

## Savchuk

### *Volodymyr Dibrova*

A month ago I was introduced to a man named Alex Savchuk. I assumed that this was a Ukrainian name and felt compelled to inform him that the correct way of pronouncing it in Ukrainian would be “Oleksiy Sāvchook.” Alex was in his late forties, like me. He was a managing director of a mid-sized company specializing in computer software development. He was born in Minnesota, went to school in New York and had lived for quite some time in California.

When he heard where I was from, he surprised me by saying “hello” and “how are you” in Ukrainian. All without the slightest accent. Later I learned that both of his parents were from Ukraine, they met in America after the war and got married here. They must have lived a pretty isolated life, because up to the age of five Alex spoke only Russian. Then, of course, everything changed once he started going to school. He admits that by now his knowledge of either Ukrainian or Russian is reduced to a couple of basic phrases. However, when he invited me to his place I noticed Russian and Ukrainian dictionaries in his study. Alex’s wife was one of those Americans who, as they say, arrived on the Mayflower. Their two teenage sons apparently showed very little interest in their ethnic background.

I explained to him that his family name derives from the name Sava, rather than from the word “sova” (owl), as he thought. I also told him that a lot of people used to name their sons Sava.

“Really?”

For some reason my remark delighted Alex as if he had gotten a promotion, and he went on to tell me his father’s story.

I was surprised to learn that Volodymyr Savchuk was born and grew up in a village that is now part of Odessa, and not in Western Ukraine, as his name suggested. At that time the village was called Dry Bottom or Soggy Bottom, I forget which.

In 1941, when the war broke out, Volodymyr was eighteen. He volunteered and was assigned to an artillery unit.

In the summer of 1943 he was at Stalingrad. On August 22 the Germans surrounded his unit and took everyone prisoner. Everything happened so quickly that nobody had a chance to resist.

Then he endured the concentration camps. More than a million Soviet soldiers were rounded up and thrown behind barbed wire without food or shelter. The Red Army was quick to condemn them as traitors and left them at the mercy of the Germans, who had no intention of feeding a foreign

army. Soldiers were reduced to eating grass and dying slowly in front of their comrades. Stalin knew that hunger was a very effective weapon and Hitler was only too eager to learn the lesson from him. Without wasting any ammunition, the Germans succeeded in wiping out whole divisions and crippling the morale of their enemy. And there was no way to measure the trauma this experience inflicted on all those who managed to survive.

For some, survival meant joining the ROA, Vlasov's Russian Liberation Army, which fought on the German side against the Soviets. And that's exactly what Savchuk did.

In the spring of 1945, Savchuk was in Poland with the Germans when he decided to tear off his uniform and go back home. Better to be among his own people, even if it meant Siberia. The Soviet leaflets that were regularly dropped on them promised amnesty for everyone who would disarm and repent. Some of his buddies warned it was a trap and that the Soviets would execute anyone who dared to come back. After all, the war wasn't over yet. Volodymyr did not know whom to believe. Using the sun to navigate, he headed east.

Before long he stumbled on a unit of the NKVD secret police stationed in a forest—he recognized their insignia. Exactly what he was looking for! But then, just in the nick of time, some basic instinct saved him. He turned back and ran. He didn't stop running until he reached Germany's southern border.

The Americans kept him in a displaced persons camp for several years before allowing him to enter the United States.

The immigration official could not pronounce his name and was determined to register him as "Micky." Volodymyr would not give in but finally settled for Walter.

Alex's mother was a daughter of an "enemy of the people" from Kyiv. In 1937, during the purges, her father was arrested and disappeared into the bowels of the Gulag. Her brother died in the war. In the fall of 1943, after her mother died in her arms, she left everything behind and headed west across a borderless Europe.

At the end of the '40s a ship brought her to the new world. She was never tempted to venture outside its borders.

A couple of weeks went by before I decided to make some notes about what Alex had told me. By that time, some of the details had faded, so I decided to ask Alex to tell me more of his father's story. I even bought a tape-recorder.

The next time I saw Alex, I asked him if I could stop by to continue our conversation about his father.

"What else do you expect me to tell you?" he said.

"Well, stuff you left out before, stuff you didn't think was important. Any information that could throw more light on the hardships of the war as seen through your father's eyes."

"What do you need that for?"

"To preserve a memory of your father's experiences. As a memorial to those times."

"Let me think about it."

Although his voice sounded upbeat I detected a hint of annoyance.

"Give me a call when you feel up for it." I did not intend to give up just yet.

