

# Recollecting *Perestroika*: Notes from the Playgrounds of Ukraine (1986–1993)

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## **Abstract**

Political crisis currently unfolding in Ukraine's urban centers churns with an iconography carved against itself, the scars of a turbulent history unevenly distributed across space and time. But not only region and language are pitted against each other in Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv and elsewhere, but generations, separated from each other by the relative movement of historical forces. *Perestroika*, Gorbachev's ambitious attempt to restructure the Soviet political economy, stands out as a point of such generational contradiction in Ukraine. Many adults experienced perestroika as an opportunity to push for national independence (and a long awaited political victory). For the children of the 1980s, however, the insecurity and tumult of this period, intensified by the catastrophe at Chernobyl, are reflected in recollections of a more intimate independence, the boundaries of which are demarcated not by political ideology but by the gazes of strangers and the absence of parents. Through these years, many children witnessed events inexplicable even to the adults around them: rising unemployment, fear of radiation fallout, shortages of food and other basic supplies, friends lost to emigration, heroin or disease. Yet for children entering the social world for the first time, what is inexplicable tends to be pushed to the edges of experience, which remains driven by the pursuit of friendship, excitement and belonging.

Ukraine's current political crisis reflects a long and turbulent history in which regions and historic cities —Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv— often found themselves pitted against one another. However, it was not just the culturally and linguistically different regions of Ukraine that have often found themselves at odds, generations might also divide or at least see events in different ways. For example, *perestroika*, Gorbachev's ambitious attempt to restructure the Soviet political economy, represented for Ukraine, a generational fault line.

Many adults experienced and recollected *perestroika* as an opportunity to push successfully for long awaited national independence. For the children of the 1980s, however, *perestroika* also stood for insecurity and tumult intensified by the catastrophe at Chernobyl. From 1986 to 1993 children witnessed rising unemployment, radiation fallout, shortages of food and other basic supplies, friends lost to emigration, heroin or disease. Yet we should also bear in mind that for children entering the social world, pursuing friendship and excitement, these troubling events might be pushed to the edge of experience and memory.

The following are excerpts from interviews that I conducted during field research in Ukraine from 2007 to 2013. Here are recollections of coming of age when as result of the turbulent times, children gained an unusual degree of autonomy. But at the same time the kids also struggled to reconcile their freedom against the need for order and security.

I hope these recollections of what it was like to be a city kid in Ukraine will invite further discussion of *perestroika*— the moment when Ukraine itself, very much like its children, enjoyed independence while also struggling to become secure. These notes from the street and playground were narrated by Viktor, Taras, Oksana, Anna and Natasha.

The pictures that complement these stories are images of playgrounds in contemporary Ukraine – some remnants of Soviet days. The pictures were taken in winter 2014 and are courtesy of my dear friend, Nadiya Chushak.

*Describe for me the spaces you inhabited in your childhood, the places you rested and played, adventured to or discovered.*

**Viktor** (born in 1981; grew up in Zdolbuniv, Chernihiv obl., and Lviv, Lviv obl.<sup>1</sup>) —on his experience moving from a smaller town Zdolbuniv, into a newly built—apartment block in Lviv with his family, at the age of five: “I arrived – and everything seemed so big, massive, not some limited circle. I remember, when I was allowed to go outside on my own, to a big yard – on the fourth or fifth day, out of the apartment. And obviously, I went straight to the sandbox. I knew it was the central spot in our courtyard, in my infrastructure. I mean, I am rationalizing it this way right now, but then – I simply went straight to the sandbox. And I thought – what if I got lost? I realized that I can be lost.”<sup>2</sup>



Nadiya Chushak, 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> Oblast' is an administrative unit, district, region. There are 24 oblasts in Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> **Viktor**: “Я приїхав – і все таке велике, масивне, і немає окресленого кола Я пам’ятаю, як перший раз мені дозволили самостійно вийти в це подвір’я, на четвертий---п’ятий день, з квартири. Так. І ясно, що я попрямував до пісочниці. Я знав, що це --- центральне місце в дворі, тобто в моїй інфраструктурі. Ну, це зараз я так раціоналізую, але тоді я пішов до пісочниці. І я подумав, я що, якщо я загублюся. Я усвідомив, що я можу be lost.”

