

Podcast Transcript: Granddaughter of Immigrants

Episode Title: The Brothers Hanchar - Episode 6

Host: Erika Hanchar

Expert Guest: Jars Balan

Transcript

(wheat field sounds)

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: The wheat wraps around him as he moves through it.

(footsteps through a wheat field sounds)

Each spike bending to his wide open, stretched hand, and then bouncing back again. And as they move, they transform ever so slightly. Wheat dust flares, gently catches the sunlight and turns gold. And for a second, it's almost magic. *Almost* being the keyword. Wheat in Ukraine was more like survival.

I'm Erika Hanchar, and this is *Granddaughter of Immigrants*. Episode 6: The Brothers Hanchar.

(birds and village nature noises)

In 1928, about 30 minutes from present-day Ivano-Frankivsk, and about 50 kilometers from the city of Chortkiv, was the tiny village of Hostiv. Not necessarily in the middle, but in the in-between. On a street, well, let's be real, on a dirt road, and past the hand-painted village sign (whose origin date supersedes the infamous year 1492) you will see three small houses. Each belongs to one of the three Hanchar brothers.

In the first house, the eldest brother, Ivan, and his wife Sofia, and their two young sons: a three-year-old Mikhailo and a six-year-old Vasyl. The second house belonged to his brother Myikhailo, and the third house to his youngest brother, Jakob. They were not wealthy landowners, but they weren't destitute peasants either. They were family farmers, independent and rooted in the agriculture of Western Ukraine, the place that turned out that black earth.

They knew what they had, and they lived for the land. They had lived their entire lives in some level of poverty. No matter how hard they worked, the volatility of their country, no matter what new name it had, made wanting a better life on Ukrainian soil seem like an impossible dream. Growing up in a country that had been continually partitioned and suppressed, changing its

borders and names, policies, and sometimes people, multiple times during their lives, taught the Hanchar brothers not to get too comfortable in any one way of life.

Despite their skills and ancestral land ownership in the village of Hostiv, in the Second Polish Republic (now modern Western Ukraine), they were suffering in poverty. And with new laws and sanctions being forced on Soviet Ukrainian farmers not too far away, it was enough to sound the alarms. And the Hanchar brothers didn't waste any time on delusions.

Jars Balan: Life was not easy in Western Ukraine. You'd have seasons where the crops were bad, right? Food was short. It was tough; it fluctuated. But it was better than what was going on in the Soviet Union. And the fact that people in Western Ukraine had it a little bit easier and only knew second-hand about what was going on in Soviet Ukraine still doesn't change the fact that they were leaving a bad situation.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar] That was historian and author Jars Balan, administrative coordinator of the Kule Ukrainian Studies Centre at the University of Alberta.

During those years of political division, as early as 1890, there was a place where Ukrainians could go and develop their own farms and build safe lives for their families. A place where they could maintain their culture, religion, and language. If you haven't guessed it yet, that place was Canada.

Ivan, the oldest of the Hanchar brothers and perhaps more of a dreamer, was the first to be swooned by the idyllic life they could build in the Canadian prairies. Posters advertising the opportunity to purchase 160 acres of land from the Canadian Pacific Railway for only \$10 were distributed across Western Ukraine in small villages like Antoniv, Chortkiv, and Hostiv. Often showcasing lush green landscapes, well-fed livestock, golden wheat fields with slogans like "Build your nest in the West" and "Canada: The New Homeland."

Jars Balan: By that time, of course, because of the pioneer immigration, people here were writing back to friends, family, neighbors in their villages and saying, "Hey, things were hard here too." Pioneering homesteading was not an easy process. Physically arduous; it broke a lot of people. But Ukrainians are tough. But at least here, they could see progress. I mean, certainly by the early 1920s already, some of these pioneers in that first wave were getting quite prosperous and when wheat prices, grain prices went up, they did very well. They invested more in their farms again, and things were developing in a very positive direction.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: With two young sons, just five and three years old, and a dwindling future, farming their old land and living their old way of life, for Ivan and his wife Sofia, was no longer the goal. They set out for bigger opportunities and made a plan for a new life in Canada. Ivan, joined by his two younger brothers, would make the journey first to secure their land, with plans to send for Sofia and the boys within a year. He officially listed the names of his wife and his two boys on his immigration papers when he arrived at Pier 21 in Canada, stating that they would eventually be joining him.

