

## Her Father's Daughter

Olia Rybachuk Balaban was born in November 1925 in Berdychiv in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic half a world away from Columbus, Ohio, where she celebrated the new 2007 year. Yet it is in Berdychiv that the events that started her long and often painful journey to the United States occurred.

Berdychiv is a small busy town about 180 kilometers south-west of Kyiv on the river Hnylopyat. It is a transportation hub for people and goods, going east-west, between Lviv and Kyiv and Warsaw, north-south between St Petersburg and Odessa. Its people, over good years, engaged in commerce and, over bad years, trafficked in anything available, from arms to horses.

The town was founded in the middle ages and attracted people of many nationalities and persuasions. Its historic places of worship include a Roman Catholic Monastery, an Orthodox Sobor, and a Hadissic Synagogue. It can also boast of being the birthplace of Joseph Conrad and the wedding place of Honore de Balzac to Eveline Hanska. But mostly, it seemed to have also attracted a succession of invaders, Mongols, Tartars, Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, Germans. The town survived them, not by any concerted action but just by letting diseases endemic to wars run their course. Events proved that in that respect the townspeople had a slight advantage over the invaders: they learned to cope with the diseases and probably acquired some immunity that gave them an edge in fighting infections. Of all the diseases that spawned in Berdychiv, typhus was the most serious.

In the twentieth century the invaders first to appear in Berdychiv were the Bolsheviks. In 1922 not only did they impose their own communist ideology but, the following year, they declared the town and its surroundings part of their nascent empire which they named the USSR or Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. This, they made clear, was a permanent conquest.

However, not all the townspeople shared their views. Among those who had reserves towards the new regime were Olia Rybachuk's parents, in particular her father Volodymyr, who had graduated from the Military Academy in St Petersburg while St Petersburg was still under the rule of Tsar Nicholas. And though Olia knew no other rule, she learned from her parents that there were other forms of government in other lands that allowed for greater tolerance in civic life. At first her attitude simply mirrored that of her parents, but it became her own when on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1938 the NKVD (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*) arrested her father, who by that time held a position of some responsibility in the town. She grew determined not to give allegiance to the communist cause or the USSR.

The arrest was conducted in the brutal fashion of the times, in the middle of the night, at gun point, with shouts and threats directed not only at her father but her mother as well

while Olya and her younger sister Oksana, bed covers pulled up to their eyes, watched in mute terror. The house was ransacked for incriminating papers of any kind. Nothing of substance was found but nonetheless her father was labeled an "Enemy of the People" in a perfunctory trial. She knew what that meant: 'enemies of the people' were punished by being sentenced to hard labor in places so harsh that nature supplied all the restraints needed to keep the inmates in place, more efficiently than any barbed wire, spot lights, or armed guards; and, as for the families of those 'enemies', they were shunned publicly and labeled as 'suspect'.

Olya could not believe what was said about her father. The verdict seemed not only unfair but so totally improbable that she kept hoping to find a way to reverse it. She brooded over the whole thing. But what could she do? She was only twelve. And yet, remembering that savage night of her father's arrest she realized she was not afraid any more because she could draw on a new reservoir of courage: that of her father's. She calmly reviewed her choices and decided to pay a visit to a friend of her parents who had dined often with his wife at her parents' house and, more importantly, who was a judge. The man, to his credit, did not dismiss her but explained that her father's case was beyond recourse for it was an NKVD matter over which he had no jurisdiction. However, he was touched by her loyalty and bravery and offered his counsel should she or her mother ever need it.

Olya's father was sent to Kolyma, a desolate region in the arctic, where the Soviets mined for gold. She went to the railroad yard on the day of his departure and saw him from a distance being led to a wagon. That was the last time she saw him but his face became indelibly marked in her heart and mind. Her father's arrest and departure for the Gulag were the anniversaries she observed.

Overnight, her mother, her sister Oksana and she became paupers and isolated. In the household, food was scarce, heating a luxury, and friends were few.

Olya watched helplessly as her mother, Lutsia (Lucia) Rybachuk struggled daily to supply the necessary to keep the family alive. 'Suspects' did not get the best job offers but eventually Lutsia managed to find employment with a foodstuff company. Olya helped with the household chores and dedicated herself to her studies. When she finished seventh grade in 1939, the traditional point at which children choose either classical studies that lead to university or technical studies that lead to some kind of trade, Olya opted for Mechanical Drawing. In two years, she'd get a diploma and hopefully a job that would enable her to help her mother make ends meet.

