



FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

How Andrei Sosnovsky
built his renovator life
in Canada

By Rob Koci

Editor's note: The mandate of Canadian Contractor is "Make life better for renovators and custom homebuilders" and we do our best to stick to the how-to's and "top ten tips" type stories. But then we come across a story like this one: how Andrei Sosnovsky, president of Sosna Inc. in Vaughan, Ontario, came to Canada as a young, naive dreamer from Belarus to "make a million dollars and see the world." It doesn't quite fit the "how to" format but this story is full of the human truth of the life of contractors so, we sat back and listened as we hope you will also.

You were a trained lawyer in Belarus. Why would you leave for something completely unknown?

I left Belarus because I was young and it was a chance to promote this Russian martial art called Sambo that I was involved in since I was 11 years old. And I thought money grew on trees in Canada. I never intended to stay. I was going to stay long enough to become a millionaire and see the world. And it was interesting, you know? I thought, why not?

What was your introduction to Canada?

I came on a one-year work visa in 1996 to teach martial arts in Timmins, Ontario. I lived at the Windsor Hotel in Timmins where I worked as a bouncer on the weekends in exchange for a tiny room on the second floor. I had 70 martial arts students to start but after a month I had only 15. They told me much later that I lost those students because I was too hard on them. My training was too difficult. I didn't know any better. I trained the way I trained all my life but in Canada



it was a little different. They don't want to get hurt. Some people don't even want to sweat. It affected my salary until for three days I didn't have anything to eat. I had no money and no food. I needed to make some money so I worked construction and I really, really liked it. I never really worked with my hands in the past. As a lawyer in Belarus I never worked with a hammer or a drill. I liked it a lot!

What was your experience encountering Canadian culture for the first time?

Total shock. I was speechless. In Timmins there was more snow that year than you had in the last 60 years. It was minus 52C that winter. And did you know that Timmins is in the Guinness Book of Records for the most liquor establishments per capita? It's a mining town and they make lots of money and there is nothing to do there but drink. And being a bouncer at the Windsor Hotel I have seen a few interesting things and been in quite a



Andrei's first home circa 1996 was on the second floor of the Windsor Tavern on Cedar Street in Timmins, Ontario. He shared a bathroom.

few situations and I was shocked. It was a cultural shock. For instance, I was not used to seeing drunk women screaming and yelling and cursing their men and hitting them and behaving obnoxious. I had never seen anything like that. In our culture, women were the gentler side. You could see men like that and even worse, but not women! And I could tell you other stories. I did not intend to stay at all. I thought, 'this place is crazy, everyone is crazy. Everybody drinks.' When I was passing through the tables a drunk woman would grab my ass and say "nice ass." I was so mad and angry, coming from Russian culture. It was insulting.

But looking back now, I am grateful, too, because I had a lot of good stuff from that experience. I trained Indian kids at a reserve. I had many discussions with a chief of the tribe. I was invited to a sweat lodge, something that white people generally don't get invited to. The experience I had was something I think very, very few people have—even native Canadians—with native peoples. There was a lot of good stuff and interesting stuff and stuff that taught me a lot. It was tough but I don't regret it one bit.

How come you didn't just go back to Belarus?

A lot of people ask me this question. I couldn't go back home. What was I going to tell to my friends? They would ask, "Andrei, why did you come back?" What was I going to tell them? Because it's too tough? Because I couldn't make money there? Because I didn't like it there? It felt like I would have been like a dog with my tail between my legs. A beat-up dog. I couldn't stand the thought of that. That's why I decided that I would come back to Belarus but only when it was my choice. I would come back as a winner, not as a loser. And I decided to stick it out and earn money and achieve something and then I will come back so I would not be ashamed.

Back to construction. You worked in construction so you could eat?

That's how I ended up on construction sites and, after leaving Timmins for Toronto in '97, that's what I did. Very soon, I was



Andrei's current big project, August, 2019. This is his first custom home for him and his family on a very nice street in Toronto.



intrigued and I wanted to learn everything I could learn.

I worked for Polish renovators in Toronto. One time, me and my Russian friend took out 17 tons of brick and masonry block over a weekend from a walkout basement where we had to walk uphill to carry all this stuff by hand in plastic bins to load in a dumpster at street level. The Polish guys thought, "Oh my god, who are these guys?!" We were like maniacs and I loved it. I continued to teach martial arts after work. Then in the evening this Polish guy named Caesar would come in to do plastering. It looked like art to me and he was so good at it, so I approached him to ask if I could work with him. He said, "Andrei I can't pay you any money but sure, if you want I can teach you." So, after my class I would return to the job site. He had a day job but he really liked taping and plastering and I would come in and he would hold my hand and he would put a putty knife in my hand and he would show me where to press and where to scrape. We would work till midnight at times. He was good to me and I learned the trade and eventually he said, "Andrei you are really helping me. I am going to start paying you." And I got better and better and he got a better job and went to Calgary and he passed all of his clients in Toronto on to me. He had very good clients.

