

From personal writing to granddaughter Margaret Olga Westaway, in 1990

My parents came out to Canada in the year 1903 with their families, from a small town called Tarascha near the City of Kiev which is the capital of Ukraine. My mother Anna had been married to my father Andrew about a year. She was 18 years-old and he was 25. All of mother's family migrated with them including: my grandmother and grandfather Mowchan, my married aunt Nadia, her husband Vasyl, and their small daughter Christina, my four unmarried uncles – Mike, Stephen, John, and Peter.

The voyage across the ocean was dreadful. It was made in a cattle boat and took six weeks. The weather was horrible and several passengers died and were buried in sacks at sea. Aunt Nadia almost died. But eventually they arrived in a new country. They took a train to Winnipeg where they made their home. The adults found jobs and eventually built a fine house where they lived for several years. It still stands to this day, a tribute to their industry and ambition. Later on they decided to move on to Saskatchewan where they took up farms in the south-west of the province. Our parents remained in Winnipeg because they had acquired a family of small children.

Dad had bought two lots in the north-end of the city and built a little house for mother and his growing family which eventually consisted of two boys and four girls.

I myself have two very early memories. They go back to the time when I was about 2-1/2 years old. In the more vivid one I see myself and my older sister Eva, aged five, crouching in the corner of the living room. We are both petrified with fright. Outside through the eastern window we can see a long silvery ribbon across the sky. It is Halley's Comet. We can hear our parents in the kitchen speaking in excited tones, "A comet, a comet, there's going to be a war!"

Recently I spoke to my sister to see if she remembered the occasion. She did. She also remembered going for a walk on the prairies where she noticed the entire surface of the field covered with a silvery powder. What was it? Maybe some of the celestial dust of the comet? No one knows. I do not recall this incident as I was not very old and maybe I did not accompany her on the walk.

Another memory comes to mind, probably even of an earlier occasion. I am standing in the empty living room between my mother and father. They have been painting it and are gazing at the walls. I am holding in my hand a little toy rooster of lead painted in iridescent colors. The tail end is hollow and is filled with water. When you blow into it there is a pleasant gurgling sound.

I distinctly remember the birth of my youngest sister which happened when I was almost six years old. I came home from play one day to find my mother with a brand new baby sister. She was beautiful and dressed up in an exquisite pink and white outfit and smelt like a flower. Her name was Nadia, which in English is translated as Hope. There was another sister in between named Vera. I should have been named Charity or some such

name but they named me Olga in honor of the great queen who was the first to become Christian in Old Rus.

So there were five of us now – four little girls and the oldest—a boy named John. We were poor but normal youngsters. We all liked school and did well. We loved to read and managed to acquire a few books in our tiny bookcase. We were brought up on Alice in Wonderland, Pilgrim's Progress, the Bible, Chatterbox, Boy's Own Paper, Tales from Shakespeare, Grimm Brothers' Tales, Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales, The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew, The Corner House Girls, Alger and Henty Books, etc.

I don't recall when I couldn't read. It seems to me I always knew how. We had lots of splendid teachers at school and they encouraged us in every possible way to do well in our studies. [N.B. Olga learned English—by the age of five—at mission Sunday Schools run by the United Church.]

Every summer we used to go to Gimli Camp which was situated about 50 miles from Winnipeg and was run by the Presbyterian Church and later on by the United Church. The word Gimli is of Icelandic origin and means “home of the gods” or “paradise” and it certainly was a veritable paradise for poor city children. We spent a week every summer at Gimli. How we looked forward to going there. Our older sister Eva used to work there as a cook's helper when a teenager.

But Eva worked at other jobs. When a very young child of 10 or 11 she looked after the children of various ladies who had to work to support their families. She also did general housework like the laundry and preparing meals. Once she was working for a woman with two small children. The husband was overseas in the army. The friend who got Eva the job one day asked her if there was anyone else in the family. Eva innocently acknowledged, “No one but Uncle Bill.” The friend thereupon had a talk with Eva's employer and withdrew the youngster from the job!

