Forward

WEEKEND READS

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Culture

As Putin lays siege to Ukraine, memories of life between wars

By Anya Ulinich

If you aren't thinking about a place at all, and then a war starts there, it seems like it came out of the blue – a maniac starts the war; a bunch of people die; the rest of us post on our social media.

But wars don't "break out." They ripen in plain sight until there is a moment when no one can ignore them anymore. This happened with Hitler's war. And this is what's happening with Putin's war, eight years in the making. All of the sudden, everyone is paying attention, asking, "What's up with Ukraine?" "How did this happen?"

It's a long, terrible story. Here is my little piece of it; it makes no mention of the bloody civil war, of Holodomor or the Holocaust. I'm not a historian. This is my understanding of Donetsk, my mom's hometown, where I spent time as a kid.

This morning, I found a picture of me from 2014. At first glance, it looks like one of thousands of images taken around the world today. Except today, my hair is gray and bobbed, not dark and long, and I haven't bothered with lipstick since the start of the pandemic. The photo is actually exactly 8 years old. It was taken March 2, 2014, in Times Square. I'm protesting Putin's initial invasion of Ukraine, the one that resulted in the annexation of Crimea and the formation of the Russian-backed separatist statelets in Eastern Ukraine.

Today's invasion of Ukraine began when Vladimir Putin officially recognized these regions – Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic – and sent troops there, officially invading.

My maternal grandparents lived in Donetsk. My mom grew up there. I was raised in Moscow, but spent a lot of time in Donetsk as a child between the late 1970s and mid-1980s. Donetsk had been an important and prosperous city in the Soviet Union, a home to coal mines and the steel industry, as well as a large toy factory. Probably every kid

growing up in the USSR played with something made in the city.

Before this latest, worst round of Putin's war on Ukraine broke out, I found a Soviet-era book about Donetsk on eBay. It was published in 1978, but despite its stilted Soviet aesthetic, the photos in it align with my memories of Donetsk: a modern city with vast flowerbeds, where most men worked in mines and factories.

Yet, less than half a century earlier, Donetsk had been almost wiped out by the Nazi invasion. At the start of the war, its population had been half a million. After the war, it was 175,000. Between October 1941 and September 1943, the city had been occupied by Germans and Italians. After the war, it was rebuilt on a large scale. Much of the work was done by Swabian forced laborers (which is its own horrible story.)

My grandfather Dmitri had gone through years of trench warfare in Ukraine during WWII. Getting wounded had saved him from getting killed. My grandmother lost her first husband in battle. These two deeply traumatized people met each other after the war. My grandmother was a 25-year-old widow with a toddler daughter. My grandfather had a 7-year-old son who was so malnourished, he couldn't walk. Together, the four of them restarted their lives in Donetsk.

By the time my mom was born in 1949, the city was back to its prewar population. My mom, the baby boomer, grew up with more than enough food, in unprecedented prosperity. Though there was no hot water in my grandparents' house, my mom had piano and ballet lessons, and, eventually, a university education.

When people in the U.S. talk about "Ukrainians," they make the nation sound monolithic. But Ukraine is a large country. People in the East, in parts closest to Russia, always spoke Russian. My grandmother's native language was Ukrainian. My grandfather's native language was Russian. Like most of the city of Donetsk, they spoke Russian with a Ukrainian inflection – this dialect had a name – Surzhik.

They lived, organically, in a Russian-Ukrainian culture, and considered the Soviet Union to be their country, and Ukraine to be their state (in a sense that New York is a state in the country called the U.S.). Ethnic conflict typically doesn't randomly flare up among people who are, for the first time in years, getting enough to eat, and get to sleep in beds instead of cellars and trenches.

I was close to my paternal family in Moscow, who were all college-educated and anti-establishment, and who poked fun at my Donetsk grandfather's staunch pro-Soviet

conformity. When my grandfather dressed up, he always wore his war medals. I believe he felt deeply grateful that the regime, in the 1960s and 1970s just let them be: go to work, have enough to eat, raise children and grandchildren. There was no war for once, and no arrests.

My grandfather adored modern appliances, all things plastic, vacations, souvenirs. He was generous to a fault. To me, as a kid in the 1980s, Donetsk was a place where nice things came from: my fancy scooter, my fake leather jacket, and, of course, toys. I got whatever I asked for.

My grandmother cooked massive quantities of amazing food and overfed anyone who entered their house. The trauma of war was not talked about, but was noticeable in absences: my grandfather never told stories about his experiences, and he wouldn't watch movies about WWII, thus missing out on probably 80 percent of available Soviet entertainment.

