



## The Ouk-rra-i-nah Story by Warren Metzler

# 1. Discovering vodka

The story begins in November, 2004, when I traveled to visit the Ukraine, a country in Eastern Europe. I had never previously visited that region. I went to a number of cities in the Ukraine, one of which was Zhitomir. And while there I met Alla. Just before I left Zhitomir, Alla gave me a gift: a ceramic bottle decorated with two large red pepper pods. I assumed it was vodka, thanked her, put it in my suitcase, and once back in Los Angeles placed it—still unopened—among my liquor stock.

I had consumed little vodka up to that point in my life. This was primarily because every vodka I had tried, even those considered premium vodkas, had a strong bite—sting—to their taste. And I like smooth beverages, alcoholic or nonalcoholic. I once encountered a critic's description of French champagne, which quite nicely describes this taste preference of mine: "it glides across the palate." This is why Alla's gift remained unopened for so long.

During that same trip in 2004 I also visited Russia. Just before leaving Los Angeles, a friend encouraged me to have some caviar while in Russia, claiming that is where one can find the best caviar in the world. So while I was staying in St. Petersburg, I asked my guide to take me to a place that served excellent caviar. And he took me to "The Caviar Museum". In the Museum was a tasting room; where, across an entire wall was shelf after shelf of vodka. This is probably why, as I stood at the bar to place my caviar order, I heard an internal voice ask, "How can I have caviar in Russian without having some vodka?" I asked the bartender for the best vodka and he placed in front of me a very futuristic looking bottle, with Kauffman etched into the glass. Hence I added a small carafe of Kauffman vodka to my order.

I sat down and began to eat the caviar, which was very good. And then I took small sip of the vodka. What a pleasant surprise! It tasted very smooth, with no bite at all, and had a full body (which is another of my taste preferences for alcoholic beverages). "Hmm", I thought. "This is really good." I decided to purchase a bottle and take it back to the US with me, so my friends could try it. Of course, I also purchased a container of caviar.

Back in Los Angeles, I served the caviar and Kauffman to my friends, and they each liked both. However, I had not yet made vodka one of my primary drinks, so the Kauffman went into my liquor stock and remained untouched for a while.



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### 2. Deciding to sell

In February of 2005, about three months after I'd returned to Los Angeles, I received an unsolicited magazine in the mail; sent from *The Wine House*, one of the liquor stores at which I shop. I read it. And one of the articles discussed premium vodkas. Several items in that article caught my attention. One was that premium vodkas sales had been significantly increasing in the previous two to three years. And another was that vodka sales were the number one category of distilled spirits in the US, 26% share of the market. Rum products ran a distant second, only 14% of the market; and everything else, which included scotch, whiskey, gin, etc., ran behind. Then I noticed an omission. That article described all the top brands of vodka sold in the US, and Kauffman vodka was not mentioned.

I promptly called The Wine House and dialed the owner's extension. To my pleasant surprise he answered. I introduced myself, mentioned the magazine and the article on vodkas, briefly described my trip to Russia, and asked him if he would be interested in importing Kauffman vodka. He declined that suggestion, but then made a fascinating comment. He told me that if I obtained exclusive import rights for Kauffman for the US, he was certain I could find a major importer who would work with me on the project.

I thanked him for his time, hung up, and wondered about his suggestion. And the more I wondered, the more I felt led to investigate. I went on the Internet and searched for Kauffman Vodka. I eventually found it mentioned on the web site of a liquor store in England. I called that store, and they provided me with a phone number and contact name for the distributor from whom they bought Kauffman. I called that person, and amazingly she gave me the cell phone number for Kauffman's representative in the UK. I called him. He answered. I explained my interest. He told me it was his impression the company that made Kauffman did not yet have representation in the US. He further stated that if I sent him an email describing my interest, he would forward it to the appropriate person in the Moscow home office.

I sent an email, received verification from him he'd forwarded it, and sat back and waited. And no reply came.

After a few weeks, I received an impulse to do a taste test. I took out the bottle of Kauffman, the gift bottle I'd received from Alla in Zhitomir, and a bottle of another Russian vodka I'd received as a gift several years prior. The Kauffman's still tasted good, the Russian vodka was okay, and the Zhitomir vodka was a nice surprise: it was a mixture of vodka and hot pepper; a spicy but pleasant taste.

I had committed to learn Russian during my November trip to the Ukraine. And since January —about two months prior— had been taking a lesson each week. So I took the



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bottle of spicy vodka to my next Russian class, and asked my instructor if she could translate the text on a small card that hung around the bottle's neck. The text on that card was in Ukrainian, but my Instructor was able to determine the manufacturer was located in Zhitomir.

While in the Ukraine I had had five different guides / translators. One of them, who I will refer to as Igor, appeared more entrepreneurial than the other four did. And I had been corresponding with him by email since my return. The day after that Russian class, I sent Igor an email describing this pepper vodka. I told him I liked it, wanted to investigate importing it, and wondered if he would be interested in working with me on this project. He replied in the affirmative.

Not many days later he sent me an email indicating he had contacted the company, that its name was the Zhitomir State Vodka Distillery, and that he was having conversations with the sales manager, whose name is Vlad. Igor also told me the company was interested in exporting to the US, plus that they had a web site with pages in English. I promptly went to that web site. One item in particular caught my eye. The site listed Presidential Standard vodka, which cost six or seven times more than any of the other types of vodka sold by that company. I wondered if that was a pure vodka; and, further, if it might have a quality similar to that of Kauffman.

Every few days I would receive additional information from Igor. And then at some point I heard an inner voice say, "Nothing more can be accomplished until you go and taste their vodka." So I decided to visit that country again. I wrote Igor about this possibility, and he agreed to accompany me to Zhitomir. I then decided I was committed to the process, submitted my application for a Federal Permit as an importer and wholesaler, and made appropriate travel arrangements. By this point, I had little expectation that I would hear from Kauffman. And I never did.



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### 3. Returning to the Ukraine

One Wednesday in June, 2005, I arrived in Kiev and was met by Igor at the airport. We spent the night in a hotel in Kiev; and the next morning, Thursday, took a taxi to Zhitomir, arriving late morning (Zhitomir is about 70 miles west of Kiev).

Vlad, the sales manager who had been Igor's regular contact, had received the opportunity to take an unexpected vacation at the time we were due in Zhitomir, and he had decided to take that opportunity. So he was not going to be available to meet with us. But he had arranged for us to talk with the director of the company, a Mr. Gertz. But once we arrived in Zhitomir and Igor called the vodka factory, he was told by Mr. Gertz's secretary (whose name was Liliya) that Mr. Gertz had been called away to an important meeting in Kiev. Liliya then told Igor that Mr. Gertz would be back at the factory the following morning, and would then meet with us. She also invited us to meet with her later that afternoon.

So Igor and I decided to have lunch. We went to a nice Ukrainian restaurant called Korchma, where I had eaten during my previous visit there, in November 2004. To my very pleasant surprise, there on the menu was Presidential Standard vodka. So, obviously, I ordered a serving of it as one of my lunch items. And how fantastic it was! It tasted quite good; very smooth, no bite, and it appeared to taste as good as Kauffman. I interpreted that moment as a positive omen for that trip. (Incidentally, you can see pictures of Korchma in the Zhitomir photo tour on this site.)

Once we reached Liliya's office, and our introduction formalities were completed, we began to discuss the importing possibilities. And here I must mention something I have not yet presented. During the discussions Igor had with Vlad, the sales manager, before my trip to the Ukraine, Vlad had repeatedly mentioned to Igor a group of vodkas called "buds", claiming they were very popular. Igor had passed this information onto me, but I paid it little regard. But as we sat in Liliya's office that Thursday afternoon, she soon mentioned the buds vodkas and kept referring to them with great enthusiasm. So Igor and I agreed to taste them.

