

Gaslit Nation Transcript
“Dictators Die, Art Is Forever: The Oleg Sentsov Interview”
8 April 2020

Sarah Kendzior:

The story of Donald Trump's rise to power is the story of a buried American history, buried because powerful people liked it that way. It was visible without being seen, influential without being named, ubiquitous without being overt. The Trump administration is like a reality show featuring villains from every major political scandal of the past 40 years—Watergate, Iran Contra, 9/11, the Iraq War, the 2008 financial collapse—in recurring roles and revivals, despite the widespread desire of the public for the show to be canceled. From Roger Stone to Paul Manafort to William Barr, it is a Celebrity Apprentice of federal felons and disgraced operatives dragged out of the shadows and thrust back into the spotlight, with Donald Trump yet again at the helm.

Sarah Kendzior:

The crises of political corruption, organized crime, and endemic racism are all connected, and they shape everyday American life. But in addition to these structural problems, we contend with specific powerful individuals who have acted against the public good for their entire careers. We see the same old men again and again, vampires feeding on a nation and draining the lifeblood from words like “treason” and “trauma” and “tragedy”. They are buffered by backers who prefer to operate in silence, free from the consequences of scrutiny.

Sarah Kendzior:

There is a reason they call it a criminal underground. You walk over it every day, unaware it exists until the earth shakes below your feet. In the eyes of autocrats and plutocrats, the future is not a right but a commodity. As climate change brings unparalleled crises, the future becomes a rare asset meant to be hoarded like diamonds or gold. To millionaire elites, many of whom already had an apocalyptic bent, a depopulated world is not a tragedy but an opportunity, and certainly easier to manage as they insulate themselves from the ravages of a literally scorched earth.

Sarah Kendzior:

The last four decades have led to the hoarding of resources on a heretofore unimaginable scale by people who have neither baseline respect for human life nor a traditional sense of the future. Their destructive actions have programmed a desperate generation to settle for scraps instead of settling the score.

Sarah Kendzior:

Unless we were part of the opportunity hoarding elite, the Ivankas and Jareds of the world, my generation did not get to have choices. Instead, we had reactions. We fought to hold on to what we had before it was stolen, while thieves demanded our gratitude and supplication. The opportunity-hoarding elite told us we were imagining the permanence of our plight and sold us survival as an aspiration. This book tells the story of how they cornered that market.

Credit:

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Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestselling essay collection *The View From Flyover Country* and the book *Hiding in Plain Sight*, out today during the plague.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's a prelude to a plague. I'm Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker, and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller *Mr. Jones*, which can be downloaded in the UK and soon can be downloaded, starting June 19th, in Canada and the US.

Sarah Kendzior:

This is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the Trump administration, rising autocracy around the world, and a global pandemic. And so, it feels like it's been several years since we last recorded the show. In reality, it's been one week. But that's quarantine time for you.

Sarah Kendzior:

We're basically winging it today. I think just because the collective trauma of this is ... I mean it's overwhelming. It's terrible for everyone on an individual level. It's terrible for us as a nation. It's terrible for us as a world. We were just describing how people are having literal overlapping nightmares that reflect the situation because I'm not sure there's been a time where we've been, as a planet, so connected through pain, in part because of the explosion of digital media but also, of course, because we're literally connected through a spreading pandemic in an axis of autocrats that wants to let it thrive.

Sarah Kendzior:

So, yeah, this is a tough time. I'm debating how coherent we're going to be. We have an interview coming up later in the show with Oleg Sentsov that Andrea did earlier in the year. I'm glad that she did that interview. I'm also glad we're running this interview the week that my own book comes out.

Sarah Kendzior:

My book came out today, *Hiding in Plain Sight*. It's a story of the last 40 years. As Andrea just said, it's a prelude to the plague because it's a story not just about Trump and his cohort and their rise, but about the erosion and collapse of American institutions, about events like 9/11 and the 2008 financial collapse. It's also an autobiography, which I normally don't do. I normally like to keep things private. I normally like to keep things private and not let people get too attached, not let myself get too attached, not let myself get too involved.

Sarah Kendzior:

But, sorry, this is the time where all around us is suffering and death and the kind of prevalence of injustice and cruelty that we on the show have been warning people about for so long. This is the culmination in many ways of our worst fears and it's the culmination of the events that I describe in my book. When I recommend it, I don't care if you got it for free. I don't care if you can find a library that functions, get it there. I just want people to know the truth.

Sarah Kendzior:

I think that that's what we've always been speaking through this show, is to educate people, to warn people in advance so that outcomes of this nature that are so crushing and so brutal. I know that in some ideal world, I'm supposed to be talking in an NPR voice and I'm supposed to be suppressing my emotions. I know that maybe for my own sake, I shouldn't reveal the depth to which this has hit me.

Sarah Kendzior:

But I mean I think another thing we've always stressed on the show is we're human beings. We're fighting for things that we value and cherish. We're fighting for our families and our friends and our freedom and our safety, and all of that has been threatened by sadists and kleptocrats and plutocrats who announced their ambitions in advance, who announced their agenda.

Sarah Kendzior:

There were so many opportunities to prevent this and stop it that the rage that wells inside me I don't think will ever be ceded, because I see every bend in the road and I see every alternative outcome. Then I see mass graves being dug in parks as a result of the refusal to look that darkness in the eye and to stand up to it and to confront it.

Sarah Kendzior:

So, yeah, that's what's going on. That's what's going on with me on my book launch. I also see the alternative future for this day, but it pales in importance to what's happening to other people, to what's happening to people on the frontlines, our medical workers, our service workers, anybody who's forced to leave their home to keep the rest of us going, to keep our society going. You have our deepest gratitude.

Sarah Kendzior:

I don't feel like that's expressed enough from our officials. It's not expressed enough from the people who should be giving it. But it's expressed from us.

Andrea Chalupa:

Very well said, as always. I can't wait to read your book, which I will be doing because all month long, April 2020, our book of the month club is Hiding in Plain Sight. So get your hands on a copy. You can even get the audio version, listen to Sarah's sweet, sweet voice. You can buy it from an independent book retailer that desperately needs your business right now.

