Paper Life: Nadia Olijnyk's Notebooks

PAUL LONGLEY ARTHUR[1]

Abstract. My Ukrainian grandmother Nadia Olijnyk lived in Adelaide, South Australia, from the time she arrived as a postwar refugee in 1949 until her death at the age of 95 in 2009. She left a bundle of notebooks in which she had written down her memories, mostly in the final decade of her life. They include stories about her life in Ukraine, including from the early 1940s when her home city of Kharkov was at the epicentre of a series of momentous battles. This paper has two purposes. The primary purpose is to present one of Nadia's stories as a first step towards bringing her notebooks to light with a view to sharing and protecting them in a spirit of intergenerational custodianship. The second is to offer a framework for understanding them by engaging with ideas and theories that relate to memory, self-narration, and writing as a means of post-traumatic healing.

Keywords: memory; trauma; testimony; intergenerational; storytelling; life writing

> The box is full of time…. There is no more wonderfully durable material than paper time.
>
> Helene Cixous (2013: 71)

My grandmother Nadia Olijnyk died 16 years ago in 2009 at the age of 95 in Alwyndor Nursing Home in Adelaide, South Australia. She left a bundle of notebooks in which she had intermittently kept a diary and written down her memories, mostly in the final decade of her life. These recorded memories were precious to her. She called them "my story". In this paper, Nadia's notebooks will sometimes be referred to collectively as diaries, the term she generally used. Towards the end, she gave the notebooks to her children for safekeeping – my mother, Kateryna, and my uncle, Nikolas – who had been in close contact with her over the last two decades of her life and had regularly listened to excerpts from the diaries as they were produced. When she was not using them,

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Nadia always made sure the notebooks were hidden away in case they fell into the wrong hands or were simply thrown away by the nursing home cleaners. However, she repeatedly made it very clear that she did not want her story to be lost. She wanted her family's Ukrainian history, as seen through *her* eyes, to be preserved and shared. Recently I visited Nikolas in Adelaide and was able to bring some of the notebooks back to Perth, where my mother and I are beginning that process, with this paper as the first step.

Nadia had lived in her nursing home room, confined to her bed, for eight years. Unable to stand or walk, she read books, watched television, and spent time with Nikolas, who visited her daily. From time to time, she also wrote. On most days, she was in touch by phone with Kateryna, who lived 2,600 kilometres away in Western Australia and spoke to her at length in Ukrainian. Nadia frequently read parts of her story to them, fresh from her pen. Because she also read excerpts to me during my visits to Adelaide or when we spoke on the phone, I feel a personal connection to the notebooks. They include many small daily observations, reminders, and jottings relating to daily life in the nursing home, but they also contain sections of extended writing that record recollections from Nadia's life in Ukraine in the 1930s and 1940s.

In her final years, Nadia's life as an immobile, totally dependent invalid in a nursing home was narrow and diminished, but she came alive in the notebooks and through them she was able to be excited and busy. As they grew she began not simply to live amongst her memories, but to take control of them, protect them, and give them the shape she wanted through her writing, making the writing itself "a kind of defence", as Mirelle Calle-Gruber suggests, "that lets us be the subject and not the victim" (Cixous 1997: 22). She found purpose and pleasure in the process of writing, "a certain jubilation of writing" (Cixous 1997: 23), and satisfaction in what she was able to achieve. Further, the act of writing itself acted as a catalyst for reviewing and reviving memories from the distant past and then holding and protecting them in the safe zone of Nadia's *present time* in a way that reflects Cixous's observation on writing of this kind: "I am fascinated by the textual properties of life on paper, by the fact that memory has found a way to protect itself and to protect the youth of its characters in the folds of a fabric!" (Cixous 2013: 71)

The notebooks are remarkable in a number of ways. First, Nadia's memories stretch over a very long and tumultuous historical span, reaching back into her early life in the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire, when it was in its last throes under the tsars. Further, through her relationships with her parents and grandparents, with whom she lived, her stories reach back into 19th-century feudal Russia. Nadia's mother read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* while Tolstoy was still alive.

