Andrey Vandenko

VICTOR SUKHODREV, THE GENERAL OF INTERPRETERS

He knows much, but talks little. Although the ability to speak grammatically and correctly is the basic requirement of his work. Victor Sukhodrev was Nikita Khrushchev's and Leonid Brezhnev's personal interpreter, and he also interpreted for Mikhail Gorbachev, Alexey Kosygin, Andrey Gromyko, Anastas Mikoyan, and other Soviet leaders during the nineteen sixties, seventies and eighties. The walls of his dacha at Nikolina Gora are covered with photographs showing him with John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, George Bush Snr., Margaret Thatcher and Indira Ghandi... He knew Frank Sinatra and Mohammed Ali, and was friendly with Van Cleibern. Bella Akhmadulina dedicated a poem to him and Mikhail Shemyakin presented him with pictures...

So there's a lot, I assure you, that this man could talk about – if he ever wanted to...

A sapper's lot is clear: he only gets to make one mistake. What about an interpreter?

Our work has its own distinctive features. After all, there are different kinds of interpreters. If a foreign tour guide, for instance, makes a mistake, there'll most probably be no great harm done.

But when you work at summit level, you simply must not make a single serious error. Because there'll be no second chance – you'll be out of a job on the spot, and you can say goodbye to your career.

Victor Mikhailovitch, you’ve spent something like four decades mixing with world leaders. Without the ability to keep secrets, you would probably never have managed to stay afloat for so long?

I wrote a book, which I called “My Tongue is My Friend”. That might sound paradoxical, but you’re right: an interpreter is a person, who hears a lot and knows a lot – the important thing is knowing, when to stop and not say too much.

Few of your interpreter colleagues, I would imagine, could boast a similar length of service at the very top?

Very probably. I’d say my case was pretty much an exception. These days, of course, there are plenty of qualified specialists – people, who are usually referred to as being bi-lingual, that is to say they speak their native language and a foreign language equally well. As a rule, these are the children of well-to-do parents, who have had the opportunity to live and study in a foreign country. It’s better, after all, not to learn a language from textbooks, but from mixing with people, who use it as their normal means of communication. In my day, of course, going freely abroad for a language practice was something you couldn’t even dream of. In those days, the only people, who could learn a language outside the classroom – on the streets, as they say – were the children of Soviet diplomatic staff.

Of which you, presumably, were one.

In the summer of 1939 the ministry – or, rather, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, as it was called then – sent my mother to London, to work in our Trade Representation there. At the time I was six, and I tailed along behind her. Usually foreign postings for Soviet specialists lasted two years – three at the most. But, if you remember, September 1939 saw the outbreak of the Second World War, and Britain was caught in a naval and aerial blockade, so we were forced to stay there right to the end of the war in 1945. I didn't start at the Soviet embassy school until 1941, so for the first year and a half I mixed entirely with English children. When the bombing of London got worse – and the Germans launched air raids with punctilious regularity – my mother had to spend the night in the Trade Representation's air-raid shelter.

There I met children from other Soviet families, but at first found difficulty in understanding them. English, you see, had become more normal to me than Russian – for a time. Then I went to school and started to remember my native language fairly quickly, but even so most of the time I continued speaking English. My mother used to go to work early in the morning and get back late at night, and I would be left with the neighbours, the Holloways. Auntie Mary and Uncle Jack had no children of their own, and they treated me like their son. I used to help them round the house, go delivering the post with Uncle Jack, and spend time in his photography lab and workshop. And naturally we spoke all the time in English. So to some extent you can say I was self-taught. I didn't attend any special schools, and even at the Institute of Foreign Languages I applied to study French...

Was that in Moscow?

Yes. In 1945 mother's posting finished, and we returned home, where I finished my schooling and went on to study at the Institute of Foreign Languages.

I notice you only talk about your mother, never your father. Do you do that intentionally?

These days one can talk openly about such things... My father, you see, was an officer, who served on the General Staff of the Ministry of Defence. To be more precise, in military intelligence – the GRU or Main Intelligence Administration. When I flew to London with my mother, my father was on a secret mission on the other side of the ocean. He was what they call an 'illegal' intelligence officer in the United States. He went there in 1939 and did not return to Moscow for another ten years. The original idea was for my mother and I to join him there – to form something like a family of 'illegals'. But these plans were interrupted by the War. With the result that I saw nothing of my father for many long years...

And living abroad he hadn't forgotten his native language?

