

Podcast Transcript: Granddaughter of Immigrants

Episode Title: The Melnyk Sisters - Episode 5

Host: Erika Hanchar

Transcript

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]

February 11, 1911.

(ocean liner, and ocean noises)

(gentle crowd voices)

They excitedly push their way through a wave of moving people on the deck of the SS Pittsburgh. The air was clear and crisp, and the breath of about 200 or so passengers was visible against a cloudless blue sky. Theodore pushes his daughter Anastasia out in front so she can get a better view beyond the sea of people. But she didn't need it. From where they stood, mid-deck, they could already see her. The crowd halted, and the only movement left was from the ship as it gently navigated the New York City harbor. There she was, towering over them, bigger than any building they'd ever seen before. She was majestic and green, and as she passed overhead, before they could even see the city skyline, they knew they had made it to America.

I'm Erika Hanchar, and this is *Granddaughter of Immigrants*. Episode 5: The Melnyk Sisters.

My great-grandmother's maiden name was Malyk. But sometimes it was written as Melnyk, depending on the record. Back then, the clerks at railway companies or steamship companies like the Red or White Star Line often wrote immigrant names as they heard them. Railway and steamship clerks heard names in loud, crowded rooms with long lineups and people speaking multiple foreign languages. So, the way they heard names and translated them in that moment often stuck with the passenger for the duration of their trip, and for those immigrating, often transferred to their immigration documents and their new home countries.

Melnyk, the name given to my family potentially by the Red Star Line, translated to **Miller**, and **Malyk**, our actual name, is **Small**. So, in my family story, both surnames point to the same sisters: **Anastasia and Maria**.

Anytime I would do a genealogy search of databases for a one Anastasia Radomski, I would find Anastasia Malyk Radomski who immigrated with her two children in 1925 and never

returned to Ukraine or Galicia or Europe ever again. However, when I would search for Anastasia Malyk or Maria Malyk, I would find another story. Often listed as Malyk and Melnyk, the sisters would be listed as traveling together with the same birth years listed, coming from the same regions as my ancestors in the Chortkiv area, and going to Mundare, Alberta, Canada.

They are listed as making the trip several times between the years 1911 and 1918 as part of a mission church. The name of the mission was listed on their immigration documents, and as it turns out, they have an archival office located in Toronto, Ontario. Operated by the Sisters of Service Convent, and in 2018, I gave them a call. They were nice enough to entertain my 100-year-old research questions. They claimed that while it was possible they had records over those years and that they might have lost them, historically, single women would never have been permitted to travel with them unless they were traveling as part of the convent as either a priest or a nun.

So, was Anastasia a nun before she married Peter? The convent archives claim that they have no record of either an Anastasia or Maria Malyk or Melnyk sisters traveling with them. They have no proof that they were nuns and they have no proof that they weren't. Perhaps these sisters were not the same sisters on record. And at the time of the phone call, that totally checked out.

A final note on Maria Malyk that comes from our family lore: according to records, she married a man whose family had settled in Alberta, too. They moved to Ontario together to raise a family in Hamilton. Maria's eldest daughter even entered the convent for a time before leaving to marry. An interesting choice that feels a little like history repeating itself.

Another unanswered question regarding Anastasia and Peter was their two plots of land that they took on as part of a government land contract when they arrived in Canada. According to historians, one family would most definitely struggle to make one plot of land work in two years, but two plots of land? Not to mention they arrived in late winter with two toddlers.

I have theories. Maybe they were young missionary nuns volunteering here in Canada. Maybe they even wanted to buy land but were unable to without the help of a man, and when they met Peter, the opportunities unfolded. Assuming that much risk for a newcomer to Canada was a death wish, even for experienced farmers. But something tells me that Peter might not have been the experienced farmer between the three of them. He spent his early adulthood in the military and growing up in a manor house where his parents worked as housemaids, not in the fields. Anastasia and Maria, however, grew up on a farm in a big family, and I believe that the Malik-Melnyk sisters were the experienced ones.

This is a lot of story and not a lot of fact. But what do you do when you have so little information? You have to look at what history tells you and separate the facts from the fiction you're writing in your head. They can be independent of each other and still be part of your family story. These are the cliffhangers that keep one searching, proving and disproving the myths.

