

Maria's Story
of Hope and Survival



Maria's Story of Hope and Survival

**The story of a Ukrainian family that
survived Soviet and Nazi regimes
during World War II**

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This memoir is dedicated to those who did not survive the Soviet and Nazi occupations, were mercilessly persecuted, and perished because they resisted the totalitarian regimes.

*I would like to express my thanks and
appreciation to my family for their
assistance in the publication of
Maria's Story of Hope and Survival*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My name is Maria Kiciuk, née Kocur. I was born in Ukraine and became a citizen of the United States a few years after immigrating here with my family.

During World War II, my family endured the horrors of Soviet and Nazi occupations of Ukraine. Fleeing from the Soviets, we landed in a Nazi Forced Labor camp in Berlin.

In 2014 my brother, Theodor Kocur, was contacted by the Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre in Berlin, housed at the former Pertrix factory, where our family had worked during the Nazi regime. The Kocur name was found on the list of forced laborers, a copy of which was retrieved by the Documentation Centre through the Red Cross. Uta Frölich, a researcher, traveled from Berlin to New York. She, along with a videographer, interviewed my brother and me. The following year we were invited for the opening of the exhibit in Berlin, entitled *The Batteries for Wehrmacht*, in which our family's story was featured. My brother and I, along with other family members, attended and participated in this emotional, multi-day event.

In April of 2020, we were once again invited to Berlin, this time for the commemoration of the fall of the Nazi regime. I was invited to participate in the events by recounting the story of my family. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the commemoration took place virtually where my family story, entitled *Maria's Story*, was presented.

The story of the Kocur family is now part of two documentation centers in Berlin. In addition to *The Batteries for Wehrmacht*, it is also part of the *Documentation Centre Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation*.

Maria's Story of Hope and Survival is an expanded version of Maria's Story. It is not just my story; it is the story of millions of Ukrainians who suffered under the Soviet and Nazi regimes. It is closely intertwined with the history of my native country Ukraine, oppressed by the regimes of two terrible dictators of the 20th century – Stalin and Hitler.

After losing its struggle for independence, in 1922 Ukraine was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union (USSR). In theory the USSR was a union of fifteen independent republics, with each republic free to develop its own language, culture, and traditions. In practice, however, it was “a prison of nations” controlled, terrorized, and russified by Moscow.

Prof. Timothy Snyder, a Yale University historian, states that during WWII, Ukraine suffered greater loss of life than any other European country. If you add that to the millions of lives lost during the Holodomor, the losses are staggering. Prof. Snyder stresses that Germany's responsibility is primarily to Ukraine and not to Russia since all of Ukraine was overrun by the Nazis, whereas only 5% of Russia was occupied and only for a short time.

It is my hope that those who read *Maria's Story of Hope and Survival* realize that appeasement of dictators only emboldens them to commit more atrocities. This has been brought to light with the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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Searching for a Better Life



Maria's parents - Theodore and Anna Kocur

My father, Theodore Kocur, was born in 1893 in the village of Strilky in Ukraine. When he was 16 years old, he left for the United States in search of work, through the port of Hamburg in Germany, and arrived in New York on July 17, 1909. When he came to America, he had the address of someone from the same village in Ukraine who could help him get settled.

My father's first job in the United States was to work on digging a tunnel to bring water from the Catskill Mountains to New York City. He was employed there for one year.

After that project was completed, he went to Shamokin, Pennsylvania, where he worked in the coal mines for about six months until he lost his job because of a strike.

In 1912, he brought over his sister Anna, who was two years younger. She later became our sponsor and brought us to the United States in 1949.



Maria's father Theodore and his sister Anna

My father then moved to Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, and worked at various jobs, such as delivering sand in wagons drawn by horses and working on boats, which transported supplies to the ports in New Jersey and New York. He was employed there for three years and earned twelve dollars a week, which was a good salary at the time.

In 1914, WWI began and ships were needed to transport soldiers and supplies and because of this, once again, my father lost his job. He injured his thumb while working at the Anaconda Company, a wire factory, and from that time on, he could not bend it. In those days they did not pay any compensation or unemployment. Because of his injured finger, and the fact that he came from the area of Ukraine that was under Austria-Hungary, he was not enlisted in the U.S. army.

It so happened that at that time a grocery and butcher store in Hastings-on-Hudson was up for sale and my father, together with his uncle, bought the store. Evenings my father attended English classes and learned to speak and read English. He even bought a car, which was a rarity in those days.

My mother, Anna Mykhalko, was born in 1893 in the village of Strilky. She came to the United States via Bremen, Germany, on June 28, 1911, and worked for a wealthy family in Scarsdale, New York.

My parents were barely seventeen years old when they left Ukraine to escape poverty in their homeland. They met in Yonkers, New York, and were married in St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church. My oldest sister Katrusia was born in Yonkers. Some forty years later three of my siblings and I were married in the same Ukrainian church.

Life was good in the United States. My parents worked hard and saved money, but good fortune could not outweigh my mother's homesickness. They decided to go back to Ukraine. They now had enough money to buy property in a village near Strilky. Little did they know that improving their life would make them a target.

Life in My Village in Western Ukraine

My life story begins in western Ukraine in a small peaceful village, surrounded by low-lying mountains. After returning to Ukraine from the United States, my father bought property in the village of Topilnytsia, not far from Strilky. I was born and baptized there.

Strilky and Topilnytsia are very picturesque villages in the Subcarpathian region near the town of Saryi Sambir. The Dnister River flows through Strilky and occasionally there were floods in spring time, which caused great damage. During the summer we used to whiten the homespun fabric in the river.



Dnister River in Strilky

The village of Topilnytsia lies in a valley between the mountains. The church and school which we attended were in the middle of the village as was the cemetery, where my brothers Vasyl, Michael and Yaroslav, who died as infants, were buried. My family, which consisted of my parents and six children, lived in Topilnytsia until 1944 when we left everything in order to escape the approaching Soviet Army.

My parents were farmers and we all worked very hard. Despite the hard work, I remember my early childhood as a happy one, but all that was about to change.



