

ANOTHER COUNTRY

Janice Kulyk Keefer

ONE EVENING, NOT LONG AGO, I came into the possession of an envelope — plain, brown, 8 x 12 — on which two words were marked, in my dead grandmother's handwriting. A foreign language, a different alphabet. Yet however much of my Saturday-school Ukrainian I'd forgotten, I couldn't fail to know these words by heart. They were the reason translation was necessary in the first place — translation from one country, language, future into another. "Moyèh pòleh: my fields."

Paszport: Rzeczpospolita Polska — contents inscribed in Polish and French. In Latin, official recognition of private life: *Testimonium copulationis: Thomas Solowski, aetas 20, Helena Lewkowycz, aetas 18*. A map of fields narrow as piano keys: the land my grandparents still own in a vanished country. From the Polish Transatlantic Shipping Company, a Notice to passengers Helena Solowska (34) and daughters Natalja (14) and Wira (12). Disclaimer of responsibility — in English, Polish, Ukrainian, German, Finnish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Roumanian, Czechoslovak, Serbian, Yiddish, and Croatian. And finally, on cream-coloured, durable paper: Certificate of Canadian Citizenship, Helena Solowska. Address, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Place of birth: Poland. Distinguishing Marks: None.

Confirmation in paper, ink, official stamps of a world I know only as memories and stories: a country as different from my own as "Rzeczpospolita Polska" and the crowned eagle is from Canada and its scarlet maple leaf. The land with which I've been obsessed ever since I was old enough to know how to remember.

WHERE TO BEGIN with something that's as much a web of gaps and silences as words? Thanks to the envelope I have, at last, something definite, concrete: Pid-Volochiska, the name of the village, though it may now be called by another name. I know that my grandfather, Tomasz Solowski, was Polish: my grandmother, Helena, Ukrainian. And I know from history books that Ukrainians living in Poland weren't allowed to speak or read their mother tongue, that the language had to survive underground, in the fields and in the home. The village in which my mother grew up was then on the border between Poland and Russia:

my grandmother told me of how she once went to market in the nearby town and bought a fine pair of pigs only to have them run away and end their days as Russian bacon. More than pigs escaped — young men were always being shot at the border, trying to cross into the worker's paradise. My aunt has stories of how she and my mother would play "mourner," draping themselves in black scarves, following the coffins to the burial ground; eyes streaming for strange young men buried with no more ceremony than if they'd been dead birds or barn cats. And there were *Liebestods*, as well — I have heard of the beauty of the young men, and that of girls in shifts stiff with blood-red embroidery, their long braids glistening, roped around them. Dead because their parents had forbidden them to marry, dead because nothing but landlessness, the kind of poverty which means starvation, could come of love. They'd hang themselves or slit their throats: I have been told about the open coffins the whole village would parade to see: protruding, purple tongues cut off; chins propped, necks scarved: that's how it was then, that's the kind of thing which happened there.

Unless, like my grandparents, you spat in Death's face. The story of their meeting I have heard and reheard, embroidered so that I can't tell, and do not wish to ask, what I've made up and what is memory. My grandmother, a mere fifteen, the youngest in a family of girls where only sons were wanted. My grandfather, a soldier, a cavalry man, going to a dance in the village. Tomasz Solowski: uniformed, handsome, tall — the girls a storm of doves around him. Of them all, he asks my grandmother to dance. She is wearing a kerchief on her head, even though young, unmarried girls may wear their long hair loose and unconfined. And while she is dancing with Tomasz, the girl who was her best friend runs up to them and whips the kerchief from my grandmother's head. Instead of thick, wheat-coloured hair, there is just a downy fuzz, like that of baby chicks: she has had Typhus — her hair is only beginning to grow in. Shamed, she runs into the garden — would there have been flower gardens in a Polish village? Never mind, I want a garden here, a river, nightingales and pear blossom. . . . Tomasz follows her, his uniform kindled by the white-fire moon. He comforts, kisses her. They are married within the next month.