Mykhailo and Jakob went directly to Alberta to secure their land, and Ivan took a job in Northern Ontario. Jackfish, Ontario to be exact. It's unknown for sure why, but perhaps the

plan was to make some money to send to his brothers to help with the homestead in Alberta at first.

But according to records, Ivan never even made it to Alberta. Six months passed with no communication from Ivan to Sofia, and then a year. By 1929, the timeframe when Ivan was supposed to be sending for his family in Ukraine to join him at the Alberta homestead, Canada had entered the Great Depression and immigration to the country was paused.

Jars Balan: Things got harder. The Canadian government, for instance, reduced immigration over the '30s. So as the 1930s happened and it's [the] Depression, it was a worldwide depression, so things weren't great there either, but things were tough here too. And so that might have been a factor in that, you know, "I can't afford to bring them over." You look at the numbers and they start dropping off by '33, '34. The interwar immigration kind of peaked. It was already reducing as the war approached, the number of immigrants coming in that wave, and only 68,000 came in that wave compared to the 170,000 who came in the pioneer wave.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: An entire year had gone by without a single letter from Ivan. Sofia was left to care for two little boys and a farm on her own, having invested everything she had into the Canadian dream, only to never see it for herself. The thought must have crossed her mind: *What if he didn't make it? What if something terrible had happened to him?*

But she carried on. She had to. Now a single mother raising two boys, and without a doubt the shame of a husband who straight-up abandoned her. Things were tough, and they were about to get dire. With Soviet Ukraine geographically back-to-back with the Second Polish Republic, now modern Western Ukraine, their crisis and hardships were becoming more real. Between the years 1930 and 1932, Stalin's regime weaponized a systematic plan to starve the Soviet Ukrainian people, known as the Holodomor.

Jars Balan: First of all, Holodomor is a term that only came into use later. And again, it refers specifically to the famine in Soviet Ukraine in 1932-33. There were some smaller famines that occurred, more regional famines, in the lead-up to it through drought, blight, and whatever that would affect crops. But the word the Ukrainians used initially was *Velykyi Kholod*, the Great Hunger. But over time the word Holodomor got adopted, and there are scholars who use it in a very narrow sense. They say that actually, the Holodomor should only be used to describe the period during collectivization where they actually went in and took food out and sealed off areas so the people couldn't leave. I mean, it was done deliberate starvation to break the Ukrainians. And that in the lead-up to that, things were a little bit different. People could still flee, leave the country, go into Siberia, go north, manage to escape it. But the actual murder, deliberate murder that was the Holodomor, is narrowly defined. But it's like the Holocaust, you know.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: This wave of absolute terror murdered nearly eight million people. The effects were felt in the village of Hostiv, where Sofia and her boys lived. Actually, the effects of this blatant massacre are still felt today. It was a man-made famine made by one man in particular. The Holodomor is by far one of the darkest times in Ukrainian history. It is so dark that, in fact, for fear of being ostracized, some countries to this day still won't recognize

that it even happened. And to be specific, those countries are: China, Israel, India, and Russia.

If you want to learn more about the Holodomor, and I highly recommend that you do, a book you could read is *Borderlands* by Anna Reid. But on another note, if you want to have a better understanding of what tyranny incarnate looks like so you can recognize it for yourself, I recommend reading anything by Timothy Snyder regarding Ukraine. Actually, you could probably just search Timothy Snyder on YouTube and listen to him speak. I sat in on a lecture at the University of Toronto years ago where he talked about tyranny and how to recognize it. Ten out of ten. Five stars. He's a national treasure.

At first, the starvation was only rumors. Farms to the east stripped of their harvest, families left with absolutely nothing. But Sofia and her boys, while not caught up in the worst of the famine, would experience poverty, death, and scarcity unlike anything you or I would know in our modern lives. They had no money for food, and what they ate they had to grow, if they could grow, or forage.

There was no money for clothing or shoes to protect them from the harsh weather. They would have to weave their own shoes and boots out of straw, wheat, or reeds. I cannot even begin to imagine what that time was like as a single mother of two boys, and what type of woman she was before and who she had to become to get them through it. Surely, death was all around and quite possibly the sting of abandonment.

When the father who left to get started on a new life in paradise, promising to send for the whole family, is never heard from again, it's easy for that chip on your shoulder to form, even at age six or seven years old. Or when the husband you trusted in this crazy plan is never heard from again. It's enough to fuel your worst nightmare. *Maybe he died. Maybe they all died. Maybe he found someone else and decided to live a new life.* Whatever the reason, the fact was true that Sofia was abandoned and left with the biggest responsibility of all: keeping her boys alive.