The grave in Topilnytsia where Michael, Vasyl and Yaroslav Kocur are buried

Caught Between Two Totalitarian Regimes



Map of Europe

On August 23, 1939, the Soviet Union entered an agreement with Nazi Germany (Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), and they became allies. As a result of this agreement, Stalin and Hitler partitioned Poland and divided eastern Europe into their spheres of influence. This led to the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, and subsequent declaration of war by the United Kingdom and France, thus beginning WWII.

In September 1939, as part of the agreement, the Soviets occupied western Ukraine and it became part of the Soviet Union, or what we later referred to as “The Evil Empire.”

There were mass arrests of Ukrainian intelligentsia and people who were active in their communities. These people were arrested, deported to Siberia, or killed. Ukrainian organizations and institutions were eliminated.

The Soviets replaced the term “World War II” with the term “The Great Patriotic War” in order to disguise the fact that from September 1939 to June 1941, the USSR was an ally of Nazi Germany. The Soviets began using June 22, 1941, as the start of WWII.

Even before the arrival of the Red Army, my father had destroyed all books about the Soviet Union. My brother Theodor, however, hid one of his favorite books, entitled *Ali Baba in Kremlin and His Forty Thieves*. It was a satirical story about Stalin and his entourage. One day, he pulled out the book and showed it to a Ukrainian officer. The officer advised my father to burn the book for our safety.

Our Family

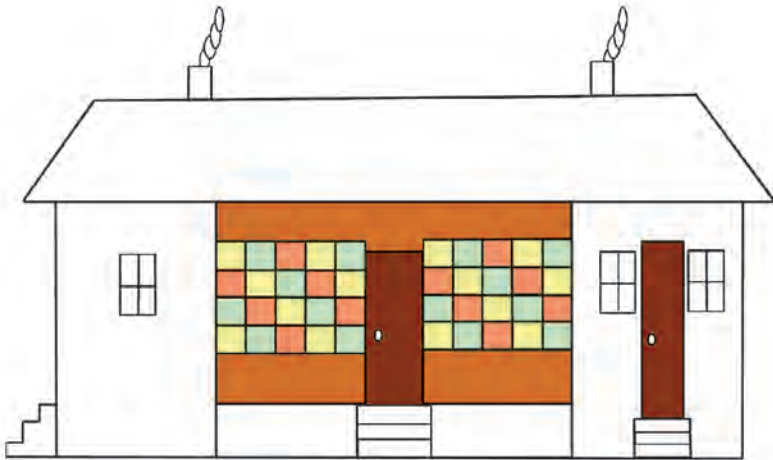


**Kocur Family 1929 - Anna, Katrusia, Mother,
Uncle Mykhailo, Theodor, Father, Mykola**

By the time the war started in 1939, my oldest sister Katrusia was married and lived in a city, quite a distance from our village. My oldest brother Mykola and sister Anna were in a boarding school. My brother Theodor, sister Sonia and I were still at home with our parents. I was six years old at the time.

Taken in by Kind Relatives

One day in December of 1939, Communist officials came to our home. They told my parents that it was no longer our house. The house and all our property now belonged to the state. There was nothing we could do. We had to leave. Our house became the headquarters for several Red Army officers.



Kocur Family home

Illustration by Maria's brother Theodor

Fortunately, my cousin took us in. It wasn't easy for him. His house was small. He had his own family and now five more of us. Very soon we understood how lucky we were to have been thrown out of our house. Our fate could have been much worse.

Arrests and Deportations

One night in February of 1940, in the middle of the winter, when the cold was unbearable and the snow waist deep, my parents heard loud voices outside speaking in Russian, which was unusual in western Ukraine at the time. The Soviet authorities often arrested people at night. That night they took my cousin's neighbor and his family to Siberia.

Still fearful that he might be arrested, my father plodded through the snow in the middle of the night to Uncle Mykhailo who lived in a different part of the village. As he approached the house, he saw sleds in the yard and heard crying coming from inside the house.

That night they took my uncle and his family to Siberia. We never saw or heard from his family again. That same night they took thousands of Ukrainians who suffered a similar fate. They were shipped to the gulags, where most of them perished from lack of food, shelter, and from slave labor.



Gulag – Soviet Slave Labor Camp

“Enemies of the People”

From then on people in our village were afraid to help us. They began to understand that in the eyes of the Soviet authorities we were considered to be “enemies of the people.” This was not only because we were somewhat better off, but more importantly, because my parents knew how people in the United States lived and could refute Soviet propaganda. No one was allowed to help enemies of the people. My cousin was now afraid to provide shelter for us. We had to leave.

My parents had to decide what to do next to save their family.



Maria's sister Katrusia's home seized by the Soviets

They placed each child with a different relative in a different village or city. I lived with Katrusia's in-laws. We later found out that the Soviet authorities also confiscated my sister's

house and property so that her family became homeless. My mother did not have a place to live, so she walked from town to town and spent a few days with each child.

In order to escape arrest, my father left our village and went to a different county in the Carpathian Mountains. Later, when we were moving west to escape the Soviets, we stayed there for a while.

Katrusia's in-laws lived through a horrifying experience. The family was lined up by a group of Red Army soldiers and was about to be shot. However, an officer intervened and the family was spared. The family's sixteen-year-old son was so traumatized that he developed severe mental health problems.

Nazi Occupation of Ukraine

The Soviet Communist occupation of Ukraine was followed by the Nazi occupation. In June of 1941, when the Nazis broke the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and invaded the Soviet Union, the Soviets began to retreat eastward and by the end of November the Nazis occupied all of Ukraine. According to the Encyclopedia of Ukraine, the NKVD (the Soviet secret police, precursor to the KGB) executed approximately 15,000 Ukrainian political prisoners in western Ukraine before their retreat.



The Eye of War – Ukraine 1941- 42 by Dieter Keller

As the Soviets were retreating, they needed horses and they took them from the Ukrainian farmers wherever they could. At that time my brother Theodor was in the village of Turia

with my uncle. Theodor guarded the property while my uncle hid the horses in the woods. When a soldier inquired about the horses, Theodor told him that they had none. The soldier was ready to shoot him. Luckily a neighbor intervened and volunteered to take the soldier wherever he wanted.

