

# BABA



*My grandmother stares out at me* from a photograph in a printed programme and I am riveted. She is as I had never seen her in life – costumed as a member of a Ukrainian mixed choir. Part of me is outraged. I had no idea she had been a performer. It was never spoken about in our home. There was no reference to her leaving the house once a week to go to choir practice, no hint she had a life outside the one in the big house with my grandfather and great-grandmother, her mother. No, I'm wrong. She did drop hints, but not about the choir.

Once I was mesmerized by a pair of white pumps with sturdy heels and in a few words, she spoke of having to wear them at the Airport Hotel where she worked, and she complained briefly that they weren't comfortable, especially when she had to carry a lot of dishes around. Another time, I heard her laughing while she was on the phone. She sounded brighter and more formal, and I knew it wasn't someone from our family. When she'd hung up, I asked her who it was. She replied off-handedly, "Oh, that's just Joe, someone I knew from the restaurant." And somehow it all came together in my five-year old mind, as a glamorous party in which Baba laughed a great deal, moved quickly with stacks of clean dishes and steaming food in a place where the people were all dressed up and happy.

My family lived next door to Baba until I was six years old. She would have been 48, my age now, when we moved down south, out of the small northern Ontario mining

town and away from both sets of grandparents. My dad's mother, Baba, had been a major influence I know on me, but probably on my whole family. She was a strong, assertive, energetic person who loved playing tricks and practical jokes. Many times, she would whisper to me to watch, creep up quietly behind my snoozing grandfather, shout in his ear, and then laugh riotously as he jumped, exclaimed and once, fell over backwards in his garden chair. When he would angrily respond to her in Ukrainian, she would slap his shoulder, say in English for my benefit, "What's the matter? Can't you take a joke?" before the two of them would continue bickering in Ukrainian. These tricks made me very uncomfortable. I knew I wouldn't like being woken up by a loud shout in my ear. But I loved Baba for bringing laughter into the world.

*She would play polka records* on her living room sofa while going about cooking or cleaning. Suddenly, she would stamp her feet three times, loud enough to make the dishes rattle. I would look astonished and then, as she starting singing the chorus, realize she was beating time with her feet. She would grab my hands and dance me around in a circle singing out the refrain and teaching me to step one-two-three, one-two-three. She started a little party with me, right there in the kitchen and I loved it.

She taught me a silly little song, "Who stole my keeshka? Who stole my keeshka? Who stole my keeshka? Bring it back to me." That I adored because I learned it quickly and I could sing it with her just as loudly, and laughingly as she did. I have no idea whether keeshka is Ukrainian for a sausage or for one's own bottom. I think she must have told me both meanings at different times and laughed to see my reactions.

She often started real parties, bringing out never-ending supplies of whiskey and ginger ale and rye bread and butter in the middle of the day. My mother often sent me next door to bring my dad home, and I would hear the music, the shouting and the singing before I actually got to the door. I would deliver the message and then be told by Baba to go down to the basement warehouse to get myself a pop. The basement was a magical place where Gido, my grandfather, had his workshop and his pin-up pictures of Japanese calendar girls. I would go past this, and past the old wooden stove where my great-grandmother had her pysanky supplies, the special pens and wax for making dyed Easter eggs. I would go to the back of the basement and open a glass-paned door into a world of bounty. Jars of dill pickles, rows of pickled beets, stacks of canned tomatoes, covered pans of holubtsi (cabbage rolls) and perohe (perogies), maybe a blueberry pie made by my great-grandmother, and sometimes leftover turkey roast. And on the floor, in great wooden crates, were bottles of ginger ale for the adults in one stack, and a smaller stack of orange, grape and cream soda for the kids. I would choose a cream soda and bring it back to her to have the cap pried off. I'd take my treat and find a corner of the kitchen where I could be forgotten, hoping the party would last. I would enjoy my drink while watching the grown-ups having fun. I have no idea what they talked and argued about. Most of it was in Ukrainian, but I liked listening to the sound of the language. Often I saw Baba throwing dishtowels at both her husband and her mother in sudden anger as the discussions grew heated. She would slap Gido's shoulders and sometimes his head. She would drape a tea towel over Steadababa's head to blind her, turn her in circles and push her forward as Steadababa murmured half-hearted protests. If Baba caught my eye while doing this, she would switch to English, make a joke and start to dance with her mother. I found it very confusing and disturbing, but also exhilarating. Her zest for life was so infectious. Once or twice, to my very great delight, my dad would bring out his fiddle and play some rollicking tune

that would get everyone clapping, stamping, and singing. And of course, Baba would be swinging someone around, the dishes would be shaking, glasses tinkling and all the world was exciting.

