

INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER ILIN

This interview with Alexander Ilin was published in 1999 in the Sydney-based Russian newspaper Horizon. It was conducted by Melbourne-based journalist and artist Ilya Burkun. It gives readers an opportunity to become familiar with the life, fate, and views on Russia's destiny of one of her many sons who was born, grew up, and lived through numerous tragic events far from his historical Motherland.

Sasha, I think our readers would be interested to learn a bit about you and your ancestors.

I was born in 1945 in Harbin. I belong to the third generation of Russian émigrés. My father was born in Orenburg, and his father in Tomsk. Both of my grandfathers were officers in the White Army. In the 1920s, along with the White forces, they came to Harbin in China. It was a major junction on the Chinese Eastern Railway (KVZhD), connecting China with Russia.

At that time, Harbin was a small town of about 1,500 people, mostly railway workers. Very quickly, however, it grew into a large city. About four million people passed through it while fleeing Russia—a huge поток (flow). Naturally, not all of them stayed in Harbin. Many settled in other parts of China, while others found refuge in Western Europe, Brazil, America, and Canada. Some migrated to Australia.

My parents were born in Harbin, where I was also born. One of my grandfathers worked on the KVZhD, while the other was a bookkeeper at the publishing house of the newspaper *Russian Word*. My mother spoke English and French perfectly, having studied them for four years at an English convent in Chifu, in southern China. My father also spoke fluent English, and they met at the English Club in Harbin.

Unfortunately, they separated very early. In 1953, my father left for the Soviet Union to work on the Virgin Lands campaign. He worked as a combine operator in Kustanai. There he remarried—a woman who had also left China. Her father, a doctor in the Tsar's army, had emigrated from Russia earlier. Later, my father and his family moved to Azerbaijan, where he died in 1981. Unfortunately, I never met him.

But let us return to your story—to Harbin. This forgotten Russian world in China transformed over several decades from a small settlement into a major industrial center. Let us briefly recall the history. Why did Russians go to China in the first place?

[Admiral Kolchak](#), commander of the White Army, was treacherously handed over by the Czechs to the Reds. The White movement was effectively decapitated. The army was temporarily led by General Kappel, who was fatally wounded in combat near Blagoveshchensk. The army retreated, and a dilemma arose: either move toward Vladivostok or use the KVZhD to go into China. The majority chose to retreat to China, as the Chinese authorities did not obstruct them. The first station was Hailar—a very small outpost. Many Transbaikalian Russians settled there, but the main поток (flow) moved on to Harbin. On May 14, 1998, we in Melbourne celebrated the centenary of Harbin. It flared up like a match and flourished for several decades, becoming a major Russian cultural and industrial center. Unfortunately, it declined just as quickly.

In 1932, Manchuria was occupied by the Japanese. Initially, this did not greatly affect the population of Harbin. How did life continue under occupation?

From 1932 to 1945, Harbin was under Japanese occupation. In 1945, the Soviet Union launched an offensive on the Manchurian border under [Marshal Rokossovsky](#), including many penal battalions.

Humanity had just emerged from the most terrible war in history, yet for the soldiers of Rokossovsky's army, this campaign did not last long. The Soviet advance was so sudden and rapid that the Japanese offered almost no resistance. Harbin was liberated in a single day.

How did the Japanese treat the Russians during the occupation?

They were relatively tolerant toward Russians, but not toward the Chinese. They did not regard the Chinese as fully human. Near Harbin there was a concentration camp in Pingfang, where biological experiments were conducted on people. Mostly Chinese were subjected to horrific diseases and experiments. People were taken from the streets and simply "disappeared"—hundreds of thousands in this way. About a hundred Russians also ended up there—those the Japanese considered offenders.

The Chinese were forced to build special facilities for the Japanese, and upon completion, the workers were executed. At the end of the Second World War, the Japanese organized Osano units, which included Russians. When Rokossovsky's army approached, the Japanese hastily armed these units and intended to send them into battle against the Soviets, but not a single Russian soldier left the barracks. Given that they were armed, the Japanese did not dare confront them.