Jars Balan: Immigrant stories are varied. I mean, there are immigrants who came over and when they left Ukraine, the goal was to draw a line between themselves and their lives there and start fresh here. So they didn't, if they had children, they didn't teach them Ukrainian. They wanted to integrate as quickly as possible.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: But Ivan and his brothers were far from living in a paradise. Western Canada would be hard, laborious work. Mykhailo and Jakob, or Mike and Jacob, as they would become known as, well, they got their Canadian dream, with the land and families and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They lived out their lives pioneering the land in Alberta, Canada.

For Ivan, the end of the road came a lot sooner than I'm sure even he would have hoped for. With the halt of immigration to Canada and the Great Depression era disrupting his mighty plans to bring his entire family, it seems that it was all too much for him. He didn't go forward with the dream. After his job in Jackfish, Ontario was completed, Ivan ended up settling in Fort William, present-day Thunder Bay, Ontario, only ever making it halfway across Canada.

Ivan's story ended up being only a fraction of the Canadian dream he was after. For a while, he took a job at a paper mill in Fort William, but records show him living in a men's boarding house on the top of a café and listed as "unable to work." This description quite often meant that he was an alcoholic and financially down on his luck, to say the least. He didn't survive this lifestyle, and he never saw Sofia again.

I really wanted more for Ivan. Alcoholism is a nasty devil that ruins one's ambition, body, relationships, and it even ruins the lives of the people around you. This isn't a PSA, but maybe it should be. Sometimes we hear old stories, historical fictions, and we chalk up behaviors to time periods and accept them because, "Well, that's just the way that they were back then," or, "Things were just different back then. Men with hard lives drank. It's just what they do."

None of that is true. I have known men and women from multiple generations and time periods, and I hate to break it to you all, but alcohol addiction is the same for everyone in every time period. Ivan was no exception. His time period didn't make him more susceptible. His actions are not forgivable under the banner of "the old days." He abandoned his children and wife. I grieve for the life he promised Sofia, the one she never got to live.

As the Hanchar brothers ran toward a new life in Canada, they dodged extreme poverty and dire times in Hostiv. Ivan especially. And even though he had new opportunities in a new land, I struggle to call them lucky. Luck is a double-edged sword. Leaving an old life behind must have haunted him.

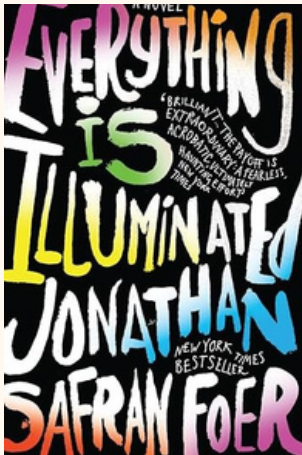
(soft electronic music transition)

Like the wheat that bends and bounces back again, everyone was forced to carry on, but no one was ever the same.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: 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.

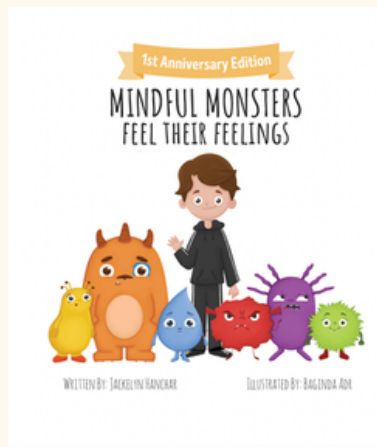
Sound engineering and design for *Granddaughter of Immigrants* by Colin Thompson and me, Erika Hanchar. Music for this episode by Semo and Out of Flux. For the full transcript and links to books mentioned in the episode, please see the show notes. *Granddaughter of Immigrants* is brought to you by Main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

