

FIRA ISN'T FROM ODESSA

I was visiting a recovering patient at the Cedars Sinai hospital when, through the half open door to the hall, I heard the purest and most beautiful British-English, spoken by a woman who was discussing some problems they were having with the elevators – she called them “lifts”. I was impressed – we usually hear this kind of English spoken by very expensive receptionists in the more prestigious American law firms – and here it was, the Queen’s English spoken better than by the Queen herself!

I could hear her coming nearer, then there was a knock on the door, and in came a nurse, smiling at us and introducing herself in perfect *Russian*.

“Hello,” she said. “My name is Fira!”

My friend and I sat there, struck dumb, our mouths open. The Cambridge-accented and now Russian-speaking nurse was black. Not just American coffee-colored, Jesse Jackson beige–black, but real dark, almost purplish, African black, her perfect white teeth a beautiful contrast to her dark skin.

Fira was just coming on duty on our floor. Our room was the last one she had to check. She had a little time to tell her amazing story.

She was born in the Ivory Coast, a former French colony that supplies most of the world’s chocolate beans. She grew up bilingual – French and the native language – in a well to do family that eventually sent her to England to study medicine. She learned English there, “I had to”, she laughed. “The British didn’t speak French. They are just as bad at learning languages as the Americans.”

While at medical school she met a black American scientist who was doing research in England. They fell in love, got married and moved to California, a house in Brentwood where Fira tended the beautiful garden and gave birth to two boys and two girls. But then the kids grew up, Fira got bored, and – with her medical background – easily got a registered nurse’s license.

But then a funny thing happened to her when she started working at Cedars-Sinai cardiac department – she realized that she couldn’t talk to many of the patients; she didn’t know how to say, “open your mouth” or “make a fist” or even “how are you feeling today?” to Russians, Hindus and Pakistanis, Tagalog-

speaking Filipinos, Koreans or Chinese who couldn't even tell her that they were in pain or wanted a drink of water. The interpreters at Cedars-Sinai are few and overworked – sometimes there is a wait of more than 8 or 10 hours and this didn't suit Fira at all.

She began to ask visiting relatives for useful phrases and managed to compile notebooks in half a dozen languages that she transliterated and practiced till she got them right. Then, one of the cardiac patients with whom Fira practiced while she recuperated turned out to be a teacher of Russian.

"I asked her if she would give me lessons at a discount," Fira recalls. "I was willing to pay if it wasn't too much and we had become good friends. She said OK and I took lessons for almost a year."

The results are remarkable. Fira's accent is pure Russian, her vocabulary is extensive and she is having fun with how the patients react when they hear Russian coming out of her very African mouth.

"I go shopping in West Hollywood," Fira told us. "I usually go into a store – I love the Russian delis, the pickles, the herring, hmm, hmm...I say, 'Hello, I am Fira, but I am not from Odessa', and they just flip out. A lot of times they give me a big discount."

She laughs. "In one of the shops a lady asked me, 'Are you Jewish?' I said that I wasn't. 'Oh, that's good,' she said. There are some people in America who don't like Jews. It's better that you are black."

She also gets discounts from the stalls when she shops at the outdoor markets and discount stores in the Santee street area downtown. Many of the vendors are Pakistanis, Hindus and Koreans and they have the same reactions as the Russians when Fira talks to them in their language.

Fira now has notebooks in Armenian, the Ethiopian Amharic, Mandarin and Shanghai Chinese, and even Hebrew and Yiddish. I am sure that she can smile and say, "Hello, my name is Fira", in all of them and probably in a few dozen more.

And so, thank you, Fira, who is definitely not from Odessa! Thank you for your smile, for your caring, for the trouble you took to help those who had no language, for being their lifeline, thank you.