

# Podcast Transcript: Granddaughter of Immigrants

**Episode Title:** The Homesteaders - Episode 4

**Host:** Erika Hanchar

**Guest:** Jars Balan

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## Transcript

**Narrator (Erika Hanchar):** They stood on the wooden platform, all their worldly possessions piled at their feet. As the train started up again, with it a gust of freshly fallen snow spiraled into the air and landed on their faces. Anastasia, holding her one-year-old son Jan, and right beside her was her younger sister Maria, holding a two-year-old Natalia's hand.

**(train noises)**

As the train moved slowly out of the station at St. Paul des Métis, some 200 kilometers north of Edmonton, Alberta, it left behind it a hollow echo that seemed to bounce off every tree that was silhouetted against a blue dusk. You could see for quite a distance the vastness of the "paradise," as the newspapers called it. When the train was finally out of sight, all that was left was an eerie silence that must have come as a relief.

**(soft piano music plays)**

It was spring in 1925 in the prairies of Alberta, but with the wind racing across the landscape, it probably felt more like a frigid Carpathian winter.

I'm Erika Hanchar, and this is *Granddaughter of Immigrants*. Episode Four: The Homesteaders.

I've got this picture etched in my brain of immigrants in the early 1900s, a dusty, miserable farmer in an ill-fitting suit, his wife in a kerchief, embroidered shirt, and a long drab skirt, children clinging to their hips and backs, tired, unfriendly, unemotional. And growing up in my house in the late 90s, we had these prints hanging on our wall of immigrants praying over a harvest. That dusty landscape and desperate and desperate looking people standing over it. My dad used to say to me, "They're like your great-grandparents," and I remember thinking, "God, I hope not."

I guess what that print didn't show was that Ukrainians at the turn of the century were irrefutably excellent farmers. They knew soil, and that made them prosperous for a time. But after wars and disease ravaged Western Ukraine, land became sparse, and poor harvest years ruined the livelihoods of many. The future looked dismal at best, but change was in the air.

Historically, the number one strategy for humans for thousands of years, when life is no longer serving you, is to change what? Your eating habits? Your hobbies? Your partners? Your profession? No. You change your location, your geography. Change your geography, change

your life. It's all very hunter-gatherer and not for the weak.

But by the 1890s, Canada was advertising free land; a farmer's paradise to Ukrainians. Canada needed the labor, and Ukrainians answered in the tens of thousands. Not because they were poor peasants, but because they were skilled farmers, especially in Western Ukraine. They were raised on that black earth soil, that Chernozem; if you know, you know, some of the most nutrient-dense in the world.

The opportunity to own a large parcel of land in just two years by farming it and being able to sell what you produce for your own profits was an opportunity not available in Ukraine. Peter and Anastasia Radomski took the leap in 1925 and moved to Western Canada after hearing of other successful Ukrainians starting a new life in paradise. But I wonder if what they meant was prairies, with the word "paradise" being a euphemism, because that's really what they got: Prairies. Big, wide-open, rocky terrain.

Peter left Ukraine first to purchase and establish their land in a little town called St. Paul des Métis in Alberta. Becoming part of what we now refer to as the Second Ukrainian Diaspora. The Ukrainian Canadian Diaspora refers to the people of Ukrainian origin living in Canada, including their descendants who maintain Ukrainian culture, traditions, heritage and Ukrainian life.

Here is the Administrative coordinator of the Kule Ukrainian Canadian Studies Center, at the University of Alberta, my friend, Jars Balan.

**Jars Balan:** The immigrants who came, came for their children and their grandchildren really, because they had a very hard life. They didn't have an easy life in Ukraine, they had a hard life here, but there was the belief and the hope that things would get better for their children and their grandchildren.

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]:** Peter, Anastasia, and Maria had left Ukraine during the period between the First and Second World Wars, in this sort of "calm before things got really bad again." They had just survived a typhoid epidemic that swept through Western Ukraine after the war that took Peter's mother and Anastasia's father and one of her sisters. The country had been divided into pieces, with Ukraine being split between Soviet, Romanian, and Polish rule. Land shortages became a real issue, so life in Ukraine looked bad for the Radomskis while they were there. But it was about to get a lot worse after they'd gone.

