

Podcast Transcript: Granddaughter of Immigrants

Episode Title: No Home Land - Episode 10

Host: Erika Hanchar

Transcript

Dialogue: Erika and Her Father

The phone crackles.

Dad: Hey Kid.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: Hey, Dad.

Dad: How ya doin'?

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: Good, D'you read it?

He clears his throat.

Dad: I read it, it's ahhh, it's pretty intense, if you ask me.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: Well that's the way he told it.

Dad: You left out the parts with Neubretski.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: I was trying to tell it in order.

Dad: It's the best part of the story, you gotta tell that part.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: Was he a real guy?

Dad: Who?

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: Neubretski, Jan or John Neubretski.

Dad: Of course he was, he was your grandfather's best friend. They went through hell and back together in the camps.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: D'you meet him?

Dad: Yes, of course, I did.

PAUSE

Dad: I mean I'm sure I must have.

(soft piano music plays)

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: So the story goes, one day somewhere between 1943-1944, after their alleged escape from a slave labor camp in Kyiv, Ukraine, Wasyl Hanchar and Jan Nieubretski, found themselves stateless, like many Eastern Europeans at that time, and walking endlessly across Europe.

I'm Erika Hanchar, and this is the podcast *Granddaughter of Immigrants*.

(soft piano music plays and fades out)

The first time Wasyl shows up on any official documents, it's as a slave labourer, again, and this time in Germany in 1944 and then in Austria 1945. He claimed to have also worked in Hungary around that time too, but there was no documentation on that work experience. There was never any story of how he made his way across Europe during those 3 years. According to Wasyl, they just walked and worked. In the time between the escape at Syrets and his arrival in Austria, there is only one story he told. The story. The story we will never be able to corroborate, but it's the story that has been told more times than any other story in our family. Heck, he even retold it to me the week before he died. So here it goes.

(soft piano music plays)

On a dirt road, surrounded by nothing but dried out farm fields, bleached by the hot summer sun that they had been walking down for some time. Could have been hours or days, or weeks. Could have been anywhere between Hungary and Austria; Jan Neubretski and Wasyl Hanchar noticed, in the distance, a vehicle stopped on the side of the road, with the driver's side door open. They quickly took cover in a ditch and waited. Watching vigilantly for the driver or passenger to emerge. They watched, taking turns peaking from the dried grass. After a few moments, with no activity at the truck, they decided to go check it out for themselves. As they moved in closer they found it was a German medical supply truck.

(soft piano music plays and fades out)

Unsure at first of what they might find inside, maybe the dead body of the nazi driving it, or worse, the alive body of the nazi driving it. They crept up around it from both sides.

No one was there.

It was abandoned, items left behind and the keys still in the ignition. It was as if the driver had been plucked from the scene.

This German medical supply truck was equipped with tools, paper work and boxes of supplies in the back. It was just them, some farm fields, an endless dirt road, and now an ambulance.

Curious, and how could they not be, they hopped inside. Nervous and excited I'm sure. As they took one last look around the sunlit fields, in the middle of the day, and still not a soul in sight and certainly no nazi ambulance drivers.

With Wasyl in the driver's seat, he turned the key and the ignition started without hesitation.

(sound of car ignition starting and rumbling)

They both laughed, and cheered, partially from shock and disbelief, but also because they knew what they were about to do next.

They drove that ambulance for hours through more farmland. They drove all day without a care in the world, with the warm breeze pouring in and the summer sun blinding them along the way. The truck was comically loud and you could probably hear it coming as it rumbled down the potholed road as the supplies clanked and knocked around one another in the back. Like 2 guys in a cheesy road trip buddy comedy. Only this one has some seriously traumatic dark undertones.

I'd still watch it. All the Hollywood tropes aside, this was real life, they were bound to at least run out of gas, break down, or get a flat tire. Right?

They drove until they hit a German security check point in a small town.

(Dramatic piano starts)

Not knowing completely where they were, but knowing that maybe they weren't where they should be. Feeling a little extra confident, they played it cool, as if they had been there and done that before.

A Nazi officer approached their truck and took one look at the two boys inside and waved them into a separate laneway. Wasyl casually drove down the laneway, trying as best they could to keep an unbothered face, as they came face to face with one evil nazi after another. As they were waved further down the laneway without question, they soon approached a large entrance to a factory-like building. They were way too deep to turn back now. The charade quickly became reality.