Andrea Chalupa:

So get your hands on a copy of Hiding in Plain Sight. I'm going to read it together with you this month of April. Then I'm going to interview Sarah as the month comes to a close. So get your questions in. For that interview, we will be selecting some listeners' questions for Sarah in regards to her book.

Andrea Chalupa:

In regards to her book, okay, guys? If you want to ask us a question about anything else, we have a Q&A that we do every month for our Patreon supporters at the Democracy Defender level and higher, where they ask us questions, all types of questions. It's like the Gaslit Nation slumber party. We answer the questions. Because we're all stuck inside, the monthly Q&A is now weekly. So every week we do a Q&A with our listeners on our Patreon page. So sign up there if you want to ask us about anything else.

Andrea Chalupa:

But in regards to Sarah's book, we're going to be doing an interview with her, a whole big Gaslit Nation family interview with her. I will be asking the questions because I'm on the show. And so, send us your questions to gaslitnation@gmail.com or DM me, send me a DM on Twitter, a direct message on Twitter, with your questions for Sarah, or email gaslitnation@gmail.com. So read Sarah's book this month with me and let's ask her all of our hard-hitting questions, okay?

Andrea Chalupa:

I think all of us are feeling pretty rotten. You could be living out this quarantine in style somewhere in your bedazzled survivalist pad in the mountains of New Zealand and still feel the great amount of trauma that this has unleashed on the world, just the fear you have, even if you're not impacted directly by this, what it means and how horribly it was addressed by the Trump Crime Family and their supporters that are making blood money hand over fist with people's lives at stake right now, pirating supplies that are desperately needed by American states, pirating supplies that are desperately needed by our allies in the western alliance, from Germany, Canada, and France.

Andrea Chalupa:

The Trump Crime Family is doing what they always do and just acting atrocious, not caring whose lives are on the line, not caring who gets hurt. They very much have blood on their hands, yet again. We've seen this throughout their reign. They had a whole history of coming up through blood money. Jared Kushner is a slumlord. Ivanka Trump and her idiot brother were getting investigated by the Manhattan DA, Cy Vance, who dropped the charges of how they defrauded investors in Trump SoHo.

Andrea Chalupa:

So these guys, they came up through corruption so it's not surprising that their corruption is worsening now that they're consolidating power and damaging, destroying innocent lives. So it's a very dangerous time. Even if you're not directly impacted, you still feel the trauma of it. You still feel the grief of it.

Andrea Chalupa:

As Sarah and I were just talking, we're having vivid nightmares about what's going on, having vivid nightmares of corruption, of being stuck under a mafia state, danger to you and your family. Nightmares like that were common in Germany during the rise of Hitler. There's a whole investigation into the nightmares that German citizens were having, whether they were directly targeted or not by Hitler's inhumane policies.

Andrea Chalupa:

So this is a collective trauma that we're all stuck under. That's why we're keeping the show going, we're doing the Q&As every week on our Patreon. And so, we're all in this together. We're all in this together. Never lose sight of that. If you want good to come out of this transformation that's happening now with the pandemic, well, you're going to have to fight like hell in your community where you live. You're going to have to fight like hell in the state where you live.

Andrea Chalupa:

As we're always saying on Gaslit Nation, community, community, community. As we're always saying on Gaslit Nation, turn your state blue, from dog catcher all the way to the governor's house. Make sure that

you live in a blue trifecta. If you are in a red state, turn it purple. If you're in a purple state, turn it blue. Fight like hell for your state, because everything we've been saying on the show about community, about the number one importance of local politics, it's all playing out right now. You see what we're talking about now, how communities are rising to this challenge to protect each other. People are refusing to abandon each other.

Andrea Chalupa:

At the same time, you're seeing governors rise like presidents in Michigan, California, in New York, Colorado. You're seeing governors basically play out the role of presidents and holding the union together. When you have a mafia, Russian mafia, asset in the White House trying to destroy our country from within—there's nothing more that his friend, Putin, would love more than to see the United States break apart like the Soviet Union did. There's nothing they would love more. That's why the Kremlin funds these psycho right-wing groups that push for secessionism, secession movements in California and Texas and so forth. They want to see us break apart.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so, what you're seeing are true patriotic leaders rising up and refusing to do that and holding the country together in our time of need. That is because local activist groups in those states worked hard to ensure that they had a good governor. They worked hard to clean up local politics, to fight to turn their states blue, to make sure their states were blue.

Andrea Chalupa:

In 2018, in the midterms, a blue wave, New York became a blue trifecta, meaning every chamber of government in the state is now under Democratic control. That's what we need across the union state-by-state. We've been going on and on about this for so long since the start of the show, and now you're seeing that all play out in this life and death crisis. It's all playing out, what we've been saying.

Andrea Chalupa:

So please do not lose hope. Go to the Gaslit Nation Action Guide, find a little area for you to cover, to devote your time to, make time for, to strengthen your community, fight for your all-important local state politics, get others involved, because that is the name of the game now. That is how we're going to protect ourselves and take back our country. We can do it. We can absolutely do it.

Sarah Kendzior:

I want to just add something. I think you made such an essential point about this being a Kremlin fantasy of having the United States broken up into parts. I mean the construction of the Soviet Union was a different thing. It was them forcibly bringing together 13 basically ethno-states that they were defining, they were drawing the borders of, in a process called korenizatsiya. It's nation-building.

Sarah Kendzior:

The states, at the time, that they built often didn't really reflect the people living in their borders, the languages they spoke, et cetera. But, over time, they hardened into real national identities. I'm thinking, of course, more of Central Asia than of the Caucuses or other states. Then many of them fought for their freedom. It was a hard-won fight, and they won. Putin has described that hard-fought victory of former Soviet states as the worst thing that ever happened in his life.

Sarah Kendzior:

And so, I definitely think there's a strong element of revenge that is being planned where they would like to see the United States broken into factions. The delineation that cable news and Republicans—and often sometimes Democrats—prefer is this simplistic red and blue binary, and we're seeing this more and more because there is a difference in the way that a lot of these blue state governors have reacted to this crisis, which is much more adeptly.

Sarah Kendzior:

But the reality is that every state is complicated. I'm living in what you would call, I suppose, the blue city of St. Louis in a red state. Our metro area alone accounts for nearly half of the state's population. Then Kansas City accounts for a great deal more.