We lived in a polyglot neighborhood and got along very well with everybody. We didn't realize it but we lived in the slums. There were people of all sorts of backgrounds there: Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, Jews, Czechs, Russians, and English. The so-called English considered themselves superior to us. We were second class citizens. They called us Bohunks, Galicians, Ruthenians, etc. They didn't accept us really, although they exploited our co-operation in everything they did. As one Anglo-Saxon said to this Ukrainian wife: “We will even marry you, but we won't accept you.” Is it any wonder that we grew up despising anything Ukrainian, especially our mother tongue? In a short time we had lost it and found it difficult to communicate with our own kind.

One of the most important influences in our young lives was our adopted grandfather. He was an elderly bachelor called Sylvester Moujow. He had no family of his own so he adopted us and we adopted him. At one time he had been an orthodox priest but for some reason he had abandoned his calling and became friendly with the Doukhobours. He lived alone quite some distance from us in one room. He was a paperboy on the streets. How he made enough to live on we don't know. He probably starved most of the time but on

Sundays when the weather was warm he visited us. He was a very wise and learned man. Mother was very good to him, feeding him great bowls of her wonderful borscht every time he came. We really didn't appreciate him, being very young and ignorant but he made a great impact on me and I shall always remember him with great affection. He loved to talk about the great figures of the past like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and discussed with erudition famous Ukrainian and Russian literary men like Shevchenko, Franko, Gogol, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Turgenev, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, etc.

We all liked school and were encouraged by our parents to do well. Dad would sometimes say to us: "Do you want to be a ditch digger when you grow up? Look at me; see how hard I have to work because I have no education." He worked in a large lumber yard called J. Arbuthnot's at first, then got a job with a neighbor who dealt with old lumber. The owner used to dismantle old buildings and sell the used lumber. Later on he got work as a packer for a jobber in a big store downtown. He worked there for over 40 years.

Although Dad had to work very hard to support his family, he kept a beautiful garden and grew all sorts of vegetables and flowers. He also found time to build us a little playhouse. He once bought two panes of lovely stained glass windows from the neighbor who was a wrecker and put these in our playhouse. I'll bet we had the only playhouse in the city with stained glass in it!

As I said before we all liked school and did well, passed our grades and kept out of trouble. Every June we were promoted to the next grade and in September we got new books—The Manitoba Readers. How we looked forward to receiving them. There were stories in the first reader about some children called Tom and Nell, Ned and Dora. There were poems and songs. Later on as we progressed there were patriotic stories and those about brave girls and boys, men and women and their exploits. I can still recall the story of Grace Darling, another about a brave boy called the "powder monkey."

In grade 3 I learnt how to plait a little bag with raffia but I was a perfectionist and kept snipping off the ends of the strands so my bag came undone. I realized that I was too impatient and too much of a perfectionist for my own good and decided to try to overcome these defects.

In grade 4 we had a Miss Anderson who was very interested in nature study and of course I became fond of her but I didn't remain in her class for long as I changed schools and landed in Miss Blois' room. I liked her too. At that time we were very poor and I remember that once I didn't own a proper pair of shoes—only two old left shoes which I had to wear so I used to cross my feet in not to make the mismatches shoes too obvious.

Of the 1917 flu epidemic:

[In grade six, her regular teacher was ill with the flu and that year, she had 31 substitutes. There were several deaths amongst her school and neighborhood friends.]

At home my mother, brother John, and sister Vera became all ill with the flu. Vera almost died of it. One day she had a terrible nose bleed. She bled for hours and then collapsed. My dad thought that she was dead and carried her to the sink in the kitchen, apparently lifeless. The doctor was contacted and came to the house. Vera recovered but was very anemic for years. She had large pale patches on her body. She was told to eat lots of food containing iron to replenish her blood cells. In time she recovered and became quite robust again.

People died like flies during the epidemic. One day they were well and alive and the next day they became very ill and soon died. It was terrifying!

The Robertson Memorial Institute was wonderful. The deaconesses prepared delicious custards, puddings, jellies, blanc manges, soups, etc. which were distributed in baskets to the stricken families. Since our mother was ill they remembered us and helped us to survive during this terrible time.

