



The Last Train From Mariupol

A story of friendship, love, and hope,
coupled with the will to persevere,
against all odds.

Martin Ravas

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“If happiness is the goal – and it should be, then adventures should be a top priority.”

Richard Branson

I. An Evening at the Harbor Cafe

The raindrops were dancing on the roof of the minibus I was riding in, on my way to meet my ex-pat friends at the Hotel Europa’s cozy ‘Harbor Cafe’.

The hotel wasn’t far from the coast, just off the Primorsky Boulevard. Its terrace provided a partial view of the Sea of Azov, and it was a popular hangout of the foreign community in Mariupol.

It was late on Thursday afternoon, and I knew some of my friends would already be there. These meetings had provided us ex-pats with a chance to unwind, have a few laughs, and exchange the latest gossip from our daily lives in Ukraine.

While many ex-pats were married, most of us single guys were dating local women. Not only because they were quite attractive, but also because they were generally very pleasant to be around.

On many occasions, during our evenings at the café, the presence of young Ukrainian professionals as well as friends made our get-togethers even livelier.

I had never come across such a closely-knit, friendly bunch of ex-pats in Kyiv, where I first arrived a year earlier, and where I was supposed to be based. And there were many more foreigners, nightclubs, bars, and cafes there.

That's why I decided to move to Mariupol in the first place, a couple of months earlier. Having visited my Austrian friend Herbert, who had already been living there, and having been invited to a couple of wild parties by him, I already knew there was a lot of fun to be had in this picturesque coastal town, full of young, optimistic, and enthusiastic people. Furthermore, it had the feel of a frontier town, with all the adventure and mayhem that comes along with it.

There is no freedom without an element of danger.

At least that's what I had already learned through experience. Even children face a greater risk of suffering an accident, each time they venture into a playground. The trouble is they usually feel freer, or even happier there, than in the relative safety of a house, or the confines of a school. Taking a risk is a fundamental part of life, whether we like it or not. Be it in business, sports, relationships, or travel. Without it, no great things can be

achieved, and no great excitement can be found. And it was yet another reason I decided to leave Kyiv, and move to Mariupol.

Being a freelance journalist requires traveling, and taking some risks anyways, and that's why it didn't really matter whether I lived in Kyiv or not, as long as the publications I had been working for didn't find out. By moving to Mariupol though, I'd have to run the gauntlet of their anger, if they did.

The minibus driver kept announcing the stops in such a blurred, casual manner, that I was struggling to keep awake, on such a gloomy, rainy day. Fortunately for me, the driver seemed to have a penchant for racing, and his erratic driving helped me keep my eyes open, each time I was about to snooze. He braked intensely whenever approaching a stop, then accelerated with full power, when departing. Anyone not holding tight risked being flung around, or even landing on the floor. Finally, I recognized the stop's announcement and sprung to my feet.

Half asleep when getting out, I stepped right into a puddle, and let out a quiet curse in English, to the amusement of nearby students.

Even though I hailed from the Czech Republic, commonly referred to as Czechia, I completed my degree in journalism in Britain. Then, while working for several English language publications, I spent the past decade on the road, using English far more frequently than my native Czech, on a daily basis.

Being in Ukraine, however, I made every effort to improve my Russian, as not everyone here spoke English well, especially older people.

My knowledge of the Czech language made it easier for me. This didn't mean though, that my ex-pat friends could not speak Russian.

In fact, most of them spoke at least basic Russian, and some of them spoke fluently. Herbert, for example, spoke almost like a native. After all, the lingua franca in Mariupol was Russian, as in most other Ukrainian cities east of the Dnieper River.

True, many of my friends had moved to Ukraine years ahead of me, so it wasn't that surprising, that I had some catching up to do.

Normally, I'd be transferring to another minibus at this stop, but today was a rainy day, and because my foot was soaked in muddy water, I decided to take a cab. Not like it cost an arm and a leg in Ukraine either.

The cab driver wasn't impressed with the roll of 70 Hryvna I had placed in his hand upon arrival. He was expecting a more commensurate tip for such a muddy ride, so he just gave me a nasty look, and sped off.

As I was walking up the steps to the café, located on the first-floor terrace of the hotel, I could already hear Herbert's loud, flamboyant voice, speaking in Russian. And along with it, the subsequent laughter emanating from anyone present in his company, at that moment. It was a familiar scene, and it made me feel like going there all the more. I was a regular by this time, and so were at least four other ex-pats, their girlfriends, wives, or friends.

As soon as they saw me, I was greeted with the usual teasing, like every other member of this troop upon their arrival. “Hey Tomas, how’s it hanging?” “Got wet, didn’t we?” They said teasingly.

