

Oh, To Be Cool in Amerika!

I was three and a half when WWII came to a close but of those days the only thing I remember was crossing a beautiful and peaceful river that meandered leisurely between Austria and Germany. In my mind, though, the river occupied a tumultuous place full of the pent up fears that had escalated day by day ever since my family, mother, Sophia Markowska, father, Leo Kobrynsky, grandmother, Emilia Podobinska, and grandfather, Kornelius Markowsky, fled our home in Galicia in advance of the Red Army. That crossing was going to make us or break us. I sensed the tensions of the adults around me. They had talked about it for hours while we were still waiting in Austria unsure of what to do in the chaos that followed the fall of Vienna to the Reds and the final victory of the Allies. It marked the second stage of our emigration but, for me, it was the beginning of my journey across Europe and the Atlantic.

The river that meandered through the countryside was the Salzach. It formed part of the border between Austria and Germany. As I learned along the way, my father wanted to cross into Germany at the Laufen bridge because his sister had crossed it earlier with her family without problems. On the Austrian side, where we saw the end of the war, the territories which eventually became part of the American Zone were still a no-man's land, but on the German side the American Zone was clearly defined and offered a guarantee of safety that was beyond treasure. My aunt and her husband had encouraged us to make the crossing in one or two meetings held from the opposite shores of the river where my father and mother shouted their questions over the waters and my aunt's and uncle's answers came to us muffled in spite of their hands cupped over their mouths and my uncle's legendary lung capacity. My memory of these exchanges is borrowed from the talks that took place later at spam-dinners when people were regaling each other with their feats of ingenuity in fleeing the Soviets after the war.

And so the big moment for us came at the German end of the bridge. It was guarded by a very young American soldier. The age of the soldier was another borrowed recollection, this one on the authority of my grandmother's tales. However, what followed on the bridge is vividly imprinted in my mind to this day. We approached the soldier in a small caravan: my father pulling a cart of his own making that consisted of two or three wooden planks resting on some sort of home made axle between the two wheels of a discarded bicycle. On the wooden planks rested a trunk of coarse rattan, and on top of that sat I, propped high on a blanket, tanned by the sun and the wind, like a dark cherry on top of a desert. Clearly the wealth of the family. The other three adults carried bundles of food and clothes and pushed the cart from the rear. Our small caravan stopped as we came abreast of the soldier. He listened to our entreaties without saying much and then let us through the gate with no more than a shrug of his shoulders. What I remember most distinctly was my grandmother kissing his hand, to his utter surprise as he tried to yank it from her grasp, looking at the river glistening below us as if to hide his embarrassment with something less personal. And it was with this shrug that we entered the land of the Free and the Rich. I have forgotten the date of this momentous day and have nobody to ask about it now but it must have been in the late spring or early summer, a month or so after the end of the war.

We settled in Laufen for the time being. I am sure I heard it said that the war was over and that the Allies had won but at my age that did not mean anything. The only thing I knew was who was the boss of us all: the Americans. On the streets there were American soldiers everywhere, dispensing their favors, cigarettes, nylons, rides in their powerful cars, chewing gum, and chocolate that for some unfathomable reason did not delight my palate but came wrapped in wonderful silver paper that I carefully stripped from its waxed adhesive to roll into silver rings and beads that I intended to string around my neck. To say the Americans were rich was to understate the awe with which their mere presence filled us. They had conquered old Europe and my heart. I wanted to learn American and to chew gum and ride in a car. None of that happened. Instead, I played with the Bavarian kids on my street and learned Bavarian German – all the while pretending to speak American -- and I talked about the Americans. But then everybody talked about the Americans and ‘Amerika’. It was the most important topic of all.

And the first thing about Amerika for starving refugees was food. Americans, I gathered, had a lot of it. Had I been older I would have known that an abundance of food was part of being rich but for the time being I just stared.

In the months following the war, our food supply was meager, to put it mildly. My mother told me that each person was entitled to six eggs a year, of which four were rotten. I do not know how long this draconian diet was enforced or how widespread but I do know that we would not have survived without the CARE packages. They came from Amerika: Where else?

They started to arrive in 1947. This was a little too late to prevent the rickets that afflicted my baby brother who was born in 1947. Still it was cause for jubilation. My grandfather who had survived on scraps decided to celebrate the first CARE package by having a bowl of the canned soup that my mother unpacked. He pronounced it delicious. My mother took a small cup; my father and my grandmother took a sip, too, careful not to deplete too quickly our new found wealth. I did not want any for there were bits of red stuff floating in that soup that I found highly suspicious. Yet I joined all the adults who gathered around my grandfather to witness the break to his long fast. We cheered him on, I the loudest because I was his ‘little princess’ and because I was happy that our new circumstances had erased the frowns on the faces that I cherished above all. After his feast, my grandfather decided to take a small nap to help the digestive process and I went to play.

When I came back, my grandfather was awake but in pain. The doctor said that his system had been so long deprived of fats and meats that it could no longer tolerate them in quantity. “That soup was too rich of a diet,” he said. My grandfather died two days later.

