

Who is that stocky, square-rig type fellow, quiet and aloof, sitting alone at the next table? He might be a broker or a brewer or a banker, but he has the build of a bucko mate.

STAVRAKOV BOYS FOLLOW THE SEA

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Two small and alien figures plodded up the path to the school, chattering in their shrill treble. Over to the east the smoke of Osaka's mills, factories and furnaces already clouded the horizon. Southward lay Kobe, with its bright harbor, busy with barges, steam and sailing ships. Above them were the green hills and the nestling homes of the well-to-do.

The little boys spoke Russian and they were going to the Canadian Academy, a mission school, one of the earliest established by Canadians in Japan.

Their names were Oleg and Vadim Stavrakov.

Vadim was born in Anuchino, Siberia, the son of Captain and Mrs. Georgi Stavarkov, people of the old nobility, on an estate which was part of their mother's

property. The family had lived there since Captain Stavrakov came home from the Russo-Japanese War, in which the naval architect and commander had fought valorously for a losing cause.

They had to leave, of course, when the Bolshevik armies swept eastward, and the estate was over-run by fierce, bearded men, lusting for loot and the blood of the bourgeois families.

The father went back to seafaring – he had owned and operated ships long before the revolution and aboard one of them Oleg had been born. And the family lived for the most part in Shanghai or Kobe after 1918.

When the boys outgrew the mission school, they were sent to Victoria, and they finished their formal education at Rockland Academy and Brentwood College. They came here in 1923 and their parents followed a year later.

Captain Stavrakov interested himself in the fishing industry, operated a fish reduction plant at Sechart,

and sketched and pondered the details of the Meridian log – which he was later to perfect and provide in quantity for the Allied navies.

It was in this atmosphere of seafaring and nautical electronics that Vadim and Oleg grew up.

When the elder Stavrakov went to England, now concentrating on electrical navigation instruments manufacture, Vadim went along to study at the Chernikieff works. Captain Stavrakov, from his New York offices, had sold an electric log to Sir Hubert Wilkins, then planning his submarine voyage to the pole. But Sir Hubert, in his Nautilus, had to leave before it could be installed. Vadim probably never would have seen the Nautilus if it hadn't been for an accident.

This was the summer of 1931, and the Nautilus was plowing across the Atlantic on the first leg of her adventurous journey, when she broke down in mid-ocean. The battleship USS Wyoming took her in tow

and brought her safely to Cork, Ireland.

Sir Hubert asked Captain Stavrov for another log, to be fitted at Devonport, and Vadim went down to install the equipment.

Then, shortly before sailing time, while Vadim still labored to connect the cables between the log on the outside of the hull and the recorder, one of the engineers decided a single-skinned tin can like the Nautilus was no vessel to be diving under polar ice – and quit.

“I don’t know that I blame him,” Vadim said.

There were, however, no fewer than 1,000 applicants for his job.

“I was astonished when they came to me and asked me what I knew about diesel engines and followed it up by inviting me to go along,” Vadim recalls.

He went.

THEY WERE ALLOWED only 20 pounds of gear a man in the Wilkins-Ellsworth transarctic submarine Nautilus and because they had to anticipate being frozen in for 18 months, they had to carry emergency provisions. Much of it was in tins – spot welded to the deckhead.

There was no heat in the vessel. Their brief preparations for meals were made on an electric stove. But, just to keep the cold out, there was a pint of rum a day for every man who wanted it.

They slept in sleeping bags – great 12-foot-long envelopes – in which it was necessary to huddle to undress and dress. The condensation, dripping off the thin-skinned hull, froze the men into their sleeping bags so that they had to be

tapped with a hammer to win freedom.

They sailed from Drake’s home port of Plymouth, to Bergen and to Spitzbergen, and then into the vast cold of the Arctic. At Bear Island they stopped briefly to hold a memorial service for the great explorer, Amundsen, reputed to have died there.

Then they entered the polar pack.

The first day in ice they lost their diving planes, so that thereafter, if they wanted to submerge, they had to go down with negative buoyancy instead of “swimming” down by manoeuvring their fins.

They carried a sled-type superstructure which was supposed to allow them to skim along under the ice. But it didn’t work. The trouble was, they found, that great icicles hung down as much as 100 feet below the undersurface.

The thin-skinned submarine couldn’t take such punishment, in spite of the \$500,000 that had been spent to convert her.

“Another million dollars wouldn’t have made a ship of her,” Vadim says disgustedly.

They went to work taking soundings down to 26,000 feet, studying the earth’s magnetism and bottom samples, and the fauna of the area.

