

Souvenirs & Mementos

In creating the solo version of “Parotiah” (“The Choo-Choo Train” in “My Father’s Works”), I tried to capture the totality of the musical idea as I imagined it. The inspiration came from a tune my father used to play on his mandolin. He often engaged members of the family as musicians to create an ‘orchestral’ performance of the piece. Such events were eminently enjoyable and entertaining for all. Think of a jazz band where every member of the ensemble gets to do their bit of schtick. So, the solo piano version is like a piano reduction of a full orchestral score. A professional pianist should be able to handle the vamp in the left hand—not so a dilettante. Yet the piece should not languish while waiting for a friendly virtuoso to perform it. The solution—rewrite the vamp for two hands as a piano duet ‘secondo,’ and double the tune in octaves as a piano duet ‘primo.’ The extra notes and doublings in this arrangement actually create a richer sonority than in the solo version. Myself, I prefer this duet score over the piano solo. By making the piece more accessible, more pianists should perform it. It is a real showstopper. All aboard?!



Summer 1964 had the Sydorenko and Baziuk families relaxing at our newly built cottages in Grafton, Ontario—the Ukrainian Plast (Scouts) Camp. Left to right: uncle Yaroslav Baziuk (riffing the chords on the guitar) was my mother’s brother-in-law; cousin Natalia used the flute to imitate the train’s steam whistle; I was the conductor (pun intended); father played the tune on the mandolin, while holding my six-month-old sister, Halyna, in his lap—she was there just for the ride; and cousin Andriy did the clickety-clack rhythm of the train with some drumming on an old kitchen drawer. The music was glorious and the memories are golden! Mother was behind the camera. What were aunt Liuba and my grandmother doing at the time? Who knows, I was concentrating on the music!



My father’s mandolin. Historically, the ‘national’ instrument of Ukraine was the kobza, which evolved into the bandura. In the 1920s, the Soviets began to introduce Russian instruments that had been invented only recently—the balalaika, domra, and bayan (a type of accordion). Meanwhile, the world over, there was a mandolin craze. By the 1930s, mandolin orchestras appeared even in Ukraine. That is where my father, as a young teenager, picked up the instrument. He was a member of the city orchestra in Kryvyy Rih, Ukraine. Although he never became a professional musician, the mandolin did save his life on occasion. As a Displaced Person in Germany after WWII, he befriended some British officers by playing for them their favourite tune, Stalin’s beloved Georgian love song—“Suliko.” Later, in Canada, he purchased this Neapolitan-style mandolin. He would often relax by softly strumming out some tune on its strings.