On June 30, 1941, one week after the Germans occupied Lviv, the newly formed Ukrainian government proclaimed independence. Soon thereafter, in July of 1941 the officials of the newly formed government were imprisoned and sent to Nazi concentration camps. Ukraine's hopes for independence were dashed once again and the country remained enslaved for many years to come.

In order to support their military expansion, the Nazis implemented Lebensraum, a policy of conquering territory for German use. In the process, they set out to eliminate Jews and Roma, and turn Slavs into slaves. Jews, Roma, and Slavic people were considered to be Untermenschen, a derogatory term meaning subhuman.

Secretly Supplying Food

The Nazis needed food and raw materials to run their war machine. They took as much as they could by imposing quotas on farm products, which the farmers had to give to the state. In cities, food was rationed and there was not enough for people to live on.

The Nazis did not allow anyone to bring provisions from the villages to the cities. My sister Katrusia and her two children spent one summer with us because they lived in a city and did not have enough to eat.



Jaroslaw Kiciuk, Maria's husband

Jaroslaw, the man I later met and married, tried to help his family. He got a job as a manager of a mill so that he could bring some grain to his family. Because bringing food into cities was forbidden, he had to get off the train two stops before reaching his destination and walk, avoiding main roads so as not to get caught.

Nazi and Soviet Labor Camps



Mykola Kocur, Maria's brother

The Nazis also needed workers. They would round up young people and ship them to forced labor camps in Germany, where they worked as slave laborers in factories and on farms.

My brother Mykola was one of those workers. A month or two before we started our journey west, he received a letter telling him he had to report to the Nazi government in Lviv. He did as he was told and was immediately taken to Germany for forced labor.

Over two million Ukrainians worked as forced Nazi laborers in Germany. Those from eastern Ukraine were listed as Ostarbeiters and had to wear the label OST. Since Ukraine had no statehood at the time, they were often mislabeled as Russians. Those from western Ukraine were usually mislabeled as Poles. The Nazi government treated

Ukrainians, especially those from eastern Ukraine, with great brutality.

For many years we did not know what happened to Mykola. We found out many years later that after the war he was handed over to Soviet authorities as part of the policy of repatriation.

Those who decided to return home after the war and those who were handed over by force to the Soviets were labeled as Nazi collaborators. They were discriminated against, ostracized, and prevented from advancing their careers. Many of the former Nazi laborers were sent to the gulags, where most of them perished.



Kolyma in the northeastern region of the Soviet Union

The Soviets sent Mykola to Kolyma, a remote region in Siberia in the Arctic Circle, known for its harsh climate and its gulag labor camps, where the mortality rate reached 80% and where millions of prisoners were exterminated during the Stalin regime. There he spent almost ten years working in the gold mines as a slave laborer.

After Stalin's death, Mykola was released from the gulag but was not allowed to live in Ukraine. Until 1960 he was forced to live in Russia. There he married Lusia and they had two daughters. Later the family returned to Ukraine and lived in the Ivano-Frankivsk region, where Mykola worked in an oil refinery as an engineer.

When the Red Army left our village in the summer of 1941, my father gathered our family and we returned home. No one prevented us from returning to our house and we did not ask anyone's permission. My family worked very hard to restore our homestead and make our farm functional again.

Ukraine's Freedom Fighters



UPA Soldiers in the forest

Young people tried to find a way to avoid being taken to Germany as forced laborers. Many of them joined the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which was formed in 1942 and fought against both the Nazis and the Soviets.

My future husband was one of those freedom fighters. For three years he lived in the forest fighting for Ukraine's independence. In the summer of 1947, two years after the war ended, a group of about 300 freedom fighters were given the task of reaching the American Zone in Germany in order to inform the free world that Ukraine was continuing its fight for independence.

It took my husband and his group about four months to finally reach the free world. They hid in the woods during the day and walked at night. They ate whatever they could find in the fields and forests. My husband said that the last two or three weeks all they had to eat were grapes. Some of them died along the way, but most of those who had set out from Ukraine reached the American zone and were able to tell their stories.

Escape From the Soviet Communists

My family left Ukraine on June 30, 1944, as the Red Army was approaching once again. One morning, and I remember it vividly, I woke up very early and heard my parents whispering. They were trying to decide what to do. I was only eleven, but I dreaded what might happen if we stayed.

Fortunately, my parents decided to leave. It was not an easy decision. They were farmers who owned property, farm animals, and a nice house. We had no place to go and no specific plans, yet the decision was made to leave everything behind and face the unknown in a foreign land. We took a wagon and two horses and left our home, not realizing that it would be forever. There were six of us – my parents, Theodor, Anna, Sonia, and I. We tried to let my sister Katrusia know that we were leaving, but that proved too difficult.

As we approached what used to be the border between the Soviet Union and Nazi-occupied territory, we found abandoned houses. In order to prevent people from escaping the Soviet Union, the Soviet authorities created a protective buffer zone and deported the people who lived there to the gulags in Siberia. This made it easier for them to patrol the border and shoot those who were trying to escape.

Since it was summer, we slept in the wagon, but occasionally stayed in one of those abandoned houses for a day or two and then moved on. One time, as the front stalled, we stayed in such a house for about a month and then continued on our way west before the approaching front.

We were not the only ones trying to escape. Thousands of Ukrainians were leaving their homes and belongings in an effort to flee, so groups of caravans were formed.

Stopped by Nazi Soldiers

Our journey to freedom ended abruptly somewhere near the city of Uzhhorod, close to the border of Czechoslovakia, when the Nazis confiscated our horses and wagon and packed everyone onto freight trains. They brought us to the city of Strasshof, near Vienna, where we had to undergo disinfection, which was routine for forced laborers. My family was then transported to a Nazi forced labor camp in the city of Linz, Austria, where my father and siblings, Theodor and Anna, worked as slave laborers.

Sometime in November or December, we were taken to a labor camp in Berlin. Anna was not with us because she was housed elsewhere at the time.