I did not understand at all. What was a Rich Diet? I finally decided that it was a diet for the rich. The Americans were rich and it made sense that their diet matched their status. It seemed logical. But why had they sent us a rich diet? Not only had their food killed my

grandfather but it had forced me to admit that we were too poor for our bodies to tolerate it. It was not a palatable revelation and I resolved to keep a safe distance from American cans.

At the funeral, as she kissed my grandfather goodbye, my mother bent her face over his hands. Standing beside her I did the same thing. I had seen corpses before. After all that's what war is all about, but I had never touched a corpse before. I thought corpses were just people who had stopped moving and talking. To my horror, my grandfather's hand was cold, not icy cold, but clammy cold. And wet. I suppose, now, that it was because of my mother's tears but I found it devastating that the man who sang to me and told me stories as I sat on his knee and found warmth in his arms should end like this. This diet of the Americans had done something awful to him. The Americans were not to be trusted. That is, until, my mother waved her magic wand that admitted my grandfather to the inner sanctum of my safe place.

That safe place consisted of a corner of the world that was ruled by Saint Nicholas, or Saint Nick as he is known in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. My mother had created it for me with daily stories of little children, me in the lead role, lost or hungry or cold or frightened or lonely who find a little animal, like a rabbit or a hen or a lamb, or a cat that knows the path to this safe place which is visited daily, nay hourly, by Saint Nicholas himself who comes to make the world all well again. The variants came from the events that caused me and the other children to be lost, hurt, etc. and which animal would come to our rescue until good old Saint Nick arrived.

I do not remember when my mother started telling me these stories; I presume it was when we left the small town of Pidhaitsi in Eastern Galicia, where I was born. Perhaps they brought her some comfort too, as we plowed our way with no clear direction other than escape the raging battles around us, reminding her that our circumstances were bound to get better. But for me, they worked like magic, and Saint Nicholas became my guardian and the avenger of all the small and great injustices that befell me.

A few days after my grandfather died, as my mother's daily story of miracles unfolded and as she was reaching Saint Nicholas' expected intervention, I interrupted her to ask if my grandfather had contacted him yet. She did not blink.

"Dziadzio?" Dziadzio is Ukrainian for grandfather. "Of course, Dziadzio has met Saint Nicholas! In fact, Saint Nicholas was the first to greet him. And Dziadzio told Saint Nicholas all about you and about all of us. And Saint Nicholas was so glad to see him that he asked Dziadzio to help him with everything that had to do with little children and especially with you."

I breathed a sigh of relief. And now that my grandfather's position in heaven was official and secure, I took great pride in it and the Americans were forgiven, my trust in them restored, the cans of soup deemed edible and the cans of beans delectable.

With the steady arrival of the CARE packages, my curiosity progressed from food to the people who were sending it to us. My mother attributed the packages and our survival to

Mrs. Roosevelt's intercession on behalf of the Displace Persons (DPs). She called Mrs. Roosevelt, 'Rusveltova'. I asked her if Rusveltova was rich. "She's better than rich," my mother answered. "Her husband, when he was alive, was the President of Amerika. She can have anything she wants. She can do anything. We're lucky that she wants to help us. She must be a very kind woman. You must never forget what she did for us."

"Does she eat the food in the CARE packages?" I asked with the utmost sincerity.

I don't remember how my mother answered my question. And it did not matter since the irony of Eleanor's feats of economy ('Economy for Millionaires' – Franklin had called it sarcastically when she was dispensing her Home Economics advice to the New York Times in 1917) and of the hot dogs served at the Roosevelt White House, would have been entirely beyond us. In fact, only later did I learn of this peculiarity, prevalent among the WASPs, that food was not something to be indulged in. However, that conversation was the starting point of a highly unsystematic enquiry about Amerika that went beyond food or wealth.

In the fall of 1946 I was sent to kindergarten. The 'Amerika' topic continued there only more incomprehensible. The teachers threw words at me that did not make sense. Even simple things like continents got twisted when Amerika was involved. For instance, I was Ukrainian and that meant that my country was Ukraine where most spoke Ukrainian. I also knew that Ukraine was in Europe which made me European as well Ukrainian. But Amerika was different.

It seemed that 'Amerika' was a continent and a country all at once. And the idea that a Continent and a Country in that Continent would bear the same name threw me for a loop for years. Other than Canada I refused to learn the names of the other countries in that continent and that exception was due solely to the books my mother had started to read to me about the Great Northern Territories that were home to my heroes, Kazan, Buck, and White Fang. All I could do at the time was to repeat to myself that the Americans who won the war for us were not Canadians, though they had brought Canadians along. People from Canada were Canadians and Americans at the same time by a quirk of logic that escaped me. The people we called Americans came from somewhere south of Canada; somewhere called the United States, an improbable name that I forgot as soon as it was uttered. My grandmother showed it to me on a map. States? Why not countries? And why did they have to be 'United'? I pictured the states tied with a string to keep them from falling apart. Yet how could I argue with the people who ruled our world about the absurdity of their name? And to top it off, they were also called 'Yankees', particularly when the Europeans got fed up with them and wrote 'Yankee go home' on every wall that was handy and there were many of them. And then to confuse me further, I was told that the Americans did not speak American but English. The Canadians, at least some of them, spoke English, the others spoke French. The English spoke English. The English were, *like*, the grand-daddies of the Americans and, *like*, the daddies of the Canadians. Except that they were not called English, but British. They lived in a place

that the French called Grande Bretagne, which was not to be confused with 'la Bretagne', that the British called Brittany.