In grade 7 and 8 Miss A.B. Campbell became my teacher—an outstanding one in my opinion. She was of Scottish descent and about 30 years of age at the time. She was dark in appearance with soft, wavy black hair, dark-eyed with a deep olive complexion, nice features, very white teeth and an enchanting smile. She had a lovely dainty small figure, very feminine and graceful with little hands and feet. She was a born teacher. She was very strict and at times a real pepper-pot but everybody adored her because she cared for her pupils.

She was a specialist in grammar, literature and music. She knew these subjects inside out and made them come alive. We studied “The Lady of the Lake” by Walter Scott. We learnt scores of lovely songs. I heard “Ave Maria” by Schubert for the first time. We entered the annual music festival in the city. We didn’t win a prize but sang very commendably. I can still remember the words of the song “I sing because I love to sing.” The other song has escaped my memory.

Next year we were promoted to a new school. We still had Miss Campbell for grammar but Miss Lipsett was our grade 9 home teacher. I had had her in grade 5. She taught us several subjects and was an excellent teacher.

The following year and for two more after that we went to high school. We had several teachers and learnt new subjects like chemistry, physics, Latin, and botany. I didn’t care for physics and chemistry and made a poor start in Latin but caught up in grade 11. I did enjoy Botany though as I had always loved flowers. In grade 10 I had a marvelous teacher in English. Her name was Miss Turner, whom I adored. Miss MacDougall taught us French and introduced us to Victor Hugo’s “Les Misérables” which fascinated me.

In grade 11, I had a Miss M.C. as my home teacher, a rather strange individual, sincere but rather biased in her opinions. I didn’t particularly like her. In some ways she was rather mean. There were many clever girls in this class, several were Jewish but there were also two smart Ukrainian ones. Anne L. was the top student in maths. Mary R. was

very beautiful and an all-round A student. She was unusual in as much that her mother had died leaving her to look after six younger siblings. The youngest were fraternal twins of about a year old. How she managed to run this household and attend school, I don't know. She had a good father but he was busy earning a living so most of the responsibility of caring for the family fell on the shoulders of this slight teenager who at the time was about 15 or 16 years old. She later went to university and became a teacher.

After I completed my grade 12 I stayed out a year because I was late in putting in my application for Normal School so wasn't able to get in. Instead I worked for several months in a country hospital as a student nurse. It was hard work. I liked it at first and thought I might be a teaching nurse but changed my mind. I decided to become a teacher, my first love. However my experiences as a nurse were interesting and educational. Right from the first I had to do everything. A young man of 22 was brought in with pneumonia and he died in a couple of days. There were no wonder drugs then. Another patient was a beautiful young fellow who had lost both legs from frost. He had just come from the old country and had no home, no place to go, so he spent the night in a barn and had both legs frozen and amputated. That was his introduction to Canada. I could go on and on with stories.

Afterwards when I had finished my nursing experience I needed a change so went to visit my relatives on the farm in Saskatchewan. My mother went with me. We stayed with my grandmother and Uncle Stephen who was a widower. The place was in the south-west corner of the province and was very isolated and wild. There were rolling hills everywhere and wild birds and animals like great swans, huge pelicans, badgers, gophers, etc. On the farm there were several large round stones with strange markings on them. My uncle said that some university professors had seen them and were interested in them. Whether they finally took them away to be on display, I don't know.

After our holiday we returned home and in the fall I entered Normal School which I just loved. I felt in my element and really enjoyed myself and did very well. My favorite teacher was Dr. Alex MacIntyre who taught us how to teach arithmetic. He was a wonderful person with a puckish sense of humour. That was his last year of teaching for he died the next year in February. He was an outstanding educator.

Well, after my year at Normal School I was ready to start my teaching career. I was fortunate because my sister Eva and I taught in the same school. I had grades 4 – 8, and she had grades 1 – 3. This was in a rural district of Manitoba.

Our teacherage was a flimsily built cottage in which we froze when the cold weather came. We had no indoor plumbing and had to pump water for drinking and washing. In the mornings we would find our bucket of drinking water frozen, sometimes with a mouse in it. There were mice in the cottage so we got a cat to get rid of them. Not long after the mouse got into our large flour bin and made a home in it to our dismay.