Sarah Kendzior:

So the reality is complicated. We're suffering already from gerrymandering from voter suppression, from an incredible dark money machine, which I describe in my book, in *Hiding in Plain Sight*. There are similar states like ours, states that are just so hard to define, and cities that are so much more complex than people give credit for.

Sarah Kendzior:

I was looking today at Wisconsin, which is holding their primary, and all of these people who came out to vote despite the coronavirus threat and despite the incredible risk it poses to their safety. They're doing what they can. They're standing six feet apart. But it's heartbreaking to see because people are staying home for a very good reason. They are sick themselves, or they want to keep themselves from getting sick, or they don't want to be a vector for the virus.

Sarah Kendzior:

But this is also, at least from the pictures I saw, I mean this is mostly black voters. These are people whose ancestors and who themselves probably sacrificed an incredible amount to vote. We saw in 2016 how many people had their vote suppressed in Wisconsin. It was over 200,000 people, and Trump took that state by 30,000 votes.

Sarah Kendzior:

So they are already dealing with a horrible phenomenon of race-based voter suppression. All of this was already in play before coronavirus made its entry. Now it's just putting people into this terrible bind of the death of democracy versus just simply death. I don't know how else to put it.

Sarah Kendzior:

So the battles we're fighting, we're going to have to expand our Gaslit Nation Action Guide. Actually, I mean I think that's a good idea. I think we need to think creatively. I think we need to think, okay, well, what if this lasts for a prolonged period of time or what effect is this going to have in the election, and certainly not rule out the worst outcomes. We never rule out the worst outcomes on Gaslit Nation, but we all need to be creative about preserving this right to vote, because these photos just broke my heart, the fact that people have to go through this.

Sarah Kendzior:

Connie Schultz, Sherrod Brown's wife and a writer, posted a picture of it and she was describing both her and her husband's reaction as being heartbroken looking at that. I teared up too because what we have is worth fighting for. There are so many people willing, literally, to risk their lives for that fight.

Sarah Kendzior:

But, my God, I wish that that wasn't the case. I wish that it didn't have to be a matter of life or death. That's why no one should have ever taken this for granted to start with.

Andrea Chalupa:

So I wanted to share a little message about the Trump Crime Family and their hometown of New York City, where their family made their fortune, because I've lived in New York since 2006. I was raised by two New Yorkers. My mom grew up in the South Bronx. My dad grew up in Astoria, Queens. New York has always been a second home to me, even though I was born and raised in Northern California. So I wanted to say something about New York City.

Andrea Chalupa:

To open that discussion, I want to play a little clip of what New York City sounds like. This is from Eric Hu on Twitter, who posted this recording. This is the soundtrack that New Yorkers now are living with.

{clip of sirens in New York City}

Andrea Chalupa:

So that's what's happening in New York right now, which is the hardest hit city in America right now under the coronavirus pandemic, the onslaught of which could have been prevented but wasn't by the Trump Crime Family, which dragged its feet on this, which encouraged people to go out and so forth, and now is, in true Trump Crime Family fashion, bungling the whole response by essentially enriching themselves, their friends, by hoarding urgently needed supplies for medical workers on the frontlines and outbidding their own states, outbidding their own allies, and essentially pirating, stealing supplies right from under people by outspending them. It's putting a lot of people's lives in danger.

Andrea Chalupa:

What we saw with Puerto Rico and Trump's response to that, throwing out paper towels to the crowd in response to that, I mean that's what he's doing to the American people. No place is it worse than what he's done to New York City.

Andrea Chalupa:

We always said that the Trump rallies are going to get shut down because of the pandemic. Well, he's turned his horrendous lie-filled, self-flattering Pravda-esque press conferences on the pandemic into his Trump rallies, and Jeff Zucker and others in cable TV are taking the bait, just like they did in 2016.

Andrea Chalupa:

So the Trump rallies are continuing as we saw in 2016, but in 2020, they're under the guise of Trump and his family lying about the pandemic to the American people and literally putting lives in danger in a variety of ways, including recommending untested remedies which the experts are pushing back against. So it's a very dangerous time and, once again, Jeff Zucker is complicit in this, just like we saw in 2016.

Andrea Chalupa:

I want to share a personal story. When I first moved to New York from Ukraine in 2006, I took a job temping. I was temping in a basement of a skyscraper in midtown Manhattan, getting paid \$15, \$20 an hour essentially to file some papers for an hour or two, and then just sit at my desk where I would work on my screenplay for hours. I thought this was a dream job because I was essentially getting paid \$15, \$20 an hour to work on my screenplay. I was so proud of myself. I felt like I hacked the system, that I was finally getting money to work on my script from somebody, even if it was just a temping job that left me alone in the corner of a basement in a skyscraper.

Andrea Chalupa:

Working in this basement, there were all these engineers and janitors and the construction guys, the property manager-type guys that would come in and out of the office, and I got to know them. In true New York fashion, they'd bust my balls, I'd bust theirs. We, of course, became friends.

Andrea Chalupa:

One Greek janitor brought me a bunch of baklava for my name day in November. It was a nice camaraderie. The engineers of the building even took me to the very, very, very highest top of the skyscraper in midtown Manhattan. Very top. I'm not talking about an observation deck. I'm talking about like, ship ladders. We climbed up to the very top. We could look out. You could see these hawks circling around the skyscrapers. One of the engineers said to me "the hawks think the buildings are mountains." I just thought that was so beautiful in that quiet moment of us staring out at the mountains of midtown Manhattan.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so, it was through this cast of characters that I got invited one night to go out with them, because they took a liking to me. They gave me a pep talk one night. We went out for drinks at the Rainbow Room, which used to be a fancy place that existed at 30 Rock, I believe.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so, we went out to the Rainbow Room and they gave me a pep talk, saying, "You can't spend your whole life in the basement. What are you going to do with yourself? Get yourself together." That was very kind of them.

Andrea Chalupa:

In talking about their lives and trying to share their experience with me, one guy at the table who was a friend who worked at the Rainbow Room, he was showing off to me, trying to set an example to me about how he got his start in the hospitality industry by working for Donald Trump. I believe it was at The Plaza.