Life in the Forced Labor Camp



One of the Pertrix forced labor camps part of the Nazi Forced Labor Documentation Center

In Berlin, as in Linz, we were in a Nazi labor camp and worked without compensation. My father and Theodor worked in a factory which produced weapons for the German Army.

The food they gave us was very bad – watery turnip soup and hard stale bread, which, people said, was mixed with sawdust.

We lived in the barracks and there was no privacy. Several families slept on bunk beds in the same room.

The gate was locked at night and opened early in the morning for people to go to work, but a guard was always stationed at the gate. We stayed there for a month or two. During air raids we were told to hide in ditches. I remember being afraid of the air raids.

Escape from Pertrix

The Red Army was approaching Berlin and we had to flee once again. Somehow my father, God bless his soul, found a way to save his family.

Early in the morning of February 22, 1945, possibly during an air raid, as the laborers were headed for work, my family crept through a hole in the fence and left the camp. Miraculously, we escaped just a few days before the camp was bombed and just a few weeks before the Red Army occupied Berlin.

Had we not fled from Berlin, “liberation day” for us would have been a much worse fate. If we had survived the bombing, we would have been taken to a Soviet concentration camp in Siberia. But since we landed in what later became an American zone, it truly became a day of liberation for us.

We took a train that was traveling south to Bavaria. We rode all night and arrived in Forchheim in the morning. There the train stopped because of an air raid and people scattered in the fields trying to escape the bombings. We stayed in Forchheim, but our baggage was left on the train and we lost all our possessions. In Forchheim we were placed on a farm, where we worked. After Germany surrendered, my father was hired to work in the field kitchen for American troops.

Anna was not with us because she had stayed in Linz, but she was also lucky. When the Soviets were approaching Linz, those who did not want to fall into their hands were allowed to move to the American zone. They were told where and when to go and buses transported them to a refugee camp in the American zone. Anna took advantage of this and escaped from the zone which became occupied by the Soviets.

After the war, my father placed an ad in a Ukrainian newspaper in search of his son Mykola and daughter Anna. The director of the camp, where Anna was staying at that time, saw the ad and informed Anna. She somehow contacted the family and my cousin, Vasyl Kocur, smuggled her over the Austrian border to Erlangen, Germany, where we were staying in a Displaced Persons camp.



Maria, cousin Vasyl, sister Anna

Policy of Repatriation



Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill at the Yalta Conference

We felt that we had finally overcome all the obstacles and were now safe. But it wasn't so. We had to overcome one more hurdle – the forced repatriation to the Soviet Union.

Under an agreement reached at the Yalta Conference in 1945, millions of former Soviet citizens were forced to go back to the USSR. NKVD agents roamed the camps to ensure compliance. Hundreds of people committed suicide rather than be forced to go back. My brother remembers that my parents were taken into custody in an effort to force us to go back. Finally, the forced repatriation policy was stopped.

We have often wondered why we were spared. Was it because my father spoke some English and his sister in the United States was ready to sponsor us? Was it perhaps that the person in charge of our camp was a kind-hearted person? This we will never know, but once again our family was saved. My siblings and I consider it a miracle that we survived the war as well as the Soviet and Nazi occupations.

Life in the Displaced Persons Camp

We were assigned to a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Erlangen, Germany, a beautiful city not heavily damaged in the war. Our father worked there for the U.S. Army and served as an interpreter when needed. Many of the refugees were Ukrainians.



**The German city of Erlangen where Maria was
in a DP camp after the war**

We stayed in Erlangen and lived there in former military barracks for about three or four years. The American organizations – United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and International Refugee Organization (IRO) helped the refugees.

Ukrainian schools and various organizations were established in the DP camp and Ukrainian life flourished. For one year I went to school in the camp in Aschaffenburg, where I was the only girl in my class. We learned different subjects, including four languages – Ukrainian, German, English and Latin.



Maria with classmates in Aschffenburg

A chapter of the Ukrainian scouting organization PLAST was established in the camp and I became a member. My counselor was Lesia Khraplyva who later became a well-known writer.



**Plast camp in Erlangen – Sonia Kocur first row 2nd right,
Maria Kocur – 3rd row 2nd right**

German Hochschule



Maria, second row, right

In 1948 we began to notice changes in our camp. People were leaving and going to different countries. In the fall, there were not enough students to form a class I could attend, so during my last year in Germany I attended a German Hochschule. It was not easy for me because all the subjects were in German. I was excused from attending various activities so that I could devote all my time to studying.

I am sorry that I did not keep in touch with any of my high school friends from Germany, but I was overwhelmed with new responsibilities in the United States and had no time to think about anything else.

Journey to the United States

Sponsored by my aunt, Anna Holowczak, we received permission to go to the United States in the summer of 1949. We were transported from the DP camp in Erlangen to Hamburg, Germany, and from there by ship to New York.



**Anna, Maria, and Sonia Kocur leaving
the DP camp in Erlangen in May 1949**

We arrived in the port of New York on August 17, 1949. It was a beautiful summer morning. As I stepped out of the cabin, I saw the Statue of Liberty, the famed monument symbolizing freedom and opportunity. It was a glorious sight that stayed with me for a long time.

For the first few weeks, we lived with my aunt. Later, my father worked two jobs for six months in order to be able to buy the house where I still live. Thirty years earlier, before



Kocur family in front of the home that Maria's father purchased in 1951 where she and her brother lived with their families for many years

returning to Ukraine, he had left five dollars in the bank. When we came to Yonkers in 1949 that amount had grown to \$50, which was an impressive amount at that time.

Two weeks after we arrived, I began attending high school. Although I had studied English in the DP camp in Germany, my English was limited so that for the first few weeks of school it was difficult for me to understand what the teacher was saying. However, since I always loved to read and learn new things, I quickly made progress.

Six months later I was the only one from my school to win an "Honorable Mention" in a New York State competition, translating from Latin into English. A year later I won third place in the city of Yonkers in a school essay contest. Two years later, when I graduated from Yonkers High School, I was one of the top students in the class and belonged to the Honor Society.