(Dramatic piano increases, and heartbeat sound speeds up)

They rolled past a barbed wire fence, past an armed guard tower. Wasyl's hands, clammy on the steering wheel, and his heart racing, was only muffled by the gravel popping under his tires and the clanging of tools and supplies in the back of their rickety truck. Both boys realizing, maybe a little too late that they had driven straight into some type of forced labor facility, not

unlike the one they had just come from, only bigger and more official, with more labourers, and giant buildings. An officer flagged them down at the entrance and asked in German for,

Nazi Officer: Sine sie zur lieferung und abholung hier?

Papers. They handed over the papers that they had found in the truck. A list of some sort. Without even a question or conversation, two additional guards opened the back of the truck and removed the supplies. The door slammed shut.

Nazi Officer: Alles ist raus.

And the officer with the paperwork waved them back the way they entered. Unscathed.

(Dramatic piano fades out)

Wasył and Nieubretski had just made a delivery to a nazi concentration/slave labour camp under the disguise of delivery truck drivers.

Now, I will never be able to corroborate this story, but when Wasył told it, he laughed the way teenage boys would tell a story that is only funny to them. It's safe to say that, especially in his old age, Wasył was no storyteller. The man spoke 5 languages, and English was like his 5th language. But every time he spoke of *this event* he laughed. Not because it was funny, but because he had survived and now lived to tell about it.

Learning that his reaction wasn't just him laughing in the face of evil and danger, but because he *didn't even* understand the threat he actually faced has been one of the biggest realizations of this entire podcast for me.

To him, the joke was that a peasant slave labour boy was mistaken for a nazi medical supply delivery person. But for us listening, he evaded death, yet again by naively and actually driving into one of history's most dangerous zones.

At a time when young boys should be out with friends, getting into innocent mischief, and figuring out life and who they are, Wasył was imprisoned. His life on pause in a way. Then one day, by some weird miracle, saw an opportunity and had the audacity to drive it. Eventually Wasył and Jan would have come face to face with the nazi guards at the village checkpoint. But in an alternate universe they would have been on foot and I honestly don't believe that two disheveled boys would have been so casually accepted by their abusers. The ambulance was placed there in some mysterious twist of fate. Lord knows I wouldn't be here had it not been.

Today we hear these stories knowing the scale of the war, and the Holocaust, from school, from books, media and the movies. But back then Wasył and Jan didn't. Their world was narrow: survive today, find food tomorrow. The recklessness is removed when you start to reframe it like that.

Even though Wasył could watch documentaries years later that potentially filled in those gaps in his understanding, he would never see that situation as dangerously as it was. We can never

know how it must have felt to be them, finding a vehicle that quite literally drove them to freedom.

This is where the story ends for Jan Nieubretsky. Well at least to my knowledge. From this point on Wasyl is on his own. I have spent far too much time searching for the ghost of my grandfather's best friend. Everyone in my family knew the stories, and can even describe what kind of man he was, how he looked; "He was short and stocky build. Tougher and braver than he looked." According to my dad and grandfather. But no one can remember ever meeting him in person. They surely remember talking about him. The story of great escape, and the joyride, was a favorite at family gatherings.

While there are no official photographs of the late, great Nieubretski, no documents, and no references to him outside of the word of mouth storytelling of my family, I did find a photo of my grandfather around age 21. He kept it in the hidden part of his wallet, for 70 years.

(soft piano music plays)

In the tiny square photo, with crinkle cut edges he's wearing lederhosen, you know the traditional Bavarian/Austria men's outfit. He is leaning up against a fence in a lettuce field, with 2 other, unnamed men. One of those other men is a shorter, stockier build, giving a pose of absolute confidence, like he knows he can get away with anything, and Wasyl in the middle with his big strong arms crossed, as if to send a message that he wasn't to be messed with.

(soft piano music fades out)

I don't know for sure if it's Nieubretski or not, but I like to imagine this photo was taken after they drove the ambulance as far as they could, and before they were eventually found by German authorities and granted the opportunity to live, because they were strong and able bodied workers. I like to imagine they were shipped to Austria, and given quiet jobs in the mountains picking vegetables, and lederhosen to wear, of course.