That year was unusual for it actually rained for 40 days and 40 nights and the water rose inch by inch in the cellar. We were almost flooded out. Some of the kids came to school on stilts.

One day the people living on the next farm to us started a fire somehow and it began to move toward our cottage. We had the children come and transfer our stuff to the school but luckily the fire was put out in time.

Another day we saw a huge black cone of dust coming towards us between our cottage and the school. It was a cyclone. We quickly ran indoors. Luckily the cyclone rolled by and no damage was done.

One day I went to a neighbor's place for milk and was bitten by their huge dog. Another day whilst taking a short cut through a neighbor's field I was attacked by their two fierce dogs. I screamed and the woman of the house called off the dogs, but not too heartily. Her small daughter who was one of our pupils had received some nursing care from me. What a way to thank me!

Most of the children were poor but decent. I did my best with them but I was so young and inexperienced. I made many mistakes. Towards the end of the term I took ill but carried on as best as I could. During the summer I rested as much as I could so as to be ready for the new term the following September.

The following year I taught in a god-forsaken inter-lake district. The teacherage wasn't bad but the people were rather ignorant and wild but strange to say the children were on the whole extraordinarily beautiful!

[My mother describes being able to help a boy with a terrible cleft palate by writing to the Red Cross and obtaining corrective surgery for him. She comments: "At first we wondered why we had ever come to such a lonely spot to teach but when we thought about the little boy we knew why.]

The next year I taught in an Icelandic district. It was a most interesting place. The people were very civilized and the children absolutely lovely. The men made their living by fishing. There was another young teacher on the staff and we both stayed with a nice Icelandic family. Unfortunately I didn't remain very long in this position as my health gave way and I had to leave in mid-term and undergo serious surgery. I was very ill for almost a year recovering from a thyroidectomy. I decided that teaching in the country was not for me. I would apply for a city position which I did when I had recovered my health.

My first city school was large and the very one in which I attended when I was six years old. The principal and a few of the teachers were the ones I remembered. I was very green and looked like a kid. My pupils were of mixed origins. I was especially fond of the Jewish youngster for with few exceptions they were very nice to teach. They had a good attitude towards school. They came to learn and not to fool around or waste time.

Even if they weren't bright they worked hard and so made progress. I stayed a couple of years at this school and was then transferred to a nearby school where I remained for about ten years. The attendance was around 500 pupils and there were 15 on the staff. Here again the children were of mixed nationalities with probably more Slavs and fewer Jews. During my term in this school there were two principals. The first one I didn't care for too much but the second was a splendid one. Mr. V.E. was very fair-minded, an excellent disciplinarian and a greatly respected educator.

The school was located in the north end of Winnipeg in the so-called slums but the youngsters were clean, bright, and ambitious and came from nice little homes with pretty gardens. I didn't think they were inferior to children in any district of the city. In fact, this school was considered one of the very best in the entire city!

I consider that the system of education in the province was excellent. We had several supervisors on the staff in music, art, physical education, and general supervisors. The latter visited each class at least once a month, the others about twice a year. Besides there were classes held by the art, music and physical education supervisors to acquaint us with our curricula.

I got along with most people but must admit that many of my fellow teachers were extremely snobbish and had a superiority complex. Some of them never spoke to 'us foreigners' from one year's end to another. They considered themselves the chosen ones and the rest of us were second class citizens.

After a number of years teaching my health gave way and I had to resign my position. I felt bad because I liked my work but the climate was too rigorous for me so I decided to head for the Pacific Coast to see if a milder climate would suit me better. I knew a couple of people in Victoria so that's where I went. I managed by a strange set of circumstance to get a nice place to stay with an elderly lady, Mrs. W. I realized I had to have a little holiday before looking for work. Also I needed building up because I was losing weight. Through her I got to hear of a splendid physician who might help me. I contacted him and he quickly discovered the root of problem: some thyroid surgery which had been done many years before. He was able to help my condition over a period of several months. I regained most of my health. I returned home for a short period to collect all my belongings as I had made up my mind to move permanently to B.C. It was a hard decision for me to make because I was leaving my family and friends but I realized I had to do it.