**Winners of the Yonkers citywide essay competition
Maria on right**



**Maria Kocur – Yonkers High School
and Hunter College graduation**

Safe at Last

The United States became our new home. Because of what my family experienced during the Soviet and the Nazi regimes, I learned to appreciate the United States, the land of freedom and opportunity, the “golden country” as my father used to say. The freedoms that non-totalitarian and non-communist countries enjoy should not be taken for granted.

44 August 24, 1989

CATHOLIC
new yorkers

A Father's Lesson

Yonkers woman works hard to preserve Ukrainian values

By JOAN DONNER

The mother of six children, all with college degrees, 55-year-old Maria Kiciuk of Yonkers is no stranger to graduations. But this commencement season has a twist. This year, Maria is the graduate.

The diminutive grandmother, who as a child lived through both the Soviet crackdown and German occupation of the Ukraine and endured life in a labor camp, this spring received her doctorate in linguistics from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. That moment was the fulfillment of a dream born of perseverance and faith—“examples,” she said, “set by my father.”

“My father worked every day of his life—right up to his death at age 83,” she told CNY. “He was deeply religious, self-sufficient and independent to the end of his days, and his love of knowledge was unflagging. As I arrived home each day I would always see him in the window reading.”

Mrs. Kiciuk completed the requirements for her Ph.D. in linguistics while raising her family and maintaining a dynamic involvement in both the Ukrainian community of Yonkers and St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church. Over a 20-year period, she has served as teacher as well as director of St. Michael's School of Ukrainian Studies. In 1987 she was the recipient of the Educator of the Year Award from the United Slavonian



DREAM FULFILLED—As a child Maria Kiciuk lived through the traumas of the Soviet crackdown and German occupation of the Ukraine but she persevered in her ideals. Earlier this year she received her doctorate in linguistics from the City

Maria with her Ph.D. diploma

I was determined to take advantage of the many opportunities the United States was offering and to be a good and productive citizen. I was also determined to learn the history and continue the beautiful traditions of my birth country, Ukraine, especially since it was under Russian control, and all things Ukrainian were suppressed.

I met my husband, Jaroslaw, in New York City, where he lived with his family. We were married in St. Michael's Ukrainian Church in Yonkers, New York, in 1953. While raising a family, I continued my studies, graduated from college, and earned a doctorate in linguistics.



Maria and Jaroslaw's wedding, September 12, 1953

Siblings Reunite After 50 Years

In the late 1980s and early 1990, things began to change in Ukraine and in all of the Soviet Union. The last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, introduced Glasnost, a policy of more open government. People were not as afraid to speak up. The enslaved countries of the Soviet Union started breaking away and declaring independence. My family was then able to reunite with my sister Katrusia and my brother Mykola, some 50 years after last seeing them. Unfortunately, both of my parents died before ever seeing their two oldest children again.



Mykola, Katrusia, and Theodor Kocur



Mykola Kocur was reunited with his family yesterday after 45 years of separation. Kocur, left, discusses his laboring days with his brother, Theodor Kocur Jr., and sister, Anna Ivanick.

Glasnost reunites a family

Siblings separated during WWII meet for Ukrainian Christmas

By Amy Teibel
Staff Writer

For nearly 40 years, Mykola Kocur's only travels were from the Ukrainian republic of the Soviet Union to a Siberian work camp.

Then, glasnost arrived, freeing the retired petroleum engineer to reunite last week with relatives he hadn't seen since 1944.

"It was just unbelievable, just incredible," Kocur, 66, said yesterday, his words translated by his sister, Maria Kiciuk of Homesite Parkway in Yonkers. "I couldn't believe it had really happened."

In 1944, when family members were fleeing their village of Topilnytsia in western Ukraine, Kocur had been away at school. Taken into Nazi custody, his parents and four siblings were sent to a labor camp near Berlin.

When the war ended, attempts to find him got sucked into the black hole of post-war communications with the Soviet Union: Not until 1957 did his family learn he had slaved seven years in Kolyma, a notorious Soviet camp at the northern tip of Asia.

Twice before, Kocur's immediate family, in the United States since 1949, had sent their brother formal invitations to visit. Both times his travel requests came up against a thudding *nyet* from Soviet officials, Kiciuk said.

But the changing of the Soviet guard and the loosening of the strictures that had bound Soviet society worked their magic for the Kocur family. The trip that brought the silver-haired engineer and his wife, Lusia, to Kennedy Airport on Friday night was approved.

Kocur's face became animated, and his hands moved like bobbing batons, when he discussed his hopes

for a freer Soviet society.

But just how ingrained the fear of official repercussion is came to the surface as his relatives admonished him against speaking too freely to the press about conditions in his homeland.

Kocur waved away most of their concerns, but he did drop a curtain when the discussion turned to his experiences in the Russian camp.

"He prefers not to talk about it," Kiciuk paraphrased. "There is openness, but there is not complete openness."

Kocur's reunion with his relatives came at a particularly joyous time. Yesterday was the Ukrainian Christmas, and his arrival imbued the family's traditional celebration with yet another sense of miracle.

"(It's) our Christmas, we have the whole family here," said Kiciuk, who

Please see REUNION, A10

Theodor and Anna Kocur reunite with their brother Mykola after fifty years

Returning to Ukraine

I returned to Ukraine three times. I visited Ukraine for the first time in 1990 as a member of the Ukrainian chorus Dumka. We sang in the Lviv Opera House, in Kyiv, and in Poltava.



Dumka Choir 1994 – Maria first row, right

In Kyiv we experienced many obstacles created by the authorities. Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union at the time and obstruction of Ukrainian events was the norm. Several hours prior to the concert, the Soviet authorities denied us the hall where we were supposed to perform. Thankfully, the organizers found a different venue at the last minute and our concert went on.

At that time young students were on a hunger strike in Kyiv to protest Soviet government policies and we joined them to show our support. I remember that in Poltava a big blue and yellow flag was smuggled into the concert hall during the concert.