Andrea Chalupa:

He was basically talking me through, showing me how it was done, by saying that he went to Mr. Trump and said, "I'm going to work my heart out for you. Give me a job," and Donald Trump gave him a job for \$35,000 a year. The guy proved himself and then Donald Trump doubled his salary the following year to \$70,000 a year of salary.

Andrea Chalupa:

He was so proud of that story. It was basically passed on to me to show if you work hard, the people at the top are going to notice, the American dream comes true. We're a system of meritocracy.

Andrea Chalupa:

With everything going on in the news lately with how Trump is treating New York City, with his clear jealousy and competition, his push for ratings, openly talking about his ratings when people are dying, his temperamental mood and jealousy of President Andrew Cuomo, who is very much the president the nation needs at this moment, I was thinking about this guy at the Rainbow Room who was so proud of Donald Trump giving him this opportunity, and I was thinking about Donald and Ivanka and Jared and the idiot sons.

Andrea Chalupa:

They came from New York City. Fred Trump made his fortune out of Trump Village over in Brighton Beach, in that area. They made their family fortune in New York City. They're New Yorkers, through and through. They know New York. They know the teachers that taught them and their kids when they were growing up, the doctors that looked after them and delivered their babies, guys like the one I met at the Rainbow Room. They know those guys. They know those guys that looked up to them, that saw them as beacons of the American dream, a dream that they could have a part of. They know the flesh and blood, the personalities, the characters of New York City. This has always been home to them.

Andrea Chalupa:

In New York, it is a rough place, it can be a rough place, but there is a code in New York City where you look out for each other. No matter how hard things get, you look out for each other. For the Trump Crime Family to so blatantly be breaking this code in front of the entire world for all to see, that is such a clear indication that they do not plan to go back to New York City. If they do not plan to go back to New York City, then where do you think they're going to stay? They're going to stay in Washington, DC. The only place to stay in Washington, DC, in that one-horse town, is the White House.

Andrea Chalupa:

So if Donald Trump and his family are treating New York City this way ... And keep in mind, Jared and Ivanka, they were socialites of that whole scene. New York City had a really interesting moment when tech took off, when Gawker and digital media took off. That was a moment. Tom and Jerry's, a bar everyone hung out in, that did have a significant moment. You would see Ivanka and Jared at Internet Week parties. The Observer, his newspaper, hired and had a lot of interesting writers and editors for a moment. They are of New York City.

Andrea Chalupa:

The fact that they're so callously, brutally betraying New York in its hour of need is such a clear indication that they do not plan to come back because they know that if you treat New York this way, you will never again be welcomed back because they're breaking the code of what makes New York New York.

Andrea Chalupa:

So we're telling you. We're the people that told you since 2016 that Trump was a Russian asset that was invading our country with the help of the mass-murdering mafia state of the Kremlin, and that this was a disaster for our democracy. I had a tweet from, I think, December 2016 saying "four years from now, 2020, we're going to have an all new world order." Look at where we are now.

Andrea Chalupa:

We said in January 2017, Ivanka Trump, that's the plan, to make her president. Now you're hearing reports about that. I remember saying he's going to fire Comey. He's going to fire Comey. Sure enough, he fired Comey. We also told you Robert Mueller will not save you, and he didn't.

Andrea Chalupa:

So we're telling you now, the Trump Crime Family does not plan to go back to New York City, and that is a troubling sign for all of us because where else would they go? They're going to stay in the White House and do whatever it takes to stay there.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah. No, I agree. I would only add one thing to this, which is interesting in light of recent events, which is that Trump formally renounced his residency in New York City at the end of October 2019, about a month before the first cases of coronavirus were detected. In the midst of the impeachment hearings and whatnot, he decided that his permanent residence outside of the White House was going to be Mar-a-Lago. He has had the abandonment of New York, both on a personal level and, apparently it seems, on a political level, in his mind for a long time, well before this virus became widely known. So that's interesting to note.

Sarah Kendzior:

You're also seeing in Florida, that is the only state I believe that is actually getting the personal protective equipment and ventilators and other supplies needed of any state in the US. There's this myth going around that Trump is withholding things from "blue states" and giving them to red states. Yes, he's absolutely withholding in a malicious way, with cruel and malicious intent, from blue states, and certainly withholding them from New York City.

Sarah Kendzior:

But I'm in a red state. My county ordered 2,500 COVID-19 tests, we got 25. That's very typical of what's happening in the so-called red states. We're not getting shit either. The one state that gets it is the one that Trump moved to, because that is how he and his criminal family see themselves in America, see themselves in this crisis. When Kushner got up on a stage and talked about our supplies, he meant the Trump Crime Family and their immediate cohort. Americans, all Americans, whether they voted for him, whether they despise him, are expendable to them.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yes, I absolutely agree with Andrea that we should be watching very closely their ambitions for DC, their plans to install Ivanka as the successor, and also of the broad international connections that Ivanka, and especially Kushner, who's so intimately involved in leading the corona crisis response, what connections they have, connections to Netanyahu, connections to various oligarchs from the former Soviet Union, connections to people like Rupert Murdoch or Wendy Deng, who set the two up in what appears to be

an arranged marriage of criminal entities. That is what their so-called romance looks like if you examine it closely.

Sarah Kendzior:

So, yes, all of this is deeply disturbing because while we are all wondering “what does the future hold?”, our lives have been destroyed in so many ways. The most routine things that we could count on, like getting in the car and driving to Target to get some groceries, I mean that's now become this incredible event with all these rules and proceedings.

Sarah Kendzior:

Nothing will be the same again. This is a nation that is traumatized. This is a nation that is suffering. They're very assured of their future. They're not acting like people who don't know what the future holds. They're acting like people who planned for this future and who helped create the conditions of this future. No, I'm not saying they created the virus in a lab. That's not my point. But they did create the reaction to it. They did respond to it in a linked and predictable and purposeful way. And so, that is something to keep in mind. Never, ever mistake malice for incompetence with this administration.

