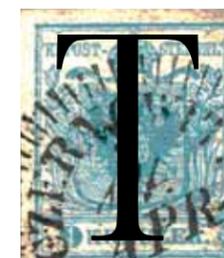


Olga Rogers
and all her ilk

Patricia Pearson



There are several paths that Olga Rogers' life could have taken, depending initially upon the choices of her ancestors. She might, for instance, have grown up in the jungles of the Amazon, if not for a certain pamphlet called "About Free Lands," which circulated through the villages of the easternmost Austro-Hungarian Empire at the base of the Carpathian Mountains.

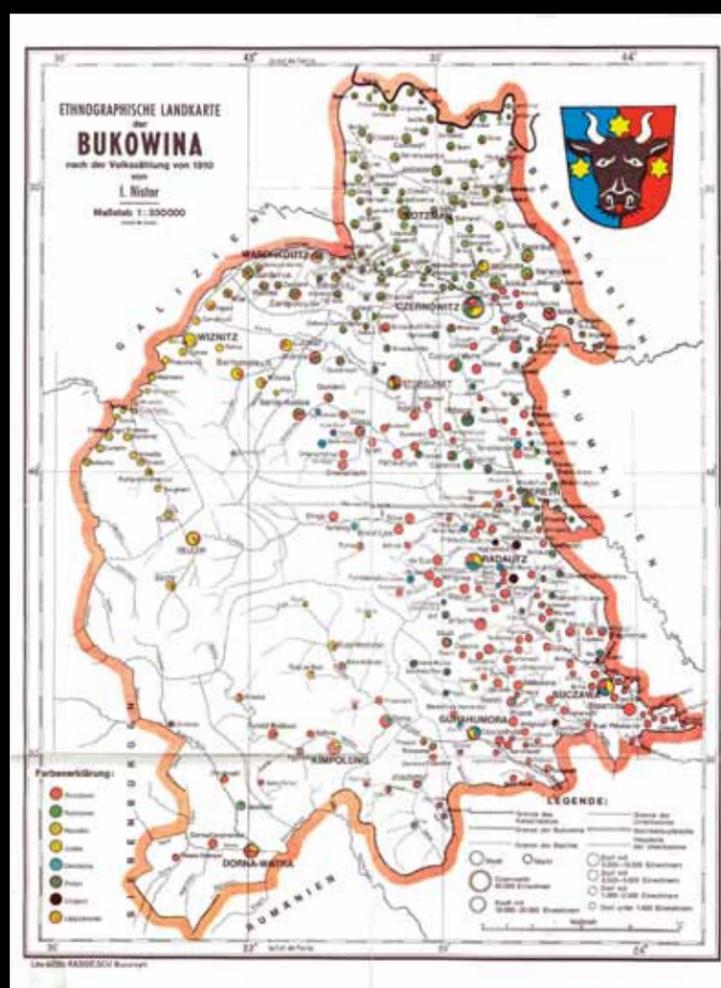
It was here that her forebears dwelt, in the region of Bukovina, a forested terrain "between Orient and Occident" that had been homeland for centuries to the Kievan Rus. By the 19th century, Bukovina was a peaceful if impecunious mixture of Ukrainians, Romanians, Germans, Gypsies and Jews, with Dracula's castle about a day's commute by ox cart. Many of the inhabitants had migrated to the region hoping to break free of feudal serfdom. Still, they could not own the forests that surrounded them, and paid endless tithes to overlords. All scabbled out an existence from the rough-hewn soil, either raising sugar beets, hops for beer, cabbages and onions, or working at lumber camps some distance from their homes.

Wives and children would take the men meals of stuffed cabbage leaves or polenta. Logging accidents in the forests were common, and required home-conjured medical skills. Without a railway, or indeed any discernable roads, felled spruce and birch trunks would be accompanied down stream by rafters to the port of Constanta on the Black Sea.

Not surprisingly, these woodland men had a facility with carpentry and carving, a custom they carried across the ocean to Canada.

How and why did they come to Canada? Well, oddly enough, a first wave of Ukrainian migrants seeking more direct ownership of their lands and forests set off in ships for Brazil. "True, we are eating corn bread," one such migrant wrote to his remaining family in Bukovina, "but it is ours." This sense of ownership, while gratifying, was turning out to be a rather slender reward given the overall hostility of the Amazonian jungle. For one thing, Indians kept shooting them with poison darts. For another, it was frightfully humid. The settlers pined for a crisp breeze.

