

From the Historical Society

From Ukraine with Love: The Immigration Memoirs of Katherine Oborski Ciolkosz

Two summers ago, we ran a nine-part series chronicling the Polish immigration story of Irene Zesut Pardo as told in her own words to her granddaughter in a series of letters. Based on the popularity of that series, we decided to do the same thing this summer with the Ukrainian immigration narrative of Katherine Oborski Ciolkosz, one of the primary contributors to the Ukrainian cultural heritage exhibit currently on display at the Museum on the Green through September. What you will be reading for the next nine weeks have been drawn by Katherine herself from her published 2001 narrative, Remembering The Gift, supplemented by previously unpublished material specific to her childhood here in Glastonbury in the 1950s and ‘60s. We very much appreciate Katherine’s willingness to share her family’s immigration story with us, and we trust that you will enjoy it – both intellectually and emotionally – as much as we have.

Marshall S. Berdan

Part 1: Generation to Generation: A Legacy of Love

Our stories are important. They connect us to preceding generations. They tie us to our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and on. If we listen carefully, we get a glimpse of what life was like for those who came before us: the clothing that they wore, the food they ate, the music they listened to, the struggles they encountered, and what they believed in. It is in telling those stories, and in hearing them, that we are connected to the past.

How fortunate my family and I are with the amount of information we have about our family history. It begins with our grandparents in Galicia, an historic region just north of the Carpathian Mountains in Eastern Europe that became a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1772.

Much of what we know about them came from my parents, Evgenija (Salji) and Petar (Peter) Oborski, who immigrated to America – my father first, in 1951, and then my mother in 1953. It was while they still had a parent, brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews living in their homeland.

The frequent letters and black-and-white photographs over many years since the 1950’s kept them connected. (That was well before Facebook and Messenger, which now instantly connects my five siblings and me to second and

third-generation cousins as near as Virginia and as far as Canada, Serbia, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Argentina, and Australia.)

The valuable written information we now have, compiled over decades, as well as the 100 or more photographs, is like a colorful tapestry coming together, piece by piece. Much of that information will fill this column over the next nine weeks. You will hear especially of the courage and determination of Peter Oborski as he pursues the American dream.

My sister Helen, born Jelena (Olena) Oborski, who shares my earliest memories, began researching our family history on the internet 15 years ago in the hopes of filling in the gaps in the information we had already accumulated. Of great help was www.Ancestry.com and www.Familysearch.com, both of which contained birth, baptism, marriage, and death records from local parish churches. Her research has been of tremendous help!

Often, the information Helen found opened up more confusion as some documents were only slightly legible. She found it necessary to learn the Ukrainian alphabet in order to read certain records. She often needed to check for phonetically similar surnames or towns on the internet. There were also spelling variations in names and places of birth. A clear example was the various spellings of our last name: Oborsky, Oborskij, Oborski, and for a woman, Oborska.

References to “Galicia” kept coming up in my grandparents’ birth records. “Where is Galicia?” we asked ourselves. The term “Galicia” is often misunderstood or misinterpreted. It was once the largest province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and went back hundreds of years when the region was fought over and changed hands between Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine.

During the late 19th century, ethnic Ukrainians constituted the majority of the population of eastern Galicia. While my grandparents were indeed ethnically Ukrainian, they were not, at the time of their birth, Ukrainian citizens as the country did not come back into existence until 1922. Instead, they were legally Galicians and hence citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

As we learned, however, ethnicity has more to do with language, culture, and religion rather than citizenship. To this day, each generation of Oborskis has preserved and held close the Ukrainian language, religion, and traditions.



The author’s grandparents, Stefan Oborski (far right) and Katarena Szerszun (far left) and their children in 1921, prior to their emigration to Yugoslavia. The two-year-old boy next to his mother is her father, Petar.”

We knew our maternal grandmother, Anna Teslja (1892-1962), was born in Zboriv. Maternal grandfather, Dimitro Salji (1888-1939), was born in Brody. Paternal grandfather, Stefan Oborski (1875-1944), was born in Baturyn. Paternal grandmother, Katarina Szerszun (1880-1948), was born in Gnidawa, also referred to in records as Hindawa. The only information we have about our paternal great-grandmother, Paranka Szerszun, is that she was born in Galicia in the mid-1800’s.

Both sets of grandparents were hardworking farmers, striving above all else to put food on the table for their families.

After World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up and Galicia was given to Poland. Sometime in 1929, they left their homeland as part of a mass emigration before it became occupied by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. We were told there was little opportunity for economic growth for Ukrainians who

were now being discriminated against by their new Polish rulers. Meanwhile, Yugoslavia was relatively stable at the time, offered opportunities for land ownership and better living conditions, and had a policy of promoting the rights of minority groups. As a result, Yugoslavia became a favored destination of Ukrainian immigrants from the former Galicia.

After World War II, Galicia was divided between Ukraine and Poland. Many villages were destroyed in the Soviet offensive and then rebuilt after the collapse of Soviet Russia in 1991.

A look at a map of modern Ukraine before its invasion by the Russian military in 2022 shows that the villages and towns mentioned above still existed. As of this writing, however, it is uncertain whether those towns, villages, and churches have been spared or partially destroyed.

Our journey will continue with Stefan Oborski as he leaves his homeland in 1911, bound for the United States of America

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Part 2: From Galicia to Yugoslavia, via America

The year was 1911 when my grandfather, Stefan Oborski, made plans to leave his village of Hindawa in Galicia, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He had learned from a neighbor that there was work in northeastern America as the country was looking to maintain and expand its industrial potential.

Cheap labor was in high demand, so much so that companies were contracting with shipping lines to transport hundreds of immigrant laborers from Austria, Hungary and Poland. The majority of the men who accepted these offers did so with the intention of returning after having earned enough money for their family to live more comfortably in their homeland. It did not take much to convince Stefan and several other men in Hindawa what they needed to do.

Stefan was leaving his wife, Katarina, and their six children behind. Traveling across Germany to the port of Hamburg, he and his fellow villagers boarded the SS Amerika, bound for New York. Each was being sponsored by someone already settled in Hartford, Connecticut, a city he knew nothing about. Stefan and the others took up residence in a boarding house within an industrial community where workers of many nationalities lived, and began working at the Hartford Electric Light Company's new (1905) Dutch Point power plant, located along the river just south of downtown.

In 1913, he heard that a conflict was arising between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Czarist Russia, so he sent for Katarina and their eldest daughter, Sophie (16), to join him in America. The remaining five children were left behind with relatives, as Stefan had not yet earned enough money to pay for their passage.

Within a span of nine years, three more children were born to Stefan and Katarina: Anna in 1914, Steve in 1917, and in 1919, my father, Peter.

When Peter was three years old, the family returned to Hindawa to be reunited with the children they had left behind. Sophie, however, remained in Connecticut. She was 25 years old, married to Andrew Bysko, and had a son, Paul. (The fact that Sophie remained in Connecticut would be of great value 29 years later when my father wanted to bring his family to America.) Once back in their homeland, now a part of Poland as a result of the post-war realignment, they found that not much had changed. Life continued to be a struggle, one made even more difficult now that ethnic Ukrainians were actively being discriminated against by the Polish government.

In 1929, a former neighbor who had left Hindawa earlier sent Stefan a letter telling him that conditions in the brand new country of Yugoslavia were much better and that it actively welcomed Ukrainian immigrants, including offering them cheap or even free land. Because of its geographical location closest to the former Galicia, Bosnia, the northeastern most of Yugoslavia's nine regions, became the most favored

for Ukrainians immigrants, whose numbers there soon reached several tens of thousands. Bosnia would now be a new beginning for the Oborski family as well.

Stefan and Katarina then made plans to leave their homeland, taking with them only the younger four children, including my father, who was now 10 years old. The four older children, now all in their 20s, remained in Hindawa, working either on neighboring family farms or in the village.

They traveled southwest across Hungary to the village of Lisnja, home to dozens of other Ukrainian immigrant families. Settled in their new self-sustaining life, they worked hard. Most households were farm based and relied on manual labor and basic tools to cultivate crops and raise livestock. The lack of modern farming equipment meant that everything was done by hand, from tilling the soil to harvesting the crops. This made farming a time-consuming and physically demanding task that required the cooperation of the whole family.

Life was often always challenging, but it also bolstered their sense of resilience. They grew their own fruits and vegetables and raised animals for meat, milk and eggs. They preserved food through canning, smoking or drying. Despite the hardships, they took pride in their work and culture, and maintained their Ukrainian language and traditions, the latter through their religion, storytelling and music.

In 1941, Peter married Evgenija Salji. She had been born in Lisnja to parents who had immigrated from Galicia years before. Peter was 22; Evgenija was beautiful at 19. A rare black-and-white wedding photograph in my family's possession taken on that cold November day shows the Oborski and Salji families, as well as village neighbors, gathered in heavy clothing. Evgenija is wearing what appears to be a man's jacket over a white dress and a beautiful white headpiece with a sheer veil. The men are in boots, some with hats perched on their heads. The women, their heads covered with babushka (headscarfs), hold little children in their arms. It is a celebration, a brief time for merriment in the midst of the overall misery of World War II during which Bosnia was occupied and brutalized by The Independent State of Croatia, a puppet regime controlled by both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

News spread quickly in early 1944 that Stefan Oborski had died at the age of 69. As was the custom, he was waked in the family home within a day or two, where those who knew him gathered to remember him and pray for his soul. A funeral procession followed the next day by foot to the Ukrainian church, and then to the cemetery.