Andrea Chalupa:

Okay. So we are going to now introduce to you, because I think we all need to hear it, this interview with Oleg Sentsov. He is a Crimean filmmaker. He was just another activist, like countless activists, during Ukraine's revolution that stopped what they were doing and devoted their time. Ukraine's revolution was a popular uprising that overthrew the Trump of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, another gold-loving thug in the pocket of the Kremlin, who was helped to come to power under the advice, under the consulting dark arts, of Paul Manafort. Paul Manafort was like the hand to the king of Viktor Yanukovich.

Andrea Chalupa:

Viktor Yanukovich and his corrupt cronies and family and kids—known as “The Family” in Ukraine—they were overthrown in a popular uprising that turned the heart of Kyiv, otherwise known as Maidan Square, Maidan, into a war zone, a fiery battle. Government snipers were shooting on the protesters and so forth.

Andrea Chalupa:

This was an uprising that united the country. People from all walks of life came together to the square, business owners, grad students, the mothers of grad students. You had Jewish Ukrainian groups. You had more militant elements and so forth. It was a big artistic festival. People had a lending library. Musicians came and played music to keep people in the square and so forth.

Andrea Chalupa:

Just another person in the mix of all this who was donating his time was Oleg Sentsov. He was arrested and tortured during Russia's sudden invasion of Ukraine, when they annexed Crimea in response to having their puppet overthrown in Kyiv. Oleg Sentsov was then taken to Russia, where he was sentenced to 20 years in a Siberian prison with arctic freezing temperatures, where he was essentially sent to die on some trumped up charges.

Andrea Chalupa:

His case was noteworthy. It stood out among all of the several dozens, around 100 or so, political prisoners that Russia snatched from its invasion of Ukraine, because Oleg Sentsov was a rising star in the world of European filmmaking. He gave all this up. He posited to be an activist for human rights and dignity in Ukraine's revolution known as Euromaidan, the revolution of dignity, and he paid the price for it.

Andrea Chalupa:

He was separated for five years in prison from his daughter, didn't get to see his children grow up. In the Siberian prison, Pussy Riot, the activists of Pussy Riot, that also experienced the Russian penal system, they said that if it wasn't for the international outcry, they would have died in prison.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so, all of these filmmakers all over the world, including Agnieszka Holland, who directed my script, Mr. Jones, they all came together leading massive campaigns demanding his freedom, demanding his release. PEN America, PEN America was instrumental in raising awareness of his campaign.

Andrea Chalupa:

I did everything that I could. I moderated a panel about his story with PEN America in New York City. I wrote an article as soon as he was sentenced. We did a big flash mob with Amnesty International on the red carpet of my film's premiere, Mr. Jones, in Berlin in 2019. We left a seat open for him at the premiere of Mr. Jones in Berlin, at an otherwise sold out premiere.

Andrea Chalupa:

We told people all about his story here on Gaslit Nation. We interviewed a producer that worked closely with Oleg Sentsov to share his inspiring story that after he had survived going on a hunger strike, demanding his release and the release of around 100 political prisoners held unjustly inside Russia, kidnapped from Ukraine. Oleg Sentsov, throughout all this ordeal, he managed to continue writing short stories, novels. He co-directed a film from prison.

Andrea Chalupa:

His producer friends and international community of Polish, Ukrainian, Russian filmmakers and other talented artists, they came together to work with him to adapt a play that he wrote called Numbers, about a group of humans stuck under a lazy autocratic, corrupt mafia boss dictator, a group of humans who were known only by a number, only by a number. A child comes into their midst and they give the child a name. And that sets off a big catalyst of naming a child. They suddenly wake up to the fact that they're not indeed numbers as the autocratic system wants them to believe. They're not numbers, they're humans. They're human beings.

Andrea Chalupa:

So he wrote this play Numbers about the importance of staying human and how staying human is its own resistance against autocrats. He adapted this play into a film from prison, working with his tenacious group of collaborators. That was an inspiring story that we shared here on Gaslit Nation in an interview with his producer. We will link to that in the show notes. You can listen to that.

Andrea Chalupa:

Throughout all of this, the most amazing thing happened. When my daughter was born, I was thinking that she might be born on an interesting day because my sister, her last child, her daughter Lucy happened to be born on the day the hero of my film, Mr. Jones, Gareth Jones, was murdered, which happened to be the day before Gareth Jones' own 30th birthday. So Lucy is the Gareth Jones baby, the sign of resurrection.

Andrea Chalupa:

Gosh, so what I'm saying is that I just kept thinking Lucy happened to be born on such a significant day for my family, the day Gareth Jones was murdered, which happened to be the day before his 30th birthday. What a symbolic thing to happen, of life conquering death. That was a very special birthday, so I wondered whether my own daughter would have a birthday like that, and she did. She ended up being born on Oleg Sentsov's own birthday, after all the work that I'd done with so many others, in raising awareness of his story and the story of other political prisoners held unjustly in Russia.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so, I was thrilled by the news that two months after my daughter was born, Oleg Sentsov was freed in a massive prisoner swap between Ukraine and Russia. When he flew to New York City, when he flew to the US for the first time in late January, I asked my friends at PEN America if I could interview him for Gaslit Nation, and I was very honored that they squeezed me in and made time for me.

Andrea Chalupa:

I happened to be the very first interview that he saw when he landed in New York that night, like that same day. He was jet-lagged. And the first thing he gets to meet when he's on New York soil is me. And so, that was very thrilling. Of course, I showed him pictures of my daughter and tried not to overwhelm him.

Andrea Chalupa:

So we're going to run that interview with Oleg Sentsov. It's translated by a wonderful champion of human rights, Polina Kovaleva, the program director for Eurasia for PEN America. She's a translator, an organizer, and longtime champion of human rights in Ukraine and Russia. PEN America and Polina were working with Oleg Sentsov in his trip to North America, Canada, and the US.

Andrea Chalupa:

Oleg went to Washington, DC and met with the State Department, members of Congress, think tanks to press them on not forgetting about Crimea and Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine where Russia continues to bomb civilians. I want to read one quote from Oleg Sentsov on his important humanitarian trip to Washington, DC.