Against both parents' wishes. She was to have been matched with a farmer whose lands were adjacent to her father's: he was to have married his step-sister, so that the land would not go out of the family. All this is true, and yet I have embroidered, misheard: I have their marriage certificate now, from the envelope — the *Testimonium Copulationis*. They were not fifteen and eighteen, as I'd always believed, but eighteen and twenty. I also have the photograph — whether it really is of my grandmother's mother I do not know, but it is her only possible likeness: a woman encased in a black dress, with a black scarf clamped round her head, cutting off her forehead, the way a nun's coif would do. And with no band of white for relief: just black, even the shadows out of which her stone eyes peer.

My great-grandmother, come to witness my mother's birth: I have been told that she sat with folded arms outside the room in which her daughter screamed. Sat, and spoke only once, saying, "You wanted Tomasz: you've got Tomasz." I've also been told that my grandmother spent only a few hours resting after her labour. She had to get back into the fields — there was planting to be done, and no money to hire help on the land.

The land, always the land: moyèh pòleh. Thin strips marked out on the tissue paper map, snipped ribbons of land, scattered through the village, handfuls of earth to be halved and quartered between what was to have been four children: my mother and her sister and then the twins who would die before they were a year old, for whose sake, the day after their birth, my grandfather went off to Canada. I have my grandfather's Certificate of Immigration, earned by a voyage, third class, on *The Empress of France*, to earn Canadian dollars and buy a few more strips of Polish land. And here, another story, one that people tell me cannot possibly be true; one that I've entirely invented. That the man in the sepia photograph stapled to the immigration card was shipped from Quebec to Saskatoon, and found himself forced to work for a farmer who treated his labourers worse than he did his livestock. How my grandfather, who'd not been a farmer back in Poland, but a soldier, set out in October to walk east to the city, any city. And through freezing rain, tempests of snow, walked all the way to Toronto, where he found work in a foundry, a place no less hellish than the farm he'd abandoned. Somewhere in my mother's house is a memento of his days in that foundry: a metal nutcracker he cast, in the shape of a dog: you press the tail down and the jaws smash whatever's caught between them.

I PICTURE MY GRANDMOTHER and her daughters, leaving the port of Gdynia, bound for a country that's no more than a foreign word, the stamp inside a passport. The crossing — my grandmother sick as a dog in her stifling, third-class berth — while her daughters dance to the accordion music sailors play on tilting, windy decks. Young girls coming down to their mother, calling her to wake up, dance, look at the moon's face, or nets of sunlight on the waves, and she'd push them away, groaning in the belly of that reeking, rolling ship. For my aunt and my mother, a time of the first leisure, the first freedom they have ever known, or would know for a long time after. No schoolwork and no farmwork, but dancing, careering round and round the decks. Until the day they dock, and officials come aboard to inspect the cargo. The blunt, purple stamp of the Health Officer on my grandmother's immigration card. And my mother remembering this: a room full of naked women, women forced to strip to the skin to assure their new countrymen they carry no hideous disease, bear no contagion. My mother thinking

that the older women are all wearing aprons, until she looks again, and sees that the aprons aren't cloth but flesh: sagging breasts and bellies of women worn and wrung out like scrubbed clothes, hung on the racks of their own bones to dry.

Now it is the dockyards at Halifax, the porter who helps them onto the train. My mother cannot say please or thank you — not just because she doesn't know any English, but because she is dumb with fear. For this man is black, she has never seen a black person before, and the village priest has told them only devils are black. This man with his uniform, his jaunty whistle and wide smile, this is the devil helping them onto, shutting them into a train bound for what, where? How did they survive that journey, sitting upright in the coaches whirling past a landscape indecipherable as the language of its people? Of the journey, my mother has told me only one thing: how she stepped out of that hot and smoky train into the night of a strange city, to find not stars but letters scrawled across the sky. Fiery, enormous, unfathomable: Sosa Sola, Sosa Sola. When she learned to read them not in the Cyrillic but the Latin alphabet; when she read them, not in electric letters on the sky, but round a coca-cola bottle, were they more or less meaningful? What sort of clue did they furnish to this place where nothing grew — where you had to go to the store for bread and milk and eggs? So that my grandmother would lock herself in the bathroom of their rooming house (having had to patiently queue for her turn). Would let the taps gush in order to cry without being heard — cry for everything she had left behind, the orchard filled with pear trees, the cows and geese and chickens, fields of wheat and rye, root cellars stocked with potatoes, onions, beets.

