

# SLAVIC IMMIGRANT WOMEN

## IN NORTHWESTERN SASKATCHEWAN DURING THE DEPRESSION

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*Aussi tard que le milieu des années vingt, de jeunes femmes slaves immigraient au Saskatchewan. Elles travaillaient aux côtés de leurs maris afin de défricher la terre. Souvent, elles devraient non seulement s'occuper des tâches ménagères mais aussi de la ferme. Malheureusement, pour la plupart les efforts de ces femmes n'ont pas été reconnus. Cet article est une brève chronique de cinq femmes pendant la dépression.*

As late as the mid-1920s many young immigrant women from eastern Europe were arriving in northwestern Saskatchewan. Their eventual fate was to be the back-breaking labour of clearing unbroken land, loneliness, and a struggle for sheer survival during the years of the Depression, 1929-39. These women could not have arrived at a worse time to begin a new life — a better life — in Canada. They had vague notions of a land of promise and opportunity to which a neighbour, an uncle, or parents had immigrated, a place called Saskatchewan. However, they were in for a rude awakening upon arrival. Although life had not been easy in the old country, it was familiar and had allowed for some sense of security. Here all was new and strange. To make matters worse, a drought hit Saskatchewan, making it the hardest-hit province in Canada during the Depression.

Once in Saskatchewan, the young immigrant women were beset by innumerable difficulties. Very few choices were available for these women upon their arrival. Simple survival was of paramount concern. Marriage offered a viable alternative to farm labour for strangers and the solitude of rural prairie life to the sometimes reluctant young brides.

Compromise was the usual tactic the young women utilized to cope with husbands in a life where co-operation was vital to survival. Often this took a sad toll in terms of physical and emotional well-being when individual women assumed more burdens than they could bear.

Life often meant giving birth alone, watching children die because there was no money for doctors, and having too many children. Besides working alongside of their husbands in the fields, the women assumed household tasks, looked after gardens and animals, helped with the construction of homes, aided other women as midwives, and brought in additional income from sources such as the picking of senega roots (used as an emetic and stimulant). Sheer distance from family and neighbours in these rural areas, as well as lack of knowledge of the English language, resulted in isolation, broken only by religious services and occasional gatherings of fellow Slavs. A common thread which runs through the lives of these women is the remarkable courage they showed in the face of often unbearable conditions.

Very few written records of pioneer prairie farm women have been left behind. *Wheat & Woman*, written by Georgina Binnie-Clark, is a rare account of one English gentlewoman's experiences farming in southern Saskatchewan in the period 1905-08 and her quest for financial and personal independence as a single woman. Because women in Canada did not have homesteading rights that allowed them to obtain land free from the government, the young Slavic women did not have this option open to them. Yet these same women sought independence and

land of their own. They saw marriage as the only viable means of pursuing these goals. The following account briefly examines the lives of five such women.

## *Maria Kostiuk*

Twenty-four-year-old Maria Kostiuk arrived in Canada in December, 1928, with her infant and husband. The young Ukrainian woman had finally persuaded her husband to follow in the footsteps of her family, who had left four years previously for Saskatchewan. They stayed at her family's homestead in Mayfair. Maria's husband wept at what he saw but she was determined to stay. She longed to be with her family. In 1929 the couple bought a homestead for \$10 near Maria's parents. Maria's second child was born in 1933. She was assisted by a midwife who lived three miles away. Luckily, there were no complications. At one point Maria helped her husband to clear some land for a garden.

I tried chopping the trees but was getting nowhere. My husband said that I might as well stay with piling the roots. I got blisters as I couldn't work well with gloves on. I'd take our small boy with us out into the field. He'd sit close by to where we were working. The mosquitoes were after him all the time.

Canning was out of the question since Maria had no jars. But the senega root, found in abundance on the farm, brought a good price in those days, either for cash or trade. Many women would gather at her place, digging up the roots with special homemade shovels. It was back-breaking work, and the mosquitoes didn't make the job more pleasant. However, lunchtime allowed for rest and conversation. After staying overnight at Maria's the women would be picked up by a family member in a buggy or wagon. Up to 25¢ was paid for a pound of senega roots. Maria could earn as much as \$5 for a day's work.