So, after surviving the Japanese occupation, your family nevertheless decided to emigrate. Why?

After the Japanese left, a struggle for power began in China between the nationalists and the communists. The communists, led by Mao Zedong, eventually won—with Soviet support. By 1949, China had become a communist state. As a result, Russians who had once fled communism found themselves once again under communist rule, which history showed to be no less harsh than in Russia. Before the establishment of communist China, the Chinese treated Russians well. Later, propaganda began to take hold. The slogan "China for the Chinese" appeared, reinforced by nationalists of all kinds. The country was engulfed by famine, which reached Harbin as well. Food was distributed by coupons. My mother received one loaf of bread per day, and I, as a schoolboy, half a loaf—and even for that, one had to stand in long queues. Some people began to consider returning to the Soviet Union. In 1953, the USSR announced the development of the Virgin Lands. After Stalin's death, those who wished to return were given the opportunity—but with no real choice: they had to go to the Virgin Lands. Former Soviet citizens hardly need to be told what conditions were like there. A train would stop in the steppe, and timber and shovels would be unloaded—thus preparations for winter began.

Credit must be given to the Chinese authorities: they did not prevent those who wanted to emigrate to other countries. Naturally, anyone who had relatives or even the slightest opportunity to leave did so. At that time, three countries agreed to accept us: Brazil, Canada, and Australia. We submitted documents to the Brazilian embassy. Four years of waiting and hardship followed. Our family consisted of my mother, my grandmother, and myself, and apparently the immigration authorities did not consider it expedient to accept us. After four years of fruitless ожидания (waiting), my mother applied to the Australian embassy. By that time, she had been dismissed from her job. The famine was raging; even clothes were rationed. We survived only because my mother, who knew French and English, gave private lessons and translated embassy questionnaires for people applying to emigrate. The regime was becoming increasingly harsh. Public executions were carried out in the city with what I can only describe as Asian cruelty. Executions of "enemies of the people" alternated with beheadings. Students from Year 7 and above—two from each class—were regularly required to attend these executions and then report back to their classmates. Even now, I can still see a decapitated body in its final convulsions, and the severed head falling into a basket.

Another year passed, and at last the long-awaited permit arrived. At that time, it was only possible to reach Australia by sea. On January 5, 1959, we arrived on Australian shores. Our destination

was Melbourne. Someone came aboard and informed us that we were actually in Adelaide—the port was on strike, and it was unclear how long the ship would remain there. Those bound for Melbourne were to continue by train. The situation was that in Australia we had sponsors who had guaranteed our initial settlement—the Strekalovski family. They lived in Ballarat, near Melbourne. Looking at a map of Australia, I couldn't find Ballarat and asked my mother what kind of city it was. She told me it was a famous gold-mining town. Jack London's stories immediately came to mind. I imagined tents and people panning for gold along riverbanks. In the morning, the train stopped in Ballarat. It was a small station. All our Russian fellow passengers continued on, but we got off. The Strekalovskiys were supposed to meet us—but since they expected us to arrive in Melbourne, they had gone to the seaport instead.

After waiting for several hours, we made our way into the town. Between the three of us, we had only one pound and ten shillings. By chance, we met a Catholic priest. My mother approached him and explained our situation. He immediately took us to a church and gave us shelter in a small room. The next day, he began searching for the Strekalovskiys, and we stayed with him until they returned from Melbourne. Within two weeks, my mother found a job in Melbourne as a draftsman in a government office. After completing her probation, she worked there for five years. Why only five years? Unfortunately, that was all the time she had in Australia. A blood clot suddenly broke loose, and she died unexpectedly. That morning I had gone to the sea, and when I returned, she was already gone.