Vadim’s work was mostly on maintenance and the operation of the navigation instruments, and when they surfaced, he was the hunter – being a fine marksman.

They were 35 days in the pack ice and it was no colder outside the hull than it was inside. Only the camel hair sleeping bags gave them protection. The whole ship’s

interior was thick with hoar frost.

Finally, they were leaking too badly to do any more diving, and they were funning mostly on one engine. They lost their radio mast and for five days the civilized world was out of reach entirely.

“They gave up hope for us,” Vadim says, “Lowell Thomas’ daily broadcasts over WRH got progressively less optimistic.”

But they made Bergen, with one day’s fuel left, and were paid off in kroner. Vadim changed his money into dollars, and thereby saved himself about 25 per cent loss, for England and Norway went off the gold standard next day.

NOW THE STAVRAKOVs had developed their Meridian log to the point where they were winning fat contracts and they were running a busy plant in Long Island City. Hughes-Owens, in Toronto, the Sperry Instruments agent, made them an offer and they sold out, the whole plant being moved to Canada.

Vadim was back at sea on the West Coast when war came. Oleg was at the Toronto plant.

Because of his Russian ancestry, possibly, the armed forces looked askance at Vadim’s applications for enlistment: first the navy, then the army, and finally the air force. Here was a man highly skilled in electronics, who spoke Russian and Japanese as well as he spoke English, a man widely experienced at sea – and there wasn’t a wartime job for him.

However, when the Russians collided with

Hitler's panzers and the Japanese entered the war, the RCAF – not without a lot of muddling – finally got Vadim into uniform. And where did he go? To the school of administration.

Things worked out, eventually, and Vadim gave the air force and his country valuable service during hostilities, from Dartmouth, N.S., to Patricia Bay, and from the Far North to Edmonton's experimental station. He was a liaison officer in Alaska, teaching Russian, and he was at Anette Island teaching Russian crews the handling of new aircraft from American factories.

After the war he went back to commercial fishing – the most painful experience of his life.

On Dec. 13, 1948, he was alone at sea in his fish boat, between Port Renfrew and Neah Bay. Fire broke out.

It was a small fire at first and Vadim managed to control it.

A passing freighter offered him assistance, "I hailed him and asked where he was bound."

"To China," was the reply.

Vadim elected to stay aboard his still smouldering vessel.

He was working below and while he was hurrying up a vertical ladder to reach the upper deck, he slipped.

He struck and broke his jaw on an iron rung, and fell unconscious into the scuppers. Later, he realized, he had lost his glasses – which was just about as disastrous a development as any other part of this episode.

The heat of a re-kindled fire brought him back to consciousness, burned on

head and hands, and he stumbled on to the deck and launched his skiff. He was wearing heavy fisherman's pants and a wool shirt. He couldn't get to his cold weather gear, He couldn't get to the radio. He couldn't start the pumps.

He climbed into the skiff, and for five hours, watched his boat burn. Flames towered into the winter sky and a chill wind blew the smoke up Juan de Fuca, and a driving hail blinded him when he peered into the weather.

Eventually he heard engines and a U.S. Coast Guard crew picked him out of the skiff and warmed him up on the way to Port Renfrew.

He remembers – among other unpleasant things – the ride out of Renfrew to Duncan by crummy and frigid bus, which took nearly 12 hours. That included stops where bridges were out, a plunging crossing of ravines to another unheated vehicle. But he survived it all.

He was burned about the face, his jaw was broken, remember, and he hadn't had a shave for 72 hours. It was little wonder they hesitated to let him ride on the bus to Victoria.

"They thought I was a bum, I guess," he said. "I certainly looked the part."

Undismayed by his misfortunes – he lost an eye fishing for tuna, and broke his ribs in a tumble in a gale – Vadim continued fishing in the summers, tow-boating in the winter months. In 1953 he was deep-sea fishing between the Queen Charlottes and the California coast, taking tuna. Most of the time he was 200 miles offshore.

He went north again, for the Yellowknife Transportation Company, working up the Mackenzie with headquarters at Hay River.

"So I can say I'm one of the few men who has seen the Canadian, the Alaskan, the Siberian and the Atlantic Arctic," he said thoughtfully. "I don't imagine there are many others."

In 1934 Vadim married Marion Lee, daughter of an old-time Victoria and West Coast family, and the son, Eevan – better known as John – is teaching school at Chemainus. Eevan and his wife have two children. Vadim's daughter is back at UBC, having taught school on graduation from Victoria University.

As to the future, Vadim will continue to follow the sea. He's an engineer with Island Tug and Barge.

Brother Oleg? He's seafaring too. He's one of the men who stand the weather watch on station Papa.