In the meantime I had applied for a position in B.C. as a teacher in the interior of B.C. and had managed to get it. It turned out to be a school in a district where the Japanese were evacuated. [Kaslo] I was there only a short while but I got to see something of these people. I found them to be very clever, very clean and law-abiding citizens. I couldn't understand why they were being singled out and mistreated by the B.C. government. I was very sorry for them.

After I left this position I stayed for a short while with my older sister who had also moved to B.C. Then I applied for a more remunerative position and got a nice one just outside of Vancouver. I liked the district and the youngster. When the term was up I applied for a position on Vancouver Island as a principal of a four-roomed school. I stayed for the entire school year during which time I became engaged to my present husband through introductions of a mutual friend. We were engaged for eight months and married at the end of June in Victoria at the home of the wonderful lady who befriended me two years before.

As this was just after the end of World War II lodgings were very hard to come by. We rented a small apartment at the home of an acquaintance for a short while. Then we were invited to live in the home of my mother-in-law for a few months. We renovated her home but she decided to sell the house. So we were forced to move again, this time to a single room where we stayed for a few months, and then moved to a residential hotel for a few years. My daughter was born and we used a loan on my insurance to buy a small house on the outskirts of Victoria. I was very happy there but eventually we had to dig up our roots as my husband had no job.

We sold our equity and moved to Vancouver. I hated to leave Victoria as I just loved it and had made many friends but it couldn't be helped. We stayed with my sister Eva in North Vancouver for a couple of months. We eventually managed to put a down payment for a small house in east Vancouver. Our second child David was born. He was very delicate having a serious heart condition. Shortly afterwards he landed in Children's Hospital where he stayed for several months. Because my husband couldn't get work I had to take my small daughter (seven years old at the time) and leave Vancouver to teach in an Indian Village, hundreds of miles north on the tiny island of Campbell Island (Bella Bella). I was very lonely here even though there were a few white people around but I was worried about my little baby. I made one very good friend, a young woman named Jennie V. who had come all the way from Nova Scotia. She was quite unusual in my estimation. She had only one proper arm and hand but was able to do everything including playing the piano and mouth organ at the same time.

I found the Indians interesting people and the experience most educational but was not happy. Next year I left daughter behind in the care of a nice family. The baby was better by then so he too was looked after by a competent couple. I hated to go back to Bella Bella as I was so worried about my children but I felt forced to go as my husband was still jobless. I finished another year and eventually returned to Vancouver. After some time we did find four rooms [upstairs in a large house] and were united at last with our two youngsters. We lived there for a couple of years more but our son died during heart surgery at age six and a half. We lived in the same rented quarters for several years. [During David's last year my mother was very ill with shingles.]

In time we managed to scrape some money together to put into a nice house in North Vancouver. That was in 1962 [By that time my dad, Olga's husband, had a steady, unionized job].

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My mother kept herself busy over the years. She was a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, hosting yearly garden parties. She translated stories from Ukrainian and some of these were published in *The Flying Ship*. Some of her translations were African folk tales and stories from ethnic regions from the former Soviet Union—still unpublished. She studied Russian at night school and with a private teacher. Later on she went to UBC part-time, enrolling in upper grade Slavonic Studies, where she studied Ukrainian, the Russian language, Russian history, art and culture, and translation. She finished fourth year studies at the age of 76, having achieved excellent grades. In her eighties she helped to re-publish her sister Vera Lysenko's novel *Yellow Boots*. Above all, she had the capacity to make friends.

She came from an extraordinary family. Her parents were Stundists and believed in higher education for both girls and boys. Her mother would read stories in Ukrainian and Russian, which no doubt helped to develop the imagination and resilience of the Lesik children.

John Lesik was the first Ukrainian-Canadian in all of Canada to become a dentist, practicing in Alberta and Ontario. Eva (Lesik) Babiuk raised three children on her own, working at the Hotel Vancouver until retirement. Vera Lesik (pen name of Vera Lysenko) worked as a journalist and was one of the first Ukrainian-Canadians writing in English: *Men in Sheepskin Coats*, *Westerly Wild*, and *Yellow Boots*. One child (Nadya) died in a street car accident at an early age. The youngest, Peter Lesik was a radio operator in the Second World War.