Of course, Donetsk had a Soviet Empire problem. By the 1980s, the Soviet Union was failing. Its industry had become outdated. Coal mines in Donetsk had been operating since 1869, and after a century, they were depleted, dangerous and unprofitable. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, miners in Donetsk experienced poverty.

I last visited my grandparents in 1996. I had been living in Chicago at the time. I went to Moscow first to see my family there, then took a train to Donetsk. When my grandmother met me at the station, she said that public transport wasn't running, because miners were rioting and flipping over street cars. We would have to take a taxi and drive through alleys and back roads. Donetsk miners were rioting because they weren't being paid. They were on strike against an employer who didn't need them.

Ukraine's economy was in shambles in 1996. So was Russia's. Nobody in Donetsk was a separatist of any kind. My grandparents weren't upset about the color of their passports. They were upset that the water pump was broken in the basement of their apartment building, and water didn't reach above the second floor, except in the middle of the night. Before they went to bed, they set buckets under open taps to collect drips through the night. By morning, they had enough water to get through the day.

In the mid-2000s, people in the region watched the quality of life improve in resource-rich Russia just to the East. In 2010, they helped elect their former Governor, the notoriously corrupt pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich, president of Ukraine. [By notoriously corrupt, I mean he had gold bathroom fixtures and a private zoo.] In an imperfect analogy, people of

the region were like the “Make America Great Again” people of West Virginia – they wished to go back in time.

When Yanukovich was overthrown in the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution and went into exile in Russia, people of Donetsk protested, and Putin – a real Hitlerish character, full of grievance and obsessed with imperial expansion – was only too happy to militarily assist them in breaking away from Ukraine.

This was eight years ago. There were outraged protests around the world. My kid and I took our signs to Times Square. Putin annexed Crimea. War began in Donetsk and Luhansk. One of my cousins lost his life.

But the world can’t afford to get involved, not until a certain point. There is a hard utilitarian calculus behind standing up to invaders versus letting them alone. The day Putin started his latest invasion, I woke up at 4 a.m., looked at my telephone, and saw The New York Times headline that said “All at Once or Bit by Bit? Putin’s Choice Could Determine World’s Reaction.”

It was as if they were discussing table manners. If Putin chewed Ukraine politely, just around the edges, the World might just let it happen, the headline implied. It made me so upset that I couldn’t sleep anymore. So I got up and made an illustration.

Eight years ago, after some shouting in the streets, the world decided to allow Putin to keep Crimea, and to assist the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in becoming self-proclaimed statelets. Statelet is a cute word, like driblet. What it actually describes is a semi-livable, impoverished place that exists in a state of perpetual lukewarm war, with a population that watches Russian propaganda on TV and waits to be absorbed into Russia. But Putin never wanted the people of Eastern Ukraine and their decrepit industry – he wanted Kyiv. For why, you should listen to his pre-invasion speech.

For the last month, I have been ruining dinners with ranting about the upcoming war. Russia’s encroachment in Ukraine was an obscure topic. Then Putin decided to go for “all at once,” rather than “bit by bit,” social media lit up blue and yellow, and the world began to pay attention to the place where my family used to have a normal life. I have one relative left in the region. Here is a text my mom received from her the other day:

We're up all night, worrying, waiting. In the morning, the shops were open 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. All the banks are closed. There is no money in ATMs. In every part of the city, there is artillery, armored carriers and smaller military vehicles. All day an armored carrier stood

by my apartment building. We hear shots from BM-21s and cannon fire. The military is digging trenches around apartment buildings – residents are a human shield for them. I gotta get more minutes for my telephone and internet ... Can't get more internet data. Will be out of reach...

The war that no one wants goes on, getting more and more horrendous by the second.

"For the first time in my life, I'm glad my parents are dead," my mom said to me. I believe she meant both: one, it sucks to be old in a bomb shelter. And two, it would have been unbearable for my grandparents to witness their hard-earned peace being so senselessly wasted.

To me, like to millions of Post-Soviet people with family ties in both Russia and Ukraine, this war seems not just shockingly awful, but absurd. To see Russian soldiers killing Ukrainians is a little witnessing people from Massachusetts slaughter people in Connecticut. Without uniforms, they wouldn't know which was which.

This sense of absurdity is reinforced by some viral videos, like the one where a Ukrainian motorist stops to chat with a crew of a broken-down Russian tank and offers to tow them back to Russia. speaking Russian. Everyone laughs. But these videos from just a few days ago don't age well against the backdrop of nightly slaughter and destruction. How long can this last before Russian people just STOP? No matter how much Putin restricts the Russian media, there is still social media. When a momfluencer in Kyiv posts the footage of an explosion on her Instagram, moms in Russia will probably believe her, rather than Putin's state television.