Andrea Chalupa:

This is from Oleg Sentsov. "You can't expect to satisfy a lion by feeding it grass, especially when you, a form of meat, stand there feeding it, in the same way you can't satiate Putin with incremental territorial negotiations. He will not stop with Crimea. He will not stop with the Donbas," which is the region of Eastern Ukraine that he's currently invading. "Putin will be satisfied with nothing less than the total dissipation of the Ukrainian nation state." That is true. Putin has even said that Ukraine is not a country. Putin will not stop.

Andrea Chalupa:

So Ukraine faces an ongoing existential crisis, a real existential danger under Putin. And guess what? Putin won't stop at Ukraine. Putin won't stop at Poland. Putin will keep going. Putin has murdered, according to one report, more civilians in Syria than even ISIS. Putin is sending these goodwill missions of aid to the United States, including using a country currently under sanctions by the US, to do so, and also Italy.

Andrea Chalupa:

Meanwhile, a doctor, a Russian doctor back in Russia, is being arrested for bringing much needed aid to Russian doctors working on the frontlines of the pandemic inside Russia and challenging the official numbers of how many are actually infected and dying in Russia.

Andrea Chalupa:

So never trust a Trojan horse from Putin's Kremlin. It has ulterior motives. This is an imperialistic movement that is driven by far-right fascist ideology. If you look at Russia's aid to western countries during this time, it's exactly like how Russian propaganda works. RT, Russia Today, likes to sound like some progressive voice of the people, showing all of the many legitimate, very serious concerning shortcomings of the United States, like income inequality, race inequality, and so forth.

Andrea Chalupa:

But the reality is that the Russian propaganda back home for the domestic audience is like Fox News on crack. It's a massive television machine, a fever dream of xenophobia. So that goes to show that even RT, Russian propaganda to an international audience, is just a Trojan horse. It's all fake. It's all there to try to divide audiences, to boost credibility, to cede in Russian propaganda to make people buy their narrative on things.

Andrea Chalupa:

It all comes with an imperialistic and ulterior motive and it's all incredibly dangerous. An imperialistic appetite will never be satisfied. Oleg Sentsov is absolutely correct. They will not stop it and they will not stop at Ukraine.

Andrea Chalupa:

So we're going to share this interview. We hope it inspires you, because understand that if Oleg Sentsov could write novels, short stories, and produce and co-direct a film all from a Siberian prison where he was sent to die, then what is our excuse stuck in quarantine in the comfort of our own homes? We must use this time to develop ourselves, develop our minds, develop our community even digitally, remotely. Go to the Gaslit Nation Action Guide, go to Gaslit Nation Reading Guide. There's a lot of things that we can be doing now while stuck inside.

Andrea Chalupa:

Understand if Oleg Sentsov can do this from a Siberian prison, then we must be inspired by that lesson and rise up to this moment in our own history. We want to be counted on the right side of history and have everybody in the future see that we fought and did all that we could to prevent the worse from happening.

Andrea Chalupa:

The other thing I want to make a couple notes of in this interview—Oleg Sentsov mentions the Stanford prison experiment. He gives that as an example of what prison was like. He has been in prison for the last five years. Do not hold it against him that he's not up-to-date on the work challenging the authenticity of the Stanford prison experiment. Treat that as what it was intended to be, which is a pop cultural reference that most people get. They understand what that means. So just treat it as a pop culture reference. Please don't be hipper than thou and hold the man accountable who has literally been locked away in prison for five years. He doesn't know the latest work challenging the authenticity of that experiment.

Andrea Chalupa:

The other thing is that we recorded this interview at the height of the Trump impeachment drama, days away from the Senate acquitting Trump. Ukraine, of course, played a very big part of that impeachment scandal where Trump forced them into a quid pro quo to get much needed defensive aid to protect their country against Trump's friend Putin in exchange for inventing a scandal against Trump's political opponent, Joe Biden.

Andrea Chalupa:

This was a sensitive time for us to sit down with Oleg Sentsov because he was here to essentially lobby the US government for support, especially as far as Crimea is concerned, and Trump has come out saying, "Who cares about Crimea? It's Russia." He's very much saying what Putin wants him to say on Crimea.

Andrea Chalupa:

So this was a very sensitive trip. Oleg Sentsov does ... I do ask him about Trump and he shrugs off the question, which indicated to me that he didn't want to get involved in our politics because, in his position, his country might be gobbled up by Trump's friend Putin. So he is facing a very serious existential threat. He has his hands full with the survival of his own country, with his own freedom on the line, with the freedom of his daughter, his children's future on the line.

Andrea Chalupa:

So he's not going to wade into the explosiveness of our own domestic politics, especially when he's here to lobby the administration in good faith for some much needed support, or Ukraine won't exist as an independent country if it doesn't get it from the US and Europe.

Andrea Chalupa:

Furthermore, for Russians and Ukrainians, they still think that we live in a pretty okay country with a lot of rights for us to take full advantage of, that we still have left. So I think that's another thing to keep in mind. I remember asking Masha of Pussy Riot about that, a similar question, and she was like, "Look, you guys still have the right to vote, so go vote." We still have the right to run for office, so run for office.

Andrea Chalupa:

In Russia, you have these brilliant kids putting their lives on the line to fight, protest corruption, and getting sadistically beaten by riot cops. They try to run for office and they get shut down. At least we have so many more rights that are being brutally stripped away from Russians. We still have rights.

Andrea Chalupa:

So please go to the Gaslit Nation Action Guide, learn how to run for office, learn how to lead campaigns, learn how to pass laws. You can do all this. You still have the freedom to do all this.

Andrea Chalupa:

Time is running out. As much as our rights are under attack, as we saw in Wisconsin, what the GOP is doing there to voting rights, as much as our rights are under attack, we still do have rights. So take whatever we have left. Don't take any of it for granted. Go to the Gaslit Nation Action Guide and check out resources there. Now, without further ado, here is the great Oleg Sentsov honoring us with his time.

{begin interview}

Andrea Chalupa:

Welcome to New York City.

Translator:

Thank you.

Andrea Chalupa:

Is this your first time in the US?

Oleg Sentsov:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

And you just landed?

