

Megan Buskey

Ukraine Is Not Dead Yet

A Family Story of Exile and Return

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Collected by Andreas Umland

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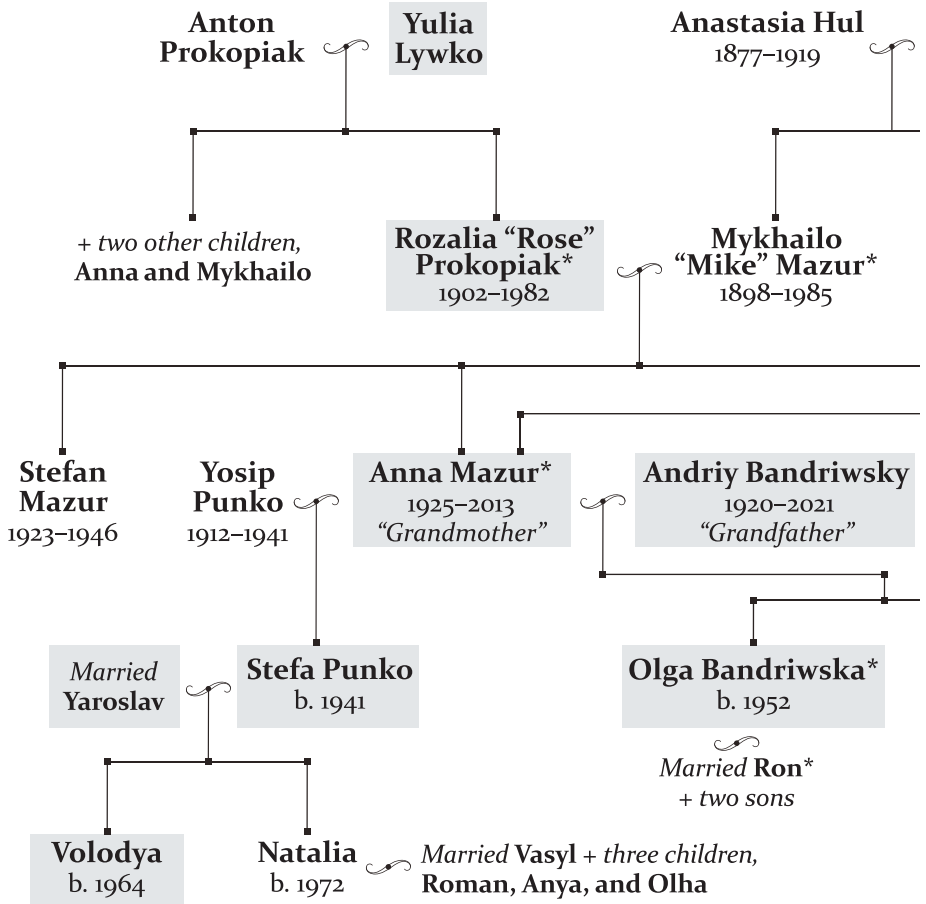
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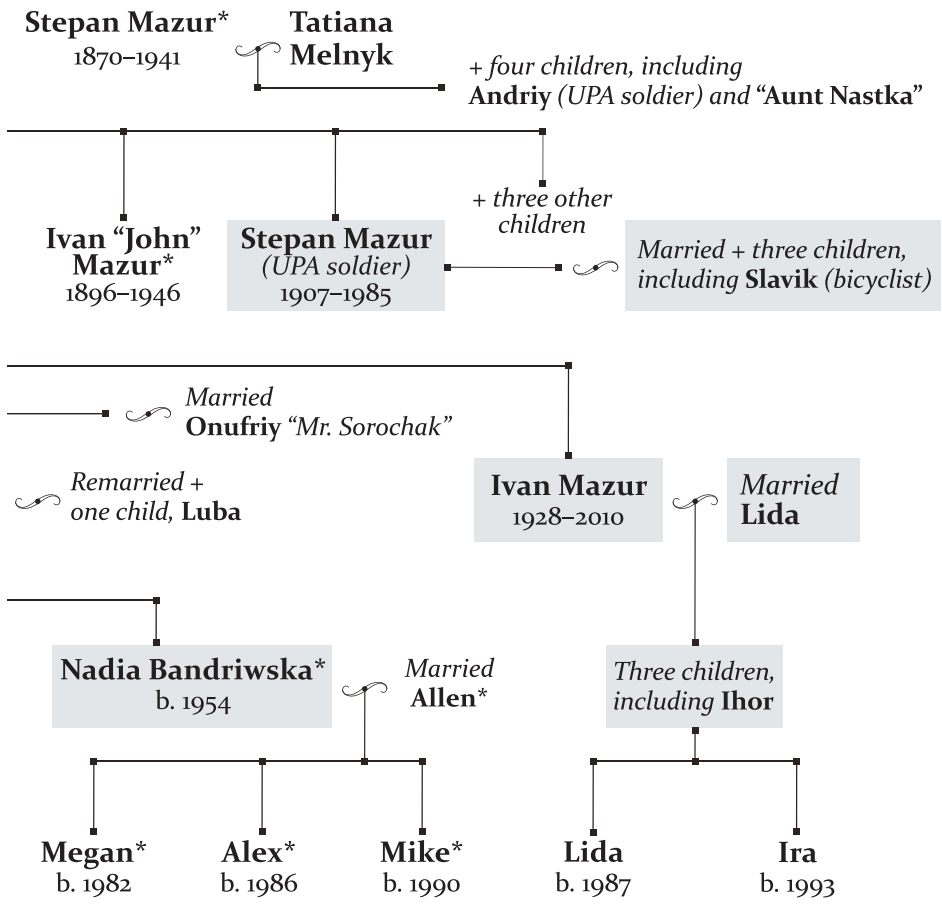
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*For my family –
past, present, and future*



Mazur Family Tree





- Gray box denotes residence in Siberia
- * Asterisk denotes residence in the U.S.



