

# My Uncle and Me

Dmitry Korolev

## BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What does it mean to feel *ashamed*?
2. Share what you know about World War II. (Note the use of Roman numerals. If you're not sure what they are, look it up.)

## As a Child, I Was Shy of Him

My uncle Victor was born with a hearing and speech impairment and some physical disabilities. As a child, I was shy of my uncle. Maybe I worried that if people saw these *peculiarities* in my uncle, they would think that something was wrong with me. Some part of me knew that this was wrong, but I *couldn't help it*. Now, I realize that he had only visible *flaws*, and these *flaws* had no effect on his human qualities. I am still *ashamed* of that feeling to this day.

## In the Soviet Union, He Had a High-Paying Job

He grew up in the 1960s in the Soviet Union. He went to a special school for children with disabilities. My uncle lived with his mother, my grandmother, in the small town of Vyshniy Volochek, located between Moscow and St. Petersburg. My mother, sister, and I usually visited them for summer vacations. In turn, my uncle would sometimes come to visit us.

Those were difficult times. The Soviet Union had won the war and was being rebuilt from the ruins. Nevertheless, the state made great efforts to rehabilitate disabled people and people with limited abilities. A large number of high-paying jobs were created for disabled people. The money he earned was very important for the family at that time. Society mostly accepted disabled people, probably because there were a huge number of people who had become disabled during World War II.

The years went by. I finished school and



Uncle Victor

started my own adult life. The USSR *collapsed*. Instead of a high-paying job, my uncle received only a small pension. This was not a problem for him; his needs were small. My grandmother was getting old, and she had Alzheimer's. For the last two years of her life, my grandmother could not

get out of bed.

## He Cared for His Mother

My uncle was with her the whole time. He helped her with everything until her last breath. He was the only one who took care of my grandmother. At that time, none of her other children nor her grandchildren helped. We visited them only occasionally. But mostly we hid behind the “important and urgent” matters of our daily life. If we could, we helped financially. But these efforts were more like *clumsy* attempts to justify our absence than real help.

## He Shows Kindness and Love to My Children

To this day, I often reflect on my uncle’s life. I think about how my grandmother loved him and always helped him, even though it must have been hard for her at times. I think about how he

repaid her for her care by staying with her until the end. My uncle never complained or asked for any help, even in the most difficult times. Now Viktor is 70 years old. We visit him during the summer holidays. He enjoys playing with my children. He does so with the same kindness and love that he did many years ago when he played with me and my sister.

## I Hope They Will Be Like Him

I am trying to understand why it took me 40 years to go from feeling shy of my uncle to feeling proud of him. Most importantly, how do I explain to my kids that I really want them to be like their great-uncle Victor, who is clumsy and who can’t hear or speak well, and who they are also probably a little shy of for now.

### AFTER YOU READ:

1. What are the qualities that Dimitry appreciated about his Uncle Victor? Be specific.
2. How did Dimitry’s feelings about his uncle evolve over time?
3. How was Uncle Victor treated in the former Soviet Union?
4. In the 5th paragraph, why is “important and urgent” in quotes? What does Dimitry mean by this sentence: “But these efforts were more like *clumsy* attempts to justify our absence than real help.”
5. Look at the other words in bold and use context clues to think about what they mean.
6. Look at the map (left) of the former Soviet Union. Share what you know about this area. Why have Russia and Ukraine been in the news lately?

## The Former Soviet Union

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was made of 15 republics. On this map, the largest one is Russia (#11). Kazakhstan is #6, and Ukraine is #4. Look at a map to identify the others. The USSR broke apart in 1990, and those republics are now independent countries.



Source: Wikipedia

Dimitry Korolev was born in 1969 in the Soviet Union. In 2021, he immigrated with his family to the United States. He is an entrepreneur. Dmitry is a student at Tomas Jefferson Adult Career Education at Piedmont Virginia Community College in Charlottesville, VA.