In November of that year, there was happier news. Helen was born without complications in the family's little farmhouse. Three years later, in May of 1947, my mother gave birth to me in that same farmhouse. There were no doctors in the area. The post-war conditions were awful. There was no prenatal care or hospital care,



Celebrants from the Ukrainian community in Lisnja, Bosnia, gather round the bride, Evgenija Silja, and groom, Peter Oborski (front row, center) at their November 1941 wedding.



Evgenija and Peter Oborski in their formal wedding photo.

and women like my mother often worked in the fields until they gave birth.

It would have been devastating, even life threatening to both the mother and child, if complications arose during childbirth. The village was some distance from the nearest medical facilities in Prnjavor or Banja Luka. It was indeed a joyous occasion when a baby came

through home delivery healthy and wailing with its first breath. I was given the name Katarina, after the aunt who had helped with the delivery. As was the custom, I was baptized three days later.

Our journey will continue with the Oborski family in the village of Lisnja ...

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Part 3: Life in the Village of Lisnja

The north Yugoslavian village of Lisnja was a poor but tranquil place in 1951. Unpaved, one-lane dirt roads scattered with small boulders or deep ruts along the way made it nearly impassable for the few cars in that area. People walked from place to place, and it was not unusual for our family of five to walk a kilometer each way to church on Sunday mornings.

We would follow the path down the hill from the farmhouse, Mama carrying Steve in her arms, and Helen and I following our father. At the end, the dirt road merged with the main road. I often preferred to walk barefoot, carrying my sandals, which were passed down to me from Helen. For her, new shoes were hard to find. Those were my only shoes, until they either no longer fit or were completely worn out. In the cold winter, we trudged through drifts of snow, dragging our feet in heavy winter boots.

The church was set back from the road. While large enough to hold the neighborhood Ukrainian community, it was not much more than an oversized room. An old wooden cross rested against the wall outside its only door. Since it had no pews or chairs, everyone had to stand during the Divine Liturgy on Sundays and holy days. As was characteristic of European Eastern Rite churches, a multitude of hand-painted icons adorned its walls.

Incense thick enough to overpower us filled the entire church as the priest blessed the icons first, bowed low to the altar, and then, turning to the left and to the right, blessed the people. Beautiful songs of praise came from each individual rather than from a choir. A harmony of favorite hymns transformed the rustic, old building into a place of reverence—we were on holy ground.

Attending church was an important aspect of village life. It provided a place of spiritual nourishment and replenishment, sustaining us and helping us to survive the otherwise harsh living conditions. Everyone took part in worship, young and old. Set prayers were learned as soon as a child could talk, the first being “Otche Nash” (“Our Father”).

Our farmhouse stood on the crest of a hill, set back somewhat from the surrounding acres of land. Beyond the fields, a neighbor’s farm came into view. The house contained nothing more than a small pantry, kitchen and sleeping area in one room, and a second room just for sleeping. It had a hard-packed earth floor and six windows. On the exterior, timber was used to frame the dwelling, and then a combination of mud and stone mortar dressed the house. Thatch, strongly bound, covered the roof.

The furnishings were of necessity rather than any decorative purpose. We used the old wood stove for both heating and cooking. While

Americans enjoyed modern technology during those post-war years, electrical power lines had not yet reached our area.

Close your eyes and picture a house without cable television, no computers, no radio, no telephone. Since there was no plumbing, there was no running water, no dishwasher, no washing machine. Doing laundry meant filling the large washtub with water drawn from the well, then heating it on the old stove. Dirty laundry was scrubbed on the knuckle-worn washboard, then hung out to dry.

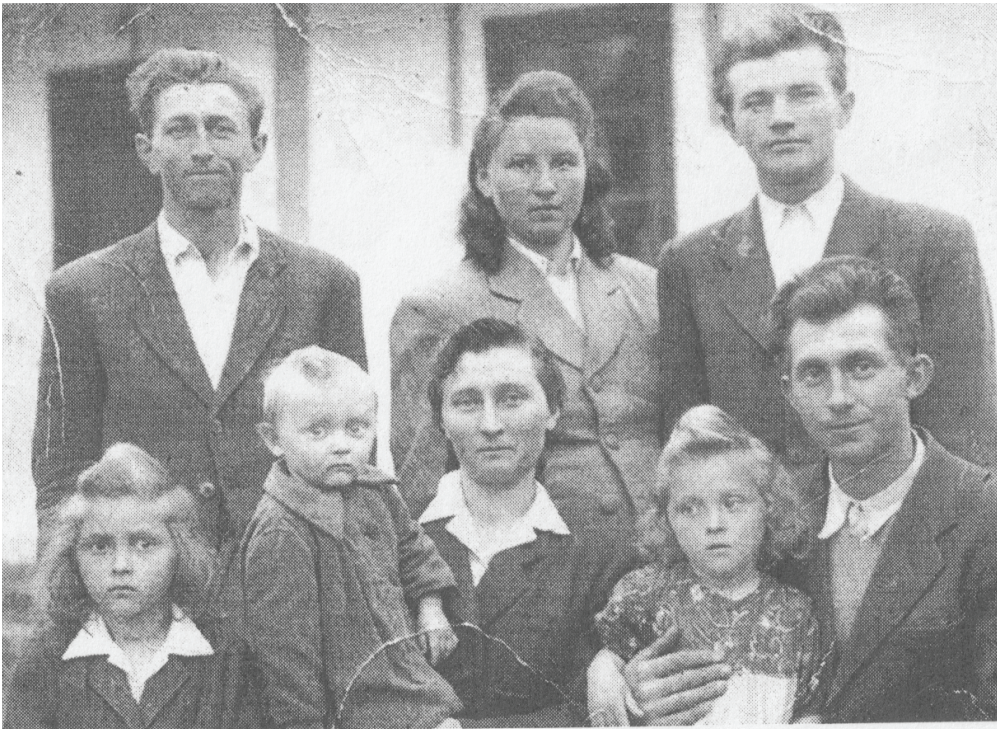
Nothing was wasted, neither food nor clothing. Snippets and scraps of fabric taken from worn clothing were sewn together to serve a new purpose. Beds piled high with hand-sewn, plump feather comforters kept us warm during cold winter nights when drifts of snow accumulated outside the door and icicles hung from the eaves as the fierce grip of winter took hold of the land.

Life on the farm was a struggle to take care of bare necessities, food and health being the most critical. Regardless of our young age, Helen and I were expected to do our share of chores. In 1951, Helen was almost seven. I had not yet turned four. Steve, at the age of one, was much too young to help in any way. Rising early, Helen and I helped feed the farm animals and gather fresh eggs.

Rich in mixed farming, our area boasted fields tall with wheat and other crops. We grew our own fruits and vegetables, and the land sustained us. Like my grandparents in Galicia decades before, we were close to the earth, our fields cultivated not with high-tech farm machinery, but rather by tilling the soil with a horse-drawn plow. At harvest time, help from neighbors was always welcomed. Each season’s yield of grain was taken to the local mill, where it was freshly ground into enough flour needed to feed our family of five. Bread was a part of the daily diet and was baked several loaves at a time in a brick oven located outside the farmhouse.

We may not have had much, yet we managed with what we did have, unlike many in cities such as Belgrade, Sarajevo and Novi Sad. That in itself made it special on those rare occasions when there was butter for the Easter paska (bread) or when there was enough sugar for cookies hung on a freshly cut Christmas tree. It was common practice to barter, or trade, one item for another with a neighbor if we did not have it ourselves. Farmers labored hard from just before dawn until well into darkness, doing their best to feed their families.

Entertainment was simple. There were no concert performances, no theaters. Instead, there were sing-along gatherings where the melodies of Ukrainian folk songs evoked the spirit of traditions and love of family. In their



The author, age 4, sits on the lap of her father, Peter Oborski (bottom right), on the day of his departure for America in 1951. To her right are her mother, Evgenija; her younger brother, Steven; and her older sister, Helen.



The Oborski family in front of their small thatch-roofed farmhouse in Lisnja, Yugoslavia, in 1953. Evgenija and Peter Oborski in their formal wedding photo.

songs, echoes of generations that came before them came alive. Dancing the kolomeyka in a neighborhood barn was common. The fast-paced, circular dance would make one’s head spin, especially after a drink or two. It was often a fitting celebration of an abundance of yet another harvest season if the weather conditions had been favorable. All that was needed for the dancing and merriment was an accordion and a harmonica. Homemade rakija, a strong fruit brandy made from plums (sljivovica), was always in good supply.

The village of Lisnja was small enough that everyone knew each other well. Most relationships began in childhood even though there was no school. Whenever there was time, the men would meet at the local café, where gossip was the favorite pastime and where rumors abounded. At home, the topic of conversation

one spring day of 1951 centered around my father. As a four-year-old, I found sitting on his lap for a rare black-and-white photograph to be uncomfortable. Mama had told Helen, Steve, and me beforehand that my father, now 31 years old, was leaving for America. He would send for us later.

I am certain I did not comprehend any of it at the time. Where was this place called America? When would I see him again? Surely, those were my thoughts that day.