She applied to the Technical School in the summer of 1939 and was accepted. As part of the application procedure, Olya collected all her primary school records and handed them over to the Principal who kept them.

Unfortunately, this was the year and the time when WWII broke out in Europe. Though the USSR was not part of the conflict at that time, having signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of non-aggression with Hitler in August, Moscow sent convoys of the Red Army

through Berdychiv to western Ukraine. The town, still reeling from the ravages of Stalin's man-made famine of the winter of 1932-1933, saw massive movements of people, soldiers and prisoners, for whom the government had made no provision for food or shelter or sanitation. Within days typhus broke out.

Typhus is an ugly disease born of poverty, and of unsanitary and over-crowded conditions. The epidemic did not surprise anybody. As typhus outbreaks went, it was severe, but teenagers were expected to survive it. Olia became sick, spent the first three weeks of school in a hospital, recovered, and reported for classes in the last part of September.

She was a little apprehensive on her first day but she had a good scholastic record. She was smart, and confident that she could master the material that was taught. She also liked drawing and looked forward to the lessons. But this was no ordinary drawing. This was technical drawing, draftsmanship, with strict rules with which she was not familiar. The classes were large and the teachers overextended. She had nobody to turn to for help to make up for the material she had missed. Within a few days Olia realized she would not be able to catch up and decided to leave the Technical School and enroll instead into the Classic Secondary School.

She immediately scheduled an appointment with the Principal for what she expected to be a pro-forma encounter to retrieve her school reports to submit them to the other School. To the interview she brought the hospital discharge papers duly confirming she had been hospitalized with typhus and duly signed. It did not occur to her, under the circumstances, that the Principal might refuse her request. But instead of an understanding teacher she found an implacable administrator who scolded her, and told her that once she had opted for the Technical School that decision was irrevocable. She had to bear the consequences even if the classes were too hard for her to follow.

"But I had typhus fever and I was in the hospital," she protested pointing to the discharge papers.

The Principal was not moved. "Rules are rules," he admonished sternly, terminating the interview.

Olia could not understand. She did not believe the Principal when he said that she could not leave the Technical School. Secondary school was not mandatory; she could leave whenever she wished. It was clear to her the Principal was just creating mischief. She did not call his action an abuse of power as we would to-day but she knew that the Principal, powerful though he was, did not have the authority to keep her at his School. The more she thought about her predicament the more it seemed to her that she owed it to her father to stand her ground.

She turned again to the friendly judge who had been helpless but not unsympathetic after her father's arrest. He had offered to help. She hoped he had the power to reverse the Principal's decision.

The Judge listened to her, looked at the discharge documents from the hospital, and finally he nodded. On the official letter-head of his Office he wrote to the Principal to order him to release all Olia's School Documents. It worked and Olia immediately enrolled in the Classical Secondary School and started to attend classes. For almost two years the Rybachuk household settled into the semblance of a routine.

That routine was disrupted in the summer of 1941 when the second wave of conquerors to come to Berdychiv in the twentieth century arrived. They were Germans and they were going Eastward beyond Berdychiv, beyond Kyiv, towards Moscow. That was to be a conquest to end all conquests. In an irony of fate, the German occupation marked the end of the Technical School for the Germans viewed the Slavic 'untermenchen' only as laborers they would use for menial tasks and on whom they did not want to waste any training or education. The closure of schools above the elementary level became a German policy that went hand-in-hand with the conscription of young people into forced labor.

But now Olia was at risk, along with all teenagers, from trawling patrols or bureaucrats in charge of fulfilling a monthly quota of 'ostarbeiters' (workers from the east). She thought she'd be safer in Kyiv. She left Berdychiv in November in an open truck that was transporting food stuff to Kyiv. The truck belonged to the company where her mother worked and even for the bitterly cold journey it still was the best thing available. She endured it for hours in shivering silence thinking of her father and the winters in the arctic circle.

In Kyiv she sought refuge with her father's brother, Mykola, and his wife, a childless couple who welcomed her with open arms. She found work at the daily newspaper "Ukrainske Slovo" ("Ukrainian Word"). Within a few months Oksana joined her from Berdychiv. However, the situation in Kyiv was getting more dangerous. Mykola who, on orders of the Ukrainian Government (Ukrainian National Republic), had trained with the Polish Infantry in Suwalki, was himself in a most precarious position both vis-à-vis the Germans and the Soviets who were re-grouping for a counter-offensive. By July 1943, as the tides of war were changing, Olia's new household resolved to leave the capital to flee west in advance of the Soviets. They traveled in stages and together when possible. Their route was circuitous, at the mercy of what shelter, transportation, and food they could find. Eventually after the war in 1946 they found their way into the American zone.

