

I want to tell you today a bit about my father's history. I will leave it to others to tell you anecdotes about his kindness, his strength, and his deep abiding love for all of us blessed to be his friends and family.

My father, Mykola Petrusha, was born in the village of Antypivka, in Left Bank Ukraine, in 1926. It was an old kozak village, prosperous and full of hard-working farmers, located in the Breadbasket of Europe. His father Ivan owned and farmed several hectares of land, and was a skilled tradesman, a gifted carpenter. His mother Oryna had studied for some time at the local woman's monastery before marrying.

My father was the second surviving son; two older brothers had died in early childhood, as often happened in those days. His brother Oleksandr was six when Mykola was born; a year later they were joined by his younger brother Ivan.

In ordinary times he would have had a good life in his home town, studying at the local school, working the earth, and learning his father's trade. He would have married a village girl and raised his family there.

But these were not ordinary times. Ukraine was under the control of Russia once again, this time in the guise of the Soviet Union. Life had been tolerable, if difficult, under Lenin, but when Stalin came to power everything changed.

Stalin had decided to collectivize the land, take it away from the villagers who owned and farmed it, and put it under the control of the government. Many villagers, including my grandfather, resisted, but in 1929 the Soviet regime confiscated their land and farm animals. My grandfather Ivan was sentenced to 3 years in prison for having resisted.

My grandmother supported them by doing odd jobs, but three years later, in 1932, their house was confiscated as well, and they were thrown out literally into the snow. Oryna found them a small house in another village which she rented, with a small plot of land for a garden. This village was quite close by to the city of Zolotonosha, where work could be found in the steel factory. Because of this, they were able to survive the Holodomor, the great Hunger-Famine of 1932-33.

What was the Holodomor? It was a centrally planned genocide executed by the Russian government in response to Ukrainian resistance to collectivization. All the food was removed from Ukrainian farm villages that winter and spring. Soviet functionaries would search private houses, removing not only seed grain for the next year, but any grain what-so-ever. Millions starved and died that winter, including my father's grandparents.

His father returned home from prison later in 1933, and was able to support his family with his carpentry. Mykola and his brother Ivan, aged 7 and 6, worked as cowherds, and would get paid in meals, which they took turns eating. Things seemed to be getting better, and in 1936 their brother Michael was born.

But then it didn't get better. It got worse. Stalin had decided to rid himself permanently of the kurkuls, the "petit bourgeois" who he felt were standing in the way of progress. As my grandfather had once hired men to help him work his fields, he was a kurkul. In 1937 Stalin had the kurkuls rounded up and taken away. Many were sent to Siberia, to prisons and work camps there, and for years the brothers held out hope that their father might have been sent there, like two of his brothers had been.

He hadn't, though. Years later, after Ukrainian Independence, when official records were unsealed, my Aunt Lida learned that he had only made it as far as the city of Cherkasy, a few dozen miles down the

road. My grandfather, along with many of his townsmen, had been shot there and buried in a mass grave.

Oleksandr found work in the factory, and Mykola was apprenticed as a carpenter. In 1941, on May 18th (my father remembered this date quite clearly), he injured his "trigger finger" badly on the job, and it had to be partially amputated. Later that year, war broke out with Germany, and his older brother was drafted into the Red Army. Mykola became the head of the household at age 15.

Although the war years were difficult ones, they were a respite for most Ukrainians from the Russian terror. The family returned to the village of Antypivka and took over their uncle Fedir's house, and worked the land. But the tide of the war turned again, and they heard the Russians were returning. In September of 1943, when they could hear the Russian artillery off in the distance, they decided it was time to leave. My father took two horses from the kolhosp, hitched them to a wagon, and set off with his family to the west. His mother and 6 year old Michael rode in the wagon, and he and Ivan walked alongside.

It was a long trip. They would travel for a while, and then stop and find work, leaving again as the front and the Russians approached. By Easter of 1944 they had made it to Halychyna in western Ukraine; in September they crossed over into Poland, and from there went by train to Austria where my father had found carpentry work.

When the war ended in 1945, they found themselves in the Russian sector of occupied Europe, and quickly got out of there. They ended up at a DP camp in Munich, in Germany, in the American zone.

Now, not everyone knows what DPs and DP camps are any more. During WWII millions of people had died, and millions more had been displaced. Some were refugees like my father. Others were the "ostarbeiters" like my mother, people taken forcibly from conquered countries and sent to Germany as slave laborers. These displaced persons, or DPs, were people stranded far from home when the war ended.

Many could simply be repatriated to their home countries, and were. But there were many who had no home they could safely return to. The first DPs who'd been sent back to the USSR were often shot or imprisoned, and once word got out the others refused to return. Although some remained in Germany, most were eventually resettled in parts of Europe, Australia, and North and South America.

