

# Podcast Transcript: Granddaughter of Immigrants

**Episode Title:** The Kobzar - Episode 1

**Host:** Erika Hanchar

**Guest:** Lydmyla Pogorelova

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## Transcript

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]**

There's a particular word in Ukrainian that I love.

**(soft piano music plays)**

The word is **Kobzar**. It refers to a traveling minstrel or bard who plays a stringed instrument and tells epic poems. And that might seem like a simple definition. But these minstrels would travel around the Ukrainian countryside, singing and proclaiming their epics, teaching word-of-mouth versions of Ukrainian histories and language. They were the keepers of oral tradition.

My name is Erika Hanchar, and this is the podcast *Granddaughter of Immigrants*.

**(soft piano music plays and fades out)**

In my family, we didn't have a so-called Kobzar, a person who passed on family lore, culture, or Ukrainian traditions. All we had were a few brief moments across a kitchen table over too many drinks. That left me with more questions than answers.

I'm a third-generation Canadian-Ukrainian, and for my family, that means my great-grandparents arrived in Canada just over 100 years ago. I'm a writer, and although I've made a few careers out of being a portrait photographer and a corporate marketing manager, my heart has always brought me back to writing.

Years ago, I set out on a family ancestry journey where my only goal was to build a family tree, but with each person I added came a number of unanswered questions. Times and places that my family had never explored before, new details that led me down new rabbit holes. And as I documented each new lead, I realized I was starting to tell my family story. Then one day, a relative passively said that they would love to read all my findings or listen to them like a radio show. And in that moment, a podcast was born.

In a twist of many fates that you will hear about in this podcast, this story, unbeknownst to me, has been developing itself for the past two decades. And ever since then, I've been piecing together the pieces of our past. For my family, for my sister, for my nephews, and well, me, hoping along the way that I would learn a little more about the family that came before and

learn a little more about myself.

But it turns out it's really hard to know who you are and who you're supposed to be when you have no idea where and who you come from. This podcast is for the storytellers and the family genealogists, the record keepers and the junior archivists. Those people who photograph and record video of every family event and get flak for never doing anything with the footage. The ones with the insatiable thirst to know and understand more about the ones who came before us. And the ones who only exist on a ship's manifest and in the faded photographs buried deep in the attic.

I feel a strong connection to the word Kobzar. There's something quite moving about the idea of passing down history. In Ukraine, at the turn of the century, the Kobzars kept those stories alive, retelling them to the population that at times was absolutely prohibited from a formal education. But who were the Kobzars, and what happened to them?

### **(Ukrainian Kobzar Music transition)**

#### **[Guest: Lydmyla Pogorelova]**

Kobzars embodied a national worldview, safeguarded collective memory, and stood as an unbreakable form of resistance. They preserved stories that the ruling authorities tried to erase. They kept alive the names of heroes and fought for freedom. They passed down moral lessons about dignity, loyalty, and courage. In a country repeatedly colonized, partitioned, and suppressed, memory itself became an act of defiance.

#### **[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]**

That was Lydmyla Pogorelova, the director of Toronto's **Shevchenko Museum**, the only museum in the Americas dedicated to the artistic works of **Taras Shevchenko**, the poet, writer, and artist who laid the foundation of modern Ukrainian literature during a time of imperial suppression.

Taras Shevchenko was born a serf in 1814, and at that time, serfs in Ukraine were legally subjected to severe bondage, exploitation, and forced labor that functioned a lot like slavery. It was all under Russian rule. They were tied to the land and sold by their landlords. They were not allowed to have a formal education, and Shevchenko was no exception, at least at first.

#### **[Guest: Lydmyla Pogorelova]**

But through extraordinary talent in art and poetry, he gained his freedom and became the voice of his nation. His writings in Ukrainian challenged imperial oppression, celebrated the dignity of ordinary people, and inspired a national awakening. Arrested for his political views, he spent years in exile, yet never stopped writing.

**Kobzar**, first published in 1840, is a collection of Ukrainian-language poems that powerfully voiced the struggles, hopes, and identity of the Ukrainian people, marking the birth of modern Ukrainian literary and national consciousness.

Taras Shevchenko's writings fiercely condemned social injustice, serfdom, and the brutal

oppression of people under Russian imperial rule. His poetry gave voice to the voiceless, exposing the cruelty of the Tsarist regime and calling for national awakening and dignity.

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]**

Now, I'm imagining myself in the shoes of a 20th-century Ukrainian serf, a farmer, who's experienced a lifetime of Russian imperial oppression. And hearing or reading the words of Shevchenko for the first time, phrases from his poems like "*Rise ye up*" and "*break your heavy chains*", that is exactly the type of language that would have inspired me or someone in my bloodline, I imagine. It would have been as impactful as looking up at the moon and then learning if you became an astronaut you could fly there. The impact would have been massive, a shift in one's mindset that would have changed my entire way of thinking. That maybe there was something more than being a serf.

