

Part Four

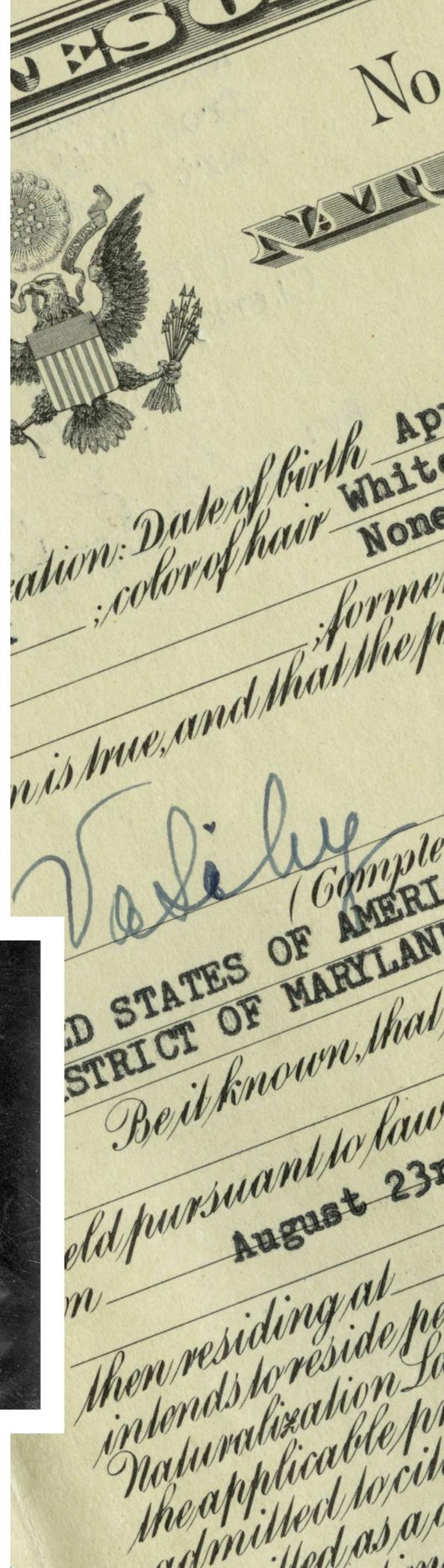
Paternal Line of Helen Stavrakis (née Elena Vasilievna Sochanskaya)



Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky
at the time of his graduation
in 1911.



Anna Britchkina
Sochanskaya around
the time of her marriage
to Vasily Ivanovich.



INTRODUCTION

Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky (b. 11 April 1878 [NS], Nichiporovka, Ukraine; d. 3 July, 1963, Elkton, MD, USA)

Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky, Helen's father and our grandfather, was born 11 April 1878 (NS — New Style date) in the village of Nichiporovka, Kiev Oblast, Ukraine, and died on 3 July 1963 in Elkton, Maryland, USA.

He arrived with his wife, Anna, in the US in 1951 to join the rest of the family and received US citizenship on 23 August 1956. At that time he was 5' 9" tall, 160 lbs, and had thinning white hair. His eyes were black.



Vasily Ivanovich wearing a Soviet-style suit, probably around 1940.

ORIGINAL
TO BE GIVEN TO
THE PERSON NATURALIZED

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

No. 7701738

Rehdon No. 36690

Personal description of holder as of date of naturalization: Date of birth April 11th, 1878 sex Male
complexion Medium color of eyes Black color of hair White height 5 feet 9 inches
weight 160 pounds visible distinctive marks None former nationality Russia
Marital status Married

I certify that the description above given is true, and that the photograph affixed hereto is a likeness of me.

Vasily Sochansky
(Complete and true signature of holder)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DISTRICT OF MARYLAND s.s.

Be it known, that at a term of the United States District Court of Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland, held pursuant to law at Baltimore, Maryland on August 23rd, 1956 the Court having found that VASILY SOCHANSKY then residing at 141 East Main Street, Elkton, Maryland intends to reside permanently in the United States (when so required by the Naturalization Laws of the United States), had in all other respects complied with the applicable provisions of such naturalization laws, and was entitled to be admitted to citizenship, thereupon ordered that such person be and she was admitted as a citizen of the United States of America.

In testimony whereof the seal of the court is hereunto affixed this 23rd day of August in the year of our Lord, nineteen hundred and fifty-six and of our Independence the one hundred and eighty-first.

WILFRED W. BUTSCHKY
Clerk of the said District Court
By *M. Ellen Coulter* Deputy Clerk.

It is a violation of the U.S. Code and punishable as such to copy, print, photograph, or otherwise illegally use this certificate.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Name changed by Decree of Court from "VASILIOS SOHANIS" as a part of the naturalization.

WILFRED W. BUTSCHKY
Clerk, United States District Court for the District of Maryland.

By: *M. Ellen Coulter*
Deputy Clerk

Citizenship document of Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky. On the back side the stamp says that his name was changed from "Vasilios Sohanis" to "Vasily Sochansky". Every time refugees like ourselves enter a new country, our names get changed.

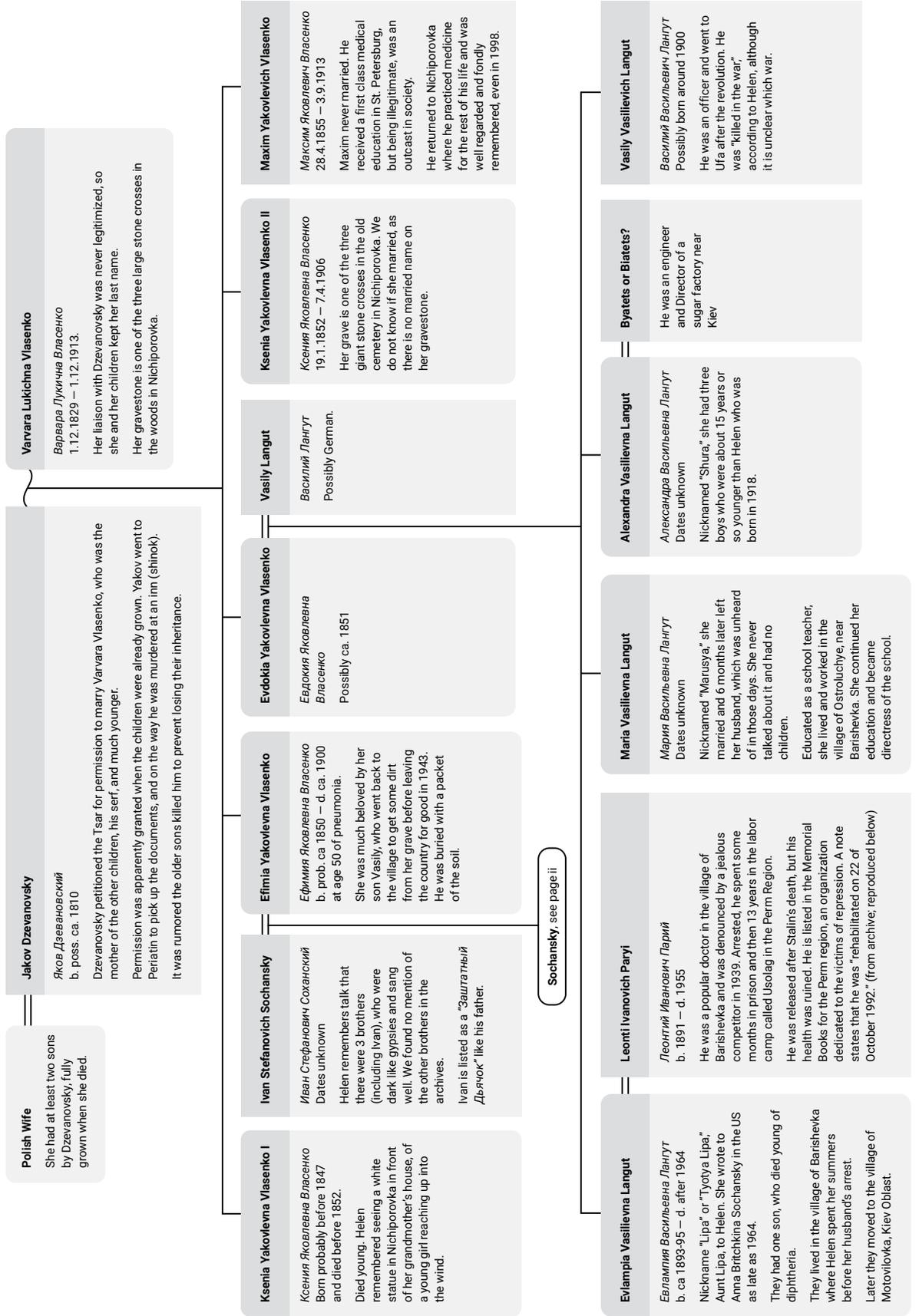
Eventually, the name on paperwork separates from one's identity. Our grandfather was addressed as "Deda Vanch," which was a contracted version of his formal name "Vasily Ivanovich."

When he wrote poetry or stories he signed his name as "Deda Vanch."

Anna Britchkina and Vasily Sochansky from an unidentified official document, probably around the time of the Revolution, shortly after their marriage.



Vlasenko–Dzevanovsky



CHAPTER 1

The Village of Nichiporovka

Vasily Ivanovich was born and raised in the village of Nichiporovka, (*Nychyporivk* in Ukrainian), some 107 km southeast of Kiev. The village, typical of the rural area of Eastern Ukraine, was named after a man named Nichipor, who was an emissary to Sweden for the famous Cossack Hetman Mazeppa around 1700 (according to the village teacher in Nichiporovka in 1998). He was probably given this village as a gift for service by the Cossack leader. A statue of Nichipor stands by the school.

The Cossack Hetman Mazeppa, a controversial figure, has been romanticized in poems, operas, paintings, and books by Tchaikovsky, Pushkin, Tereschenko, and Lord Byron. Condemned by the Soviets, he has recently been reinstated as national hero of Ukraine and a postage stamp was issued in his honor.

During Tsarist times, villages had no history, so no one bothered to record the past of Nichiporovka. Peasants were reviled in the Russian Empire and considered little more than chattel that produced food for the empire. Until the first prerevolutionary social movements of the 19th century, they were considered “the scum of the earth” and their stories were of no interest.

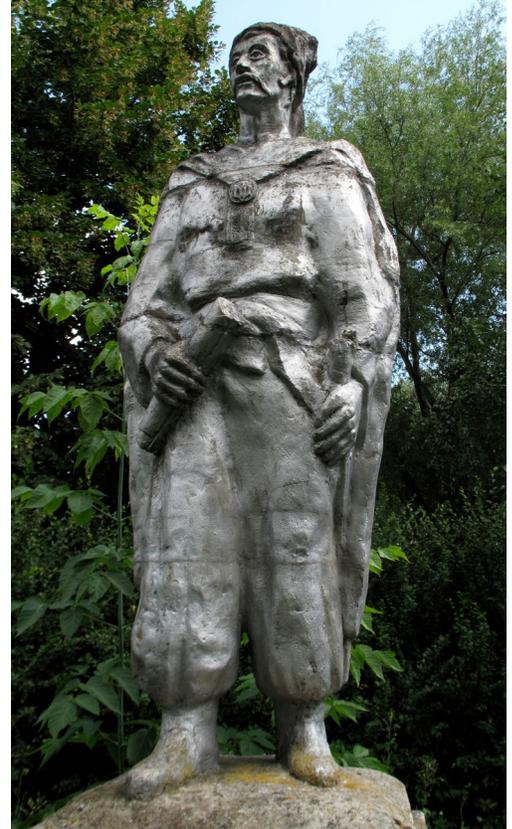
Literacy in the Russian Empire remained below 20%. Most villages had no schools. Children and adults were expected to toil for the rich landowners, who, until 1861, owned the peasants and also demanded rent for the land allotted to them to produce food for their families.

Rural life was poor and backward. Peasants lived in huts without running water, toilets, or basic sanitation. Most could not even afford boots. In the winter, they wrapped their feet in straw bound up with rags as they had done for centuries.

These conditions prevailed even into modern times, for when Olga went to Nichiporovka in 1998 on a bitterly cold and snowy winter day in November, she came upon an old man leaning heavily on a cane as he hobbled painfully along a the road. To her surprise, his feet were wrapped in rags and bound with rope. Shocked at this medieval apparition in the 20th century, she offered him money to buy boots. Giving her a toothless smile, he said he had no need of money. His feet were warm enough. She asked if there is anything else she could get him, but he replied “No, thank you, I need nothing. I have everything.” The only thing he did accept from her was a chocolate bar.