I remember my grandmother remembering how she'd wept: how, the only time I asked her if she wished she'd never taken that boat to Halifax, she couldn't answer me, as if my question were not only meaningless, but lunatic, like asking if you wished to be unborn. I remember for myself the backyard of her house on Dovercourt road, the narrow strip of grass at the back, bordered by prodigally fertile earth: roses and zinnias and phlox and asters: beans and tomatoes and garlic which, once harvested, would hang in wreaths on the cellar joists: cucumbers for pickling: raspberry canes and strawberry beds her grandchildren were free to harvest. That narrow strip of garden fed my aunt's family as well as my own — could the land my grandmother had left behind in Poland, those paper fields, have ever produced so much? Could that earth have been any richer, blacker?

Blacker, yes, because the dead were there, my mother's sister and brother, twins who'd died in infancy. For years the ghosts of that unknown aunt and uncle haunted me: I would scour the old albums and find pictures of babies which I'd persuade myself were them, Ivan and Marusha, even though the photos were taken on Centre Island or at Niagara Falls, and these children had died in another country. For a long while I only knew that they'd died young. I hugged this mystery to myself, half-shocked and half-enchanted: nobody else I knew possessed

this kind of ghost, was singled out in such a distantly macabre way. And then, much later, information came without my asking. When I was pregnant my mother told me, for the first time, that Ivan had died only a few days after his birth: that Marusha had suffered all her short life, from epilepsy. They couldn't afford doctors, there was no hospital nearby, and so to keep the baby from harming herself they would put her into the trough used for kneading dough, holding her body straight until the fits had passed. And then my mother told me of the night her year-old sister died: the open coffin, no bigger than a cradle, being placed on a high shelf, and my mother, curious, not understanding, reaching up to where the baby lay. Finding something impossibly cold and small, something which she still cannot believe had been her sister's hand. Years later, my mother recounted a dream my grandmother had had, the night before Marusha's death. Something evil had come into the house — something long, snakelike, thick as felt in the mouth. She'd had to roll up this evil thing in her arms, roll it up like a carpet and then push it outdoors. When she woke she'd found herself standing outside, arms pressed against the fence, her feet and fingers stiff with snow.

I HAVE IN MY POSSESSION a plain brown envelope stuffed with tissue paper documents the colour of dead leaves. I have, too, a set of stories, memories of other people's memories. And an obsession with a vanished country, a landscape of differences and mirrors, prodding me to link scraps and pieces into something durable, before silence undoes all the strings. My grandparents' lives haunt their photographs and signatures on those dead Passports stamped with heraldic eagles. The faces of my mother and my aunt reflect the faces in their Polish passport photos the way a gibbous moon reveals the new. Sometimes new stories are disclosed — things I can't imagine and don't know how to ask for. Not long ago I spoke on a radio programme to do with Ukrainians and war crimes about the need to face and respond to, not just "transcend" the past. I spoke of how the children of immigrants had never been told the necessary things, how any history of complicity and guilt had been hidden from us. And received, some weeks later, a letter from my aunt, who'd happened, by pure chance, to have heard me speak. It was a very ordinary, affectionate letter, full of news of her children and questions about mine. But she began by speaking of the radio interview and by telling a story of what had happened to a cousin of hers, who'd been a young boy when she left Poland in 1936. During the war, Nazi sympathizers in his village had gouged out his eyes, cut out his tongue, while his mother was forced to watch. Relatives had written, after the war, recounting this. And now my aunt wrote to me, not in anger, but in perplexity: "We never wanted to burden you children with this — how could we have told you? Is this what you really want to know?"

Not want, but have to know, along with all the stories of lovers in a garden, memories of neon stars and epic journeys by boat and train and foot. The stuff that my particular obsession feeds on, threading images and words through ever-larger silences.

AURORA BOREALIS

Rudiger Krause

at the northern frontier
the early warning line
 of pine and spruce
trembles

as night spreads
 all the blinds
and curtains in our settlements
 are fluttering
in the solar wind

only minutes away
towering tongues of fire
 erupt — a corona of
angels leaping and laughing

a dance reflected
on the throbbing retina
of the optic sky

a riot of photons
 a roaring lightshow
for the deaf

mute
we stare at the awesome
wonder
 distant wings feathered with glory
on the verge of our night

within reach
within our eyes