But they were not out of danger yet.

The danger that they anticipated was Repatriation. The Yalta Agreements signed by the Allies stipulated that all WWII refugees, and those all came from Eastern Europe, would be sent back to their country of origin which, as far as the Soviet Union boundaries were involved, meant the boundaries of 1939. This stipulation had horrendous implications. For Olia, Oksana, Mykola and his wife, and for two millions other refugees, that meant returning to the land they had fled and a regime they feared and abhorred. And once back, it meant either exile to the Gulag or to Siberia or a sentence of death.

Little wonder that people did their best to convince the Americans, the British, and the French that they were not from Eastern Ukraine or Russia.

Olia, Oksana, their uncle Mykola and his wife took their own measures, claiming to be one family, father, mother and two daughters. They pretended to have lost or forgotten their birth certificates in the rush of their departure. Olia professed to have been born in Rivne, a town in Western Ukraine that was not part of the Soviet Union in 1939. The authorities in the American Zone accepted their story and granted them DP (Displaced Persons) status.

But the danger that they did not anticipate lurked in the Bavarian countryside. In the summer of 1946, the four lived in Frankenhofen, idyllically situated in the Bavarian Alps. Olia had a bicycle that came in handy to get to know the country and, more prosaically, to run errands.

On one afternoon in July a friend, Yuri Postenko, called on her to help him deliver some messages and documents to a parish priest in a Ukrainian Orthodox community that was not only a few kilometers away, but those kilometers were at a 60degree gradient. Olia managed the climb on her bicycle with some difficulty but the descent was a different story. She did not manage that at all. At a bend in the road the bicycle went one way and she another, head first down a jagged slope bouncing from rock to rock for about 40 meters. That is about 120 feet! She ended up at the foot of the slope, in a soft pasture. At that point she lost consciousness. Yurii called on a near-by farmer who brought her home on a horse drawn wagon. She was put to bed without regaining consciousness. Doctors were called in who could only shake their heads and bandage her sprained ankle. Their diagnosis was so pessimistic that Olia's aunt called the priest to administer the last rites. The hours ticked by but Olia remained comatose. Night descended. The aunt lit a candle and started praying softly, hope slowly ebbing away. But before midnight Olia opened her eyes, fully conscious, startling her aunt and demanding to know what the commotion was all about.

Her sudden and full recovery surprised the doctors but not Olia. She believed her father was protecting her. She wondered if it meant he had died. But when she looked at the calendar, the Julian calendar of her Orthodox faith, she saw that her accident happened on the feast day of St Volodymyr and believed that her recovery was a sign either from him or about him that she would decipher in due course.

The miraculous recovery heralded a change of fortunes for Olia and her kin. In the fall she started to attend lectures at the Ukrainian Free University in Munich while Oksana attended High School. They began to lead a new life, a life of civic tolerance that her parents had told her about. To pursue that life to its fullest, the Rybachuks emigrated to the United States in 1949. Olia married Vasyl Balaban in the New Continent and gave birth to three daughters.

In all those years she had no news of her parents. Her efforts to establish contacts, at least with her mother in Berdychiv, remained unsuccessful as the Cold War took hold between former Allies. However, in the slight thaw in the Soviet Union that followed Stalin's death, she learned that her mother was in ill-health and in dire circumstances. She determined to bring her to the United States.

Olia's first steps were to contact the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) to correct her record with the American authorities. This was necessary so she could establish the true relationship with the woman who had stayed behind in Berdychiv. Olia hoped the INS would send her back to the Soviet Union but it was a risk she had to take. The agent in charge of her case proved to be understanding: Olia's birth parents and birth place were formally changed and Lustia Rybachuk was allowed to emigrate on that basis. She arrived in New York in 1967, marking the end of a long saga that culminated in a victory of love and determination.

Lustia brought with her several documents but none was more poignant than Volodymyr's death certificate. He had died on June 5, 1946 of a blood clot but the death certificate was not issued until August 1956 in Berdychiv. Her mother told Olia that he had been rehabilitated but had not returned from the Gulag. But in Olia's heart there never was any need for rehabilitation only for remembering a decent man who was called to rise above his accusers.