

Podcast Transcript: Granddaughter of Immigrants  
**Episode Title:** Moving to Saskatchewan - Episode 11

**Host:** Erika Hanchar

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Transcript

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]:** In late spring of 1948, on a rather crisp but sunny morning, the tiny train station at Spittal an der Drau, in Carinthia, was a sea of women. Refugee women from all the surrounding Displaced Persons camps, were being excitedly escorted by British authorities to board their train out of Austria and the last ship out of Portugal, and out of Europe for good.

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

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

In late spring of 1948, on a rather crisp but sunny morning, a large group of refugee women were escorted by British authorities to the Spittal an der Drau Railway station in Carinthia, nestled in the Austrian alps. They were boarding a train bound for Lisbon, Portugal. Terrifying and exciting, a mix of emotions. A little bit sad but also a dream come true.

The platform was a teary mess of goodbyes, as the young women left behind friends, partners and some new husbands. Wasyl had made a promise to Ana that he would come find her as soon as he was granted passage to leave Europe and immigrate to Canada.

But the train station celebrations masked the real truth, that Ana was setting out on this mission alone. There was no guarantee that Wasyl would be granted passage or that it would even be to Canada. But they had hope, and that seemed to work for them over the past few years. The train huffed as it started to move from the station. Ana finds a seat next to the window so she can catch Wasyl's pale blue eyes from the crowd.

The feeling of dread sets in knowing that he's on the wrong side of the window and not with her.

**(train sounds and women's voices)**

But his eyes still follow hers as the train starts to move and before she realizes it he's on the move too. Pushing his way slowly through the crowd, and then a little faster, bumping into people all while not breaking eye contact. She laughs at him and all the girls on the train clamour to the window to watch Wasyl and he hops over someone's luggage on the platform and the girls on the train start cheering him on.

The train picks up speed and Wasyl starts to really run and jumps off the platform onto the grass alongside the train, now in a full speed sprint. Anna laughs as he tries to keep up and for a split second their eyes meet again...

...until the moment is severed by the speed of the train by the landscape creeping in. Leaving Wasyl out of breath and happily defeated in its smokey wake.

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

There wasn't a person alive watching that scene play out who couldn't see that their love was real. Ana remembers the other girls on the train, remarking, "*Oh that man loves you.*"

Ana shot her and it paid off when the uncle she had never met agreed to bring her to Canada. The door opened for a brief moment and she ran through it. For Wasyl it wasn't so easy. There was no one waiting for him in Canada.

It would be almost 4 months before Wasyl's passport would be stamped in Canada, and in that time Ana would have to travel across the world, alone. From Austria to the Port of Lisbon in Portugal to board the SS. Nea Hellas for a 10 day ocean voyage to Halifax, and Nova Scotia's Pier 21.

The ship was no ocean liner from the early days of immigration. There was no class system. These were often cargo ships repurposed to transport people across the ocean. There were no amenities or upgrades to be had. But I bet it was nice to travel aboard a female only ship.

During the voyage, a woman went into labour and Ana assisted in the delivery of a healthy baby girl. What a symbol for a new beginning. The new baby was even after the ship "Nea" which is so fitting because it means "new" in Greek.

Ana arrived in Halifax in April of 1948. Passing all Pier 21 inspections, she took the immigrant train across the country and was received by her sponsor, the uncle she had never met. He owned a farm in a tiny Hamlet called Bankend in Saskatchewan.

If you look up Bankend today you will learn that the current population is between 5-15 people. It's rural, to say the least. Sitting 2.5 Hours from Saskatoon. It is mostly just farmland, with more farmland backing on to one another. You can see it for miles, with its few grain silos, post office, and 2 cemeteries. One for Ukrainian settlers and one for Icelandic settlers. People don't typically live in Bankend, they farm there. There are over 150 registered farmers for the land that sits in the Bankend district, none of which live there nor did they in 1948, well none except Ana and her uncle.

Back at the DP camp in St. Veit, Wasyl made the most of his time. Ukrainians in the camps worked hard to carve out small pieces of normal life, teaching and attending classes, joining in on celebrations, and contributing to cultural centers. And during the day all that pleasant distraction worked. It worked to keep the bad memories at bay and the demons out. But as the nighttime always returned, so did the past. Screams and nightmares echoed through the barracks, a reminder of the traumas that no one could truly escape.

Wasyl carried those scars too, so he chose more distraction. He kept moving, learning carpentry, leatherwork, and with his fourth-grade village education, he slowly built on his reading and writing, most importantly, in English.