I put my wet jacket on the hanger near our table, took a seat, and removed my wet shoe. This elicited a few laughs. Everyone knew what the streets of Mariupol could turn into, during a heavy rainstorm. It was only August, with the weather still balmy, so I knew my shoe would dry in no time. “How’s Anna doing”? Asked Herbert with an impish smile, knowing full well I kind of fancied her. Anna, whom I had met by chance at a shop in my neighborhood, lived in an apartment block next to mine. I once pointed her out to Herbert, while we were walking near my apartment block. It was quite a while ago, but Herbert had a very good memory for such things.

Nikolai, the burly bartender, manager, owner, bouncer, and caretaker all in one, brought me

my usual double espresso with milk without asking, as always.

He only spoke limited English, so we tried to speak with him in Russian, whenever possible. He was an ex-military police detective, born and raised in Mariupol. The son of a Russian mother and a Ukrainian father. Being a Ukrainian of mixed ethnicity, he was proud of his Russian heritage but displayed strong Ukrainian national affiliation. The word was out he had taken part in the defense of Mariupol seven years ago when the separatists tried to take control of it. In this eastern part of Ukraine, culturally speaking, there was a thin line between being Russian or Ukrainian. Politically speaking, however, the difference between Russia and Ukraine was far more pronounced. And considering the recent events in this part of the world, many inhabitants of this city let their loyalties be known.

Over the weekends, Nikolai always had an extra waitress helping out at the café, as well as an extra cook helping his wife, Natalia, in the

kitchen. This made for a smoother and faster service, but was not usually necessary on weekdays, apart from special occasions.

The way this cafe was run, the behavior of the staff, the relatively good quality of the coffee and food, the affordable prices along with its location gave it a very pleasant, cozy feel. A home away from home, for many ex-pats.

It took less than ten minutes to walk to the beach, and that was another reason why this café became our favorite haunt. Furthermore, those under the influence, unable to drive home, simply booked a room at the hotel for the night. It happened quite frequently, especially to Herbert. He even had a specific room for such an occasion, and the reception staff always kept it in reserve for him, as long as they could, just in case.

I settled at the large table among the others and sipped my first double espresso. It was gone in less than a minute, as usual. Nikolai already knew this, and duly brought another one in a timely fashion. I always accepted it,

even on the rare occasion I didn't really want another.

Most ex-pats here were highly educated, qualified, and had good steady jobs, unlike me.

Herbert was in charge of modernizing the Mariupol Port's logistics, financed by the IMF. An impressive position for someone who barely turned thirty-six and looked younger still.

As such, he was given a large house with a nice garden, in the best part of town. He had a house cleaner and a company car for his use 24/7. Even an expense account!

Jack the Scot was an ex-SAS soldier in his mid-fifties. Bulky and muscular, with silver hair and a matching trimmed mustache, he was in charge of training the newly established Ukrainian Special Forces.

Jeremy was a young, good-looking Frenchman in his late 20s, supervising the allocation and distribution of EU grant money, earmarked for modernizing Ukraine's telecommunications systems, and metallurgical factories in

Mariupol. These guys were all specialists in their field, while I was a mere freelance journalist. Yet, none of them seemed stuck up, or arrogant. Quite the contrary.

They all seemed cheerful, open-minded, and friendly folks.

Despite Ukraine having experienced tense relations with Russia during the past decade, few of the locals I had met here seemed to harbor any anti-Russian feelings or prejudices. Not against the Russian people that is. They were wary of the Russian leadership, however, and rightly so. Later that month, some Russian forces began to assemble along the border with Luhansk and Donetsk. Most people in Mariupol, including my ex-pat friends, felt they only came there to boost the morale of ethnic Russians in the separatist regions, and not much more. No one seemed to be bothered by it.

Neither was I, despite the fact my grandparents had experienced a full-blown Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, about which I had heard a lot.

I barely finished my second espresso, and a round of beers was brought to our table, for all of us.

It was common for Ukrainian girls to drink beer as well, much like in Czechia, or elsewhere in Europe. They drank perhaps only a tad less than the guys, but drink they did. “Cheers and ‘Na Zdarovie’”, we all exclaimed cheerfully in English and in Russian respectively, to reflect our multicultural grouping.

One round followed another, the latest stories were exchanged, and before long it was dark outside. By this time I was under the influence, to say the least.

On this occasion, Jack picked up the whole tab, despite others offering to pitch in. We usually took turns, but the most well-to-do ex-pats took theirs more frequently than the rest of us.

They instinctively knew no one was out to take advantage of them, and that not everyone was earning as much as they did. We all just wanted to unwind, have some fun, and enjoy the

company of the others. And that's how it was on most evenings at the Harbor Café of the Europa Hotel, in Mariupol. Just like tonight's cheerful get-together, we kept meeting here on a regular basis.

My best friend is the one who brings out the best in me.