According to the 'legend' they'd thought up for him in Moscow, my father pretended to be from the Baltic States, someone, who wouldn't raise any eyebrows speaking English with an accent. But, in any case, there was nothing to stop you speaking Russian – America was, after all, a country full of immigrants...

And after the States, was your father sent on a mission somewhere else?

No, he stayed in Moscow and shortly afterwards retired.

Did he have anything to do with you going into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1956?

None whatsoever! My father's involvement in my career was rather different. When I graduated from the institute, the GRU took an interest in me. The idea was that I should go into military intelligence, but before that they approached my father for his opinion. "Over my dead body!", was his sharp retort, and the matter was closed there and then. All this I found out from my father much later.

Did you want to become an intelligence officer?

If I'd been offered the chance, I would have gone without hesitation. Don't forget: times were a lot different then. But looking back on the past now, I thank my lucky stars and my father that I never joined the special services.

Even so, a lot of secrets must have come your way.

All foreign ministry employees, whatever they do, have to sign the official secrets act. But I really did have to work on top secret documents. And to obtain clearance for this work, I had to have a higher rank. After all, the higher the rank, the higher the clearance.

And what rank did you reach, Victor Mikhailovitch?

When I retired, I was an Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary First Class, as the title is officially called. I find it quite funny.

What's so amusing?

My rank is the equivalent in military terms of a colonel-general. If you consider that my father was only a colonel, then...

Have you got a uniform with stars on the lapels?

Yes, I have. During the war Stalin introduced uniforms for diplomats, though later they were abolished. But our present foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, has reintroduced them. Today the uniforms of the higher ranks in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs look practically the same as they did when Stalin was alive.

Have any other interpreters ever been given such a rank as that?

No. In the diplomatic hierarchy only the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary is higher... But don't get the idea that my career was simple and easy. There were plenty of those, whose job it was to watch over the morals of Soviet citizens, who were not too pleased with me.

I find it hard to believe that someone as upright and proper as you appear to be could have done something to discredit the honour and dignity of an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I suppose it depends how you look at it. Personally, I've never considered that I've done anything to dishonour anyone or anything, but I've led what might be described as a fairly 'liberated' way of life. After all, I've been married three times and, by the standards of those days, that was considered highly reprehensible.

And wasn't your third wife the daughter of an 'enemy of the people'?

Yes, Inga was the daughter of the famous Soviet actress, Tatyana Okunyevskaya, who spent six years in a GULAG. Mind you, at the time of our wedding Inga's mother had already been fully rehabilitated... But that was not the point. In the fifties a divorce alone was enough to lose you your job at the foreign ministry. My own case was examined at a Komsomol (Young Communist Youth Movement) Committee meeting. And I would have got the chop, had I not been Khrushchev's personal interpreter. As it was, I managed to get off with a severe reprimand. There was an attempt to stop me going abroad with delegations on the grounds that Comrade Sukhodrev could not be trusted, but it came to nothing. I continued to travel round the world with Khrushchev and other 'party and government' leaders, as they used to be called at the time.

Who out of all that lot – from the purely personal point of view – did you find most sympathetic?

Well, they were all very different people. At one time it was fashionable to see them as the faceless, grey 'men in the Kremlin'. And, to be sure, outwardly these people tried to appear no different from each other – they dressed modestly and wore similar suits, hats and coats. And you can't judge the individual from the clothes he's wearing. But when you got to know them better, you realized that they were all very different individuals. Each had a spark of his own, but probably Kosygin and Mikoyan I found the most interesting to work with. And, of course, Nikita Khrushchev.

Whatever they say about him today, that man was a real character! Oh, he was uneducated alright, and not particularly cultured, but sharp as a razor! They broke the mould, when they made him! He was never at a loss for a word and could charm anyone – abroad as well as in Russia. Incidentally, for all that he appeared a bit slow, Khrushchev knew very well how much depended on the interpreter. He might be making the speech, but the foreign audience would be listening to somebody else. For this reason Khrushchev would keep his eye on me, size me up, as it were.

Did he use the familiar word for 'you'?

No, as a rule he used the polite form, but he called me by my Christian name. Gromyko, on the other hand, who was foreign minister for many years, never used anything but surnames. It was always: "Sukhodrev, do this; Sukhodrev, do that"... It was just his habit. The only people he made an exception for – and used the polite name and patronymic form of address – were members of the Politburo. Everyone else, including his deputies and aides, were referred to by their surnames only.

But, as I say, each of them had their own individual way of talking to people and their own individual style of behaviour...

And Khrushchev's style of behaviour is still pretty legendary today – from the shoe he banged on the table at the UN to his famous promise to show America 'Kuzma's mother' – whatever that might mean to an English-speaking audience!

