

Podcast Transcript: Granddaughter of Immigrants

Episode Title: Ice Cream World - Episode 8

Host: Erika Hanchar

Transcript

Dialogue: Erika and Her Father

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: The line muffles. I can hear him shifting in his seat, and then an uncomfortable deep breath that crackles and wheezes as it moves through the end of a cigarette. Exhale.

Father: I don't know, I... I don't know much. Again, just that he was in a camp as a slave laborer. You know, the work camps. Not good jobs. He stole that ambulance though, I remember that story with Neubretzky.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: Right, right, I remember that story too, but what did he tell you about the camp?

Father: [Clears throat] Nothing. Just that they never killed him because he was a strong guy. He cleaned up the bodies of victims in camps.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: Ugh, that's disturbing. Doesn't make sense either though.

Father: He was a prisoner in there. That's what they made them do.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: I know, Dad. It's a worst story.

Father: Yeah, well, that's probably why he didn't like to talk about it. Why would he say it if it wasn't true?

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: Right?

Father: You know what he did love to talk about? How him and Neubretzky stole that ambulance.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: My dad always found a way to deviate from the hard conversations. Breaking the silence because it felt like a punishment to even talk about.

I'm Erika Hanchar, and this is *Granddaughter of Immigrants*. Episode 8: Ice Cream World.

It's the summer of 1990, and we're all sitting on the plastic-covered sofa at my grandparents house. There's no air conditioning, and my legs stick instantly, holding me in place.

(soft piano music plays)

My grandmother brings me and my little sister ice cream sundaes in those fancy 1960s-style malt shop glasses; two maraschino cherries on top of Neapolitan ice cream. When I leap off the sofa to the table to dig in, the plastic cover tears at my skin, leaving an unpleasant sting.

It's after dinner on Sunday, so the kids' TV station automatically switches over to the Ukrainian-Polish local TV station. The screen fills with grainy images of famine, war, and faces I don't yet understand. My dad leans closer to my grandfather. This was their ritual. My dad said that he learned more from his father in those 60 minutes on Sundays than in all of the years of conversations. Almost like if they were watching it on TV, it was safe enough to talk about. My grandfather would watch these war specials like they were old family movies, recalling events and places. It wasn't for children. Not even a little bit.

(soft piano music fades out)

My sister at the time was about three or four years old, and I was around seven years old.

(spoon clinking sounds)

Her spoon clinking away against the glass ice cream sundae cup in her own little ice cream world, while I was absorbing shockingly graphic images of famine and war. It's not untrue when they say that sometimes siblings, even those who grew up in the same household, often have very different upbringings. My grandfather stares at the TV. His voice catches.

Grandfather (Vasil): I could never go back. They'd send me to the Gulag.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: His wet eyes break from the TV.

Grandfather (Vasil): You have so much food. Just look at you.

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: He's looking at me. I look down at my ice cream. It's melting, but I'm not sure if I should keep eating it or not. My grandma instinctively hollers from the kitchen.

Grandmother: Wally, I can make you an ice cream too!

[Host & Narrator: Erika Hanchar]: He would yell back something in Ukrainian that I wouldn't understand, and then he would go back to his show. Another scene would trigger another memory. Neubretzky.

(soft piano music plays)

He says his name like a punchline, a world event, or a title of a book. The best friend, John Neubretzky. He would brag about their adventures like teenagers who got away with a petty crime. They were merely 20 years old then. And he would laugh, and we would all laugh, until it wasn't funny anymore.

(soft piano music fades out)

In September of 1941, Ukraine was invaded by the Nazis, and after a near-decade of Soviet

terror, some Ukrainians at this time truly believed that the Nazis might offer reprieve from Soviet oppression, corruption, starvation that they so yearned for. Vasil was now caught in a full Nazi occupation. Here's what we know about Vasil, and here's what we know about history.

The young people of hundreds of tiny villages left their families within the first few weeks of September 1941. Some went on to new places of work, and others, well, they soon realized that their new places of work were not jobs at all. At just 19 years old, Vasil was paraded out of the village of Hostiv. Boys and men in most Ukrainian villages were rounded up, sometimes by force, and sometimes because they volunteered out of the fear of having the barrel of a gun to their head. Given jobs with papers to prove it, and it all seemed honorable at the time.

From September of 1941 to the spring of 1943, Vasil is nowhere to be found, though. He's not even listed on a single document. In 1943, he had a passport and work papers from Nazis in Austria, where he is listed as working in agriculture. And there'll be more on that later. But in those two years after he marched out of his village, he was quite literally missing in action.