It was a delightful experience. The buds vodkas had an after-dinner liquor taste, not at all a vodka taste, which was very pleasant. And they were all quite smooth! I later discovered what gave all the buds vodkas their distinctive tastes: each type contained an alcohol tincture made from the buds of birch trees. The company made five different types of buds, but I liked two in particular: *Lagidna* and *Elitna*.



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### 4. Tasty buds

Lagidna contains vodka; plus alcohol tinctures of birch tree buds and sap, coriander, and sweet grass (also called Hierochloe odorata, buffalo grass, holy grass, and vanilla grass); and also port wine, sugar, and citric acid.

Elitna contains vodka; plus alcohol tinctures of birch tree buds, coriander, and sweet grass; and also cognac, sugar and citric acid.

Allow me to briefly describe birch buds and what an alcohol tincture is. Throughout each winter, the branches of each birch tree are covered with buds (as are the branches of many deciduous trees); each of which looks like a miniature pine cone (about 1/8 of an inch in diameter, and maybe a 1/4 inch long). In the Spring, from those buds springs the birch tree leaves and their stems. The birch tree buds used to make an alcohol tincture are picked in the spring, just before the leaves emerge.

Now to describe how the alcoholic tincture is made: After the birch buds are obtained, they are crushed, then placed in a closed opaque container and covered with ethyl alcohol. The container is closed and opaque to keep the mixture from being exposed to light or air. Ethyl alcohol is used because that substance does a great job of pulling the essence out of living substances (does a great job as a solvent). After several weeks of soaking, the liquid is filtered (to remove any solid material which is left), and the remaining liquid is a “birch bud alcohol tincture”.

By the way, this is the same process by which all herbal tinctures (such as those sold in health food stores) are made; except very few herbal tincture manufacturers here in the US soak their herbs for weeks; most soak their herbs for only a day or two, and often use water instead of ethyl alcohol.

Igor had never previously tasted the buds vodka, and he also liked them very much. I then decided I would include Lagidna and Elitna in my order.

Before the discussion was completely finished, Igor suggested we invite Liliya to dinner that evening and I agreed. He requested, and she replied she would call him later that evening with the answer.



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### 5. Postive omens

We left the factory, and I decided to purchase samples of the four products I intended to order. I would take these back to the States with me, so my friends there could personally experience what I intended to import; plus I would submit some of them to the Federal government for the required product testing. The vodka company had a retail store near our hotel, and this is where we went next. After leaving the store we realized we were near Korchma, the Ukrainian restaurant I mentioned earlier, and we decided to go there for some refreshments. While there, Igor received a call from Liliya, who said she would meet us in front of our hotel at 7.30 pm.

Around 7.00 pm we got up from our seats at the restaurant, and proceeded to walk toward the hotel. But just before we left the restaurant's premises I heard my name called. I looked around wondering who could possibly know me in that place. And, low and behold, there was Alla walking toward us from the restaurant's garden. If you remember, she was the person who had given me the bottle of pepper vodka as a gift during my previous visit, seven months prior. Igor had attempted to call her several times that day, but repeatedly reached a message that said her phone was no longer in service. I asked Alla if she would join us for dinner. She agreed, and stated she would meet us in front of the hotel at 7.45 pm. And Igor and I continued back to our hotel.

I was in a state of amazement. Zhitomir is a city of several hundred thousand residents. To have Alla present at the same restaurant as me, at the same time, having no awareness I was in town, couldn't possibly be a mere coincidence. This had to be what I call *an act of God*; (God deliberately forcing a human, or humans, to act in a certain manner; or deliberately causing a situation to unfold in a specific way; so something He wants will happen). I proceeded to interpret this happening as another positive omen (that *Presidential Standard* was as delicious as *Kauffman* was my first positive omen).

Actually the first positive omen in the Ouk-rra-i-nah process was the owner of The Wine House answering his extension when I called, plus him telling me about obtaining import rights for Kauffman vodka.)

Liliya showed up at the hotel as she had promised, and Alla appeared as expected, so off we went to a restaurant. Not Korchma this time, but one called *Khatynka* (which you can also see pictures of in the Zhitomir photo tour. I had eaten at Khatynka twice on my previous trip to Zhitomir, both times with Alla, and I considered it superior to Korchma. We had a lovely dinner.

At some point during that dinner, I suddenly realized that I was sitting at the identical table at which Alla and I had sat during our two visits to that restaurant back in November (seven months prior). There I was, Liliya, the vodka factory director's



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secretary, to my right; Alla, who had introduced me to that factory's products, sitting across the table; Igor, my Ukrainian partner, without whose efforts I would not be there, sitting to my left; all of us at the same table at which I had twice sat during my last visit . And all unplanned. This was a MAJOR affirmative omen; far more significant than the previous two positive omens.



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### 6. A Challenge to overcome

The next day Igor and I went to the factory to see Mr. Gertz. He invited us into his office, and we sat down and began our meeting. The director spoke no English and I spoke no Russian (nor Ukrainian), so Igor did a lot of translating. At first Igor and him conversed for some time. Then Igor translated for me and told me there was a major problem: the company was unable to assign me exclusive import rights for the US, primarily because they had shipped a container of their vodka to an importer in Miami, Florida, eight months earlier (October, 2004). Furthermore, they had established a contract with the Miami company, one that guaranteed that company could continue to purchase vodka from the Zhitomir factory as long as they bought at least one container per year. Therefore, until October 2005 arrived and no further order had been placed by the Miami company, an exclusive import right for the entire US was unavailable.

I was stunned. And to allow you to realize why, let me provide some background information. If you remember, the initial occurrence which caused me to consider importing vodka was a conversation with The Wine House owner about importing Kauffman's vodka from Russia, specifically that owner telling me *if I obtained EXCLUSIVE import rights for Kauffman vodka, in all likelihood a US importer would be willing to work with me on the project*. Since talking to that storeowner, I had had conversations with several other people who had experience in importing alcoholic beverages. And in every one of those conversations, the other person stressed I must have exclusive import rights before I order a single bottle.

Each one defended this view with the same argument: if you became successful and did not possess an exclusive import agreement, other companies could go to the Ukraine, offer the vodka factory a "better" deal, and obtain the exclusive right themselves. Also, in several of the communications I sent to Igor before arriving in the Ukraine, I had told him I wanted exclusive import rights. And each time that Igor replied regarding this issue, he repeated that Vlad had stated the acquisition of exclusive rights was a definite possibility. As I sat there in Mr. Gertz's office I wondered how in the world Vlad could have made such a claim, knowing the vodka factory had already shipped a container of vodka to a company in Miami?

Now another background point of even greater consequence, one I learned in my twenty five years experience as a well-being physician.

Once a person —say me— incorporates a particular view —say I decide I must have exclusive import rights before I sign an import contract—, that person operates as if that view is reality. Plus operates as if that view is an essential part of the entire project; meaning that if that view is threatened —circumstances indicate that view cannot be manifested—, the person will immediately assume the entire project is doomed to fail.



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I suggest to you that every human being in the world operates in this manner.

Thus as I sat in the director's office and heard Igor tell me they had shipped a container to Miami the previous year, my inner being immediately concluded the entire project had just gone up in smoke; I presumed my trip to Zhitomir had been a total waste of time.

Then within a few minutes, actually probably within thirty to forty seconds, other thoughts began to appear in my mind. What about those positive omens? Especially that phenomenal one the previous night in the restaurant????!!!! Those omens were very inconsistent with the project being over. I had accomplished many successful projects in the past, and in each one, positive omens appeared at various points throughout the process. Yes, it was true, positive omens had also appeared in projects of mine that had failed. But never had a positive omen of the weight of the one in the restaurant the previous evening appeared in a failed project. What was going on here???? I was now quite confused!