This was a lot to swallow, even as I progressed from kindergarten to first grade. And I became sure that it was a trick, and a nasty trick at that, that my teachers were playing on me, especially as I had to learn all this in French. And this was because, in spite of the CARE packages, my father decided that we would be better off scaling a Citadel other than Laufen. That Citadel was Cheratte on the river Meuse near the city of Liege in Belgium. It contained treasures fit for Barbarians like us with its deep coal mines of anthracites that glistened in the sun like diamonds, once my father had dug them out from the maws of the beast below. This was the second phase of my journey. It did not take long by train from Laufen to Liege, an overnight trip. But our transformation was as deep as the mines that covered my father in soot from head to toe: from Refugees we had become Emigrants, 'cheap labor' Emigrants at that; but we were 'better off'.

To my surprise, there were no Americans in Cheratte though, even there, I felt their presence.

Being better off, I then learned, meant saving money for 'University' for me and for my baby brother. The fact that I was struggling in the first grade did not faze out my parents. They told me not to worry, French would come to me sooner or later.

My education started in earnest with the arrival at school of my first copy of the weekly 'Tintin' magazine. I brought it home and, with my mother's help, deciphered, slowly and painfully, what it was all about. It was about a young boy, a teenager long in the tooth, who traveled all over the world setting things right while he was at it, a little like my Saint Nicholas of Laufen, but whose magic took some 40 to 50 pages to come to fruition rather than the 10 or 15 minutes that was allocated to Saint Nick. This was a magazine for me. Within a month I understood French and could make myself understood by the teachers and my classmates.

In Cheratte, life revolved around the coal mine which was located in the center of the town, just across from the school and the doctor's office, and a few meters from the Church, appropriately enough on rue de L'Eglise. These were institutions that went hand in hand for, at least once a week, the sirens would sound an alarm to notify the town's people that there had been an accident at the mine. And then, whatever injury the doctor could not fix, the priest would bless with the last rites. There was no way of keeping us, the parish school pupils, away from those gut wrenching scenes since we were all closely related to the miners and eager for all the gory details. Luckily for my father and us, he escaped intact after four years of counting his blessings.

My father worked six days a week. On Sunday he rested and my mother went to the movies with me in tow. The movies were shown in the Parish Church Hall at 2:00 pm, and every Sunday the Hall was packed with people dreaming of something better than the mine next door. For my mother and me, the movies were like the songs of sirens: irresistible. Beautiful people, whatever their circumstances, resolved their problems

quickly and lived forever, poised and secure in their decisions. They were gracious, smart, and good. We did not know people like that, including ourselves.

My mother and I discussed the stories, the stars and their clothes and gestures all week long, and all the more so since my mother eventually figured out that the English movies were not all from England but most of them were from Hollywood, and *Hollywood*, she told me was in Amerika.

That was a revelation to me. Up to then I saw Amerika as a country of rich people, mainly soldiers, headed by Rusveltova who occupied a 'better than rich position'. But those movies went beyond riches in a way that I didn't quite understand but that I knew instinctively was cool, though cool was not part of our vocabulary at the time. To describe that idea, I used the French word: 'chouette' which had some connotation to 'nice' and my mother used the Ukrainian equivalent 'klassychny' which meant 'classy' in the sense that it was worthy of imitation. This exercise in vocabulary forced me to explain to my mother and to myself what I thought was cool about the movies. I liked the clothes the stars wore and their flowing hairdos, and I liked the way they tapped the ashes off their cigarettes and the jokes that peppered the dialogue though I did not understand one word. Somehow I sensed they were witty. For all of these reasons I wanted to be cool too.

Luckily for me, my mother also wanted me to be cool. Shortly after we started going to the movies, my mother turned an old jacket of hers into a dress for me. It was raspberry pink with grey dots: a ravishing confection if there ever was one, and for the first time I felt pretty, the equal of any movie starlet. I strutted my dress to a school affair, with my long hair left to cascade in loose ripples on my back. Innocently I marveled at how easy it was to be cool: I twirled in my raspberry dress up to the podium to receive a prize (it was a consolation prize – a book titled 'Le petit chose' by Alphonse Daudet which took me a whole summer to read), I tossed my hair as I pirouetted back to my seat, and from then on I held my head high with no real clue that a consolation prize is a second rank prize given to students with indifferent grades. From that point on I sought occasions to look 'cool'. When I was in the second grade I got a fabulous doll for Christmas with eyes that opened and shut, and a head that was full of lovely red hair, and limbs that could rotate. My mother had worked extra hours at a cannery to buy it for me. The doll and I came into our own with the help of a bicycle that I got, in the spring, a splendid blue bicycle for which I had 'saved' my money since first grade. I enthroned the doll on the rear rack of the bicycle and paraded her back and forth on the rue de l'Eglise for all to see. And then I was the coolest kid in the school, bar none, natives included.