In Soviet Ukraine, stories of the start of collectivization were circulating, and within three years, most Ukrainian farmers in the East had been forced into Stalin's policy to strip away family farms and fold them into the state and seize their harvest. First it was voluntary, then it was forced. So food and grain had become scarce. The fear of starvation was very real, and it stretched to the western parts of Ukraine, prompting families to find new land in a new country.

**(soft piano music plays)**

**(horse and buggy on a cobble stone road sounds)**

Anastasia and Maria left by horse and buggy, packing what they could for a family of five with two toddlers into a wagon, and leaving behind more than just what they couldn't fit—siblings, parents, friends, their homeland. Despite how disjointed it may have felt at times, it would be the last time either of them, Anastasia or Maria, would see the village of Antonivka again.

I wonder if they realized how permanent this adventure would be. Traveling as two young women alone to a new world was risky and dangerous. Just the trek alone subjected them to all kinds of disease, not to mention you could travel huge distances only to be turned away during an inspection by a ship's company before you even came face-to-face with immigration at your destination.

**(soft piano music plays)**

**(train and baby and mother sounds)**

From Chortkiv by train, they would have sat with babies on their laps on wooden benches with the cold spring air pressing in for nearly a day until they reached present-day Gdańsk, Poland. They would unload their luggage and children and potentially look for food for the next leg of the train trip.

**(ocean liner sounds)**

And from there, another train carried them across Europe to Antwerp, Belgium, where they boarded the RMS Aurania. But before boarding, they would have had to complete the Red Star Line's mandatory medical checks, make sure that their paperwork was in order, and that they financially could be cleared in Canada.

A week in steerage traveling across the Atlantic Ocean meant cramped sleeping quarters among other steerage passengers, being vulnerable to contracting a multitude of illnesses, not to mention general seasickness affected between 50% and 90% of travelers. So if you didn't get sick, everyone around you most likely was.

**(soft piano music plays)**

And after a week or two at sea, relief would finally come at Pier 21 in Halifax, Canada. If you made it through immigration, which most often did due to the pre-screenings they had in Europe, then only a few hours later you would be heading across Canada aboard the immigrant

train. In all, nearly 400 hours of travel.

**(soft winter wind sounds)**

Every leg colder, harder, and further from home than the last, until finally, a wooden platform in the windblown plains of Alberta in the night in the freezing cold, where Anastasia and Maria could, for probably the first time in nearly a month, breathe a sigh of relief.

**Jars Balan:** Well, depending on where the land was in relation to the railway lines that had been built at that time... initially, in the 1890s, the first immigrants that came, the train ended here basically in Edmonton, and they would go on foot.

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]:** No!

**Jars Balan:** On foot, or if they could, if they had some money with them and they could afford to buy an ox or horse and wagon or something like that, they would do that. Often they would go in with friends, other immigrants, together to collectively purchase some stuff and load all their belongings on a wagon and make their way to the homesteads that the men had chosen earlier. But it was not uncommon for them to walk 80, 100 kilometers over a couple of days, sleep outside under a tree... come into the city, you'd have to register your land and then, of course, for homesteading purposes, you had to clear a certain amount and you had to improve the land, meaning put structures on it, buildings on it. And after, if you qualified that way, then the deed would be given to you and you'd pay 10 bucks. It wasn't totally free. And you would acquire the land legally, and that became your possession to do whatever you wanted with it.

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]:** Imagine stepping off a train. You're exhausted. It's freezing outside, and you have to carry a baby in the dark across the windy prairie. You're being led not to a house, but to a dwelling dug straight out of the earth, a sod house. Walls of dirt, a roof of grass. This is all in the winter weather. That was the first shelter of many newcomers to Alberta. This was their very first experience in Canada.

Peter, Anastasia, and Maria and the two children would live their first months in Canada in a sod house until they had the means to buy lumber and build a proper home, all whilst farming and prepping their land for harvest. There were no other family members that settled there before them, no one to pave the way for them, no one to show them the ropes. It was a behemoth plan, but with that came the promise of a future.