Henry Ford

II. A Visit to the Port

Being a journalist, I was naturally curious about everything going on in Ukraine and especially in Mariupol, where I now lived. After all, I had a living to make and needed to come up with

some interesting reports for the magazines I worked for, which asked me to submit more stories about Ukraine.

The clear wish of the majority of the Ukrainian people was to integrate Ukraine closer to the West. In turn, the West obliged by offers of increased cooperation, training programs, educational aids, various loans, and grants designed to improve governance, logistics, equipment, etc.

That's what most of the ex-pats I met in Ukraine were here for in the first place. And Mariupol was a frontline city so to speak, right next to the separatist regions and not that far from the Russian border itself. It was an especially important city for Ukraine due to its port facilities and the huge Azovstal Metallurgical Plant, among other things.

But it was the young people of Mariupol who especially wanted to remake this city into a modern, western-leaning metropolis. My ex-pat friends and I loved the spirit of the local people here, especially the younger ones, their

friendliness, optimism, and efforts to improve their city and their country. For those reasons alone, Mariupol felt very welcoming, exciting, and enjoyable to live in. The positive attitudes of the people, despite all the hardships of the recent past, made it a rewarding place to be at. And in turn, we the ex-pats made our best efforts to help them achieve their aspirations.

Last night at the cafe I had asked Herbert if I could visit him at his office at the port to write a report for the magazine.

I can't say he was too excited about the idea at first, as he was usually too busy at the office and took his work very seriously, but he obliged for friendship's sake.

I suggested a morning time but he was only available at 3:30 pm. I took what I could get and arranged myself accordingly. I decided to sleep in that morning, with no need to get up early for such a late appointment. The sun was shining, many kids had already returned from school and were running riot in the playground

of my apartment building when I finally woke up.

It was almost half-past one when I took a quick shower, then had some scrambled eggs and a cup of instant coffee for breakfast. Half an hour later I threw my laptop in my backpack, put some halfway decent clothes on, and off I went.

As I was approaching the entrance to the port facilities, where Herbert's office was located, I was stopped by a guard. "What's your name?" He asked sternly. "Tomas Slancar", I replied. "Nationality?" "Czech". "Phone number?" I had to dig it up from my phone contacts, as I never remembered my own number, having frequently changed sim cards as I traveled.

He contacted Herbert's secretary and I was let in.

Loads of workers in hard yellow hats and quite a few be-suited businessmen milled about the port facilities, while heavy machinery was moving crates and containers in the

background. "What a busy port," I thought to myself.

The sounds of cargo ships blowing their horns echoed in the distance. Seagulls were flying overhead, searching for any lost piece of food dropped nearby. They were probably louder than the ships and the machinery combined as they squabbled and fought for the leftovers.

I was guided to the logistics center, 2 floors up the elevator, and as I got out, a bright orange sign read: 'The Logistics Center CEO, MA. Mr. Herbert Zittel.'

In I went, and while I was waiting, his secretary served me a cup of coffee. A few minutes later Herbert emerged from his office, dressed in a three-piece suit, looking like a million bucks.

"Come on in Tomas and make yourself comfortable. Good to see you". He said loudly. He looked very professional I must say, over six feet tall, fairly slender but muscular, with light brown hair. His large, light blue eyes were as penetrating as the latest and the most powerful Siemens X-ray machine.

Still, it was clear he was very serious about his work. His phone kept ringing and stacks of papers were all over the place. Two desktop computers kept showing graphs and various figures.

“Boy, oh boy, I could never do his job. It would drive me insane,” I wondered to myself.

But he was full of energy, multitasking between different issues naturally, as always.

“So Tomas, what would you like to know about my work here, about the port”? He asked eagerly.

“Just tell me how you guys improve the existing conditions here on the ground and something about the port, so I can write an article for my magazine,” I said casually.

“Very well, move over here, sit down, listen, and watch this, my friend”. Herbert said matter-of-factly.

He started telling me about the increasing volume of traffic, despite the Russian Navy’s frequent impediments, about how they

streamline the various processes of sending and receiving cargo, the new improved loading and unloading procedures, and techniques, the new machinery supplied and paid for by the IMF, etc. He showed me the various graphs and figures. The improvements to the system were obvious to see, even for those not trained in this field, and I was duly impressed. Apparently, the port's cargo ships transported mostly coal, metallurgical equipment, steel, aluminum, etc. Before the conflict in 2014, almost 50% of the port's cargo was Russian. But after, the port was cut off from many of its main shippers in the north of Donbas.

And this is why The IMF and The EU stepped in to help out.

The port started shifting its focus away from coal and metal-related cargo, and more toward foodstuffs, such as grains and oils, as well as clay and various project cargo. It also strived to improve its logistics toward better efficiency, a job Herbert was tasked to oversee.