### *The family I grew up with was very closed and private.*

Friends very rarely visited the house. It seems extremely naïve now, but I assumed I knew everything important about my grandparents. I certainly didn't know the details of how the family left Ukraine and settled in Canada. Mystery clouded the picture, even as my uncle attempted a genealogy of the family and tape recorded interviews with my grandparents and great-grandmother. He was frustrated by the "I don't know", or "I don't remember" or "it was a long time ago", but the message was clear. My grandparents wanted to cover their tracks and were perfectly happy starting with a clean slate in a new country. Funny how my parents moved away to a different city to start with a clean slate, and how I moved again, closer to our northern Ontario origins but not quite there. It's as though there is a family tradition of obliterating our early roots so as adults we can choose a new life.

She must have been babysitting, but I remember sitting on the special chair with the two steps up, joining Baba in an illicit breakfast of toast and coffee. The woman who would ply us with food and drink and more food and drink said confidently "Oh, that's all I need in the morning to get me going," and I thought that was wonderful. I would sip my warm, milky coffee, and bite into the thin but liberally buttered hot toast and think this was the best breakfast in the entire world. It was sophisticated, grown-up and illegal since I wasn't supposed to have coffee until I was 16. Baba would still be busy tidying up the spotless kitchen, moving into the guest room to turn on the beautiful wooden floor model radio, with its big, boomy sound. I would be excited because Baba was such an adventure. You never knew if a party was going to break out, or a treat would suddenly be offered, but you were pretty sure something good was going to happen.

Sometimes, we would go outside to sit with Steadababa in their immaculate garden, with the lawn just so, the flowers just so, and the tree branches graciously extending just the right amount of shade. Baba might hang up the washing and Steadababa would stroll slowly amongst the flowers, pulling up a weed here, breaking off a flower there. It would be quiet, except for the rhythmic squeak of the clothesline. And I would start to feel a little disappointed that nothing exciting was happening. Often Steadababa would sit on the little wooden bench against the house, enjoying the sun and the company of the tabby cat, while I would examine the sloping driveway for interesting bits of loose stone or falling leaves. I remember the quality of the light coming through those leaves so that even now, when I see the same light through different leaves, I immediately feel a pleasant sense of expectant happiness. Baba and Steadababa would murmur in Ukrainian, the bugs would be buzzing, it would be slow and peaceful and at any moment, Baba might start stamping, and singing and laughing. I realize now, my mother must have been busy next door with my younger baby sisters, because I don't remember any other family members being around. My dad and Gido must both have been at work. So it was just us girls, enjoying the day.

*When I was much older, in my thirties, I went to visit Baba by myself.* The house was just as quiet and exciting as it ever was with a few changes. Now the guest room still had the special hospital bed that Gido had slept in during his last year when he'd had his legs amputated because of gangrene. But the beautiful radio was still there. The immaculate front room with its plastic-covered "good" sofa and the lamp with the red revolving lampshade showing a scene of a fire. The



basement radio still came up when you turned on the light switch. Gido's tools were all still there and the wonderful warehouse with its stores of pickles and vegetables. And Baba will still quick with an unexpected treat – a \$10 dollar bill suddenly appeared for me to get myself an ice cream. She tucked a sparkling rhinestone necklace into my suitcase since she no longer wore such things.

I look at her picture, the challenging stare with the secret humour, and I am sad and angry at the same time. I wanted – want to know her, this woman who came to Canada first as a young girl of twelve, and then, when she was sent back to Ukraine, again, unwanted as a teenager. This woman whose infectious laugh and high good humour could switch in a flash to hot anger. This woman who, for a laugh and to shock people, dressed up in a man's suit and had her picture taken beside a 1930's car, looking for all the world like a gangster. This woman who gave me a taste of excitement, beauty and the larger world before I was removed from her influence and taken to live down south. I want to know how it was that she left the house once a week to go to choir practice. Did she have Gido's support or did she do it behind his back? And why on earth, knowing how much she loved to sing, and to party, why did she stop going to the choir? Did my grandfather suddenly put his foot down and say no more, she had to stay home and stay out of trouble? Did she flirt with all the men, anger all the women, and play so many practical jokes that she was no longer welcome?