As a Russian Jew from Moscow with a strong connection to Ukraine, I hope that Russian people will get rid of Putin before a huge chunk of Europe is back in ruins, the way my grandparents found it in 1945. And I hope that the sentiment written in 2014 on the banner above will finally come true.

Anya Ulinich is the author of the graphic novel "Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel." She is currently making art about the war. You can contact her on Instagram @mindcaptive

Opinion

I went to Ukraine to find my roots. The KGB found me first

By Howard Fineman

The KGB men who took me into custody in Ukraine were straight out of central casting.

The Bad Cop was older, with a porcine face. He wore a leather trench coat cinched tight to his fat frame, and spoke only Russian. The Good Cop was young and lean: Bobby Kennedy to J. Edgar Hoover. His cloth overcoat was unbuttoned, Lenin style, and he had loosened his tie. He spoke fluid English and offered me an old-style Russian cigarette, which was an inch of acrid tobacco at the tip of a cardboard tube.

This was almost a lifetime ago –my lifetime.

It was Sept. 1970, and I was fresh out of college, starting a year of foreign travel to explore my Jewish roots on a fellowship from the Thomas J. Watson Foundation. I probably was the first of what became a flood of Jewish-American Boomers to make such a pilgrimage to Ukraine.

With no permission to do so, I'd driven my VW bus an hour south of Kyiv to the historic city of Bila Tserkva, which had been predominantly Jewish in the 19th century. I wanted to get a sense of the place where my ancestors had lived for many generations before fleeing to America during an infamous series of pogroms in 1905.

So, I just drove there – and the KGB found me and picked me up. The curator of the city museum had reported me, and the two agents took me to a small office inside that building to start their interrogation.

"What are you doing here?" Bobby asked.

I didn't want to say much. "My grandmother was born here," I said. "She and her parents went to America."

Bobby looked at me intently. “When was that?” he asked.

“1905,” I said.

A glimmer of comprehension crossed his face. The two conferred. “You have no business here,” Bobby said. “I will now prepare a statement. You will sign it.” He did, and I did.

I didn’t know what it said. I didn’t ask. All I wanted was my freedom.

They sent me on to Odessa.

I’m humbled and embarrassed now by my timidity all those years ago, as Ukraine has become the deadly center of world conflict; as its brave citizens fight not just for their freedom but their very lives: and as they are led and inspired by a heroic Ukrainian Jew, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who bears a vague resemblance to my own son.

History moves in circles. The ancestors of millions of us American Jews trace at least a few centuries of their wanderings after the destruction of the Second Temple to the old Pale of Settlement. Now we and the whole world have been drawn back to the Ukrainian heartland of that long-troubled region, then as now buffeted by Russia’s wars with other great powers.

My 1970 trip, and later visits in more recent years, gave me a faint sense of why my ancestors fled Ukraine. They yearned to escape capricious power and control their own destiny. But those trips also gave me a sense of why my grandmother spoke of the place in a wistful way at times. It is a beautiful landscape, full of passionate people who know and love their long history; who love the land and who, like the Jews, suffered enormous loss and terror.

I am not naive. Though my family was fairly prosperous there, they were forever at the mercy of Polish nobles, Russian bureaucrats or sword-wielding Cossacks. Read Isaac Babel, the 20th century journalist and playwright from Odessa, and you get the resignation, cynicism and despair that Jews often feel there.

Most of the 1 million Soviet Jews killed during the Holocaust were from Ukraine. In Bila Tserkva in 1941, the local citizens took part in an especially heinous episode: the shooting of 100 wailing Jewish children in a forest outside the city.

Still, I found something comforting and even noble about Ukraine and Ukrainians. They

could be proud of their Jewish culture, which includes Sholem Aleichem, who lived in Bila Tserkva for years, and the flood of Jewish classical musicians produced in the conservatories of Odessa.

The fabled agricultural countryside is astonishing. As I drove across much of it, its coal-black soil glistened in the sun like diamonds. The thatched huts dotting the landscape were painted a pale blue that matched the sky.

And like the Jews, all Ukrainians were subjected to genocide: Stalin's vindictive, paranoid, deliberate starvation of 4 million of them during the agricultural upheaval and famine of 1932-33, the Holodomor.

Now Ukrainians are facing another disaster at the hands of Russia. Supporting them is more than an act of nostalgia. Vladimir Putin is a bloodthirsty liar with the gall to depict as "Nazis" a democratically-elected Ukrainian government led by a Jewish president. His bloodthirsty nationalism echoes the racism that led czars to create the Pale in the first place: Jews could only live among other inferior peoples in inferior places, such as Ukraine, lest they defile Mother Russia.