How did you eventually find yourself in business?

Around 1999, I assembled my own computer with parts that I

bought here and there and posted my resume on the internet. Half a year later I had forgotten all about the resume but I got a call from P&C Construction and they ask me, "Are you looking for a job?" and I said, "No, but how much are you paying?" He said, "\$20 per hour," and I said, "what?" because I was making around \$12 or \$14 at the time. I said, "Yes, I am looking for a job!"

It was commercial work. Offices, steel studs, etc. The Polish guys were sad to see me go. I was supposed to work at the IBM building offices but I was asked to go to Toyota for one day and never ended up at IBM. The foreman, a really good guy, Bob Belisle, liked me and he said, "there is no way I am giving this guy away." He was a carpenter for 47 years, a good guy that had seen it all. I worked under his supervision at Toyota. Then Toyota said why don't you work for yourself? I asked P&C for a phone because I was being called all the time and I thought they should, so I asked, "Can you give me a phone." I was paying for my own phone. Phones were expensive. I guess it was only \$40 per month but it was still a lot of money for me. They refused. In 2001, I opened my own company. Toyota was my only client.

How did you end up in residential?

I was always attracted to residential work. Commercial work is good money but there is no feeling of fulfilment. Nobody appreciates your work. Nobody cares because it is a big corporation. As long as you get it done on time, as long as you don't make any big surprises...as long as it is quiet, it is good. But nobody says, "Thank you." In residential, I felt I could make something beautiful out of nothing. I could create something. So I left my assistant at Toyota and I moved on to pursuing the residential projects. I hired a designer and I hired Roman (the current Project Manager at Sosna) and another carpenter, and so on and so forth. And now we have 17, 18 employees, I guess.

When did Sosna start?

Sosna started in 2001. Initially, I did both commercial and residential work. Then there was a point I noticed I was not getting any commercial work. In commercial you have to be very good at doing the backdoor thing. Facility managers like to get kickbacks from the contractors. The bidding process is not really fair. I got a chance to look behind the curtain a little bit and did not like it at all. I can't give these envelopes, you know, I don't have it in me. I can't give these bribes. It doesn't feel good and I don't respect myself with that. I found when I was dealing honestly I would not get a job because my price was always higher. I thought what am I going to do? I thought I would have to be the cheapest contractor or I would have to be a crook, so, I figured, you know what, I don't want either. I don't want to be known as the cheapest and I have no talent for being a crook.



That's when I decided to focus on residential.

Slowly but surely, with my designer Olga, we grew on the residential side and I turned down commercial. Initially I thought I will never make money in residential but I was wrong! I am very happy I made the switch.

Talk about some of the decisions you had to make to grow and be successful.

When I started focusing on residential, I was still doing a lot of the work myself. I remember I was trying to put a screw though drywall when my phone rang. Okay, I put down the screwdriver and answer the phone and then as soon as I finish talking on the phone I pick up the screwdriver and I am trying to put the screw in again and my phone rings again. And it's back and forth and back and forth and I realize I can't put screws in drywall anymore because my phone is ringing off the hook. And I also notice that I am not answering the phone very well because I am thinking of something else or I have a screwdriver in my hand or I am on a ladder and I am not doing anything well. So, I decided, I will either have to put in screws or answer the phone and run the business. It was a no-brainer. I hung up my toolbelt.

Did you take a financial hit to make that decision?

I don't remember it being extremely difficult in terms of financials. It was definitely a financial hit but I wouldn't say it was a dramatic change.

What other moments were key to growing your company?

What helped me very much, I was actively looking to learn about how to run a business in Canada. I knew construction from my Polish guys and Bob and Caesar but, how to run a business? I was looking actively for information. CMHC had lots of good information for contractors and homeowners at that time. I was reading something, I don't remember where, that said if the owner of a construction company has no knowledge of construction, that he was more likely to have success! This blew me away. I went to all of the courses—air quality control and building science, carpentry, everything I could do. I've got a Red Seal carpenter's license and I read all the books on carpentry because that is what I thought I needed to be successful. And then I am reading this and it says to me, "It's not true buddy! You don't need any of this stuff!" That really blew me away. Really, wow. I was doing it all wrong.