There I was, left with my grandmother—a college student with no means of support. There were no grants or allowances in those days. I took a job at a petrol station and continued my studies. At that time, there were no automatic pumps. Later, I qualified as a mechanic. Around that time, I met a girl who was very interested in dancing. I used to visit her after work. Often, arriving early, I would watch others rehearsing in a dance ensemble led by a man named Karasev, a former dancer with the Red Army Ensemble. One day he said to me: "You spend so much time here—why not try?" I did. The girl eventually left me, but dancing stayed. I went on to dance for twenty years.

Why didn't it become your profession?

Strangely enough—because of [the war in Afghanistan](#).

It seems that wars in your life have not been merely symbolic. After all, you were born in the year the Second World War ended.

Yes, that's true. I will return to the Afghan war, but first I should mention another one in which I was directly involved. In 1965, I turned twenty. The Vietnam War was underway, and Australia was among the countries involved. During that time, mandatory conscription was introduced. As I was still a student, my draft was postponed until I graduated. In 1967, I was called up for military service. I joined a training battalion, and in January 1969, I was sent to Vietnam as a field radio operator.

I must admit, this is the first time I've spoken with a participant of the Vietnam War. Any war is terrible. For me, that war is associated with Francis Coppola's film Apocalypse Now. It feels like a way to imagine an apocalypse. But I was only a spectator—you were a participant. What did the war look like from your perspective?

An Australian military base was located in Phuoc Province. There were three infantry battalions, an artillery unit, an armored personnel carrier unit, helicopters, and tanks. Our mission was to prevent the Viet Cong from infiltrating the province. The Viet Cong fought not only against us but also against their own people—those they believed were not resisting us strongly enough. There was no clear front line or rear. Danger was everywhere—even in the toilets. Knowing Europeans' preference for seated toilets, the Viet Cong devised simple but deadly traps: a scythe, a piece of rubber, and a trigger stick. When someone sat down, the stick would snap, and the blade would

strike upward. They also used fishing line traps—almost invisible—connected to knives. In general, guerrilla warfare is the most terrifying kind. By day, a Vietnamese villager might welcome you; by night, he could ambush you on a mined road. They were incredibly resourceful. We knew of bases hidden in the mountains, connected by vast tunnel systems. We would destroy one tunnel, and they would dig another. We understood that we could not defeat them. Although the Australian contingent was relatively small, Australia lost about 700 soldiers (the actual number is lower) and more than 2,000 were wounded.

In my opinion, the Australian army was well adapted to jungle warfare. We carried four days' worth of rations and operated much like the Viet Cong. The Americans, on the other hand, received hot meals by helicopter daily. This often exposed their positions—and if a helicopter was lost, which happened frequently, a unit could be left without food or even ammunition. We fought alongside American troops, and I saw how they conducted the war. To be honest, I lost all respect for American soldiers after witnessing their treatment of civilians.

But civilians didn't spare them either.

That's true. But one must understand that war had become a normal state for the Vietnamese. They had fought among themselves, and before that against French colonizers. They had grown accustomed to bloodshed.

I can only say I'm glad you returned alive. What was life like after demobilization?

It was very difficult to readjust to civilian life. Once again, dancing helped me. A friend from Karasev's ensemble told me: "There's a television competition in Melbourne—let's try." I did—and reached the final. I didn't win, but it inspired me greatly. At that time, there was an ensemble called *Kolobok*. It was led by former soloists from the Moiseyev Ensemble and the Pyatnitsky Choir. We were also trained by Anatoly Borzov, who had headed a department at GITIS (the State Institute of Theatre Arts in the USSR). After some time, I formed my own theatre group, which existed for about 18 years.

Now, returning to the Afghan war and how it affected my life. Borzov, having seen me dance and my work as a choreographer, suggested that I study at GITIS. I was very interested. It was a world-renowned institute, and it would also have given me the chance to meet my father and see Russia. I immediately began preparing the necessary documents, but the process dragged on. Then the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Australian government broke off relations with the USSR, and my plans collapsed. It was 1980. In 1981, my father died. We never met. I never became a student at GITIS. For the third time, war changed my судьба (fate). I did not become a professional dancer and had to return to my main profession—design.