When I began my travels in Ukraine, one of the first people I met was a young medical student in Lviv. He had been sent by the authorities to check me out. He must have been regarded as a trustworthy member of the Communist Party, but he strayed from the official line to passionately explain that his identity as a Ukrainian was paramount and that Ukraine was and always would be its own country with its own language and heroes.

The next day, my minder brought me a slim volume of poems by Taras Shevchenko, the national poet of Ukraine. He read aloud from the most famous, which concludes:

Water your freedom
with the blood of oppressors.
And then remember me
with gentle whispers
and kind words
in the great family
of the newly free.

We Jews were and are part of that family, especially now.

Howard Fineman, a longtime DC-based reporter and TV news analyst, is contributing correspondent for RealClearPolitics.com and author of " The Thirteen American Arguments .

Culture

How a career in performance prepared Volodymyr Zelenskyy for this moment in Ukraine

By Robert Zaretsky

One of Karl Marx's best-known lines appears in "The Eighteenth Brumaire," his merciless vivisection of the revolution of 1848 in France. Torn between crying and laughing at the words and actions of the French revolutionaries, who seemed to see themselves as characters in a remake of the earlier revolution of 1789, Marx panned their performance. Riffing on a line from his fellow philosopher Hegel, Marx declared that history always occurs twice: the first as tragedy, the second as farce.

In the unprecedented events of the past week in Ukraine, the words and actions of the country's leader have upended Marx's dictum. Thanks to Volodymyr Zelenskyy, we have discovered, almost overnight, that history first enters as farce, then – or so it appears as I write – as tragedy.

By now, most Americans know that Zelenskyy is not a professional politician, but instead a professional actor. Not just an actor, but a comic actor. Born to Russian-speaking Jewish parents in central Ukraine, Zelenskyy had, after law school, launched himself into a career in films. But it was a television series, "Servant of the People," that brought him into stardom. In the series, which ran for four seasons during the mid-2010s, Zelenskyy stars as a history teacher who, thanks to a viral video of him cursing the incompetence and corruption of politicians, finds himself lifted by popular acclaim to the presidency.

Life proceeded to imitate art. Entering the presidential election of 2019, Zelenskyy won by a landslide. It was an event that seemed to distill the uncanny character of our post-modern age, where appearance and reality merge into a spectacle to which we are all either amused or bemused spectators. Think of it as one part Karl Marx, who warned that we had entered an age where everything solid melts into air, and one part the other Marx, who as President Rufus T. Firefly in "Duck Soup" announced, as his country Freedonia lurched into war, that not only was his Secretary of War out of order, but so too was the

plumbing.

But this is where Zelenskyy pivots not to farce, but instead to tragedy – and the greatness that often accompanies it. His wry one-liners – when our government offered him help to flee Ukraine, Zelenskyy replied "I need ammunition, not a ride" – now make us look uneasily at ourselves rather than laugh loudly with him. Instead of seething in a taped video against crooked Ukrainian political leaders – as his character, Vasyl Petrovych Borodko, did in "Servant of the People" – Zelenskyy instead shames Western political leaders in a live video call from a battle-scarred Kiev, warning that unless they help, they might not see him again alive.

Though the latter video has not been made public, Zelenskyy probably appeared unshaven and wearing his now standard green tee shirt and fatigues. He has, at times, worn full battle gear in the other video messages he and his staff have made since the Russian invasion. All of this, in turn, hints at a paradox. While fatigues are required of a soldier, they are remarkable when worn by a president. Is it possible that, even now, Zelenskyy is still acting?

While the answer must be "Yes," it does not undermine the pathos and power, or for that matter the truthfulness of Zelenskyy's performance. Compare his recent public remarks to those made by another president who began his professional life as an actor: Ronald Reagan. In his speeches, Reagan repeatedly confused scenes from World War II movies with the war itself, most notably his account of a bomber pilot who chooses to go down in his fiery plane with a trapped tail gunner.

It is not clear, as one observer remarked, whether Reagan was able to distinguish real life from reel life. Zelenskyy, however, is acutely alive to this distinction. He is using reel life – the knowledge he has won as a screenwriter as well as an actor – to underscore the existential stakes of real life not just for Ukrainians, but for us as well. Not only is he sincere – an affect that any accomplished actor can achieve – but he is also authentic.

