no places left anymore for the flight Dusseldorf–Rome on 24.12. I told them that it is not my fault and they have to find something for me. In 20 min they found a flight from Frankfurt and, as they told, it was the only and the last possibility for me. The good point about that flight was that it cost only 660 DM (even cheaper than before) and started not very early, even a little bit too late — at 19:40 on 24.12. And I was supposed to land in Rome at 21:30. In addition I had to spend another 60 DM for train up to Frankfurt. Still, it was cheaper than before. Fine. I agreed. In fact I had no choice. They booked this flight and, since it was already 18:00 and they closed the office, I was supposed to come next day to buy the ticket. They were open on 24.12 but only up to 12:00.

I called to Russian Travel Agency and ordered second ticket. There were no problem with booking but there was no time to send ticket to me. To send it with courier was quite risky, so, we finally agreed that the ticket will wait for me on 28.12 at the Aeroflot desk in Munich. This service costs 60 DM.

24.12.1999

In the morning I went to Travel Agency, bought the ticket, packed suitcase, and went to the airport. Next few days everything was more or less fine. Instead, adventures were waiting for me on 28.12.

28.12.1999

Since my girlfriend bought the ticket for the flight from Rome which departs at 7:40, we had to start very early in the morning. Arriving to Fiumicino airport in the early morning turned out to be not very easy. We bought a ticket for an intercitty bus which we had to take at 3:00 at night and which should bring us to Rome at

6:30. We took the bus in time but it was not departing from our stop. We asked the bus driver what was the problem. He told that this bus belongs to a network and we are supposed to wait for another bus that will bring few passengers who have to take our bus. :(The problem was that the wheel of that other bus exploded. Finally, 40 min later the bus, which we were waiting for, arrived and we started. It was not nice inside, very warm, very many people in a small volume. But we survived as did all others. We arrived to Rome at 7:00 instead of 6:30. The bus brought us to Roma Tiburtina, an underground station located to the East of Rome. The airport is at South-West, much behind the city. There is a train connecting Tiburtina to Fiumicino, but we had no time to go by train, even if the bus arrive in time, since it take about an hour. So, we exited the bus very quickly and while I unloaded our luggage, my girlfriend run to catch a taxi. We explained everything to the driver and he drove us to the airport quite fast, sometimes violating rules as they used to do in Italy. :(It was not so close anyway so we arrived to the airport only at 7:30. My girlfriend run to check-in, but the woman at the counter rejected to admit her. She told that to check-in 10 min before departure is too late. She even did not allow my girlfriend to run to the gate without luggage. :(My girlfriend kept insisting very much but the only thing she got was to speak with a chief. After 20 minutes of "discussions" the following offer was made: Since in any case she needs to go to Milan, because the flight to Moscow starts from there, she can take another plane which departs in 20-30 min from Rome, and it lands in Milan Linate, the national airport. "So" — the boss told — "if you would like to risk, you take now this plane to Milan without luggage (since only 20 min left) and then, in Milan, you take a taxi to the international airport (the shuttle train between the 2 airports would have taken longer). If you will be lucky, you might catch the plane to Moscow". Well, my girlfriend agreed very fast, although the other officers discouraged her telling that the probability of success was too little. On the road connecting two airports there is usually heavy traffic. But that day was holiday and not so many people are driving, so, she took the risk. I was not witness of all this negotiations, so as I saw her to come from the office of the boss, she just told to me: "Okay, ciao, I am running to take another plane to Milan. Take care of my

suitcase."

oh, those Italian girls! Okay. I relaxed. My plane was at 10:30 and I had plenty of time. I put both suitcases to the trolley and walked around the airport to look around. About 9:00 I decided to check-in and get rid of suitcases. I suspected that two suitcases of 20kg each are too much. In principle only 20kg are allowed. Therefore I went for check-in to the same counter where my girlfriend was arguing. I asked the lady to accept all luggage without extra payment. She again spoke with the boss, who told that "They forgive me 15 kg, but I still have to pay for 5 kg of extra weight". Okay. I had no choice and went to pay. 110DM. :(Finally all was done and I went to the proper gate to wait for the flight. At 10:00 (30 min before the flight) they announced that the flight is delayed for 15 min. Well, not a big deal. 15 minutes passed, but they didn't give any further announcement. I went to ask. They told me that they will invite us to the plane in 2-5 min. They are just waiting for the command. Okay. In 20 min, they finally invited us to the plane but also announced that due to bad weather conditions in Munich there is a probability that the plane will land in Nuremberg. Shit! I went again to speak with one of the ladies and explained my situation: if we land in Nuremberg, I will miss my plane to Moscow, which takes off from Munich. She smiled very friendly and told that "Alitalia will solve all problems. Just take your plane and don't worry about anything". :) Okay. We will see, how Alitalia will manage it. I sat in the plane thinking that if the plane lands in Munich, I am still in time for Aeroflot plane to Moscow. Since we are delayed for about 30 min, we will land in Munich (I hope) about 12:10, so that I will have 1 hour to pick up my 2 suitcases, exit, run to Aeroflot desk, take tickets, check-in, etc... In the mean time everybody sit, but the plane didn't start. In 5 minutes, the captain announced that the take off is postponed for another 40 min, again due to bad weather conditions in Germany. :(At this point I understood that I am not in time at all. So I caught the steward and explained him my situation. The worse point was that my ticket was waiting for me at the Aeroflot desk in Munich. If I will not appear in time, the ticket will just expire. I asked them whether they have any connection with Munich airport. I needed somehow to let Aeroflot's people in Munich know about me, my troubles and that I am late due to delay