After the Revolution, education became universal and mandatory, but it took years for electricity, roads, and a measure of development to reach the villages of Ukraine, and even that was not much. Peasant quality of life remained appalling.

Under these conditions, documenting the lives of the poor was not a priority.



Picture taken by Kathy in 2014 of the Cossack for whom the village of Nichiporovka was named. This is the village where Vasily Ivanovich was born and went to grade school. It's also where his ancestors lived for several generations.

Most likely, he was “given” the village for services to Hetman Mazeppa, for whom he served as emissary to Sweden around 1700.

Taken in 2014 by Kathy, a couple in Nichiporovka walk down the road.

Villages in Ukraine have remained less developed than the cities. Before the Revolution and throughout the Soviet period, they remained backward.

To this day villagers are not used to outside visitors, so they stared at Kathy as she took the picture. The village is not exactly on a scenic route through Ukraine.

Little has changed over the last 100 years. The Soviets replaced thatch with corrugated iron and installed electricity, but water is still drawn from wells and toilets are scarce.



In 1998, the population was about 1,800, but we do not know what it was in Sochansky's day. More than likely, Nichiporovka was larger in the past, for after the collapse of the Soviet Union, agriculture declined, forcing young people to flock to the cities and towns in search of work. In 1998, the village was inhabited mostly by children and grandparents dependent upon money sent by the absentee middle generation.

Old style thatch village house in Nichiporovka taken in 1998 during Olga's visit. The Soviets installed electricity with TV but no running water or heat.

The rebuilt houses were upgraded to zinc roofs, but all the houses in 1998 still used outhouses for bathroom facilities.



In 1998, the only western-style wooden house belonged to the village and was assigned to the school teacher. It was a small, three-bedroom, elevated dwelling with working central heat but no insulation. There was indoor plumbing but no water, and the toilet was permanently clogged with trash and smelled. The only sign of habitation was a dirty bedroll on the floor of one of the rooms.

This was the only indoor bathroom with a flush toilet in the whole village. All other houses had small outhouses in back.



The typical fenced-in back yard of a house in Nichiporovka in 1998. The building in the back is a barn and hayloft. Geese run wild in the yard itself. The outhouse is generally located in the very back by the barn.



In 2014 water was still drawn from wells such as this one, photographed in Nichiporovka.

The Saga of the Village Church

The village church, called the Svyato-Pokrovskoye (Holy Intercession) was present at the time of our grandparents and ancestors. Built in 1750 at Andrey Bobir Street, it is a beautifully decorated wooden structure with a gold-leafed dome, resting on a stone foundation.



In 2014 the villagers of Nichiporovka were rebuilding their church which had been demolished during the Soviet era. All through Ukraine, churches are going up following original plans as much as possible, with original icons and frescoes appearing after 100 years of concealment.

Even though this church is in his birth village, Vasily Ivanovich was baptized in one called the "Pokrovsk," which may have been in the town of Periatin or even in Poltava.

In 1930 the Soviets stripped off the gold. The story goes that as they tried to climb the roof to remove the gold from the cupola, each of the first three men fell to the ground. Finally, they threw a loop over the cross and pulled on it together until the cross and cupola came crashing down, and they removed the gold while it was on the ground.

In 1941 the church was completely dismantled to build defenses. Only the base of the foundation remained.

In 2000 the new construction over the original foundation was consecrated by Patriarch Filaret. By 2014, when Kathy and her family visited, the church was well on its way to completion. By 2016 this was completed and a priest came to live in the now-growing village.

The bells also have a story. Sometime after the fall of the Soviet Union, representatives from a museum in Kiev arrived to take the village bells for the outdoor village museum they were building in the city. The villagers objected and sent the officials packing.

Undeterred, the museum officials returned at night and stole the bells. Today, the original bells are on display in the model village in Kiev. The villagers replaced them with hanging pots.

Originally, bells served as the notice of public announcements for the village. They announced births, deaths, and danger or called citizens to meetings.



The village of Nichiporovka originally had ancient church bells next to the church. The bells were used to summon people for meetings, announce births and deaths, and issue warnings.

A few years before 2014, representatives from the outdoor village museum in Kiev demanded the bells for display. The villagers refused, so the museum representatives simply stole them one night.

The villagers were unable to get them back, so they hung pots of various kinds as sad replacements. The Soviet era may have ended, but for villagers, self-determination has not been fully realized.

CHAPTER 2

Helen's Ancestors – Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky's Grandparents

The story of Vasily Ivanovich's family begins somewhere in the 19th century with two families: Sochansky and Vlasenko/Dzevanovsky residing in the village of Nichiporovka. It is a vague story that was almost completely suppressed after the Revolution.

Vasily Ivanovich talked little about his family and never mentioned his parents. Occasionally he recalled small bits and pieces of school life, his sister, or superficial things which would have been "safe" topics during Soviet times.

Over the years Helen gleaned snippets of her father's past, but these remain small and disconnected. Thus, this segment of our family history remains short and with few pictures.

Varvara Lukichna Vlasenko (1829–1913) – Vasily Ivanovich's Grandmother, Helen's Great-Grandmother

Vasily Ivanovich's maternal grandparents were Varvara Vlasenko and Jacov Dzevanovsky. She was a serf and he was a Polish landowner. Due to a series of tragic misadventures and the Tsarist bureaucracy, they were never able to marry, so the children always retained their mother's name.



Varvara Lukichna Vlasenko was born in 1829 (date recorded on her tombstone) a serf, the property of a Polish landowner, Jacov Dzevanovsky who had lands near the neighboring town of Periatin. Serfdom was not abolished until 1861, and even then, it took a number of years for all serfs to gain independence. Many had to compensate their owners for the loss of their labor.

Epitaph for Varvara Lukichna Vlasenko, grandmother of Vasily Ivanovich and mother of his mother, Efemia Vlasenko Sochanskaya, in a special section reserved for the family.

Born a serf, she became the partner of Jacov Dzevanovsky, a Polish landlord, after the death of his wife. He petitioned for permission to legitimize the marriage and their children. When the letter from the tsar's representative arrived, he was killed on his way to retrieve it.

It was always thought his grown sons by his first wife killed him at an inn near Periatin. The letter disappeared, and Varvara and her children remained illegitimate without the right to use his name.

Her father's name was Lukich Vlasenko, but her mother's name is unknown. Most likely they were residents of Nichiporovka Village, for serfs were attached to villages, and the villages were part of the landed estates which were bought and sold with them as property. The village was called a *mir*, which is the old Slavic word for "whole world" and for "peace." It was the whole world for the serfs who could only leave with permission of their owner.

Around the time of Varvara's birth, Dzevanovsky was probably already married to a Polish woman with whom he had two sons (that we know of), either the same age or slightly older than Varvara. Sometime before Varvara's late teens, Dzevanovsky's Polish wife died, and he fell in love with his young serf. Helen surmised that he was about 40 or 50 at the time.

They became lovers, and he installed her in a large comfortable house on the edge of the village where they raised at least five known children: four daughters and one son.

Infant mortality was high, and there may have been other short-lived children in between the surviving children, but the first one we know of is Ksenia I, who was probably born sometime between 1840 and 1846 and died before 1852 as a "young girl." On 19 January 1852, another girl was born and given the same name. Because Ksenia I died as a "young girl," there were probably one or two births in between the two Ksenias. Ksenia II died on 7 April 1906 (OS), and her grave is with her brother (Maxim) and her grandmother's.

Vlasenko graves in Nichiporovka in 2014. Only three graves were found, those of Varvara and two of her children, Ksenia II and Maxim the doctor.

The family was more prosperous than the average villager, and their gravesites stand a bit apart from the main cemetery, off in the forest. Without family members to tend the graves, the forest has encroached upon them.

The crosses are of dark maroon marble, and the epitaphs clearly give the names and dates for each individual.



Three years after the birth of the second Ksenia, on 28 April 1855, Maxim, the only boy was born (he died 3 September 1913). We have no dates for the other two girls — who would become our great-grandmother Ephemina and another daughter whose name was probably Evdokia. These two women could have been born between the two Ksenias or after Maxim. At present, we do not know.

Marble Crosses in the Woods

In 1998 I (Olga) visited the village for the first time in an attempt to find our ancestors. The school teacher, a historian and outsider, was very interested and accompanied me to the homes of two old men who did indeed remember Uncle Vlasenko and the Sochansky family. One had known the family well and partied with Vasily Ivanovich's younger brother, Nikolai. He knew where the graves were located and directed us to the old main cemetery located in the woods on the other side of the village.



The marble crosses of Varvara Vlasenko and two of her children, Maxim, the local doctor, and Ksenia II, her daughter.

We did not find Efemia, our grandfather's mother, from whose grave he picked up soil and carried with him to his own grave in Elkton, MD.

This family was quite prominent, and the graves are set apart from the main cemetery, but without descendants, they have become overgrown by woods.

This cemetery was huge and in a snow-covered forest floor but after some hiking, we stumbled on to three massive dark marble crosses, now tilting precariously over collapsing graves. To my surprise, each had a panel on the base giving the name and dates of the interred individual, and it turned out that they belonged to Uncle Maxim, his sister, Ksenia II, and their mother (our grandfather's grandmother), Varvara Vlasenko. All three dated to before the Revolution.

In 1998 I (Olga) talked to this old man in the village who had known Mykola Sochansky, our grandfather's younger brother. The man on the left was the schoolteacher at the time. He was a historian and only assigned to the village for a short period of time.

I asked him if he knew where the graves were, and he said that "Sochansky's are Vlasenko's" and pointed to the other side of the village where he said the Vlasenkos were buried.

We found the Vlasenko graves, but we found no Sochansky graves.



The second old man I visited with, the schoolteacher as guide, Ivashenko, told me that there had also been some old graves at the spot where the Sochansky house had stood, behind the old school. At some point in the distant past, both the house and mill were razed, and, according to him, the graves were "dug up." He did not know whose graves they were and whether or not they had been moved or simply discarded.

In 2014 I (Kathy) searched around the soccer field, where the old mill had stood long ago, for this second set of graves. At least two people corroborated that some of our family was buried in this part of town as well as in the forest graves, but all I found were gently sloping mounds in an open field without any markers.

Olya, a woman whose house abuts this field, told me that this was the location of the oldest cemetery in town and that the "rich" people were buried there. She thought the graves were probably looted for gold and was very apologetic about saying so. However, it is possible these were ancient *kurgans*, archaeological burial sites from prehistoric periods.

I was told another curious story by the local women. Apparently, every year, an unknown woman arrives from Kiev to visit the Vlasenko graves. Her last name is "Bobir," but no one knew who she was or why she came. One of the village streets bears this name.

The name must have meant something to our family because among our father's (Peter Stavrakis') belongings there are some prints of 19th c. landscapes painted by an artist named Bobir.

Helen Visits Her Great-Grandmother Efemia's House

Our mother, Helen, remembers visiting the abandoned house of her great-grandmother Varvara in her youth.

• We walked along an overgrown path through a thick wood with large
• beautiful trees that now grew wild. It looked like this was once a lovely
• garden. Now it was all overgrown. The path opened out to a clearing
• through which I could see a very pretty wooden house, abandoned for many
• years and now falling apart. No one lived in it. There was an overgrown
• garden in front of the house with a round stone-covered patio. In the middle,
• stood a beautiful white marble statue of a young girl, running, her right arm
• extended toward the sky reaching up into the wind. They told me this was
• Ksenia.
•

Naming a newborn child for one that had died was not uncommon in the past. Commissioning a statue of a dead child, however, was unheard of in rural Ukraine, for childhood was fragile, and death stalked the young.

We searched for the remains of the house and the statue in the woods near the Vlasenko graves but without success.

Jacov Dzevanovsky (Дзевановский)

Varvara's life partner and Helen's great-grandfather was the Polish landowner, Jacov Dzevanosky. It was said that he himself came from the "west," (a term that generally referred to Poland and that his first wife had been Polish. It was not unusual for Poles to own lands in Ukraine and live there permanently or seasonally.

After his wife's death he fell in love with his serf, Varvara Vlasenko, and they decided to marry. But during Tsarist times, marriages across classes were forbidden, except with special approval from the tsar's representative ("conciliar," or "consular," or "counselor" — as explained by Helen, although she did not know the exact office).