So where did he go? This is where history comes into play. While World War II Nazi occupation history is messy and misleading, and for the most part of my life has vilified all Ukrainians as being complicit in Nazi war crimes, and yes, a lot of that is true, but that's for someone else's family tree. There is another truth, and it's directly connected to this story. One truth that is so horrendous, it will make you wish for the latter.

Some boys were taken into slave labor camps, basically a version of a concentration camp where they systematically work you to death in support of the Nazi Final Solution. Some of those boys were assigned to point-blank murder Jewish Ukrainians and then were murdered in the process. While other boys were assigned to deal with the aftermath as forced labor, performing soul-sucking, brutal work, often chosen because of their physicality and ability to operate heavy machinery or were capable of heavy lifting, or by the flip of a coin received this nightmare fate. And while both fates are traumatic, and I would love to celebrate Vasil's luck in not having been chosen to point-blank murder people, there is certainly nothing lucky about what was to come.

Vasil's personal account puts him in a labor camp after being taken from the village of Hostiv. This adds up because on September 19th, 1941, German forces occupied Kyiv, the capital of the then-Soviet Ukraine, and began to round up Ukrainians from the west. According to his passport, Vasil was also issued papers by the Nazis in 1941, and in his personal account was taken into a forced labor camp. But forced or not, it still contributed to the Nazi Final Solution. It's never fun to find out any story about the Holocaust involving your family. It is the looming black cloud of history, and we're all connected in some way.

As a granddaughter of people who were just kids at the time of these atrocities, we really have no control over the past narrative. The best we can do is tell it like it was, and honor the victims and survivors, and learn from the mistakes of the past. While I'm always looking for new information and new stories and new facts as documents and stories are being translated and digitized and rediscovered still to this day regarding the Holocaust, at this time, the year 2026, I believe that there was only one scenario for Vasil. And it's not because I want this story to be

true; I want this story to be very much untrue. It's a theory with timestamps and mapped pins.

There is only one storyline that makes sense, that brings together his claims of being in a labor camp, cleaning up bodies of victims in camps, and finding an abandoned ambulance. Very shortly after Vasil was taken from the village of Hostiv, it is believed that he was taken to the forced labor camp called Syrets in Kyiv, where potentially he witnessed one of the most horrific massacres of World War II, and you've probably never even heard about it.

(sad piano music plays)

It's called Babi Yar. And if you've ever been to Kyiv, you might have walked there without even knowing it. Today it's a green park, quiet with willow trees leaning over a ravine. At the entrance stands the statue of a thin little girl, a memorial to murdered children. She's elevated at just the right height to catch your attention and draw that ancestral trauma right to the surface. It's sad and abrupt and uncomfortable. It stands as a contrast on purpose, to make you stop and question, and maybe even remember. Because if I didn't tell you and you never saw the statue, you might never have known that the beautiful, quiet, and peaceful Babyn Yar park, some 80 years ago, became one of the largest open-air graves of the Holocaust. In just two days, 33,771 Jews were shot there, families stripped, lined up, and executed. By the end of the occupation, the number buried there would reach 100,000, making up of Jews, Roma, political prisoners, Ukrainian nationalists, and anyone the Nazis marked for death.

And right beside it is Syrets camp, where Vasil describes he was taken. Syrets concentration camp for forced laborers was approximately one kilometer from Babyn Yar ravine and was simply an open-air field with a few dug-out holes in the ground for shelter, surrounded by barbed wire, and at the height of its activity held about 2,000 prisoners who would become the Nazi workforce, men and boys from the farms of Western Ukraine, most who died fast under the poor conditions, overcrowding, disease, and starvation.

After the massacre of the Jewish population at Babyn Yar, the Syrets camp was down to about 500 men. Vasil claims that he was still alive during this time because he could operate heavy machinery and lift heavy things. The prisoners were held at Syrets until 1943, when they were taken to the ravine at Babyn Yar, just one kilometer away, and forced to work in a chain gang on one of the most horrific tasks of the war, in my opinion. In 1943, as the Nazis tried to erase their crimes at Babyn Yar, the prisoners were forced into the Nazi operation Action 1005. They were ordered to exhume the nearly two-year-old grave site of the 100,000 decomposed bodies and then burn them.

The work lasted for months, and when the pits ran out, the prisoners knew that they would be next. So they devised a plan of distraction and escape.