Next: Peter Oborski’s vision of the American Dream is about to become a reality.

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Part 4: Peter Oborski Returns to America

As a four-year-old in April 1951, unaware of the world around me, I did not understand fully the news I heard my mother telling Helen, Steve, and me: that my father would be leaving us that day for America. It was only many years later that I was able to piece together the events that had led up to his decision to emigrate to the United States. Even now, however, many of the details are still fuzzy as my parents were reluctant to talk about what had happened during the war, no doubt because the memories were too painful.

What I do know is this. Shortly after the outbreak of World War II, both my father and his brother Steve, two years older, joined the Royal Yugoslav Army in the naïve hopes of preventing Nazi Germany from overrunning Bosnia just as it had so many other countries in Eastern Europe. When the inevitable invasion came in April of 1941, it lasted only 12 days, but left tens of thousands Yugoslavian soldiers dead and an estimated 250,000 taken prisoner. My uncle Steve lost his right leg, a loss he endured throughout his lifetime. After the defeat, both brothers returned to Lisnja and within six months, my father got married. When Josef Tito's communist resistance army later took up arms against the brutal Nazi puppet regime, he declined to participate.

Wartime privations and the destructive skirmishes waged by the resistance left the country's infrastructure in tatters, and life in Lisnja became even more challenging. My parents did the best they could to sustain themselves in the hope that life would eventually return to the way it had been before the war. That was not the case.

When the war finally ended in the spring of 1945, Yugoslavia's path forward was set to be determined in a national election in November. In what was widely believed to be a rigged and unfair election, Tito's Communist Party won overwhelmingly, and Yugoslavia aligned itself with Russia, then firmly in the hands of dictator Joseph Stalin. Well aware of what Russia had done to independent Ukraine following World War I, my father and his brother decided they could no longer have their families remain in Bosnia. The following year, they began what would become the long and arduous process of emigrating to the United States, the country of their birth.

Since the two brothers' cases were nearly identical, their application processes proceeded in tandem, greatly assisted by their elder sister, Sophie, who had remained in Connecticut when the rest of the family returned to Europe in 1922. She was now married to Paul Herman and living in Glastonbury.

It was their understanding that they had lost their American citizenship because of how long they had been living in Yugoslavia. In a letter dated October 17, 1946, to the United States Department of Foreign Service, subscribed in the Embassy of the United States at Belgrade, my

father stated that he intended to return to the United States to reside permanently and "pursuant to the provisions of Section 323 of the Nationality Act of 1940, as amended, he intended to be a naturalized citizen."

As it turned out, neither brother had actually lost his American citizenship. But documenting that and getting the American passports they needed to reenter the United States proved to be a nearly four-year ordeal. Part of the delay was undoubtedly the bureaucratic slowness of post-war and now Communist Yugoslavia and the necessity of much back-and-forth correspondence. Another retarding factor was the necessity of frequent in-person appearances at the American Embassy in Belgrade, a good four hours from Lisnja.

For some reason, Steve was the first to get his American passport. He and his wife, Anna, and their three sons, Ivan, Slavek, and Vladimir (translated to John, Jerry, and Walter), sailed to America from Genoa onboard the SS Vulcania on February 14, 1951.

It wouldn't be until April of that year that Peter was finally able to work things through with the American Embassy in Belgrade. His passport, still in our family's possession, signed by the consul at the embassy states: "I certify that the holder of this passport has submitted to me evidence which I believe to be sufficient to overcome as of this date the presumption of expatriation under Section 402 of the Nationality Act of 1940. I hereby request all whom it may concern to permit safely and freely to pass, and in case of need to give all lawful aid and protection to Petar Oborski, a citizen of the United States."

With his new American passport, my father was now free to leave Yugoslavia and lost little time in doing so. He left Lisnja on May 3, and arrived in Genoa the next day, where he boarded the SS Exochorda. Two weeks later, he arrived in New York, where, because of his American passport, he was processed on Manhattan, not Ellis Island.

He made his way to Glastonbury, where he moved in with his sister until he could find an affordable rental apartment of his own. He found work as a stonemason with SD&W Construction in Hartford. It paid him a decent salary, enough so that within a year, he had saved the \$458 needed to pay for our own transatlantic voyage.

Once my mother learned that my father had earned enough money to send for us, she, with the help of her brother Vladimir, began the arduous task of legally emigrating. The first step was obtaining Yugoslavian passports for the four of us. Once that was accomplished, we had to secure exit visas.

That's when things hit an unexpected snag. My father was still the legal owner of our farm, but he was now in America with no intention of returning to Yugoslavia. Claiming that he had abandoned the property, the Yugoslavian government, now set on Russian-style collective farming, asserted its ownership and began the



The author's nattily attired father, Peter Oborski, is greeted by his two Glastonbury resident sisters, Anna (left) and Sophie (right), upon his arrival in New York in May 1951.



Peter Oborski at work as a stonemason, earning the money needed for his wife and three children's passage to America.

process of evicting the four of us.

Getting out of Yugoslavia as quickly as possible was now more important than ever. To help accomplish that, my father sought the help of a friend who was fluent in English. That friend, Joseph Ziemba of Hartford, wrote a letter dated March 15, 1952, to Connecticut Senator Brien McMahon in Washington, D.C., on our behalf:

Dear Senator ... The last letter received from Evgenija Oborski was on February 17, 1952. Mr. Oborski received mail from his wife regularly each week. At Christmas time, Mrs. Oborski received a letter from the state telling her to vacate her home, the home which her husband had built, and that the state was taking over the place. They did not receive any money from the state. Mrs. Oborski has three children ages two, five, and eight, and she does not know where she is going to live. The children's names are Stefan, Katarina, and Jelena. Mr. Oborski is a United States citizen and I know you will do all within your power to get this family over here as soon as humanly possible. I am enclosing airmail stationery for a letter to the American consul at Belgrade.

On June 4, Peter received a letter from the

Foreign Service of the United States, acknowledging his letter requesting the embassy's assistance. The letter indicated that their records showed that we were entitled to non-quota (wife and children) immigration status, and that we had made our formal applications for immigration visas on April 18, 1952. Further, the application had been tentatively approved and the visas would be issued to us once my mother reported that she possessed a valid Yugoslav passport. The letter ended by saying, "Since the issuance of a travel document to Yugoslav citizens is an exclusive prerogative of the Yugoslav government, the embassy regrets that it may not intervene" on our behalf.

Eventually, the holdup was resolved and we received our exit visas. By now, however, time was of the essence. We had to be out of Yugoslavia before they expired.

Next: Our journey out of Yugoslavia

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Part 5: The Journey to America

It was April 26, 1953. My mother, Evgenija, gathered together Helen (8), Steve (3), and me (5) outside the farmhouse we were about to leave in the Yugoslavian village of Lisnja. It was the long-awaited day of departure from the only home the three of us had ever known. The arduous two-year document procurement process was over. We had finally received our passports. We were on our way to America.

My grandmother, Anna Teslja, and Mama's only brother, Vladimir, along with her sisters Hanja, Slavka, Katarina, Marena and Evka had come to say goodbye. Nieces, nephews and cousins took their place with the others. This was a major event, with even neighbors from surrounding farms coming to bid us farewell. Photographs were taken, one after another as a remembrance of the day. It was hard to smile, especially for my mother. We were leaving our family behind, not knowing if we would ever see them again. A small brown suitcase and leather briefcase was all Mama took for the journey. There were no prized possessions.

The ride out of the village was a bumpy one. Mama sat close beside her brother in the horse-drawn wagon as Helen, Steve and I positioned ourselves on the back floor. We traveled to a train station an hour away in the city of Banja Luka.

"Dopobachenya" (goodbye), Mama said to her brother when we arrived. Vladimir lingered, not wanting to say those parting words. As she stepped down from the wagon with his help, she assured him she would write. With a tightened grip on her only piece of luggage, she took Steve by the hand while Helen and I followed with the leather briefcase carrying our departure papers.

"Dopobachenya vuyko" (goodbye uncle), we yelled out to him as we stepped up and boarded the train before taking our place on the brown leather seats, the air thick with the smell of diesel fuel. As the train pulled out of the station, the sight of him grew smaller and smaller.

Our journey across Yugoslavia to Trieste, Italy, took several hours. The next day, we boarded another train, which took us across northern Italy to the port of Genoa. There, we boarded the Conte Biancamano, the ship that would become our home for the next 12 days. We traveled third class since it was the most affordable. That meant we slept in bunks on the lower deck. My eyes became accustomed to watching the waves of the wide ocean through the portholes, enough for seasickness to set in from the constant thrashing. (I have no doubt today that is where my fear of drowning comes from.)

Each day, we walked to the upper deck on our way to the dining hall and beheld the same sight: the glistening surface of waves breaking in the middle of nowhere. How vast the ocean seemed.

The four of us spoke neither Italian nor English, and there were no other Ukrainians on board that we knew of. Since we could not communicate with anyone, we stayed to ourselves, always by my mother's side. Not being able to understand what people were saying created overwhelming fear, especially on the one occasion when everyone began pushing, shoving and shouting in their native language. We had no way of knowing it was only a routine evacuation drill.

"What will it be like in America?" we asked Mama, upon hearing that we were finally approaching land. "You will see many new things," she replied. I eagerly awaited the end of the voyage. Part of the reason was to see my new coun-

try. But I also knew I would see my father again.

