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## THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE OF COLD WAR POLITICS

**Victor Sukhodrev** was at more superpower summits than any world leader.

EISENHOWER and Khrushchev. Carter and Brezhnev. Reagan and Gorbachev. In almost every photograph there is a slim, dark-haired man standing in the middle, anonymous but indispensable.

He has the respectful mien of a manservant and the concentration of a game-show player.

He is **Victor Sukhodrev**, the king of interpreters, who in a career of nearly 30 years was present at more superpower summits, more deal-making, more brinkmanship than any of the men who flanked him.

He was present but not present, emptying himself of ego, slipping into the skin of the man who was speaking. It was a role that had fascinated him since he was a boy watching wartime newsreels, the mysterious figure he calls the man in the middle.

Throughout the Cold War, Mr Sukhodrev was there in the middle — low-key, reliable, professional, the English-language voice of every Soviet leader from Khrushchev to Gorbachev.

He spoke these leaders' words to seven US presidents, from Eisenhower to the first George Bush.

"It's an almost mystical feeling that you are bringing people together, people who otherwise would never be able to communicate," Mr Sukhodrev, 72, said at the comfortable country home near Moscow where he has settled into retirement with his wife, Inga.

Somehow, through a process he does not understand, he finds himself unconsciously speaking with a perfect American accent to Americans and a British accent to Britons. The accent that might be called his native one is British because it was as a boy in London in the 1940s that he learned English.

His mother, separated from his father, was there as a member of the Soviet trade mission. From the age of six, Victor was among English playmates. When at the age of eight he entered the Soviet embassy school in London, he found himself translating for school officials on public occasions.

"That is when I really believed, and never lost that belief, that when I grew up I was going to be the man in the middle," he said. "I was going to be an interpreter."

He returned to Moscow at the age of 12, graduated from the Institute of Foreign Languages and soon realised his dream, at the top level of the Kremlin.

Early on, travelling to the US in 1959 with Khrushchev, he learned how to interpret, with conviction, statements that embarrassed him.

When Khrushchev told Americans that Soviet citizens had no interest in owning a car or a home, Mr Sukhodrev dutifully translated, while saying to himself, "I want a car! I want a house!" But the man in the middle is not, after all, as self-effacing as he seems.

"You are the one," he said, remembering the moments when the world was watching.

"It all boils down to, you are the one that they are understanding, not your boss, who speaks in an unknown tongue. It is you they're reacting to. If you get applause, it's you who are getting applause."

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<http://www.ausit.org/pics/Maninthemiddle.doc>

[October 2, 2005]