Second, the diaries are full of precise detail – names, clothes, dates, locations, colours, smells, melodies, the words of songs – recalled from many decades ago, that take the reader straight into the place and time of the memory. Third, although some sections of the diaries are written in Ukrainian,[2] most entries are in English, a language that Nadia was never taught but picked up from scratch when she arrived in Australia at the age of 35. Fourth, in spite of the catastrophic events and circumstances that form the context for many of the memories, the stories repeatedly focus on small, homely incidents, highlighting moments of humour and happiness in the midst of traumatic events that shattered Nadia's world, mainly during World War Two but also during the previous decade, which included the time of the Holodomor, Stalin's imposed genocidal famine that ravaged Ukraine. By providing sketches of daily life as experienced by people finding ways to survive while a massive war raged around them, Nadia's diaries exemplify the simple point made by Marianna Torgovnick in her book *The War Complex: World War II in Our Time* (2005: 17): "Throughout disasters, life always goes on in quiet corners". With war again a daily reality in present-day Ukraine, Nadia's diaries have gained contemporary relevance by taking readers to the sites of historic cataclysmic events and allowing intimate insights into how, for individual people whether then or now, life somehow does go on in the midst of trauma.

This paper has two purposes. The primary purpose is to present one of Nadia's stories as a first step towards bringing the notebooks to light with a view to sharing and protecting them in a spirit of intergenerational custodianship. The second is to offer a framework for understanding them by engaging with ideas and theories that relate to memory, self-narration, and writing as a means of post-traumatic healing.

Nadia was born in Lyubotin, near Kharkov, Ukraine, in 1915, two years before the Russian Revolution began. She was seven years old when the Soviet Union was established on the territory of the former tsarist Russian Empire.[3] As a teenager she lived through the Holodomor, and as a young mother of two boys she lived with her husband – my grandfather Petro Olijnyk – in Kharkov, which became the epicentre of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1943 (see map below).

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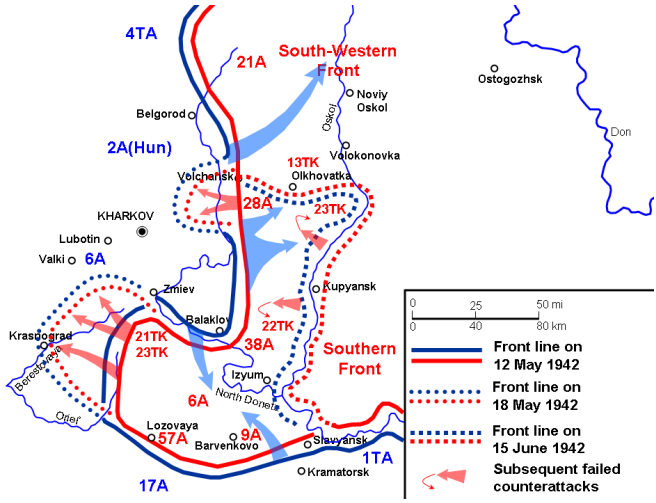
[2] There are also occasional segments that are written in Russian.

[3] Wikipedia: "The Russian Empire was an empire that spanned most of northern Eurasia from its establishment in November 1721 until the proclamation of the Russian Republic in September 1917. At its height in the late 19th century, it covered about 22,800,000 sq km (8,800,000 sq mi), roughly one-sixth of the world's landmass, making it the third-largest empire in history, behind only the British and Mongol empires." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Empire (24.08.25).



Map of 1942 Kharkov offensive: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2062170

A key city along the southwestern front line, Kharkov was the site of four major battles between Hitler's and Stalin's armies. Nine hundred and fifty thousand Allied soldiers from the West were also involved, supporting Stalin (Glantz 1998: 240–246). In the First Battle of Kharkov, 20–24 October 1941, the German army took control of Kharkov, so Nadia and her family fell under German rule. Seven months later, in the Second Battle of Kharkov, the Red Army encircled the city and tried to win it back. According to historian David Glantz, "765,300 men are recorded to have taken part in the Kharkov operation".[4] But the Soviets failed.[5] Two hundred thousand soldiers

[4] These statistics are provided by Glantz (1998: 246): "German and Soviet strength along the German-Soviet front in May 1942 was approximately 3,580,000 Germans (including 950,000 Allies) and 5,449,898 Soviets (in operating Fronts and armies). Strength returns for the Soviet Southwestern and Southern Fronts were 614,073 and 578,313 men, respectively, plus an additional 331,548 men in the Crimean Front, for a total of over 1.5 million men opposing German Army Group 'South'. These figures generally agree with the recent Soviet figure of 765,300 men recorded to have taken part in the Kharkov operation. On the other side, German Army Group 'South' on 1 May 1942 had 50% of its required infantry strength, and the total strength of the Army Group, including Allied forces, did not exceed 1.3 million men."