Suddenly, there was a lot of excitement. Once positioned on the top deck, standing up with the railing barely touching my forehead, with Helen by my side and Mama holding Steve, the torch of the Statue of Liberty came into view in the distance! Within minutes, the entire copper-clad monument loomed closer, appearing larger and compellingly more beautiful.

Arriving in New York harbor brought tears of relief to many on board, including us. While still in the harbor, a quarantine inspection was required to make sure there were no contagious diseases among the passengers. Once that was completed, we docked on Manhattan, where the first- and second-class passengers were allowed to disembark. As third-class passengers, we were put on a ferry to Ellis Island, then in its second-to-last year of operation, for processing.

As the ferry pulled away from the dock, my gaze turned from the Statute of Liberty toward the view of the American flag flying over Ellis Island. It was enormous in size as it unfurled in the breeze.

After disembarking from the ferry, the passengers lined up, three or four across, for processing in the massive hall. We had been given tags to pin to our clothing in case we became separated, something that would have been easy in a crowd of what seemed like a thousand. We moved slowly through the line, with travelers speaking in different languages, the noise adding to the confusion of what was happening.

When we arrived at the front of the line, an immigration inspector, fluent in several languages, questioned my mother about where we were going and who would be at the harbor to meet us. This was done to verify that her answers matched those on the ship's manifest that had been filled out in Genoa. (Today, I am fortunate to have a copy of that manifest listing all of our names.)

Afterwards, we were ferried back across the harbor to where our ship had docked. Every few minutes Mama glanced at Helen and me as if to reassure herself we were still with her as she held Steve in her arms. Helen and I became fidgety, eager to see our father's face. We had to know he was waiting for us.

I remember looking into the crowd of what seemed a thousand or more assembled there, trying to recall what he looked like. I focused again and again without seeing him, ready to cry, until Mama took my face into her hand and turned it slightly to the side. In the distance, he appeared as big as ever! Clean-shaven, tall and upright, his tan suit hung on his almost too-thin frame. Helen and I were burning with the sight of him.

Pulling away from Mama, we let loose with a burst of energy impossible to tame, and ran as fast as we could toward him. As he bent down with arms outstretched, I leaped into his arms, grabbing on to his jacket sleeves. I clutched onto him, not daring to let go and kissed him over and over, until he had to let go. With one stride, his arms opened to hold Helen tight, smothering her with his embrace, while my hands grabbed hold of his baggy trousers. As Mama approached, he took Steve from her arms, and hoisted him in the air. Then it was her turn. He circled his arms around her and held her close, their faces beaming with pure joy. The two-year separation was over.

With my uncle Steve and his family joining us, a dozen or more photographs were taken in front of the Conte Biancamano. The photos

See Historical Society, page 20



Evgenija and her children Helen, Katherine and Steve pose for one last photograph before departing for the United States of America in April 1953.



May 11, 1953: The Oborski family is together again!

★ *Historical Society cont. from page 9*

were significant. They captured not only our escape from Communist Yugoslavia, but more importantly, the fulfillment of my father's determination and hard work to provide a better life for his family.

Now it was time to see that better life. Helen, Steve and I ran to my father's black Ford and eagerly jumped in the back seat! Never having been in an automobile before, it was a thrill just to be seated there, watching the traffic trickle by. As I looked out the open window, the air felt refreshing on my face. My eyes became wide with attention, focusing on the enormous tallness of the buildings set against the Manhattan skyline.

With my uncle leading the way in his own car, we left the city behind and headed towards

Glastonbury on the Merritt Parkway. About halfway there, we stopped at a grassy area on the side of the road. There, my aunt set out a picnic for us on a tablecloth—our first meal in America—and a welcome sight to behold of foods too plentiful to have imagined back in Communist Yugoslavia. Things were indeed much better already.

Next: A new life begins in Glastonbury.

To learn more about Glastonbury's Ukrainian community, and see dozens of colorful cultural artifacts, including a collection of magnificent Ukrainian Easter eggs, come see the special exhibit on display through September at the Historical Society's Museum on the Green.

From the Historical Society

From Ukraine with Love: The Immigration Memoirs of Katherine Oborski Ciolkosz

Part 6: A New Life on Grove Street

On the evening of May 11, 1953, we arrived at the three-room apartment my father had rented for us on Grove Street, directly across from St. John’s Ukrainian Catholic Church and only three houses off of Main Street. The house was owned by Joseph Kozuch and Joseph Patynok, members of the church and new friends of my father.

The Grove Street of the 1950s was very different from the Grove Street of today and, in fact, is not even in the same location. The original Grove Street, a two-block dead end extending east from Main Street near its intersection with Naubuc Avenue, had been laid out in the early 1900s for the sake of providing much-needed multi-family housing for the mostly German workers at the Williams Brothers Silver Company. It was the Germans who had built the small Lutheran Church there in 1902.

By the early 1920s, Grove Street had grown to about 30 large, three-story wooden houses. The German families still there had now been joined by ones from Poland and Italy, and roughly 20 Ukrainian families. When the Lutherans built a new larger church for themselves on Griswold Street in 1925 (still in existence today), the Ukrainians jumped at the opportunity to purchase the old one. Each family contributed \$50, enough for the down payment. The remainder of the purchase price was paid off in short order through various fundraising events, especially church dinners.

Mr. Patynok and his wife, Mary, were two of its founders. Mary was bedridden during most of their married life and her husband devoted his time to her as well as to the church, taking in duties as custodian of both the church and the church’s cemetery on New London Turnpike. He would walk to the church from Clinton Street, where they lived, each week to clean and pray for his wife.

Our third-floor apartment was modest in its furnishings. Having grown up in relative poverty in Lisnja and raised on the ethics of hard work, my parents took the accommodations in stride. They learned to adjust, holding on to bigger dreams of one day purchasing a home of their own. Everything given to us had been used by another family. As space was limited, Helen and I slept on the futon-style sofa in the living room. It was a gift from a Ukrainian family from the church, one of many acts of kindness we would receive.

A round oak table, also in the living room, was used for all our meals. There was no space in the small kitchen, where the old wringer washing machine stood in the corner. Laundry was hung on a clothesline outside the back door to dry. Steve slept with my parents in the one and only bedroom.

There were Saturday night baths, one by one, and my parents stressed the importance of dressing nicely for church on Sunday mornings. Helen and I were excited to wear the new dresses that our aunts had purchased for us.

As we crossed the street and entered the church for the first time with our parents beside us, we were reminded to proceed in silence, in reverence to where we were. Helen, Steve and I took our place in the front pew, where several other children were seated. Upon kneeling, we crossed ourselves three times, folded our hands and said the prayers Mama had taught us as soon as we could talk. Having done that, we sat and waited for the Divine Liturgy to begin.

Mama sat in the last pew, about eight rows back in the little church, and my father stood behind her against the wall, along with his brother Steve. How my parents loved that little church and how my father loved to sing.

Ever since my uncle Steve and his family had arrived in Glastonbury three months earlier than my father, they had rented a ranch-style house at the top of the hill on Spring Street Extension, on a dirt road down Old Trail Road. Their house was very basic and had no running water. But they had land for their vegetable gardens, something they cherished. During the week, my uncle worked at a local machine shop, while his wife labored in the Dickau tobacco fields between Main Street and Naubuc Avenue (the area now located on Glastonbury Boulevard).

Another aunt, my father’s sister Anna Rudakevic, found work as a caretaker for an elderly man, Mr. Vittner. He lived at the end of Great Swamp Road (where the road today meets the corner of Deerfield Drive on the right). His old house had not changed over decades and had no running water either (yes, even in 1953, there was an outhouse on his property!). We spent

many occasions visiting Mr. Vittner on weekends, running around the open fields and playing with his dog. After his death a few years later, the house was demolished and the land sold for the development of new homes in the area of what is now Deerfield Drive, Great Swamp Road and Opal Drive.

Aunt Sophie, the sister who had sponsored my father during the immigration process, lived in a house at the bend of Addison Road, just south of the East Hartford line. The acreage behind the house she and her husband, Paul Herman, owned is now the Duck Pond Road cul-de-sac. She had found work as a domestic helper for Dr. and Mrs. Raffa on Main Street. Their brick colonial still stands today across the street from CVS, with an addition for business use on the north side.

It was only natural for us then that Sunday afternoons were spent visiting. That was what families did then. None of the stores or business were open, and our families spent time together, the cousins playing hide and seek outdoors and the parents catching up on written news from relatives in Yugoslavia.

The small black-and-white television given to our family by another family from the church not only opened my eyes that summer, but was my tutor in learning English. My world was filled with watching “I Love Lucy,” “Howdy Doody,” “Roy Rogers,” “The Lone Ranger,” Jack Benny and Red Skelton. They were all good, wholesome programs. Television became my primary source of entertainment; its sounds and actions mesmerized me!

In time, my shyness gave way as Helen and I learned the language and as we began to slowly make friends in the neighborhood. There were the Davis children on the first floor. Across the street, next to the church, lived Theresa and Joe Melzen’s children. Their grandfather, Stanley Melzen, had emigrated from Poland in 1913. The family business, as I remember it, had been located on Hebron Avenue set back from the road (where Chase Bank is today) and sold farm products and feed, including grain and supplies, for the area’s agricultural enterprises.