But was I cool enough for the Americans? Amerika was cool, uber-cool. The question arose because we had applied to emigrate further west since many Western countries had opened their doors to the thousands of DPs who were marking time after the war in Europe. I gathered we had applied to Canada, Amerika, and Australia. I guess that my father was tired of counting his blessings in the coal mine. When I asked why we bothered with countries other than Amerika my father told me we applied where our chances of being accepted were good. In my considered opinion, that was just plain silly.

For one thing, I knew how to get money in Amerika: you went to Alaska and on the Yukon River you found gold and exchanged it for dollars. Simple. My mother had read it to me countless times. She thought I cared only about the dogs and the wolves in the Jack London and James Curwood books but I listened to everything she read. I knew of the Klondike, and words like Prospecting and Panning. I thought it would be cool not to be poor anymore. My father wouldn't have to be covered in soot and my mother would not have to rise before dawn to go to the cannery. Pity my parents ignored my sage advice.

And for another thing, there was something about the Americans that made people stop. The atom bomb had that effect. And if there was going to be another war after Stalin exploded his own bomb this was the country to emigrate to. All the DPs realized that Amerika was far more powerful than the beggarly place that was called the Soviet Union where people had to scramble for food and shelter and clothes and where movies and movie stars did not exist.

That is not to say, however, that my convictions were neatly articulated and ready to be spewed off when the need arose. In fact, these were not so much convictions as feelings that sprang forth in a haphazard way. But when I learned that my best friend Orysia was emigrating to Canada these feelings was all I had to point out to her the errors of her way.

I cared about Orysia. She was Ukrainian, taller than me, smarter than me, older by a year, but she was in my class and every day we walked home from school together with two other best friends: 'Krzistina', a Pole, and Cri-Cri, the only native and the daughter of the mine owner. Krzistina's family had also applied to emigrate to some country or other.

With the talk of emigration running wild through the mining town, the four of us rehashed our takes on the pros and cons of the new options available to our families. Cri-Cri who obviously had overheard her father worrying about operating the mine without the DPs, was the most vocal. Cri-Cri wanted to know why Orysia would want to emigrate so far away while Belgium was offering us advantages unparalleled in our experience?

I too wanted to know what my friend and her family thought they might find in Canada, but our arguments seemed to go round in circles, leaving me frustrated at my inability to put my thoughts in order and advance my case for Amerika.

However, one day, I surprised myself. I remember the talk had become heated. Krzistina had announced that she considered the most beautiful language in the world to be Polish. She pointed out the sounds such as 'ian', 'ien', that were the most melodious in the world.

The rest of us did not like this, one little bit.

Orysia seized the moment immediately to defend our own tongue.

“That’s nothing. In Ukrainian, we have the ‘sh’, ‘ch’, ‘shch’ ‘tch’ that are even softer,” she stated with great force.

Cri-Cri, with the authority of her father’s position over ours, put in her word for French. “Listen. No other language has the ‘e muet’ and the rhythm that French has!”

I paid attention, wondering what else could be added to the discussion when suddenly I was inspired.

“You’ve got it wrong. All of you. The most beautiful language is American. And do you know why?” I sucked in my breath the better to start enumerating all the things I knew and liked about Amerika, movies, stars, silver wrappers, White Fang, Gold, chewing gum. But instead what came out of my mouth was, “Because they won the war, that’s why!”

To my chagrin, my classmates burst into laughter. But for once I just let them laugh. I knew I was right. That was the proof I had been looking for. Amerika was It. Amerika was the center of the universe. And that’s why I wanted to emigrate there. Everybody wanted to do what the Americans were doing. Everybody talked or wanted to talk American. And that’s why it was the most beautiful language in the world and that’s why I wanted to be there.

Unfortunately, I learned at home that we were going to emigrate not to the United States but to Canada.

I protested.

“Why aren’t we going to Amerika?”

“Because Canada accepted us.”

“Didn’t Amerika accept us?”

“They don’t like to take people who’ve had contagious diseases.”

So that was it: the Americans did not want *me*. I had caught tuberculosis in Germany and now, though I was cured, the Americans sensed there was something wrong with me. There was nothing to do but to switch my allegiance to Canada.

Canada was not bad. We were going to Canada as ‘Political Emigrants’. Evidently Canada did not mind that I had caught tuberculosis. Also, I reasoned that, with the gold in the Yukon Territory, Canada would soon rival Amerika in riches. What’s more, this was to be our last move. My father promised it to me.

He and I discussed all this on the cold Atlantic on the ship, “Miss Nelly” that carried us from Bremerhaven to Halifax in June 1951. By that time I was almost ten and I remember I was cheered by the thought of settling down finally in Montreal, even if it was far from the Northern Territories. But I still had a lot of questions, most of them beyond answering and definitively beyond my comprehension.