Thanks to the ubiquity of flat screens, we are stepped in a virtual world where everyone, especially politicians, is almost always acting. Some, like Reagan, do it well; others, like Marjorie Taylor Greene, not so well. Then there are those who do it so well that the line between sincerity and authenticity collapses. In a speech he gave 20 years ago on actors and politics, the playwright Arthur Miller placed Franklin Delano Roosevelt in that category.

"My impulse is to say that FDR alone was not an actor, but I probably think that because he was such a good one," Miller confessed. "He could not stand on his legs, after all, but he

took care never to exhibit weakness by appearing in his wheelchair or in any mood but upbeat, cheery optimism which at times he most certainly did not feel. Roosevelt was so genuine a star, his presence so overwhelming, that Republicans, consciously or not, have never ceased running against him for this whole half-century."

FDR's presence overwhelmed because he grasped the overwhelming need to project optimism at a time when, with the world battered by depression and war, optimism was rare, even risible. Of course, Zelenskyy can stand on his legs. But he, too, has grasped the gravity of matters at hand, inspiring his fellow Ukrainians to stand against the Russians and stand for democracy and decency.

The title of Zelenskyy's television show has suddenly veered from the ironic and comic to the dramatic and historic. It turns out that our man in Kiev is not just the servant of the people, but also the servant of democracy.

A professor at the University of Houston, Zaretsky is also a culture columnist at the Forward. His new book, "Victories Never Last: Caregiving and Reading in a Time of Plague" will be published in April by University of Chicago Press.

News

A tale of two rabbis: Meet the men with dueling claims to be the leader of Ukraine's Jews

By Jacob Kornbluh

The chief rabbi of Ukraine is a 57-year-old U.S.-born former member of Israel's Karlin-Stoliner Hasidic sect who was once an executive member of the World Jewish Congress.

The chief rabbi of Ukraine is a 55-year-old Russian-born member of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement who is close to associates of former President Donald Trump and recently created "Anatevka," a village for displaced Jewish families inspired by "Fiddler on the Roof."

The two men – Rabbi Yaakov Bleich and Rabbi Moshe Azman – have since the Russian assault on Ukraine began a week ago each posted a series of dramatic videos about their efforts to evacuate Jews and raised millions of dollars to support them. Their dueling claims to be the country's top Jewish leader date back two decades, a fraught history involving many questionable characters.

"Remember that he who does not care and he who agrees silently – that is an accomplice to a crime, a war crime, a crime against humanity!" Rabbi Azman declared in a video posted on Wednesday, of him holding a Torah scroll in front of the ark in a Kyiv synagogue.

Warning Russian Jews that their silence would be remembered and pledging to stay and care for those unable to flee, he added in Russian: "I never thought, even in my worst nightmare, that I might have to perish under the shells of Russia, where I was born, where I went to school, where I have many friends, who are silent."

Meanwhile, Bleich has been publishing "live updates" via YouTube on a daily basis, using an Ukrainian flag as a backdrop.

"We already have evacuated some people," he said when the assault began last Thursday. That evening, he released another video, pleading for help: "We are sheltering in place

outside of Kyiv in our camp until tomorrow morning at 6 a.m. when we hope we will be able to hit the road,"

For viewers, it might seem as if Bleich is on the ground assisting his flock at a time of great need. In fact, he has been making the videos from his home in the Hasidic enclave of Monsey, New York, where he received a call from President Volodymyr Zelenskyy this weekend and, as of Wednesday morning, had raised more than $1.4 million online for Kyiv's Jewish community.

Bleich didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

On social media, a Twitter user mocked the dueling claims, posting a picture of thousands of Chabad emissaries posing for their annual group photo with the caption, "Exclusive photo of all of those claiming to be the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine."

A title in dispute

The competing messages highlight an ongoing dispute over who is the official chief rabbi of Ukraine for close to two decades. The government views the chief rabbi as the representative and liaison to the Jewish community.

Bleich was widely recognized as chief rabbi of both Kyiv and Ukraine in 1992, when the country declared its independence from the Soviet Union, although he was never properly elected. He became head of an ancient synagogue located on Shchekavytska Street in Kyiv's Podil neighborhood, which was, at the time, the only functioning synagogue in the capital.

In 2003, the Chabad-Lubavitch movement appointed Rabbi Azrael Haikin, who now resides in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, as the country's chief rabbi, a move that drew confusion at the time. He is in his 80s, has not lived in Ukraine since 2008, and has not been vocal since the war began.

That same year, Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny, a Ukrainian native, was selected as the Reform movement's chief rabbi in 2003. Dukhovny, 71, recorded an emotional video message from a basement in Kyiv, earlier this week. "It's a difficult time, but I know you are with us," he said in the video, thanking people who have donated to the Reform communities across the country. "We know that, always, good is overtaking evil."