of other flight. And then, if Aeroflot flight is also delayed by some reason (maybe also due to weather), then the ticket can wait for me. Otherwise they should change this ticket to the next date or flight.

Unfortunately steward and captain told that they have no connection to Germany. They will have it only when we will land in Munich. "Excellent". "Ok" — I told — "Since we are going to wait another 40 min, can I exit the plane and call to Germany by myself?". They agreed, and steward went with me. As we found out, it was not so easy to exit back to the airport :-). After all passengers sat in the plane, the security service locked all doors and gates, so we were ringing to them while they came and allowed us to enter the airport. Then, I needed to find a pay-phone and buy an Italian phone-card because I didn't have one. :-). As soon as they realized this, they agreed to let me call from the Alitalia's phone. I called to my Russian travel agency, because I didn't know the phone number of Aeroflot desk in Munich. I explained the situation and told that (1) they have to warn the Aeroflot desk in Munich about me, my flight number and that it is delayed, and (2) they have also to re-book my ticket to Moscow for the day after. After managing this, I went back to the plane a bit more relaxed. Finally the plane started only in 1 hour. The flight was fine and we landed in Munich rather than in Nuremberg. My neighbor, listening to this story plus couple of other travel stories which happened to me previous times, told that I have to write a book about my adventures. So, I follow the suggestion. :-)

In Munich, as I exit the plane, there was a man waiting personally for me who told me that "unfortunately the flight to Moscow took off 15 minutes ago." :-). Well. This means that at least there is no hurry. I have to take my luggage and speak with Aeroflot and Alitalia to discuss how to get to Moscow. I got suitcases without problems, and first went to the Aeroflot desk to get finally my ticket and to see what my Russian travel agency managed for me. The ticket for tomorrow was already there. I asked whether it is possible to "send me" to Moscow today by any mean. They told "no". There is only one Aeroflot flight per day. Then what about hotel? I should stay somewhere up to tomorrow. They told that this is not their fault. They just bring me from Munich to Moscow. So, for the hotel I have to discuss with Alitalia. Well, it sounds

logical.

I went to Alitalia. I suspected that they will refuse, because all these troubles are due to weather. And they are not responsible for weather. This is actually exactly what the steward in the plane told me. Just in case I had one argument: "Why Aeroflot plane took off in spite of bad weather, and Alitalia plane could not land?". At Alitalia desk I explained my problem. The lady was kind enough. She checked the schedule and told that Alitalia can send me to Moscow just today via Zurich. There is a flight at 15:00 Munich-Zurich and then Zurich-Moscow, but I will be in Moscow only at 23:30. I told: "Okay. But what about weather in Zurich?" I wouldn't like to be in the same situation in Zurich as now in Munich. She told that airport was not closed and everything seems okay there. Finally she took my Aeroflot ticket and started to change it to Alitalia's Munich-Zurich-Moscow. Then, almost at the end, she found some strange code written on my ticket which she obviously didn't like very much. She told: "Wait for me, please", and went to the Aeroflot counter to the other terminal. After 40 min she returned and told that I have some special very cheap tariff (the one for 550 DM from the Russian agency), which is not changeable, not remarkable etc. One thing after the other. No way for me to fly today to Moscow! She also visited the office of her boss and agreed with him that Alitalia will provide a hotel for me. Well, finally that was exactly what I wanted. As I learned during the next 5 minutes, they have options to provide only hotel, hotel + breakfast or hotel + dinner + breakfast, etc. In my case I've got the cheapest option: only hotel.