Oleg Sentsov:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

The first thing you have to deal with is me. Sorry. I'm sorry. Okay. So I have to ask you, first and foremost, we talk a lot about why art matters today with everything going on in the world, did you find, when you were in prison ... First, I want to talk about your story and then the larger story. But first with your story, I was very inspired to hear that you were working on a film from prison. Could you talk a little bit about what that was like, trying to make a film from a prison, with the temperatures so cold and the conditions the way they were?

Translator:

So I was doing movies before, during, and will be doing movies after my prison time. I don't see the difference for me. It is my life, it is important for me, so I'm going to be doing it no matter what circumstances. Of course, there were difficulties in the process, mostly related to the communications,

because it takes time to communicate my ideas to people who will be basically helping me in implementing my ideas. But that's pretty much it. That's the difference.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm reading your book right now and I'm really inspired by your writing. There's so much sensitivity there. It's like you write like Hemingway without trying hard. Hemingway has a horrible tendency to try too hard. You have the clear, honest writing of Hemingway without the bravado of Hemingway. It makes for a very sensitive, engaging reading. My childhood kept coming back to me when I was reading about your childhood.

Translator:

So Oleg says that Hemingway is his favorite writer. So he's very honored to be compared with Hemingway. This is the first time when someone compares me with Hemingway. But what I want to say is that I don't want to look like someone. I don't want to copy anyone. I'm just writing as I am.

Andrea Chalupa:

For you, in terms of your work, your writing, I want to talk about that creative process. What's the best advice you ever got for your directing? What's the best advice that serves you as a director?

Translator:

I cannot really recall the best advice for my directing because I consider myself as self-taught. I learned from directors who already died. So when I applied for the directing school, they didn't take me. But while I was in the process, I was in this building where I found something written on the wall. And this, I think, taught me more than any school. This phrase said, "It is possible to learn how to direct a movie, but it's impossible to teach."

Andrea Chalupa:

What advice do you have for people that want to become a film director? It's Oleg Sentsov film school.

Translator:

I wouldn't give any advice. I didn't take any advice and I wouldn't give one. But if you're searching for advice, probably one of the best ones would be from the director [inaudible 00:49:54]. And so, he said that in our profession, there are more people who give up than people who failed.

Andrea Chalupa:

For you, do you think, with everything going on in the world, not just Putin but the climate crisis, all the dangers we face today, what is the point of making art?

Translator:

We already have Greta Thunberg to take care of the climate change, so I'm not worried about that. Regarding authoritarian regimes, I was doing movies before this actually concerned me directly, before it really touched my own family and myself. After the Russia-Ukraine conflict started, after Crimea, after everything, what's happening, I stopped the movies. I was really focused on this problem and how we should deal with this problem. But at the same time, autocrats, they are coming and going. But art is eternal.

Andrea Chalupa:

Everyone wants to speak with you now. There's so much celebration around meeting you. It's a huge honor for me personally. You're obviously an important witness to the Putin regime and how it works, and reminding people about Crimea and why Crimea matters. How do you find the ability to balance essentially your important role now with human rights and making art and finding time for your projects? How do you find time to do both, essentially? Because I struggle with that.

Andrea Chalupa:

I want to go to Poland and make my next movie, but I need to stay here and try to stop Trump from getting a new election. So my projects are on hold now because of Trump. How do you prioritize? Do you want to just leave it, do your talks now, and then just disappear into the film industry for a while? Because you have every right to, obviously.

Translator:

The big answer to this question, I'm very well-organized. Currently, I manage to do both advocacy work, and you can see it from my travels, and I'm, of course, working on my future films.

Andrea Chalupa:

What are some of those projects?

Translator:

So I'm currently working on the movie that I have already started in 2013, but couldn't finish because of the war. It's the movie called Rhino. If everything goes as planned, we will start shooting in September already this year.

Andrea Chalupa:

Wow! That's great. Good luck. Do you plan to film in Ukraine?

Oleg Sentsov:

Yeah. It's a German and Poland co-production.

Andrea Chalupa:

German-Poland co-production in Ukraine. How do you feel about the Ukrainian film industry currently, the Ukrainian film scene?

Translator:

We do have the film industry on a pretty good level right now, and it develops. We have many directors who film movies right now, and they're not only screened and in Ukraine but also shown in the international festivals, such as in Venice. In the film festival in Venice, there was a movie of Vasyanovych called Atlantida and a film called Dodomu by Aliev. Dodomu, which you translate this, "going home", by Aliev, took the prize in Cannes.

Andrea Chalupa:

So it's doing pretty well. So when you came home to Ukraine, what were your strongest impressions of how things had changed since you had been gone?

Translator:

Unfortunately, there were not so many changes in the government or country itself. It was visible not only for me, but for the whole nation. That's why we chose a different government.

Andrea Chalupa:

Absolutely. Was it shocking for you that you have a TV star, Donald Trump, as president, a TV star, Zelensky, as president, returning to this world where TV stars are now president?

Translator:

First of all, Trump was not just a media personality, he was also a millionaire. But, in general, as a concept, I believe it's great because everyone has this opportunity, and that's how it should be in the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

What advice do you have for us here in the west to understand about Putin's regime and to ... I think there's a tendency to forget Crimea or for Americans not to know why Crimea matters. So what would you say to an American that says, "Who cares about Crimea? Let Putin have Crimea. Why should we care about Crimea?"

Translator:

It is important to remember about Crimea, particularly because after the Second World War in 1945, the borders were divided, and everyone agreed on these borders. Russia agreed that it's going to have these borders and not going to invade anything else. And it broke this promise. It also broke the Budapest Memorandum, where the US basically protected Ukraine on the borders.

Translator:

We give up the nuclear weapon to protect the world. We remembered that the US promised that they're going to protect us in the danger if it arises, and the US did not. This is one thing.

Translator:

Another thing is that there is an international law which Russia basically broke by going into this war. There are many more territories that are in this very dangerous situation, very vulnerable situation, and Russia can continue if it wishes to do that. Many of these countries are also allies of the United States. So the United States should remember about that.

Andrea Chalupa:

Absolutely. Why do you think, under Putin, Stalin has been treated as a hero under Putin? Why do you think there's been such a renaissance around Stalin under Putin?