Oh, Nikita Khrushchev knew, how to stir up his audience alright! And he loved sprinkling his speeches with Russian proverbs and colloquial sayings...

Have you ever had to deal with tricky stuff like this from the leaders?

Sometimes. You see the main thing for an interpreter is to get the right reaction from the listener. Let's say one person is telling another a joke. It might seem funny in the language it's told in. But there are hundreds of jokes that can't be translated literally. Usually this is because they are based on linguistic, cultural or even historical or national peculiarities, and lose all point in another language to the extent that they seem stupid and fall flat. Believe me, for people in my profession there is nothing worse than deathly silence after translating a joke. If the listener can't appreciate the humour, it's the translator, who gets the blame, not the teller. And for an interpreter it's the equivalent of a death sentence. I can't remember the number of times I've had to get out of tricky situations by doing voice changes, mimicry, and generally becoming an actor so as to produce the right effect and get at least a smile out of the listener, if not an actual laugh...

As for Kuzma's infamous mother, Khrushchev first used that expression publicly at an American national exhibition held in Sokolniki in 1959. As it happened, I was away at the time in Geneva with Andrey Gromyko, so I wasn't actually present, when the words were used.

You see what happens, when you're away – old Kuzma's mother starts causing problems.

What happened was this. Richard Nixon came to Moscow to open the first US exhibition ever held in the Soviet Union. He showed Khrushchev round, pointing out certain things and talking about them. The argument started by the mock-up of a house, which had been made full-size, but shown in cross-section as it were. There was no outer wall so that the whole of the interior could be seen. It was an ordinary family house, but it amazed the visitors. Many of them at that time had never even seen televisions, and here there were smart refrigerators, dishwashers and washing machines and all sorts of mod cons, the very existence of which had never even been suspected by Soviet citizens. People stood and stared open mouthed at this house.

And Khrushchev got worked up about this?

He certainly did! He started criticizing everything and saying that all this bourgeois domesticity was alien to the Soviet citizen, and that it was stupid to build a cottage for each family, when you could put up a multi-storey block of flats and provide living quarters for a hundred people. This was one of Khrushchev's pet topics, and he was just as vehement in his opposition to private cars, considering that public transport was what needed to be developed. And, incidentally, looking at today's kilometre-long traffic jams in Moscow, you sometimes think that maybe he wasn't so wrong...

Anyway, the argument at the exhibition moved from the particular to the general and changed to a dispute over global philosophical matters with the capitalist and the socialist each trying to

prove that his system was the more progressive and promising. At one point Khrushchev said to Nixon: “Your grandchildren, Mr Vice-President, will live under communism!” To which Nixon replied: “No, yours will live under capitalism”.

One must admit that the American was right, and, in Khrushchev’s case, it was not even his grandchildren, but his children, who preferred to live in America than in their native country – Sergey Khrushchev has long emigrated to the States and changed his nationality. But that’s something we know with hindsight; at the time Nikita Khrushchev said, as he was fond of saying, that the Soviet Union would catch up and overtake America and, at the end of the day, “ we’d show them...” And it was at this point, when faced with translating exactly what it was that Khrushchev intended showing them, that the interpreter was suddenly at a loss, and out came the limp translation about ‘Kuzma’s mother’ – which, of course, meant nothing to the Americans, who had no idea what the Soviet leader was talking about.

Later in that same year, 1959, Khrushchev repeated the expression he liked so much while on a visit to the United States. We were travelling through Los Angeles, and he sat there gazing at the super-abundance of the life around him and was suddenly reminded of Kuzma and his mother.

I assume you’d guessed that this might happen.

I admit I’d done a bit of homework – just in case. But it was actually Khrushchev himself, who came to my aid, when he said: “What are you translators racking your brains over? I only wanted to say that we’d show America something it hadn’t seen yet!”

But Nikita Khrushchev had another little phrase that caused our diplomats a lot of trouble. At one point, in the polemic fervour of the moment, Khrushchev, speaking to unseen American opponents, used a phrase that was extremely badly chosen, and one that he wouldn’t be allowed to forget for a long time. The discussion had centred once again on competition with the United States, and Khrushchev used an expression, which is common enough in Russian, when one side is asserting that it will beat the other at, say, a football match. The trouble was that abroad the words were taken in their very literal meaning with the result that it sounded almost as if the Soviet leader was threatening war.

How did you translate them, then?

