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A QUIET MIDDLEMAN FOR PRESIDENTS AND COMRADES



Viktor Sukhodrev

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, and his head is often tilted slightly to one side, close to the ear of one of his neighbors.

He is Viktor Sukhodrev, the king of interpreters, who in a career of nearly 30 years was present at more superpower summitry, 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, feeling his feelings, saying his words.

It was a role that had fascinated him since he was a boy watching wartime newsreels, the mysterious figure, invisible in plain sight, that 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 has spoken these leaders' words to seven American presidents, from Eisenhower to the first George Bush, making him one of the few Soviet officials that all of them have met.

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

Even now at the age of 72, he said, he cannot seem to stop. Sometimes, when he sees inexact translations by lesser interpreters on television, he said, he wants to shout out, "No! No!"

Sometimes when he is reading, he said, he catches himself unconsciously translating passages. "It's very annoying."

When he talks, it is with deliberateness and precision, as if he were processing and translating the thoughts that come into his head.

"That is your life, that is your profession," he said. "So again, it might be an effort when you are just starting out, but then it grows on you and it becomes part of you and then you are not making a conscious effort. It just comes naturally. You slip into that role. You could analyze it through Freud somehow."

Somehow, through a process he does not understand, he finds himself unconsciously speaking with a perfect American accent to Americans and with a British accent to Britons.

"I would not be playacting," he said. "I would adapt without noticing it because when I'm speaking to a person I want to be on the same wavelength. It's something in the brain."

The accent that might be called his native one is British because it was as a boy in London in the 1940's that he learned the language.

His mother, separated from his father, was there as a member of the Soviet trade mission. From the age of 6, Viktor was among English playmates, quickly becoming more comfortable in their language than in his own.

While his mother worked, the boy became close to the postman who lived upstairs and joined him as he walked his route. It was from the postman and his wife, he said, that he learned the British manners that gave him his special grace as an interpreter.

"You always have to remember your place," Mr. Sukhodrev said. "You can be close to the person, but you must know who you are and who he is. It's a fine balance. A delicate balance. It depends on your upbringing."

When at the age of 8 he entered the Soviet Embassy school in London, he found himself translating for school officials on public occasions, and he liked the feeling.

"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. And if I was going to do that, I felt, I was going to be damn good. Maybe the best."

He returned to Moscow at the age of 12, graduated from the Institute of Foreign Languages and quickly realized his dream, at the highest level of the Kremlin.

He found that the interpreter, as cool as he may seem, is often sweating much harder than the men on either side.

Here at the pinnacle, where every nuance has a nuance, the mind is a constantly whirring computer, cleared of thought, making instant decisions.

"You cannot stop to ponder," Mr. Sukhodrev said. "You just can't. If you do, you fail."

There is no margin for error; only perfection is acceptable.

"An interpreter at that level cannot - not 'should not' - simply cannot make a mistake," Mr. Sukhodrev said. "He cannot. No way. Well, if he did he'd be out, and rightly so."

Sometimes after interpreting at the Kremlin and writing the required memorandum of all that had been said, he would come home long after midnight, his head still full of words, unable to sleep.

"Inga would give me - not a double - a treble shot of Scotch and at 3 o'clock in the morning, we would go out and walk the dog," he said. "But at 9 o'clock, I had to be back in the office to go into the next round of negotiations."

Early on, traveling to the United States in 1959 with Khrushchev, he learned how to interpret, with conviction, statements that embarrassed him and proverbs he had never heard before.

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!"

On a later trip to the United States with Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, he said, he stole a Gideon Bible from a hotel room, breaking both Christian and Communist commandments.

Since then, he said, one of his pastimes has been to open the Bible at random and compare passages in the English and Russian translations.

"It's been stunning!" he said. "I've been stunned by the magnificence of the translation. I feel that the Bible is perhaps the greatest work of translation that ever appeared in the world."

The Bible may have held other hidden pleasures for him. Formally, he was an atheist like everyone else in the Kremlin. But, perhaps not alone, he said, "I was not an unbeliever, let's say."

ON one recent afternoon, he and his wife - a retired professor of English - sank into deep, soft chairs by the window, she with a screwdriver, he with a vodka and bitter lemon, as the last of the sunlight filtered through the leaves outside.

As he looked back over a life very well spent, the great interpreter revealed a secret: The man in the middle is not, after all, as self-effacing as he seems.

"You are the one," he said, remembering those heady 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," he said. "It is you they're reacting to. If you get applause, it's you who are getting applause."

So there really is an ego hovering there between the statesmen, sometimes stealing their applause lines.

"Well, yes," he said. And their punch lines as well. "That's why when you are translating a joke, you've got to make the other guy smile. That feels pretty good."

Reference:

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/01/international/europe/01sukhodrev.html?pagewanted=1&ei=5070>