(sad piano music plays)

One night, a small group of prisoners managed to steal a grenade from the officer barracks, and in the days leading up to the completion of Action 1005, they had collected scraps of anything they could hide to make their own barbaric weaponry. This next part is 100 percent documented. On the night that would be their last as prisoners, a live grenade was tossed into an abandoned

officer's shed, causing a massive disruption in the park. The last 200 or so prisoners took off running into the forest behind Babyn Yar, running as fast and as far as they could. The Nazis opened fire,

(gunshot sounds)

and rumor has it that they shot and killed nearly all remaining prisoners, all but five who disappeared into the forest.

(sad piano music fades out)

Vasil never said that he was one of them. What he did say, over and over again, was that he and his best friend, Jan Neubretzky, had cleaned up the bodies and that if they ever found them or if they ever returned to Ukraine, that they would be locked up. And that fact alone is enough to imagine the weight that he carried. I believe that between 1941 and 1943 in Ukraine, that a slave laborer who was basically MIA until 1943 on paper, and as well in Nazi documents, and claims to have exhumed bodies before the advent of the more systematic concentration camps, could have only been at one place, at Syrets camp. The only camp known to have exhumed bodies and not documented slave laborers because they were covering up their atrocities and using Ukrainians to help do so. It was the first major massacre of World War II. I'm open to other theories. Actually, I'm praying for them.

It seems highly unlikely that only five of 200 prisoners survived, but if someone had asked me if I had escaped from a slave labor camp and blew up a Nazi shed after two years of living in a mud hut and being forced to carry out such actions, I too would say no. I believe that there was only five of the survivors who wanted to actually claim they were there. Vasil for his entire life was pretty tight-lipped about his experiences, but this story needed to be mentioned, not the exciting, successful escape that I'm historically placing him into, but the aftermath that was forced upon him.

Vasil never mentioned the name Babyn Yar, probably because he'd never heard of it either. He was taken from his village on a September afternoon in the back of a truck and driven for hours, not knowing where he'd be going, then dropped off in a barbed wire lot with hundreds of other men. He was a farm boy from a small village.

(sad piano music plays)

But if the story is true, and if he was at Syrets, then he would have heard the gunfire. He would have smelled the burning. And he would have stood, a teenager boy, in a ravine; a silent hell.

(sad piano music fades out)

I think about this **Nikita Gill** poem every time I think about my grandfather, and it feels like the most fitting way to end this episode. It's about a father, but in this case, it's about a grandfather.

"In another universe I meet my father when he is a child.

We play catch in the woods, and as we play he tells me he isn't allowed to cry.

But sometimes the world hurts him and he doesn't know what to do with all that pain.

So I give him the shoulder he needs to cry on, and he does.

He does until the tears are gone.

And afterwards, I buy him ice cream, and I listen to his laugh,

The glowing warm laugh of a child who knows that he is safe.

I wish someone could have done that for him. Be a kind, safe place for the child that he used to be.

Would it have made a difference?

Would it have made a difference?

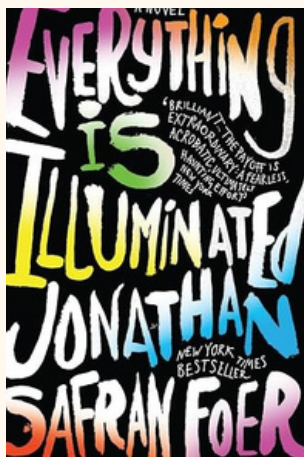
(soft electronic music plays)

And then, of course, there's the best friend he had through it all; the best friend with no record or photograph. But maybe that's all a best friend is sometimes. It's someone that you just carry with you in memory.

This episode of *Granddaughter of Immigrants* was written by me, Erika Hanchar..

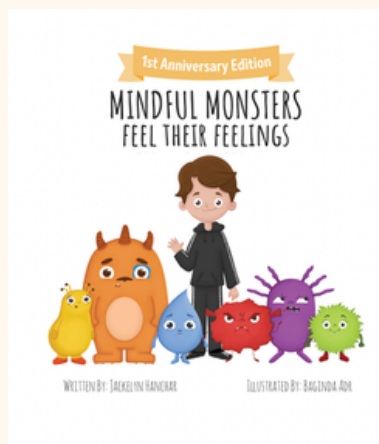
Sound engineering and design for *Granddaughter of Immigrants* by Colin Thompson and me, Erika Hanchar. Music for this episode by Semo and Out of Flux. For the full transcript and links to books mentioned in the episode, please see the show notes. *Granddaughter of Immigrants* is brought to you by Main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