The stories move on with or without the facts. It can sometimes be years before pieces begin

to fall, and no matter how they fall, they still seem to fall together. And this story was on pause because I just couldn't place Anastasia in Canada before 1925 on paper.

I called my mom on a random night in 2024 to vent about it. My sister and I had just come back from a trip to New York City where we did one of those history tours at Ellis Island. My mom casually suggested that I look at the Ellis Island archives for Anastasia and Maria. Reluctant, because I knew for a fact that we didn't have any connections there, we had no American family that I knew of, but she convinced me that it was worth a two-minute search on the website.

I typed in her name and birthday and her village into the Ellis Island website search. And what do you know? At least 20 people with her name came up. I meticulously reviewed every Anastasia, but only one of them matched her birthday: June of 1894. The hometown was listed as Chortkiv, Poland, and the travel date on the entry document to Ellis Island was 1911, which predated all the Pier 21 immigration records I'd read. If it was my Anastasia, she would have been 17 years old at the time of arrival. She would have needed to travel with a male companion to come to Ellis Island; it was the rule, as I learned on my Ellis Island historical tour that I'd just taken.

I carefully read through the manifest, seeing that she listed herself as 19 years old and passed through all of the inspections and spent little to no time waiting to enter the United States. She did in fact have a travel companion: her father, a man named **Theodore Melnyk**, or perhaps we would know him as Theodore Malyk, my great-great-grandfather. Theodore Melnyk, as listed on Ellis Island arrival documents, claims that he was from the district of Chortkiv and heading by train to Canada.

Now, I want to go back in time because partway through making this podcast, I discovered this new storyline, one that predates the Radomskis and their Alberta homestead, and that predates the marriage of Peter and Anastasia and the First World War. Let's rewind.

(rewind vhs sound)

(soft piano music plays)

It's 1910 in Antoniv, and the Kingdom of Galicia, now known as Western Ukraine, is the poorest province in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was felt across the land on political and personal levels. Families often divided up their land amongst their children with no way to expand or produce more than what they needed for their family to survive. And this, in most cases, solidified their poverty.

The Malyks by this time had four sons, two of which were already married, and five daughters, with one married, and not nearly enough land to split between all of them. Plus, they had one

more on the way. Theodore's wife Maria was pregnant with their last baby, who would end up being their sixth girl. Opportunities were extremely limited beyond farming. Supporting the entire Malyk clan of ten children plus spouses and grandchildren was next to impossible.

But during this time, something exciting was happening, something life-changing. Theodore Malyk was crafting a plan to expand his life and his land. A plan that most likely was prompted by having no other choice. The oldest unmarried child of Theodore and Maria Malyk was Anastasia, a 16-year-old daughter, and she was to be the first of his children that most likely would not inherit their ancestral land. The family land had already been divided up between her elder siblings, and dividing it again would make parcels so small that they would be foolish to try and survive on. Anastasia and her five younger siblings would never own their own land in Ukraine, and as Anastasia was already 16 years old, it was already looking like she had no future.

So her dad made a power move that rippled across time.

Between the years 1890 and 1914, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians traveled to the Americas, responding to land contracts like the one Canada was offering, that gave immigrants with farming skills a chance to own 160 acres of land for very little money.

With his last and only chance to give his daughters a better life, he managed to finance a trip to Canada. This was more of a reconnaissance mission, a very expensive one. Expensive because he planned to come back to Ukraine.

(soft piano fades out)

Where most immigrants coming to America were making their first and last trips ever to their new homeland, this trip in today's values would have been in and around \$4,000 US. Maybe more if they didn't get the best deal on train tickets or ocean liners. The average annual income of a 20th-century farmer in Galicia would have been around \$2,000 US a year.

The Malyks would have had to save four years to make this trip or borrow money from family, and perhaps they did. Maybe Theodore and Maria Malyk always dreamed of moving to Canada, and perhaps their plans just changed. Regardless of how they were able to afford the cost or how unusual the circumstances were, it would have taken years to prepare for this.