I'd heard various times that the reason my family weren't much involved with other Ukrainian Canadians was because my parents and grandparents found those organizations stifling. We didn't go to church, or observe the Gregorian calendar holidays. My great-uncle John, my dad's uncle, took us occasionally to a Ukrainian summer camp called Palermo for the day, but there were always arguments between my uncle and the rest of the family about what happened between the grown-ups. There was the sense of political dispute and again, because the discussions were in Ukrainian, and because the older folks didn't take the time to explain to us younger kids what was happening, I know almost nothing about what they were disputing.

*So I look at my grandmother's picture* where she sits in the middle of a community, and feel that somewhere here there is a key to why I felt so isolated growing up. There is a mystery that she can unlock. For as an adult, I can



glean information from that picture that that I did not have access to when I was younger. For example, the programme is well produced, showing the input of many formal groups of people, from the Association of Ukrainian Canadians, to the Workers' Co-operative of New Ontario Limited. There is a message from the Timmins mayor, advertising from businesses in Toronto, Kapuskasing, Timmins, Cobalt, Rouyn, and Noranda. There was an executive committee, a programme committee and an publicity committee all involved organizing and promoting this concert. The programme is full of researched notes and photographs of prominent Ukrainian scientists, writers and artists. There are biographies of the performers and background notes on the music. And there are professionally photographed group pictures of the participating choirs and string orchestras. This is no casual thrown-together singalong.

From my own participation in such events both as a performer and as an organizer, I know that my grandmother's choir would have been contacted at least a couple of months in advance of the July 1<sup>st</sup> concert, asked to set up a formal photo session and consulted about the repertoire to be contributed. Many of the photographs have an elaborate painted backdrop of an outdoors garden scene, so you know the organizers asked for a very good photograph, posed and careful. The South Porcupine Choir is one of only two choirs whose musical director is not identified, and in the other choir's photograph, there is a man in a suit instead of traditional costume, occupying the central place where every other group's director is. The implication is that the South Porcupine Choir was self-directed.

The groups I have been part of would normally spend between 1 to 3 months, rehearsing once a week, to prepare for a high profile concert such as this. There is usually pressure on the performers to show up for each rehearsal. If a person is unsure of whether they will be able to commit to the actual concert, that person would probably voluntarily not sit for the official photograph. Bad feelings are easily engendered if a person just shows up for the photograph, and the concert, and doesn't bother putting in the work during the rehearsals. Everyone would have to agree on what to wear, where to have the photograph taken, and when. There would be discussions on what kind of shoes and stockings to wear. Should headdresses be worn or not? Who will take the photograph? And who sits or stands where?

*Baba must have participated in the actual gala event* since I have the programme. Because she's in the photograph, properly dressed, she must have shown up regularly for rehearsals and participated in the decision-making. Since the choir seems to have been self-directed, and knowing how outspoken she was, Baba must have had something to say about every decision. . . And the concert, billed as the first Northern Ontario Ukrainian Canadian Musical Festival, seems to have been a big deal. It was public with choirs and orchestras from hundreds of miles away journeying to Timmins. So why was my grandmother's participation never proudly mentioned? So what if the event was 10 years before I was born? Something that prominent and exciting in a person's life still carries meaning that normally they would want to share. I still love mentioning important concerts I'd been part of fifteen and twenty years later. And we all know the stereotype person who describes their role in the "war" or "when I was young". Things we are proud of we never tire of thinking about or telling other people. So I ask myself, was Baba not proud of her participation in this choir and this concert? I know many, many choirs who have members for life, singers who return week after week, year after year. There's nothing in the picture of this choir to explain why Baba, who loved music so much, stopped attending. I look at this picture and see a group of people who successfully co-ordinated themselves to sing in a major

concert. I see Baba whom I knew loved music and I can't understand. What stopped her? What made her give up the weekly satisfaction and thrill of raising her voice in music she knew, with people who shared her ancestry and immigrant experience?

Little snatches of conversations overheard come back to me. Phrases that didn't really mean anything to me at the time now start me speculating. "The women were too restrictive and small-minded", "I don't care much for them," "They're not much fun,". "The old world is old. We came here to Canada to be Canadian."