As soon as the nice weather was upon them, Peter took a job in a mine, like most newcomers did at the time. That took him away from the family for months at a time. But it also brought in money for supplies and lumber to build their farm and home from. Anastasia and Maria were responsible for the development of their two plots of land. They had two harvesting seasons to turn 280 acres of dusty prairies into a homestead. As two girls raised on a farm, the idea of building a homestead might have seemed like a nice challenge. But even back in Ukraine, where farm life was quite provincial, they at least had a house. And in Canada, they started in the literal dirt.

**Jars Balan:** They might have been thinking ahead, maybe an ambitious thing... the fact that

your great-grandfather was away a lot of the time mining was fairly typical, or not unusual. The men would take jobs to make money, cash that they could use to develop their homesteads. But when they left in the spring, they'd get a house started, for instance, but then the finishing of the work on the house would be done by the wife and the children if the children were old enough... the mudding and whitewashing. And then they would chip away at clearing more land, which was an arduous process in those days. There, it was all done by hand. So the women and children would do the best they could to expand as much cleared area as they could. The men would often return in the fall to help with harvest. They would bring money with them, buy things, materials, food even, things they needed to survive the winter.

**[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]:** I can barely wrap my head around the idea of coming from an established farm and home life where you had certain amenities and being willing to risk it all. It just goes to show you how much they wanted a better life. They went on to develop two plots of land and farms and homesteads. They started a real life in Alberta, and from there, they built everything else. But honestly, this all seems a little too *Little House on the Prairie* for me, especially since Anastasia and Maria didn't have a dad like Michael Landon to guide them through this new life.

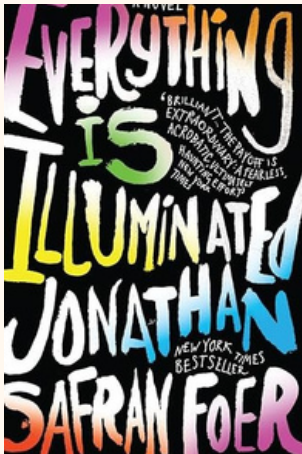
**(soft electronic music transition)**

Their dad died long before they took off on this adventure. And I just wonder... how'd they do it?

This episode of *Granddaughter of Immigrants* was written by me, Erika Hanchar, and made possible with the help of our guest historian and author Jars Balan, administrative coordinator for the Kule Ukrainian Canadian Studies Center at the University of Alberta. If you'd like to learn more about Ukrainian Canadian history and culture, you can read his book, *Salt and Braided Bread: Ukrainian Life in Canada*, available on Amazon.

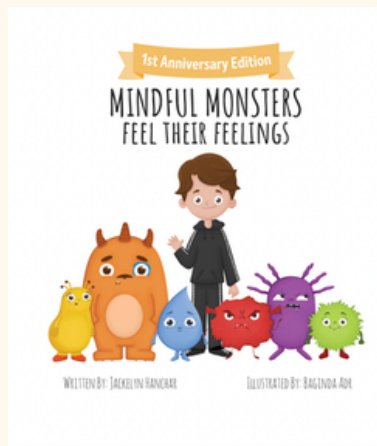
Sound engineering and design for *Granddaughter of Immigrants* by Colin Thompson and me, Erika Hanchar. Music for this episode by Semo and Out of Flux. For the full transcript and links to books mentioned in the episode, please see the show notes. *Granddaughter of Immigrants* is brought to you by Main Character Creative, a digital media agency.