More thoughts appeared. Throughout my life I had been involved in many projects which failed, and many which succeeded. Certain aspects had appeared in all the successful projects, which never appeared in any of the failed projects. And several of those aspects were present in this project. An example being that the project's scope expanded as it progressed: it started with the idea of importing one premium vodka; and now involved importing a premium vodka, plus a nice vodka (the pepper vodka), and two very pleasant vodkas (Lagidna and Elitna). No previous project of mine that had expanded as it unfolded had ever failed!

There I was. On one hand was the immediate sense the whole project had collapsed, and on the other hand was the awareness of information that indicated the project would eventually succeed. But how could it succeed when no exclusive rights were available????



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# 7. No guarantees in life

Then the following thoughts appeared: An agreement of exclusivity was really a form of a guarantee. It is an attempt to ensure future problems don't occur. No guarantee tells you what destination to pursue, nor what actions to take, nor on what aspects to focus, which are the only three phenomena that direct any one project toward success. Hence, in regard to what leads to success, a guarantee is worthless.

I'll expand. In this project, my destination was importing vodka into the US. I also had to take many actions; examples being to obtain an importer's permit, send the purchase price to the Zhitomir factory, establish a contract with the Zhitomir factory, arrange for the container to be shipped to California, visit retail establishments to sell the product after it arrived, obtain invoices with which to write up my orders, and arrange for a warehouse in which to store the vodka once it arrived in Los Angeles. And as the process unfolds I had to focus on certain aspects; examples being ensuring I act in a proper manner, that I communicate my views clearly, and that I hear all that others present to me. No guarantee, including having exclusive import rights, is involved in anything I've mentioned in this paragraph. Each guarantee is just an attempt to eliminate certain potential future problems.

Now some clarity began to appear in my mind. I remembered that years prior I had discovered and implemented the following principle, *never pursue or accept a guarantee*. But before I describe how I developed that principle, I need to describe my view of a principle.

In every activity of each day, every single human being follows certain directives; as in she uses certain directives to determine how to process that activity: which destination to pursue, what actions to take, on what to focus, and at what point to conclude the activity is over. I propose that all the directives humans follow can be placed into one of four categories, each of these four categories being defined by a certain level of reliability. Here's a description of each one:

(i) Guideline. Each guideline moves you in a specific direction; but could lead to failure or success, so possesses minimal reliability. An example is "make sure you earn a living".

(ii) Rule. Each rule guides you in a particular direction; one that ensures the final outcome will be viable, but provides no assuredness any quality will appear during the process. (*Each quality is a moment of pleasure.*) So each rule offers a fair degree of reliability. An example is, "don't lie".



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(iii) Standard. Each standard directs you in a certain direction, one that certifies you eventually arrive at a successful outcome that contains qualities (you have several moments of pleasure as the process unfolds). These provide a considerable degree of reliability. An example is “when you work do your best to be productive”. (*To be productive is to produce a viable result effectively and efficiently*).

(iv) Principle. Each principle instructs you to take a set direction, a direction that ALWAYS leads you toward the optimal outcome for that activity.

*(An optimal outcome is one that contains an excellent result, and each participant thoroughly enjoying that process. Be advised, there is one —AND ONLY ONE— optimal result for each activity humans do; the identical outcome for every human who does that activity.)*

Since each principle leads you to the optimal outcome for some (or many) activity, each one offers total reliability. An example is “always pursue resolution each time you and another person disagree”.

*(Each resolution process involves dialoguing until you and the other person are both clear about each other’s view; and then continuing until neither of you can think of anything relevant to add to the issue you’re discussing.)*

That defines how I perceive a principle. Now to describe how I developed the principle “never pursue or accept a guarantee”.

Over a many-year process I learned that no guarantee actually exists. Yes, there are papers on which guarantees are written. But no guarantee ever actually provides protection from a future problem, if that predicted problem does appear. Whenever a problem appears, if you attempt to use a guarantee to solve that problem, worse problems will soon manifest. I propose it always works this way, even though most people ignore this phenomenon.

I also learned that each limitation (think problems) I experience, or any other person experiences, can be converted into a benefit if it is properly processed. Because every limitation experienced by a human was sent by God as discipline, and all His acts of discipline are designed to take a person to a glorious outcome.

I, often without realizing it, avoid a development opportunity (avoid a situation in which my personal development would increase if I processed it optimally). And since God wants me to take advantage of each such opportunity He sends me a limitation(s); which is always a message: “Wake up here Warren, you’ve been missing a great opportunity, get out and there and start looking.” Each time I heed the message and begin to seek a new opportunity, I soon find one. And after I’ve mastered that opportunity, God removes



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my limitation and my life improves. Further, any discomforts I experienced, money I spent, or inconvenience I suffered as a result of processing that limitation(s), I soon recognize was a reasonable tuition fee for me to pay to arrive at the increased quality I now have in my life. Once I realized all I described in this paragraph, I never again attempted to protect myself from a future problem.

To summarize: At some point in the past I learned that guarantees don't actually work, and also learned that all limitations lead to future successes if properly processed. And once I learned this information, I committed myself to never again pursuing or accepting a guarantee.

As I sat there in the director's office, contemplating the unavailability of an exclusive import agreement, and then realized my desire for such rights was a desire for a guarantee, I immediately knew I could not continue to press for such action. I had to continue the project without import rights. I was sure God had set me up in this project, and sure he would have it turn out for the best.

If at some time in the future, the company so appreciates my results and efforts that they offer me exclusive rights for the US, I will accept them. But I will not seek for nor require exclusive rights to begin to import that company's vodka to the US. At the first break in the conversation between Mr. Gertz and Igor I described my new position to Igor, and asked he inform Mr. Gertz, which he did.



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### 8. I'm done!

I then told Mr. Gertz I wanted to order a combination of Presidential Standard, the pepper vodka, and Lagidna and Elitna buds vodka. And to my amazement another problem arose. Mr. Gertz spoke for some time, then Igor translated and told me Mr. Gertz claimed Ukrainian law required the birch buds vodkas have an expiration date of six months after manufacture. Again I was stunned. I had never heard of an alcoholic beverage having an expiration date.

My immediate thoughts were that it would be impossible to import the buds. I assumed, from my past exposure to US government regulations regarding expiration dates, that once the US government were informed of this expiration date, they would require extensive testing to accept the buds, which I would never be able to afford. So once again I was sensing the entire project had collapsed. Although I had come to the Ukraine intending to import vodka, only knowing the pepper vodka was available; and I now knew Presidential vodka was available, which was really good; the fact that I had the day before decided to also import the buds vodkas, meant they were now an integral part of the project. It was the identical situation as when I was earlier told exclusive import rights were not available.

I also felt as if Mr. Gertz was attempting to stop me from doing business with this company. And an inner voice told me "You're done." So I told Mr. Gertz I would not be able to continue, thanked him for his time, shook hands and said goodbye. Then Igor and I left his office, said goodbye to Liliya, and made our way out of the factory.

*(I'm not sure why no series of thoughts then appeared, which would have processed the situation so I could continue; because, as you will discover, my eventual first shipment was of only Presidential Standard and the pepper vodka. But you need to understand I have no control over which thoughts appear in my mind, nor what final conclusion I choose in each situation. I recognize most people assume they create all their thoughts in their minds, and they formulate all their conclusions in their minds. But I'm clear I do not think in that manner.*

*Here is how I always think. As each activity progresses I notice a variety of thoughts. Then after each activity is completed I review all those thoughts, looking for a concept that rationally factors in all those thoughts. And I accept the first rational concept that appears. Life has taught me that God sends me all my thoughts, and all the concepts I consider; except when Satan sends me some. I originate none.*

*Because no thoughts occurred, I didn't need to sit there and wait until some did. Further, I have another principle I follow which was relevant to that situation: once a sense of completion occurs, or "I'm done" appears, and one or the other appears in every activity*



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*I do, I know that activity is over. And I promptly finish up and actively look for what's next. So when "you're done" appeared I was fine with moving on.)*

However, as Igor and I left the factory I was mystified. Everything had worked out so well, why in the world had this dead end appeared? But consistent with my longtime life philosophy, I accepted it was God's way, and I proceeded to continue on with the rest of that trip; which involved going to Poltava, a city east of Kiev, to visit some friends.