[5] Drawing upon many sources, Glantz provides quotations and references that use the term 'Russian' when referring to the Soviet army or Red Army. Glantz also sometimes does this, as for example, in this account of the "unprecedented carnage" in the Kharkov

died. Stalin's defeat in that battle was recognised as changing the course of the Second World War.[6]

All this took place around my grandparents' city and close to their home. They lived in fear, knowing that the battle front could advance into the city at any moment. Writing from the German army's point of view, Glantz reports, "We found ourselves in a threatening situation. The strikes of Soviet forces penetrated our defences in a series of sectors. Soviet tanks stood only 20km from Kharkov" (1998: 242). The story from Nadia's diaries that I present in this paper was written around the time of this Second Battle of Kharkov.

The family continued to live under German occupation and through two more battles for Kharkov until, in late 1943, Petro, Nadia, their two children and Nadia's mother, Alexandra Anoshkina, were transported towards the west in freight trains to prison labour camps in German-occupied Poland and Germany.

In April 1944 my mother was born in a labour camp in Dvi Kozi, in German-controlled Poland (see Arthur 2014). After the war the family spent five years as displaced persons until they arrived in South Australia in 1949 as refugees.

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battles and the extent of Soviet losses: "The Red Army soldier in May 1942 was either a survivor of the intense combat of 1941 or a newly mobilised and hastily trained replacement. The cream of experienced Russian soldiery had been sacrificed to the slaughter of 1941. The Red Army began the war with a personnel strength of approximately 5.5 million men. In 1941 the army suffered roughly 6.1 million casualties…. Such unprecedented carnage had an inescapably adverse impact on the combat readiness of Soviet military formations and the individual combat skills of surviving and fresh Red Army soldiers" (1998: 102).

[6] According to Glantz (1998: 240), "During late May and early June, in the immediate wake of the Kharkov defeat, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov visited England and the US. Haunted by the Kharkov and Kerch debacles, he argued strongly for creation of the second front as soon as possible 'by sending 35 divisions across the Channel'". In his Soviet-oriented account of the Kharkov operation, Glantz also provides an analysis by Sverdov (1992: 58): "The scale of the ensuing catastrophe was clear to Sverdlov: So it was on the Southwestern Front in September 1941, when Stalin forbade the timely withdrawal of forces from Kiev. That decision led to the encirclement east of Kharkov of 600,000 Red Army troops and the rapid advance of Fascist forces to the east. So it was at Kharkov. As a result of this defeat, the situation on the southern wing of the Soviet-German front sharply changed to the advantage of the enemy. The Southwestern and Southern Fronts suffered immense losses and were considerably weakened. By the middle of June 1942, the enemy threw Southwestern Front forces back to the east to the Oskol River, which to a considerable degree facilitated the further advance of Fascist forces to the Volga and into the northern Caucasus" (1998: 247).

Photograph taken in 1929: Nadia (second from left) with her mother Alexandra, father Leonid and sister Lera (Valeria) in the grounds of Lyubotin hospital, where Alexandra and Leonid were medical staff living in a hospital apartment. (Author's personal collection)

While Nadia's writing does not focus on the Kharkov battles, they form the traumatic backdrop to many of her memories. In setting these remembrances down on paper, she is doing much more than preserving them. She is reclaiming her past and in so doing also reclaiming her*self*. Nadia's writing embeds her version of herself into the historical record. Her stories also provide an example that demonstrates the post-traumatic healing power of the writing process itself as it weaves memory narratives that re-create and reclaim the self, performing the 'writing cure'. In her book *The Writing Cure*, Emma Lieber draws upon her clinical experience to explore the connections between the talking cure that is the basis of psychoanalysis and writing as a means of post-traumatic healing. Through her investigation she is able to realise that "What I couldn't see was that the something 'not right' in myself that I thought was motivating my

analysis and preventing me from writing was simply my insistence that as yet I could 'not write.' It didn't occur to me that the writing was itself the righting, or something of the cure" (2020: 2).[7]

