

Khodorkovsky's Son Tells of Exile in U.S.

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November 22, 2010



Pavel Khodorkovsky, the eldest son of jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, posing on the New York side of the Hudson River, with New Jersey high-rises in background.

NEW YORK — Pavel Khodorkovsky, the eldest son of imprisoned tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, keeps a Boston-Moscow plane ticket in his closet in his New York apartment as a memento.

He never used the roundtrip economy-class ticket to fly to Moscow to ring in 2004 at a planned New Year's celebration with his father and grandparents.

On Oct. 26, 2003, the day after Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested by gun-toting officers at a Siberian airport, Pavel received word through his father's lawyers that he should stay away from Russia for safety's sake.

Seven years later, Pavel said he never expected to live in self-imposed exile for so long.

"I never thought that I would stay here. I had another plan initially," Pavel said in a rare

interview over a cup of black coffee in a New York cafe.

His father probably couldn't have said it better himself.

The arrest of Russia's once-wealthiest businessman in 2003 changed the plans of many people, ranging from his immediate family to the scores of investors linked to his now-bankrupt Yukos oil company or simply interested in investing in Russia.

But for Pavel, whose parents divorced when he was 3, the change of plans is purely a personal loss. His father missed his wedding last year and the birth of his first granddaughter in December. While the two remain in contact through letters, his father has little opportunity to assist in the development of his first business, an energy monitoring company.

All eyes are once again on Mikhail Khodorkovsky as a Moscow court prepares to hand down its verdict on Dec. 15 in a second trial that could add six extra years to the eight-year prison sentence that he is already serving on related tax charges.

Khodorkovsky's supporters, including his son, say the charges are revenge from Vladimir Putin's Kremlin for the businessman's political and commercial ambitions.

Pavel, 25, said he felt optimistic about the trial's outcome but did not expect an outright acquittal because that would allow his father to be freed when his current sentence ends next year.

"The presidential elections are in 2012. Who will release him in 2011, right before the elections?" he said, speaking in Russian.

He said he believed that Putin still considers his father a threat to his power, while President Dmitry Medvedev has taken a back seat in the issue.

Putin, commenting on the Khodorkovsky affair earlier this year, called it "a criminal case" that involved murder in addition to tax evasion.

Pavel Khodorkovsky denied the murder allegation.

In the New York cafe, Pavel, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, looks very much like his father, especially when he smiles. His smiles were frequent during a recent interview, and he constantly forgot his coffee, sipping it only after being reminded.

Pavel was just 18 when he moved to the United States in fall 2003 to study business administration at Babson College near Boston after graduating from a high school in Switzerland. He said he chose to study in the United States on his own and his decision was not connected with what was going on with Yukos.

"Father just advised me to study at a university abroad. ... I decided to go to the United States, but Dad didn't influence my decision," he said.

Pavel, Khodorkovsky's son from his first marriage, said he had an "excellent" relationship with his father as a boy but complained that he seldom saw him because his father worked long hours. He said his mother, who lives in Moscow and calls him almost daily, never forbade

him from seeing his father.

“Dad isn't strict. When he's angry, he just starts speaking in a low voice, looking directly into your eyes. This is his strictness,” he said.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky also has a 19-year-old daughter and twin 11-year-old boys with his second wife.

Pavel said he missed his father and regretted only growing especially close to him in the months before his arrest.

“The most painful thing is that we started communicating the most after I graduated from high school,” he said, adding that he saw his father frequently during the 10 weeks that he spent in Moscow in summer 2003 before leaving for college in the United States.

Pavel said, however, that it was clear at the time that the situation over Yukos was heating up.

“When I was leaving, the company was under pressure, but it was unclear how serious the attack against the management would be,” he said.

He said his father seemed to sense his looming arrest when he visited his son in Boston in September 2003.

“I asked him how things were going, and he said that imprisoning him was the only thing left to do,” he said.

“But it seemed so unreal at the time. A merger with Sibneft was under way. They were making the world's fourth-largest company by production volume. ... And it seemed that things would come out all right and nothing would happen,” he said.

Yukos and Sibneft, controlled by billionaire Roman Abramovich, announced merger plans in April 2003 to create a global oil giant. The sides abruptly announced a suspension of the deal in November 2003.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky had been financing opposition parties before State Duma elections in December 2003, and Pavel said Putin might have feared that his father's support would result in the creation of a “serious political force.” He said his father had planned to leave business to focus more on political issues after turning 45, in 2008, but he rejected speculation that his father ever planned to mount a Kremlin bid.

“He never told me about this,” Pavel said. “When he said that he planned to leave the business, turning to politics, at the age of 45, he didn't mean running in presidential elections.”

He said his father had wanted to develop democracy and civil society through Open Russia, a public organization founded by Yukos shareholders to implement charity and educational programs.

Pavel said he had planned to return to Russia after graduating from college. “But when Father got imprisoned, coming to Moscow made no sense anymore,” he said.

After getting a bachelor's degree, he moved to New York in 2007 and started working with New Media Internet, a New York-based company owned by self-exiled media tycoon Vladimir Gusinsky. The company oversees technical support for web sites, including Russia's Newsru.com and Inopressa.ru.

“It was my first job,” said Pavel, who continues to work for the company as a project manager.

He said he likes the job but longed to run his own business. So earlier this year he founded Enertiv, which makes equipment and software to remotely monitor energy consumption. The company's products allow clients — private businesses and institutions — to monitor online the amount of electricity consumed by every circuit in a building, Pavel said, adding that the system helps to reduce energy consumption costs.

He said Enertiv had no rivals on the U.S. market and has yet to post a profit.

After leaving Russia, Pavel has remained in touch with his father's parents, relying on them for the latest news.

In his letters to his son, Mikhail Khodorkovsky has written that he is looking forward to seeing him and his granddaughter, Diana.

“My dad has expressed many times in his letters to me his regret that he is not able to hold his granddaughter and how much he is looking forward to it,” Pavel said.

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