Dzevanovsky applied for permission to marry Varvara and legitimize the children, but such petitions took years to work their way through the tsar's bureaucracy. In the meantime, they lived together without the benefit of marriage and had children. He was obviously very conscientious and made sure that the family was well provided for, transferring large pieces of property in the village to his children and separately to his wife. Helen was told that the Vlasenko family had been quite well off.

Years later, when their only son, Maxim, was already at university, Jacov received word that a letter from the tsar's conciliar had come to the post office in Periatin, and he had to pick it up in person. Before he even received the letter, word had spread that he had been granted permission to marry Varvara. This worried his two older sons (born of his first marriage), for if the second set of children were

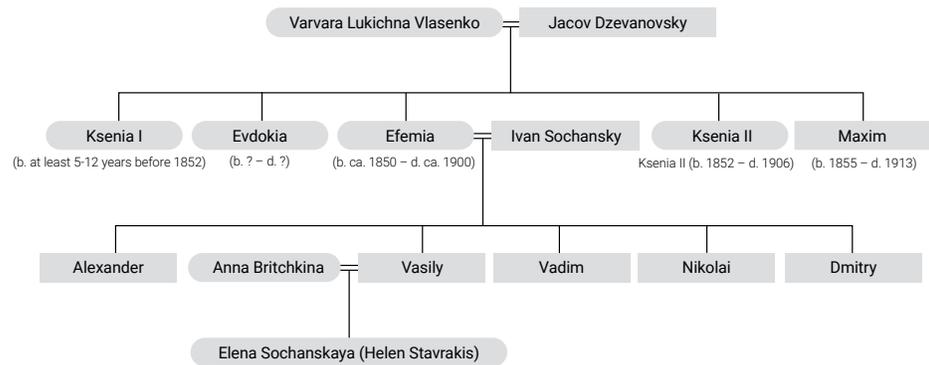
legitimized, their father's land and wealth would have to be divided equally among all the children, and their share would be reduced even more.

Jacov set out for Periatin to pick up the letter, a trip that would take him several days on horseback. On the way, he stopped overnight at an inn (*shinok*), and there he was murdered. People said the two older sons did it, but nothing was ever proved, and no official inquiry was ever conducted. The crime remained unsolved. We can speculate that the wealthy landowner's sons could have applied pressure on the lowly civil servants to keep the case from ever going to trial.

It is likely that the letter did indeed permit the marriage, for why else would anyone have killed him, and why did people say that his older sons committed the crime? Had the letter denied his petition to marry, his older sons would have celebrated the decision. The letter itself disappeared and Varvara's children remained illegitimate.

Thus, all Efemia's children had to keep the Vlasenko surname. They stayed in the village, but the Dzevanovsky sons were not heard of again. Helen had heard that they were not particularly popular among the townsfolk.

The Children of Varvara and Jacov



Varvara and Jacov had five children that we know of, although there may have been others who died in infancy. Maxim was the only boy. From bits and pieces of memory, Helen seemed to think that her grandmother, Efemia, had been the youngest. We know the exact birth dates only for those family members whose tombstones we found, which includes Ksenia II, her brother Maxim, and their grandmother Varvara Vlasenko. For the rest we have to estimate using indirect evidence and guesswork.

Ksenia I (possibly born between 1840 and 1847 – d. before 1852) and Ksenia II (1852–1906) Vlasenko

Ksenia I died in childhood or early youth, and a second child was give her name, a common practice in those times. We know nothing more about her other than the existence of the beautiful marble statue Helen had seen in her youth. We were unable to find a grave for Ksenia I, although we did find the tomb of Ksenia II, with its giant marble cross, in the woods in Nichiporovka.

We don't know how old Ksenia I was when she died, but Helen described the statue as that of a "young girl," a term that in Russian refers to a child somewhere between 6 and 14 years of age. According to a genealogy constructed by Prof. Vitaly Kovalinsky based on archival material, Ksenia I died at age 11, which would put her birthday at least 11 years before the birth of Ksenia II, in 1852 (See annex for chart).



Ksenia II, daughter of Varvara Vlasenko and Jacov Djevanovsky, grandparents of Vasily Ivanovich. She was named after an earlier child by the same name who died young.

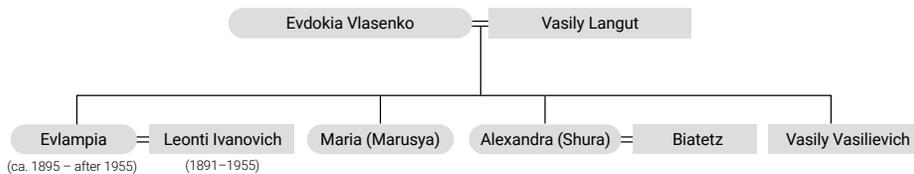
They were sisters to Vasily Ivanovich's mother, Efemia. The first Ksenia died in childhood, and we do not know her birth or death dates. The second child named Ksenia was born in 1852, so Ksenia I died prior to that.

Helen remembered a statue in white marble of a "young girl" reaching up into the wind in front of their overgrown and abandoned house. We estimate she was between 5 and 12 when she died.

[Olga: Is this referring to a chart that will be at the end of this part or a geneology chart in the text?]

That would indicate that some of the other children of Efemia, whose birth dates remain unknown, were born in the years between the two Ksenias, although there may be gaps due to children dying in infancy.

Evdokia Vlasenko (?-?)



One of the children of Varvara and Jacov, born between the two Ksenias was probably Evdokia, an older sister of Efemia, Helen's grandmother. We know a bit more about Evdokia than of the others because Helen was close to Evdokia's daughter, Aunt Lipa (Evlampia Langut), with whom she spent summers while in her teens.

Evdokia was married to Vasily Langut, a man who worked in the sugar industry and was either German or of German origin. Helen remembered that he was an officer, although what type of officer is not known. They had four children that we know of, Lipa (Evlampia), Marusya (Maria), Shura (Alexandra) and Vasya (Vasily).

Evlampia Langut (ca. 1893 – ca. 1955)

Aunt Lipa, first cousin to Helen's father, was always close to Helen, and even when Helen's family came to the US, they corresponded secretly, for the Soviet Union dealt harshly with citizens who maintained ties outside the country.

Aunt Lipa smuggled letters out when she could to Helen and to Helen's mother, Anna, instead of writing directly to her cousin, Vasily Ivanovich. Although he always remained emotionally and psychologically tied to his village and homeland, he left communication to his wife and daughter.

An envelope addressed to Aunt Lipa by Anna was found among her things after her death on which she wrote out her full name "Evlampia Vasiliievna." From this we know her father's name was Vasily Langut. Although a genealogy obtained by Prof. Vitaly Kovalinsky lists her father's first name with the initials "M."

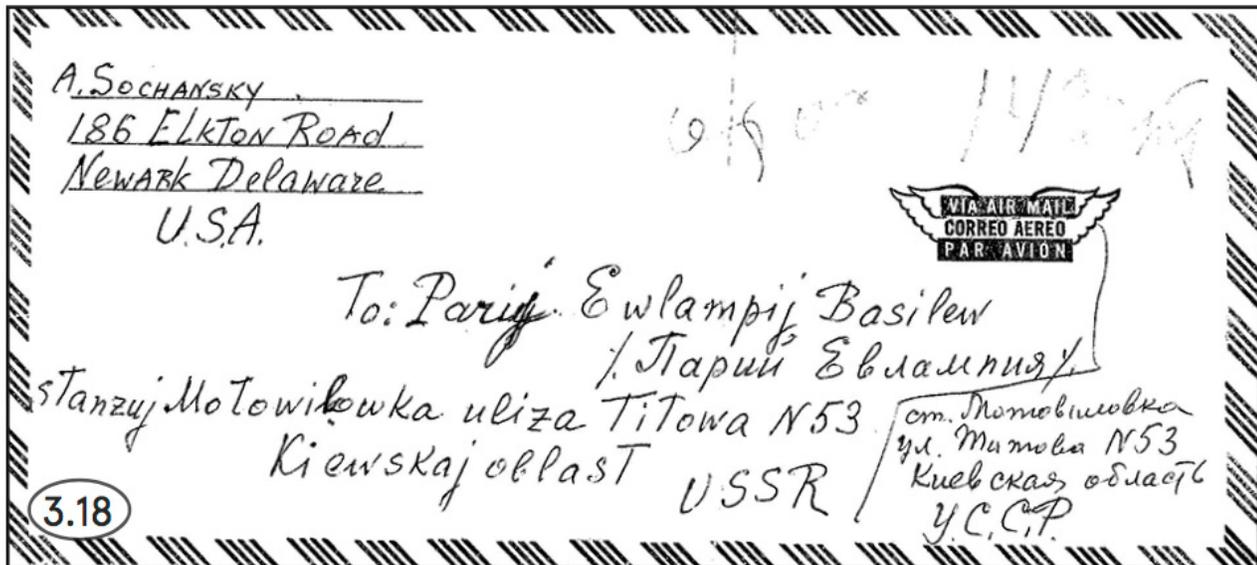
Aunt Lipa lived with her husband, Leonti Ivanovich Paryii (1891–1955), in the nearby village of Barishevka where he practiced medicine. They had one son who tragically died of diphtheria around the age of ten. During her teens, Helen spent summers with her aunt, as it was considered healthy for her to take advantage of the country air. Often her friends from school would also take the train and come out for a day to visit, and Aunt Lipa occasionally came into Kiev to spend time with the family.

Leonti Ivanovich practiced medicine in the village and was highly respected. The story goes that sometime before 1944, during one of the purges, another doctor got jealous of his popularity and denounced him to the authorities for "anti-Soviet" activities, a normal trumped-up, political charge of the time.

Leonti Ivanovich was arrested, imprisoned in Kiev, where he was tortured and then tried in the political tribunal called the "troika" (because it had three "judges"). There, in 1944, he was deemed guilty and sentenced to five years in prison, although the sentence turned out to last much longer.

He was then sent to a GULAG in the Perm region of Siberia, where he endured 13 years of hard labor, occasionally sending out cryptic messages to his wife.

In the GULAG he treated other prisoners medically and was released in 1953, probably at the time of Stalin's death. Tragically, his health had been ruined by the years of torture and incarceration, and he died two years later. (See Part 6: Helen's Youth for a more detailed description of the arrest and of Helen's visits to her aunt and uncle).



Our grandmother, Anna, communicated secretly with Lipa, her husband's cousin, and this envelope was among her things which Helen had saved over the years. Correspondence with Soviet citizens was generally dangerous, as it could lead to their arrest and torture, and all mail was censored.

Some Soviets were issued limited visas to visit the US or Europe for scientific or diplomatic purposes, and they hid personal letters in their luggage at great personal risk.

No one ever knew who carried the letters. They simply appeared. At one point in the 1950s Helen received several letters on various colored scraps of paper which informed her that she now was the owner of the Sochansky land in Nichiporovka.

Of course, private property had ceased to exist after the Revolution, but locals still maintained customary inheritance practices.

Maryusa (Maria) Langut

Maryusa married but had no children. She left her husband after only six months of marriage, something that was unheard of in the Russian Empire at the time. Helen knew her but her aunt never talked about her marriage. She started out as a school teacher and then became a school director and continued her education. She lived and taught in the Village of Ostroluchie, not far from Barishevka.

Shura (Alexandra) Langut (b. ca 1910–12)

She married a man with the surname of Byatyetz who was the director of a sugar factory near Kiev. They had 3 boys who were 15 years younger than Helen, who was born in 1918. Thus they were born around 1932 and after.

Vasya (Vasily) Langut

All we know about him is that he went to Ufa after the Revolution.

Maxim Vlasenko (1855–1913)

Of all the five children, illegitimacy affected Maxim, known as “Uncle Vlasenko,” perhaps the most profoundly. At the time of his father Jacov's death, he was studying medicine at university in St. Petersburg, which was a particularly expensive education.

Because of his illegitimacy and his mother's serfdom, he was never accepted into St. Petersburg society. St. Petersburg was a large, cosmopolitan city at the time, and the center of high society. It was the playground of the wealthy, urban elite students in a society where the lower classes were reviled and mistreated. Emancipation had only taken place less than 10 years before, putting him squarely between two worlds.

With his father's death, all hopes of Maxim's for any kind of legitimacy evaporated. Nevertheless, he finished his degree and returned to his village of Nichiporovka, where he practiced medicine, living "quietly" the rest of his life as the village doctor. Helen referred to him as a "recluse." He never married as far as we know.

According to the village schoolteacher who accompanied me (Olga) around the village in November 1998, Uncle Vlasenko had a house built for himself and was highly regarded for his service in the village. This was corroborated by an old man during that same visit.