Nadia's diaries also show how such narratives can have a continuing positive effect on others, in an accumulating history through successive generations. Further, Nadia's notebooks mark a moment just before the global transition to the mass adoption of the laptop, smartphone, and tablet, heralding the death of the handwritten diary as the primary means of recording the commitments and events of daily life. This gives added poignancy to the sometimes shaky script that emerges raw, with no editing to refine it, and allows the reader to feel how closely Nadia was connected – physically – to her narrative in the act of writing. There is a moment in the book *Rootprints,* on memory and life writing, when Helene Cixous refers to this kind of connectedness in her most productive moments of writing at night as "the moments of proximity to myself" and explains that "it is as if I were writing on the inside of myself. As if the page were really inside" (Cixous 1997: 105, 106).

Nadia and Petro, circa 1939 (Author's personal collection)

As I handle the diaries, I am aware of ethical issues that arise in dealing with personal autobiographical material. There are questions of privacy, interpretation across languages and cultures, and geographical and temporal distance. In this case, the privacy matter is handled by the writer herself in that within the notebooks she is explicit in her desire that they be read and in her hope that they will reach an audience. She entrusted them to her children for that

[7] Lieber also refers to the written text as "the unlanguaged having been brought to language so as to change that unlanguaged field, and the pressure it exerts" (2020: 4).

purpose. I am grateful to my mother for her assistance with selection and interpretation and for our many conversations that have provided a living link with Nadia's stories.[8]

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides a framework for seeing the work of keeping Nadia's memories alive as an intergenerational obligation and privilege:

> At stake is precisely the 'guardianship' of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a 'living connection', and that past's passing into history or myth. At stake is not only a personal/familial/generational sense of ownership and protectiveness, but an evolving ethical and theoretical discussion about the workings of trauma, memory, and intergenerational acts of transfer. (2012: 1–2)

The overarching value of the diaries that I focus on in this paper is their provision of a vehicle for my grandmother, late in life, to discover her talent for storytelling and writing, and in the process to reclaim her life and her identity on her own terms. This was after almost a lifetime of being undervalued and, in terms of the historical record, unheard and unseen. At the same time the diaries offer privileged historical glimpses into life in Ukraine and beyond under the tsars, under Lenin, under Stalin, under Hitler, and eventually in postwar Australia.

Her marriage to my grandfather Petro Olijnyk was clearly a difficult one. I saw and felt this every time I visited. Afflicted with what would now be recognised as PTSD he compulsively told stories of his traumas, becoming agitated and highly emotional each time. His stories dominated conversations in my grandparents' house. My grandmother rarely had a chance to get a word in. She provided the welcoming backdrop of food – borscht, cotleti, pirozhki, pelmeni, plyushki, Napoleon cake – and inserted the occasional snippet of a story from her point of view. When Petro was not with her, she loved to tell her stories. But in them she cast herself not as brave and resourceful, but as hurt, frightened, vulnerable, and knocked about by whatever blows each day delivered. With each loss, shock, or cataclysmic event, what was required of her was a way of surviving, so she constantly found ways to keep her spirits up, and those of her children and mother who were with her throughout the worst of those times.

What motivated Nadia in her 80s and 90s to write about her life for the first time? Although this question can never be fully answered, a number of

[8] Kateryna Olijnyk Longley published a story told to her by my grandfather Petro about one of his experiences during the Kharkov battles. The story "The Commisar's Boots" is embedded in Chapter 3 in Gunew and Longley (1992: 24–28). Before 1990 she published under the name Kateryna Arthur.

practical and emotional contributing circumstances help to explain her desire to do this.

Her husband continued living at home. Nadia by then was unable to walk or stand, so in the nursing home she spent every day alone in her room. My uncle Nikolas visited her daily, but she had no other regular visitors. This meant that there was suddenly a void where previously cooking and homemaking for herself and her husband had given her life meaning. She immersed herself in reading books that Nikolas borrowed for her from the library. During the first few years, she also began to write, intermittently, diary entries that recorded daily life in the home: which nurses were on duty and what they were like, phone calls with family news, what food she had been served. She described wheelchair outings with Nikolas and visits from those of us who would fly to Adelaide from other parts of Australia. Writing in English was not easy, so she often consulted a dictionary and apologised for her mistakes. Although it would have been much easier for her to write in Ukrainian, she told us that she didn't want to do this because no one would make the effort in the future to read in Ukrainian and her writing would be wasted. In fact, she did write a portion of her story in Ukrainian, and as she predicted, the hurdle of translation means that these sections remain untranslated and unread 16 years after her death. In addition to having time to fill, Nadia felt a new sense of freedom to write when she was no longer in the shadow of her husband's presence and the dominance of his memories in their house. As Henry Krystal reports in his essay on trauma and aging, there is a direct connection between losses in physical capacity in older age and the urge to look back over one's life: "These losses force a shift from doing to thinking, from planning to reminiscing, from preoccupation with everyday events and long-range planning to reviewing and rethinking one's life" (Krystal 1995: 78).[9] Krystal's focus on post-traumatic remembering and retelling in the final years of life is particularly relevant to Nadia's attitude to her traumatic past:

> *Rather than reviewing the problems of technique, I want to focus my discussion on the relation of certain post-traumatic constellations to the old-age re-evaluation of one's life*.... In old age, as in treatment, we come to the point where our past lies unfolded before us, and the question is, What should be done with it? The answer is that it must be accepted or one must keep waging war against the ghosts of one's past (Krystal 1995: 78, my italics).

[9] As Krystal (1995: 77, 78) explains, "Rather than reviewing the problems of technique, I want to focus my discussion on the relation of certain post-traumatic constellations to the old-age re-evaluation of one's life.... In old age ... we come to the point where our past lies unfolded before us, and the question is, what should be done with it? The answer is that it must be accepted or one must keep waging war against the ghosts of one's past."

By writing about her past, Nadia accepted and honoured it.

Confinement and immobility were the external factors that made writing not just possible but necessary for Nadia to give her a daily purpose in an environment where she had hardly any options to build a bearable life in the nursing home. She was facing a situation in which, as Krystal describes it, "the progressive loss of gratification, support, and distraction limits the choices to the two alternatives*: integration* of one's life or living in despair" (Krystal 1995: 77). But internal factors also motivated her to write. Put in the simplest terms, Nadia did not want her life to be forgotten. Further, through her writing she had the satisfaction of creating something tangible and worthwhile in spite of her diminished circumstances. Laub's views on the power and value of testimony are relevant here: "In my experience, repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which [one] has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival" (Laub 1992: 84, 85). Nadia was able to breathe new life into her history, with her fears, her traumas and her triumphs, integrated and made visible to whatever degree she chose through her narrating voice. Writing was a positive form of *action* that was empowering and self-validating.[10] Laub (1992: 84, 85) emphasises and explores belatedness in post-traumatic testimony in ways that align with Krystal's observations on retrospective integration of one's life in old age. In Nadia's case the integration involved a further step – a conscious creative act of transforming memories from traumatic times in her life into engaging, shareable stories.

In the process of shaping the stories from the past, Nadia was also re-creating herself *into the future* for her readers. She was bringing herself into view as she wanted to be remembered. Through this act she was actively countering identities that had accrued over her and around for her for almost a century. Sometimes she wanted to explain herself or express regret at her actions. Repeatedly she offered her thanks to those long dead whose names and faces she clearly remembered. These belated gestures of gratitude provide a sense of fulfilment and closure in her narrative: something has been acknowledged, honoured, and put to rest. However, as some of the entries show, the pain does not go away; it is managed by the writing: shaped, encapsulated and packaged.

As her grandson, I am aware that I am distanced from Nadia's world, not only by time, but also by barriers of culture, language, and gender. However, a bridge over these barriers has been present throughout my life because of

[10] Laub (1992: 84) emphasises the importance of understanding the belatedness of post-traumatic testimony: "it is not by chance that it is only now, *belatedly*, that the event begins to be historically grasped and seen. I wish to emphasize this *historical gap*. This emphasis does not invalidate in any way the power and the value of the individual testimonies."