After that I left both suitcases in the airport and went to wait for the shuttle mini-bus which should bring me to the hotel. While I was waiting for it, I was rather bored. I found special display with touch screen where I could check my emails and surf the web during 10 min for 3 DM. I tried it. I couldn't finally check my emails, because this display could not handle properly the small window which appears for entering user name and password. So, I surfed the web a bit, and looked at my home page which surprisingly looked fine :-). At the end of 10 min I disconnected, the screen flashed several times and showed blue screen so familiar to all M\$ Windows users. "Application xxxx violated system blah-blah...and will be terminated. Press any key to continue or Ctrl-Alt-Del to re-

boot.” Which any key? There is no any key! Only touch screen, which does not work in this case. It was so funny that I made a picture of this touch-screen with my small camera.

While waiting for the mini-bus I called to the cellular phone of my girlfriend to ask how was her trip going. Her flight arrived to Milan Linate only 10 min later, and the hostess agreed to let her go out of the plane before the other people. So, she could quickly leave the plane, the airport, and run to the taxi area. Before taking taxi, she asked the driver whether it is possible to get to Malpensa in 40 min or not. If not, she wouldn't have gone and risked to pay so much money for the taxi. The man told that there were no traffic jam announcements in the most crucial point of the route, so they could have made it in time. He drove really fast, 170 km/h, and no much traffic was met on the way. While driving, he suggested to call Alitalia and ask about the terminal of her flight — he would have driven her directly at the terminal avoiding internal transfer by bus, foot, or else. Good idea. They arrived 30 min before the plane start. He took a lot of money, but waited for her to pass check-in :-)

So, her adventure was successful and she arrived in time to Moscow airport. When I called her from Munich, she was in Sheremet'ev — Moscow International airport. Shortly, I explained to her my situation and that I was going to stay in Munich for one day. Therefore she should go to my aunt (that is where we stop usually) by herself. She was in Moscow already few times but she was always guided by me. So, it could be difficult for her to find a way. I actually anticipated this situation, because we were flying in different airplanes using different routes and while we were going by taxi to the airport in Rome I wrote her some instructions just for this case. Now she had to use them. I also called to my aunt to explain the situation and that my girlfriend will come alone. My aunt does not speak English, so I had to explain everything. For this two calls I spent almost all money which were on my phone card.

My girlfriend was going to follow my instructions to get home. The place where she was waiting the mini-bus that should bring her to the metro station was unfortunately changed. But she didn't know this. So, she waited in the wrong point for 10 min, then she decided to ask to the only person who was nearby. Surprisingly, the young man spoke a fluent English.

He told that, may be the bus-stop is in different place now. He quickly stopped a car, spoke with driver, started loading his luggage. Then turned to my girlfriend, asked where she had to go, they could have done a piece of road together up to a metro stop. She didn't know what to do — the man was looking okay, but one never knows. Moreover I told her to be careful in this sense. Moscow is a big city and it can be quite dangerous. Especially for foreigners who just arrived from abroad with money in the pocket and take an unknown car. She was thinking about all this and when the man asked again the only words she could find were "is it safe?". The man smiled, and answered she could judge herself. In spite of my warnings, she decided to go. :-(She never listens to me!

The driver took care of her luggage. There was much traffic through the center, but finally they brought her to the house of my aunt. Entering the house was also a little problem, because the door to the house was locked with a code, which she didn't know, and there was no ring. That is how civilization is introduced in Russia — already there is a code-lock, but without a bell or possibility to call. :-) Somebody from the first floor gave her the digits, but didn't tell to push the buttons simultaneously. So, it didn't open. After some time, the same person decided to go down to open the door. :-)

Meanwhile, I was waiting for the shuttle bus that had to take me from Munich airport to the hotel. I was fed up of waiting and called to the hotel to ask where, the hell, their bus is? Finally, after another phone call (0.00 DM left on my phone card), the bus arrived and brought me to the hotel. The hotel was quite expensive — 4 stars, although there logo was with 6 stars :-). It was situated just 1.5 km from the airport, in a field, in the middle of nowhere. I wanted to call to my aunt again to see whether my girlfriend arrived successfully but I didn't want to call from the hotel because I suspected that it will be very expensive. I went out, walked around but didn't find anything like a pay-phone or a kiosk to buy a new phone card — just fields around, the road, and my hotel. :-) Finally, I went back and called from my room. The call of 3min and 25 sec finally cost about 18 DM (about 5 DM/min). In the evening I had the normal wish to eat something, and again, since the hotel is in the field, the only way to get some food is to go to the restaurant of the hotel. When I saw the prices, I understood why the coupon for

free food was important. But, as you remember, I didn't have one. Finally, I paid 46 DM for the dinner and 25 DM for breakfast next morning. I told you, it was very good, expensive hotel :-). When I was leaving I had also to pay for using TV (20 DM). So, in total, in this hotel given to me for "free" by Alitalia I left 109 DM!