I made friends with Albert and Fernanda Delmonte’s daughter, Aida, who lived next door to us. On a recent visit with Aida at her home, after not seeing each other for decades, we reminisced about those early years on Grove Street. Her parents had grown up on a farm in Italy and immigrated to America in 1948, moving to Glastonbury shortly thereafter. Memories still hold of all the delicious pizza and soups Aida’s mother regularly made for us to enjoy.

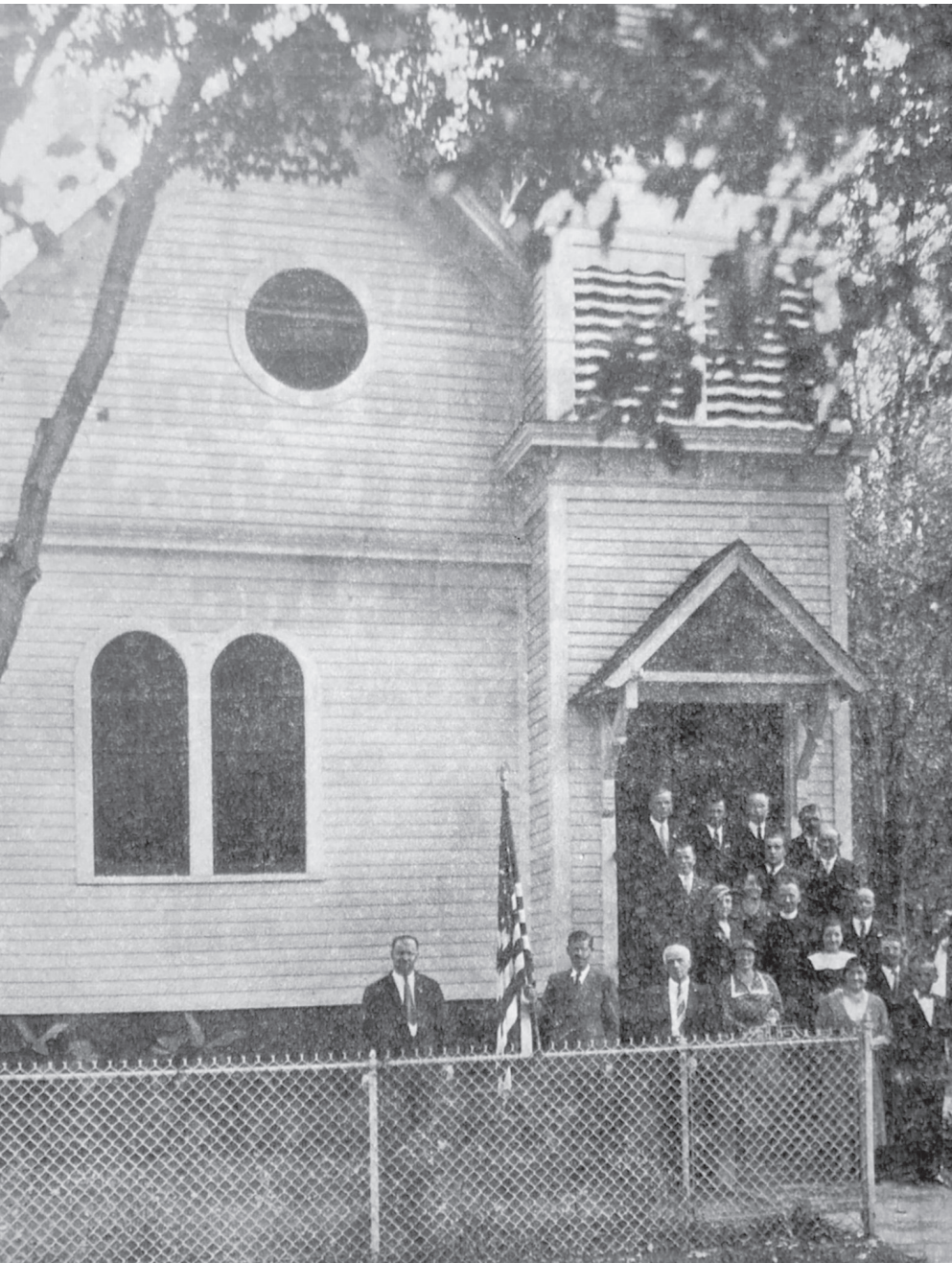
The Cappa family lived in back of our house, by way of a narrow dirt road on the side. Helen and I made friends with their daughters. Further up the street were Frances and Virginia Pudlo. On a recent visit with them at their home, we spent hours talking, as if time stood still—decades have passed, yet our heartwarming memories have remained.

There were fun games outside. Tag, red light/green light, hopscotch, jump rope, Simon says. There were paper dolls, coloring books and crayons ... all so new and wonderful to me!

By the time September came around, I had learned enough English to be ready for Mrs. Ellerd’s first grade class at the Academy School, a half-mile down Main Street. It was there that I began to read about Dick, Jane, and Spot ... “Come Dick. Come and see. Come and see Spot.” At the beginning of each school day, I stood and proudly recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

Without any input on my part, my name was changed from Katarina to Katherine, its American version. After all, I was in America now.

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The founding members in front of St. John’s Ukrainian Catholic Church on Grove Street in 1925.



Looking east up the original Grove Street from its intersection with Main Street. While undated, this photo captures the way Grove Street looked when the author, then six years old, first took up residence there in 1953.

From the Historical Society

From Ukraine with Love: The Immigration Memoirs of Katherine Oborski Ciolkosz

Part 7: A Foot in Two Cultures

As I began first grade at Academy School in September of 1953, I was filled with a curiosity about the world around me. It was that innate desire to learn I felt I needed to explore, enhanced by Mrs. Ellerd’s encouragement. I was no longer living in the Yugoslavian village of Lisnja, and I was no longer doing chores on the farm, nor walking a kilometer to church each Sunday. There was now a new freedom building within me as I readily engaged in new sights, sounds and experiences.

My eyes grew unmistakably wider as I became mesmerized at Saturday matinees with Helen at the old Glastonbury Theater on Hebron Avenue. (The white Derr Plaza building is still there, but it has not been a movie theater for decades.) Then there was the time our family walked the short distance from Grove Street to a fair behind Academy School that first fall. Underneath the large tent were bright lights, costumes and funny clowns. To eat, there were hot dogs, French fries and cotton candy. All too wonderful for me to have even imagined in my native village.

Neither had I ever heard of Halloween. With my mother’s permission, Helen, Steve and I purchased a fabric mask and gathered together some old clothes, thus making our own costumes. When darkness came, we joined other children on Grove Street and went trick-or-treating for several hours. It was such fun!

Not long after Halloween, Christmas decorations began filling the stores. We were able to talk our father into purchasing a real Christmas tree. Christmas trees were part of the Ukrainian holiday tradition, its customs dating back to my grandparents and the generations before them in Galicia. For those first years, it was important that we maintain our Ukrainian traditions. Americanization would come later.

A few days before Christmas, I would find Mama in our small kitchen, an apron tied to her waist and a scarf to keep her hair in place. She began preparing the bread and cookie dough in the early morning hours. “There is much to do,” she would say, often letting Helen and me help as she mixed the ingredients, then let the dough rise.

My uncle Steve and his family joined us for our first Christmas Eve “holy supper,” which began, by tradition, soon after the first star appeared in the sky. A non-meat meal, it was preceded by a day of abstaining from all meat and dairy products.

My father began with the Lord’s Prayer (Otche Nas) in Ukrainian, as we joined hands. Then, he distributed prosphora, small chunks of bread that had been blessed the previous Sunday by Father Czervinsky, the pastor of St. John’s. My father went from one person to the next, dipping a piece of the blessed bread in honey, giving it to each of us. “Krestos Rozdajetsia” (Christ is born), he would say as part of the ritual. We had learned early on to respond with “Slavit Yeho” (Honor Him).

A Ukrainian “holy supper” traditionally consisted of 12 foods, some of which were borscht (a beet-based soup), holubtsi (stuffed cabbage with rice), pierogi (potato and cheese filled dumplings), herring or other type of fish, marinated mushrooms, jellied fish and kutia (wheat or barley cooked with honey, poppy seed or walnuts). After having fasted all day, little wonder we were all delighted when it finally came time to eat.

Ukrainian Christmas carols resounded merrily throughout the small space as the men’s faces beamed with rosy color, especially after a little wine had been consumed, making the singing more robust.

On Christmas morning, we could not hold our excitement at the sight of a wrapped gift for each one of us left under the tree by Sviaty Nykolai (Saint Nicholas) as we slept. After all,

we had been good all year. Mama received a new scarf; my father, a wallet; Helen, a sweater; and Steve, a small dump truck. And for me ... my first baby doll.

In April, a fourth child, my sister Mary, was born. We were now a family of six. To accommodate her crib in the three-room apartment meant moving Steve (almost four now) into a small bed in the kitchen, where the wringer washing machine once stood. (It was moved to the enclosed back porch.)

In some ways, the Oborskis were a typical American family of the mid-1950s. My father was the breadwinner. Mama was the homemaker and foundation that nurtured us. Society’s expectations followed strict gender roles then, with women focusing primarily on caring for their families and their home.