“Are you going to work in a coal mine again or are you going to go to a gold mine?”
“No. I’m getting too old for that kind of work. But I think I’ll be able to borrow \$200, perhaps \$250 and that should tidy us until I find a new job.”
“Will we be rich?”
“Oh, no. But we’ll be all right. You’ll see.”

From Halifax we took the train to Montreal. The money my parents had so assiduously saved for University amounted to \$20.00 (Canadian) and just about paid for the trip. Orysia’s family greeted us at the train station.

Within a few days of our arrival in Montreal my father’s carefully laid out plans hit a snag. He discovered that Canadian banks lend money only to people who had something with which to cover their borrowings. We had nothing: no collateral let alone securities of any kind. Yet we needed to pay the rent for a modest apartment and put food on the table to say nothing of the warm clothes necessary to meet the unforgiving Canadian winter. My father started looking for a job immediately. It immediately became clear that money would remain the fulcrum for the family. And it did for just over fifteen years. My first lesson in Canada was that there was no distinction between political emigrants and those who came as cheap laborers.

Materially we were not better off than in Cheratte. From our arrival, it took my father close to five weeks to find something in the port of Montreal unloading cargo and during those weeks it seemed the sword of Damocles was hanging over our heads on an ever more tenuous string. Afterwards when my father applied to some plant or garage or shop for a more permanent job he competed with all the soldiers who were returning home from the war. And then, after he was hired at ‘Dominion Bridge’, the seniority system made him vulnerable to the massive layoffs that shook the economy in frequent and violent spasms in those years. My mother worked at first at a sweatshop, sewing, and then cleaning houses. My parents were not picky. They took anything that was available just like in Belgium.

For me, the change was drastic. I had lost the insouciance that marked my childhood. I became aware of every bill and expense we chased, often in circles. Gone were the Sunday afternoons at the movies in the parish Hall on rue de L’Eglise. We were so immersed in our daily grind that I didn’t even notice it. Gone, also the stories, Saint Nicholas, Buck, Kazan, and White Fang. Saint Nicholas, I had outgrown even before leaving Cheratte. As for the others I now preferred reading on my own. And reading was what I did most assiduously. My grades finally improved and so did my awareness of my DP background. In retrospect, it was the most sensible way to fit into my new country.

To get out from under, in 1955 or 1956 my parents bought a small store with our small savings and a loan from the Ukrainian Credit Union. The Credit Union had found a slight walk-around the problem of collateral: it made loans to people who could find friends or acquaintances who’d vouch for them. At the store my father sold, rented, and repaired beaten-down bicycles. I was the support staff called upon to translate: contacts with our French Canadian neighbors, with teachers, doctors, petty officials of all ilk. At first, my

parents enrolled in classes designed to teach English to foreigners but it became evident very quickly that they had neither the time nor the energy to focus on a new Language while at the same time providing for the family. My own English was laborious and I operated almost exclusively in French. We lived in the small industrial suburban town of Lachine on the outskirts of Montreal.

The store was too much of a seasonal business to provide the family with a steady income, once the loans were serviced. In the winter of 1956-57 my father worked at the store by day and by night as a janitor at a motel that was about three or four miles away from home. He finished usually after one o'clock. The last bus was at 2:00 a.m. The day he missed the last bus marked the low point in our efforts to make a go of it.

It happened on a late January night. My mother woke me, perturbed that it was well after 3:00 in the morning and he had not arrived home yet. Could I call the police. Of course I got the brush off. The police told me not to worry, he'd be back home when the bars closed. I didn't know when the bars closed but I did not want to relay that message to my mother with its dismissive interpretation. Then I called again to see if there had been any accidents reported between the motel and our home. That the police took more seriously, and I was able to tell my mother that the hospitals in the area had no record of him. We waited together, peeping through windows covered in frost. Typically the temperatures reached 20 to 30 degrees below zero Fahrenheit in January. But it seemed much colder that night. My mother and I took turns to blow on the window panes to soften the frost that we then scratched off with our nails. The scratching made a high-pitched noise that jarred our nerves even further but we did not stop. Around 4:00 am we heard muffled foot steps outside. My mother sighted her relief. "I'll go and run a hot bath for him." I greeted my father at the door. His face was such a deep and unhealthy red that I was gripped by the same scary feeling I got at the pit of my stomach in Cheratte when the alarms sounded and the miners limped out exhausted from the mouth of the mine, one by one. His hands were cold and clammy. But he was back.

I thought we were paying an inordinate price for the privilege of living in Canada. Was our freedom worth all that? It seemed very expensive. I shared my doubts with my parents but my father was in no mood to listen: we had no choice but to persevere. He was right, of course. However, I found myself impotent in the face of the hardships that confronted me and my family and I searched for a meaning to freedom that would justify my parents' faith and hope. I found none. I did not think I was exercising any special freedom that needed protection. Seeing my doubts, one day my mother told me of the terror that reigned in our town within a few months after the Soviets invaded Western Ukraine in 1939 following the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Pidhaitsi was a small town south west of Lviv that had two elementary schools. My mother was the principal of the 'Stare Misto' (literally, Old Town) school. As soon as the Soviets arrived she was sent to be re-educated in some camp in the new precepts: Russian language, a new version of our history, communist economics and communist doctrine. The re-education of the general population was more brutal.