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# 9. Becoming Johnny Appleseed

Somewhere during the Poltava stay, or perhaps on my way back, I now don't remember exactly when, I had the following thoughts. The Ukraine was a former member of the Soviet Union, and major deceit, bureaucratic absurdities, and massive inefficiency were omnipresent aspects of that system. Such views are very difficult to eliminate from one's personality, even years after the former system has disappeared. So maybe many of the Ukraine's citizens, even senior management of established businesses, were not yet aware of standard western business practices. Possibly I could work with this vodka factory, sort of a Johnny Appleseed —missionary— of good business practices, demonstrating by my behaviors what is a reasonable way to do business. I was unsure of this possibility, but deep inside I sensed the project was again active

After I returned to the States I wrote to Igor and told him about this new consideration. Then a few days later Igor wrote to me and told me some interesting news. He stated that Vlad had contacted him and was strongly insisting to Igor that a deal was possible. Vlad wanted Igor to contact me and encourage me to reconsider. After I read Igor's letter, and remembered what I had sensed in Poltava, I had an inner voice tell me to continue the process. I then applied for a California importers and wholesalers permit, obtained and read many regulations, searched for warehouses where I could store the alcohol when it arrived, considered marketing techniques, investigated the alcohol wholesales and importing business, and so forth. Once I received my Federal and California permits, I wrote Igor and told him I was ready to return to the Ukraine. We found out a time when Vlad would be present in Zhitomir and Igor would be available, and a date was set; which was in November, 2005.

Some more interesting complications occurred. During my first trip to the Ukraine I had flown with Austrian Airlines; from Los Angeles to Dulles, near Washington, D.C., to Vienna, and from there to Odessa. This time I thought I would try a different airline. So I booked with KLM and flew from Los Angeles to Detroit, then on to Amsterdam, and afterwards to Kiev. The take-off in Detroit was delayed, and when we arrived in Amsterdam, an airline representative told us passengers that most of us would miss our connecting flights. This information bothered me.

For my first trip to the Ukraine I had scheduled all my travel plans, and obtained assistance in obtaining a visa, through a travel agency in Toronto owned by a man I'll call Sergei. For this trip I had again scheduled a few aspects through him. Before I left, Sergei informed me that he and his daughter would be on the same flight as I from Amsterdam to Kiev. I had communicated with him a number of times by email and phone, but had never met him in person. So I really wanted to connect a person to the voice. (*\*Our being on the same flight, unplanned, was another intriguing coincidence of this trip.\**)



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Hence I didn't heed the instruction of the airline person as we disembarked, and I rushed to see if I could catch my scheduled flight to Kiev. I made the flight. And during the flight I met Sergei and his daughter. When I reached Kiev I assumed my baggage had not accompanied me, and I thought it would be on the next flight from Amsterdam, which was scheduled to arrive a couple of hours latter.

I went through immigration without my luggage, and asked if I could go out and meet the people who were waiting for me. I was given permission, and went out and met Igor to tell him of my dilemma. After the later plane arrived, I went back into the incoming baggage area, but low and behold my luggage had not arrived. And there were others with the same problem. I registered the problem with the airline's luggage office, went back out to Igor and informed him of my problem. I decided I would buy sufficient clothes for the Zhitomir portion of the trip there in Kiev, and hope my baggage would arrive the next day. My luggage did arrive the next day, but the airline did not deliver it to Zhitomir as promised, and I was not able to retrieve the luggage until I returned to Kiev. Fortunately I was able to purchase sufficient clothes for the five days I spent in Zhitomir.

My shopping experience was interesting. I am a large person, and particularly like to wear suspenders instead of a belt. Yet I was able to find clothes in my size, and even found a person to attach buttons to the trousers I purchased so I could wear suspenders.

Once I had purchased all the clothes I needed, Igor and I drove straight to Zhitomir (in a taxi) and checked into a hotel. Then Igor called Vlad. It was arranged for us to meet him at the factory the next morning at 9 am. We had a good night's sleep, and arrived at the factory as scheduled. I had wanted to tour the factory and learn exactly how the vodka was made, and that occurred. But numerous difficulties occurred involving the next item on the agenda, which was to determine the details of the contract. Fascinatingly, none of those difficulties were between Vlad and I. Almost all were between Igor and I. I began to realize that Igor had very fixed views of what needed to occur, and when any of his fixed views were incompatible with mine, he would be very resistant to perceiving my view on the current issue. However, in time all the details of the contract were satisfactory.



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# 10. Bottling in up

Next was the issue of the bottles. The bottle the factory already used to package Presidential Standard vodka was a great bottle: it had a distinctive shape; and was 750 ml in size, which was acceptable for sales in the US. So I decided to use that bottle for my Presidential Standard orders, and all that was needed was an English language label for the bottle.

However, the company packaged all its other types of vodka only in 500 ml bottles; including the pepper vodka, and the two buds bottles.

*\*(You may be wondering why I was still willing to import the buds vodkas. When I returned to the States from the June trip, I had called the US Federal lab that tests alcoholic products; and mentioned the expiration date situation. The scientist I talked to told me the US government cared less about other country's expiration dates, only about expiration date requirements that had been established in the US. And there were no US expiration dates regarding vodka products.*

*Further, once Igor had returned to his hometown he looked for buds vodkas made by other companies in the Ukraine. And although he did notice an expiration date on those bottles, it was for twelve months after manufacture. So obviously the Ukrainian government had not established a six-month expiration date policy.*

*Igor called many government offices, but was unable to find any person who was certain about the government's policy on buds vodkas and expiration. Hence I was not concerned.)\**

The 500 ml bottles were a major problem, because several decades prior the US government had banned that size of container for alcoholic beverages. The government's claim was customers would mistake a 500 ml bottle for a 750 ml bottle, and then feel cheated afterwards when they realized they had less product than expected for the price they paid. I was unable to grasp the logic of this decision; because the US government accepts 200 ml bottles and 350 ml bottles, and the difference between 200 ml and 350 ml is considerably less than the difference between 500 ml and 750 ml. But that is the law and it can't be changed.

You would think it would be as easy as pie to find 750 ml bottles in the Ukraine. But apparently not. However, Vlad was aware of a Byelorussia company that sold bottles of that size. Vlad called his boss, Mr. Gertz, and received permission from Mr. Gertz to purchase the Byelorussia bottles for my orders. And so, that problem was solved.



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### 11. What's in a label?

Then there was the issue regarding the labels that would be on the bottles I imported. If you are unfamiliar with alcohol beverage importing or manufacturing here in the US, you may not realize how particular the US Federal government is regarding labels on alcoholic beverage bottles. Examples are the height of the letters that describe certain information, exactly what names can be used, and that the “Government Warning” title of the health warning has to be a bolder text than the rest of the words in the health warning. Until you receive Federal government label approval, US Customs will not allow your product to enter the US.

I was aware of the label approval requirement before I went to Zhitomir. And as a result had communicated its significance to Igor. I had told him he needed to inform Vlad I wanted to meet with a graphic artist in Zhitomir. I would communicate to the artist all the required elements so he could create an English language label that fitted those requirements, and then the approved labels would be on all the bottles I imported.

But that Thursday afternoon, soon after we began to discuss the label issue, I realized Igor had not impressed on Vlad the importance of this situation. Furthermore, Vlad informed me the graphic arts company the Zhitomir factory used to create its labels was in a city situated 300 kilometers (approximately 185 miles) to the west; and he, Vlad, knew of no graphic artist in Zhitomir. But after a bit of dialogue, during which I impressed upon Vlad the gravity of the situation, he remembered a local graphic artist, and we went off to see that person.