Like all Ukrainians, my parents valued good manners. We were taught to say “thank you” and “please” and to respect our elders. Good behavior was non-negotiable. It was not proper for us to speak up or openly disagree. We just did what we were told.

Our financial situation, however, prevented us from being like most American families in town. As money was tight, we were not involved in social things like dance lessons, gymnastics, music lessons or sports. My father’s income as a stonemason had to keep us fed first, and Mama made the most of a limited income with simple home-cooked meals. She found ways to maximize everything by making soups, using potatoes and vegetables, making her own pasta and pizza, and baking her own bread. She never used a cookbook; everything was from memory, without measuring. Remembering our upbringing in poverty-ridden Lisnja, my parents always insisted that we finish everything on our plates.

Groceries were purchased at Buckley & Camp on Hebron Avenue, where items were tallied on a cash register, not scanned, and then packed by an employee. Because my mother did not know arithmetic, it became Helen’s responsibility to pay for the groceries with the money given to her by my father.

My parents were strict, devoutly religious people. Over time, they became increasingly more involved in the Ukrainian church, with my father helping to mow the lawn. When she had time, Mama gave a helping hand at church dinners.

On Saturday mornings, Helen, Steve and I joined our cousins John, Jerry, Walter and other children from the church at Father Czervinsky’s home on the corner of Grove Street and Main, where his wife (Ukrainian Catholic priests are allowed to marry) taught us catechism and where I learned to write the Cyrillic Ukrainian alphabet.

Because we were speaking only English in school all day, Helen and I soon came to master the language. Mama had the hardest time. Speaking slowly, with a heavy Ukrainian accent, and with our encouragement, she slowly learned English from us. As she spoke, we in turn responded, carefully enunciating each word in English for her, along with an explanation of its meaning.

For extra money during the summer of 1955, my parents picked strawberries at the Grasso farm on Marlborough Road. A bus picked us up along with other families on Grove Street, then it continued up Hebron Avenue for miles until we reached the farm across the street from Arbor Acres. As they picked pints and pints of strawberries, Helen, Steve and I played on the swings, keeping a watchful eye on baby Mary.

That September, tragedy struck. The news came by telephone, only hours before the local television broadcast of a gas-leak explosion in a manhole at the construction site where my father was working. He had been badly burned on a portion of his hands, arms and neck, and rushed to Yale-New Haven Hospital, where extensive surgery was required. Mama managed as best as she could without him. Unable to drive his car, she relied on my uncle Steve to take us all the way down to New Haven, usually several times a week. It was reassuring to see him improving each time we went.

After three months, he was able to return home. Even then, it took several more months before he was able to return to work. That time allowed for visits from aunts, cousins, neighbors and church friends, showing their support.

In dealing with my father’s injuries, it became more important than ever for all of us to cling to our faith, the ingrained basis for our security and our strength. My parents had endured hardships before. They were determined to



The Oborski family stands in front of their first Christmas tree as they celebrate Ukrainian Christmas on Grove Street in 1953.



Peter and Evgenija Oborski and their children Katherine, Steve and Helen take a moment to pose for the camera after attending St. John’s Ukrainian Catholic Church on Grove Street.

cling to the hope that they fervently built their dreams upon in this country. With the food and monetary donations from local charities as well as churches helping to sustain us, life slowly began to be good again.

In time, we were back to where we had been financially before his accident. Realizing that our family of six could no longer live comfortably in the small Grove Street apartment, my

parents began searching for a home of our own. Next time: Fulfilling the dream of home ownership.

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From the Historical Society

From Ukraine with Love: The Immigration Memoirs of Katherine Oborski Ciolkosz

Part 8: The Dream of Home Ownership Fulfilled

It is fair to say that home ownership is both a huge goal and major accomplishment for most immigrant families. It certainly was for our family of six who had been living in a three-room, third-floor apartment on Grove Street since the spring of 1953.

It was with great excitement, therefore, that in early 1957 my parents announced that they had saved enough money to put down a deposit on a 100-year-old house on Naubuc Avenue in the Curtisville section of town. The house, which had been owned by Joseph P. Clark, a bachelor who died suddenly in August of 1956, was purchased “as is” from his three heirs. It needed a lot of work, not the least of which was clearing it out from under a nearly impenetrable tangle of overgrowth.

In addition, it was located kitty-cornered from the Phelps Oil Company’s large tank farm on what was then Phelps Road, but is now the site of the Riverfront Community Center. But at \$10,900 it was a bargain too good to pass up, and we soon became accustomed to hearing oil trucks rounding the corner from Naubuc Avenue at all hours of the day and evening. A month later, a \$7,000 mortgage was taken out on the property.

With 10 rooms, all of us children had a bedroom of our very own! Although some of the rooms were in dire need of repainting or re-wallpapering, we didn’t mind. In addition to what we brought over from the Grove Street apartment, the house was outfitted with Mr. Clark’s old furnishings, and everything left behind, including a sofa, chairs and end tables, were now ours.

The house had an old oil heating system that noisily blasted hot air through the registers in the sagging floors and carried the musty smell of the cellar throughout the house. The part of the basement directly underneath the kitchen had only a dirt floor and was used by my mother to store all her jars of canned fruits and vegetables.

The narrow, wooden stairs creaked as I climbed up to my very own bedroom. Adorned with flowered wallpaper and matching border, it was there that I often dreamed—it was my very own cozy retreat, a quiet hideaway, my oasis of calm. Sprawled out on my bed, I could watch Mama from the open window, wearing a simple sundress, always a scarf tied at the back of her neck to hold her pin curls in place. With a shovel in her hand, she would dig and plant. That summer, masses of zinnias sprouted alongside marigolds, daises and dahlias. The gardens transformed the entire yard with a profusion of color and fragrance.

I was a happy 10-year-old. Not only did I love our new home and the small yard that we finally had, but I was making new friends with the Bretschneider kids directly across the street, the Mazziottes next door, and Bruce Lester two houses down. Helen, Steve and I spent countless hours playing “capture the flag” with them in front of the office property nearby after it had closed for the day. We became so wrapped up in play that we only went home when darkness set in.

Once the weather turned cold, we eagerly awaited not only Thanksgiving, but the arrival of yet another sibling. The sight of a huge turkey with all the trimmings was a visual delight, along with a box of assorted chocolates provided by a church friend. All of this made waiting for

Thanksgiving hard to do. By now, celebrating this uniquely American holiday had become only natural for us.

It was during that year that my family reconnected physically with several families from their village in Yugoslavia with whom they had stayed in touch by mail. Hearing that there was work to be had at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, they had begun arriving in Connecticut, not by ship, but by airplane. Eventually, there was a thriving Ukrainian community in Willimantic connected to St. Mary’s Ukrainian Catholic Church. Helen, Steve, Mary and I would soon make friends with their children, who were close in age to us.

It was only logical, therefore, that on Christmas Eve our big house on Naubuc Avenue would welcome them. Not only was it full of delightful aromas, it overflowed with the songs at the dining room table of those former close friends, now newly arrived in America. After the traditional Ukrainian “holy supper,” the women helped my very pregnant mother clear the dishes from the table, hand wash them, and put them away before rejoining the men in song.

Four days after Christmas, my brother Peter was born. We were now a family of seven.

Two years after I had settled into the luxury of having my own room, my father informed us that he was going to convert the house into a two-family residence for rental income. Our family was now larger, all of us kids were older, and his salary was no longer able to cover all the additional expenses. So he had agreed to rent the upstairs to his sister, Ann Rudakevic, whose husband had remained behind in Yugoslavia.

It was a huge undertaking. Since his building expertise was somewhat limited, he enlisted the help of my cousin, John, and a Ukrainian friend. The plan was to add a bedroom off the dining room, where Steve and Peter would sleep. On the outside of the house, a set of stairs would lead up to an enclosed porch, with entry into a small kitchen that had once been a bedroom.

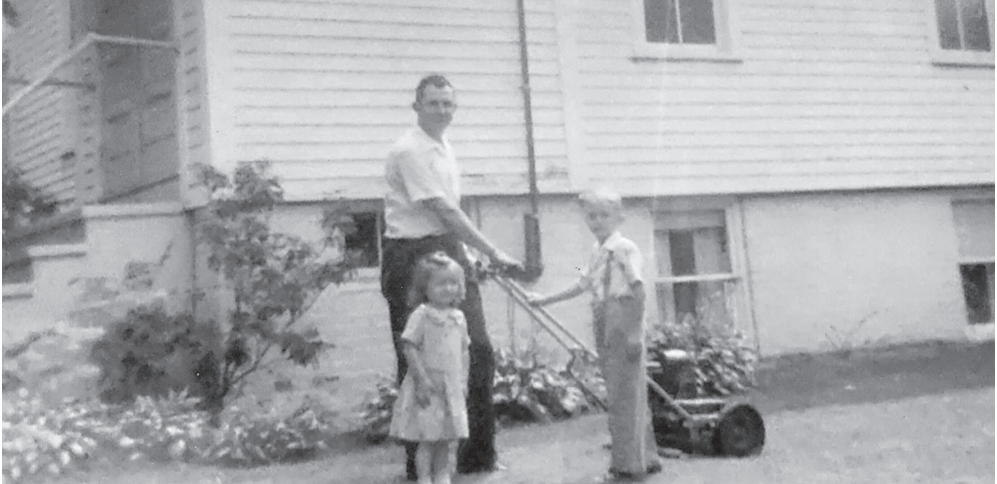
When the hammering finally stopped months later, my father began to seal off the upper stairway. That meant us children all had to move downstairs. Helen, then 15, Mary, almost six, and I, now 12, had to share not only the same bedroom, but one that only had two single beds. Helen had her own bed since she was the oldest; Mary and I shared the other. The age difference caused frustration, our interactions became difficult and arguments ensued over space.