## *Ksenka Dubnyk*

Twenty-four-year-old Ksenka Dubnyk (née Hrabowa) came to Canada in April, 1929, at the insistence of her father, who had too little land and too many daughters. She worked from May to October as a "hired man," the only Ukrainian worker on her cousin's farm in Wakaw, disk-ing, seeding, and stooking for a dollar a day. The strain on the young woman's abdominal muscles from the disk-ing left her feeling ill for days. Added to this illness was homesickness. Although she was reluctant to wed, on December 5, 1929, Ksenka relented and married her ardent suitor.

It was a strange country and it was awful. He grew up in the same village. At least he was not a stranger. . . . I would cry so much when I arrived. But I had nothing to go back with. I just had the clothes on my back. I even had to fix my own shoes. . . . I saw it was real bad in Canada. I didn't know the language. I got scared.

Ksenka had three babies, one after the other. Her harrowing experience of rescuing by herself some neighbouring children from a fire led to her nervous breakdown. There were no more children for eight years.

On September 17, 1930, her first child was born. She insisted her husband go to seek work because there was no money and he had heard of the possibility of work on a threshing crew. Reluctantly he left, but not before asking the midwife in the district, a Polish widow, Mrs. Wozny, to assist his wife. Meanwhile, Ksenka had gone out for kindling wood. Some time later she tried to sleep but her back ached terribly. Feeling very much alone, she went to her neighbours for some assurance but found the house too crowded to stay. "I'd double over when the pain would come. By the time I was near home, I was crawling on my hands and knees. I got in and the baby was born right away." The midwife arrived to wash the baby and cut the cord. On December 25, 1932, Ksenka's second baby, only three months old, died of convulsions. "It was hard — one



child after another. I was sick." Her husband didn't bother to register the children since they were all girls. He reasoned there was no need to register them since they wouldn't be taken into the army.

### *Dora Chipak*

Twenty-two-year-old Dora Chipak (née Masnyk) arrived in Saskatoon in 1927 to be with her fiancé, who had left Europe a year earlier. The young Ukrainian woman worked in the homes of some Ukrainian Jews, taking three months off every harvest to work for Doukhobors in the Blaine Lake district. Interestingly enough, Dora earned more from her work than did her fiancé. Dora married after the 1930 harvest. The wedding was not elaborate. Dora wore the better of her two dresses. The next day Dora was mud-plastering a barn for her room and board.

By 1931 the young couple settled down on their own land in Glaslin. Dora's first child was born on February 13, 1931. The temperatures that November and December were between  $-30^{\circ}\text{F}$ . and  $-40^{\circ}\text{F}$ . That particular day it was  $-45^{\circ}\text{F}$ . The road was blocked with snowdrifts from three to five yards high. Dora's husband went for the midwife. Dora had some problems with the delivery but the child was born safely. Five years later, on September 2, 1935, Dora's second child was born.



I had dug six bags of potatoes. I went to the barn. I was wearing felt boots. Suddenly my birth sack broke and all the liquid went into my boots. I had to return to the house. I threw off my boots. I was ready for bed. This time I knew something about all this. My husband went for the midwife. Meanwhile the child was born. The midwife came, tied the cord, and washed the child . . . I prayed we'd have no more children. I breast-fed the younger three years. The first child I breast-fed two years. Most had fifteen or sixteen children. When they'd come out of a house it was as if they were coming out of a school.

### *Katie Meiers*

Fifteen-year-old Katie Meiers (née Wudkewich) arrived in Canada with her family on May 15, 1930. After a brief stay at her uncle's farm, the family bought a homestead at Sandwich, four miles away. Food was scarce. As the eldest child, the young Ukrainian girl was compelled to seek out work and give her earnings to her parents.