Quite literally: “We’ll bury you!” – I didn’t have any choice... You asked me about dealing with tricky expressions. Well, this was an occasion, when I would have been glad to make changes, but there was practically no opportunity to manoeuvre so I tried to give as precise a rendering of the sense of what was said as possible. Even so, I repeat, they never forgave Khrushchev for that phrase. There were even claims that he was actually threatening to kill Americans – which was clearly going too far in distorting the sense.

How did you react to Putin’s famous proposal to ‘waste the terrorists in the bog’?

It’s on about the same level. Very likely more elegant means of expression could have been chosen, but... it’s not my style to give advice to the country’s leaders.

Have you always stuck to this principle?

None of the Soviet leaders could ever get used to the English and American habit of having cocktails before a meal. Before sitting at table, it was deemed proper to stand around for 10-15 minutes with a glass and chat about this and that. Our leaders couldn't understand this, and saw it as a pointless waste of time. Brezhnev was particularly at a loss. In his view, once the guests had arrived, you should sit at the table, pour out the vodka and start the meal. I had to explain to him politely that etiquette required cocktails and there was nothing that could be done about it. You see, the ambassador couldn't take it on himself to talk to the General Secretary of the Central Committee about this, but in my position I could take that liberty.

And the liberty of blowing smoke all over Brezhnev – or so the story goes.

Only after he'd asked me to. It was at the time, when he'd been finally forced to give up smoking. Before that he'd smoked incessantly, preferring Novost to all other brands. These were made at the Dukat Factory on a special line. Outwardly, they looked the same as those sold in any Moscow shop, but actually Brezhnev's Novost cigarettes were made from choice tobacco with special technology.

Maybe the KGB put something into them?

I never heard anything like that. But I know he liked to try all sorts of different cigarettes, and every so often would start talking about it. He was given an opportunity to try different brands during the Camp David talks in 1973, when the Americans got to hear of Brezhnev's passion for smoking. They offered him a selection of all the most famous American brands and Brezhnev tried them all. He even smoked a cigar, but in the end came back to smoking Novost.

Did Khrushchev smoke?

Never in front of me.

Did he let others smoke?

There was no official ban, but I'd never take such a liberty, when we were inside. If we were outside, in the country somewhere, I might light up. But the only time I actually smoked in front of Khrushchev was during the Vienna talks with Kennedy in 1961. There the sessions went on virtually without a break for two whole days. My opposite number, the American interpreter, was also an inveterate smoker, and even before the talks got underway we'd exchanged fears that we would have to do without for quite some time. But, as it happened, there was an unexpected solution at hand. Kennedy's back started hurting after sitting at the table for so long – it was his old war wound playing up. Anyway, he asked the interpreter for a cigarette to relax a bit. But before lighting up Kennedy asked Khrushchev's permission. Khrushchev said that smoke didn't trouble him. After the US President had lit up, my American colleague and I also reached for our cigarette packets. Khrushchev didn't seem to mind.

But with Brezhnev I could smoke right there in his Kremlin office. True, I'd never be the first to light up, but if Brezhnev took a cigarette, I'd do the same. Gradually, they started to limit

Brezhnev’s smoking. He had a special cigarette case made with a timer to open it once every hour.

And did he manage to hold out?

He tried. But when he could stand it no longer, he’d ask one of his visitors for one.

Including you?

Including me.

Did you give him one?

What else could I do? You’d hardly disobey the top man in the country... When Brezhnev was banned from going anywhere near cigarettes, he’d get his guards to light up in the car. It was something to watch: the limousine would come to a stop, the door would open wide, and out would come a great cloud of smoke with none other than the Comrade General Secretary himself emerging from it...

He’d ask me to blow smoke over him too. Even during the talks. What would happen was that Brezhnev would look at our delegation and say: “Right, Gromyko, you don’t smoke. And you don’t either, Agentov... Victor, help me out, will you?..” The scene was surreal: the head of state is sitting there, and his interpreter is blowing thick clouds of smoke all over him... That same passive smoking that we now know is the most harmful.

When did you start smoking a pipe?

So long ago I can’t remember. I got my first one as a present from someone, but I can’t even remember who it was. And before that, I’d sometimes try a cigar at receptions.

Have you given them up, then?

If I’m given a good cigar, I’ll smoke it with pleasure, but I stopped buying them ages ago. Back in the old days of the Soviet Union, you could easily get real Cuban cigars – the sort they could only dream about in America. And incidentally, did you know that our embassy in Washington used to bring Cuban cigars in through the diplomatic bag and forward them on the quiet to J. F. Kennedy in the White House – the very man, who personally imposed the embargo on Cuban tobacco coming in to America? I find that quite amusing.