It most definitely inspired Ukrainians of that time. Shevchenko's book *Kobzar* traveled beyond Ukraine and as far as Canada with some of its first Ukrainian settlers.

**[Guest: Lydmyla Pogorelova]**

This bold defiance did not go unnoticed. In 1847, Shevchenko was arrested by Tsarist authorities for his involvement in the secret Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood and for composing politically charged verses. He was exiled, forbidden to write or paint, a punishment meant to silence him.

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]**

Imagine your words being so powerful that your punishment is silence. For Shevchenko, it was a literal silence; no communication with the outside world, keeping his radical words from the masses. But there's another iteration of being silenced that I'm more personally connected to. And that's voluntary silence, which stems from fear.

If you have Eastern European grandparents who never spoke of their lives from the old country or shared ancient family stories, perhaps it was a trauma response to the type of Russian brutality and oppression that they grew up having to deal with. The fear of never having enough to eat, or being persecuted for something you've said, or simply wanting a life that doesn't align with your oppressors. I wish that I could speak of it only in the past tense.

**[Guest: Lydmyla Pogorelova]**

In 1932, Soviet authorities invited Kobzars and bandurists, the blind bards and keepers of Ukrainian oral tradition, to a national conference in Kharkiv, then the capital of Soviet Ukraine. Instead of a cultural gathering, it was a trap. The Kobzars were taken outside the city and executed. The exact number remains unknown, but estimates suggest hundreds were killed.

Why target Kobzars? These musicians were more than entertainers. They were living archives of Ukrainian history. Their songs preserved stories of Cossack freedom, peasant suffering, and national pride. All of which clashed with Stalin's vision of homogenized Soviet identity. The massacre was part of a wider campaign of cultural genocide. Journalists, novelists, playwrights,

and artists, anyone who carried the Ukrainian voice, were arrested, exiled, or executed. This period, often called the **Executed Renaissance**, saw the destruction of a vibrant cultural awakening. Entire generations of stories, songs, and ideas were lost, erased by bullets and fear.

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]**

But despite Stalin's efforts, the Kobzar traditions did not die. They went underground, survived by foreign Ukrainian communities like the ones here in Canada, and then didn't re-emerge until Ukraine's independence in the early '90s.

**(Ukrainian Kobzar Music transition and fade out)**

Growing up, anytime I would ask my grandparents about the past lives of our ancestors, I was always met with a "Why do you want to know this?" followed by a grand mix of Ukrainian and Polish word combinations that not even a native speaker would be able to decipher. But every once in a while, I would get a tiny clue, a small insight into where they came from and who they were before me. Their stories weren't lost; they were just suppressed.

My grandparents lived next door to me my entire childhood. Their backyard adjoined ours, and even though we all lived in one of those typical late '80s and '90s new-build homes that we, by the way, all moved into on the same day in 1987, theirs somehow was the perfect specimen of 1960s home decor. And it's still a core memory for me.

**(soft piano music transition)**

The starburst clock on the wall, the olive-toned matching fridge-stove combo, the small pile of purple velvet Crown Royal bags, always next to a half-full bottle on the table. I used to take those little bags and use them to keep small toys, coins, and cool rocks in. My grandfather wasn't the stereotypical Slavic vodka drinker one might expect, at least he wasn't in my lifetime.

I can remember the exact position of each trinket on each fake marble table in their home. A collection of random items from around the world. It was all so fascinating to me as a little girl, like the giant wooden eagle perched in the hallway with its wings spread wide, or the statue of the bronze naked lady at the entrance to the basement where my sister and I spent most of our time playing as kids. I remember we would run past it really fast trying not to make eye contact with her. But my favorite was the large bowl with painted eggs. I would gently mix them around with the big wooden spoon until I was shooed away from the breakables.

**(soft piano music transition fades out)**

They had one of those elaborate sectional couches with the silver motif pattern, a real Chesterfield covered in plastic. I remember we were only allowed to sit on it to watch TV when a history TVO special came on or *The Young and the Restless*. As the cigarette smoke would fill the kitchen air and mix with the smell of cabbage and tomato, from the outside, it must have seemed like a culturally Canadian-Ukrainian Polish standard. But there were signs of what I had chalked up to being quirky that now, in my 40s, I see as something a little bit more broken. Like the surplus of new styrofoam meat trays and enough plastic bags and folded cardboard boxes to run their own grocery store. Actually, it's probably because of my grandparents that we all

have to pay for these now; my sincere apologies.

