

‘Vasyl the Bushmaster’ is more arms dealer than ambassador

A year on from Russia’s invasion, Ukrainian ambassador Vasyl Myroshnychenko says his trenches are in Australia as he rallies support for his country’s defence.

[Andrew Tillett](#), *The Australian Financial Review* Feb 24, 2023 – 10.31am

A year ago, Vasyl Myroshnychenko feared he was a marked man.

As [Russian missiles rained down on Kyiv](#), Myroshnychenko, his wife, their two children and his brother-in-law were stuck in traffic along with thousands of others desperately trying to flee the city.



“Apparently I was going to be a target for the Russians because I’m an activist”: Ukraine ambassador Vasyl Myroshnychenko at Lilotang for Lunch with the AFR. **Gary Ramage**

“In those days the Russians were on the outskirts of Kyiv. No one knew what was going to happen tomorrow,” says Myroshnychenko, as he sits down a world away from the fighting at Canberra’s Lilotang restaurant for Lunch with the AFR.

“Apparently I was going to be a target for the Russians if they occupied Kyiv because I’m an activist, educated abroad, did an internship at the US Embassy – I’m a CIA guy for them! I don’t know whether they would execute me, but they would probably just put me in jail so they would shut me up.”

Since arriving in Canberra last April as Ukraine’s first ambassador to Australia, Myroshnychenko, 41, has not shut up. And, as I learn over the course of lunch, upsetting Russians runs in the family.

Following his appointment by President Volodymyr Zelensky in December 2021, Myroshnychenko expected the focus of his work to be on growing trade and investment between Australia and his homeland, given his background in business and economics.

But that changed in an instant when Vladimir Putin ordered his troops to attack Ukraine, with Friday marking the first anniversary of the invasion.

‘Vasyl the Bushmaster’

Myroshnychenko has become more an arms dealer than an ambassador, tirelessly lobbying ministers, MPs and the military and making the case in the media for Australia to keep up the flow of weapons to help his country's fight for survival.

"I even got a nickname in the foreign ministry – 'Vasyl the Bushmaster'," Myroshnychenko says. It's a reference to the 90 armoured troops carriers [Australia has donated](#) to Ukraine.

Myroshnychenko has selected Lilotang for our lunch on the advice of the Croatian ambassador. It is popular with diplomats. The Japanese restaurant fills up quickly as we study the menu, complete with manga-inspired artwork.

We opt for a selection of dishes to share: a bowl of miso soup, tuna and salmon from the raw selection, popcorn shrimp and grilled scallops. When we ask the waitress if that's enough, she suggests adding a main course, so we add the duck breast. Myroshnychenko eschews rice and a drink.

"I'm trying to lose weight. All my suits I brought from Ukraine are small. I've gained weight because of stress, I don't sleep," Myroshnychenko says.

The war continues to be personal for Myroshnychenko. "Ukrainians are [traumatised big time](#). People die every day. You have friends who die, you have relatives who die. You read it every day, different stories of rape or killing, torture."

He says two university classmates of his died in the early days of the war. They were part of a cadre of Kyiv University graduates who came of age determined to build a democratic corruption-free post-Soviet Ukraine.

Others have been elected to parliament to sweep out the old guard, others work in the bureaucracy. Many studied at Western institutions (Myroshnychenko's resume includes a year at the London School of Economics, as well as internships at the US Embassy in Kyiv and the Canadian parliament).

While Myroshnychenko's study equipped him for a career as a diplomat, he opted instead to combine business and civil society, including co-founding a strategic communications consultancy and being a president of the European Youth Parliament's Ukraine branch.

"I was always an activist in my life, going back to university. I was a bit restless. Apart from studying at university I always wanted to do something else," he says.

Media star

When the "Revolution of Dignity" occurred in 2014 – an uprising against Ukraine's then pro-Russian government – Myroshnychenko was in demand from international media such as CNN to provide eyewitness accounts.

The revolution though was the catalyst for Putin's first grab for Ukrainian territory. In response, Myroshnychenko co-founded the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre.

"The idea was how can we amplify Ukraine's voice internationally," he recalls.

"When MH17 happened, we hosted 220 press conferences. That's where I met [then foreign minister] Julie Bishop for the first time. I moderated her press conference.

"What happened in a way, I also became a commentator on foreign affairs for Ukrainian media. A lot of Ukrainian media would ask, 'Hey Vasyl, can you explain for us what is happening in the world and how it affects Ukraine.'

"With the Crisis Media Centre, we dealt with Russian propaganda, fighting Russian propaganda. You can explain Ukraine."

University was important in another way. Myroshnychenko met his wife, Liana, while they were both students. They just celebrated their 20th wedding anniversary. Their daughter Yaroslava, 19, is studying chemistry in London and son Yuriy, 6, lives with them in Canberra.

Our food starts to arrive. The tuna comes in small chunks with crumbled feta on the plate, accompanied by a fresh orange, ginger and tamarind sauce. The salmon nigiri sits on top of a crunchy fried parcel of rice with an orange dollop of spicy salmon mousse on top. No regrets here.

Life under Russia

When Putin launched his invasion last year, Kremlin propagandists claimed Russian soldiers would be greeted with flowers as liberators.