**Taras** (born in 1983; grew up in Zolochiv, Lviv obl.): “There was a courtyard; and a pavilion nearby it.<sup>3</sup> And there was a slide, and sometimes – a rocket. Or this spinning thing (merry---go---round), which you need to spin and then – you are spinning on it... a swing and a sandbox with no sand in it. [...] We lived in a dorm, and then in 1989 or 88 we moved into an apartment; and when I was first brought there, I didn’t know what an elevator was. So, on our way there, my dad was trying to explain to me that it was like a closet that moves, and I couldn’t imagine it moves vertically, not under an angle... It was a big building and we were one of the first to move in – everything was empty. In the dorm we had had only one room, and in the new apartment I walked into a corridor and there was a bunch of doors, and I asked my dad if all of that was ours. It was. ... I was brought to the balcony; I was afraid ... There, if you stick your head out of the window you could see the lake – a big lake! And I used to go there to look at the lake...”<sup>4 5</sup>

**Taras**, continues: “There was a moment when we were bumping around garbage bins... We were searching there for different things... Once Vas’ka, who later immigrated to Canada, found a red purse, and we had a fight because of it. I saw it first, but he was first to grab it... (laughing) [...] I also had lots of toys. My dad used to travel on assignments – Vladivostok (located at the head of the Golden Horn Bay, not far from Russia's borders with China and North Korea), Vladikavkaz (southeast Russia, at the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains) ... and I had the most fancy toys on the entire street, probably!”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pavilion – meant to serve as a playground, but is more like an empty brick shelter.

<sup>4</sup> **Taras**: “Є двір, а біля нього є павільйончик... І там совганка, а іноді – ракета... Є така штука, яку треба крутити. І тоді ти крутишся... Є качеля, і є пісочниця, в якій нема піску... Ми жили в гуртожитку, а потім у 89 чи 88---ому переїжджали на квартиру, і мене, коли перший раз привели, я не знав, що таке ліфт, і мені тато намагався по дорозі пояснити, ми йшли пішки, ... і він мені намагався пояснити: ... там, така шафа, яка їздить, а я ніяк не міг уявити. Що вона вертикально їздить, я думав – вона під кутом... Мене привели в будинок, а це абсолютно новий будинок, ми одні з перших заселялися – все пусто... Ми в гуртожитку в однокімнатній квартирі жили, а тут я захожу в коридор, а там купа дверей, і я питаю в тата: то наше? – так... Мене вивели на балкон, а я боявся... Там, якщо засунути голову, було озеро видно велике... Я туди ходив на озеро дивитися...”

<sup>5</sup> Translated from Ukrainian and Russian by the author.

<sup>6</sup> **Taras**: “В нас в дитинстві був такий етап, що ми по смітниках лазили... Ми там шукали всякі штуки... одного разу Васька, той, що в Канаду виїхав, знайшов червону косметичку, і ми з ним так побилися за ту штуку – я її перший побачив, а він її перший підняв... (laughing) [...] А ще в мене було дуже багато іграшок. Мій тато в командировки їздив – Владивосток, Владикавказ... І в мене були самі модні іграшки напевно на всю вулицю!”



Nadiya Chushak, 2014.

**Oksana** (born in 1984; grew up in Nadvirna, Frankivsk obl., Ukraine): “In childhood, you know, everything happens spontaneously. It seems your friends are forever, even though you don’t remember how you met them. There were always [a mix of] older and younger (kids)... When the oldest played a bottle, we did something else .... Our apartment building was built by the firm my mom worked at; and all of them (young tenants given apartments by the state) worked at the same place... And it happened so everyone had kids of approximately the same age, between grade 3 and 5 – everybody had just moved in, so no one [moved in] having many peers. Two other apartment buildings were also just built, so friendships had started forming, there was no problem... I associate childhood with benches (in the courtyard of several apartment buildings, benches were commonly placed by each entrance to the building), when there are grandmas sitting on the benches, and women talking, and you are running around them.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> **Oksana**: “Не, в мене був пісок! Ти розумієш, в дитинстві, там все виходить все спонтанно... Тобі здається, що в тебе вічні друзі, ти не пам’ятаєш як ти з ними познайомилася... І завжди був поділ старші---молодші... Ну, коли там старші в бутылочки грали, то молодші... [...] Так сталося, що у всіх діти були приблизно одного віку, десь з третього до п’ятого класу, і всі переїхали, ні в кого не було компанії, там якраз побудували два сусідні будинки, і там, відповідно, формувалася компанія... І не було проблем... В мене дитинство асоціюється з лавочками, коли на лавці і бабусі сидять, і жінки сидять. Щось говорять, і ти там поміж ними бігаєш.”

***What kinds of rules or expectations were there around being outdoors? How were they established or agreed upon?***



Nadiya Chushak, 2014.