Then, of course, they had a serious collection of cookie tins. You know the kind, the blue Danish cookies that no one really loves, that most certainly was filled with threads and pins and needles. Real immigrant clutter. And as a kid, I laughed at it all; I was even embarrassed by it. Embarrassed that they wouldn't throw anything away, that they kept every piece of wrapping paper from every opened present at Christmas. And when they passed on, I found that they had trunks full of 30-year-old new but unused towel sets that perfectly matched their bathroom decor. A pantry with enough canned goods for at least a few months, and every single bank slip, loan application, and government-issued document they ever received. I now look at it as a trauma response to never having enough of anything. But I want to understand all of these items and the traumas that come with them.

My family's story is made up of regular people, hardworking families, mothers and fathers and children from faraway ancient villages who blazed new paths with the universal goal for a better life. Generations of people who did hard things, crossed uninhabitable landscapes and oceans without knowing what the future would hold for them on the other side.

And while my grandparents weren't poets, musicians, or writers, they too carried fragmented memories, truths, and histories. What they saved, hoarded, and passed down became their own kind of oral tradition; one that's importance I wouldn't understand until much later in life. But if I've learned anything from the Kobzar legacy and from my grandparents, it's to carry the story forward in whatever way you can.

**[Guest: Lydmyla Pogorelova]**

In today's world, where disinformation, censorship, and cultural suppression still exist, the story of the Kobzars is a call to listen more closely to the voices that carry truth and to protect them at all costs.

**(soft electronic music transition)**

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]**

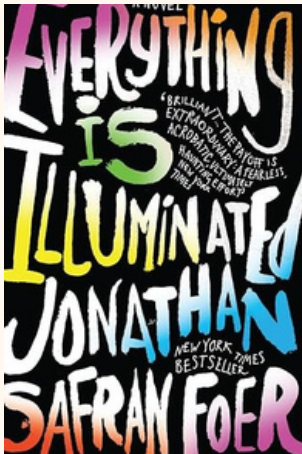
But deep inside the excess of their very long lives was a mysterious pile of documents, neatly organized and kind of tattered, faded, torn, and taped back together again. And those documents set me on a side quest that would end up leading me into the next 20 years of my life.

This episode of *Granddaughter of Immigrants* was written by me, Erika Hanchar, and made possible with the help of our guest Lydmyla Pogorelova, the director of **Toronto's Shevchenko Museum**. To learn more about the life and artistic works of Taras Shevchenko, you can visit them online at [shevchenko.ca](http://shevchenko.ca) or in person at 1604 Bloor Street West in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Sound engineering and design for *Granddaughter of Immigrants* by Colin Thompson and me, Erika Hanchar. Music for this episode by Out of Flux and Victor Bykovsky. The full transcript for this episode is available in the show notes. *Granddaughter of Immigrants* is brought to you by

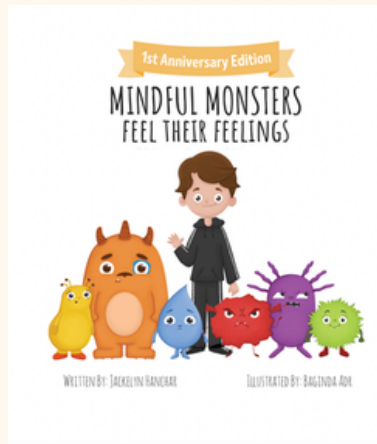
Main Character Creative, a digital media agency.