Translator:

Russian people are used to that. They allow this to happen. Putin, by legalizing Stalin, he basically makes Russian people forget about all the atrocities of Stalin. It's all related to the war. It's related to the

victory in war. He plays with this victory and seeks this victory basically as his own victory, not Stalin's victory. That's why many Russian people, they actually follow him, because they don't question this. They follow the big powerful leader.

Andrea Chalupa:

I read an interview with you where you talked about being in the Russian prison and seeing Russian people up close and losing a sense of hope that the Russian mind can awaken to a different sort of Russia. Do you have hope that Russia can find its way forward into a real democracy, and also with having a real democracy confront the truth of its history?

Translator:

Did they change their behavior? Did they go on the streets to protest for me to change my mind and think that there is hope? No.

Andrea Chalupa:

On a Person-to-person level inside the prison, and forgive me if this question is offensive, did you ever develop any sort of meaningful relationship with any of the guards or any of the authority inside the prison? Did you ever see any crack, any glimmer of humanity in any of those people, or were they all put in that position because they don't have that ability?

Translator:

No, it's almost impossible to keep any humanity in these kinds of places. I recall the American experiment in some American prison where-

Andrea Chalupa:

Oh, oh, Stanford. Stanford. Yeah, Stanford prison experiment.

Translator:

Yes, Stanford experiment. So you remember that, right?

Andrea Chalupa:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Translator:

After a couple of weeks, they became-

Andrea Chalupa:

The power.

Oleg Sentsov:

Stanford-

Andrea Chalupa:

Prison experiment.

Oleg Sentsov:

... prison experiment, yeah.

Translator:

That's right. And it explains a lot. That's the kind of environment that these people live in. So it's clearly very hard to keep any humanity. Clearly, if this happened with Stanford for two weeks there, people who work in prisons do atrocities with people who are imprisoned, and they are not charged with that. They are absolutely left free. Obviously, they do it for years and they continue doing it, and nothing happens with them. So they will continue.

Andrea Chalupa:

So my grandfather, my dede Lonya, he's from Donbas. He inspired the Price of Truth film, and my dede Lonya inspired my film. I based my script on his stories. Some of the stories he wrote about were surviving not just the famine in Ukraine, but also Stalin's Great Terror when he was arrested. One thing that was-

Translator:

Was he tortured as well?

Andrea Chalupa:

Oh, yeah. Of course, yeah. And so, one thing that was very-

Oleg Sentsov:

[foreign language 01:00:09].

Translator:

[foreign language 01:00:09]. Sorry.

Andrea Chalupa:

One thing that was really fascinating is that my grandfather learned a lot of useful, interesting information while in prison from the other prisoners.

Translator:

About what?

Andrea Chalupa:

About the political situation outside. So he would see leaders, communist leaders, thrown into prison. That's how he understood what was happening. What was anything interesting that you learned that gave you deeper insight into anything, the political situation from the other prisoners?

Translator:

Clearly, if we compare this time with the time of your granddad, the world's changed a lot since then. If you're asking me about people in prison, they don't really care about the world outside of prison. They

have their own problems there. They live their life in prison, which has nothing to do with the outside world.

Translator:

It's pretty intense. It's pretty full as the world itself. There are many things going on in prison if you think about it, and it doesn't give you an insight about the outside world. But it really certainly gives you an insight of world in prison.

Andrea Chalupa:

My father-in-law spent time in prison, and he said the same thing. He learned French in prison. He learned to speak and give lectures in prison. Did you develop relationships, any inspiring connections with the other prisoners, or was there anybody there that helped inspire your work or was supportive of your work as you were making your film and doing your writing?

Oleg Sentsov:

No friends in prison.

Andrea Chalupa:

No friends in prison.

Oleg Sentsov:

Nobody has friends in prison. It's not a place where we can make friends.

Andrea Chalupa:

How did you get through it? What do you think helped you the most to get through it?

Translator:

No, there's no friends in prison, but when I was there, I wrote a collection of short stories about life in prison. These short stories and other works will be published already this autumn. I was hiding this from the guards so that they won't take it away. My writing is so bad so they wouldn't even-

Andrea Chalupa:

That's not true.

Translator:

They wouldn't even understand what I wrote. But anyway, I was hiding. I managed to get all my writing out of prison and I'm going to publish it.

Andrea Chalupa:

Excellent. What about other Ukrainian political prisoners? Who else should we be aware of? What organizations can we support to help support them?

Translator:

Frankly, there is more than hundreds of political prisoners, Ukrainian political prisoners that are left in Russian prisons. Most of them are Crimean Tatars, and their charges are based on the religious basis. There is another group of political prisoners in Donbas still. It's very hard to know how many people exactly are left there because, separatists, they don't provide this information. We assess that it's approximately about 300 people.

Translator:

Well, I say separatists, but, of course, we blame Russian regime for this because we know that it controls these regions. And this imprisonment, Putin is directly responsible for the imprisonment of these people.

Andrea Chalupa:

Well, I can't thank you enough for ... I had a million questions obviously, but I don't want to take up your time. I want you to celebrate. I want to thank you for all the inspiration you gave me. I tell everyone that my daughter was born on your birthday, and right away they're like, "Oh, special baby." Agnieszka Holland said she's already in the resistance. So thank you so much.

{end interview}

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues, and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

We want to encourage you to donate to your local food bank, which is experiencing a spike in demand. We also encourage you to donate to Direct Relief at directrelief.org, which is supplying much needed protective gear to first responders working on the frontlines in the US, China, and other hard-hit parts of the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

We encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Syria and refugees who are some of the most vulnerable people in the world to this pandemic. Donate at rescue.org. We also encourage you, as always, to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry. Donate to the Orangutan Project at theorangutanproject.org.

Andrea Chalupa:

Gaslit Nation is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. Check out our Patreon. It keeps us going.

Sarah Kendzior:

Our production managers are Nicholas Torres and Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle.

Andrea Chalupa:

Original music in Gaslit Nation is produced by David Whitehead, Martin Visonberg, Nick Farr, Damian Arriaga, and Karlyn Daigle.

Sarah Kendzior:

Our logo design was donated to us by Hamish Smyth of the New York-based firm Order. Thank you so much, Hamish.

Andrea Chalupa:

Gaslit Nation would like to thank our supporters at the producer level on Patreon...