Neither Dukhovny nor Haikin ever got official recognition from Ukraine's government.

Azman challenged Bleich for the title in a 2005 election. Born in St. Petersburg, he was close to Viktor Yushchenko, who had been elected president of Ukraine the year before after surviving an assassination attempt by poison during the volatile campaign. Yushchenko named Azman as his liaison to Ukraine's Jewish community.

But Azman's election was deemed illegitimate by a majority of the local Chabad rabbis, who represented the Federation of Jewish Communities, the region's largest Jewish group. Secular Jewish leaders from local cities and towns joined in protesting the vote.

Bleich never gave up his title and remained active in the country. A Kyiv weekly magazine, Focus, named Bleich and Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky, the chief rabbi of Ukraine's Dnepropetrovsk Jewish community, among the 15 most "powerful foreigners" in the country in 2008.

That same year, the Karlin-Stolin Hasidic sect disavowed Bleich amid an internal power battle over the community's institutions in Ukraine.

Bleich also held other communal leadership positions. He served as an executive member of the World Jewish Congress until the summer of 2021, and vice president of the European Council of Jewish Communities. Bleich lost some of his communal positions in 2019 following sexual abuse allegations, according to the blog Frum Follies. In the 2019 presidential election, he backed former President Petro Poroshenko who was defeated by Zelenskyy.

In the previous conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014, Bleich accused the Kremlin of staging antisemitic "provocations" in Crimea and compared Russia's behavior to that of the Nazis prior to the Anschluss invasion of Austria in 1938.

During that conflict, Azman founded a village for Jewish families displaced by Russia's five-year war against Ukraine in the eastern Donbass region. He named it Anatevka, after the village from "Fiddler on the Roof."

Azman is head of the Anatevka Jewish Refugee Community and appointed to his organization Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, two associates of former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Parnas and Fruman were indicted in 2019 on campaign finance charges related to their efforts to remove Marie Yovanovitch, the former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, from her job. Azman also appointed Giuliani as the "honorary mayor of Anatevka."

On Jan. 6, 2021, Azman appeared to back the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol, comparing the

situation to the 2014 ouster of Ukraine's pro-Russia president and saying: "The people protesting against mass election fraud broke into the capital. God bless America." Bleich downplayed it, saying Azman didn't voice the opinion of Ukrainian Jews.

In recent days, both Azman and Bleich have been quoted in the media and described as chief rabbi of Ukraine. Eighteen years after his election was disputed, it seems that Azman – putting his life at risk – has solidified his standing as the country's chief rabbi.

Jacob Kornbluh is the Forward's senior political reporter. Follow him on Twitter @jacobkornbluh or email kornbluh@forward.com.

News

A Jewish billionaire in Putin's inner circle is called out — and called upon to broker peace in Ukraine

By Louis Keene

A Jewish billionaire in Vladimir Putin's inner circle who owns one of the most renowned soccer teams in the world agreed to help broker peace in Ukraine – and on Wednesday, announced he would sell the club.

Roman Abramovich, the Russian owner of the West London soccer team Chelsea, has become a global player not only in sports and commerce, but also in a geopolitical struggle that threatens to reconfigure the world order.

But as Abramovich, 55, mediates one conflict, he is the subject of another. The wave of economic sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine has targeted Russian oligarchs like Abramovich, an oil-and-aluminum magnate whose relationship with Putin dates back decades, and members of Britain's Parliament have called for the seizure of his assets. Freezing them, European and American leaders hope, will raise the pressure on Putin to end the war.

This Russian power broker, however, is also an Israeli citizen and one of Israel's most prominent philanthropists. There, Jewish leaders are rising to Abramovich's defense. A letter signed by the head of Yad Vashem, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel and representatives from several other major Israeli charities and organizations asked American ambassador to Israel Tom Nides to refrain from targeting Israel's second-wealthiest citizen.

The request, sent two weeks before the war began and reported by Israel's Channel 12 news, comes as the Jewish world, with rare exceptions, rallies to the Ukrainian cause, its Jewish president and the tens of thousands of Jews who call it home. Stories of Jewish

Ukrainians fleeing, sheltering, and enlisting have proliferated alongside footage of residential high rises devastated by rocket fire. On Monday, an Israeli citizen was reportedly killed in Kyiv by Russian shelling. A host of mainstream Jewish organizations are fundraising for or dispatching emergency aid.

Abramovich has taken pains to stay above the fray – first by stepping back from Chelsea, then by attempting to mediate, and now by selling the team. In a statement released through the club, he said he planned to direct the proceeds of the sale to victims of the war in Ukraine.

