THE STORY AND THE ARCHIVE

ECHOES OF A COSSACK EXILE

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Їхав козак за Дунай,
Сказав: — Дівчино, прощай!
Ти, коніку вороненький,
Неси та гуляй!

A Cossack rode beyond the Danube,
And said, “Girl, farewell!”
You, my little black horse,
Carry me on, at your ease.

- Folk song, attributed to Semyon Klymovskyi, probably 18th century

The date on the card was the first surprise: 13 April 1916.

It appeared beside Alexis Davidenko's name on a medical record from a Kuban scouting battalion – the 4th Kuban Plastun Battalion – noting treatment for malaria in an army hospital in Maikop, a district centre in the northern Caucasus. Nothing in the family's account placed him there at that time. According to the story passed down, he entered military service later, when the empire was already weakening, in the chaotic final year of the Tsarist army and the civil war that followed, and survival had become improvisation. The card suggested an earlier beginning, fixed in ink, and I had to decide how to read it.

The Kuban lay to the north of the Caucasus, a frontier region settled by Cossack families in the nineteenth century. Its stanitsas supplied both mounted and foot units to the imperial army. Some were raised locally, commanded by officers who knew the men and the terrain well; others were formed into specialist scouting battalions whose work took them along the southern front. Record-keeping in the region varied from district to district. A man might appear in one ledger and nowhere else. None of this made the 1916 date easier to place – it sat awkwardly beside the family story. Maikop served as a regional military hub on a front that remained comparatively stable in 1916. A medical record from this setting suggested routine order at precisely the moment when that order was beginning to fray.

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The story I knew started elsewhere. Alexis, I was told, joined the conflict only when the old structures gave way. He spent nights in the forest, slept in abandoned dugouts, and lived on whatever food he could find. The lines along the front had blurred. Units formed and dissolved without clear authority. During one engagement he realised afterwards that one of the opposing groups had contained his brother Andrij. No one in the family treated this as remarkable. It appeared as one of the facts that had travelled intact: two brothers divided by a conflict neither had anticipated.

The forests he moved through were the broken woodlands of the foothills: strips of shelter along riverbanks, pockets of undergrowth between settlements, stretches of ravine where men could hide for a night before moving on. Many Kuban Cossacks followed similar routes, withdrawing in small groups when command collapsed and the distinction between soldier and refugee narrowed. They became – in effect – among the first displaced families of a conflict that had not yet settled into its final shape.

The retreat south shaped everything that followed. He left with others when their position could no longer be held. They moved across the Kuban plain, a landscape of steppe and cultivated land, then into the foothills where paths narrowed and villages appeared sporadically. Sometimes they walked. Sometimes they rode on carts abandoned by families who had already fled. At the coast they boarded a vessel heading for the Dardanelles. The ship was refused entry. Accounts differ on what happened next. Some said the passengers were ordered into the water; others that they chose it. Alexis swam ashore and climbed the rocks. He stayed in Turkey for almost a year.

Little of that period survived in the family memory. Constantinople had become a gathering point for large numbers of displaced Russians by 1920. Some found temporary work with relief organisations; many lived in improvised quarters along the waterfront as space opened and closed. Movement through the city was constant. Documentation was irregular, and a man might work for a merchant or a charity and leave nothing behind but memory. The fragments that remained in the family account were specific and sparse: women veiled in white cloth, garlic crushed into broth, and the smell of salt on his clothes.

Beyond Constantinople, his route west is no better documented – a gap consistent with the world he was moving through. Corsica formed the next stage. Men reached the island by diverted vessels, improvised crossings, or places found on ships moving irregularly through the Mediterranean. Corsica had begun to absorb increasing numbers of displaced Russians, many of whom found short-term work in the interior while waiting for decisions made elsewhere.

Displaced men were offered shepherding work through the Swiss Red Cross. He lived outdoors, followed the flock, and drank sheep's milk. Illness returned. In the family story, malaria belonged here. Illness was tied to exile – not to service.

The wider history of that year in Corsica offered a frame the family never mentioned. In early 1921, almost three thousand Russians arrived on the steamer *Rion*, diverted from a planned passage to Brazil. They found themselves in a state of administrative limbo around the port of Ajaccio, sleeping in barracks provided by the authorities and taking temporary work in agriculture – their fate shaped by decisions taken in distant offices.