So I stopped reading construction books. I completely abandoned them and started reading books on business. I realized if I want to be successful I don't need to know all these things. And it was true. 100 per cent. To me a whole new world opened up. I read the book, "E-Myth." You need to work on the business, not in the business. And now you've got to find the people who do the work so you can build them. It was intriguing.

How was the transition off the tools?

At first, I was hungry for the feeling of accomplishment that I got from the tools. You know, I would do a very difficult project and



it might be the last day, and I have a difficult issue, like how to install trim around an obstacle or a bulkhead and I would work the whole day and I would find the solution and, oh my gosh it looks so beautiful and the client is so happy and you are so tired

Defining your client

One of Sosnovsky's strongest commitments to the company is to define the client that is "the best fit" for his company and, perhaps more importantly, be willing to turn away those that are not.

You need to define your ideal client. We have it down to science. With the help of the Sandler sales system and my sales coach, we determined that our ideal client is a couple in their 60's, empty nesters who have their kids grown up or are about to leave and they want to stay in their older house. We have the question on our lead sheet, "How long do you intend to stay in the house?" And when we hear, "Five years," we disqualify them right away. It doesn't matter what their budget is or where they are located, we recommend them to someone else. If they don't intend to stay in the house for a long time, if it's not their "Forever House," Sosna is not a good fit for them. It is definitely the client who will stay in the location, enjoy our work and brag about their renovation to their friends and neighbours for years. We want to get referrals from them. We don't want to build for people who just wants to be comfortable for a few years or who want to rent it out or sell. And our ideal client has lived in the same house for many years, too. It's true, if someone has just moved in to a house, we might take them if they have a specific problem that we are good at solving, but only if they say, "Yes, we are planning on staying for a long time."

Andrei Sosnovsky

and exhausted but you know your client is happy and you got money in your pocket and sit down to dinner that night and life is so good. I was hungry for this feeling—this feeling of fulfilment—that you have accomplished something, completed something to everyone's satisfaction. That feeling was very good, but the feeling was gone because I was no longer doing construction. I felt hungry for it. Even lonely! I was doing all this business stuff and the only results was money in the bank. Yeah, it's good but okay, move on. Only in the last few years that I started see it differently. I am building a company. Yes, I am not building walls and stuff but I am building my company. It is also a creative process and I am finding that old satisfaction again.

Now I realize that I have unique opportunity to influence people in other ways. Do I still miss that sense of accomplishment? Yes. I think sometimes if I had the option for someone else to run my company, and me just working on the tools, I would rather do that, because I loved it.

Okay, let's keep going with teaching. Talk to contractors in the \$1/2 million gross revenue range. What would you tell them?

First, never think that you know everything. Always learn from others. That would be my biggest advice. To actively seek out help. Be it a business coach, or sales coach or a NextLevel group or some sort of peer group or something where they can learn from someone that is ahead of you. That is the most important thing. If you are just trying to invent a wheel on your own, eventually you probably will if you are determined, but it is going to take you a long time and will cost you a lot of effort and it's just not worth it. Learning from others is a lot easier. And you have to continue doing it. All the time.

And when you are delegating, first of all you need to realize what happens if, and what will you do if, and you build the scenario and then find ways and strategies to avoid problems and

prevent bad things from happening.

Running a business is like a chess game. A good chess player thinks a couple of moves ahead. He thinks what is next and what is next. The further you can see, the better player you are. And the same thing goes with construction. If you are thinking a few moves ahead, everything goes very smoothly. But if you look at only what is happening today, you can't be successful. I see it all over the place, many contractors even my framer who is building my house. I ask him what are you going to do tomorrow? He says, we'll see, I'll let you know tonight. He has no plan. He has no plan. Amazing! No plan whatsoever.

And it's important also to say this: Probably the most important aspect of all for me. That is praying to God. All we can do is our best effort but the result is in God's hands, not ours. Praying for guidance, patience and wisdom is crucial to me. I'm afraid to think about a single project that I would start without a prayer for help. There have been few occasions when God saved my health or reputation. Faith also helps put things in perspective. Knowing that this won't last forever and that there is something else more important than business helps relieve the stress that our industry is so susceptible to. cc

A photograph of the exterior of the Improve Canada building. The building is a modern structure with large glass windows and a prominent vertical sign that reads "improve" in colorful, stacked letters. Several blue arrows point to different parts of the building with handwritten annotations. In the top right corner, the "improve" logo is displayed above the text "Canada's Largest Home Improvement Centre".

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