But while Israel, an American ally, cautiously condemned Russian aggression, the tug-of-war over Abramovich underscores its delicate position with regards to Ukraine. With as many as a million Jews living in Russia – including a few of the country's wealthiest individuals – Israel wants to avoid provoking Putin. And it likely wants to protect Abramovich, whose donations underwrite some of the country's most cherished institutions.

A recipe for success — and influence

Since Roman Abramovich took over Chelsea F.C. in 2003, the team has transformed from a middling franchise into a trophy-hoarding juggernaut.

Abramovich quickly earned a reputation for spending lavishly on top players and cycling out managers like training equipment. His approach yielded few friends but brought – some would say bought – virtually unparalleled success in European soccer.

He had applied the same philosophy as a businessman: spend what it takes to win. He acquired a controlling interest in national oil production through billions of dollars in bribes to Russian officials – copping to it in a U.K. courtroom years later – and elbowed his way into aluminum by buying out his rivals.

While amassing his approximately $14 billion fortune, he developed a relationship with Vladimir Putin. In a lawsuit leveled against him by a former business partner, Abramovich was accused of acting as an enforcer for Putin who helped consolidate the oligarchy by threatening other businessmen with confiscation. A biography of Putin by British journalist Christopher Hutchins referred to Abramovich as "Putin's favorite oligarch."

Abramovich, whose was born in the southwestern city of Saratov and whose maternal grandparents were born in Ukraine, has downplayed his ties to Putin, with his lawyers

telling the Guardian, “It would be ludicrous to suggest that our client has any responsibility or influence over the behavior of the Russian state.”

As Russia has drawn increasing ire from the west in recent years, Abramovich has attempted to hedge his bets by securing citizenship abroad. Shortly after Britain rejected his application in 2018, he became a citizen of Israel through its Law of Return. He acquired Portuguese citizenship in 2021 by claiming Sephardic heritage, though his application is now reportedly being investigated.

Long before he made aliyah, Abramovich had poured millions into various Israeli causes. A 2018 article in Times of Israel pegged his total donations to Sheba Medical Center, a hospital near Tel Aviv, at $57 million; early in the pandemic, he funded construction of a new ICU there. In 2020, after BBC News Arabic revealed he had contributed $100 million to a Israeli settler group that operates in East Jerusalem, a spokesperson for Abramovich said he had donated $500 million in the past two decades “to support healthcare, science, education, and Jewish communities in Israel and around the world.”

A conflict within a conflict

Earlier this month, as media outlets around the world reported that Russia was preparing to invade Ukraine, Britain foreign secretary Liz Truss said a list was being prepared of Russian oligarchs who would be targeted for economic sanctions if Putin started a war.
Though the list itself was not made public, the likelihood that Abramovich, as one of Russia’s most visible oligarchs, would be on it may have prompted Israeli leaders to write on his behalf.

Yad Vashem denounced the invasion of Ukraine. But it is also supporting Abramovich. In a letter to Nides dated Feb. 6 – two weeks before the invasion – Yad Vashem chairman Dani Dayan and Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel David Lau lauded Abramovich’s donations and said sanctioning him would be unfair and hurt Israel and the Jewish people. The head of Sheba also signed the letter.

On Feb.8 – two days after the date on the letter – Yad Vashem announced an “eight-digit donation” from Abramovich that would fund the museum’s International Institute for Holocaust Research for five years.

Abramovich was not included in the first round of sanctions – neither were several of the wealthiest Russians as ranked by Forbes – but calls for the seizure of his assets continued to grow as the crisis in Ukraine worsened.

On Feb. 24, British Labour MP Chris Bryant said government documents had identified Abramovich's direct ties to Putin and to "corrupt activity," and called for the freezing of his assets.

Two days later, Abramovich announced that he would be transferring stewardship of Chelsea to the trustees of its foundation, saying, "I believe that they are in the best position to look after the interests of the Club, players, staff, and fans." But he retained ownership of the team and will continue to sign the checks.

The statement, and a separate one issued by the club the next day, were received poorly in Parliament and the British media.

"Unless and until he condemns the criminal invasion of Ukraine I will continue to call for the UK to sanction him and seize/freeze his assets," Bryant wrote on Twitter in response. Robbie Earle, an NBC soccer commentator, said the club's statement, which did not mention Russia or Abramovich, was "an embarrassment."

A fortune in the balance

If Abramovich's efforts to stave off sanctions are wearing thin, proving his value in a potential cease-fire could keep the soccer club in his possession a while longer.

