

Olexa Dovbush: Ukraine's Hutzul Robin Hood

In the Carpathian mountains in 1700, after the Ukrainian Cossack State had been dismantled by Russian tsars and Polish kings, a little boy was born. His life lasted only 45 years, but his legend lives on. So great were his achievements that he was a legend in his own time. His name was Olexa Dovbush.

Olexa's family was the poorest among the poor – komirnyky. A small herd of sheep were his father's only wealth. Olexa's family worked as shepherds, hired hands for wealthy landowners. Hunger and illness were frequent guests in the small shanty that the Dovbush family called home. Early in his life, Olexa joined his father in his work. Soon, he saw with his own young eyes how the rich landowners abused the serfs – lying, cheating, depriving of any comfort in life – while building their own fortunes.

But in the hills and on the pastures, Olexa witnessed something very different. There he saw the fleetfooted comings and goings of the "opryshky". Freedom-fighting rebels around whom many legends had grown. Opryshky lived in the mountains, in caves hewn out of the sides of cliffs. They roamed on foot, asking the peasants they saw for information on whereabouts and activities of the ruling class against whom they took up their fight.

Olexa was hugely inspired by the opryshky. He longed to be one of them. Even as a young child, Olexa would take short trips into the mountains, finding secret passages from valley to valley, wishing for a band of brothers to join him. But Olexa knew in his heart that despite being the best marksman and smartest woodsman, he would never, ever be able to join the opryshky. Olexa was disabled. With only one good foot he could never keep up with the opryshky. With only one good foot, he would never be fast enough to beat the landowners in a fight. And he would never be strong enough to pull the poor, like his own parents, out from oppression.

Nonetheless, Olexa kept going. On his own, slow hikes into the Carpathian mountains. On one such excursion, Olexa fell very ill, and could not return home at night. He found himself a hut (*kolyba*) and collapsed. He slept – it felt like days – until he was suddenly jolted awake by thunder. Through sleep-filled eyes and fever he saw a tiny jolly man running about playfully.

Olexa's eyes worked hard to focus on the strange sight. He noticed little horns on the man. "Is this the Devil – *did'ko*?" he thought to himself. Another vision appeared, of an Old Hutzul in gold *postoly* (leather moccasins) floating above Olexa and the *did'ko* on a white cloud. The Old Hutzul reprimanded the Devil, scolding him and sending thunderbolts after him. But the Devil was fast and fit and avoided all punishment, laughing scornfully at the old man. Wanting to defend the Old Hutzul against the scorn and teasing of the devil, Olexa took his rifle, loaded it with a silver button from his coat

(*kyptar*), aimed and fired at *did'ko*. With that shot the visions were shattered; and disappeared in an instant. And Olexa was no longer sick. He got up, brushed himself off, and made his way back to his village.

The next night there was another dream. This time, the Old Hutzul stood in front of him, a gold axe (*topirets*) and a new *postoly* in hand. "Thank you, Olexa," he said. "Thank you for your help in the mountain. Now, ask for what you wish and I will grant it."

Without even thinking, Olexa replied: "I don't want anything but to be healthy and strong – the strongest man in the Karpaty." After considering the request carefully, Old Hutzul said "So be it!" and disappeared. In the morning, Olexa awoke and started again for the mountains thinking it was just a lovely dream.

However, as he walked, something happened. Suddenly, his foot straightened out. He encountered a boulder on his path, and with one hand removed it. He whistled, and the trees bent over. Over the course of that hike, Olexa Dovbush was recreated. He stood taller, his back broadened. He became the dark-haired young man with a beaming face, a sharp eye, and a voice that rang out across the hills. On his head appeared a hat with a colourful plume. To his sides came pistols and a rifle was slung onto his back. In new *postoly* his feet bounded easily from rock to rock.

Without a moment's pause for vanity or conceit, Olexa took up the campaign of the *opryshky*: the fight against the rich and the defense of the poor.

Olexa Dovbush found other young men, strong and brave, who also had seen the back-breaking work and hurt and tears of powerless people. With his band of brothers they would storm into the homes of the landlords, and upon leaving, their arms would be laden with gold. They would load the sacks of riches onto horses, cut holes in these sacks, and a trail of gold would follow them as they traveled where they were needed the most.

Olexa and his *opryshky* traveled far and protected many Hutzul villages. He became known as a powerful avenger and his name was feared. Kings sent soldiers by the thousands to hunt him down but he had become the strongest man in the Karpaty – just as he had wished. And he would never be caught.

It is true that Olexa Dovbush helped everyone, but his most frequent visits were to the village of his childhood. To his parents he brought to the same things he had given to serfs across the Karpaty: comfort in life, justice, and, most importantly, hope.