While living in Germany, my father and his brother Ivan learned to drive, and worked as drivers. They had been trying to emigrate to the USA, but their mother was in poor health, and they weren't having any luck. One of Uncle Ivan's regular passengers was a US official dealing with the DP camps, and she helped them get their paperwork through.

In 1950 they sailed for NY, a long voyage on a leaky, decommissioned military transport ship. They arrived in the Big Apple with 75 dollars and big dreams.

Life was difficult at first in the USA; my dad and uncle Ivan worked whatever jobs they could find in New York and then Washington, DC. Pan Kowalenko, a friend of theirs from the DP camp, had settled in Detroit, and wrote to tell them of the good jobs available in the auto industry. So they moved to Detroit and have been here since.

My dad worked at the Chevrolet plant in Hamtramck, with Ivan, and supported their little family. In 1952 Ivan married and soon began a family. Mykola continued with his bachelor ways, while supporting his mother and now teen-aged brother Michael.

In 1955 he stood up to a friend's wedding in Chicago; he was paired with a cute little Chicago girl in the wedding party named Sonia. He fell in love, and was soon commuting to Chicago each weekend to be with her. They were quickly engaged, and, due to his mother's poor health, married 6 months later, in February, dashing my aunt Nina's plans for a beautiful summer wedding for her little sister.

And then he lived the American Dream. He worked hard, first at Chevrolet, and then at Bendix, where he did carpentry. He often had jobs on the side, moonlighting as a builder. He and his brother John bought a piece of property in Troy, then rural exurbs of Detroit. They split it in half, and built their own houses themselves, next door to each other. He and Sonia had two children, my brother Bill and me.

My dad had never had a chance to get a proper education; his childhood was one of struggling to survive, not homework, quizzes and proms. But he learned and spoke four languages, and was a whiz at trigonometry. In the early 1960s he attended night school, learning blue-printing and die-making, and then pooled his resources with his two brothers to start their own company, Shorwood Tool and Die, in 1965.

My father worked with his brothers every work day for 20 years, and then socialized with them on the weekends. They were incredibly close. Holidays were always family affairs for us, and all the members of all three families would attend. In 1985, the brothers closed up shop and retired, but still got together for their "meetings" two or three times a week, where they would reminisce about the old days over a bottle (or two, or sometimes three) of red wine.

There is so much more I could tell you about my father. How much he loved to fish, and how he enjoyed those weekly games of Pinochle with Pan Fedorenko and the Sulkiwskys.

I could tell you about his love of country, and of both his countries: he once started a bar fight (in his bachelor days) when a fellow patron disrespected America. He celebrated the fourth of July, but also all the Ukrainian national holidays. I spent a lot of time at akademiya at Fitzgerald High school, learning again about the first universal declaring Ukrainian independence, about the brave boys at Kruty, and hearing the poetry of Taras Shevchenko. We marched together in anti-Soviet protests with him, and celebrated together when Ukraine became independent in 1991.

I could tell you about his travels with my mother, and about the beautiful furniture he built me with the skills he learned from his father, or about how he spent the first six months of his retirement remodeling my house. I could tell you about his pride in his children and his grandchildren. I could tell you so much more, but there isn't really time enough.

One more note about my dad's history. You may wonder what ever happened to their oldest brother Oleksandr. The truth is, for the longest time they didn't know. After the war, they searched for him, contacting various refugee committees and the Red Cross, but they couldn't find him. At the same time, the Iron Curtain came down across Europe, and they lost contact with Ukraine and what remained of their family. An acquaintance who had served with him told them that he had died in the war, and for many years they believed this.

In the late 90s, during the period of Glasnost, Pani Romanchuk's niece Lyuda came to visit from Ukraine. She was from Kaniv, and often travelled to Zolotonosha on business and offered to look for my father's cousins there. When my mother and I went to Ukraine in 1989, my first time and her first time back, Lyuda and her husband took us to meet them. While we were catching up, my mother mentioned to my Aunt Lida that Oleksandr had died in the war. No he hadn't, she told us. He had been back to Zolotonosha after the war.

Aunt Lida took it upon herself to find him. He had changed his name, and moved to Belarus, but she found him, and not only him--we discovered two cousins we hadn't know of, and their families. In 1990, my father returned for the first time to Ukraine, and had a chance to reconnect with his brother after almost fifty years. They visited for several days, talking each other's ears off. They kept in touch after my father returned home, and made plans for him to come visit the family in the USA. Before he could do so, six months later he died of a sudden heart attack.

.....And I lied a bit at the start of this talk. I DO want to tell you about his love, his deep abiding love for his family. It is the greatest gift that he gave me, this love of family. He loved us, all of us, and we loved him. When he passed away last Thursday, it was in the presence of his family: his wife, children, grandchildren, brother, sisters-in-law, and nieces and nephews. We sat with him to the end, holding his hands, until his very last breath, and then sat some more.

He has left a hole in our hearts, and in our lives. We feel his love still, though, and we miss him greatly.