Book RECOMMENDATIONS



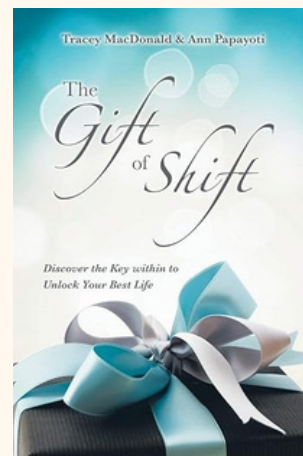
EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

JONATHAN SAFRAN-FOER



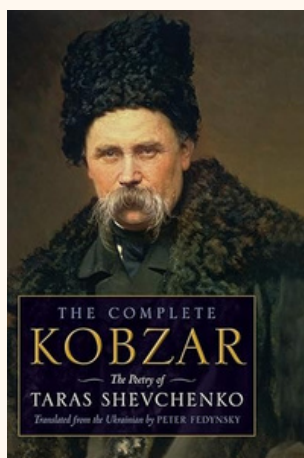
MINDFUL MONSTER FEEL THEIR FEELINGS

JACKELYN HANCHAR



THE GIFT OF THE SHIFT

ANN PAPAYOTI & TRACEY MACDONALD



THE KOBZAR

TARAS SHEVCHENKO



SALT AND BRAIDED BREAD

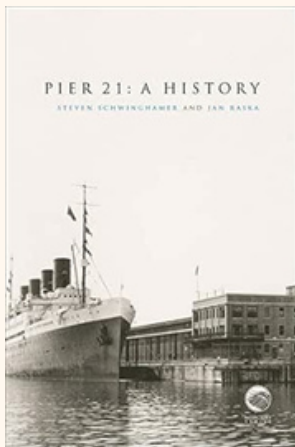
JARS BALAN



STYX : THE RIVER

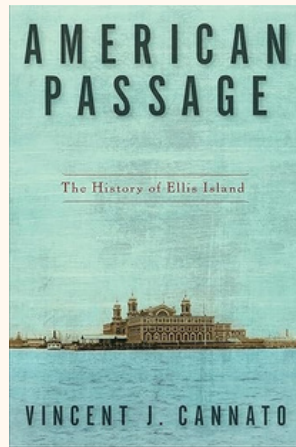
NAKITA GILL

Book RECOMMENDATIONS



PIER 21 : A HISTORY

JAN RASKA
STEVEN SCHWINGHAMER



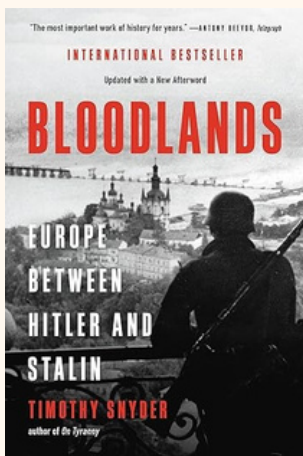
AMERICAN PASSAGE

VINCENT CANNATO



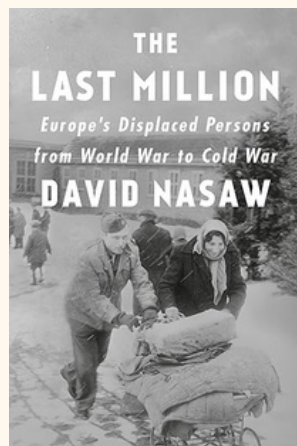
BABYN YAR

A. ANATOLI
ANATOLY KUZNETSOV



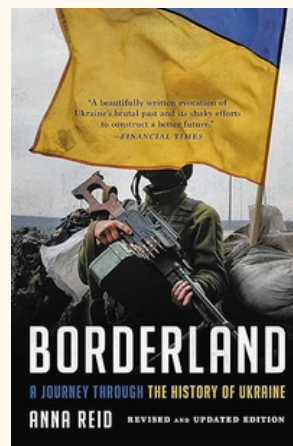
BLOODLANDS

TIMOTHY SNYDER



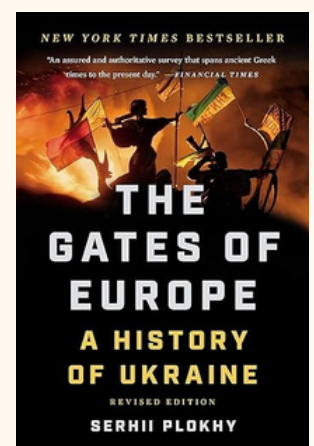
THE LAST MILLION

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
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