Myroshnychenko brands Russia a “coloniser” determined to stamp out any sense of Ukrainian nationalism over centuries. He remembers the days of growing up in the Soviet Union.

“You just live it, it’s your life, you don’t know any other life,” he says.

“So at school, we’d talk about Lenin, talk about the Communist Party, it started at an early age, the glorification of Lenin and the Communist Party. When you reach the age of seven you become this junior Young Lenin. It’s kind of bizarre, but we thought it was OK. We had no clue.

“I remember the parades my parents had to go to [October Revolution and May Day]. Everybody had to be there. If you had a job, and everybody had a job, you had to be at the demonstrations because if you were not, you’d be fired.”

As a 10-year-old, Myroshnychenko remembers being at his maternal grandfather’s house in August 1991 when Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* was aired on state TV as Communist hardliners attempted a coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. While the plot failed, it hastened the Soviet Union’s demise.

”I asked my grandfather what was happening and he couldn’t really explain. He hated the communists, he hated everything related to communism,” Myroshnychenko says.

“[On my mother’s side] they were very afraid to talk at home about it. We learnt about it after the Soviet Union collapsed, but before that no one would ever discuss it in the family because kids talk and that would put you in danger. Before 1991 no one ever told me the Soviet empire was evil.

“My grandmother, in the 1940s, when she was 16 or 17, she was somehow involved in some underground resistance to the Soviet system and she nearly ended up in jail. Luckily, she knew somebody in law enforcement, or somebody knew her, so they spared her because she was too young, but the guys she was with were sent to jail.”

It was a different story on his father’s side of the family, which prospered during the communist era. Myroshnychenko’s grandfather was in the military because it was well paid and provided a good pension.

“Those were two different worldviews. And this is what Ukraine is all about. There were some people romanticising the Soviet Union. Well not any more, most of that generation is gone.”

Our waitress starts to put our hot dishes down. The popcorn shrimp comes with a subtle chilli mayo. I’m surprised to see the scallops are chopped up rather than served whole, sitting in a creamy wasabi mayo on the shell, but it works.

Communism and consumerism

Growing up in western Ukraine, communism's collapse left a void that consumerism filled.

"We got a glimpse into the world through television," Myroshnychenko says.

"The most clear memory of the early 1990s was advertising. Advertising was beautiful, Marlboro cigarettes, sneakers or Bounty. All those big American brands which get on television and all of a sudden you can buy this stuff. But everyone was so poor you were limited in what you afford to buy.

"In my days growing up, the most fashionable things you could have was Nike leather shoes. Every teenager was craving for a pair and only very few could afford the real ones, but you could get the fake ones from China – very cheap and not leather.

"I was young and I really wanted to go to America. I watched this *Beverly Hills* show, remember? It was on Ukrainian television and I was like, 'Wow this is how Americans live. They all drive cars.' It was this fascination with America that got me interested and motivated."

The opportunity to see America came when he was 15 and won a scholarship to go on a high school exchange program to Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Although Myroshnychenko's parents were doctors, they earned just \$20 a month so he studied English for eight hours a day to have a shot at the scholarship.

"It is interesting because when I got back, it was like, 'What did you learn?' I learnt English, I saw democracy in action but it was only 25 years later I realised what that program did for me: [it] was about my Ukrainian identity," he says.

"In 1996, nobody in Tennessee knew anything about Ukraine. So I always had to explain what is Ukraine, how Ukraine is different to Russia. Spending that one year explaining who you are gave me a clear identity.

"There was also the idea that if you really want to do something, you can achieve it if you really want it. I've used that for a pattern for my life for 25 years." (He also bought a pair of genuine Nikes.)

War stories

I circle back to the war. Like many others in Ukraine, he thought Putin was bluffing until the invasion actually happened.

"At five o'clock in the morning my wife wakes me up. We can hear explosions and the war has started. The airport is under attack, all the military targets in Kyiv are under attack," he says.

"So we fled Kyiv. It took us a long time to get out. We ended up on the outskirts of Kyiv for two nights because the traffic jams were so heavy. Then the fuel was gone and you couldn't get fuel. It was like one of those Hollywood movies when the big catastrophe happens and you see the huge lines of cars and no fuel and you're stuck."

The family spent two nights at friends' homes outside Kyiv before they reached his parents in western Ukraine.

Despite the bloodshed and destruction, Myroshnychenko remains optimistic Ukraine will win the war.

“My generation is different,” he says. “We want to see Ukraine become a developed, prosperous European nation which would have an independent court system, which would have the same standards of living people in Eastern Europe have. We are part of European civilisation.

“We’ve been asking for tanks for six months. Now finally tanks are coming. We’ve been asking for multi-rocket launchers, we got multi -rocket launchers. We’ve been asking for air defence systems, we got air defence systems. We’re now asking for jets, I hope we eventually get jets because we need to defeat Russia militarily.”

Myroshnychenko has to leave before our duck arrives; he needs to get to parliament to do a photo shoot with MPs and senators on the floor of the House of Representatives in a gesture of solidarity.

I ask if he has been tempted to head home and pick up arms. “My trenches are here in Australia.”