On August 24th, 1991, Ukraine declared independence. It was truly a glorious day, one that I felt I had waited for all my life.

I was in Kyiv for the second time in 1992, this time for a full six weeks. There I taught English and English pronunciation of basic medical terminology to a group of Ukrainian physicians. The program, organized by the Ukrainian National Association, was directed by Prof. Zirka Voronka.

I lived with the family of Prof. Danylo Kryvchenya, the Director of the Cardiology Department. Later, he and his wife, as well as two other doctors from this group, came to the U.S. on different occasions and visited us.



**(L to R) Maria Kiciuk, Danylo Kryvchenya, MD,
Zirka Voronka and students**

During those six weeks I learned to make my way around Kyiv. One day I met a woman on the tram and started a conversation with her. She took me to see some sights in

Kyiv. On that day, I saw St. Sophia Cathedral and the Golden Gate, the main gate in the 11th century fortifications of Kyiv, with a church constructed above its passage. As we walked down the street a woman came up to me. It was my cousin Orysia, who lived in Cherkasy and had come to Kyiv with her daughter to visit someone in the hospital. And so, quite unexpectedly, we met on the street in Kyiv.

After my stay in Kyiv, I went to western Ukraine and spent a week with my family. My niece Vira and her husband Andriy drove me by car to Topilnytsia, the village where I was born. Where our house once stood, there now stands a nice school. I was happy to see that the gates to the school were painted in Ukrainian colors – blue and yellow.

In Kharkiv as a Fulbright Scholar

In 1993, I had the good fortune to spend the fall semester at the V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University as a Fulbright scholar. It is one of the oldest universities in eastern Europe and the second oldest in Ukraine.

I taught a group of 25 male students, who were trained to serve as advisers in various parts of the world. Their knowledge of English was excellent. I brought several copies of *The Ukrainian Weekly*, a U.S. based Ukrainian newspaper, and used them as supplementary material.

While in Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, I witnessed the devastation of Ukrainian national, cultural, and linguistic identity. The following is an excerpt from an article I had written for *The Ukrainian Weekly* upon my return to the United States:

I enjoyed my stay in Ukraine very much. What made it difficult for me, however, was to witness the results of Moscow's long and ruthless russification policy in Ukraine. It was during this period that about 40,000 scientific terms were eliminated and the status of the Ukrainian language was downgraded virtually to zero.

It was a time when people were looked upon with scorn and suspicion if they spoke Ukrainian. Even wearing an embroidered shirt was considered counter-revolutionary and led to persecution. The language of instruction in all the schools was Russian, and the Ukrainian language was only one of the subjects, with as little as one hour a week

allotted to it. Moreover, those who did not want to take it were excused for a variety of reasons. Nowadays, the language one hears in the streets and other public places is almost exclusively Russian. I was also shocked to see that people still write their names and addresses in Russian and even the name Ukraine is not spelled in Ukrainian.

The expectation that one has to speak Russian is so strong that it is difficult for these people to fathom that Russian is not being used in Ukrainian communities in western countries. For example, when I showed the film *Harvest of Despair* to my class and pointed out that all the witnesses were from eastern Ukraine, one of the students commented that it did not seem probable since the witnesses did not speak Russian.

I asked my students if they had heard about the Holodomor, the 1932-1933 famine genocide in Ukraine during Stalin's regime. They had not, with the exception of one student who stated that his grandmother mentioned it, but only after Ukraine became independent. One day that same student, who commuted to the university from a neighboring village, told the class that on the train, on his way to Kharkiv, an elderly man conversed with him in Ukrainian. The student was excited and surprised that he used the Ukrainian language instead of Russian.

In my first three weeks in Kharkiv, I did not hear any Ukrainian spoken in the streets or shops. One morning, when I was looking to buy a Ukrainian newspaper at a kiosk in front of the university, I was pleasantly surprised to hear a man speaking

Ukrainian. When I mentioned to him my surprise at hearing the Ukrainian language, he replied that it was because he was from Lviv and not from Kharkiv. Eastern Ukraine was much more russified than western Ukraine because it was under Russian control for a much longer time.



Maria with a group of her Kharkiv University students

In Kharkiv, I met with my brother Mykola and his family and visited them many times. I spent Christmas with them and we enjoyed a lovely traditional Ukrainian feast. Back home in the United States, my husband and our children prepared the twelve dishes for Christmas for the first time without me. We always kept the beautiful Ukrainian traditions during this festive time.

Ukraine Declares Independence

My daughters Natalia and Marta were in Ukraine during the collapse of the Soviet Union. These are Natalia's recollections:

In 1991 Marta and I joined a group called Dzvin, a Canadian organization that sent young Ukrainian-Americans to meet with Ukrainians living under the Soviet regime. We were placed with Ukrainian families throughout the month-long trip. They were very warm and welcoming. Even though Marta and I were born in the United States, we



Natalia and Marta in Ukraine in 1991

are fluent in Ukrainian and were happy that we were able to participate.

Although we were brought up in totally different circumstances, we all got along very well. Growing up in a democratic society, the Soviet system was foreign to us. I remember going into a shoe store where there was not one pair of shoes for sale, yet the government-run store had an employee sit there all day.

In August 1991, towards the end of our trip, Mikhail Gorbachev, then president of the Soviet Union, was placed under house arrest during a coup. Flights back home were canceled and there was almost no communication with the outside world. People were afraid of the uncertainty, not knowing what would happen next. We started seeing tanks in the city streets of Kyiv. On August 24, 1991, we were fortunate to be there on the day Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union. It was an amazing experience to be part of this great historical event.

Freedom Fighters Return to Ukraine

My husband visited Ukraine in 1992 with our daughters Lesia and Natalia to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). It was attended by a large group of former freedom fighters, most returning to Ukraine for the first time. There were commemorations in Kyiv and other major cities throughout Ukraine.

It was at this time that my husband was finally reunited with his brother, whom he had not seen in over fifty years.



