How my Ukrainian granny drove me to drink

A chance discovery of an old diary set film-maker Dan Edelstyn on a quest to revive his family's once proud vodka empire

My adventure began in summer 2005, in the loft of my mum's house in Devon, with the discovery of an old suitcase full of beaten up notebooks, a jumble of negatives, prints and trinkets, including a bone hair slide, some old letters in Russian, French and English, and a comb. The people staring out of the yellowing, creased photographs were in the prime of their lives, yet possessed a haunted quality. The reality in which they lived was a turbulent one, and though they faced the camera with brave determination, they could not quite persuade the silver nitrate that it was a happy time.

Chief find among my private archaeological scoop was a pink paper folder, full of wafer-thin, typewritten manuscript; this was the story that would weld all the other fragments in that suitcase together: in that document I discovered for the first time the grand story of where my family had come from. It was a story written in sepia by my grandmother, Maroussia, of a world that had vanished for ever.

The manuscript was a first-hand account of the Russian Revolution and the end of the First World War. It began with a ball in my 18-year-old granny's Kiev townhouse — a gathering that contrived a forced gaiety overshadowed by news of defeats on the Western Front and a feeling that things were about to change irreversibly. She caught my imagination completely. I knew I had to make a film about this fascinating woman.

Two and a half years later, amid the snows of a Ukrainian winter, my partner Hilary and I touched down in Odessa, armed only the manuscript, a few copies of old photographs, some family documents and a film camera. We had a handful of academic contacts: mostly elderly professors of literature and history, archivists — people who could recount the long, complex and sad history of Jewish Ukraine to us, and escort us to municipal archives. We spent three weeks looking in these archives, but we found nothing about my family, the Zorokovichs.

It wasn't until we reached Kiev that we made the chance discovery of the village at the heart of this story. A stern Soviet-style archivist full of rules, regulations and formalities reported that the name Douboviazovka (found in a scribbled note to my father from Maroussia) referred to a village with a sugar factory in northeast Ukraine. We leapt on a train and hoped for the best.

Maroussia's description of her journey to the country estate from Kiev became the reference point for our own journey. On the first visit to the village, we discovered not only the family's old sugar factory — now in ruins, stripped of its last precious materials, but also a spirits distillery which had also belonged to the family. The distillery was still open, operating hugely under capacity but still the major employer of the dwindling village.

All at once the past and the present seemed to collide. We met the oldest woman (103) in the village, Nathalia — she not only remembered Maroussia, but told me she had dreamt I would come. I began to fancy that there might be design in all this madness — perhaps instead of finding my family's past in the village, I had unwittingly stumbled on my future. Should I try and take the distillery back into family possession? Ridiculous: the village was depressed and in decline and attempting to reclaim the distillery would just create more instability. But the romance was compelling, and I began to carry myself around the place with an increasing swagger. I was taking on the mantle of the second baron Zorokovich von Edelstyn and I had come to save the day, inject a little entrepreneurial spark back into a village which badly needed it. It seemed that the place just wasn't the same since they had ejected their capitalist oppressors — and so it fell on me to do the honourable thing, and resume service as normal.

Could I start to import its vodka? Maybe. How hard could it be?

> **The oldest woman in the village said she had dreamt I would come**

Before I could embark on this life-changing journey, I had to answer an important question; first to myself, and then to my partner Hilary, to the director of the distillery, my producer in London, all my friends, my family and a slew of potential investors. How could a struggling documentary-film director with no capital or experience in any sort of business venture possibly hope to launch a vodka that could succeed in a highly competitive market, against brands with multimillion pound advertising and marketing budgets? And the deeper question: why would he even want to?

Clockwise from main picture: Dan Edelstyn with vodka from the revived family distillery, now on sale in England; his grandmother Maroussia Zarakovich as a girl with her parents; the family's factory in Ukraine

But the deceptively simple notion had taken a solid hold of me and despite attempts to stop me — maybe even because of those attempts — I resolved to re-establish the vodka empire of the Zorokovich family in the UK marketplace. My goal was noble, if ambitious: as well as amassing a considerable fortune for myself, my family and business partners, I would plough profit back into the village, helping to improve the infrastructure and morale of the abandoned place, and of course I'd see to the healthcare and other issues that the locals were no doubt suffering from. Once I'd achieved all this I'd probably go for a swim before dining at the club and catching a late performance of *Singin' in the Rain*.

The whole experiment felt irresistible, and when things seem impossible, as often they do, I have only to remember the appalling simplicity of the first vision — how easy it all seemed — and somehow the complications all fall away again, albeit temporarily.

Beyond the vision, the detail looms — a million little jobs needing to be completed to an absurdly high standard and to deadline. Bottle, liquid, cork, screen print, customs, agents, bonded warehouse, sales teams, contacts, hitting the streets, door-to-door sales, cold calls, allies and enemies — all the classic traits which define all the best stories and business ventures. And the relentlessness of the whole thing takes over: the vision is one thing, its manifestation in reality is another entirely. A vision takes imagination, execution demands practicality, determination, relentless energy, reserves of which were low due to the feature film that had just been finished and the child just born.

Can the vodka empire be realistically re-established? Can the community over there be revitalised in line with the original vision? Time will tell. At this moment, to say there are complications would be an understatement. But one triumph has been achieved — you can pop down to Selfridges and pick up a bottle of my great grandfather's rather fine vodka!