I notice that instead of having her right arm folded neatly in her lap, as the other women in the front row do, Baba's has disappeared under the blouse of the woman next to her. It's odd because of how carefully the people have been positioned in each photograph. Legs were either all crossed towards the centre, or all not. Hands were either folded in laps or held instruments. And here in the South Porcupine choir, the two women at the end are out of alignment. I suddenly remember family photographing sessions, where Baba is pinching either my bottom or someone else's to get us to jump and spoil the picture and just as suddenly I know without a doubt that that is what Baba is doing in the choir photograph. As I look at the two of them I can feel Baba's hard pinch and hear her innocently surprised "oh, what did you do that for, you've spoiled the picture," and I am utterly convinced that she is pinching her neighbour's thigh and her neighbour is trying, discreetly, to prevent her.

*I think of myself now and how I might react* to such shenanigans. I'm afraid I wouldn't have much patience if I were the organizer, co-ordinating schedules and costumes and locations and people to finally have the pose "spoiled" by a smart aleck in the front row. And if I were Baba's neighbour, I'd be frustrated at her lack of co-operation. When I've been in group photographs, I've wanted the shoot to go cleanly and well, and I did what I was told, stood where I was meant to and behaved. I sound to myself like a "do-gooder", someone who bends automatically to authority, and in fact that's what I am. So Baba's antics would have made me extremely uncomfortable. I would have laughed involuntarily, because Baba's glee was contagious, but I would have felt guilty, angry and extremely uncomfortable. So I start wondering if that's why Baba quit the choir. Did she outstay her welcome? Did her colleagues finally get so irritated that instead of joking and laughter, she could only attract quarrels and bad feelings?

I start to wonder about her relationships with the opposite sex. She's a good-looking woman of 32 in the photograph. Once again, I think of choirs, bands and other musical groups of which I've been a part. And without fail, there have been intrigues. Sometimes gently innocent liaisons, sometimes down and dirty affairs. But there is almost always an awareness of the opposite sex, especially on performance evenings when everyone is dressed up and looking their best. There's an appreciation between group members that usually adds nothing more than an agreeable frisson to the event. Looking at my grandmother's complex expression, and with the background of my own experience in such groups, I now wonder what happened with Baba. I suppose there is a chance she would have been quiet and timid with the men, while venting her practical jokes with the women only. But my own experience of her says this isn't likely. Baba ran a rooming house on the top floor of her home. I remember her easily keeping the boarders, all men, in their place with her no-nonsense attitude. She cleaned their rooms, and greeted them casually as they came and went. But they were kept completely separate from the family part of the house, and I heard her being quite short with anyone who dared to raise a complaint. There was no sense of my grandfather having anything to do with this home business. Baba was plenty strong enough to run it on her own. So the idea of her turning into a timid wallflower at choir has no validity.

What does have validity is the idea she would have been flirtatious and provocative and maybe even a bit of a tease. Am I just imagining things when I see bitchiness in some of the faces of the women? I can easily build up a picture of Baba teasing both sexes so much that the women would get fed up with her mean jokes, and the men fed up with her teasing. There was never any whiff of impropriety around Baba's house. No unexplained absences, or awkward phone calls that I was aware of, although as a child, I must admit such things might have been hidden from me. But the sense of Baba, Gido and Steadababa locked in their own world with very little outsider influence was strong, and I believe had Baba been having affairs, she probably would have tipped me off in some small way just to be risky and cause trouble. So I believe she was faithful to her husband. But I can also easily believe that her aggressive jokes and provocative behaviour might have so exasperated her fellow choir members, male and female alike, that she might not have been welcome at practice after a time. I can imagine people gradually turning the shoulders in exasperation, no longer laughing as she pinched and verbally prodded. Left without a source of victims and without an appreciative audience, she might have well have lost interest in attending and just dropped out of the group.

But I don't know for sure. She's been gone for 20 years so I won't ever hear her



explanation of what happened. And what makes me so angry and hurt is that I feel I've just discovered a way of connecting with her. If, as an adult, I could have shared my love of music and my experiences as a performer with her, I might have been able to reach her in a fundamental way. I might have learned why she liked hurting people to get a reaction out of them. I might have understood something about my own need to make music from listening to her describe what she loved about. We shared a sense of adventuring which led us both to seek out connections with strangers in a musical venue. We shared the commitment to practice for a concert, the willingness to blend our talents with those of friends and acquaintances, the drive to make music. And I would have loved the opportunity to make myself a little bit more special to her, as she was to me.