Jaroslav reunited with his brother Julian



**Jaroslaw in Lutsk at the
50th Anniversary of UPA**



**Maria's husband Jaroslaw and daughters
Lesia and Natalia**

Remembering the Victims



Burial of victims of the Soviet Communist regime

Once Ukraine became independent, mass graves were discovered throughout the country. On this trip, while visiting my village, my husband and daughters came across a sobering scene in Strilky, where my parents were born. This is how Lesia describes it:

The village was having a funeral for hundreds of victims of the Soviet regime. Bodies that had been thrown into a pit were dug up, placed in caskets, and properly buried. According to the villagers, another 800 or so bodies were buried under the train tracks and could not be exhumed. Similar funeral processions were held throughout Ukraine. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, people had been too afraid to even mention any of this happened.

Kocur Family in America



Kocur Family Reunion July 25, 1998

My family, my brother's, and both my sisters' families are thriving in the United States. We are a close-knit family and throughout the years we frequently got together to celebrate family occasions. In 1998 we held a Kocur family reunion with over 60 family members attending.



**Maria with her siblings and their spouses
(L to R) Theodor and Dorothy, Maria and Jaroslaw,
Raymond and Sonia, Anna and Joseph**

My siblings and our spouses were all blessed with good health and good children. We lived not too far from each other and visited each other quite often, especially during the holidays.

The Kiciuk Family



**Maria with her husband and six children
(L to R) Natalia, Lesia, Oksana, Jaroslaw, Sonia, Marta**

The city where we made our home, Yonkers, has an active Ukrainian community that understands the importance of keeping Ukrainian language and traditions alive. My husband and I took an active part in community affairs. I am proud to say that all six of my children speak Ukrainian fluently and are aware of their Ukrainian heritage.

This is how my daughter Oksana remembers her childhood years:

As a child of parents who fled the Soviet Communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes, I, along with my five siblings, grew up in a vibrant Ukrainian community in the U.S. My

life centered around church activities and attending Ukrainian Saturday School, where we studied Ukrainian literature, history, and culture. Weekdays included Ukrainian dance and choir practice while summers were spent at a Ukrainian camp in upstate New York, where we bonded with other children and made lifelong friends. I can say that these experiences enriched my life.

While growing up in my community, I did not know that my friend's parents had survived the Holodomor and that members of their family had starved to death under Stalin's regime. I did not know that my best friend's mother had been taken from her village as a 15-year-old to work for the Nazis. I did not know that some of my family members were taken away to Siberia by the Soviets.

It was only much later that I found out about these horrible events. All of this trauma and fear was buried deep inside and never discussed. My parents only wanted to start a better life for their children, free from the hardships they had experienced, while never forgetting the love they had for their homeland and passing it on to the next generation.

My daughter Sonia describes the importance of her Ukrainian heritage:

My siblings and I, like many first-generation Ukrainian Americans, passed on our love of the beautiful Ukrainian language and culture to our children. It was very important for our

parents to preserve the language and traditions of their homeland since those living in Ukraine were not free to do so. My mother used to say that if we don't preserve the Ukrainian identity, then the sacrifices of those who fought and died for Ukraine would have been in vain.

One of my children has enriched his life by embracing the opportunity to live and work in Ukraine. I sincerely hope that the refugees who fled Ukraine due to the 2022 invasion retain their heritage and language.



Jaroslaw and Maria 60th wedding anniversary

In September 2013 my husband and I celebrated our 60th wedding anniversary surrounded by family and friends.

Ukrainians Stand Up for Freedom

For centuries, Russia has been committing human rights abuses against Ukraine and other nations. In the 20th century alone, its regime was responsible for the death of millions of Ukrainians by means of starvation, deportations, and executions.

In 1932–1933 Joseph Stalin, the authoritarian ruler of the Soviet Union, unleashed a massive genocide, known as the Holodomor. Millions of Ukrainians were deliberately starved to death over a span of eighteen months, all while living in what was known as the “breadbasket of Europe.” Russia has never admitted to committing this genocide and still holds commemoration ceremonies honoring Stalin.

The Soviet regime destroyed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by arresting, murdering, or deporting the clergy and church hierarchy. Four-fifths of the Ukrainian cultural and intellectual elite perished. Russification was pursued in all spheres of life.

After declaring independence in 1991, Ukraine gradually began to move away from Russia and develop closer ties with the West. Ukraine held two mass protests in defense of European and democratic values in the years following Ukraine’s declaration of independence: the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity.

The Orange Revolution was a series of protests that took place after the November 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, which was marred by Russian interference, fraud, and corruption. For two months, hundreds of thousands of protesters demonstrated peacefully against the rigged

run-off election between pro-western Viktor Yushchenko and his rival, pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych. The Supreme Court of Ukraine voided the elections and new elections were held.

My son Jaroslaw went to Ukraine as an election monitor. These are his recollections of the experience:

In 2004 I was the President of the Westchester, NY chapter of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America. Groups of election monitors were sent to polling locations throughout Ukraine. I had never been to Ukraine, so I jumped at the opportunity. I was assigned to the city of Cherkasy. The Ukrainian people took the election very seriously, did not impede us in any way, and were proud that they were having a fair and democratic election.

The following day, while in Kyiv, I witnessed crowds of Ukrainians celebrating the victory of President Viktor Yushchenko, who spoke before the crowd. It was a joyous celebration of democracy that will stay with me forever.

SEEKING HONESTY

3 men with Yonkers ties go to Ukraine as vote monitors



Carucha L. Meuse/The Journal News

Jaroslaw "Jerry" Kiciuk, in his parents' home in Yonkers last week with wooden carvings from Ukraine, is one of more than 300 people from the United States and Canada who will monitor Sunday's Ukrainian presidential election.

Ken Valenti
The Journal News

YONKERS — On Sunday, when Ukraine reaches what could be one of the most significant milestones in its recent history, Jaroslaw "Jerry" Kiciuk of Yonkers will be there.

The 38-year-old engineer will be one of more than 1,000 international watchdogs monitoring Sunday's historic presidential revote in order to prevent the massive voter fraud that marred a Nov. 21 vote and threw the former Soviet republic into turmoil.

"Hopefully now, they're going to be a little more fearful of committing fraud."