"Sure," he said. I waited ten days but Alex didn't call. Meanwhile the day of my flight back to Ukraine was fast approaching. I was in Boston on a three-month grant from IREX to study computer science and had a return ticket for the end of November.

So I called Alex and asked when he could see me.

Alex said he was busy.

I told him it was my last chance to get more information about his father.

"What do you want it for?" he asked.

"To fill in the gaps. The gaps in our history," I said.

"Are you a historian or something? You're not a writer?"

I thought I knew what might have scared him, so, using the best English I could muster, I assured him I wasn't a spy. I also told him that members of the ROA were no longer persecuted. On the contrary, they're now treated as anti-Communist fighters. Although, I added, they're still not eligible for military pensions.

"But," he persisted, "my father was neither a hero nor a historical figure."

I felt that we were not communicating, so I decided to try to explain to him that, in fact, it's the so-called "ordinary people" who turn the wheels of history. And that their lives are the only genuine reality we can hold on to. The problem is that nobody gives a damn about them. They never get a choice. They're always ordered about. They always find themselves between a rock and a hard place. (I had looked up that expression in anticipation of this turn in our conversation.)

I told him that I was interested because our history had always been falsified. We were fed sugarcoated half-truths and, sometimes, downright lies. Of course, now that the Soviet Union has disappeared, we have inherited the mess!

As an example, I tried to tell him the story of Pavlik Morozov, a peasant boy who during the years of Soviet collectivization snitched on his parents, then was murdered by his relatives, and subsequently canonized by the Communists as a young hero. Generations of children were brought up with him as their shining model. Only now we find out that the boy did not betray anybody, but rather that he was butchered by the local secret police in order to create the first juvenile martyr.

But my explanation grew so cumbersome that I finally gave up. Instead I just summed it up for Alex: we, as a nation, have been left with

nothing to be proud of. Just look back at our recent history. You will see that all the Communist leaders are criminals. How, then, did three generations of my people ever manage to get through the nightmare of revolution, famine, purges, and wars? I want to know, did they have their moments of happiness? Did they have anything to celebrate? In other words, what was their life made of? I want to be able to feel its fabric!

My rant was too overwhelming for Alex, and he began to cave in.

"Why don't you talk to your own parents about this?"

"I wish I could. But they are dead."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

"I didn't mean to—."

"Now, of course, it's different. But when they were still around, I didn't care much about any of this. Not that they ever encouraged me to ask. People didn't talk much about these things, you know."

"I know!"

Actually, that's not exactly true. My parents did talk about their wartime experiences, but only when they argued. And they did that at full volume, complete with yelling, sobbing and trashing the kitchen.

My father blamed my mother for leaving her sister and mother behind and fleeing to Poland in advance of the German retreat. She fled with her lover. When they reached Katowice, he met somebody else and dumped her. Brokenhearted, she walked all the way back home.

My mother blamed my father for dodging the draft (he was eighteen at the start of the war) under the pretext that he had to take care of his sick mother.

He worked at a factory during the war and then for forty more years after it ended. Eventually, he worked his way up to production manager. And had it not been for his blemished war record (for a Soviet citizen to live, let alone work, under the German occupation was a stigma, if not a crime), he would have made it to managing director.

My father was extremely gifted in mechanics and engineering. But he was always self-conscious about the pockmarks all over his face, which he got after contracting smallpox as a child.

My mother never contracted smallpox. She was so beautiful. But she was also extremely insecure and afraid of everything. She had just turned twelve when, in the middle of the night, men in uniform carrying revolvers burst into the family apartment and arrested her father.

As a boy, I often wondered about all the handsome men that might have lined up to get my mother's attention, if only more of them had come back from the war.

Every time my parents were having a fight in the kitchen, I would lie awake in my bed imagining a different life for me and my mother—if,

instead of returning home, she had chosen to go to Paris, or London, or San Francisco.

Alex told me that his parents were coming over for Thanksgiving and that I could talk to his father then.

"And when do you celebrate this Thanksgiving?"

"Next Thursday," he said.

"Very well. Because next Friday, I'm leaving."

"Just don't bring the tape-recorder with you, okay?"

"Sure. Just let me know what time is good for you."

"I'll give you a call."

Alex didn't call. I guess he figured that would put me off. On Thanksgiving day I stayed glued to the telephone until late afternoon. Then I grabbed my last bottle of Ukrainian pepper vodka and hurried to Alex's place. I pictured them all sitting nicely around the holiday table. I didn't care much what they would think of me. It's not like I had anything to lose. They would still have to let me in, wouldn't they?