We arrived at what appeared to be an apartment building, climbed two flights of stairs in a stairwell with no lights, and entered what looked like an apartment. But once past the entrance door, I could see every room was furnished like an office. Welcome to the Ukraine I thought. I was told this was the Scherzo printing company.

We were then directed to a room in which there were several computer stations and I felt at home. It was just like the offices of all the graphic artists I had visited back in the US. Once in that room I was introduced to a person by the name of Alexander Kovalevsky. And a nice surprise; Alexander spoke English. He had even been to the US, having gone there three years prior to learn certain modern printing techniques. Alex sat in front of his computer. I sat next to him, and he proceeded to open the file they had from the Zhitomir vodka factory. Soon the current labels were on the screen, and Alexander asked me what changes I would like to make. I offered a few suggestions, and he realized I wanted a major design change. Whereupon he told me that he is not a graphic artist, he is a printing pre-press graphics person.



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I was stunned. What was I to do? But then an idea appeared. I asked Alexander if I could send him label files from the US, and he could then use those files to create the printed labels the factory would place on the bottles. He replied that could definitely occur.

I felt great. I could take a sample bottle back with me to the States, have the graphic artist there create the labels, obtain label approval; and once I received label approval, send a copy of the label files on a CD to Scherzo in Zhitomir, and the labels the vodka factory then placed on the bottles would be exactly what was approved by the US government. The best part of this possibility for me was that I could have my graphic artist in the US design the labels. I have had many things custom-designed in the past, and each time numerous adjustments occurred before a desirable product happened. Those inevitable adjustments for these labels would be far more effectively accomplished if I used an artist who lived near me, and we were able to conduct in-person dialogues.

Once the label situation was handled, there was one more item to accomplish, visit the place where the spiritus was made. That facility was in a village named Chudnov, located about an hour's drive to the southwest of Zhitomir. And the next morning, Friday, Igor and I went to Chudnov and toured the plant.

You can see pictures of this plant, with accompanying written descriptions of the spiritus making process, on the [Chudnov photo tour](#) segment of this web site.



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# 12. One lie too many

Igor and I spent the weekend writing out the details of the proposed contract. Then Monday morning we went back to the factory, and by shortly after noon I had a signed contract. That afternoon we drove back to Kiev and spent the night there in an apartment.

The next morning another fascinating event occurred. Igor and I were standing in the kitchen, waiting for the taxi to arrive, and he suddenly confessed that Vlad had not contacted him after the June trip. He reminded me that I had written him after the June trip, and described that I was considering continuing with the project. He also told me he didn't want this project to disappear. And then he had decided to tell me that Vlad had called and insisted we continue, hoping that information would encourage me to start again.

I looked at him, amazed at this presentation, and spontaneously stated, "So you lied to me?" He looked at me, developed a quite pained expression on his face, and then rushed out of the kitchen and into the bathroom.

Once he exited from the bathroom he had a new view on the issue. He had not lied, instead he had not revealed the whole truth. Then another principle I follow came into play: I do not work with any person who lies.

I told Igor my view on lying. But he continued to sustain his position. We didn't have time to resolve this issue, because the taxi driver arrived at that point, and off we went to breakfast; and after breakfast to the bus station, where I caught a bus to Poltava.

But once I returned to the US, I continued to communicate with Igor about this issue. I provided him with several extensive descriptions as to why lying was unacceptable to me. I told him he could continue to lie; but unless he willingly admitted he lied, apologized, and told me it would never reoccur with me, I would cancel our business relationship.

Finally he did as I requested. But, amazingly, only a month or two later he obviously lied a second time (about a separate issue). This time, after I'd communicated the obviousness of his deceit, and reminded him that I could not have a relationship (business or friendship) with a person who lied, he wrote back and told me it was too difficult to work with me, and he wanted to cancel our business relationship.

I accepted his choice, but for me that action created a major complication. From the beginning of the project I had offered him two forms of reimbursement. He could keep records of all the time and money he spent, and I would reimburse him for all expenses and pay him an hourly rate. Or I would give him 10% of all the profits I made in the US,



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(profits being defined by what was left after all expenses had been paid). He decided to accept the 10% option.

So if we parted ways, how would I reimburse him for his efforts? Then I thought I would give him 10% of the profits from the first container which was ordered; which would be fair compensation for all the time and effort he'd expended up to that point. I communicated this offer and he accepted it. But then another problem emerged.



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# 13. Deceit and mistrust

Igor had agreed to go to Zhitomir at the time the container was packed and shipped; so as to check it was packed correctly, and that the associated paperwork contained all the items I needed to meet US Customs import requirements. I had suggested he do this, and he had agreed, because I had great suspicion the vodka company would not carry out all its responsibilities. This suspicion did not arise without cause. By the time Igor and I had visited Zhitomir the second time, (the visit I just described), I had had much exposure to Ukrainians; and I had concluded that the majority of the people who lived in that country regularly lie, plus consistently exhibit one or more corrupt actions.

I'll provide several examples:

I was in Kharkov for several days, and because of the positive manner with which my guide / translator referred to her boyfriend I asked to meet him. His name is Alex. We met, and during our conversation, I at some point asked Alex what was the one item, or category of items, he most wanted, which was currently not available in the Ukraine. He replied good tools. He was a carpenter. I was amazed at that response, expressed my amazement, and he told me the following story. A Ukrainian company had been granted exclusive import rights for a reputable German tool manufacturer and over time had established many customers for those tools. Next that Ukrainian company went to a far Eastern country, and had tools manufactured to mimic the German company's tools; which were obviously inferior, and of course much cheaper for that Ukrainian company; and sold those fake tools in the Ukraine as the genuine article. Soon the Ukrainian purchasers of that company's tools realized something had occurred, stopped buying products from that company, and in a short time the company went bankrupt.

My guide in Kiev told me one day she didn't pay income taxes. She was self-employed and would only pay taxes on her income if she voluntarily reported her income to the government. Why did she not pay taxes? Because she had been an official guide while the Soviet Union existed, the current government no longer operated an official state tour guide agency, and she felt abandoned. Yet she was very religious, and said a prayer every time we went past a church. And there are many churches in the Ukraine.

One of my regular taxi drivers told me he bribed a government official so his daughter would be accepted into the government program, a program where the students receive free tuition and a living stipend for their four years of university.

I met a young woman in one city who had applied and been accepted into an agriculture college on scholarship. She lived in the city, had never worked on a farm, and had no intention of working in agriculture after graduating from college. Why did she apply for that scholarship? Because she knew that college had an exchange program with a British



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agriculture college, and she would be able to spend a year in Britain and become fluent in English.

Every person I talked to in the US, who had experience doing business with a former Soviet Union country, insisted I be very careful, because in their experience most business deals created in those countries resulted in much money disappearing.

Finally, I need to mention another issue that provided fertilizer —fertile ground— for my suspicion. The factory had a firm policy that all its customers, including me, had to send payment for the entire shipment before that shipment would be prepared; which was, of course, before any shipment would leave the factory.

It is very common in international trade to have reimbursement occur via what is called an escrow account. An example: A company in China is willing to sell you a product, and you are located in Los Angeles. The China company sets up a relationship with a company in Los Angeles that handles escrow payments. You deposit the full purchase price with that escrow company, that company notifies the China company, and the China company makes the product and ships it to you. When the shipment arrives in Los Angeles it is assigned to the escrow company and not to you. You are notified the shipment has arrived, and go to inspect the goods. If you agree to accept the shipment, the escrow company releases the payment to the China company and you take possession of the shipment.

I could have contacted a lawyer in Kiev who specialized in international trade, paid him a lot of money and had him contact the branch of the government that had control over the Zhitomir vodka factory. (That factory is actually owned by the Ukrainian government.) Then in time, that lawyer could have convinced the government to instruct the vodka factory director to agree to an escrow payment. But I didn't know any such lawyer in Kiev, didn't have extra money to pay such a lawyer, and my impulse was to deal with the company and not to go through a multitude of intermediaries.