# Book RECOMMENDATIONS



**EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED**

**JONATHAN SAFRAN-FOER**



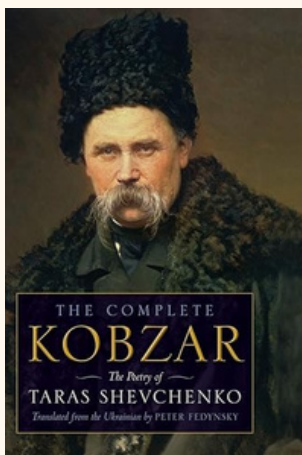
**MINDFUL MONSTER FEEL THEIR FEELINGS**

**JACKELYN HANCHAR**



**THE GIFT OF THE SHIFT**

**ANN PAPAYOTI & TRACEY MACDONALD**



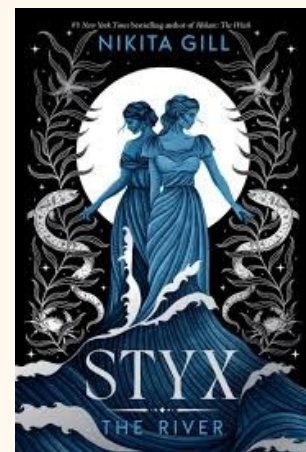
**THE KOBZAR**

**TARAS SHEVCHENKO**



**SALT AND BRAIDED BREAD**

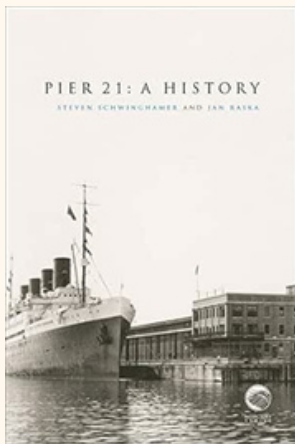
**JARS BALAN**



**STYX : THE RIVER**

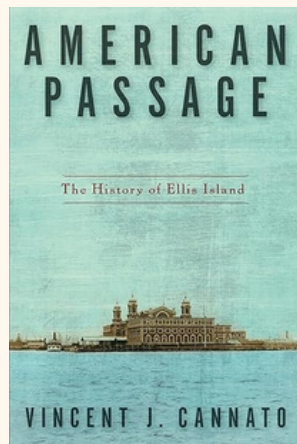
**NAKITA GILL**

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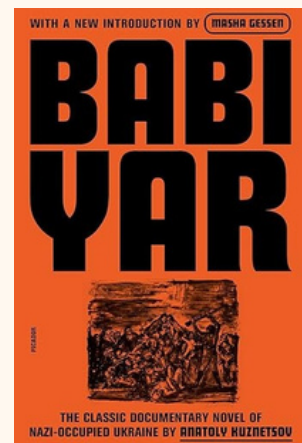
PIER 21 : A HISTORY

JAN RASKA  
STEVEN SCHWINGHAMER



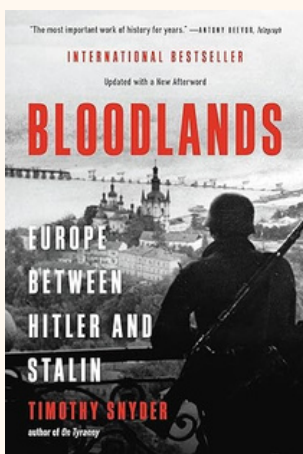
AMERICAN PASSAGE

VINCENT CANNATO



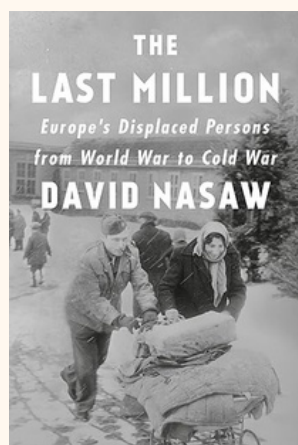
BABYN YAR

A. ANATOLI  
ANATOLY KUZNETSOV



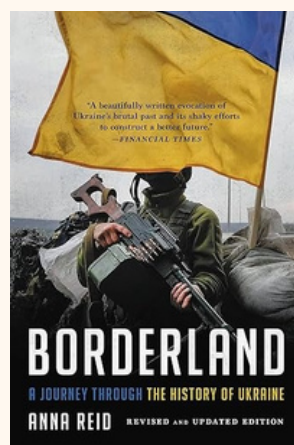
BLOODLANDS

TIMOTHY SNYDER



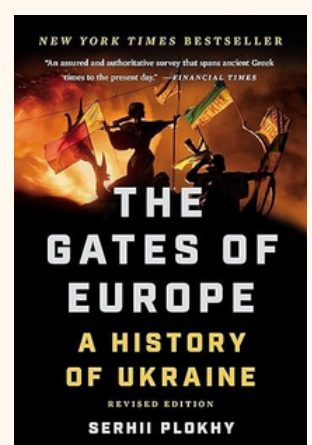
THE LAST MILLION

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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