Her first work experience in Canada was quite demanding for a fifteen-year-old girl. She spent two months on a relative's farm harrowing with four horses. Then Katie worked for room and board on a farm fifty miles from her parents until she could find closer employment. Her next job was working on a nearby farm where she milked the cows, stooked, and worked in the house because the farmer's wife was pregnant. The \$7.50 a month that she earned was given in the form of produce to her family. The following two years Katie worked for a Scottish couple in the same district, milking their twenty-two cows and cooking.

In April, 1933, Katie married a young Polish man, Michal "Mike" Suberlak, whom she had known for two years. They went to North Battleford, the nearest town, to get married, had lunch in a restaurant, and returned promptly to start a new life on CPR land near Whitkow. The next day Katie was mud-plastering her sod-roofed log house, mixing the clay with her feet.

Katie was already somewhat experienced in childbirth when her first child was born in 1933. At sixteen she had found herself in the unenviable position of having to assist her employer's wife in the delivery of her baby. The husband had left the farm to fetch a midwife. "I cried that I didn't understand what to do but she begged me. I had to help. She told me what to do. It was her second child. I cut the cord. . ." Katie's mother assisted in the delivery of her first child. Two years later, in 1935, her second son was born. Her husband had gone for a midwife, but by the time they arrived the child had already been born. The next day

Katie was outside working. There was no one to take her place. She would bring the babies out into the fields with her while she stooked with her husband. "I took the kids with me. I was by myself. Sometimes they slept indoors and I'd go out to work. Other times they'd sit outside. They'd even eat dirt. And that's how they grew up." Fortunately the children were healthy.

Katie worked from sunrise to sunset. She was up at daybreak, milking the cows, operating the manual separator, gardening, cooking, helping her husband with the stooking, and feeding the chicken. In the summer she would can mushrooms, Saskatoon berries, and rhubarb for the winter. The only change to the constant toil was the change of seasons, which brought some relief.

## Julia Ornawka

In 1930 thirty-three-year-old Julia Ornawka arrived in Canada with her husband and three children. After a brief stay on her sister's farm the Polish couple bought some land near Whitkow from a widow. The first few months proved disastrous for the inexperienced couple. Everything seemed to go wrong. The machinery kept breaking down at harvest time. Julia had to tie the wheat by hand. Half their crop froze. Julia had three more children after she moved to Canada, in 1933, 1935, and 1937.

I had to work when pregnant. It made no difference. The next day I'd be up and working. The midwife would come in time, just as in the old country. I didn't want to be by myself. It was awful and important. I was afraid. One man, my godfather, helped his wife with all her deliveries.

Childbirth was difficult, but the death of children was even more trying. Life was never the same for Julia after the death of her little boy. He had been hit on the head by another

boy with a baseball bat. Though he had suffered convulsions, there was no money for a doctor. Half a year later Julia left her six-month-old infant, whom she was still breast-feeding, and took her son to see doctors in North Battleford and Saskatoon. There was little hope for the boy. Three weeks away from home left the mother longing for her infant. Torn between worry over her son and her baby, she finally left Saskatoon just before Christmas. The temperature was -55°F. On the night of her departure, her son died in hospital.

There was no end to work for Julia.

I did what a man did and more. My husband would say if there was housework, leave it until the evening and help me now. He wasn't strong. I did everything, helping. I picked rocks and roots. When my husband ploughed and the pieces of prairie wouldn't turn over I'd turn the clods over by hand so the grass wouldn't rot. We were breaking the land together. I'd take the children with me, along with some food and water.

There was also canning, gardening, and looking after the cattle. Late in the fall, Julia and a neighbour woman had to mud-plaster to insulate the log house her husband had built. The water was so cold that they had to heat it and then mix the mud with their feet.

What sustained these women through all of these hardships, in what was often a pioneering endeavour? "I had just enough strength to pull through, a faith that God would help, and there were the children. We had to struggle so they would survive," said Dora Chipak. Dora's statement echoes those of women like her who came to shape a life for themselves in Canada. These women, the least acknowledged pioneers, deserve recognition for their remarkable role in developing the farming communities of northwestern Saskatchewan. As Dora's husband reflects: "If it wasn't for my wife, I probably wouldn't have gotten anywhere."