Is that what you are doing now?

For 27 years, I have worked at the University of Melbourne as a designer. I have developed various devices for PhD students, helping them complete their research projects. In recent years, my work has been closely connected with medicine.

Sasha, for many years you have been the president of the Russian ethnic society in the state of Victoria. What is the aim of this organization?

I have been involved with the Russian ethnic society for 15 years, and for the last five years I have served as its president.

How was the society organized?

In Melbourne, in the state of Victoria, there were about 16 Russian community organizations, all operating separately. The first task was to unite them. Secondly, we ensured that members of our

organization were represented in various governmental and public bodies, both at the local and federal levels. Thirdly, we focused on cultural life—preserving ethnic traditions and values, and assisting newly arrived migrants in adapting to life in Australia.

Please tell us about your connections with Russia.

The first Soviet national ensemble to visit Australia came from Omsk. After their concert, we met the performers and invited them to our homes. At that time, this was quite difficult—many things were restricted, and there was fear of defections. We also maintained close contacts with merchant seamen. There were almost always at least two Soviet ships in our port—mostly from the Far Eastern and Baltic shipping companies, and occasionally from the Black Sea fleet. With sailors who visited Australia more than once, we developed ongoing relationships.

Later, we discovered and grew very fond of the songs of [Vladimir Vysotsky](#). Sailors brought me recordings, which I have kept to this day. Those who had visited us would pass along our addresses and phone numbers to others—it became a kind of living chain. We showed them the country, and many of them even took Australian parrots back with them as exotic souvenirs.

Today, everything is much easier. There are no restrictions, but unfortunately, Russian ships are no longer seen here. Still, it is easier now to establish contacts.

How do you maintain these connections?

Once, there was the powerful Soviet Union, and maintaining contact was very difficult. Emigrants like us were considered enemies of the people. But people remain people, and there has always been a mutual attraction. The Australian–Soviet Friendship Society was established, supported by the Soviet consulate. Through this organization, many artistic groups came to Australia. We hosted performers such as [Zykina](#), Voronets, and Tolkunova. It was also significant that the [composer Kabalevsky](#) became one of the society's most active members. Now, of course, there are no such obstacles. The Iron Curtain has fallen, and our connections have only grown stronger.

Sasha, let's talk about something else. The Iron Curtain has fallen, freedom has come—and with it a wave of cynicism, violence, and permissiveness. Russia seems to have fallen back into something like the Middle Ages, which the West passed through long ago. What do you think?

You know, the Russian coat of arms features a two-headed eagle—it is very symbolic. One head looks to the East, the other to the West, like Siamese twins: two heads on one body. The interests of East and West have never aligned, and Russia, positioned between them, is torn by contradictions. There are many other reasons for the current difficulties. But I am an optimist.

At the university where I work, there is a Centre for Russian and East European Studies. Not all of its forecasts have proven accurate, but its economic outlook suggests that the recession will last until about 2001, after which growth will begin—and there are grounds for this. Organized crime structures will eventually stabilize, the redistribution of property and social transformation—similar to what occurred in countries like America and Germany—will come to an end. Banking capital will be legalized and begin to function as it does in any developed society. Russia has always been rich in intellectual talent. It continues to supply the world with brilliant minds. It is no secret that Russian specialists have significantly contributed to the development of computer technologies in America.

But Russia has always been a country of extremes. There is a kind of pendulum principle at work: the deeper the suffering now, the greater the recovery later. At present, the pendulum is at the peak of hardship—but having reached that point, it will inevitably swing back.

My brother George was born in Russia and now lives in St. Petersburg. In 1988, I invited him to visit. We met at Tullamarine Airport... We are very similar in character and intellect. Since then, I have visited Russia five times and made many friends there. I care deeply about their fate, and about the future of Russia itself.