***How to Re-establish a Vodka Empire* has its London premiere tonight at the Prince Charles Cinema and is in UK cinemas from Friday; Zorokovich 1917 vodka is available at Skylon Bar, Rules Cocktail Bar, One Aldwych, LoungeLover, Selfridges and direct from myvodkaempire.com**

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, BEN GURR

The rake's redemption

David McVicar tells Magnus Linklater why he is beating his demons with his latest staging

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, GORDON JACK

Colin Judson as Sellem in The Rake's Progress; below, David McVicar

Reputations , once won, are hard to dispel. At 46, the opera and theatre director David McVicar is now surely at the pinnacle of his career, loved and lauded at Glyndebourne, La Scala, Covent Garden, and the Met, where his *Anna Bolena* last year was one of the New York opera house's big productions. He invests his work with passion, digs deep to find the story at the heart of an opera, and now, with his new production of *The Rake's Progress* at Scottish Opera, has turned a morality tale into a compelling exposure of contemporary obsessions with celebrity and instant wealth.

But McVicar is still saddled with the image of being opera's "bad boy", prickly, difficult to work with, obstinate, angry. One critic broke off in the middle of a review recently to comment, unprompted, on his reputation as a maverick director.

McVicar finds it baffling. "It's not true," he says. "I really am not difficult to work with. Anyone who knows me well knows that I am not. People love working with me. Singers love working with me. Theatres like me around because they get a great big dose of good energy and passion."

I forbear to remind him that the last time we talked he spent the first five minutes tearing me off a strip for quoting from an article he had disliked. And he admits that he "doesn't suffer fools gladly". He quotes Berlioz, who conducted a running battle with the management at Paris Opéra in the 19th century.

"I recognise so many of those problems of laziness and stupidity, and people who have no business being in theatres, running theatres or working in theatres. It still happens, you know."

He puts it down to his Scottishness: "I get into a lot of trouble because I am so straightforward. I'm very Scottish in that. I call a spade a spade, and sometimes I get into trouble. When I encounter stupidity and incompetence I have to point it out . . . in every walk of life the incompetent and the stupid win. Look at banks. You know this. People of integrity and passion are always the losers, and ultimately I am going to be defeated; I am going to be a loser. And that's very Scottish of me."

He insists, however, that he has mellowed — and it's clear that he is a more settled and even contented figure these days. He puts it down to two things — his long and happy relationship with the choreographer Andrew George, and kicking a long-standing addiction to cocaine.

"I'm a gentler person now because . . . the primary reason is my marriage to Andrew and the second reason is I'm not a drug addict any more. I had serious, serious problems with cocaine. I admit it openly, and I got off it myself, without any professional help at all. I went cold turkey because I knew it was destroying me, and since then I have had a much better life and I don't mind saying it. But even when I was as high as a kite, I was still good to work with."

It's such an obvious and startling reversal of *The Rake's Progress*, in which Tom, the anti-hero, abandons a loving woman for a life of decadence and decline, that it seems extraordinary that McVicar has not tackled it before. "It's been a 25-year mission to do the piece," he says. "I've had the show buzzing around my brain, and the struggle has been to persuade anyone to let me do it."

Scottish Opera's boss, Alex Reedjik, promised him the production after his brilliant *Traviata* four years ago. "I told him, 'If you don't want me to do *The Rake's Progress*, I think I'm going to spontaneously combust. It is driving me insane.'"

The Rake's motto, "Live by my wits and trust to my luck," is a synonym for every get-rich-quick celebrity show on television. Tom is lured by Nick, an egregious devil-figure — a sort of latter-day Simon Cowell — into leaving his betrothed, Anne Trulove, and opting for fame, fortune and ultimate destruction. Although McVicar sets his production in the 18th century, the parallels with shows such as *Big Brother* and *The X Factor* are irresistible.

"All those kids who want to go on Simon Cowell's show — they're Tom," says McVicar. "If you talk to most teenagers now, they want to be famous.

"The opera is a fable that ends with morality, but the opera doesn't believe in its own moral — that for idle hands and hearts and minds the Devil finds work. Actually it's their own choice. And the true tempter is nature. Tom chooses to pursue his nature, in a way that is catastrophic. As it so often is."

For all his failings, however, Tom remains a strangely attractive figure, as McVicar points out: "People relate to him because of his fall from grace and his longing to return to the state of innocence, the state of Eden; something we all recognise. As Stephen Sondheim says in that wonderful line in *Into the Woods*: 'Everybody makes terrible mistakes: honour the mistakes everybody makes.' "

McVicar is thrilled with the work he is doing with Scottish Opera. For all that its finances are tight, and the number of productions it can mount is restricted, he is struck by the total commitment of the company, its chorus and its orchestra.

"The people involved in the production are the most dedicated professionals in any company in Britain," he says. "They will go beyond the call of duty because theatre is in their blood. I must pay a special tribute to the stage management department who are like a little army — it's incredible what that team does. As to the chorus, there's no other like them. They're all just giving one million per cent. So heart-warming for us. That's another reason to come back to Scottish Opera — they're just the core."

The contrast between the glamour and extravagance of the Metropolitan in New York (as an example, they raised $5 million in the course of just one gala evening of *Anna Bolena*) McVicar believes production standards can be every bit as high at a small company. "What you see on the stage is only as good as the people that have made it, in whatever capacity," he says. "And in that, Scottish Opera is as rich as the Metropolitan Opera or Covent Garden or La Scala in Milan. And it's not always the best thing to throw money at stuff to make it better. It's about skills, and it's about people, and it's about the way the people work cohesively together. That is what makes theatre."

He had just watched the first run through, and it had worked — the doubts that hang around any new production had melted away, rather like the upheavals of his own life. "We got to the end, and it was like, oh my God, I got it on to the stage. We got it out there! I got the demon off my back."

***The Rake's Progress* opens at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, on Saturday, and tours to the Edinburgh Festival Theatre from March 27 (scottishopera.org.uk).**