Alarmed by these reports, an energetic Ukrainian immigrant to Alberta by the



name of Professor Joseph Oleskow wrote a letter to the Canadian government, enquiring about the possibility of land allotments in the wide prairies. (There would still be Indians, of course, but they were being neatly tucked away on reserves at this time, and – at any rate – didn't have access to neurotoxins.)

Having secured a sense of encouragement from Ottawa, the Professor set about scribbling a pamphlet, which reads rather like a cross between a real estate brochure and a horror story, entitled "About Free Lands."

Of Brazil he warned his readers, "People die there like flies. The climate for our people is deadly in those parts. Such is the hell to be found in the state of Parana." Canada, on the other hand, was somewhat closer to heaven, if not to home.

Oleskow dispatched his dramatic pamphlet to Bukovina, and almost single-handedly succeeded in enticing 170,000 Ukrainians to the wooded aspen parklands of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta in the years leading up to World War I. A desire to leave Bukovina was further spurred by the Russian Revolution of 1905. Worker unrest, peasant revolts and a rising swell of Russian nationalism were making educated Bukovinians such as Olga's paternal grandfather increasingly uneasy. Was it only a matter of time before the Ukrainian intelligentsia was put to the axe? In 1909, the Kotyk family heeded the prairie siren call and set sail for Halifax Harbour.

Most migrants to eastern Canada at this time would come ashore in Halifax and then travel via the Intercolonial Railway to predetermined points west. This is likely what the Koryks did, heading for a parcel of land in Manitoba tucked in the southeast corner about ninety miles from Winnipeg. Here could be found a few scant souls of Ukrainian and Icelandic heritage, building sod-roofed houses with steep overhangs, and working the rocky terrain. (Olga remembers playing in her grandparents' field, upon its outcroppings of glacial stone, leaping from one to another as if they were islands in a grassy sea.)

The Kotyk family arrived, unpacked and hunkered down to the business of mixed farming, planting fields of butter-yellow canola, here a bit of horseradish, there some garden vegetables, and also hemp, which could be used for oil and rope and itchy cloth-

ing. They no longer had landlords demanding rents, but they did have Royal Canadian Mounties trying to prevent them from getting stoned.

"You can't grow that hemp," a nosy Mountie complained one day, after poking around the property.

'But we use it for oil,' Olga's aunt Mary protested, 'and the birds sing so sweetly when they get the seeds!'

Humour has ever been a healing balm for stress. So, too, is a sense of belonging, and Canada's Ukrainian migrants were quick to set up various societies at this time, and to sing and practise the liturgy in one another's homesteads. Olga's father, Dmitri, was nine when he became a Canadian settler. Her mother, Wasylyna, was fifteen, and hadn't expected to be a settler at all. As fate would have it, the young Wasylyna was possessed of a 'cruel stepmother,' who sent her off from her Romanian village on what she innocently assumed was an adventurous holiday visiting a cousin in Manitoba. In fact, her stepmother was delivering her to the altar. Did money change hands? Or was she offloading one more mouth to feed? We don't know, but there would be no return passage on the Atlantic to Bukovina. Not then, not ever. "So that was quite a shock," says Olga, with characteristic understatement.

Indeed. And yet, upon such alarming developments do the fortunes of our children turn, for diminutive Wasylyna Kotyk would go on to mother nine cheerful Canadian youngsters, all of whom availed themselves of opportunities for learning in a land far from the tyranny of Stalin.

She might have been born in the Amazon. She might have been born on the Carpathian plain. Instead, Olga Kotyk was born in Manitoba's "North-East Quarter Section 108," the fifth child to arrive to Dmitri and Wasylyna, on February 8th, 1926. "They had to put a town on my birth certificate later," she says, "but the village had vanished, so then they put Vita, which is an Icelandic name for water." Water would be a theme of her life, from the lakes and rivers of her childhood to the weekly sailing excursions she later shared with her husband Buck. Less of a theme would be sod huts, which she was soon about to leave behind.