According to the British publication the Jewish News, which first reported Abramovich's involvement, Ukraine contacted him through his Jewish contacts in the country, including Ukrainian-Russian film producer Alexander Rodnyansky.

Little is known about the extent of the diplomatic efforts beyond their location at Ukraine's border with Belarus. Rodnyansky told the Jewish News Abramovich was using whatever ability he had to advance negotiations.

"Although Mr. Abramovich's influence is limited, he is the only one who responded and taken it upon himself to try," Rodnyansky said. "If this will have an impact or not, I don't know, but I am in contact with [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelenskyy's staff myself, and know that they are grateful for his genuine efforts."

And with world soccer taking action against Russia – FIFA suspended the country from World Cup qualification Monday – many will continue to point to one of its most famous owners as a domino that must fall before Putin reassesses his attack on Ukraine.

In addition to Chelsea, now valued at more than $2 billion, Abramovich's assets include 450- and 500-foot yachts, a mansion in London worth well over $100 million and an air fleet that includes a 787 Dreamliner.

"Surely Mr. Abramovich should no longer be able to own a football club in this country," Bryant said in Parliament. "Surely we should be looking at seizing some of his assets, including his 150 million pound home."

Louis Keene is a staff reporter at the Forward. He can be reached at keene@forward.com or on Twitter @thislouis.

Opinion

I'm a rabbi in Warsaw. I'm terrified for the future of Ukraine — and the free world

By Rabbi Yehoshua Ellis

I live in Poland and work as a rabbi in the local Jewish community, but I've been paying close attention to Ukraine since Putin's last invasion in 2014.

I was invigorated by the election of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2019, and even more impressed when he stood up to President Donald Trump, refusing to take part in a quid pro quo for American arms – and I told him so when we met in Krakow in early 2020.

Here in Warsaw, we don't have a front-row seat to Putin's latest atrocity, but we are dealing directly with its spillover. More than a half a million refugees have already fled Ukraine, and over half of them have crossed into Poland. We have been busy moving humanitarian aid into Ukraine and people out, especially Jews.

As a student of Central European history, this invasion scares me to the core. The last time Europe saw something like this, 20 million people died on this side of the Atlantic – and don't get me started on what happened to the Jews.

But our situation this time is remarkably different: at stake this time is not the survival of the Jewish people, but the survival of the free world.

While there are already thousands of Jewish refugees in Poland from Ukraine, they are refugees because they are Ukrainian, not because they are Jewish. Unlike virtually every other time in Jewish history, Jews are fleeing because the entire country is under attack, not because Jewish businesses and properties are being specifically targeted.

Throughout Europe, especially in Poland and Moldova, a broad network of local and international Jewish organizations have mobilized to help refugees. The Joint Distribution Committee has provided psychologists to work within the refugee population, while the

Jewish Community of Warsaw and a myriad Polish Jewish organizations are organizing volunteers and professionals to assist.

Barring bureaucratic obstacles, Ukrainian Jews also have a place they can settle permanently – Israel – where they have familiar and tribal bonds. The Jewish Agency is working hard to ensure that potential olim are provided for while they wait to fly to Israel from Poland.

We are trying to respond to the Jewish needs of the refugees as well. The war is unlikely to end soon, and the Straus-Amiel emissary organization, of which I am a proud graduate, is employing its global network to organize Ukrainian and Russian speaking rabbis to come read the Megillah and provide holiday programming during the upcoming Purim holiday. We have also upped our communal matzah order and are buying Haggadot in Russian in preparation for Passover.

We don't know what this war will bring next, but we do know that the holidays are on the way. In these projects we are indebted to the generous assistance of the whole Jewish world.

I don't doubt that antisemitism is alive and well in Ukrainian society and that the indignities might be daily – I get it, I live in Poland. And yet, the level of acceptance and integration of Jews into Ukrainian society after the fall of the Soviet Union has been remarkable. After all, the main hero emerging from this crisis is Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a Jew. And that clearly demonstrates the kind of society that Ukraine is: a democratic society based on citizenship.

This is an example the whole world should learn from. and what makes Ukraine such a threat to Putin. And this is also the reason that the free world needs to do all that we can to support Ukraine.

The war being fought in Ukraine is a battle for a small country that believes in the value of democracy, citizenship and the rule of law. But it is also a battle for the soul of the world and international law.

Freedom and democracy are the values that have allowed Jews and Jewish life to flourish throughout the world, and we must defend them at all costs.

Rabbi Yehoshua Ellis is a Rabbi in the Jewish Community of Warsaw and a graduate of the Ohr Torah Stone Straus-Amiel Emissary Training Program.