My mother talked to me often about her friends and her life in Galicia. But none of her stories had a greater impact on me than Marusia's, one of her pupils in Pidhatsi.

“When the Soviets came to town and it became clear to them that people rejected them and their doctrine, they started to arrest the dissenters and to deport whole families to Siberia under the smallest pretext. The first time they came to our town was in early December very early in the morning. It must have been around 3:00 o'clock in a convoy of heavy trucks that left tire marks in the snow. They woke us all up. And we peered through the windows in the dark. They had stopped in a little clearing by the main road and soldiers, in small groups, armed with a list of names and rifles knocked at some doors. They knocked at the door of Marusia's family who lived across two small gardens from us. Marusia came to our house to let us know what was happening to them. She told us they had been given half an hour to pack whatever they could into a small suitcase for a journey far away. That was all she knew. She went back quickly in her flimsy dress and shawl. When she left I looked out of the window and it was only then that I noticed from her foot prints that she did not have shoes on. She must have been nine or ten at the most. Later we learned that they had been taken somewhere to Siberia.”

My mother paused, looked at me to make sure I understood what it meant to go to Siberia in December in a light dress with only a shawl for warmth, and bare footed, and then, presumably satisfied by the expression on my face, continued her story.

“In our schools, the Soviets planted an informant in every class who reported on the teachers and the pupils. The townspeople thought that's how the Soviets came up with the lists for Siberia. At first they told their children to think before they spoke. And the children tried to be careful. I saw them struggle. But often they said something that seemed innocuous but later on proved to be damaging to their families or their neighbors. So then the people told them not to talk about family or neighbors and only to answer the questions that the teachers asked. And the teachers tried to stick to the material provided by the texts that had been vetted by the authorities. And we tried to ask general questions that kids could answer together so that nobody would be singled out. But what we were doing was muzzling the students, our own children. And ourselves.”

Here my mother's face turned red and her voice rose in fury at her past but her fury was deliberate as if she really wanted me to 'get it', both the conditions in Pidhatsi and her passion. “Guess what happened? When the kids stopped talking and asking questions they became dumb. Do you understand me? We became dumb. Stupid. We dummed ourselves down.” She shook her head, very calm now, her eyes boring into me. “The kids ended-up learning by rote. I did not want that for you, for us, ever.”

When she put it that way, it seemed that the sole purpose of our immigration was to have me ask questions right and left. Could there be an argument less dramatic for leaving Pidhatsi and Galicia? I wished for something with more punch, something in Technicolor, that I could use with my French Canadian friends. It would have been sassier to present our case as a matter of life and death: Shouldn't we have come to the

West to escape Marusia's fate and to avenge her probable death? But instead the burden of proof lay in my ability and willingness to probe my world.

My first step towards this worthy goal was to look at my school, very French and very Catholic. My favorite book at that time was the saga of a French Canadian family written by Gabrielle Roy, "Bonheur d'occasion". The family lived in a quarter of the city that was called St Henri which happened to be where my father bicycle shop was. It was a working class neighborhood full of two-storied apartments with stair cases built on the outside like so many fire escapes. That particular area was at the bottom of Mount Royal. Wealthy people lived on the mountain and the foothill, by contrast, was home to a preponderance of French Canadians and to a variety of immigrants, from those who settled in the nineteen hundreds to the new comers like us. I felt very much at ease there when I 'helped' my father on Saturdays. It was like Cheratte without the mine, with the same street names invoking the blessings of saints at every corner. My father's store was on rue St Jacques (St James) and it was flanked by two churches, one Catholic and one Protestant. Between the two churches there was not much to choose: both were old and tired and their parishioners were just as old and tired. Neither of the churches played a role in the lives of the people of St Henri. I remember the evening I entered the Catholic one and the echo of my footsteps in the empty chambers forsaken even by the immigrants. That was because we, the immigrants, knew the rules of the game even without being told: money and power resided on the slopes of Mount Royal. This was the path from the port to the bank. The Churches on the mountain were full of people. Gabrielle Roy's characters did not make it to the bank or to the churches on the mountain and I felt a great affinity with them. And though I thought it cool to pit one's wits against the mighty my father thought it more efficient to relocate his store in an area populated by more affluent Irish, Jews, Italians, and French and where the lingua franca was English.

Most immigrants sent their children to the English Canadian schools and sided with the English in matters of language, jobs, and politics. I discovered that side when my father relocated the store to the Notre Dame de Grace district. And I discovered the English were a different breed altogether.

To get to know them I first had to learn English and that I learned at summer camp from the Ukrainians kids whose families had come directly to Canada from Germany or Austria. And then I read. To start with I re-read the Jack London stories in their original and when I became more fluent, I discovered Robertson Davies and Stephen Leacock and that wonderful cartoonist Giles whose magic was as dry as them came. My mother told me that this was known throughout the world as 'British humor'. It did not open any gates to any banks but it expanded my notion of cool.