No manifest survives that could place Alexis among them. The family preserved only the fact of Corsica and the memory of shepherding work arranged through the Red Cross. Yet the circumstances align in a way that is hard to ignore: a passage from Turkey to the island, a period of uncertainty, and labour in the hills while decisions were taken elsewhere. His trace there is narrow; the broader movement around him is documented in detail. Both stand together without forming a single line. His own path narrows again at this point, returning to the scale of family recollection rather than documented movement.

When he reached France in the early 1920s, the war that had pushed him from his home had become background detail. He found labouring work near Paris, met Anna, and moved with her to Artois. They married in 1927 and opened a café. When the Germans occupied the region, the family endured interrogation, evacuation, and the loss of most of their possessions. They rebuilt afterwards, as they had rebuilt before. This was the story that reached me: hardship, movement, and a series of recoveries.

The card belonged to a quieter moment the family did not emphasise.

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His name appeared in a clear hand: Alexei Timofeevich Davidenko, written in Russian. His unit was recorded as the 4th Kuban Battalion of foot scouts, drawn from Cossack settlements in the region. The card noted his diagnosis and origin. It listed stanitsa Pereyaslavskaya. The family named a different village: stanitsa Slavyanskaya. Both were Cossack settlements in the same district, close on the map and closer still in sound. One appeared in the Russian record; the other in the French documents that shaped the family's account. The difference remained.

A second medical card from the same year listed Mikhail Timofeevich, same patronymic, same region, same diagnosis; different battalion – the 10th Kuban Plastun Battalion. The family remembered only Andrij. I could not tell whether archive and memory referred to one man or two. Both lines held. The difficulty lay not in choosing between them but in understanding the shape formed by their divergence.

Administrative boundaries shifted. Names altered as they travelled across languages. Men moved between units. Local records did not always match central ones. What remained were fragments that had survived by chance and recollections preserved because they mattered to those who carried them.

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The medical card fixed Alexis in a specific moment in 1916, inside an army that still functioned. He was twenty-one. The handwriting suggests a clerk accustomed to completing such forms. The record captured a single point: a date, a place, a diagnosis, a stated origin.

The family story began with the collapse that followed. It was shaped by events that left the deeper mark: the confusion of the final months of the war, the struggle through the forests, the escape to the Dardanelles, and the year in Turkey. None of this appeared in the surviving official record. The card belonged to the world that preceded it.

The two beginnings did not align. One placed him in Maikop in 1916. The other placed him in the forests during the retreat. Each held part of the truth. The card offered a point of origin – the story, an account of consequence. Records generated under one authority often fail to carry through to the next, and the story preserved within a family reflects a different logic from the paperwork that survived. The challenge lies not in reconciling them but in understanding what each preserves.

The years after 1916 left few documents. His time in Turkey left no papers. Corsica left only memory: the flock, the mountains, the episodes of illness, and the fact of Red Cross work. When he reached France, the archive resumed its course: a marriage certificate written in Cyrillic and French; birth registrations for his children; municipal entries marking each address. These documents captured the life he built, not the life he escaped.

When I placed the two medical cards side by side, I was struck by their economy. A state recorded what mattered to it: the battalion, the illness, the date, the place of treatment, and the stated origin. Everything that shaped the decades ahead lay outside that frame. One brother made his way to France. The other is harder to trace. The family preserved what guided them through the years that followed. The archive preserved what fell within its own purpose.

The distance between these accounts does not resolve. It reflects the nature of the period: fragmented authority, disrupted communication, uneven documentation, and memories shaped by necessity. A life that crossed borders is unlikely to hold its shape in what survives. The fractures form part of the material.

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I return to the date: 13 April 1916. It stands at a point before the world he knew began to shift. Behind it lie the villages named differently in each account. Ahead lie the Dardanelles, Turkey, Corsica, Paris, and the café in Artois. The card does not contain that journey. It offers only a beginning. Systems designed to register or protect displaced people were only starting to take shape in these years, and even then unevenly. He crossed borders that had not yet learned to register – or refuse – the displaced.

Other documents raise their own questions. Some repeat familiar details. Others diverge. None erase the significance of the card. It remains the earliest record that places him in a specific moment.

I place it aside. The contradictions remain, and so does the fact of this single entry: a name, a place, and a date written before the course of his life moved beyond the frame. The rest lies in the traces that follow. From those traces – scattered, partial, and sometimes contradictory – the outline of his life must be assembled.

This essay forms part of ongoing research toward a future book on lives caught between collapsing empires. My first book, The Quiet That Remains, is available now.