

Vladislav Davidzon

Jewish-Ukrainian Relations and the Birth of a Political Nation

Selected Writings 2013-2023

With a foreword by Bernard-Henri Lévy

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Collected by Andreas Umland

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Vladislav Davidzon

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POLITICAL NATION**

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For my Queen Regina.

And my family.

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Foreward

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

Vlad

Vlad came into my life upon my return from Ukraine in 2014.

I had brought Petro Poroshenko and Vitaly Klitschko, the two leading candidates in the upcoming presidential election, with me to Paris.

Both knew that this contest, which capped the fall of pro-Russian puppet Viktor Yanukovich, would open a new page in Ukraine's history.

For the two candidates I had organized a meeting in a Paris theater repurposed as a conference center for throngs of Ukrainian exiles, newly converted Russian dissidents, and Parisian friends of the spirit of the Maidan.

At the end of the meeting, indifferent to the crush of the crowd and ignoring the increasingly nervous French and Ukrainian security services trying to protect the day's heroes there emerged a very young man, small in stature but working his elbows to good effect. Admirably bold, he planted himself in front of enormous Klitschko, hulking Poroshenko, and me: "My name is Vlad Davidzon. I work for the American magazine *Tablet*. I want to interview you."

I was struck by his combination of playfulness and assertiveness.

By his voice, which, in the course of a sentence, switched from a flute to a baritone.

By his air of a disheveled dandy, a cross between Truman Capote in Bennett Miller's movie and the suspended Balzac in Nadar's famous photograph.

A few days later I gave him the interview he had asked for, which he turned into a fine article.

Since then, we have been real friends.

From Paris to Kyiv, from Tangiers to the south of France and New York, I have gotten to know this start-up intellectual, as mischievous as a child and fascinated by rakes, with a devilish laugh and a taunting gaze, arrogant and clever, impulsive but never credulous, ambitious but indecisive, erudite and poetic.

He asked unusual questions: Could one admire Hemingway and love Fitzgerald? Is it possible to be a writer and rich at the same time? Is there a secret to literature? If one fails to produce a first book, is there a way to skip ahead to the second or third? Is there a king who would pay a jester like himself? Once a book is written, is it possible to distance oneself from it?

He spent considerable energy compiling, not a book, but a scrapbook that filled enormous albums whose pages sagged and swelled with overlapping items, a never-ending scrapbook in which everything came together like an exquisite corpse of which he was the sole author: calligraphied haikus and aphorisms, glued paper cutouts, candid photos, detail from a painting, a fragment of a comic strip, a quote plucked from his mind at dawn or in the midst of sleeplessness, an outline for an article, a fallen leaf, a stamp, a calligram, a geometric shape, an expression of admiration, the first words of a curse, a cat's head, a silly sketch à la Rimbaud stuck to a Warholian laundry ticket—all assembled into a caricature of a book (like Mallarmé's *The Book*), about which his wife Regina did not hesitate to say, her eyes turned up to Heaven, that this was not how he was going to make the name for himself that he sought.

Was he a poet or a dilettante, a devil or a dandy? Was his bottomless curiosity offensive? Did his friends have to worry that he would not exempt them from his ulterior motives and claimed to know everything about the penchants and passions of others? Was he American or European? Uzbek, Russian, or Ukrainian? Was he bragging when he declared that on the day Russia invaded Ukraine (for he was one of the few people I know who, like me, never doubted that the day would come) he would tear up his Russian passport in front of Putin's embassy in Paris, London, or Washington? And how much should we believe of his stories

about his childhood in Brooklyn in the shadow of a powerful, half-mad father who imparted to him a taste for luxury cars, infernal machines, and mischief—and who, in Vlad’s telling, was always on the verge of stepping out of a Jérôme Charyn novel and into a Martin Scorsese film?

Those questions aside, he accompanied me on a pilgrimage to Bangladesh, where he was a quiet witness to my reunions, half a century after the fact, with the survivors of the young team that, in the shadow of André Malraux and his still-born international brigade, gave me a taste for adventure and an obsession with the laws of genocide.

He was with Gilles Hertzog and me—solid as a rock, brave, and funny—on a trip to Tunisia during which we had hoped to start a new dialogue among old comrades from the Libyan revolution but where, with conspiracy theories and local antisemitism playing a role, I fell victim to an electronic lynching that nearly became a real one.

When I wrote *Looking for Europe*, a one-man play that was an invocation of the spirits of Dante, Cervantes, and Victor Hugo (and an appeal for their speedy resurrection in Ukraine bearing the features of Taras Shevchenko back from limbo), it was Regina and Vlad who made it possible for me to present the play in the opera houses of Kyiv, Lviv, and Odesa.

It was Vlad who arranged my first meeting with Zelensky.

Vlad who told me about Metropolitan Andrei Sheptitsky and the fact that Ukraine, the land of the Holocaust by Bullets, was also one of the countries with one of the greatest number of Righteous Among Nations (rescuers of persecuted Jews).

In other words, it was Vlad who began to instill in me a conviction central to this book—namely that the relations between Ukraine and the Jews were and are more complex than they are in the minds of those who cannot see beyond the continuing popularity of Stepan Bandera among Ukrainian nationalists.

But our minds really met with the breakout of the war in Ukraine.

Vlad was in Kyiv on the morning of the invasion.

As the holder of a Russian passport that he had not yet burned, it was very possible that his name would be on the Kremlin's kill lists of "traitors to Greater Russia."