Efemia Vlasenko and Ivan Sochansky (Vasily Ivanovich's mother and father)

We do not know when Efemia Jacovlevna Vlasenko was born, but two of her siblings were born in 1852 and 1855. According to what Helen heard from her father, she died at age 50 of pneumonia — word had it, around 1900.

Efemia Vlasenko married Ivan Stepanovich Sochansky and had five known children. Both she and her husband died before the Revolution, but the dates are unknown. By 1941 when WWII came to Ukraine, of her five children, only Vasily Ivanovich still survived. Her first born, Alexander died young of TB. Vadim and Nikolai perished in the purges of the late 1930s. Anna died around 1920 of breast cancer.

Vadim's son had apparently fled to Ufa when his father was arrested and killed in the purges. Vasily Ivanovich sent him money for some years after, but even his name has not remained. We don't know what happened to Anna's boys, Kolya and Tolya.

Even long before the Revolution, the family valued education. The children in Efemia's generation and her own children grew up in a "house full of books." They were half serfs and villagers, but they were enlightened (progressive for the time). The children all went to school, including Vasily Ivanovich's sister, Anna, who even went to secondary school, a rare situation for a girl at the time.

Vasily Ivanovich once told Olga that when his sister was in the gymnasium she hid her lessons in her coat sleeves so people would not think of her as a school girl but as an mature young woman who had already graduated.

Education was not easy to acquire in the Russian Empire. It was expensive and schools were few and far between. Yet the Dzevanovski and Vlasenko families went to great effort and expense to provide the best possible schooling for their children. As Helen put it, "Their education was advanced, liberal, and progressive." By "progressive" she was referring to the changing social values in Tsarist Russia, where progress was to come from education, including for women.

In Russia at the time, "liberal" referred to "democratic," which indicated the struggle to achieve reforms that would lead to greater popular participation in governance.



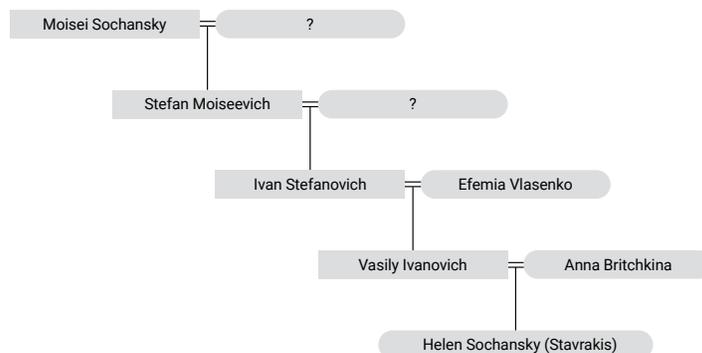
Grave of Maxim Vlasenko (1856-1913), son of Varvara Vlasenko and Jacov Djevanovski and brother of Vasily Sochansky's mother Efemia, was a popular physician in the village and was still remembered.

His Polish father paid for expensive medical school in St. Petersburg but was murdered before his children by Varvara could be legitimized. It was said his sons by his first wife murdered him when he got a letter granting permission to legitimize his union with her.

Maxim was left illegitimate and lived a retiring quiet life, never marrying. He was a highly respected doctor and remembered even in 1998.

Ivan Stefanovich Sochansky (dates unknown) — Helen’s Grandfather, Vasily Ivanovich’s Father

Male line of Helen’s father, Vasily Ivanovich



According to archival material, Vasily Ivanovich’s father was Ivan Stefanovich Sochansky, who was the son of Stefan Moiseyevich Sochansky (1814–1882). Stefan’s father, in turn, was Moisei. In the geneological record from the archive, both Moisei and Stefan are listed as a “Заштатный дьячок” (major church deacon).

Moisei is also known to have had a sister, Olga, who married a man by the name of Gregory Petrovich Poleshko, with whom she had three children between 1883 and 1888. He was listed as belonging to the landed gentry. From the name, his origin may have been Polish, which would not be unusual since a lot of the landowners in Ukraine were of Polish origin, dating back to the Polish Lithuanian Empire.

Lore has it that sometime in the distant past, two or three Sochansky brothers appeared in the village from somewhere in the “south.” Possibly, the Balkans. Macedonia and Bulgaria were also mentioned as possibilities. They were tall, dark, good looking and liked to sing and dance.

They settled in Nichiporovka, a region where, as Helen said,

-
- The soil was rich; there were forests and steppes, meadows and woods. It
- was paradise country. Everything grew well. This caused much trouble in
- history. Everyone wanted to grab Ukraine and its fertile soil.” The villagers
- referred to them as “gypsies.” Somehow they acquired land and owned a
- mill in the village.
-

The Ivashenkos, whom Olga met in November 1998. His uncle worked in the Sochansky grain mill before the Revolution. The mill was across the road and up the street from his house but had been demolished. The field was now used for soccer.

The Ivashenko's had a typical village house with one whole wall constituting the *pech*, or wood burning oven and heater. There was an outhouse in back and possibly a bedroom off to the side of the *pech*.



After her father's death, Helen received smuggled letters in the US from the village announcing that she now owned the land. Of course, this was wishful thinking, for the Soviets had taken everything away, so there was no private property. But it indicates that the villagers had not forgotten the family and that some old customs survived.

Efemia also had some property in the village, which she had inherited from her mother, although we do not know which it was or even where. Unlike Western women, Ukrainian women kept their property rights after marriage.

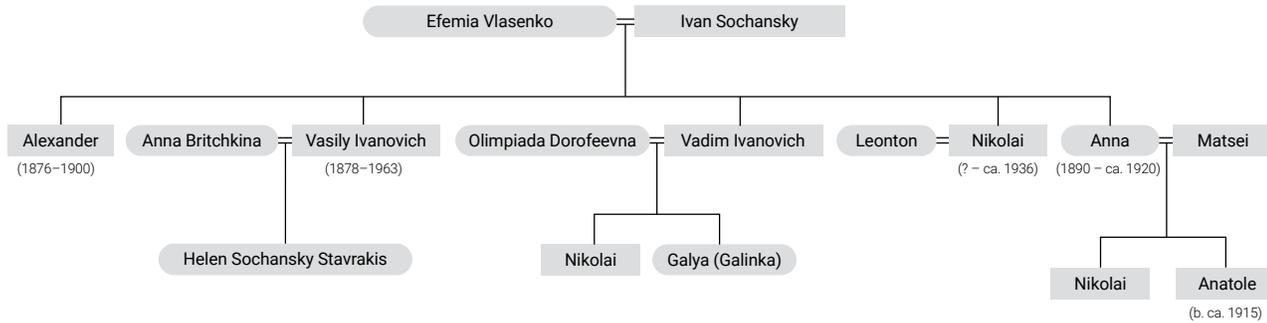
Village view of Nichiporovka in 1998.





Village views of Nichiporovka
in 2014.

The Children of Efemia Vlasenko and Ivan Sochansky



Alexander Ivanovich (b. 9 December 1876 – d. 1900)

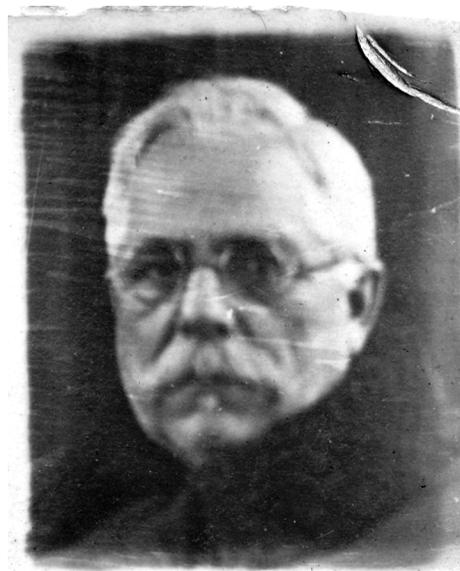
Alexander Ivanovich Sochansky died of tuberculosis at age 24 while studying mathematics at the prestigious Kiev University. It was said that Alexander was “quiet” and that he had a brilliant mind with a genius-level aptitude for mathematics. On various occasions, Helen had said that he committed suicide.

Kiev University was one of the most prestigious schools in the empire at the time and correspondingly difficult to enter; it served mostly children of elite and noble families. Alexander apparently was so talented that he got a scholarship that covered all expenses — a rare achievement for a village boy in those days.

Kiev University, now renamed the Taras Shevchenko University, still stands in the heart of old Kiev. It is located near the homes where the authors’ parents and some of the grandparents grew up, and it is here that Peter, our father, studied medicine.

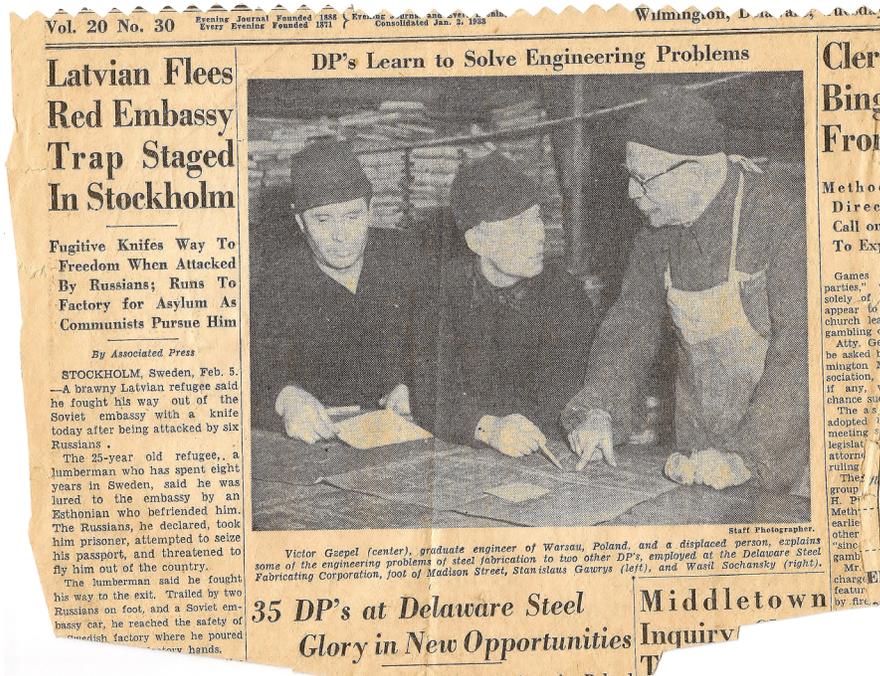
Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky in later life. Once he left Ukraine, he lost his status, his friends, his home, and all ties to his family. He went from being a person of consequence to a man with no past and no present.

He was keenly aware of this and it depressed him. At times, it probably made him angry and increased his bad temper, which had already been a problem when he was young. To some extent, he probably took it out on his daughter, Helen, with whom he always had a troubled love/anger relationship.



Vasily Ivanovich (b. 12 April 1878 [NS] – d. 3 July 1963)

Vasily Ivanovich was born in Nichiporovka but died in Elkton, MD, USA, where he had settled with his daughter, Helen, and her family. His story is found in Chapter 3 below.



Newspaper clipping from the Wilmington Journal showing Vasily Ivanovich teaching some basic mechanics to other immigrants.

He tried to get involved and to become useful, but because he could not learn English and never learned to drive, the effort petered out.

Vadim Ivanovich (b. 5 March 1881 – d. ca. 1938)

Vadim Ivanovich was born on 5 March 1881 and married Olimpiada Darifeevna, a woman of Greek heritage. They had two children. They had a daughter, Galinka, who died of scarlatina (scarlet fever) when she was 12. After that, they had another child, named Nikolai (Kolya). Sometime in the late 1930s during the purges, Vadim was arrested and taken to jail and never heard of again. Presumably he died. Many people disappeared and were never heard of again once they were taken away. His son, Nikolai, fled eastward to escape the persecution that had involved his father. Vasily Ivanovich never saw his nephew again, but he sent him money. It seems he even somehow sent money from the US in 1950, although that may be incorrect.

Vadim Ivanovich, a bookkeeper, was never politically active or controversial. He just became one of the millions of innocent victims of the time of terror.

Nikolai Ivanovich (b. ? – d. ca. 1938)

Nikolai was still remembered in the village in 1998 by his name in Ukrainian as “Mykola.” His wife’s name was Leonton. We have no record of children. He disappeared into the vast purge network at around age forty according to an old man in the village who still remembered him.