Alex's wife opened the door and gave me a forced hug. I wish I had her nerve.

When I stepped in, it looked as if they were done giving their thanks. In the center of the table I saw what was left of their traditional pumpkin pie. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee permeated everything. Guests were spread all over the house, enjoying their food, drinks, and conversations. A small crowd spilled over into what remained of Alex's backyard—most of it was occupied by a huge swimming pool that was covered with a tarp for the season. Brightly colored mums lined the fence.

Alex introduced me to pretty much everybody, but I could not really make out who was family and who was just a friend. Volodymyr Savchuk, Alex's father, was not there. Alex's mother was outside, surrounded by a bunch of young people. She was smoking a cigarette and telling a joke. Her audience welcomed each of her one-liners with guffaws. I knew it was her because of her thick accent and the wrinkles all over her face and neck.

"Is your father here?" I asked Alex.

He told me his father was upstairs and asked me not to bother the old man with too many questions. Two months ago he had open-heart surgery. According to his doctors it went very well, but he seemed unable to overcome the effects of general anesthesia. As a result, he now had vivid memories of things and events that took place fifty years ago but could not remember what he had for breakfast.

I poured myself some wine and went upstairs. From what I had seen (and I'd been invited to quite a few homes during my stay), Alex's house looked like a typical American home. There was nothing fancy about it. Of course, it was not as small as my studio apartment in Ukraine, but still, his place looked too modest for somebody who was the manager of a small but successful business and who probably made at least a hundred grand a year, if not more. I might as well ask him.

Somebody called out to me. I turned around and saw Volodymyr Savchuk. Alex introduced us and went downstairs to join his guests.

The old man did not look his age. He had a healthy complexion, sharp eyes, and a gentleman's posture—proud and dignified. Looking at him, I thought to myself that if he had stayed in the old country, he would not be in such great shape, if he had survived at all, that is.

When he heard where I was from he addressed me in Ukrainian, then in the course of our conversation he occasionally threw in Russian words and phrases, until finally he switched entirely to Russian. But when I, trying to please the old man, did the same, he slid back into Ukrainian without noticing it.

I complimented him on his command of the mother tongue and asked where he had a chance to practice it. "Probably with members of the Ukrainian diaspora?"

Savchuk replied that in the early '50s he had made a few attempts to approach local Ukrainians, but as soon as they heard that he had served in the Russian Liberation Army, they stayed away from him.

I saw an opportunity to jump in with my questions. So I told him that I had heard from Alex about his war experience and would like to hear the particulars of his story.

"What do you want to know?"

"Little things. Stuff you won't find in books. The way it really was."

"Why?"

"No reason."

"There is always a reason," he said, starting to walk toward the stairs.

I rushed to explain that in my opinion, each individual life is precious. And that unless we know our history, we are lost in total darkness. And besides, there is a tragedy behind every human life. It is those tragedies that they tried to conceal from us. So it is actually our responsibility to unearth how it really was.

"What for?"

"To know."

"What do you need to know for?"

"To take pride in the facts!"

"To take pride in what? That we were captured? Or that I fled?"

"But you had no choice! And that's precisely what is so tragic about it! The fate of the common man. Who is always a victim. Who always finds himself between a rock and a hard place. And that means—"

"There's always a choice," he said, talking more to himself than to me.

I kept quiet, trying not to put his memories to flight and hoping that he would now reveal to me the things my folks would never dare talk about.

Instead, he just stood there, miles and years away from me.

"You were talking," I prompted him, "about a choice."

"I was standing less than a stone's throw from the two of them," he said. "I could hear every word they were saying. But they couldn't see me. 'Cause I was in the shade, sheltered by a tree. And the moment they stopped talking, I ran. I had no idea I was making a choice. I just ran for my life. And now I'm here."

He became quiet again as I waited for him to continue.

"And that made all the difference," he said, and at that very moment we heard Alex's wife calling us to come downstairs.

I finished my wine and let myself out without saying good-bye. They wouldn't miss me. My plane was taking off the next day at 7 a.m.

"Hold on!"

I turned around and saw Alex's father standing on the front porch.

I walked up to him.

"What's your name again? I think you told me, but my memory isn't what it used to be ..."

"Alex. Oleksii."

"And your last name?"

"Savchuk. And, by the way, my father's name was Volodymyr."

The old man bowed his head as if staring into a deep well. A good minute must have passed before he saw something there.

"Ah, I see, of course," he sighed, then stepped inside the house and closed the door.

*Translated by Lidia and Volodymyr Dibrova*

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