Now the purchase price was going to be in excess of \$30,000. To send that amount of money, then not have Igor go and check the shipment before left the factory, was seen by me as a great risk.

That describes my suspicion, and all its contributing factors. And I repeat the problem I faced when I agreed to Igor's request he not continue. If Igor were not available to go to the factory when the container was packed, how would I ensure that the factory behaved in an appropriate manner? And there was a further problem. There were still unresolved issues with the factory, issues that required dialogue; Vlad spoke Russian and no English, I spoke English and no Russian. Now that Igor was no longer available to communicate with Vlad, how would I resolve those issues?



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Next, as in that previous time in the director's office, a series of thoughts appeared.

My life philosophy for many decades was that God —the Supreme Being— existed; that God ran the entire universe in great detail, down to determining how each activity I did (and every human did) turned out; that, as I described earlier when I discussed my experience in Mr. Gertz's office (the director of the vodka company), any limitation which appeared could be processed to achieve a benefit; at which point I realized suspicion was a limitation, and should not be considered in any actions I took.

So I decided to not regard my suspicions. But what about communicating with Vlad?



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# 14. Overcoming the language barrier

I then thought of Regina, my Russian instructor. If you remember, I had been taking Russian lessons since my first trip to the Ukraine. Why not have a three-way conference call with Regina, Vlad and I? My phone system had conference calling capacity, and I had two voice lines, so it could work. I presented this possibility to Regina at my next lesson, and she agreed. But she lacked the capacity to send emails to the Ukraine in Russian, so I needed an additional person.

Then I thought of Aleks. He was a friend I'd met in Poltava, who was communicating with me on a regular basis via email and an occasional phone call. If there was any written information I wanted to send to Vlad, I could send Aleks an email, he could translate the message into Russian, and send that translation to Vlad.

*\*(In case you don't know, when email is sent over the Internet there are many connections where the incoming message is processed. And any one message can leave one of those connections in a different condition compared to when it arrived. This is especially true when the message is in non-Roman letters, and the email is being sent from one continent to another. You can install special software on your computer that eliminates this phenomenon. But until you do, what you send to Europe [from the US] in Cyrillic script—the Russian alphabet—often arrives as gibberish.)\**

Early one morning (the Ukraine is ten hours ahead of West Coast —US— time) I established a conference call setup with Regina, and I then called the sales office at the vodka factory in Zhitomir. Fortunately Vlad was at work. We talked that day, and talked many times since, and every issue I need resolved was eventually settled quite satisfactorily. Therefore my need for a way to communicate with Vlad was fulfilled.

By the way, Igor and I again have begun to communicate in a friendly manner. But we have not returned to a business relationship.



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# 15. Bureaucratic hurdles

Now to describe other aspects of the project process: In December, 2005, immediately after I returned from the Ukraine, I contacted the graphic artist I used, Adam. We met. I gave Adam one bottle of each of the four products, and he proceeded to begin his design process.

Meanwhile, I sent samples of the four types of vodka I wanted to import to the Federal government lab for testing. And about four weeks later I received the results. I received a pre-import letter for the Presidential Standard, which stated I had to place “Vodka with natural flavoring” on the label. Also a pre-import letter for the pepper vodka, which stated I had to place “Pepper Flavored Vodka” on the label. But no pre-import letter for the two buds vodkas. I was informed the Formulation division could find no evidence that birch buds, birch sap and sweet grass were each GRAS. *\*(I’ll soon describe what a pre-import letter is.)\**

Let me here expand on what GRAS is. GRAS is an acronym, which stands for Generally Recognized As Safe. Back in the late 1800’s the Federal government began to regulate food items, initially testing certain foods to ensure they were safe. Then in the early 1900’s, Upton Sinclair wrote a book called *The Jungle*, which described extensive unsanitary conditions in the then current meat packing industry. There was an extensive reaction in this country, which resulted in Congress passing the Food and Drug Act of 1906, and considerable more government oversight of the packaged food industry was established. The FDA was established in 1927, which later created a separate division to oversee food and drug sales. A few years latter the FDA established a food safety division, and the first specific requirement for a packaged food was established in the late 1940’s (canned tomatoes). Many more such regulations soon followed. By the way, that 1906 act defined all alcoholic beverages as food.

In the 1960’s, at the request of the Nixon administration, the FDA created the concept of GRAS and established a GRAS database which has since been expanded many times. However, a food substance can still be considered GRAS without appearing on that database. This is because any substance is considered GRAS once the majority of reasonable food scientists in the world accept that substance is safe for human consumption; even when that substance is not listed in the FDA GRAS database.

There is an organization called FEMA; “Flavor and Extracts Manufacturer’s Association”. FEMA has a GRAS panel, made up of expert food scientists, and they meet several times a year to approve substances. If they approve a substance, they then publish what they call a Fema-graph, which states that substance is safe and describes the supporting evidence. Any substance that has a Fema-graph is accepted by government



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agencies as being GRAS, even when that substance is not listed in the FDA GRAS database.

There is a third way to have a substance listed as GRAS. You construct a package that contains articles from reputable scientific journals anywhere in the world, or articles that describe original research, all of which demonstrate a particular substance is safe for human consumption. You then submit that package to the FDA. If they accept your reasoning, they will send you a letter that states, in essence, “we don’t disagree with your reasoning.” Each such letter is accepted by all Federal agencies as validating that substance is GRAS.

Now both the FEMA process and the FDA package-submission process are expensive. The FEMA process could cost close to, if not in excess of, \$50,000. And even if there is plenty of scientific literature available, the FDA package submission process can cost close to \$20,000. I intend to pursue this latter route for the two buds products in the near future.



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# 16. In accordance with US law

At this point in this story, I want to briefly recount the history of US government alcoholic beverage regulation. If you know this information, you might better understand some of the events in this story.

I've already described The Food and Drug Act of 1906; which gave the Federal government authority to regulate how alcoholic beverages are made. Then in 1938 Congress passed the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act, which gave the FDA authority to determine what should appear on the labels of alcoholic beverages. However, the FDA has rarely exercised that authority.

Prohibition was in effect from 1919 to 1933. And in 1935 Congress passed the Federal Alcohol Administration Act (FAAA), which directed the creation of the Federal Alcohol Administration (FAA), and gave that organization authority to determine what appeared on alcoholic beverage labels and what were acceptable alcohol manufacturing processes. In 1940, the FAA had its name changes to Alcohol Tax Unit (ATU), and it became a division of the IRS (Internal Revenue Service). Then in 1972 another name-change occurred. The new name was the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; and the organization was moved out of IRS's oversight, but remained in the Treasury Department as an autonomous division. There it stayed until the Homeland Security agency was formed in 2002; after which Firearms went to the Homeland Security department, while Alcohol and Tobacco stayed with the Treasury Department, and was renamed Alcohol, Tobacco, and Trade Branch (ATTTB).

From 1938 onwards, the FDA and the FAA worked with each other regarding alcohol beverage label contents, with occasional antagonistic interactions. Then in 1987, the current administration ruled the ATF possessed exclusive responsibility for label content, yet directed the ATF to use the FDA as a resource for expert advice.

The previously-mentioned 1935 law, the FAAA, directed the FAA to ensure alcoholic beverage labels were accurate; plus required that each such label state the type of alcohol, its level of quality (its proof as an example), and the net contents. However, that act did not require that ingredients be listed. In the ensuing years, especially since the 1970's with the major growth in consumer advocacy groups, many consumer groups have petitioned the Federal government to require alcoholic beverage labels list the ingredients present. But each such attempt has been rebuffed as being unfeasible. Currently each label must describe the type of alcohol; the class into which the ATTTB, after testing, places that beverage —Pepper Flavored Vodka being an example—; the percentage of alcohol; the net contents; a Federal Government health warning; the origins of the beverage (in what country it was made); and the name and location (city and state) of the importer or manufacturer.