Canada at that time was looking to build up their population, and specifically they wanted men who could work tough jobs, mining, milling, and on the railway. By then, Canada had created the Displaced Persons Act, which allowed for 35,000 Eastern European men to immigrate to the country, under mandatory working contracts to help build up the Canadian economy. These men needed to be in good mental and physical health. No criminal records, and could not be a national security risk. Meaning, anyone who qualified for these contract positions was given a path to citizenship. In most cases guaranteed work with big, stable, iconic companies could not be an enemy to Canada or Canadian way of life at all. You had to be ready to acclimate to Canadian life, culture and you had to play by the rules.

But getting approved wasn't as easy as wanting it really bad, or being determined. Remember the Soviets had already come knocking. They were quite literally taking their people back. And now that Ukraine was considered the Soviet Union, and there was no longer a familiar Ukraine to go back to, Wasyl was considered by most to be a Soviet citizen.

This was a conflict of interest for Wasyl and the Canada Displaced Persons Act requirements. In 1948, we are well ahead of what we know today to be asylum rights. Where one who fears their country of origin is a serious threat to their well being, can come to Canada for refuge. If this was an option for Wasyl in 1948, I am sure he would have chosen asylum, instead of what he actually did.

Fear and rumours spread fast in the camps, threat of repatriation agreements between Soviets and the British, Canadians and Americans to return all Ukrainians to was becoming very real, and the stories of the Siberian Gulag were enough to dredge up decades old fears. A Ukrainian displaced person had to act fast, get passage to Canada, Britain or the United States before the Soviets had time to intercept them. Becoming whoever they needed to be to get there. Ukrainians and other eastern

European displaced persons who could not secure passage quickly resorted to falsifying documents. All of a sudden, there were a great number of Polish born, Ukrainian speaking citizens.

The opportunist in Wasyl was determined to not only get out of the DP camp, but to see Ana again. With this new opportunity another fire burned within; to find his father, Ivan and his uncles. His closest connections to Canada.

According to Wasyl's Displaced Person's documents created after the war and in that small sliver of time before he showed up on a Soviet repatriation list, Wasyl was now born in a village called Hoflier, Poland. Not, Hostiv, Ukraine. By his 25th birthday, in May 1948, Wasyl was in London, England boarding one of the last immigrant ships to Canada, as a Polish-Ukrainian. The S. S. Marine Falcon, a cargo boat, repurposed to transport the last of the DP's of Europe.

When Wasyl arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax, he was one of thousands of displaced persons stepping off ships every week. The port was overflowing with returning soldiers, war brides, and refugees. Processing DP's moved fast, too fast, within days he was sent onward to Montreal, where immigrants were properly registered, assigned jobs, and given contracts.

Wasył took a one-year labour contract with the Canadian Pacific Railway. He was assigned to Rossport, a lonely railyard on the north shore of Lake Superior, near Fort William, present day Thunder Bay. It wasn't by chance.

Wasył was looking for his father. The man who had abandoned him when he was a child during years of struggle in Ukraine, who wasn't there to speak up for him when the Nazis dragged him to a labour camp.

It's unclear how much information Wasył was able to gather on his father Ivan when he arrived in Canada. But it is awfully strange that he purposely chose Rossport, Ontario for his first job assignment. Given that Rossport was but an hour or so away from Fort William, Ivan's known residence for nearly 20 years by that time

With that weight driving him, he boarded the train west from Montreal. But the four-day trip stretched even longer when, at the very last moment, he stayed on past Fort William, until the tracks carried him even farther, into Saskatchewan.

**(soft piano music plays)**

A few days later, he stepped off the train at Wishart station, to fulfill a promise, and walked the last eight kilometers to Bankend, where Ana was waiting. After seven years of war and camps, they were finally free. Together, on the wide-open prairie. Flat farmland stretched in every direction. Out there, if a threat was coming, they'd see, they'd see it for a whole day before it arrived. Freedom was a blessing, but also a silence that left space for old traumas to fester. But for a short while, they allowed themselves to breathe, and live a little, maybe for the first time in their lives.

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

Not long after Wasył returned to Northern Ontario to start his railway contract, a letter arrived. Ana was pregnant.

**(soft electronic music transition)**

The plan was for her to join him as soon as she could in Rossport at his new job, but a strong winter came on too quickly. In January 1949, during a blizzard Ana went into labour. With the roads impassable, a baby was born in the only farmhouse in Bankend, Saskatchewan.

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.