My most important foray into the English world happened through a man I met skiing in the Laurentian Mountains. This man had impeccable WASP credentials which, unfortunately were irrelevant in my world, He had been 'smoked at' by several tutors and had just been entered the 'Brain-Drain' economy class for shipment abroad to disseminate England's brand of cool, which was in high demand around the world. I was

not blind. His posture was cool, his dress was cool, his accent was cool, but best of all his wooing of me was incredibly cool. We were married within six months of our first meeting in spite of a separation of 500 miles. The kicker in that relationship was that he had found his niche in the United States. To follow him I would have to apply, once again, to Amerika. I was twenty-one.

By association with my husband I too became cool, at least for a short time. I could sense it at every turn. The American consulate in Montreal looked at my application with a benevolent eye. Tuberculosis? There were no blemishes on my lungs. A waiting time of 27 years for Ukrainians? No problem. I could come on the British quota which was never full. Papers written in a foreign language? My papers were in Ukrainian and Latin or Polish and Latin, and Latin was not a foreign language. No translation was needed. I was welcomed.

What I expected to find in Amerika was glamorous people and guns.

Guns I found aplenty.

Three and a half months after I arrived in Amerika, President Kennedy was assassinated. On television Walter Cronkite blinked. At the local beauty parlor where I was getting my hair done, people blinked, and I blinked. The nation blinked. The only person who retained her poise and composure was Mrs. Kennedy. She was stoic. Alone, with two small children at her side, she epitomized grief and dignity and courage to a country glued to its television sets. And as soon as it became apparent that the assassin acted alone and that no insurrection was going to take place, the country showered Mrs. Kennedy with admiration and even adulation. She became a celebrity dodging paparazzi and for the middle class an icon to be emulated. Not to be left by the road side I bought myself a pair of oversized sun glasses that swallowed my face into a toothsome grin. This was by any means easier to tackle than gun control. I mean shopping.

It is not that I want to give a short shrift in this account to my efforts to understand the issue of gun control and then of the Vietnam war, and abortion and feminism. I listened, I read, I attended seminars and rallies; I even joined the League of Women Voters where I reported on school funding programs. My mother in Montreal was proud of me and kept tabs on my activities. But I found it hard to explain to her the level of intercourse. Americans were extremely well read. Amerika, I slowly found out, was full of talking heads. They headed institutes commonly referred to as 'Think Tanks'. And every University and every ideological group had one. And each talking head was more articulate than the next. The extraordinary thing was that all this chatter did not dissolve into sophistry. I guess the ideological groups were too sincere for that to happen. But the chatter often turned into rants. There was no dummifying down in Amerika but I got lost in the volley of arguments that became so refined that they served as a label rather than a means of persuasion.

Clearly words were not enough to sway people. And in the floundering, Amerika lost some of its cool. Shopping was not enough to restore public-self image, no matter how

hard people tried to copy the celebrities of the hour or used the dollar as a proof of American might. The low point came with the photograph of a Vietnamese child running, crying, her arms flailing in pain at the napalm that covered her and burned her. She was naked, the napalm having burned through her clothes and all the more pathetic. The picture was taken in 1972. It was shown on the televised evening news by Walter Cronkite and reprinted in countless journals. I saw the picture and I thought of Marusia. It was a wakeup call to the nation. The picture, in effect, inspired the people to put an end to the Vietnam conflict.

With the end of the war a softer image of Amerika crept into the media and ushered a new notion of cool that was more natural, more individualistic but at the same time more inclusive. My children, two girls, thought me the ins and outs of this new age cool. But as a country it took Reagan to recapture Amerika's cool standing in the world. There was no ambiguity with Reagan. He personified cool. He was savvy. He had a bon mot for all occasions and the courage of his convictions. He used strong words like 'evil', 'right', and 'wrong'. He managed to heap ridicule on communists and Stalinists and all the mindless apparatchiks who toiled like robots to keep people subjugated to the will of a tyrant. He made the ridicule stick to the Kremlin and its elaborate bureaucracy as they produced prisoners while the West and Amerika produced wealth. And even before the Cold War was won by the West I completely identified with Amerika. I thought life was good again, we were rich again, sure again and I forgot that the path to freedom was a tough one for the citizens of the Soviet Union and that their attempts to free themselves from their prison chains was not ridiculous. And so it was that the price we paid for winning the Cold War was to minimize, not to say, trivialize the struggles that were still going on for the most basic rights and needs.

That point was brought home to me in 1985 with an incident, small in the overall scheme of things but huge as far as testimonial to the harshness of ordinary lives of Ukrainians under the Soviet Union even during the perestroika years.

In October that year, a Ukrainian sailor, Myroslav Medved, jumped ship in New Orleans. Twice. His ship was the Marshall Koniev, a freighter. Both times he requested but was denied asylum in the United States by authorities from the Border Patrol and was returned forcibly to his ship and then to the USSR. I was stunned. Just what was the reason for that?

