



# Baba Podkova

*There's more to the story of Baba Podkova than Burtzik the dog, planting corn in your front yard, or gallstones in a pickle jar, though all of them have something to do with that fateful night in January of 1930 and the note on the pillow.*

Maara Haas

**T**he whole of north-end Winnipeg went out in search of Baba Podkova. Burtzik the old, blind collie sniffing for clues — much good that was. You could put a raw steak or a sliver of turnip on his nose; he couldn't tell which was which.

How it all turned out goes back to where it really began, which has to be the green-roses kerchief and hoity-toity Anastasia, Baba Podkova's only child, who married upper-crust River Heights, the army bigshot Corporal General Reginald Fortescue Brown, Esquire.

Baba Podkova was happy enough to live with herself and the dog Burtzik, better company than Mr. Podkova, her cold-storage husband, an egg candler with cold-cement feet and the habit of spitting up phlegm in the kitchen sink.

When God in His mercy shortened her husband's miserable life with killing gallstones, she respectfully placed the gallstones in a pickle jar on the oak sideboard under the calendar picture of the crucifixion and went on living.

Haggling for sour salt at the Main Street market, smoking her garlic sausage in the backyard kiln, or moving between the stalks of corn on the house side facing the sunny street, there was no mistaking Baba Podkova's knobby head in the green-roses kerchief tied under her chin.

Late into the night Baba and Burtzik sat together, sharing the earphone plugged to the crystal radio set, holding their breath as the creaking door opened and closed on a ghoulish mystery.

The fly in the butter was Anastasia, who wanted her mother upper crust, even wanted her to change her name.

"You simply have to change with the times," her daughter scolded. "You know Woyblansky, our garbage man? He changed his name to Mr. Webb and what do you think? He's running for mayor. Why do you have to live alone in this rotten shanty? You could live like a lady in River Heights. Learn to play bridge, meet cultured people. You really should think of getting yourself an English hat instead of that immigrant babushka. You look as if you just got off the boat from Europe. Neighbours are saying your daughter is neglecting you, leaving you here unprotected, all alone. Suppose a thief, an escaped convict, a strangler even, from Stony Mountain was on the loose."

Baba Podkova usually closed the doors in her ears to anything Anastasia said, but she got to worrying about the thief who might break into the house one night and steal the gallstones in the pickle jar, the last remains of her suffering husband.

So the next fine day Baba packed her things and left her house in the care of a neighbour who promised to bank the boxstove with a shovel of coal once a day to



Illustration: Diane Fine

keep the water pipes from bursting.

What little I learned of the time that Baba Podkova spent in her daughter's house isn't good. The River Heights bylaw stopped her from smoking garlic sausage in the back garage. When she hit the health inspector with the leg of a chair, her son-in-law, Corporal General Reginald Fortescue Brown, Esquire, threatened to drum her out of the district with a bloody show of artillery and the Union Jack in flying colours.

River Heights is different, all right. It's hard to believe that the people out there grow nothing but grass on their property, just to watch it grow and cut it down till it grows again, but it's not a story that Baba Podkova could invent. Or could she? Another thing: the colonel's hound, German Shepherd Somerset Wagstaffe Masfield Reginald Brown, retired from the British Intelligence Secret Service, would have nothing to do with a commoner civilian like Burtzik the dog.

From her daughter's side, life with Baba Podkova was even worse. Rattling around in the upper-crust mansion like a dried-out pumpkin seed in a pumpkin shell, Baba took up smoking Old Chum tobacco, rolling her own. Anastasia hid the Chanticleer papers for the cigarettes, but being Ukrainian, always resourceful, Baba tore out the onionskin papers from the first editions in the colonel's den, smoking her way through all of Dickens and Thackeray.

Introduced by her daughter as Mrs. Cove, Baba Podkova brought out the stones in the pickle jar: "And this is my husband. How do you do."

Or she came to tea in her green-roses kerchief and black felt boots, acting like a dummy, pointing to herself: "Me Ukrainian off da boat." She whispered aside to a horrified guest, "I'm a prisoner here." Anastasia finally laid down the law. Tomorrow Baba would have to renounce her green-roses rag, she would have her hair cut and frizzled at the Tip-Top Beauty Parlour, and be Canadian.

The rest you know, aside from the note her daughter found pinned to her pillow:

Dear Anastasia and Mr. Colonel.  
I am not hiding my green-roses kerchief.  
I am not hiding anymore, who I am.  
I am going by foot to Czechoslovakia.  
Don't try to follow me.

And where do you think they found her? In the most expected place, of course. Clutching her ancient wicker suitcase containing the two-ton family Bible, three dozen hard-boiled eggs for the journey, there she was, on the steps of the old St. Nicholas Church three blocks from home — the miracle of the green-roses kerchief blooming like a spring garden in the midst of the swirling winter snow.

*This short story was broadcast on the CBC show "Identities."*