Book RECOMMENDATIONS



EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

JONATHAN SAFRAN-FOER



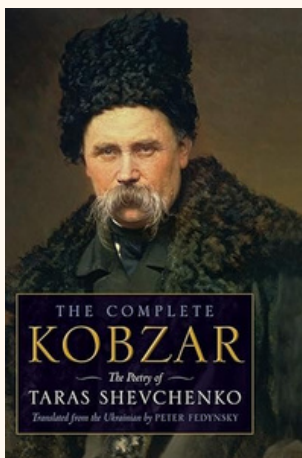
MINDFUL MONSTER FEEL THEIR FEELINGS

JACKELYN HANCHAR



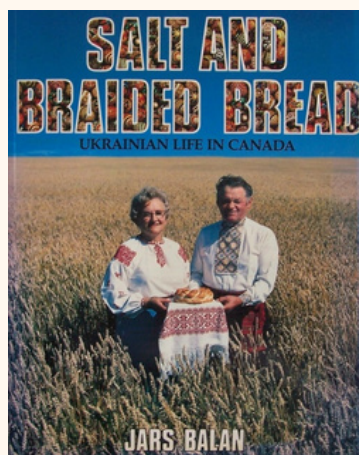
THE GIFT OF THE SHIFT

ANN PAPAYOTI & TRACEY MACDONALD



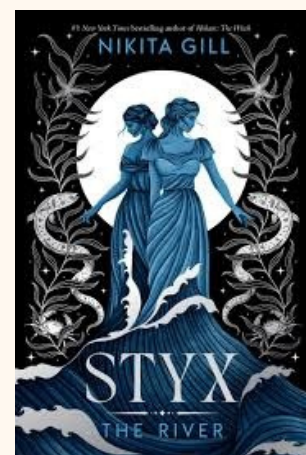
THE KOBZAR

TARAS SHEVCHENKO



SALT AND BRAIDED BREAD

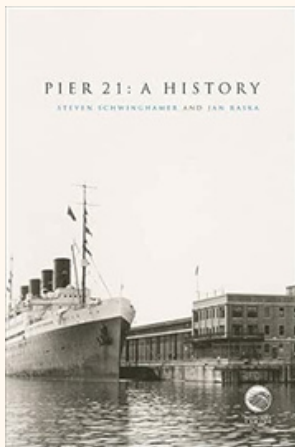
JARS BALAN



STYX : THE RIVER

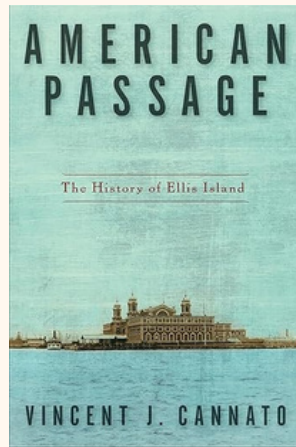
NAKITA GILL

Book RECOMMENDATIONS



PIER 21 : A HISTORY

JAN RASKA
STEVEN SCHWINGHAMER



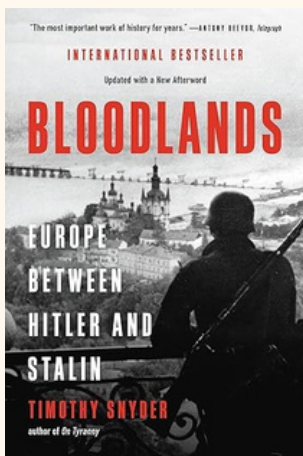
AMERICAN PASSAGE

VINCENT CANNATO



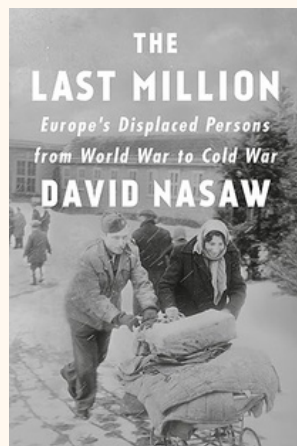
BABYN YAR

A. ANATOLI
ANATOLY KUZNETSOV



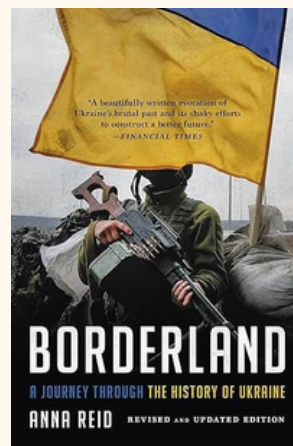
BLOODLANDS

TIMOTHY SNYDER



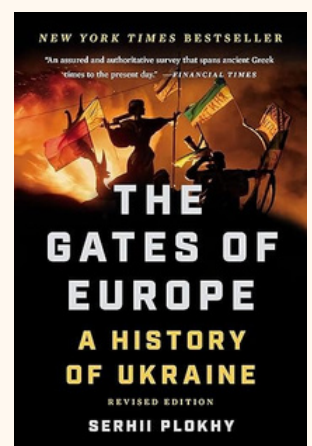
THE LAST MILLION

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](https://www.instagram.com/erikanataliahanchar)
[@maincharactercreative](https://www.instagram.com/maincharactercreative)

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