And fearing that a Ukrainian patriot manning one of the checkpoints that were sprouting up like mushrooms after the rain of rockets and missiles might see him as a Russian infiltrator, his friends advised him to go home.

He stayed.

First in a village halfway to the Belorussian border, where he was like a caged lion calling us nonstop on FaceTime to show us the combat helicopters flying over his house.

Then, in the Odesa region, where, between reporting assignments for *Unherd*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Tablet*, he organized the exfiltration of his wife's family on a cold and solitary night.

And later still further east in Lysychansk, where, with a mutual friend, British essayist and war reporter David Patrikarakos, he reported on the battle of Severodonetsk: the targeting of civilians, the pain-lined faces of survivors, the days when the rolling fire of artillery rattled the bunkers and made it impossible to sleep.

And finally on the southern front, in Russian-occupied Kher-son, from which he followed the beginnings of the counterattack led by commander in chief Andrii Kovalchuk, the oft-decorated hero of Ukraine, who deployed the blend of courage and tactical intelligence that proved the key to victory.

Vlad passed through deserted villages and fields scorched by artillery duels.

He accompanied the general to forward posts where he engaged a fighter in a surrealistic discussion of the press crisis in the United States and the decline of literary criticism.

He was with the soldiers as a deluge of fire was falling and they all killed time in the trenches by calculating the firing rhythm, the distance between shots, and how long it might be until the firing resumed, thinned out, and fell silent.

He meditated on the relative merits of woods or copes for impeding, diverting, or possibly stopping the fire from a Russian sniper targeting his car.

Here was the straight Oscar Wilde, converted overnight into the most curious, intrepid, and acute of war reporters without ever giving up the stylish pouch he wore with the bullet-proof vest, without forgoing his matching jacket and socks, and, above all, without sacrificing anything of his humor and composure.

There is in him a bit of the early Norbert Jacques, before his invention of Doctor Mabuse and before the Second World War, the Norbert Jacques who covered the battle of Anvers in 1914 and the combat on the Dnieper in 1916, where he made it a point of honor not to change any of his upper-class habits, neither his taste for first-class travel nor his nostalgia for the luxury hotels of his Barnaboothian youth.

Vlad has obviously read Malaparte, the inspired author of *Kaputt* and chronicler of the battles of the 20th century, the man who never empathized better with a humanity tattered, battered, and torn by aggressive fire from aircraft and artillery than when he was at the front, his head in the ragged clouds, carrying on his secret dialogue with D'Annunzio, his obsessive reading of Virgil and Homer, and his commentaries on Horace, Pascal, Shakespeare, and Villon.

Vlad's description of a field of sunflowers that have bloomed as if nothing had happened while being enshrouded by gray smoke from an exchange of artillery fire suggests a passage from Isaac Babel in which (though I cannot locate it) nurses lying in the grass watch yellow flames consume nearby carpets of flowers.

Then there is the other form of art in which he dares to dabble, that of writing simultaneously on three tracks—the comic, the tragic, and the strategic. Did Ilya Ehrenburg, the master of the genre, do any better in his reporting from the eastern front for *Red Star*?

Readers may think me exaggeratedly enthusiastic.

But I have chided Vlad too often not to say to him, on this occasion, "Well done, my friend!"

For every man, or for every intellectual at least, there comes a moment, an event, a shock (Michel Leiris would say a *cornada*) where a searching life is revealed to itself.

I am not talking about love.

Nor a spiritual awakening that is like a second birth.

Nor the great encounter—Socrates, Descartes, Freud, Levinas—that changes the course of one’s life and causes one to feel reborn yet again.

No.

I am thinking about the historical event that everything within you sensed approaching, an event that, once it occurs, pulls together scattered thoughts, brings back dreams from childhood, awakens unused strengths, imparts an aspiration to greatness that prior circumstances had not allowed to emerge—in short, an event that mobilizes and crystalizes the most secret and noble part of the soul.

For some, the event comes too early. Unprepared and unequipped, the intelligence is there but not the heart; the heart has not yet been broken enough; it is insufficiently hardened. Sartre in 1940.

For others, it is right in front of you, holding out its arms. It looks at you like your reflection in the mirror. But it has come too late; you’re tired of waiting; life got the better of hope; the fountain of youth has dried up; your restlessness has left you. This is Lamartine grumbling—bitter and gentrified—that he, too, if he hadn’t been married, would have followed Byron to Greece to fight.

For others even less fortunate, those born too young in too old a world or too old in too young a world, the moment never comes at all. These individuals are the retired soldiers of the *cornada*, the eternal lookouts, caught somewhere between Julien Gracq’s *The Opposing Shore* and Dino Buzzati’s *The Stronghold*. It is the fate of children of the century crushed by greatness of their fathers, blinded by their panache, and incapable of recognizing the signs of the epic even were they to appear before them.

For still others, the rendezvous comes, and it comes at an opportune time, at the right stage of life. The civil war in Spain for some. The war in Bosnia for others. Bangladesh for me. (To say nothing of those who create their own stage, forcing fate, in a cer-

tain way.) They are not examples of the knife and the wound exactly – more like the toreador and the horn.

Vlad belongs to the last group.

The war in Ukraine is his war.

It caught him off guard – but he expected it.

It threw him off – but he got right back in the saddle.

The war was a summons for which he had been preparing with the poise that he brings to all things, a poise that did not fail him when the event arrived.

A successful baptism.

Welcome to the club.

Now he can finally get to work.