On summer Sundays after church, if we were not visiting in Willimantic or with my cousins in town, we spent the day at Rocky Neck State Park. My father loaded up the red Coca-Cola cooler with ice from Kinne’s gas station on Main Street, then packed it with lots of small bottles of our favorite sodas like birch beer, orange, grape, and cream, which he had purchased by the crate from Pequot Springs on Spring Street. The trip to the beach in his 1948 black Ford sedan seemed to take forever on the old New London Turnpike.

Once there, we changed into our bathing suits and enjoyed swimming the entire day. Somehow, there was always enough food left in the cooler to pull over along the roadside for a picnic on the way home. Exhausted from playing in the water and sun, Helen, Steve, Mary and I slept the rest of the way home, while Mama tended to baby Peter in her arms. Trips to the ocean became a recurring adventure for us—something we could have



Peter and Evgenija Oborski’s dream of home ownership was fulfilled in 1957, when they purchased a 10-room house on Naubuc Avenue.



Peter Oborski often helped with yard work at St. John’s Ukrainian Catholic Church on Grove Street. Tagging along in this photo from 1956 were his children Mary and Steven.

never done in Yugoslavia.

By the time I entered eighth grade in the fall of 1960, I was still somewhat naturally reserved and socially ill-at-ease, but also wondering if I would fit in now with a much larger number of students as eighth graders attended classes at the combination junior-senior high school complex on Hubbard Street. It was certainly much harder to find my way around!

It was only a few weeks later that the first televised debate for a presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon took place. I was intrigued by the charisma of the junior senator from Massachusetts and what he had to say. When the day came to vote, my father proudly cast his ballot for Kennedy because he thought he

was more for the workingman. (My mother, who had never become a citizen, was not able to vote.)

Even my parents realized this was a historical moment. On Jan. 20, 1961, they sat us down in front of the black-and-white television to watch the inauguration of the 35th president, alongside Lyndon Johnson as vice president. This may well have been the moment I first became interested in the dynamics of our country’s government.

Next: The 1960s and beyond.

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From the Historical Society

From Ukraine with Love: The Immigration Memoirs of Katherine Oborski Ciolkosz

Part 9: Creating My Own American Dream

By the beginning of my freshman year in 1961, I had become confident of my way around the maze of classrooms at Glastonbury High School, and comfortable with a small group of American friends.

Since taking a foreign language was a requirement (my fluency in Ukrainian, both spoken and written, didn't count), I chose French with Mrs. Lippincott. To help us learn, there were new specially equipped foreign language labs, with taping and listening booths and monitors for the teachers to listen in.

Since my father reflected strict "old country" values, both Helen and I were not allowed to date in high school. His thinking was for us to do well academically, marry a Ukrainian boy, and raise a family. Going to college was not important in his eyes. I was naïve, grounded in following my father's rules, and not yet thinking seriously about my own future. I focused, therefore, on excelling in my classes, and taking typing, bookkeeping and stenography, knowing that those skills would be helpful in securing a job after graduation.

Outside the classroom, I became involved in the Pep Club, choir and in sports, playing field hockey and basketball all four years. With my typing skills, I jumped at the opportunity to work on the school newspaper, "The Laurel Leaf." I felt as if I was finally fitting in.

In May 1962, my sister Trisha was born. We were now a family of eight, still living in the downstairs portion of our two-family home on Naubuc Avenue. Trisha slept in a crib in my parents' bedroom.

It was on Nov. 22, 1963, while getting off the school bus, that the world seemed to stand still with the news that President Kennedy had been assassinated earlier that afternoon while riding in a motorcade in Dallas. It was hard for me to grasp the news, or make sense of what had happened to the man I had such admiration for. I will always remember that day and the days of mourning that followed, where I was at that time and what I was doing.

The following June, Helen, I and her soon-to-be husband, Peter Tkaczuk, made the trip to Arlington National Cemetery and paid our respects at the top of the hill, with the eternal flame and white picket fencing surrounding the gravesite. (Peter's family had fled Soviet Ukraine to Germany, where he had been born during the war.)

For several years now, it had become increasingly obvious to all of us that the injuries my father had sustained from his work-related accident in September of 1955 continued to cause him great pain and hence reduce his quality of life. Shortly after the accident, he had sued the New Haven Gas Company, on whose lines he had been working for his employer, SD&W Construction, when the explosion occurred.

While the gas company was rather quickly found to have been negligent and my father was awarded a \$60,000 settlement, procedural appeals from their lawyers tied things up for the next seven years. As a result of the delay, my father was compelled to find less enjoyable and less well-paid work at a factory in New Britain. It wasn't until January 1964 that the Supreme Court of Connecticut conclusively ruled in his favor and he finally received his settlement money. He used it to buy another home at 33 Rolling Hills Drive, off of Fairlawn Road.

While this house was brand new, it still only had three bedrooms. That meant we basically

had the same sleeping arrangement, at least for a year until Helen married Peter at St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Hartford in July of 1965, at which point my sister Mary and I had more space to ourselves. The newlyweds moved into the first floor of the house on Naubuc Avenue, which my parents still owned. My aunt, Anna Rudakevic, continued to live in the upstairs apartment.

As I entered my senior year of high school, my father lessened his strictness and allowed me to attend dances at the Ukrainian National Home in Windham with a close friend, Marena Bobrek, whose family had immigrated from Lisnja in 1961. My overnight stays at her home in Willimantic were often the highlights of the school year, ending with a Saturday evening we spent dancing the polka and meeting new friends, both Ukrainian and American.

1965 was a huge turning point in my life. I graduated 33rd in a class of 228, got my driver's license and financed my first car, a 1962 Ford Fairlane. To make the down payment, I used the money that I had saved from the prior two summers when I had worked side by side with my Aunt Anna at the Woodbury Glass Company on Burnside Avenue. It wasn't the newly advertised 1965 Ford Mustang—my dream car—showcased at the 1964 World's Fair in New York, but it would do just fine for the time being. I began working as a secretary in downtown Hartford with the hopes of soon starting classes at Manchester Community College.

1965 was also the year that I applied for citizenship, just as Helen had done the previous year. After meeting the eligibility requirements, which required that I was at least 18 years old, spoke English, was a permanent resident, and had some knowledge of civic matters, I sat for an interview and civics test. I felt confident that my interest in American history would not fail me, and it did not. One of my proudest moments occurred when I, alongside dozens of others, stood in front of a judge at the federal courthouse in Hartford on Sept. 10, swore an oath, and became American citizens.

That moment cemented my keen appreciation for democracy and love for this country. It became even more special when a month later, I received a letter from Governor John Dempsey, who had been born in Ireland, extending his heartiest congratulations. It read: "Since I myself, along with my parents, acquired citizenship by naturalization, I believe that I appreciate more than the average native-born person the significance of making a voluntary decision to become an American. It shows how highly you value the great privilege of being able to say 'I am an American.' May your future as an American citizen bring you many years of contentment and fulfillment."

Now with a job and a car, I began to pursue my own dreams for a good life. There had been much matchmaking pressure from my parents and the Bobrek family as their son was my age. But, after only one date, I knew we were not meant to be. Because I was working full-time and helping at home, I chose to put off college for the time being.

A year after graduation, with my Uncle Steve now the owner of the house on Grove Street we had once lived in, my cousin Walter mentioned matter of factly something I became interested in hearing more about. His neighbor, Ed Ciolkosz, who had graduated from GHS with both of us and was now in the Army in California, had been asking about me.

Thus began a relationship neither of us expected. We kept in touch by letters and calls and



Peter and Evgenija Oborski stand in front of their new home on Rolling Hills Drive in 1964. Pictured (l-r, back row) are Helen, Anna Oborski, Anna Rudakevic and Katherine; front row: Steve, Peter and Evgenija, holding Trisha.



The writer's parents, Peter and Evgenija Oborski, in a happy moment at their daughter's wedding in 1974.

dated when he came home on leave. The ongoing war in Vietnam naturally brought concern, but relief came with the news that he was being sent to South Korea instead. Upon his discharge in 1969, we were married, and in the 24 years of our marriage, we purchased a home in Manchester and raised two sons. Between working part-time for attorneys and staying active with school activities and sports for both sons, I felt my dreams were coming true.

My brother Steve graduated in 1968, became a naturalized citizen, and entered the Army the following year. Upon discharge in 1972, he became the Glastonbury Police Department's

youth officer. Later, he joined the State's Attorney's Office as an investigator under John Bailey. My sister Mary graduated in 1972, and found secretarial work locally for several years before getting married and focusing on raising a family.

Our family sustained a major loss when, on Nov. 30, 1974, my father died at the age of 55. It was the first funeral I had every attended, and it hit me hard, unable as I was to accept the reality of his death. Most people remembered him as a kind, quiet man, involved in his little church. They remembered him as a hard worker from the early years when he arrived in America, providing a home for his wife and six children. They remembered him as one who loved to work with his calloused hands still scarred from his accident, as he carved out small wooden crosses for the stations of the cross displayed on the interior walls of St. John's Ukrainian Catholic Church.