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Prologue

In February 2022, the omicron variant of COVID-19 had swept across the United States, shuttering all the places I frequented as an urban thirtysomething – restaurants, coffee shops, bars, music venues. People rarely ventured from their homes. I made myself walk along the Brooklyn waterfront every day so I could feel the sun on my skin rather than just the glare of the computer screen. The days had the agonizing slowness of previous COVID waves, but February felt particularly ominous. Pulsing beneath the stillness of this second pandemic winter was the drumbeat of possible war.

The news was full of the fact that Russia had amassed more than 100,000 troops along Ukraine’s borders. The U.S. government was warning with growing urgency that Russia intended to use this force to launch a full-scale attack on Ukraine. To me, a Ukrainian American with many family members in the country, the news was alarming, to put it mildly. Unthinkable. Bombs falling on the Kyiv neighborhood I had lived in when I was twenty-two? Rockets pounding the steppe that surrounded my grandmother’s native village? Russian warships firing at Odesa, where my aunt vacationed each summer with her grandchildren?

I nervously checked in with my family in Ukraine to see what they were thinking. My cousin Lida told me about civil defense groups that had sprung up in Lviv, the city in western Ukraine where she lived and worked as a human resources specialist. Average citizens – teachers, IT programmers, university students – were getting training on how to load guns, apply tourniquets, navigate around mines. “Deep inside, I believe an invasion won’t happen,” Lida said over Zoom from her apartment, where she was isolating with a suspected case of COVID. Other family members evinced the same belief. Yet each day the news suggested that we were drawing closer to a cataclysm beyond anyone’s imagining.

The third Monday of February, I made my morning cup of black tea and milk and checked my Twitter feed, as had become my ritual. The week before, an American magazine had reported that the Russians had drawn up “target and kill lists” of Ukrainians to

imprison, torture, deport, and murder as part of their planned occupation. At the time, it had seemed farfetched. Now I read that a senior U.S. government official had described Russia's plans for Ukraine as "extremely violent" and confirmed the accuracy of the magazine's report. "This will not be some conventional war between two armies," the official warned. "It will be waged by Russia on the Ukrainian people—to repress them, crush them, to harm them."

The official's characterization lit a fear in me that none of the previous coverage had. The faces of family members, friends, and former colleagues who might be on the Russians' lists flashed through my mind. They were all people who worked hard, devoted their talents to just causes, had hopes and dreams and flaws and families. The thought that their life's work might be destroyed, that they might be deprived of their freedom, perhaps even their lives, lodged a rock in my stomach.

What made that feeling even more wrenching was that, like many of their countrymen, my own family had been persecuted for being Ukrainian. When I thought of people I knew who could be at risk, their faces merged with the image I had of my grandmother at twenty-five, her face smudged with coal dust from working in the mines after the Soviets exiled her to Siberia for the offense of being related to a Ukrainian nationalist. That such a parallel could occur today shook me far past the point of tears, and I cried hard that morning.

I would cry more in the weeks to come, but that was the moment when I started to grasp the horror of what lay ahead.

By the time Russian president Vladimir Putin gave a lengthy address on the Ukraine "matter" later that day, my tears had dried. Numbness had set in. I scowled at my computer screen as Putin held forth like a drunk, belligerent uncle at Thanksgiving dinner, slouching in his chair, waving his hand imperiously.

Putin's rhetoric was all over the place. He was concerned about the Donbas, a coal-rich region of eastern Ukraine coveted by Moscow. Ukraine was indistinguishable from Russia, its existence

a strategic error committed by Lenin. It was now time to correct Lenin's mistake, to "decommunize" Ukraine for real. Kyiv had stolen gas from Russia. Ukraine was being run as an American puppet state. Russian-language speakers were being suppressed. Ukraine was going to develop nuclear weapons. NATO was going to use Ukraine to attack Russia. Aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism had been "elevated in Ukraine to the rank of national policy."

This was not the first time Putin had trotted out this motley set of arguments. In fact, he had been making these claims for years. In 2014 he had condemned the pro-European protestors on Kyiv's central square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, as "nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites." They had "resorted to terror, murder, and riots" to seize power, Putin said. "These ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler's accomplice during World War II...flaunt slogans about Ukraine's greatness, but they are the ones who did everything to divide the nation. Today's civil standoff is entirely on their conscience."

In the years that followed, he returned to these points again and again. Putin was clearly preoccupied, if not obsessed, with Ukraine's existence as an independent state. Twisting the country's complex history to his own ends, he settled on the message that Ukraine needed to be "de-Nazified."

The claim was preposterous. For starters, the country was now led by Volodymyr Zelensky, one of the world's few Jewish heads of state. Still, I understood, on some level, how that history could still be felt to be pressing on the present. My family's fraught history in Ukraine featured many of the same factors—Nazi influence, Ukrainian nationalism, Moscow's imperialism—that Putin was invoking to justify the invasion. I knew that their interplay was complicated.

When Russian missiles began to rain down on Ukraine on February 24, that nuance was buried under the rubble and carnage, like many other aspects of Ukrainian life before the invasion. Russia's war on Ukraine was the most shocking and devastating geopolitical act in Europe in more than a generation. And it would bring me closer to my family story than I ever thought possible.