**Oksana:** “We, for instance, were allowed to be outside until midnight, or one in the morning... There were old ladies sitting on the bench at midnight in summer, too; and it was OK to be out so late, I mean nobody really was forcing us to go home. Really.”<sup>8</sup>

**Taras:** “When I was at home, it was easily arranged: the window opens and there is a voice, and you know that your time is up! Or when the dinner was ready... At grandma’s nobody limited anything at all. There we could be in at six or seven or stay out until midnight, whenever. The main thing was to eat. There was a plate served with whatever and I had to eat before going to bed; because everybody was trying to scare me saying I would dream of gypsies or spiders all night if I didn’t eat.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> **Oksana:** “Ну, наприклад, в нас можна було гуляти і до 12---тої, і до 1---ої ночі ... Просто бабусі сиділи всі, там, до 12---ої ночі влітку, і можна було і до 12---ої, і до 1---ої гуляти, ну, тобто нас не заганяли спати ніколи. От.”

<sup>9</sup> **Taras:** “ Я, якщо був вдома, в батьків, то все вирішувалося так: відкривається вікно, і з вікна, знаєш, --- твій час закінчився! Ну, і коли зварили їсти... А в бабульки ніхто нічого не обмежував. Там можна було прийти в 6---ій, в 7---ій, а можна – в 12---ій, коли хочеш. Головне було поїсти... Стояла миска з якоюсь їдою, і я мав поїсти перед сном, бо мене все страшили, що, якщо я не поїм, то мені будуть снитися, або цигани, або павуки.”

***How far did your territory extend? How did you explore it? What were your moments of joy or fear associated with?***

**Oksana**, continues: “Also, there is a river running through our whole town, I mean, it’s not really a river, more like a canal, by now it’s more like a swamp – Fliakomyjka, and all settlers in Nadvirna where I come from, are called “fliaky” I used to think that “fliaky” meant “settlers of Nadvirna”. I was shocked to learn that fliaky were pig intestines! And I discovered it quite late and was offended – how can you call someone “fliaky”? We [children] used to explore Fliakomyjka, the river. We went into all puddles, in the water – that was the best during floods, when a bunch of trees had fallen; then we wore rubber boots. To us, it felt like the entire universe, we walked through the sea and oceans...”<sup>10</sup>



Nadiya Chushak, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> **Oksana**: “ I ще – через все місто в нас проходить, ну, то не річка, типу, канал, вже майже болітце – Флякомийка, і всіх корінних мешканців Надвірної називають фляки. І я в дитинстві думала, що фляки – це корінні мешканці Надвірної, я була дуже шокована, коли дізналася, що фляки – це тельбухи! а я це дізналася в дуже пізньому віці, і це для мене був шок – як то можна було фляками обізвати? Ми ходили і досліджували ту Флякомийку. Ми ходили по всіх канавах, по воді – то по воді, і ще найкраще було – це коли була повінь, і повністю все затопило, купу дерев повалило, то ми одягали гумові чоботи, і в нас це було як вся земна куля, ми ходили по морях, по океанах...”

**Anna** (born in 1984; grew up in Horlivka, Donetsk obl. and Lviv, Ukraine): “I didn’t have to move much. I lived with parents, then my parents went to India – you know those work assignments... My dad was a mountain engineer; he and mom lived in India for two years. I had allergies and they were not sure if there would be food I can eat; and I was left at home with grandma. I stayed in the same town, but different district – there was a different world at grandma’s... I was two and a half. I remember a sandbox in a courtyard and those metal swings... A standard yard, we all played there together. We were let out early in the morning, and played until there is “Ania, come have dinner!” (Calling out from the window)... It was my life between 2 and 3... Then, I was back to our house in city centre, age three to five, there we had a company – the five of us (peers), and we hung out together... When I stayed at grandmas, I had an older cousin there and we went everywhere together, I was a youngster in a company of older kids, a squirt. We had our sandbox, and another sandbo X– the others’... There are boys’ and girls’ territories. The boys played by the construction, there were garages being built – we (girls) were not allowed to go there ... It (play) was spontaneous. We went outside with dolls, we had a “doll house”; they had garages...”<sup>11</sup>

**Natasha** (born in 1984; grew up in Lozova, Krarkiv obl., Ukraine): “I remember very well when the house was being built... (New apartment building in the neighbour, around 1986---7) Even Natasha said that she had played there with Marakhovskaya (her girlfriends), and her brother, too; and that she lost a doll at that construction or something, but I had never been to that construction. It seemed scary to me, if we were caught by a watchman and he’d be yelling at us and that would be embarrassing; and then he might go talk to my parents; I was embarrassed to get caught. I wasn’t very adventurous (laughs). [...]