# Book RECOMMENDATIONS



**EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED**

**JONATHAN SAFRAN-FOER**



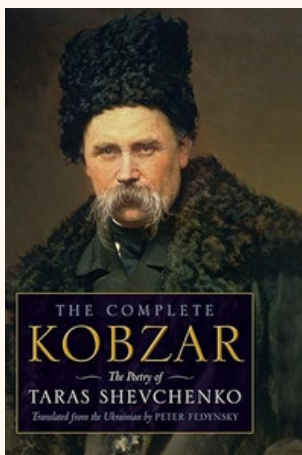
**MINDFUL MONSTER FEEL THEIR FEELINGS**

**JACKELYN HANCHAR**



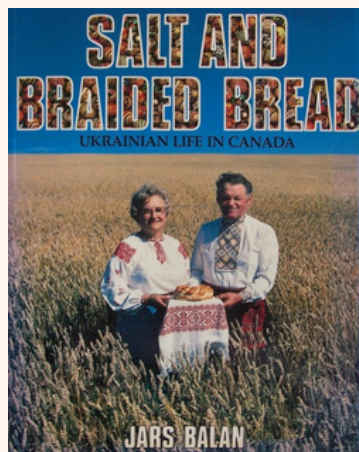
**THE GIFT OF THE SHIFT**

**ANN PAPAYOTI & TRACEY MACDONALD**



**THE KOBZAR**

**TARAS SHEVCHENKO**



**SALT AND BRAIDED BREAD**

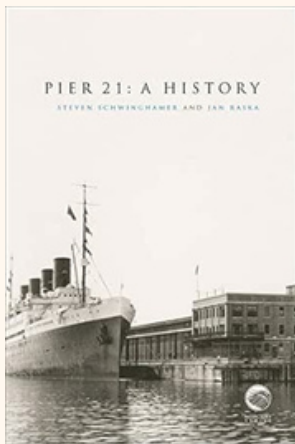
**JARS BALAN**



**STYX : THE RIVER**

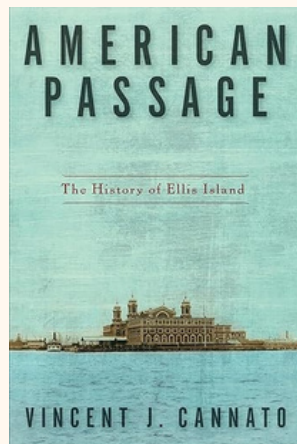
**NAKITA GILL**

# Book RECOMMENDATIONS



**PIER 21 : A HISTORY**

**JAN RASKA  
STEVEN SCHWINGHAMER**



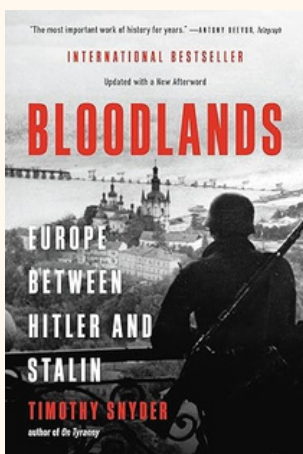
**AMERICAN PASSAGE**

**VINCENT CANNATO**



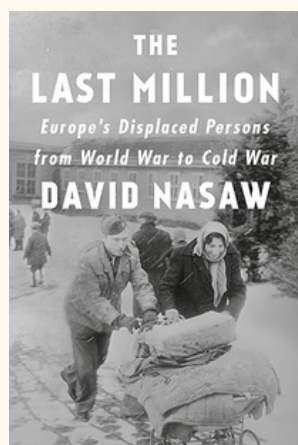
**BABYN YAR**

**A. ANATOLI  
ANATOLY KUZNETSOV**



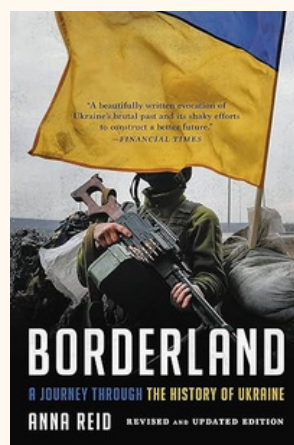
**BLOODLANDS**

**TIMOTHY SNYDER**



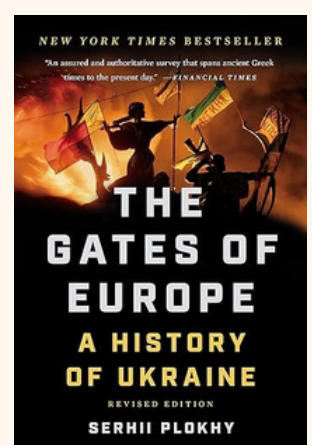
**THE LAST MILLION**

**DAVID NASAW**



**BORDERLAND**

**ANNA REID**



**THE GATES OF EUROPE**

**SERHII PLOKHY**

# ABOUT ME

I'm Erika Hanchar, a **Writer, Director, Podcaster** in Ontario, Canada. I got my start in the film industry as a Stills Photographer on a **YTV children's television** production back in 2005.

In 2016, I received the Kobzar Scholarship to the **Humber School for Writers** in Toronto, and have participated in several readings at **Toronto's Arts & Letters Club** in 2018 and 2019.

In 2022, my manuscript *The Warsaw Servant* was named a finalist at the **Palm Beach International Book Festival**. More recently in early 2025, I wrote and directed a **PSA commercial** with the Women in Film & Television in Florida, USA.

My Podcast **Granddaughter of Immigrants** 2026 is a creative storytelling experience of my families immigration journey to Canada. With expert guests from **University of Alberta**. Museum Director of Shevchenko Museum in Toronto and my psychologist, who all breath history, story and clarity into the narravtive.



*"(Erika) you really have your senses down, I could taste, feel, see and hear what the characters were going through. The taste of gravel was in my mouth. Honestly."*

**Lois Cahall** on the manuscript for; *The Warsaw Servant*  
**Founder and Creative Director**  
**Palm Beach Book Festival**

## CONTACT

ERIKA HANCHAR  
 Represented By:  
 MAIN CHARACTER CREATIVE  
 hello@maincharactercreative.com  
 maincharactercreative.com



@erikanataliahanchar  
 @maincharactercreative

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