Jaroslaw "Jerry" Kiciuk

He is one of at least three men raised in Yonkers — more than 4,000 miles from the Ukrainian capital of Kiev — who are traveling to the country of their parents' birth to help oversee the culmination of a bizarre election season that has even seen the poisoning of opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko, whom many Ukrainians — and Ukrainian-Americans — see as the country's chance to pull itself from the shadow of the former Soviet Union. Yushchenko survived what was recently revealed to be massive dioxin poisoning, but the toxin left his face ravaged with pock marks.

"Hopefully now, they're going to be a little more fearful of committing fraud," Kiciuk said. "And just our presence should do something to quell their ability to commit that."

He is one of at least three men raised in Yonkers — more than 4,000 miles from the Ukrainian capital of Kiev — who are traveling to the country of their parents' birth to help oversee the culmination of a bizarre election season that has even seen the poisoning of opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko, whom many Ukrainians — and Ukrainian-Americans — see as the country's chance to pull itself from the shadow of the former Soviet Union. Yushchenko survived what was recently revealed to be massive dioxin poisoning, but the toxin left his face ravaged with pock marks.

Please see UKRAINE, 2A



Sergei Grits/The Associated Press

Ukrainians carry crosses decorated with Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's blue campaign ribbons during a religious procession in Kiev this week.

Ukrainians in New York

There are 869,799 people of Ukrainian ancestry in the United States. Local numbers include:

136,967
in New York state
6,465
in Westchester
1,975
in Yonkers
2,176
in Rockland
500
in Putnam

U.S., state, Rockland and Westchester figures are 2003 Census Bureau estimates; Yonkers, Putnam figures are from the 2000 census.

Maria's son Jaroslaw on the cover of the Yonkers Journal News

The Revolution of Dignity began in late November of 2013 as a small protest of students in the Maidan Square in Kyiv and quickly grew into a mass demonstration. Yanukovich, then president of Ukraine, had rejected an agreement with the European Union, choosing closer ties with Russia. In an effort to squash opposition, he ordered the shooting of peaceful protesters, killing over one hundred innocent civilians. Braving brutal winter conditions, people continued to protest until late February 2014, when Yanukovich was removed from power after fleeing to Russia. New elections were held in May 2014, and the international community was invited to monitor these elections.

My grandson, Stefan, and son-in-law, Andriy, traveled to Ukraine to accompany thousands of international election monitors. These are my grandson's observations:

As these horrific events unfolded, I was no longer just reading about Ukraine's fight for freedom in history books but watching it in real-time. Traveling to Ukraine as an election monitor during this crucial time was an easy decision. I grew up speaking the Ukrainian language, participating in its rich culture, and learning to appreciate Ukraine's long and proud history. I was inspired by the persistence and bravery displayed by the people.

We landed in Kyiv, where we saw the barricaded streets in the center of the city, still in place from the Maidan protest. It was inspiring to see

firsthand what I had been watching on the news for months.

The day before the elections, we traveled east to Poltava where our group was based. We planned our routes so that we would visit as many polling stations as possible. Divided into pairs, we covered the city and its surrounding towns and villages. We were happy to report that we did not observe any corruption. I truly believe that having international election monitors was a deterrent from Russian interference. Ukraine seemed to be well on its way toward becoming a democracy and we were honored to be a part of it.



Stefan with members of the Ukrainian American Youth Association in Ukraine in 2014

The attempts of the Ukrainian people to transform Ukraine into a more pluralistic and democratic society were “punished” by Putin with the 2014 invasion of Crimea and the Donbas area in eastern Ukraine. The Russian Armed Forces, disguised as separatists, have been fighting Ukrainians on Ukraine’s soil for the past eight years. Over 14,000 Ukrainians had already lost their lives prior to the ramped-up 2022 invasion.

The 1994 Budapest memorandum, signed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia had assured protection of Ukraine’s sovereignty and its borders. In exchange, Ukraine, which had the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world, agreed to give up all of its nuclear weapons. Despite the assurances, the West opted for a policy of appeasement when Russia violated the agreement. With no consequences for its 2014 invasion, Russia was emboldened and in 2022 launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine.

History Repeats Itself

On February 24th, 2022, the world that I had known for thirty years since Ukraine gained independence, was turned upside down. Ukraine, my homeland, a country of 44 million people, was invaded by its neighbor, Russia. With total disregard for international law, Russia launched an unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine, a sovereign, democratic nation.

Russia is committing genocide against Ukraine once again, causing utter devastation and immeasurable suffering by its indiscriminate attacks. Schools, maternity wards, hospitals and churches are being bombed and rape is used as a tool of war. Entire cities are being obliterated and thousands of civilians are killed. Millions of people have been displaced and families are being separated just as our family was separated by the Soviet regime.

In September 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated that Russia has forcibly deported up to 1.6 million Ukrainians to Russia, to isolated regions of the Far East, after interrogating them in so-called filtration camps. In these camps, children are purposefully separated from their parents, Ukrainian passports are confiscated, and Russian passports are issued in an apparent effort to change the demographic makeup of parts of Ukraine.

The present Russian invasion of Ukraine brings back painful memories of my family's experiences when the Soviets occupied western Ukraine during my childhood. I recall the constant dread that we might be arrested and deported to the gulags.

Ukrainians Inspire the World

Ukrainians are courageously defending not just their homeland but other democracies. The world is inspired by their resilience and perseverance. The entire nation rose up against a much bigger and better equipped enemy.



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky is to be lauded for his leadership. He and his team have remained in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, despite the great danger they face. When offered assistance to flee the country, his response was, "I don't need a ride, I need ammunition."

I am grateful to the United States and to the entire free world for the military and humanitarian support that they

have provided and to the journalists and photographers who risked their lives documenting the horrors of the war against Ukraine.

History does not have to repeat itself. We can stop Russia and we must stop Russia, a state sponsor of terror. As Martin Luther King states, "A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."



Children salute Ukrainian Soldiers

God bless Ukraine!
God bless the United States!

Slava Ukraini!
Heroyam Slava!