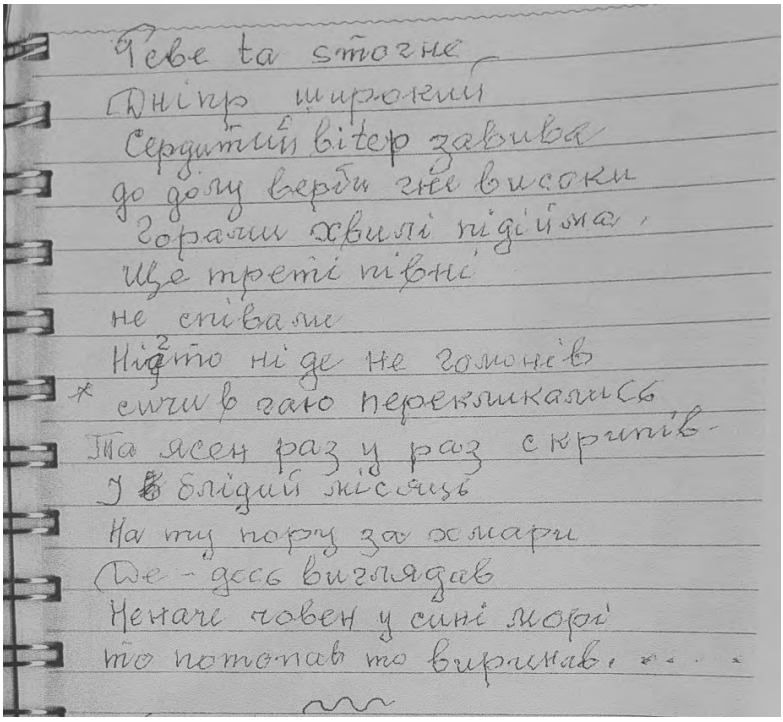
my relationship with my mother. She was very close to Nadia, spending her childhood years with her and her mother, Alexandra, and speaking to them primarily in Ukrainian. I am indebted to my mother for the many hours of conversation we have had about Nadia's diaries. She was entrusted with the diaries, but since Nadia's death in 2009 they have remained boxed and shut away until now, when her sense of responsibility for preserving them and making them available to a wider audience has been shared with me.

The stories Nadia chooses to tell are not heroic or large in scale, though sometimes they describe acts of courage. They generally focus on the small details of events and their settings, describing locations, emotions, clothes, daily struggles relating to food and protecting the family in the midst of uncertainty and danger. In this focus on small things, Nadia proudly expresses her sense of her own strength, throughout the period of famine, war, and statelessness, through to the present: the time of 'imprisonment' in her room when she was writing in the nursing home. This is the signature attitude in her diaries. It states: I was there. I remember. It was hard. I was often afraid and vulnerable, but I continued living, loving, and creating happiness where I could, and I am here to tell my story.

The following excerpt from book 7 of her diaries is an example:

> Wartime year about 1942. I remember it was cold because I was wearing Siberian gray-white jacket – of hare.
>
> It was war time. The food was very hard to get – impossible. Ukraine was nearly all under German occupation. We, Peter and I, had two girl goats. Rivka – grey, good looking and friendly. Belka – white with mad eyes and with impossible character.
>
> It is hard to believe that Rivka gave us three litres of good creamy milk – Belka one to one and a half.
>
> I was very attached to our dear goats, but only my mum could milk Belka. With me or anybody else she, dear girl, kicks her skinny legs and overturns the dish of milk and laughs – me – me – me.
>
> I started to tell you a more serious story but remembered my dear friends – girl-goats.
>
> Peter's brother Gregori lived in the beautiful part of Ukraine – Poltavshina [written in Ukrainian script]. About 25 kilometres from the city of Poltava was Rublivka and the near Rublivka village of Truhinivka – the richest part of Ukraine.
>
> It was so rich, the soil, good climate – wheat, rye, fruit, med [honey].
>
> Apples were best in the world. Taras Shevchenko wrote,
>
> "Ne mae drugoiy Ukraini
>
> Ne mae drugogo Dnipra" [There is no other Ukraine. There is no other Dnipr]
>
> But they spoilt the beautiful River Dnipr, they build on it electric stations … atomic.

The writing that follows in the diary extract below sets down the Ukrainian lyrics of a famous song about the River Dnipr that Nadia used to sing.[11]



Extract from Nadia's diary (Author's personal collection)

[11] The song Nadia inserts is a famous Ukrainian song about the Dnieper River: "The Wide Dnieper Roars and Moans" [Ukrainian: Реве та стогне Дніпр широкий, Romanised: *Reve ta stohne Dnipr shyrokyi*].