But in general, it is very interesting to see a building being built in front of your eyes, and new floors are rising – something completely absent nowadays. By the way, I experienced similar feeling when the yellow building was finally completed! (In the mid---2000s, one of several construction projects unfinished by the Soviet state that had been abandoned for nearly thirty years was

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<sup>11</sup> **Anna**: “...Так сталося, що я не переїжджала. Я жила з батьками в одному місці, а потім мої батьки поїхали до Індії – ті, знаєш, такі професійні поїздки... Тато був гірничий інженер, то вони з мамою жили два роки в Індії, а в мене була алергія, вони не знали, чи там будуть продукти, щоб мене годувати... і мене лишили з бабцею. Тобто я жила в тому самому місті, але в іншому районі, і там, в бабці був інший світ... Мені було два з половиною. Там я пам’ятаю пісочницю в дворі і знаєш такі залізні качельки... Там був такий стандартний двір, ми там всі разом бавилися. Нас випускали зранку, а потім: «Аня, іди обідать!» ... Так я жила від двох до трьох років... Потім, від трьох до п’яти років я жила у Львові, в будинку в центрі, там в нас була своя компанія – п’ятеро... і ми всі разом лазили... А от, коли я жила у бабці – там я мала старшу сестру, і я з нею ходила. А знаєш, як це – молодший у старшій компанії, Малявка. І в нас була своя пісочниця, чужа пісочниця – типу, сусідська... Були хлопчачі й дівчачі території. Хлопчики бавилися там, де будували гаражі, то там нам не можна було... Воно якось раптом ставалося. Ми виходили з ляльками. В нас був «дом для кукол», а в них були гаражі...

finished. A newly renovated high-rise apartment building was painted yellow –  
**VY**) Say, you are walking by and looking at the construction – they build and build; and it is fascinating to see one more building appear in town... Some kind of déjà vu occurs.”<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup> **Natasha:** “Помню, кстати, очень хорошо, когда строился дом... даже Наташка говорила, они лазили там с Мараховской, там это, она там куклу потеряла, все такое, с братом лазила, а я вот на этой стройке ни разу не была. Меня пугало то, что если нас увидит охранник— дядя, то он наругает и мне будет стыдно, и если еще к родителям он приведет меня, то есть мне было стыдно осознавать это, что я поймаюсь. И я была в детстве такая, не рискованная, бо большей части.

А вообще, интересно, конечно смотреть, как у тебя на глазах строиться дом, там появляются этажи – чего в данный момент нет. Кстати, вот это чувство я испытала, когда достраивали желтый дом! ты идешь и смотришь как его делают, и делают, и как—то чудно, что в городе делается еще один дом... Какие—то дежа вю происходят.”

**Taras** continues: "...I just remembered that there also was some old scary man, homeless, maybe, I don't know, he always looked worn---out and had a hat with ear--- flaps... and a metal stick with a wire attached to it, he seemingly used it to trap street dogs, which he traded for pelts; we were afraid of the guy very much..."<sup>13</sup>

**Oksana** continues: "I don't think we were scared of anything at all...though I've always thought that there must be some scary man in each childhood, like a bum or a crazy person on a street that is both scary and funny... We also had such a lady... We chased her sometimes, and she threw stones at kids mostly... And there was a scary watchman at the kindergarten, and we were afraid of him. There was a high wall, and if we tried to climb the wall, he hit us on the fingers with a stick; and even when he didn't hit, it was still scary! We used to go play there, and a watchman was considered frightening..."<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

As the social and political fabric of Ukraine is today badly torn, the legacy of *perestroika* has been cast aside. Yet, behind the fog of thirty years of crisis and turmoil, children still dwell on the streets of Ukraine. How will today's conflict shape their outlook?

If these interviews show anything, it is the resilience of children. In the days of Chernobyl, there was not much to play with, but play time seemed unlimited. Even young children felt free to experiment and explore places quite far away from home. Anna was only about three years old when she played with older children in a sandbox without any adult supervision. Or consider the image of the homeless mad man—both scary and attractive to kids—perhaps unemployed or somehow else unable to adjust to rapid social change, turned out on the street. The kids dealt with all that and one hopes that they will manage the troubles of the today.

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<sup>13</sup> "...Я ще згадав, в нас був дядько такий старий, не знаю, бомж – не бомж, він такий обдертий ходив, в такій шапці—ушанці ... і в нього була така палка залізна з протягнутим шнуром, і він, типу, псів ловив тою штукаю, і здавав їх на шкіру, і ми його дуже всі боялися..."

<sup>14</sup> "Я щось взагалі не пам'ятаю щоб ми чогось боялися. Я, типу, думала, що обов'язково десь в дитинстві повинен був бути ... або божевільний, або бомж... Якого всі і боялися, і сміялися... В нас теж була така тьотя... Бігали за нею, там... вона переважно камінням кидала за дітьми... І ще в нас був дитячий садок...там був страшний сторож, і ми боялися сторожа. Там було така висока стіна, ми по тій стіні лізли, а він зверху палкою бив по пальцях, і навіть, коли він не бив, все одно було страшно! Ми ходили туди бавитися, і сторож – це було щось страшне..."

### **About the author**

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