Helen said Nikolai had finished university but was somewhat aimless and worked in one of the sugar beet factories. His first cousin’s husband, Byatietz, managed a sugar factory, so he may have worked there. Helen thought he was working in Periatin or one of the other cities near there at the time.

Various members of our family were involved in the sugar industry, and one of the organizations or processing businesses even rented two combined apartments, totaling 16 rooms, for offices in Britchkin's apartment house in Kiev.

The Vlasenko-Sochansky tie to Britchkin may have been independently forged, but it was cemented by the marriage of Vasily Ivanovich and Anna Britchkina. It is possible that this sugar beet factory tie made it possible for Vasily Ivanovich to meet his future wife, Anna Britchkina, or, alternatively, that the marriage led to the tie between Britchkin and the sugar industry.

According to Helen, Nikolai disappeared sometime around 1936 or 1938 without a trace, presumably arrested and executed, as happened to so many others during that time.

Helen described Nikolai thus:

- Mykola looked completely like a gypsy. I knew Mykola. Also Vadim and his wife.
- Nikolai was also taken by the NKVD.
- He was the kindest gentlest of men, "milieshi." He was gay, danced, sang, expounded philosophies and theories...but at the same time he was a rogue and could strip you of everything you owned before you even realized what was happening. No one trusted him, though it was fun to socialize with him.
- He was just that kind of person. All of a sudden he got involved in religion. What fascinated him was that he believed all the current events were already described in the Bible and he loved making these connections. In those times you could not say you were religious; it was a crime and very dangerous.
- He was destroyed in the purges. He started preaching that the Bible would save Russia. He had a big Bible bound in leather. He stopped me on the street once and showed it to me, right there, out in the open (a very foolhardy thing to do). 'Look,' he said, 'everything that is happening now was accurately described in the Bible many years ago!' Well, you can imagine how long he could go around and say these things! One night they came and took him away. It seems they sent him to a labor camp but he never returned.
- Afterward, we never discussed his views at home and never even mentioned him.

In 1998 when Olga asked the old man who eventually led her to the Vlasenko graves if he remembered any of the Sochanskys. His old face creased into a broad smile, and he told how he used to party with Mykola. He remembered him fondly, especially how he sang and danced and always was the life of the party.

Then his face grew sad, and he said that at some point Mykola found religion and went around preaching from the Bible and that “they” took him away around 1936. He was never seen again. The old man thought perhaps Mykola was preaching in Kiev at the time and giving out Bibles. This corroborates Helen’s memory that somehow religion was involved in Nikolai’s disappearance.

It did not take much to be arrested during the purges, even if you were careful, but Nikolai seemed to have pressed his luck. If this old man still remembered his religious activities some 60 years later, they must have been quite impressive.



Taken in November 1998, Olga stands next to an old man who remembered Mykola (Nicolai) Sochansky fondly (younger brother of Vasily Ivanovich, Helen’s father). He smiled a warm toothless smile when he heard the name and told of how enjoyable Mykola had been.

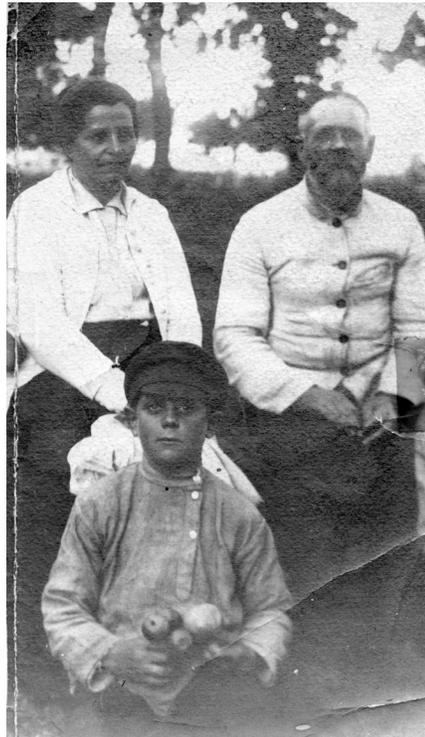
He described Mykola as the life of the party who danced and sang and was funny. He said that later he got religious and was giving out Bibles on the street around 1936 (not a good year for religion in the Soviet Union) and disappeared, never to be seen again. The old man was born in 1914, so he would have been about 10 years older than Mykola.

This old man led us to the Vlasenko graves on the other side of the village.

He lived in a typical village house with geese in the back and no heat or running water, even in 1998.

Anna Ivanovna
(b. 3 April 1890 – d. ca. 1920)

Anna Ivanovna was the youngest of the children of Efemia and Ivan. She married a man by the name of Matsei with whom she had two children, Kolya (Nicolai) and Tolya (Anatoli), who were born around 1915. She died at age thirty of breast cancer. What happened to the boys, we do not know.



Anna (Anyuta) Sochanskaya, her husband Matsei, and one of the two sons – Kolya (Nicolai) or Tolya (Anatoli). She was Vasily Ivanovich’s sister and died of breast cancer at age 30.

Helen identified him as Matsei, her uncle by marriage.

On the right: We do not know for sure who this is, but the photo was grouped with the Sochansky people. In any case, it is one of the relatives of the period.

It is also possible that she is a relative on the Farimski side of the family because few, if any, of the village relatives took formal photos.



In the list of children of Efemia and Ivan compiled by Prof. Vitaly Kovalinsky from the archival material, neither Nikolai nor Anna appear. Instead there is a Maria born in 1890, followed by Dmitry, who was born in 1893 and survived only one year.

Neither of these names had ever been mentioned by Helen, and it is possible that “Maria” is really Anna, for the birth date is about the same. Dmitry only survived a year, so we have included him here. Efemia would have been about 43 at his birth, and children born late in a woman’s child-bearing span often did not survive.

CHAPTER 3

Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky
(b. 11 April 1878 [NS]; d. 3 July 1963)

Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky was born in the village of Nichiporovka, Ukraine, to Efemia Vlasenko and Ivan Sochansky in 1878.

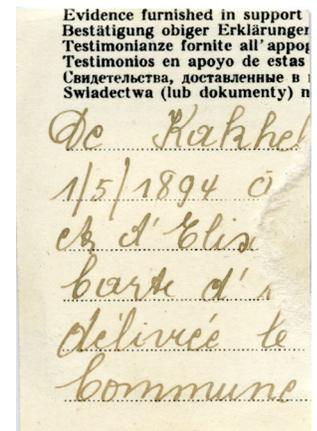
Helen recounted...

-
- The Sochanskys lived on something like a farm. They had
- animals; they had workers, land, their own field of wheat and rye,
- which they took to their own mill to make into flour, baked bread...
- There were no stores. People in the villages made everything they
- needed, or their neighbors made it and they exchanged.
-
- Our family was well-to-do and completely self-sustaining. But
- they didn't have money. All their lives went towards work to
- sustain themselves through the year. Since we had cold winters
- and snow, you had to have a plan. They worked a lot in the warm months
- and prepared everything they would need for food – vegetables, sauerkraut,
- stewed tomatoes, for the winter. They had to make enough to feed the
- pigs, chickens, and other animals. The farm was a very big enterprise, but
- it really only actually supported one family: Sasha, Vadim, Vasily, Anyuta,
- Mikola, the parents... also the workers. They ate there as well.
-
- Times change. That period was one where the whole family worked to
- sustain themselves through the year.
-
- Still Efemia and Ivan sent all their children to get an education. Deda Vanch
- went to seminary because it was free and they had no money. That was
- a common path. Boys finished the seminary and then...they did whatever
- they could.
-

As a child, Vasily Ivanovich portrayed himself as quite a hell-raiser, constantly playing pranks on neighbors and at school and getting punished by his father. He left us a partial account of his youth, dictated to Anna in a mix of Ukrainian and Russian and translated years later by Helen.



A portrait of Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky, which was affixed to some kind of document. It may have been from his UNRRA (UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) camp document in Italy in 1946 because Russian and Ukrainian documents were not written in several languages.



Back of Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky's portrait.

The Unfinished Autobiography of Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky

It was written by Vasily Ivanovich when he was about 80 years old and rewritten by Anna on 12 January 1964. Signed, А. Соханская.

•
• In the metric book of births in the village of Nichiporovka, Poltavsky
• province, Periatinsky county «уезд», in the year 1878, on the date April 11,
• it's written that «раб Божий» (servant of God) Vasily was born. That is the
• famous date with which my earthly life begins. (Note: "rab bozhi" is a very
• common term, as Mom goes on to say, that's what we called everyone in "our"
• church).

•
• This event wasn't foreshadowed or accompanied by anything special. There
• was only a single comment of an old man about the hour of the birth, which
• happened around midnight. This is what he said: "If one is born at midnight,
• and the cock crows, (please God that doesn't happen), because old people
• say the one who was born will become the devil." (This is all in Ukrainian,
• Mom translating into Russian. The Ukrainian villagers were famous for their
• superstitions – that's what Gogol wrote about, in a very funny account. And
• the devil was always involved).

•
• Well, it's apparent that fate smiled on me and the cock didn't crow.
• Childhood, children's games and fun, the first steps of learning took place
• here in the homeland, without any particular notice or remarking on it.
• However several episodes are firmly written in my mind and I remember
• them to this day.

•
• I was a mischievous boy, rowdy, empty-headed, and lazy about learning.
• But at pranks and tricks I was a true composer, for which I often received
• terrible punishments, depending on the mood of my father.

•
• I had an older brother, Alexander, the total opposite of me – quiet, modest,
• diligent, compliant. Being opposites didn't stop us from being great friends,
• though I was often annoyed that I couldn't, at the critical moment, drag him
• into being a co-conspirator to get half of the punishment. Somehow the
• adults figured it out, and punishment wasn't divided between brothers.

•
• I remember when I was six. We had Jews living in the village. They were
• a peaceful people, never involved in any fights of squabbles. One day a Jew
• who was not from our village was walking along the road. I harassed him
• until he got so mad that he came after me. Then three mean dogs came at
• him. Hearing his shouts, my father ran out of the house, quieted the man,
• apologized, and looked around for me, but by then, I had sneaked into the
• house, climbed onto the stove, and hid behind the chimney, anticipating the
• predictable results.

•
• My father got an account of the whole episode from the Jew, and that was
• corroborated by one of my brothers who saw the whole thing. On that basis

•
• he decided how many lashes I should get with a whip. My luck was that
• hiding behind the chimney, there wasn't room to get a good swing of the
• whip, that was my way out. I never resorted to crying and yelling while
• punishments were being meted out. I took it the way it was supposed to be.
• Actually, that was probably better than crying because often the executioner
• starts to feel pity toward the silent victim.

•
• As we were growing up, the question of education came up. Somehow we
• learned the alphabet in the midst of all our activities, and further...? The
• local priest had a daughter, and the family decided to send us to her for
• lessons. She was not very strict, was capable, and very quickly figured out
• the characters of my brother and me.

•
• Although we didn't get a lot of homework, Sasha (Alexander) managed to
• spend all evening on his lessons. At first, that kept me occupied a bit, and
• I was like an assistant to his cramming. Also, that gave my parents a good
• impression of my diligence. Because of my excellent memory, it was enough
• for me just to listen to my brother in order to learn the lessons. But this
• situation soon bored me, and I didn't pass up any opportunity to get involved
• in something more interesting.

•
• One day, bored, I saw out the window that a worker leading a horse loaded
• a barrel onto a sleigh and was about to leave the yard. He was hauling
• drinking water. I shot out of the house like a bullet, ran to catch up to the
• sleigh, jumped onto it while it was moving, and took a ride all the way to the
• man's house. Luckily, the water made it safely and we unloaded the barrel
• together. But the next day, of course, I didn't know my lessons. So a discus-
• sion started. The teacher wanted to know why I didn't do the homework and
• what I had been doing yesterday. She stuck to this interrogation like a sauna
• leaf. (They used to use branches in the sauna to swat their skin with and if
• the leaf came off, it stuck to your skin). Finally, I mumbled to her that I was
• helping get the water barrel and didn't have time. I thought that would end it,
• but no. The torture got worse! I shut up.

•
• That evening, suddenly, she came to visit our home. I immediately sensed
• that this was not going to turn out well for me. *Принесло её нелёгкая!*
• (Idiomatic expression meaning: "It was not a pleasant errand that brought
• her"). And my younger brother Vadim got so agitated that he went into the
• kitchen and climbed onto the stove (*pech*). There (on the stove), we always
• felt at safe, comfortable, and at peace.