The song's lyrics come from the first stanzas of the 19th-century romantic ballad by renowned Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko. The original melody was composed by Danylo Kryzhanivskyi in 1886. The song is a powerful and evocative folk ballad that has become a significant national symbol and is widely recognised by Ukrainians:

> The mighty Dnieper roars and groans, The angry tempest, howling, bends, Tall willows to the very stones, And mountain-high great billows sends.
> The pale-faced moon picked out this moment To peek out from behind a cloud, Like a canoe upon the ocean, It first tips up, and then dips down.
> The cocks don't crow to wake the morning, There's not as yet a sound of man, The owls in glades call out their warnings, And ash trees creak and creak again. [Translation by Google Gemini, 09.05.25]

Nadia picks up the thread of the narrative in English:[12]

> Tato[13] [Peter] with several other men who had been working before the German occupation on the new modern factory Подвестдор [Podvesdor] asked permission from the Germans to make a tractor [truck] out of old rubbish at the factory, then occupied by the Germans. They got it.
>
> They built the truck and Tato had the idea to go to Rublivka and exchange some food for machine oil and for some [other] things which people could not get in our country anymore. Soap. I made it myself.
>
> Tato organised four men to go with him to Rublivka to his brother Григорій [Grigori] on this old truck they had made of old parts.
>
> Tato was very frightened to go so far in those very dangerous times.
>
> He said to the four men that he will send his wife Nadia instead. I was very afraid, but to bring food for the family was very necessary. In the end I said yes.
>
> I had not met those strangers before this. When they came to our place I was like a mouse, I wanted to run away and hide under the floor.
>
> I was not brave, I was not good looking. I did not start to talk to them. I sat in front with the driver and another man. Why was I afraid? I did not know. I thought I shouldn't be with those rough-looking men. Why didn't Peter go himself? Was he afraid of the war around us? I was not afraid of the war. I was afraid of the men around me. I did not talk to them. I was sitting silently and quietly like a small grey mouse.
>
> Suddenly in the middle of nowhere between beautiful trees in the night our 'car' stopped.
>
> I started to talk, asking – where are we?
>
> They told me that the 'car' just stopped. Something was wrong – not to worry.
>
> They said to cheer up.
>
> 'We will look after you'.
>
> 'Look, we are strong and good men. Our families hope that we will bring food to our children. We promised to Petro Stepanovich [Peter] to look after you well'.
>
> 'We know that you are just a girl. If you need privacy, tell us. We are frightened too. Please help us to look after you'.
>
> I said, 'Alright'.
>
> I started to feel better and could talk with the men.
>
> Two of them decided to look for a place with people. Soon they came back and started to push the truck. . . .
>
> I started to feel better. What will be will be.

[12] Small editorial changes to grammar and spelling have been made for the sake of clarity.

[13] The family usually called Peter 'Tato' (an affectionate term for father).

We came to a whitewashed country house and I was welcomed by a nice country woman who gave us all cups of warm milk with big pieces of bread. What hospitality.

Our men went to fix the truck while I was put on the bench to rest.

Soon they fixed the truck, asked for the right way to go and went to find Rublivka and Peter's brother Gregori.

We found his small, whitewashed house. It was very bad luck – Gregori was not home. Gregori's wife Stepanyda was not very friendly when she looked at the four men who told her they will come to stay with her for several days until they will be lucky to exchange some of their treasures for food such as sunflower oil, flour, pork fat, perhaps sugar. Whatever.

She told us that I will stay with her, but she will find another place for the men.

It was summer time so it was not hard. They could sleep in their truck.

Stepanyda showed me their bed with a beautiful cover, embroidered pillow cases and very lovely doona.

She said they never sleep in it. The bed is for show – it is the pride of her [life].

She will arrange for me a place on the bench.

'Thank you', I said. 'Any place will do.'

The men went to find Peter's friend Uncle Mykola. He was the one to look after all of us, in case Gregori was not home.

Peter's mother Hanna told me before how bad and unkind her daughter-in-law Stepanyda was. I was expecting the worst. But she, Stepanyda, gave me a breakfast of boiled eggs and milk.

Suddenly Peter's good friend Mykola – 70 years old – came to take me to his hata [house]. There was a big room, clean and smelling of fresh food.

I was surprised to see a beautiful young woman setting the table.

Uncle Mykola said to me, 'Nadia, do not be surprised and wonder. This beautiful woman-girl – she is the wife of my youngest son. To save her from any other men, my son, who was taken to war to be a soldier in the army, asked me to look after her. She loves her husband, my son. I looked after her so well that she became not only my cook – I taught her to cook – but my young wife until my son I hope will return from the war'.