So the president got the odious Castro’s cigars from us?

With the greatest of pleasure!

To be honest, I’ve never really felt crazy about cigars. Pipes are what I go for. When I married Inga, she and her sons from her first marriage gave me a birthday present of three pipes made by Fyodorov, the great master from Leningrad. He was the only pipe maker permitted to stamp his personal trademark on his pipes – the Latin letter ‘F’. Fyodorov was awarded the title of ‘Merited

Craftsman', without even having higher education. He certainly must have been a unique individual! Can you imagine how I felt, when I saw three of his works of art together? It was a present fit for a king! I've kept those pipes and can show them to you... When a person gets a hobby, a real passion for something, his relatives and friends ought to feel very pleased, because choosing a present immediately ceases to be a problem – you always know what to give a collector. I started getting pipes from all over the world.

A lot?

Quite a lot. But the point is not the number. A pipe shouldn't be left without being used for long – otherwise it will not be much use. Today I've got about twenty five working pipes, and each has its own biography, its own genealogy, and each in its own way is special.

Take the story connected with Fyodorov. I met the master pipe-maker a few years before he died, when I was taking the Australian prime minister on an excursion around Leningrad. I remember there was not a single finished pipe in his workshop – only albums with photographs of his work. I looked through them with great interest and read a letter of thanks from Georges Simenon for what was called the 'Maigret' pipe. Fyodorov spent a long time telling me about his work, and then he said: "Anyway, you've not come here to look at pictures and listen to my stories. You want a pipe – I'll make you one." After that, he looked me over attentively, in both full-face and profile, even asked me to show him my bite. When he'd finished, he took a piece of briar and a pencil, and began drawing the shape of the future pipe on the wood...

A month later I was back in Leningrad. This time I was with the suite of the British prime minister, Harold Wilson. At an appropriate moment I went to see Fyodorov. The pipe was ready – a beautiful, classical model. But I only got to smoke it once – that evening in the hotel. On the next day I returned to Moscow with Wilson. I knew that the British prime minister was a connoisseur of pipes, and I suddenly got the idea of making him a present of it. I won't hide the fact that I was sorry to part with Fyodorov's work, but once I'd made up my mind, there was no going back. I went into the first carriage and, asking if I could speak to him for a few moments, told him all about the pipe. I finished by saying that a pipe like that should belong to someone, who knew much more about pipes than I did. Harold Wilson was very touched.

Like any real collector, he immediately began examining the new pipe, and then, reaching into his jacket pocket, pulled out... another pipe, which outwardly looked very much like Fyodorov's. Seeing the amazement on my face, the prime minister smiled and said: "I bought this Dunhill literally the day before coming to Russia. And like you, I've only had time to smoke it once. I'd like to give it to you as a present..." And so we exchanged pipes.

Later, when he'd retired, Wilson made another trip to the Soviet Union. He was received by Brezhnev, and I took him out to Mikoyan's dacha. Obviously, I simply had to ask him about the Fyodorov pipe and when I did, he became very animated: "Oh, that's one of my favourite pipes!" So that was the story about the Fyodorov pipe..."

At work – didn't they ever accuse you of lording it? A pipe, after all is a rather aristocratic accessory.

I practically never smoked at work. With the schedule I had, there was practically no time to eat – I had mere seconds to swallow food whole like a boa constrictor. And when you're rushing about there's no time for a pipe – as you know, smoking a pipe needs leisure, peace and tranquillity. So for a long time I made do with cigarettes: I'd take a couple of puffs and – back to work. I didn't really become a proper pipe smoker until after I had retired. The last five years before retirement, I worked in New York, at the UN Secretariat, while here in Moscow I had this dacha built.

In 1994 when my posting came to an end, Inga and I spent all our time finishing our dacha, and then we finally moved out to Nikolina Gora. Now I try to go into town as little as possible, and can sit here without going anywhere for weeks on end. And I love it. Sitting by the hearth, watching the television, smoking my favourite pipes with a glass of whiskey and soda beside me...

What else could a man want?

It was at the dacha that I got the idea of writing a book. Well, to be honest, it was Inga, who pointed out that I had everything I needed here for writing. Here I've time to think about things without having to rush, and sit under the pines and enjoy a pipe...

Are you planning a continuation of your memoirs?

I've had an offer to re-edit the book with a few changes and additions. But I'm not in any hurry to answer. I'll have a quiet smoke and give it some thought...

Reference : http://www.en.cigarclan.com/articles/2004/1/09/
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