•
• Also, that day a *starik* (old man) came to us. He was a blind *lyrnik* – (lyre
• player, who would wander around the countryside playing and singing for
• money). He sang cheerfully, accompanying himself on the lyre. For a long
• time I watched that instrument, and in my secret soul decided I would build
• one, or at least one like it.

•
• We went off to the *pechka* (stove) to discuss how to make a lyre. (A
• Ukrainian stove takes up half the main room and has a ledge where several
• people can sit comfortably and absorb the warmth from the burning wood. It
• is a favorite place for old people and children to sleep in the frigid winters.)
• We gathered at the *pechka*. Next to us, stretched out, lay an old cat. So
• Vadim covered him with a rag and held him. The cat scratched – the little
• ungrate – and I grabbed the tail and wound it up as if I were the Lyrnik
• winding up the lyre and, little by little, singing along. At first, the cat silently
• pulled away, but then it started meowing at the highest pitch of its range so
• that the chords of our concert brought a shout from Mama in the next room.
•
• Ganna (Hannah), our housekeeper said (in Ukrainian) “Why is the cat
• screaming like that?”
•

Note from Helen: They had servants. Even though they weren't wealthy, they had workers. It was a different class. You can imagine the way of life there. No light, no plumbing; heating was the *pechka*. You cooked in big containers on the *pechka*. They all had several servants in the home and also a male worker. These were all *prastiye lyudi* (uneducated, illiterate people) who lived with them and helped them; one *dyadka* (old man) would provide the firewood, which meant going out into the woods and chopping it. The *pech* required a lot of work. Someone had to take away the burnt ash and clean it out. The stove also had to be “fed” with coals and wood to keep it going. Cooking required cleaning and preparing vegetables. In other words it was a job for several people. There was the mistress of the house. She managed it all. The servants were not paid much, sometimes not at all. They got food and a place to sleep.

•
• What size was the house? Maybe like a three-bedroom, two-story US house.
• Large by the standards of the village but not as big as US houses are today.
• More like the houses from the 1950s.
•
• When Ganna appeared, Vadim and I crawled up onto the *pech* to get away.
• Vadim was shaking the cat, and I was twisting its tail like the lyric playing
• the lyre. The cat continued screeching. Then we heard the thundering of
• the chairs in the kitchen as the grownups started to get up to see what the
• commotion was about in the main room. Prudently, we quickly climbed
• back into the darkest corner of the *pech* and let go of our musical “instru-
• ment,” who lept away from us angrily and greeted the arriving adults with an
• indignant swish of its tail as it silently melted away.
•
• This time we got off lightly, and the incident ended only with laughter, some
• harsh words, and a strict order to go do our homework.
•
• In the spring, our studies finished, and summer was used for domestic
• work – grazing the calves in the pasture, herding them, and watching over
• them. There were two very mischievous calves in the herd that kept trying
•

to jump over the canal to get into the green fields planted with grain. So we had to keep special watch over them to prevent them from damaging the crops. The work was not hard but boring. I thought and thought, and finally came up with a solution to make the job more efficient. "Why don't I tie their tails together?" I thought. "Then they won't be able to jump over the canal into the neighboring field. If one jumps, the other will hold him back."

So, to put my plan in action, I brought some bread, patted the calves, gave each a piece of the bread, which they ate, and I quietly tied together the hairy ends of their tails. When the calves started to walk away, they pulled and pulled at each other and the knot got tighter. They got agitated and started to run toward the canal that separated the pasture from the cultivated field. One jumped, but the other stopped, and they both fell into the canal.

By now I was frightened. "How will I get them out of there and how will I untie their tails?" Luckily, the neighbor turned up. He and I jumped into the canal and with great difficulty untied the calves. He gave me a friendly moral lecture and said that it's possible one of the calves would be left without a tail. Seeing for myself the results (of the prank) I sighed in relief that this time it ended well for the calves – and for me as well.

In October I was sent to "Zemstvo School" – the yard was separated from ours only by a stick fence. I had long been aching to go to this school but was too young. What pulled me there, of course, were not studies. I watched with undisguised envy the lively games of the schoolchildren, and like a sick person, my only way to participate was to make up my own approximations of their games.

From the first days at school, I made friends with the main rowdies. The hours of boring lessons stretched long and passed slowly. The breaks and recess periods, on the other hand, passed quickly. Especially the half hour break during which we ate a snack. That passed very quickly as well. My brother usually went home, but I didn't want to. I hung out in school, and lunch was willingly shared with me by my peasant companions. (Because the Sochanskys owned land, they were a slightly higher status villagers than the *Krestiani* or real peasants. Their land was not enough to make money, but it was enough to provide for the family comfortably and to support a few servants and workers.)

And so, with pieces of bread in our hands we raced around in a friendly way through the recess. Rarely did a day pass without unpleasant discussions with Mama about my absence at lunch, but finally she gave up arguing with me. In the morning I tried to leave home as fast as I could – there my group was waiting for me.

One day, having overslept, I tore out of bed and ran through the kitchen. That was laundry day. On the table there was a pile of wet laundry. Mama saw me

•
• and cried after me, “Where are you going? You forgot to wash!” “No time,” I
• said. “I’m late,” and I tried to run past. But that wasn’t to be! She grabbed me
• and smeared my whole face with soapy laundry water. Well, how can I go to
• school looking like that? No one would have noticed a dirty face, but a soapy
• one? That would not do. They’ll laugh.

• So I had to get undressed and wash. And amazingly, I wasn’t late for the
• beginning of the lesson.

• The second year of school, the teacher was a villager – young, who owned
• some land and worked at agriculture. He was an energetic, lively man but
• was not suited at all for the role of teacher. In the end, he got drunk.

• There was a tavern (*shinok*) across the streets from the school, and every
• day he left when class was done at noon and went at once to the tavern,
• leaving behind his very thick reed switch that he brought with him every
• day. At noon he left it in the corner of the room. He later came back in the
• afternoon to finish the school day, and in the evening he took it home with
• him. Of course, the education was weak in those days, but still, we were
• afraid of him. And once I ended up in trouble.

• I was chasing a friend around at recess yelling curse words and suddenly
• saw the teacher who seemed to be frozen in his chair. He stood up and said,
• “stretch out your left hand.” I gave him my left hand, and he turned it palm up,
• then hit it twice hard with a ruler. “If that isn’t enough...” I don’t think I swore,
• at least not in front of him again.

Vasily Ivanovich also wrote stories and poems, only a few of which survived in unfinished form. He always signed them “Deda Vanch,” the nickname his grandchildren used for him.



According to Helen, her father attended primary school in the village and later enrolled in a seminary boarding school in Poltava called a *ōypca*. It was not unusual in those days for talented young men who had no money to get a good education through the church, which gave them a choice of a secular or religious track.

Picture of the school in Nichiporovka that Vasily Ivanovich attended.

Vasily Ivanovich graduated in the religious track but was not ordained. Instead, he sought further training in mechanical engineering at a technical institute or university.

Helen said that her father had originally shown an interest in medicine but discovered he could not stand the sight of blood.

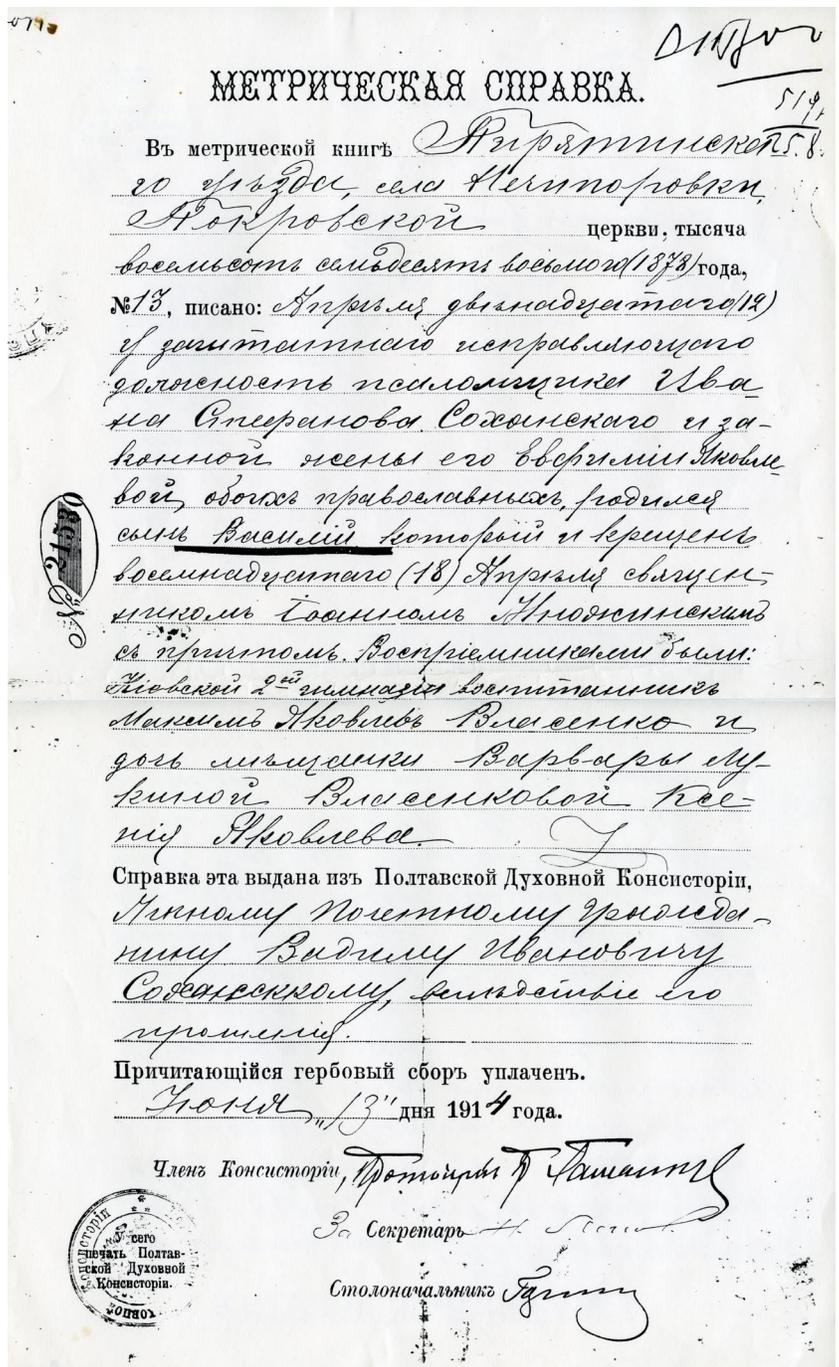
While in Poltava, he came to know the Kravchenko family, and years later, during WWII, that friendship would lead to one of the Kravchenko women he knew marrying his brother-in-law, Sergey Britchkin, in France (Part 3).

He often visited their home, eating meals and spending evenings singing. In summer they visited local fairs, called *jahrmarka*, in the area together, a common practice for both business and pleasure. These fairs were made famous by the author Gogol in his book *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*.

At one such fair, he bought his future mother-in-law a brown woolen plaid blanket to use as a shawl. In 1944, Olga was wrapped in this blanket, suffering from pneumonia as Germany came under US shelling, and Helen did not expect her to survive.

Vasily Ivonovich was known for his deep, rich voice. We remember that, as children in Delaware, they would ask him to sit at the piano and sing down to the lowest possible note, tapping the keys one after another until he hit the bottom note.

Trained for the church, he knew all the traditional music required at funerals, *otpevat*, which he performed years later, in 1947, at the funeral of his mother-in-law in Athens, Greece. Helen sadly recalled how beautifully her father sang hymns while the priest, Father Nikolai, officiated in his black robes..." (Details in Part 9).



Baptismal document of Vasily Ivanovich in Pokrovski Church, belonging to the Poltava diocese.

The document is dated 1914, so it may have been a copy made in preparation for marriage or for Vasily Ivanovich's move to Kiev following his years studying in Siberia.

Education in Siberia and Meeting Kirov

After leaving the seminary in Poltava, Helen's father became involved in revolutionary politics and was labeled a "troublemaker." As a result, he was rejected from the prestigious universities in Kiev, Saint Petersburg, and Moscow and took a job

as a machinist feeding coal into steam engines on trains on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In 1904 he got accepted and enrolled in the newly established Tomsk Technological Institute, now the Tomsk Polytechnic University, in Siberia.

The Tomsk Technological Institute had been established in 1896 at the instigation of Count Witte, who had been a prime mover in the financing and construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Witte and other investors saw great potential in the industrial development of Siberia, and the objective of the institute was to educate a homegrown crop of engineers and technical experts to build the new industries in the Russian Far East.