(soft piano music plays)

But in early 1911, Theodore and his 17-year-old daughter Anastasia traveled to the Americas. They arrived at Ellis Island in February, where Anastasia listed herself as 19 years old. Minors were known to be listed as a public charge due to not having jobs set up for them in America or any connections to the country, so they most likely would embellish their ages by a few years to avoid the headache of another round of Ellis Island scrutiny. From there, they headed by train to Mundare, Alberta, Canada, the epicenter for Ukrainian-Canadian immigration at the time. It was a place to make connections and potentially survey the land and secure what one might need to start a homestead.

I like to think of myself as a planner. Actually, no, I *know* I'm a planner. And maybe that's a trait that was passed down to me from my great-great-grandfather Theodore, a man who played a

very long game. And before I'd even looked up my family on the Malyk side, and before I'd even considered an Ellis Island connection, I had already been there, twice, actually. I had already read five or six books and watched every documentary and every movie depicting even the smallest scene of what immigration during that time period looked like. I also immigrated to the United States years ago, and before I actually decided to make the move, I'd traveled there at least 20 times. I see myself a little bit in this story.

It might sound a little woo-woo for some but I believe that the pieces of this messy story, these clues, these places, were the drag path left for me to follow but my ancestors as evidence of their life and struggle.

When the father and daughter returned home to the farm in Antoniv, after what could have easily been a two- to three-month trip, the realities of life, I'm sure, sunk in fast. Toddlers running around the farm, with their youngest daughters being just five and one year old. The Kingdom of Galicia was still struggling in poverty, and the fact that most peasants were landless must have been hard to face after a whirlwind adventure to a prosperous land. I imagine that the new plan to move to Canada would still be years in the making before they could return and really set things into motion and start a homestead. It would take a lot of money, more than the cost of the trip this time around, and he still had more than a handful of kids to raise in Ukraine.

When Theodore tragically died of typhus in 1920, it must have shocked and deeply traumatized the family. It had already been eight years since their trip to Canada, not even a full two years since the end of the war, and Anastasia and Peter were just married. So the plan that Theodore was making for his family could have easily ended with his death. But maybe it didn't. Just because I can't prove that their travels to set up a homestead happened doesn't mean they didn't.

It wasn't until after World War I that the implementation of travel documents even existed for the general public. All you needed was a ticket to board a ship; there was no documentation of travel beyond a ship's manifest. So could it have been them? If there was even a shred of possibility that my theory could be true, that maybe the reason Anastasia and Maria, the daughters of farmers and a determined man with a big dream and a big plan, even thought that they could take on 280 acres of land on their own was because they knew they could do it.

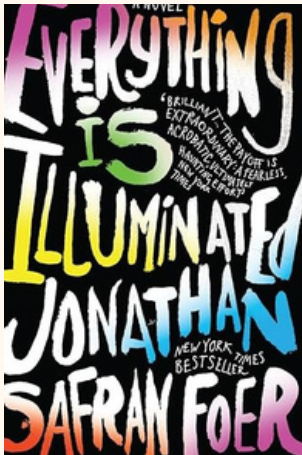
(soft electronic music plays)

At the corner of Township Road 594 and Range Road 475 in St. Paul de Metis, in the prairies of Alberta, Canada, are two plots of farmland sitting side by side. One's owned by two sisters. Farmland that before 1925 didn't exist, land that has produced harvest for the last 100 years, all because two sisters never gave up on a family dream.

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 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

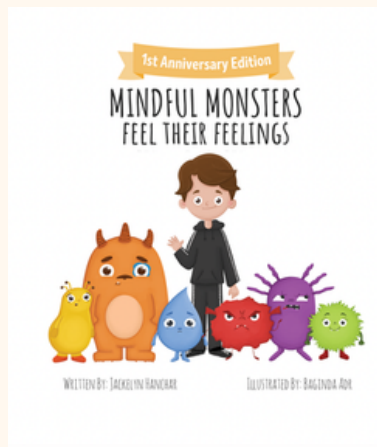
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Book RECOMMENDATIONS



EVEYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

JONATHAN SAFRAN-FOER



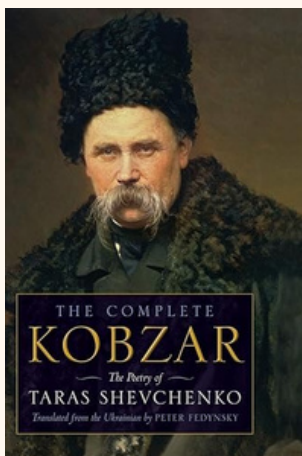
MINDFUL MONSTER FEEL THEIR FEELINGS

JACKELYN HANCHAR



THE GIFT OF THE SHIFT

ANN PAPAYOTI & TRACEY MACDONALD



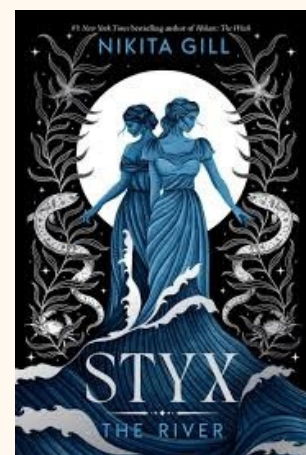
THE KOBZAR

TARAS SHEVCHENKO



SALT AND BRAIDED BREAD

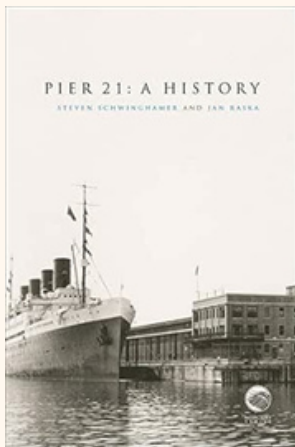
JARS BALAN



STYX : THE RIVER

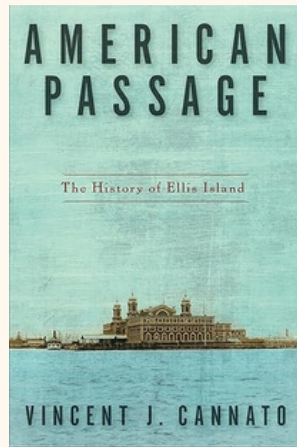
NAKITA GILL

Book RECOMMENDATIONS



PIER 21 : A HISTORY

JAN RASKA
STEVEN SCHWINGHAMER



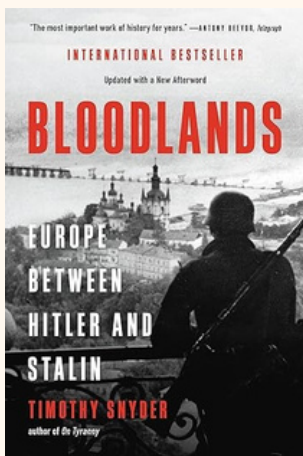
AMERICAN PASSAGE

VINCENT CANNATO



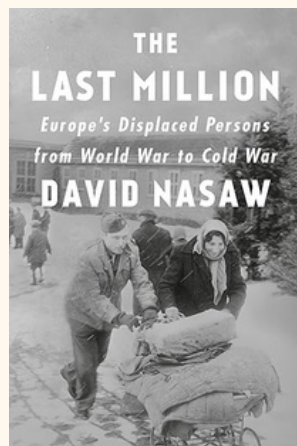
BABYN YAR

A. ANATOLI
ANATOLY KUZNETSOV



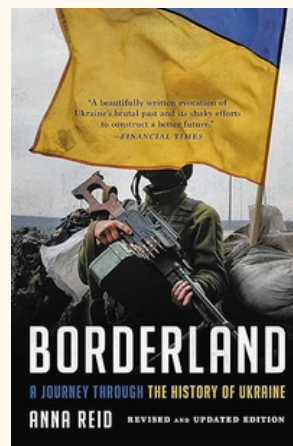
BLOODLANDS

TIMOTHY SNYDER



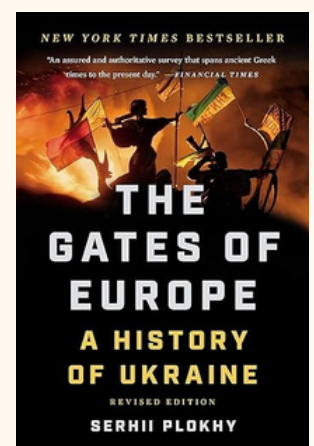
THE LAST MILLION

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*
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