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ATTTB operates a laboratory, and before you can sell an alcoholic beverage you must submit a sample to that laboratory. That lab sends the test results to the Formulation Division of ATTTB, which determines whether it is acceptable or not to sell that beverage. If that division decides you can sell that beverage, it sends you what is called a *pre-import letter*. That letter describes the permission to sell, plus tells you what class of alcohol must be listed on each bottle's label.

You receive a pre-import letter when you're importing a beverage. I'm not sure what document you receive when you're manufacturing a beverage here in the US, but the process is the same.

Then you design the labels, after which you submit an application, a picture of each label, and a copy of the associated pre-import letter to the Label Approval division of the ATTTB. If that division approves that label, you are then free to import that beverage.



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# 17. A design for life

Now to continue describing my particular process:

Soon after I received my pre-import letters for Presidential Standard and the pepper vodka, Adam, my graphic artist, provided me with copies of the labels, and I then submitted my first label application. And I waited. And before long, in the mail came a rejection letter. Some requirement had not been met. I had Adam make changes in the label to fit those requirements, and resubmitted both applications. A few weeks later another refusal came. Finally, after several attempts, I received approval for all four labels: Presidential Standard in a 750 ml and a 50 ml bottle; and Harr-a-sho! in a 750 ml and a 50 ml bottle.

*\*(A brief explanation of the 50 ml bottles. My research into selling vodka gave me the impression 50 ml bottles [called “miniatures”] would provide a way for certain people to discover my products. Certain people may be willing to purchase an unknown drink for the approximate \$2.00 price of a miniature, but would not risk investing in a 750 ml bottle. In addition sales to hotels to place in their guest rooms, and to airlines, are all of the 50 ml size.)\**

One of the rejections deserves description, to provide an example of how frustrating the process can feel at times. I personally have a strong interest in the aesthetic appearance of products; whether I sell that product or I purchase it. In regard to the Harr-a-sho! product, I thought it would be informative to have the label read “a blend of vodka and capsicum pepper”. My reasoning being that most Americans would think black pepper, instead of spicy pepper, when they saw the label “pepper flavored vodka”. Plus I sensed the former read better. So on my first label application was the subtitle “A blend of vodka and capsicum pepper”. Back came rejection letter, saying the label must have a subtitle of “Pepper Flavored Vodka”

While the label approval process was proceeding, I received a notice from the ATTTB regarding a seminar in Las Vegas, one that would cover all aspects of importing and distributing alcohol products. Naturally I went.

It was very informative. Then in the afternoon there was a speaker who focused on label approval. And one point she made was that the formulation and label approval divisions were considerate of requests. So I raised my hand and presented my pepper vodka situation; stating that I perceived “A blend of vodka and capsicum pepper” to be more informative to the consumer than “Pepper Flavored Vodka”. The speaker was puzzled, said she didn’t understand why my suggestion was refused, also stated “we are flexible”, and then gave me the name of a particular person to email in the formulation division in



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Washington, D.C. As soon as I returned from Las Vegas I emailed that person. I'll refer to her as Ms. Smith.

A few days later I received a phone call from Mrs. Smith, who mentioned she was calling in reference to my email. I presented my position regarding the subtitle, and after some conversation she told me she would put me on hold and soon return. A few minutes later she came back on the phone, and told me their division had switched the category for the pepper vodka from "Pepper Flavored Vodka" to "Specialty Vodka". Further, I would soon receive a new pre-import letter in the mail directing the label to say "a blend of vodka and capsicum pepper". And that phrase is now on all the pepper vodka labels.

Once Adam provided me with an acceptable label design, I mailed a CD containing all the label files to Alexander at Scherzo in Zhitomir. I realized these were not approved labels. But I assumed the final approved labels would only contain text differences, which Alexander could easily implement in Zhitomir; and I wanted to allow as much time as possible for Alexander to communicate to me and solve any problems he noticed in the files. There were a number of issues that needed to be resolved, so I'm glad I acted in this manner.

After I received label approval, I wrote Alexander in Zhitomir describing all the final changes. And at the same time, I sent a fax to Vlad at the factory describing the details of my order. And more complications arose.

Soon Vlad sent me verification that my order had been accepted, after which I wired the entire purchase price to the factory's bank account.

Then a bit later, Vlad notified me he would not use Scherzo to print the labels for my order, claiming they wanted too much money. He was going to use another company. Vlad also communicated he was sending me a PDF file of the labels, and he wanted me to fax back the images with a signature to show I approved.

I was perplexed and dismayed. I had visited Scherzo in Zhitomir and met Alexander. At that time I wondered how I would reimburse the company for the work done. I had communicated this concern to Igor. He talked to Vlad, and then informed me Vlad said I need not worry. Vlad had told the owner of Scherzo they would receive the contract to print all the labels, and their income from that printing job would pay for the design work they were going to do. But now they were not being given the printing assignment. I promptly emailed Alexander, and told him to inform me of Scherzo's fee for the work they had done. He sent me a figure, and I wired the company that amount.

But there was a further complication.



## 18. Fear and frustration

When I was reviewing the PDF file of the labels Vlad sent me, I happened to notice a size discrepancy; the size of one label in the PDF was considerably smaller than the size of that label on the proofs I had received from Adam. This was major problem, because as I mentioned previously, the US government is very strict about certain items; one such requirement being a minimum size for certain lettering on the label. If the printed labels were reduced in size compared to the final Scherzo design, some of the label's lettering could be illegal. If that was the case, and US Customs noticed, they would refuse the shipment entry into the States.

I immediately contacted Adam, my graphic artist. He assured me the proofs he had sent me were the exact size of the final label. I called Alexander in Zhitomir, and he assured me their files were the same size as Adam had designed. Then I asked Alexander how the vodka factory had obtained the graphic files Scherzo had completed, and he told me the factory had not yet received those files. I then asked if he could imagine the source of the images in the PDF Vlad sent me. Alexander then told me, that when he sent me a PDF to verify the final labels he had sent Vlad a copy of that PDF. Alexander further told me that since I had paid their company, they would willingly give Vlad a CD of the final files if he sent someone over to pick up that CD.

I was astonished by this information. How could Vlad have some label printing company create a label based on images in a PDF; which has no correlation for size, and **especially especially especially** has NO CORRELATION FOR COLOR? The colors in the labels were very specific; much work and many conversations were involved in the final color selections. And I would be very displeased if the labels on the bottles that arrived in the US were not as was designed by Adam.

I promptly composed a letter to Vlad. And in it I wrote I would not provide label approval until I received a letter, on the vodka company official letterhead, which stated someone from the factory would pick up the graphic files from Scherzo, and factory personnel would ensure the labels on my order matched those files. I emailed this letter to Aleks of Poltava, asked him to translate it into Russian and forward it to Vlad. Within twenty four hours I received an email containing the letter I had requested.

I then thought all was solved, and I would soon receive word that the shipment had been sent. That was not to happen. But before I describe the next events, I need to provide some



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### 19. Size matters

Back when I first investigated importing vodka from Zhitomir, I also began to investigate the requirements of US Customs and the various ways products were shipped to the US. I soon realized there was an issue related to pallets.

Since you may not be familiar with pallets I'll describe them. Each one is a flat item; typically four feet by three feet in width and four inches thick. The four-inch thick part contains numerous openings, into which you can insert the arms of a forklift. Most goods stored in warehouse, or being transported in containers or in trucks, are stacked on pallets. And with a forklift you can easily move pallet-loaded goods: change their location in a warehouse, or move them on or off a truck or container. Ever since pallets were introduced, most have been made of wood; although, recently, increasingly they're made from plastic.