Not surprisingly, my mother, now left alone to care for Peter (16) and Trisha (12), took his death the hardest. He had been her whole life. She mourned him, as Ukrainian tradition taught her, for a full year in solemn dark clothing. Eventually, the passing years subdued her grief as she faced the realities of her life with acceptance and faith.

Next: A Legacy of Love is Passed On.
To learn more about Glastonbury's Ukrainian community, and see dozens of colorful cultural artifacts, including a collection of magnificent Ukrainian Easter eggs, please come see the special exhibit on display through September at the Historical Society's Museum on the Green.

From Ukraine with Love: The Immigration Memoirs of Katherine Oborski Ciolkosz

Part 10: A Legacy of Love

The postwar industrial boom brought many changes to the small, still mostly agriculturally oriented town that I had arrived in back in 1953. By the 1970s, the population of Glastonbury had nearly doubled and the town was well on its way to becoming primarily a residential community for professionals and their families, many of whom commuted into Hartford.

A far-reaching plan to minimize existing traffic snarls and create a modern town center was approved by voters in 1970. Included in the comprehensive redevelopment plan was demolishing all of the 30 or so houses on Grove Street to make room for a new residential/commercial development to be known as Glen Lochen.

In the winter of 1973, Glen Lochen developer David MacClain approached the St. John's Ukrainian Church community with a plan to save the church from the wrecking ball by donating a quarter acre of land at the corner of what would be the rerouted New London Turnpike and a new Grove Street, upon which the church would be moved. Given the unacceptable alternative, church members gratefully accepted MacClain's offer, and the church was moved in February 1974.

When it was, the galvanized iron box that had been placed in the cornerstone of the 1902 Lutheran church was opened and its contents examined by the Glastonbury Heritage Commission. In a new cornerstone ceremony, a copper box containing items of future historic significance was reset. My son David, two years old at the time, and I were among those who helped seal the new cornerstone in place. The following year, the parishioners celebrated the church's golden anniversary with a celebration of liturgy, followed by dinner and dancing at the Irish American Home Society on Commerce Street.

Over the years, I had come to know most of the founding members who had immigrated to this country in search of a better life for their families. It was their steadfast faith and the \$1,000 they had raised for a down payment that allowed them to purchase the then-abandoned Lutheran church on Grove Street in 1925, and eventually pass that heritage on to their children. All are now gone. My memory of them and their families and how they impacted my life, however, remains. They have indeed left a strong lasting legacy, one to be honored. It is a legacy of their love for their families, for their country, and for their cherished religion, one that I myself have been blessed to receive.

After my father's death in 1974, no matter how much I thought I was prepared to someday also lose my mother, I was not prepared at all when she died on Aug. 9, 1983, at the age of 60, after undergoing cancer treatments for two years. The best gifts my mother could have ever given to me were her warmth, her strength, her reverent spirit and her determination to persevere despite trying times.

Most assuredly, she passed on to me the joy she found in our family. I often wondered how she had done it all: leaving her mother, brother and sisters behind at the age of 30, not knowing if or when they would see each other again. How courageous she had been to leave all that behind to sail across the ocean to a country she knew little about in order to provide a better life for her children.

It was the year after her death and the sale of her home on Rolling Hills Drive that I began to have a strong yearning to revisit the back roads of my native village. That my mother had continued to stay in touch with our relatives there was even more reason for me to now see them again and learn firsthand about our family ties.

I had never flown on an airplane and the thought of flying over the ocean for hours terrified me to the point that a migraine set in the day before. My sister, Mary, the first member in our family to be born in America, spoke of her strong desire to join me as she wanted to meet all her aunts, uncles and cousins in Yugoslavia. We both knew we needed to make the trip.

I am forever grateful that I followed that yearning as it allowed me to reconnect with family there, including my uncle Vladimir, who had seen my mother, Helen, Steve and me off at the train station in Banja Luka in May 1953. Now, as I look back on that three-week trip, I am in complete awe of the opportunity I had to be together again with those who only remembered me as six-year-old Katarina.

And so it was in September of 1984, that Mary and I flew on JAT Yugoslav Airways from Kennedy Airport to Zagreb, and then on to Belgrade. Getting off the plane, we were intimidated by

the uniformed military personnel throughout the airport, walking stiff legged past us, cradling their rifles across their chest. Others stood rigidly at attention at the exits, while I averted eye contact.

Once our passports were stamped, they waved us on to be greeted with tight embraces from my Aunt Katarina, her son Genjo and his wife, Uncle Vladimir, and Uncle Ivan, who had been eagerly waiting behind glass doors. Two cars were needed as there were now seven of us, along with four suitcases packed with gifts for everyone.

Once seated in Genjo's small car and on our way to his home in Sremska Mitrovica, about an hour west of Belgrade, it seemed as though not much had changed in the 31 years since I had left. We passed villages where modern improvements even then had been slow to arrive. The simple setting of villagers walking or small cars yielding to horse-drawn wagons competing in the flow of traffic all captured the ambience of a place modern technology had almost forgotten.

Communication was a bit awkward at first since they spoke mainly Serbo-Croatian, with limited Ukrainian, and knew no English. But we were able to converse, especially when assisted by many of the younger second cousins who had some knowledge of English, which was taught in their schools. As a result, our communication became that much easier.

Each day of the first two weeks was filled with trips to meet relatives close by and north to Novi Sad, where my father's brother, Josip, lived. Each day, we enjoyed yet another lovingly prepared meal.

For the third and final week, we drove another three hours west to Lisnja, the place of my birth, when we stayed with my mother's brother, Vladimir. It was there the eye could see the beauty of the land for miles and where the sight of cattle grazing in pastures and sheep meandering were still commonplace. An incredible feeling of awe filled me as we passed the small café where the men still gathered when there was time, and where they had talked of my father's departure for America 33 years earlier.

As Genjo drove up an unmarked dirt road, I was eagerly searching the surroundings, each moment bringing me closer to a familiarity I once knew, expecting that the road would lead us to the old farmhouse. The house that came into view, however, was much too large to be the house I had been born in. We soon learned the farmhouse had been razed and a two-story brick dwelling erected in its place. I focused now instead on a tree nearby, once the very spot where our departure photos were taken in 1953, a landmark from a photograph I was carrying with me.

With each passing day, my time became a celebration embodying the spirit of a family once worlds apart, but now temporarily reunited. The evening before Mary and I were to return home, Genjo called everyone together one last time for a meal around the table, reminiscing with toasts of "Mnohaya leeta" (wishing you many years), laughing, and then dancing the kolomeyka, that all-too-familiar, fast-paced circular dance.

The next morning was the hardest part of the trip, for it worked on all my emotions. Realizing that I would probably never see any of them again, I grasped to take everything in, absorbing it in the moment.

As Mary and I took our place in line boarding the plane, I turned my head with a final backward glance. I could only see Uncle Vladimir standing in front of the others, the ache of parting clearly visible on his face. Just as I had done when leaving him in Banja Luka in 1953, with a brisk movement of my hand, I waved a final goodbye.

How different my life would have been had my parents not settled in the United States. That very thought helps me to appreciate being a citizen in this great land of America. I have had the privilege of growing up with its freedoms, none of which I would have had in Communist Yugoslavia. As a result, I have gained a keen appreciation of democracy, one that I have never taken for granted.

My parents held tight to their American Dream. They had seen the realities of life under communist rule. Leaving everything behind was not easy. Neither was raising a large family on a limited income. There were trials, and their perseverance had been tested on many occasions. In the midst of it all, their faith sustained us.

With the conclusion of this series, I have come to understand my life even more clearly. Until now, it had presented itself as more of a puzzle than I had realized, one based on a combination of two cultures: my roots in post-World War II



St. John's Ukrainian Church rests on a temporary footing, awaiting a new foundation after being moved to its location at New London Turnpike and Grove Street in 1974.



The author (second from right) and her sister Mary (second from left) join their relatives and friends in Yugoslavia for food, laughter and dancing on the evening before their return to the United States in 1984.

Eastern Europe and my growing up in a nearly idyllic American town. As I look back over the decades, those deep Ukrainian roots are clearly a bigger part of who I am today than I had previously thought.

Planted by my grandparents in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Galicia in the late 1800s, they were passed on to my parents in Yugoslavia who, following their own dream for a better life for their children, brought them and us to a new life in America. It has always been my intention to preserve the Ukrainian traditions, language and music for my sons and my five grandchildren. I pass that legacy on to them so that it will be preserved and cherished by them before being passed along to yet another generation.

At this, the conclusion of our series, the Historical Society would like to thank both the author for sharing her family's fascinating immigration story with us, and The Citizen for allowing us to publish all 10 installments over the course of the summer. Anyone wishing to secure Xeroxed copies of any missed installments is invited to stop by our Museum on the Green at 1944 Main Street. While there, you can learn more about Glastonbury's Ukrainian community, and see dozens of colorful cultural artifacts, including a collection of magnificent Ukrainian Easter eggs, in our ongoing special exhibit. Also available are copies of Katherine Oborski Ciolkosz's full-length 2001 memoir "Remembering The Gift," from which this series was drawn.