Eventually, the road and the war brought Wasyl to St. Veit, Austria. Records place him living in the basement of St. Jakobs Church, a forced labourer listed under agriculture. A completely different slave labour experience than his last. His job: pick vegetables. His bed: a church cellar.

Not too far away, in the castle gardens of a resort, Ana Wowk was living in her own captivity.

Even though the imminent threat of danger was invisible in the Austrian Alps, it wasn't gone. The war still raged on, two strangers, from the same country, performing similar jobs. Picking vegetables in a garden, a job that after all the horrors Wasyl experienced must have felt like a fever dream.

But who could have needed a crew of agriculture workers to pick fresh vegetables daily, in Austria, during wartime?

Why, the only resort in the area with the guests arriving daily.

And after much research, and let me tell you, there is not much to go on, we believe it was a place called Schloss Fuschel.

About 30 kilometers from St. Veit stood Schloss Fuschel Castle, a lakeside resort hosting the Nazi party and was leased to Joachim von Ribbentrop the foreign minister of Nazi Germany and operated for a short time by Nazi politician Alfred Frauenfeld and his wife, Rosemarie, known to Ana Wowk simply as 'Rose.'

In her diaries, Ana wrote of working under Rose's orders: preparing food, managing gardens, and preparing rooms for Nazi officers on vacation from the war. It looked like service work, but it was slave labour.

I looked up the castle while researching this podcast, and while there have been blogs written about its role in wartime, they try to not shine a light on its dark past. It is an absolutely striking fairy tale place, that sits lakeside, with Austrian alps as its backdrop. One day I would love to visit it. Yes, I know it's like visiting a cotton plantation in the deep American south just because it's pretty. But it's more of a way to tie off all the loose ends of this family story.

In her old age, Ana Wowk tells of that time when she was about 23 years old, working in the gardens of the resort when she met the boy she would fall in love with.

Ana Wowk met Wasyl Hanchar one afternoon in the garden. As a labourer from a local farm crew, Wasyl would come in from the town a few times a week for work and during those stopovers they would get to see one another. It was all so romantic, the waiting and anticipation for each meet up. It was no secret, everyone at the resort and in the town of St. Veit knew Wasyl and Ana as a couple. They fell fast in love.

When the war was officially declared over and they were both free. The Schloss Fuschel Castle resort was seized within days of the Americans arriving in Austria. It survived the war and today it's a luxury hotel with very little mention of its dark past. Ana was soon moved into the British zone just outside of St. Veit. The St. Jakobs church that Wasyl was living in was officially turned into a Displaced Persons camp.

From 1946-1948 Ana and Wasyl lived in the DP Camps that housed both men and women and families. This was the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and later the International Refugee Organization (IRO).

At the time a displaced person was anyone who was taken from their homeland and had no homeland left to go back to. When both Wasyl and Ana left their villages they left Ukraine, and now, there was no more Ukraine, it was just the Soviet Union, Russia.

You might think that the end of the war would bring safety and a bit of relief, especially in the British zone refugee camps, but a new fear entered the game. Repatriation.

Russia suffered huge losses during the war and was in desperate need of able bodied workers, who could help rebuild the country after massive destruction. Rumours spread that the Soviets

were taking back displaced persons from all Eastern block countries. This didn't necessarily mean you were going back home, if you even had a home to go back to, it meant you were going to Northern Russia, to Siberia, it meant you were going to the Gulag.

(soft electronic music transition)

Wasył and Ana understood what a Russian occupation of Ukraine could look like.

For them, and for thousands of others, immigrating to a new country, and starting a new life was the only option. Canada was the only other country outside of Ukraine that they both had ties to. Ana had a distant uncle she had never met, and she wrote to him asking for sponsorship. And Wasył, well he had connections to family that also immigrated to Canada, he just hadn't heard from them in nearly 20 years.

This episode of *Granddaughter of Immigrants* was written by me, Erika Hanchar. Sound engineering and design for *Granddaughter of Immigrants* by Colin Thompson and me, Erika Hanchar. Music for this episode by Yezekiel Raz, Out of Flux and Semo. 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.