29.12.1999

At 11:00 I went to the airport by the mini-bus of the hotel, and spent sometime looking around and reading. Then I took my 2 suitcases from the cloak-room and decided finally to check my ticket, which was re-emitted for today. It was a bit difficult to understand it, because the day before the lady from Alitalia desk had glued something on top of it and drew something, so it was a mess. But finally what one could definitely find that the line which corresponds to the flight Munich–Moscow was filled with the date, flight number etc, but the line corresponding to Moscow–Dusseldorf was just empty. hmmm... I wonder what people in Moscow will tell me on 12.01.2000 when I will come with this ticket? There was no flight number, no date, nothing written.

I had 1 hoer and half before departure of my plain and I decided to go to the Aeroflot desk to clarify this point. The officer, a German who was speaking good Russian, looked at the ticket and told: "Okay, I will simply rewrite it". He took an empty ticket and started to rewrite all data to it, having my ticket to the left from him and the telex-message to the right. This was a telex message he received the day before, where it was written that my ticket should be shifted to today. Then at some point he stopped and told: "I don't understand something. Are U going to return to Munich or to Dusseldorf from Moscow?". I told: "Of course to Dusseldorf. Why to Munich? I live next to Dusseldorf". He told: "Hmm... strange, but in the telex it is written that the return ticket is from Moscow to Munich! And I cannot change it, because it is in the computer. You should contact your travel agency and clarify this point". Okay, I went to call. As you remember I had no money left on my phone card, so I needed to buy a new one. I found a machine which sells them, for this I needed coins. Finally I called to my Russian travel agency, explained the point and asked them to call to Aeroflot desk to resolve my problem. All this took about 25 min. So, I

went back to the Aeroflot desk, and started to wait for the call. At this moment the officer left, phone was ringing, and when he appeared again the phone was already silent. I told him that it was ringing, but the he replied that for him, in general, this call does not change very much. He needs a new telex from Frankfurt, where it will be written that my return flight is Moscow–Dusseldorf. Okay. I went and called again to my agency, asked them to organize sending a telex from Frankfurt. Then I called in 5 min again and they told that they send all info to Frankfurt and in 5–10 min telex should arrive. I went back to the Aeroflot desk, looking at my watch — 40 min before the flight. I was thinking that "the most funny thing will be to miss my plane again and stay here for another day". I told the officer that I have only 40 min and he explained that he filled the new ticket already and as soon as telex arrives, he signs the ticket and I run to check-in. Okay, it might work. 30 min before the flight, the telex came and I got the ticket. Check-in was not closed yet. There were 3 persons in the queue still. When it was my turn, it was again problem with extra luggage and I was sent back to the Aeroflot desk to pay for extra weight. My explanations that I already paid ones etc. did not help. They told that the payment for extra weight depends very much on the distance of the route, so I had to pay the route Munich–Moscow anyway :-(The same officer at the Aeroflot desk calculated the price only for 10 extra kg instead of 20, and it was 273 DM! I think that my face showed that I was really upset. He told: "Okay. If you pay in cash, it will be only 140 DM :-)". I grinned. There were 2 reasons to grin: (1) because it is in the best tradition of Russia "if you pay in cash, then it is twice cheaper", (2) because I finally saved lots of money! After this I successfully passed the security control, the passport control etc. and went to the plane. The rest of the trip was fine.

Russia, as always, met me with a long queues to the passport control. It is usual in Sheremet'evo. People joke that guards keep us waiting to give an opportunity to loaders to check our luggage. :-) Those who pass passport control fast, in any case have to wait for their luggage for 30–60 min. The funny thing is how they make announcements. According to my experience of last several times it became already a "good" tradition in Sheremet'evo not to announce on which bend is the luggage from your flight. Even if they write something on the indi-

cator board, it does not corresponds to the reality. If you are lucky they will make announcement by voice that the luggage of the flight X is on the bend number Y. Finally I passed all this passport control and custom. There is usually a crowd of people there at the exit waiting for arriving people. My girlfriend also was waiting for me. She found a way to come and meet me. On the way to the airport the police officer was about to catch her to the local police office to check her identity (it happens often in Moscow). She managed to convince him that she has to go. :-)

...So, patient reader, I hope you enjoyed going through all troubles of our "relaxing" hol-

iday time. You might now think that most of these adventures have been blown up or described with much emphasis...well, I can ensure you that all what is here corresponds to how things went. :-) One more thing...all in all, we didn't get too much stressed and we did enjoy a lot our holiday time! As you see I can get into troubles even without millennium bug. :-)

Jülich, 25.01.2000

Torgodun Zygar.