Last summer, 2005, the US government decided that bad organisms live in the wood of the pallets, that those organisms arrived in the US on pallets, and then infected certain US vegetation. Realizing this problem, they sought a solution. The solution chosen was to require all pallets which arrived in the US, which were made of wood, to be treated: soaked in an special chemical, or exposed to high heat for a specific length of time. Regulations were issued, soon adopted internationally, and before long every country which engaged in international trade had an office that oversaw implementation of these regulations. These regulations were to be in effect by January 2006, which was prior to when any container I would order would be shipped.

I found a web site that described this problem, plus one which listed the offices in each country that oversaw the implementation of these regulations. Then I wrote to Igor, told him the address of each web site, and informed him of the situation. It took him some time, but eventually he found a company in Zhitomir that made pallets of wood that had been treated. Hence that problem was solved.

The next issue that arose was in regard to packing the shipping container. But, again, first some background: I previously mentioned that the factory required me to send the entire purchase price prior to bottling the vodka in my order, which of course meant prior to shipping the vodka. And they wanted the exact price; to the penny. For me to accomplish this task, I needed to know exactly how many bottles would be placed in one container.

This issue would have been handled with ease if the factory had experience of shipping vodka overseas as required in my order: all the goods stacked on pallets, and the contents of each pallet shrink-wrapped. The factory had shipped vodka to other countries in containers, and had shipped that one container to Miami the previous year. But all those shipments had been all Presidential Standard, and pallets had not been used. So no one at



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the company knew, regarding to my order, exactly how many cases would fit in a forty-foot container.

My natural response to all such situations is for me personally to search for a solution. So I contacted my shipping broker and asked him about shipping, I went to the warehouse I would use to ask them about shipping (that warehouse had much experience receiving containers from overseas filled with alcohol products), and I searched the Internet.

I finally concluded that the standard approach is to use four-foot by three-foot pallets, and stack the pallets about six feet high, wrapping the cases on each pallet in shrink-wrap. With pallets that size, twenty pallets would fit in a forty-foot container: two rows of ten. International shipping containers are all a standard size: about seven and a half feet wide and seven and a half feet tall, and either twenty feet or forty feet in length. Although there is seven and a half feet of space inside each container, it is not recommended you stack the cases that high for international shipments that travel on ocean-going ships (as opposed to air freight). You want to leave room for the cases to move, and you want to avoid the weight of the cases on the upper levels of each pallet causing breakage in the cases on the lower levels, especially during the times the ship encounters rough seas.

But those were not all the factors involved in packing my container. The Presidential Standard bottles were tall and thin, whereas the Harr-a-sho! bottles were of a regular size. This meant the Presidential Standard cases would have a different size compared to the Harr-a-sho! cases. That difference in size could mean a different number of cases of Presidential Standard would fit on a single pallet, compared to the number of Harr-a-sho! cases.

And there's more: The factory did not have the capacity to fill 50 ml bottles. But I'd found a place to bottle miniatures here in California. So I was also ordering two 200-liter bulk containers, one of each type.

Then one more question: How many of each type would I order? How many cases of Presidential Standard versus cases of Harr-a-sho!? If I knew which type would sell best that decision would be easy, but I was starting from scratch, with no experience in the alcohol business.

It was quite a quandary, and there was no solution in sight. I decided that the two 200-liter bulk containers could fit on one pallet. And I further decided that if Vlad would only tell me how many cases of Presidential Standard fit on a pallet, and how many cases of Harr-a-sho! fit on a pallet, I would decide how many pallets of Presidential Standard and how many pallets of Harr-a-sho! to order, and then calculate the total purchase price; (to the penny! :-)).



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During several of my conversations with Vlad (with Regina as translator) I attempted to have him give me those cases-per-pallet figures, but he kept refusing. Then during one such conversation, he asked for the name and phone number of a shipping agent in the Ukraine.

This request irritated me, because it implied to me Vlad was not accepting my shipping “expertise”. And normally I would have refused to attempt to discover such information, because of a standard I’ve followed for years, which is that I never acquiesce to another person’s agenda, especially when I perceive that agenda as unreasonable —unrealistic for the current circumstances—.

However, however! A few days prior to Vlad presenting his request for a shipping contact, a person, who I’ll call Sanford, had asked me to do something I considered quite unreasonable. My initial response was to say no. But then an inner voice told me to go ahead and act as Sanford requested. And I did. And after I fulfilled Sanford’s request, the situation between he and I was resolved.

Now achieving resolution is very important to me. Actually I have a principle that I must pursue resolution each time I have a disagreement with another person. And life has shown me many many times, that each time I achieve resolution that current situation improves a considerable degree. So once I experienced with Sanford that acquiescing to an “unreasonable” request lead to resolution, I was sure going to consider that with each unreasonable request I encountered in the future.



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### 20. A Solution that fits

Soon after I hung up with Vlad I remembered the Sanford situation, and decided to comply with Vlad's request. So I then called my international shipping contact, Alessandro, and requested a name and contact information for a shipping agent in the Ukraine. To my surprise, a day or two later Alessandro sent me an email with that information; a company called Barwill, which was located in Odessa (the Ukraine's main shipping port on the Black Sea). The next time I conversed with Vlad I provided him with Barwill's contact information.

A day or so later I had a new inspiration: Vlad could converse with the people at Barwill, and using their expertise determine the exact number of cases that would safely fit in a forty-foot container. Also, when it came time to ship the container, Vlad could call Barwill, state the exact date the shipment would be ready, and a container could be trucked from Odessa to Zhitomir, filled, and taken back to Odessa all on the same day.

I'll explain the significance of this last point. When I initially investigated shipping, I located a company which performed customs brokering (filled out all the paperwork required by US Customs, plus processed that paperwork), as well as freight forwarding (arranges all the shipping activities; in my case from having an empty container transported to the vodka factory in Zhitomir, through to having a warehouse pick up the container from the ship at the Long Beach port here in California). And I sensed it was a very competent company. It is called Nik Associates. Alessandro was my shipping contact at Nik. When I went to Zhitomir in November, 2005, I told Vlad I would arrange all the shipping, which included arranging for an empty container to be trucked to the vodka factory once my vodka order was ready to be shipped.

During that November visit, Vlad had told me to schedule the empty container to arrive at the factory twelve calendar days after their bank in Zhitomir received my purchase payment, because the shipment would definitely be ready within that twelve-day period. But I had wondered: what if there was some unforeseen delay during the twelve days after my purchase money was received? What if the truck that brought the container had to remain at the factory for several days, or even for several weeks? How much money would that cost? Interestingly, that assumed delay did occur. The filled container did not leave the factory until about one month after my money arrived at the factory's bank in Zhitomir.

Now back to my inspiration. If Vlad called Barwill after he knew exactly when the shipment would be ready, there would be no scheduling problems. And I wouldn't have to establish schedules that weren't met.



**OUK-RRRA-I-NAH**  
**TRADING COMPANY**

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The next conversation I had with Vlad (the first one after I'd provided him with Barwill's contact information), he told me exactly how many cases would fit in the container; which happened to be 1,215. He further stated it would be the same 1,215 cases, regardless of how many of those cases were Presidential Standard and how many were Harr-a-sho! In that conversation I told Vlad about my inspiration, that he and Barwill schedule the empty container's arrival date. He willingly agreed and appeared very happy to pursue that approach.

Since I now knew the number of cases that would fit in a forty-foot container, I had only to determine how many cases of each type I wanted, which I did. I was then able to wire the factory the exact purchase price; to the penny! :-)

Subsequent to that issue being resolved, there were no further major problems. The container left the factory filled with vodka on Thursday, September 14 2006. Then it left Odessa on Sunday, September 17, changed ships in Constanta, Romania; again in Istanbul, Turkey; also in La Havre, France; and in Freeport, the Bahamas; finally arriving in Long Beach, California, on November 4, 2006. Yet it would not be until February of 2007, three months later, that others and I were selling vodka to retail establishments in the Los Angeles area.

That completes my tale of how **Ouk-rra-i-nah Trading Company** began to do business.