I asked Klava if she will go back to her husband on his return. She was confused and said that will be very hard to decide. Uncle Mykola was very kind and generous, and clever besides, and her husband was not mature.

'I think I will stay with Uncle Mykola. The problem is the children. Uncle Mykola wants to have grandchildren.'

I came to their big room for a dinner of beautiful soup, galushki [dumplings] and pieces of chicken.

Uncle Mykola and Klava sat opposite me, gave me a bowl of soup and then told me that they had already had their meal. They asked me to enjoy my meal.

> I had some very beautiful soup, but that was not all. They put in front of me a big bowl of Габрусівна Каша [pumpkin pudding].
>
> This was a very special Ukrainian dish. You have to prepare a very good pumpkin, clean it of seeds, cut off the skin, cut the cleaned pumpkin into small pieces and put them in a good heavy dish, add milk and beautiful millet (not bought in a shop but at the market, made at home by country people) that has a golden colour and a very special taste; add a piece of butter and some sugar if you wish and put it in the oven. When it is ready you add some milk in the plate. (Use rice instead of millet.)
>
> After I had finished my meal I started to talk business. Uncle Mykola helped me to exchange my treasures for good food such as speck, lard, flour, sunflower oil and some millet, cream and buckwheat. Some honey for presents.
>
> It was a big success but I told Peter that I will not go anymore anywhere. It was an experience I remembered all my life. I was very worried and disturbed about our boys [ages six and four] while I was away.

For me, the most powerful effect of the writing is a sense of privilege at being invited in to enter moments in my grandmother's life in Ukraine as she revives them and relives them through her writing. The details that she shares in this story – of feelings, conversations, domestic settings, smells and tastes – make it easy to forget that the food-gathering journey from Kharkov to Rublivka that she describes took place when the war between the Soviet Union and Germany was raging throughout Ukraine. The front line was barely 20 kilometres away, advancing towards Kharkov at the same time that the siege of Leningrad was occurring in the north. Furthermore, Nadia was travelling with men who were strangers in a vehicle, cobbled together from discarded parts, that was likely to break down – and did. She had left her two young children in Kharkov and was desperate to bring food home by trading some precious possessions in her husband's home village where he had relatives and where food was still available. It was a traumatic experience for Nadia, one that remained imprinted in her memory in all its detail for the rest of her life, yet the story is not told as one of trauma.

The epigraph at the beginning of this paper carries particular significance at this moment in history when writing on paper has been all but abandoned as the primary vehicle for life writing. This story is one of many in Nadia's notebooks, waiting to be told. There is something reassuring about the solidity of the books and the physicality of the handwriting. While digital technologies have provided massive opportunities for recording, storing and sharing memories, much is being lost in the rapid progression towards a paperless world. The durability into the future of the medium that carries the story has become a crucial issue. There are also substantial challenges in enabling digital

content to be transferred and easily accessed. Life writers have gained a wealth of benefits during this century, ever since the smartphone became available to citizens worldwide. However, even the most advanced digital storytelling technologies cannot bring the reader into contact with the words on the paper, as they were applied moment by moment, touched by the hand that held the pen.

My grandmother's diaries provide a tangible example of a specific kind of reaction to traumatic events experienced in the distant past. Memories that are difficult to confront, and may have been avoided and suppressed for decades, can come to the fore towards the end of one's life, as Krystal observes, drawing upon his many years of first-hand experience as a psychotherapist and researcher working with victims of trauma (1995: 77). Through this belated confrontation, a choice can be made between acceptance and engulfment or, to use Krystal's words, "integration of one's life or living in despair" (1995: 77). In Nadia's case, the desire to write her memories as stories demonstrated her acceptance of the past, and her ability to both reclaim her history on her own terms and to heal herself in the process. Most importantly, her writing became a form of action that empowered her in a situation where her physical disability and confinement had robbed her of her agency and sense of worth. The 'writing cure', as it has been called (Lieber 2020), came to her rescue, enabling her to do much more than simply record her memories. It brought satisfaction, self-validation, a sense of purpose, the pleasure of creativity, and a feeling of connection not only with the past but also with the future through her shaping of the stories for a potential audience and through the physical durability of her notebooks.

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