The Tomsk Technological Institute opened for business in 1900 and had to attract students to wilds of Siberia. As a new institution it probably had more lax entry requirements than the very prestigious and western universities. Plus, officials always felt that in the sparsely populated and non-industrialized Far East, revolutionaries and other trouble makers could do little damage.



A photo of Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky at the time of his graduation from the Tomsk Technological Institute in 1911. He entered the institute in 1906 and joined the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. At Tomsk he met Sergey Kirov, who went on that year to join Lenin's group that eventually became the Bolsheviks. Vasily Ivanovich stayed with the Social Democrats which evolved into the Mensheviks.

It is a rare occasion that he was wearing a western suit. He always preferred local style clothing.

The Tomsk Technological Institute opened for business in 1900, a year when the Russian Empire was undergoing a building boom. That same year a number of technical and scientific institutions were inaugurated in a major push to industrialize the huge country. (Photo credit: unknown)

In 1903 Helen's future great Uncle Jacov Mihailenko was sent there to establish the School of Chemistry, which he led for the next two decades. While there he got to know Vasily Ivanovich, of whom he did not approve.



It took Vasily Ivanovich a full six years to complete the four-year degree in mechanical engineering, graduating in February of 1911. Helen attributed his late education and slow progress to revolutionary activity, but it is also likely that he did not apply himself fully to his studies and that he had to work to pay for his schooling.

The Tomsk Technological Institute had several buildings. This one was the engineering school where Vasily Ivanovich studied mechanical engineering, graduating in 1910.



ДИПЛОМЪ

№ 10
Данъ отъ Томскаго Технологическаго Института Императора Николая II **Василію Ивановичу Соханскому**, сыну заштатнаго ис. д. псаломщика, православнаго вѣроисповѣданія, родившемуся 12 апрѣля 1878 года, въ томъ, что онъ, **Соханскій**, по окончаніи въ 1900 году полнаго курса наукъ въ Полтавской духовной семинаріи съ свидѣтельствомъ этой семинаріи былъ принятъ съ 1 сентября 1904 года въ число студентовъ Томскаго Технологическаго Института, гдѣ и окончилъ курсъ по **Механическому** отдѣленію. По выдержаніи испытанія въ экзаменаціонной комиссіи 1 февраля 1911 года и по представленіи дипломной работы на тему: „Дисковое парораспределение“ былъ удостоенъ званія **Инженеръ-Механика** съ предоставленіемъ ему правъ, изложенныхъ въ статьяхъ 31, 32, 33, 34 и 35 Высочайше утвержденаго 12 іюня 1900 года Положенія о Томскомъ Технологическомъ Институтѣ Императора Николая II.

При поступленіи въ Государственную службу на штатную должность техника онъ, **Соханскій**, въ силу ст. 71-й т. III по продолженію 1906 г. Свод. Зак. Россійск. Имп., имѣеть право на производство въ чинъ XII класса.

Г. Томскъ, „.....“, „.....“, дня 1911 г.

Директоръ Томскаго Технологическаго
Института Императора Николая II

В. Алексеевичъ

Деканъ Механическаго Отдѣленія

*Подпись
А. С. Сидорова*

Секретарь Совета

В. Малеев

*Копія вѣдома: Секретарю по студ
генеральн. деламъ*



У сего диплома печать Томскаго Технологическаго Института Императора Николая II.

Vasily Ivanovich's diploma in mechanical engineering from the Tomsk Technological Institute. After his marriage around 1917, he worked at various jobs, one of which was inspecting boilers on the boats carrying cargo and passengers along the Dnieper.

Growing up Helen never knew what her father did or where he spent his time when he was absent from home for long stretches. Occasionally, his absences were so lengthy that she and her mother resigned themselves to the fact that he would never return.

However, he always did and never talked about where he had been.

While at the Institute he met the future star Bolshevik, Sergey Kirov, who spent 1904 and 1905 in Tomsk as a member of the Socialist Democratic Labor Party, to which Vasily Ivanovich also belonged. It is here that Kirov developed his own political consciousness.

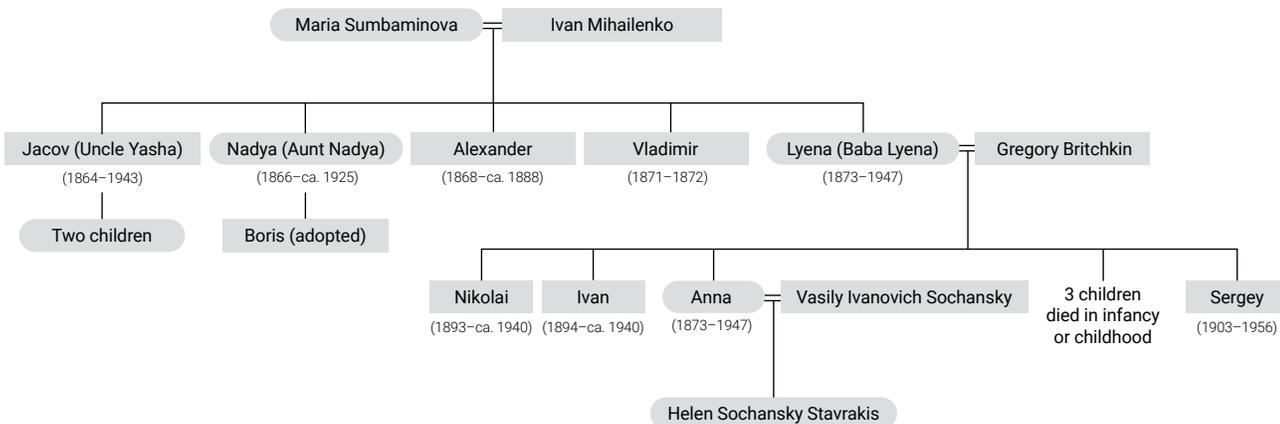
Kirov, eight years younger than Vasily Ivanovich, was a native of Siberia and a child of the crushing poverty that typified rural Russia. After being orphaned as a young boy, several wealthy families in his home town of Urzhum in the Ural Mountains collected enough money to send him to secondary school and then to trade school in Kazan, where he studied mechanics.

The year 1905 saw the first and unsuccessful Russian Revolution, which both Vasily Ivanovich and Kirov waited out in Tomsk. By 1906 Kirov had joined the Bolsheviks, left Tomsk, and had been arrested for anti-government publishing. Vasily Ivanovich, on the other hand, remained with the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, which later came to be known as the Mensheviks.

Kirov eventually became a close associate of Stalin's and was famously murdered in 1934, presumably on Stalin's orders by hired assassins. However, this provided Stalin with the excuse he needed for a major purge of the Bolshevik leadership of the time.

Meeting Uncle Yasha in Tomsk, Siberia

In 1901 Helen's uncle Yasha (Jacov Ivanovich Mihailenko — her grandmother Baba Lyena's brother) arrived in Tomsk to take the post of Professor of Chemistry at the newly opened Tomsk Technological Institute. He eventually rose to the post of provost before returning to St. Petersburg to take over Mendeleyev's laboratory and research position upon the latter's death.



At some point, someone warned Uncle Yasha to stay clear of a young revolutionary only 14 years his junior who was still plodding on toward a university degree. This rabble rouser was named Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky. Eventually, the two met and the older man was singularly unimpressed.

About four years or so after Vasily Ivanovich graduated and moved to Kiev, Uncle Yasha was appalled to learn that this not-so-young and not-so-diligent, passionate revolutionary was engaged to marry his grandniece, Anna. He wrote to the family expressing his displeasure and referred to Vasily Ivanovich as a *buntovchik* (a rioter, revolutionary). He also described Vasily Ivanovich this way: “От него всегда луком пахнет” (from him always emanates the odor of onions!)

He was not heeded, and the rest is history.



The chemistry school of the Tomsk Technological Institute was housed in a separate building from engineering where Vasily Ivanovich studied. Helen's Uncle Yasha (Jacob Ivanovich Mihailenko), a distinguished chemist and colleague of Mendeleev, came in 1901 to set up the department.

Vasily Ivanovich arrived in Tomsk in 1905, and by then Uncle Yasha was an established professor who would eventually become provost.

Around 1914, when Vasily Ivanovich was courting Anna Britckina in Kiev, Uncle Yasha expressed his disapproval of “this revolutionary who always stank of onions.” This did not deter Vasily Ivanovich or Anna, however.

He was Anna's mother's brother and future uncle by marriage to Vasily Ivanovich.

After Mendeleev's death, he returned to St. Petersburg and took his position as a distinguished scientist. (Photo credit: sourach.tomsk.ru)

Vasily Ivanovich's Arrival in Kiev

After graduation, Vasily Ivanovich went to seek his fortune in Kiev where he met Anna Britchkina, a girl 18 years his junior, at a piano concert in the Conservatory of Music where she was performing Chopin's Moonlight Sonata.

He courted her and she fell in love with him. The marriage was considered unsuitable by her parents. Her father, Gregory Britchkin, in spite of his own humble origins as a serf, which was a class standing lower than that of the peasant — he had pulled himself up the social ranks and reached the level of Guild #2 in the merchant class.

Vasily Ivanovich, though educated, remained a penniless peasant. Nevertheless, Anna fell in love with him, and after overcoming her parents' objections, the two married in 1916 or 1917 and settled into what he hoped would be a privileged but productive life in her family's affluent and elegant quarters in their large apartment building.

Helen always said of her father, “He had big ideas. He could charm anyone. And he convinced grandfather to let him marry my mother. But my father never really did anything. He was just a good talker.”



Photo of Anna Britchkina Sochanskaya around the time of her marriage to Vasily Ivanovich.

We do not know what employment he had, if any, when he arrived in Kiev, but he attended concerts and rented a room across the street from the Britchkin house. It is possible that, as his parents were both deceased by then, he may have had a small income from the family lands and mill in Nichiporovka.

Life in Kiev – Reconciling Frugality with Wealth

Vasily Ivanovich was always very spartan in his habits and disdained luxuries. He avoided new clothing and was opposed to all forms of materialism. He ate village food — vegetarian borsch, pork fat, black bread rubbed with garlic, buckwheat groats, and occasionally a small piece of fish, chicken, or meatball. He drank only tea and vodka.

The Britchkins, who were wealthy, maintained an elegant frugality. What they purchased was always of high quality and in good taste but was never flashy in the style of the nobility. They worked hard and did not depend upon an army of servants, although they had a nanny, a maid, gardener, and day laborers.

The Russian Empire was not only a class society, but it was also a “caste” society, in that each class had its way of dressing and had to follow strict guidelines as to how many horses could be attached to their carriages and how much wealth they could exhibit.

The family dressed in dark clothing, proper for merchants of the day, eschewing sparkles and baubles favored by the aristocracy. They had the best silver, porcelain, clothing, linens, and wooden furniture that money could buy, much of it privately ordered from the best artisans.

The Britchkins inhabited a ten-room fashionable apartment near the old city center in a multi-dwelling building they owned. He never asked of anyone what he did not ask of himself, and he demanded hard work and self discipline of his family and workers, although he also expected his children to acquire the best possible education — something that had been denied him.

The family had no frivolous parties or brilliant social gatherings, although they entertained visiting church dignitaries, other pious and serious individuals, and probably also family members.

Britchkin was also prudish. When Baba Lyena’s sister, Nadya, who lived half a block away from the Britchkins, became the subject of gossip implicating her in an affair with her adopted son’s tutor, Britchkin forbade his wife from associating with her sister.

To Helen, her father was always an enigma. He stuck to many of his village ways and he hated ostentatious displays of wealth. His in-laws enjoyed their wealth, albeit in a muted no-flash manner. Vasily Ivanovich did not acquire material things and yet he enjoyed his in-laws’ apartment and material possessions. He did not want to own anything himself but admired his father-in-law’s wealth. Helen always saw this as a major contradiction and source of anxiety for her father, possibly even a sense of guilt. She often referred to him as an opportunist.

In 1943 when the family was fleeing Kiev, an incident occurred which left her forever baffled about her father. In preparation for the departure, the family had loaded up a rickety horse cart with many of their material possessions which had remained hidden in storage from before the Revolution: linen night gowns, night shirts, dishes, pots, silver, candle sticks, fine table cloths, curtains, and other household possessions acquired by Britchkin.

