

A European Woman

summary

It is well known that it is usually women who preserve memory, whether it be family, historical, or personal memory. Preserving and passing on stories is often credited as the evolutionary reason women live longer than men. And so Marija tells her story.

She recounts growing up on a secluded farm in Ukraine, where remote dwellings were abundant in the good old days. She talks about her parents—her mother, a simple peasant woman who was robbed of man after man by the war and who was ultimately left to fend for herself, and her father, a worker from Beroun who spent his life toiling away at a cement factory and experiencing the massacres of war. She talks about her husband and their marriage, which—despite having its bright moments—resembled walking the razor's edge, about her children, neighbors, her immediate and extended family. Here and there, she shares a little bit about herself.

Throughout the book, Marija's narrative is interwoven with great historical events and the tragic history of a nation that was supposed to be long gone but managed to beat the odds. The history of twentieth-century Ukraine told from the perspective of the working class leaves no doubt that the story takes place in one of Snyder's Bloodlands. A lost struggle for independence. Ukraine's first famine (the one before things got even worse and people had to start surrendering their bread). Collectivization, which resulted in land being taken away from the peasants who had tended it for centuries. The second famine, which had people dropping like flies—people would sit down in the middle of the street and never get up again (if they were lucky, they hadn't gone mad and eaten their own children first). World War II, which had that moron Hitler believing he could break people who had experienced Stalin. The Holocaust. Post-war famine and everyday life in Soviet Ukraine. The Chernobyl explosion and perestroika, and finally, long-awaited independence followed by emigration. The narrative, which brings all these experiences together—out of order, in fragments, circling back to some repeatedly—undoubtedly reflects the experience of the rest of Europe as well, though the experiences can be projected differently into the historical memory of each nation.

Who is the European woman the novel's title refers to? At times, her identity may seem to crumble under layers upon layers of labels put on her by the others. The unwanted "German bastard" at the beginning of her life, the equally unwanted old emigrant at the end. A Czechoslovak, a "Russki," a Ukrainian. But these labels don't mean much to the main character—all she cares about is that *she* knows who she is and where she belongs. She knows what's important in life and has incredible patience with everyone around her. The novel pays homage to all Ukrainian women, who quietly defied the tough times they lived in, women who passed on fascinating stories that were supposed to be erased from memory, women who are still passing them on today to the younger generations, sharing their insight into how to survive.

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