The Medved request for political asylum was quite different from the economic migrations of Porto Ricans or Mexicans. This was more like the Cuban Mariol boat exodus, where American authorities did not send the poor devils back to the tender mercies of the Castro regime, whether they were criminals released from prisons on purpose or dissenters seeking freedom. Why was the Medved case different, I wondered.

In the Ukrainian American newspapers, there was talk of bad timing as the request came just when Reagan was about to meet with Gorbachev. But there was also talk of the repatriation clauses that were hammered out in Yalta in February 1945 among the Allies.

Those clauses stipulated that nationals from the Soviet Union were to be sent back to the Soviet Union if caught by the Americans, the British or the French.

I did not know if the Yalta Agreements were still in effect in 1985 but I took Medved's side without hesitation. It seemed to me that Medved qualified for asylum because he was at risk of serious mistreatment upon return to the Soviet Union for the Soviets did not take kindly to defectors.

Over the years I had learned what punishments were inflicted on people who dissented from the Soviet approved line of conduct. With my parents I had discussed on multiple occasions what would have become of us had we been sent back to the Ukraine in 1945 or 46. There was a chance, they had told me, that my father would have been executed. But if not, the likelihood of him and us being sent to Siberia, was very high. We would have been hungry for there were no CARE packages in the Soviet Union. My father would have returned from work battling the bitter cold, harsher than the cold of Montreal. He would never have owned a store that was his to run as he pleased. My mother might have been teaching at some kholhosp school but more probably, since she was Polish and Roman Catholic and had been already re-educated once when the Soviet first came to Pidhaitsi in 1939, she would have been working the fields or building roads. My grand parents would have died regardless, but with their hopes for a better future for their family in shreds. My brother would likely not have survived, but I might in some orphanage of the State choosing.

Besides, I knew about the brutality of the punishments from a story that my father told me when we were still living in Belgium. In the story he described the whips that were at the disposal of the NKVD. They were made of ropes and knotted at various lengths. I misunderstood the context of the story and I asked if the cattle or horses would not turn on whoever whipped them. My father laughed.

"The whips were not for cattle or horses," he said. "They were for people. Cattle were too precious to be whipped."

And if memory serves me right, those whips were also used by the Gestapo to bring order to a recalcitrant population.

It was lucky for us that we had lived in Western Ukraine, a part of the country that was not subject to the Yalta repatriation clause because the western borders of Western Ukraine pre-dated the Soviet invasion of 1939, having been in place during the Austro-Hungarian times. But in Austria in 1945 that would not have been enough to save us from the trawling Soviet Patrols who repatriated first and asked questions later. For the first time I finally fully understood the urgency with which my parents wished to flee to the American Zone.

Medved was less lucky: after his return to the Soviet Union he was sent to a psychiatric aisle of a Soviet prison where he was treated with electric shocks for two years. Later, after the electric shock treatments he became a priest and returned to the United States.

The main repatriation push, for civilians or soldiers, lasted approximately from 1945 to 1956. It was known by the name 'Operation Keelhaul', and for good reason. It was ugly and brutal and it sent an estimated five million people to Siberia, the Gulag, or the execution squad. People who were caught in the Soviet nets viewed the sentence with deep despair choosing frequently to commit suicide rather than return to a land ruled by a tyrant. And I do not know if these suicides were included in the estimates. This was not a small operation. But few denounced it; the exceptions were Nikolai Tolstoy and Julius Epstein, and that was much later, after the fact. Otherwise, there did not seem to be much awareness or interest about it. People were just tired of the war and its misery.

But my grandmother and grandfather and my parents – and I -- were in the thick of it and we were fleeing. And there was nothing ridiculous about the Soviet Union in my parents and grandparents mind. That last obstacle at the check point at American zone across the Salzach must have seemed like a gate to Paradise. Did the young soldier who let us through with a shrug know what we were fleeing from? Perhaps all he knew was how desperate we were. Until the Medved affair I thought that he had been embarrassed by the hand kissing – from his description by my grandmother, he must have been just out of High School and hand kissing would definitely not have been cool by High School standards -- but then it occurred to me that the soldier did not know how to deal with that kind of gratitude because he never encountered that kind of tyranny. His world, of laws and rights and justice, and his youth would have been too different from ours for him to be able to look us in the eyes to let us know he understood. And now I watch my own children react to the Medved confrontation, and I try to find words with which to explain the actions of their family that do not fall short of the reality. I show them my small collection of photographs and I wait for a sign of understanding.

I do not know if they understand. Not for lack of imagination but because the conditions that regulated daily life seem so pointless or ridiculous, in retrospect. Astonishingly, they do not dwell on them or on the harshness of the punishments meted out. They dwell on the escape, on the determination that inspired my parents and grandparents, and particularly on their great grandmother. "She was a hunched-back? And she walked through Poland, and Czechoslovakia, and Austria?" They are awed. And their conclusion comes out not so much as understanding but as appreciation encapsulated in the word 'Cool'. For them that totally summed it up.