The heavy cart was laboriously pulled by two lame and sickly horses that were losing their strength as they hobbled through western Ukraine to occupied Poland. Baba Lyena, Helen's grandmother, who was in ill health could not walk but rode atop the pile of household goods. It rained on the road, and as conditions deteriorated, Helen realized that the household goods had to go, or the family would perish. So she stopped, and with Peter's help began to drag down all the heavy wooden crates which the empty-handed, defeated soldiers politely asked if they could scavenge. She told them to help themselves. They could not take all this stuff.

Vasily Ivanovich and Anna were so angry to lose all these material things that they turned their backs on their daughter and refused to speak to her for a long time afterward. (The story can be found in Part 9: Exodus). Helen could never figure out why her father, who refused to acquire material possessions, found it so difficult to part with things that had not seen the light of day for over 20 years and which were certainly less valuable than their own lives.

Helen also wondered how her father reconciled his revolutionary politics with his marriage into a bourgeois family. To her, this was more evidence of his opportunism. However, it has to be remembered that Vasily Ivanovich was a Social Democrat and espoused the view that the bourgeoisie would be instrumental in creating a new democratic period of transition to socialism.

Helen was educated within the Bolshevik (Leninist-controlled) doctrine, which defined the bourgeoisie as the enemy of the Revolution and had to be eliminated. At some point, her father and grandfather must have come to terms, for they began to work together on a plan to build affordable workers' houses on Truhanov Island. Vasily Ivanovich designed them, and Britchkin planned to finance the project, although events prevented the project from ever going forward.

The Human Cost of the Revolution

The Revolutions swept away everything, and both former serf and peasant ended up with nothing. Everything Britchkin had built up over his life was taken away. Vasily Ivanovich, who had worked hard to elevate himself above his peasant roots, going to seminary and then on to university, also ended up with nothing. As Helen said, "The Bolsheviks exterminated the best people. These people could have been of use. The whole story of the first 25 years of the Revolution was of someone deliberately trying to destroy the best."

The ensuing years of civil war destroyed the industrial and agrarian infrastructure of Ukraine, dashing Vasily Ivanovich's hopes for a better life. Within the space

of a few years, he was reduced from an eloquent organizer, preaching a more just society to a supplicant hiding from the bloodthirsty Bolsheviks with whom he had previously worked so closely.

The hard line of the Bolsheviks now put him at odds with his family and friends who began to see him as selling out to the wealthy elites.

However, despite his marriage into a bourgeois merchant family, Vasily Ivanovich still retained some comrades in the old revolutionary circles. After the tsar abdicated there was a parliamentary meeting in St. Petersburg to choose a new government. The Menshevik Party was popular with the workers and peasants. Vasily Ivanovich was invited to this meeting but did not go. He was afraid of being cut off from Kiev should something happen and not being able to get back home.

As it turned out, he was right. Helen remembers him telling her that if the trains stopped running, he would not be able to return. As it turned out, the Bolsheviks took over in an armed coup, called the October Revolution, commandeering all transport, and the trains were stopped. “The Bolsheviks,” Helen remarked sadly, “were the only party that wanted to destroy everything.”

It appears that this was the meeting called by the Provisional Government in September 1917 (OS). Vasily Ivanovich prized the invitation, keeping it for years hidden in the backing of a mirror. To own something like that would be cause for imprisonment or death in the new system. It was said that he brought it with him to the US, but we have not found it.

After the Revolution, Vasily Ivanovich kept to his village roots, probably both because of personal preference, and also due to expediency — it was important to look like a proletariat, not one of the *vrag naroda*, enemies of the people. Helen remembered that in the room where they slept, Vasily Ivanovich liked to sleep on a coarse, homespun blanket, while Anna preferred white blankets and pillows with crinoline and lace and delicate handkerchiefs.

He also dressed like a villager, with wide pants and a loose shirt, a *kozbuk* (traditional peasant long fur coat), boots, and conical hat.

A Man of Contradictions

From all accounts, it appears that Vasily Ivanovich was a man of contradictions. He could be “a great charmer,” according to Helen, and even in old age he was handsome and charismatic. He knew people everywhere around Ukraine, including former revolutionaries who helped him get his family situated in housing after the Revolution.

“The whole world owed him favors — he was always in charge of something,” Helen said. His job was overseeing and inspecting all the steam machines on the Dnieper. Lots of people needed work, and Vasily Ivanovich was in a position to employ them. He was good with people, though not the buddy-type, and tried to help when people needed it.”



This photo, taken around 1928 when Helen was around 10 years old, is the only picture we have of father and daughter.

He was verbally abusive to her, and in this picture her smile is tentative and cautious but somehow pleased. It was taken probably in the room at 12 Malopodvalnaya Street, which had been Anna's family building.

As an example, Helen remembers that in 1933 during the starvation, when all they had were slimy potatoes and a thin soup of cabbage and water, Vasily Ivanovich brought home a student who ate with them every night. When the student finished his diploma, he thanked Vasily Ivanovich and said, "This diploma belongs to you."

He then offered to pay for all the meals that had sustained him during his university years, and Vasily Ivanovich said to him, "Young man, do not give me anything. You will repay me by giving to someone else in need when the time comes."

However, Vasily Ivanovich could also be cruel and verbally abusive to the people closest to him. As Helen pointed out, his work was conveniently suited to his personality as it required travel; he would leave for long stretches of time with just his backpack, essentially abandoning his wife, who often had to handle everything at home. He liked his freedom. According to Helen, he always resented his mother-in-law, Helen's beloved Baba Lyena, who opposed his pressing his suit of her daughter. Baba Lyena remained silent but never trusted him, and he must have sensed this.



The *kozruk* was a long fur coat with the fur turned to the inside. It was standard peasant garb in Ukrainian villages and always carried along on travels to serve as bedding if one needed to bunk down on the ground in the open air.

Vasily Ivanovich had a whole local wardrobe which, during Soviet times, he used when appropriate or helpful to gain sympathy from the authorities due to his lower class standing.

Even though Vasily Ivanovich had left village life behind and had struggled to get an education and marry into a higher class family, he never forgot his roots and remained proud of his humble origins.

One way he expressed this was through his wardrobe, always keeping some bit of clothing that announced his peasant background. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

When they all were forced into living together in one or two rooms, he was nasty to her, a trend which continued through their exodus from Kiev and up until her death. He and Anna had a habit of deliberately not speaking to Helen, or to Baba Lyena, if he was put out by something. These bouts of petty spitefulness lasted for months, making home life tragically disagreeable.

In the US, he often belittled and insulted his daughter, Helen, even though it was only through her and Peter's efforts that Vasily Ivanovich and Anna survived. Along with his charm, there was clearly a dark side to his personality.



Photo for some document, showing Vasily Ivanovich wearing his conical Ukrainian hat. Taken in Ukraine prior to 1943.



Taken in Newark, Delaware, USA ca. 1960. Vasily Ivanovich wears his conical Ukrainian hat.

A Ukrainian Version of the "Underground Railway"

The 1930s were difficult and tragic times in Ukraine, with the Soviets literally carrying out a war against the peasantry. In the beginning of the decade, the Soviets wanted to nationalize all land and to force peasants onto collective farms. The peasants resisted. The retaliation was massive and brutal and involved deportations, arrests, executions, and, ultimately, a massive famine that cost up to 7 million lives in Ukraine.

The peasant purges, called the "dekulakization" of Ukraine, began in 1929 when Stalin issued a directive that landowning and wealthier peasants were to be shot, sent off to Siberia, or detained in local labor camps. The so called *kulaks* (the word means "fist") were richer peasants who owned land in the villages. They opposed the Bolsheviks, as they had everything to lose and nothing to gain from the collectivization of land and animals. Thus, the Bolsheviks decided that they were to be eliminated.

Owning a couple of cows or five or six acres more land than his neighbors would put a peasant into this category of being a *kulak*, especially if a jealous neighbor informed on him. Lenin described the richer peasants as “bloodsuckers, vampires, plunderers of the people, and profiteers, who fatten on famine.”

To encourage informants, collaborators were planted in the villages to inform on neighbors. Once someone was denounced, the man was arrested, and his house and lands would be appropriated by the state. The informant often got small rewards from the victim’s property. In many cases, whole families were sent off to labor camps.

When a so-called *kulak* learned that he was about to be arrested and deported to what was essentially a slave labor camp, he would try to run away, often with only what he could carry on his back. Many from Nichiporovka made their way to Vasily Ivanovich for help, which was terribly dangerous for him and his family. If he had been discovered, he and his family would all have been evicted and sent off to labor camps along with the villagers.

He helped as many as he could by finding them places to hide and relocate to using his old Socialist party connections. Helen remembered from her childhood the furtive knocks on the door in the middle of the night. Hushed urgent voices. Whispers. Fear. Terror.

She recalled desperate people slipping into the house at night and sleeping on the floor in the hallway with instructions to go out by the back door and “melt away” if the police or anyone should appear. If they were spotted, then they were to leave quickly and quietly through the corridor.

She remembered them clad like the peasants with pants stuck into boots, wearing a *kozbuk* and even fur hats in summer, which they used to sleep on outside. They carried everything they owned in a bag on their back. Women often had to renounce their husbands to survive and to save their children. There was “a beautiful lady about to be sent to a prison camp where they had sent her husband. In order to save herself and her children, she had to disown him — to wail and curse him saying her husband left her and was a *sabachi sin*, son of a dog!”

One such victim, Anton Bochan, had gone to the country school with Vasily Ivanovich. He had prospered in the village and was accused of being a *kulak*. They



Dekulakization. A rural parade organized by the Soviets under the banners “We will liquidate the kulaks as a class” and “All to the struggle against the wreckers of agriculture”.

The Soviets turned rural peasants against the successful family farmers who, as a class, opposed collectivization because they stood to lose the bits of land and animals they owned. They were, however, the most successful farmers, and the result was a complete agricultural disaster. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)



Village from around 1900 not far from Nichiporovka, near the city of Poltava. Photographer and publisher unknown.



Downloaded from the internet from an unknown author. This is a picture of a village near Poltava, which is in the area of Nichiporovka, probably taken around 1900–1917.



came for him to Nichiporovka one night, but he escaped and ran for his life, ending up in Kiev.

Vasily Ivanovich managed to get him an unsavory job on a project fertilizing fields with sewage. It was 100 kilometers away and appeared relatively safe. With no cars and only dirt roads made impassible by the spring rains, there was little chance of his being discovered.

One day Anton made the mistake of going back to Nichiporovka to see his wife and children and was spotted by an informer. Helen remembered that her father was furious with Anton for his impetuosity. Even though Anton towered over Vasily Ivanovich, who was no small man, the latter gave him a furious tongue lashing, liberally sprinkled with the colorful profanities for which the language is famous.

Anton knew he had to disappear. “I’ll run away!” He offered.

But Vasily Ivanovich came up with a new plan for Anton. “No, they’ll find you! Go away from work for a couple of days. Say someone is sick, then make your way *na zapad* (meaning “to the west”). There is a wooded area. I know a good Communist there — *svoi chelovek* (one of our people).”

In the end, the story had a happy ending. Anton survived and continued working in the sewage fertilizer factory; his son also went to work there, eventually becoming an engineer.

Years later, in the US, Helen remembered that the daughter or son of a villager wrote her father, thanking him for saving their father’s life.

Leaving the Beloved Homeland Forever

In 1943 Vasily Ivanovich left his country forever with his wife, daughter, mother-in-law, granddaughter, and son-in-law. They traveled through occupied Poland and lived under the Nazi occupation. Then, as the war ended, all were relocated to Italy and permitted to continue on to Greece. From there the family made their way to the US and settled in Maryland and Delaware.

Vasily Ivanovich loved his homeland. Helen said he loved the steppe, the fields of wheat rippling golden in the breeze, the scrubby forests, and the river. He would put a small rucksack on his back and disappear for long periods of time, walking she knew not where, sleeping in the open, and returning a free spirit whenever he felt the need.

In the village and its environs, he was known. He was somebody. And when the purges came, and the villagers were persecuted, he took risks to save those he could. He started out his life gambling for prosperity and justice, and he lost. He married into wealth and hope, and the Revolution took that from him.

It let him down and stripped him of his family, his brothers, his nephews, cousins, and friends, and even took his dignity. After the Revolution, like others of his class, he had to remain in the shadows just to survive.

Then, when Kiev literally blew up under Nazi occupation, Vasily Ivanovich lost the one thing he loved most, his homeland. That he did not lose his life is due to his enterprising and indomitable daughter, Helen, and her talented physician husband, Peter. Vasily Ivanovich and Anna survived with their offspring and left behind them many successful descendants in the US.



Doroga (road) by Ukrainian painter, Konstantin Kryzhitsky, 1899.