*For I still remember the hurt* when I journeyed to South Porcupine for the first time on my own, and after her surprised and welcoming hug, she looked behind me, pushed me aside and asked where my younger sister was, hadn't she come too. I don't whether my sister was her favourite, or whether she just wanted a whole party to come with me and not just one person, but in any case I was hurt. I knew exactly how few visits Baba had had from her son, my father. It's not that I wanted gratitude, but I did think someone who liked to party as much as she did would welcome an unexpected guest. She was alone in the house then. Steadababa was being looked after in the local hospital, and Gido had passed away. She was all alone in that big, empty, spotless house. I don't think she even had a boarder then. It was a blow to feel her disappointment full on. I was not enough.

And it was a surprise the next afternoon, when I returned from sightseeing, to open the fridge and find the remains of my favourite take-out fried chicken had entirely disappeared. She didn't mention it to me. When I spoke about having lunch, she said off-handedly she'd had hers and that there was rye bread and butter in the fridge if I wanted. The hero-worshipping small child in me was then pushed away by the outraged adult. How dare she take my favourite food, I fumed, and not even offer me anything worthwhile in its place? Where were the steaming holubtsi and perohe? Where was the leftover turkey? I didn't say anything out loud of course. It was clear that times were different – that Baba was as a newly single woman, not the one with a full house of people to feed and a willingness to open her doors to guests. But the contrast was a painful one. As an adult, I now saw a woman with priorities I didn't agree with. Baba was keeping the house as squeaky clean and dust-free as it ever was, but that seemed to have become her whole world. Now she fed herself only toast and coffee, not because it was that wonderfully sophisticated breakfast of long ago, but because she couldn't be bothered cooking for herself. Her secretive devouring of the fried chicken that had unexpectedly appeared in her fridge showed me more clearly than words, how the vigorous, life-loving girl in Baba was still fighting to get past the pleasure-denying adult.

And more painful surprises awaited me as we did have lengthy discussions, and she complained about being unhappy with Gido, and advised me never to marry. This was the time she showed me the picture of her dressed up as a man beside a car that she learned to drive. This was when I got a sense of a fury that drove her, the restless anger that kept her feeling that the grass was always greener somewhere else, that a better party was happening elsewhere to which she hadn't been invited. As Baba spoke of her daily life now that seemed colourless and purposeless, I glimpsed the rage of a

vital, energetic woman who wanted better things in life, a woman who left the haystacks of Ukraine for the promise of Canada, an adventurer who worked hard all her life but who ended up profoundly disappointed.

With my youthful drive to fix things, I asked her flatly why she didn't move to Toronto. Baba used to come visit our family in southern Ontario once every five or six years. She never stayed very long, because the high point of her trip was going to Toronto to shop and to visit her girlfriends, one of whom had actually been the moll of a 1940's Toronto gang member. There was excitement around her as perfumed, wearing bright feather earrings made of plastic, and one of her beloved flowered blouses, she would kiss each of the grandchildren, push \$10 dollar bills secretly into our pockets and say good-bye to the tops of our heads, her eyes already looking focused on adventure. Now that she was a single woman like me, and virtually unencumbered, I couldn't think why she just didn't do what she wanted.

But she couldn't move Steadababa from the hospital, Baba answered. And besides, her house was here, and her friends. Her voice, and excuses, trailed away.

I see her getting up to rinse her coffee cup and end the conversation, but now I have older eyes, less clouded by sentiment. And now I see a woman who scored off her unwanted daughter-in-law by distributing lavish gifts to her children behind her back. I see a woman whose sense of fun did not extend to actually connect with people, to form a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. I see a powerful, energetic and angry woman who kept her lips tightly closed against the truth she longed to blurt out, that she was terribly unhappy. I see a woman growing more and more isolated, refusing to reach out to anyone who could help share her grief, her despair, her solitude. I see a woman constantly rushing towards adventure only to find it constantly out of reach,

At the end of that disturbing weekend visit, I felt I'd done my best to get to know Baba as a person, away from the noise and bustle of a family visit, and I had failed. I had tried to win her confidence and connect with that exciting woman who had so inspired me as a child. I wanted her to stamp the floor again in time with a polka so I could stamp too, show her I'd understood, and then thank her, formally, for her gifts. For her merry laugh, abundant treats and unexpected dancing in my childhood had been a constant inspiration in the years of grey desperation which followed. From her, I believe I developed my love of the forest and wildlife, my sense of happy expectation of life and in part, my love of music. But Baba didn't dance. She put a bottle of wine in front of me, made herself another cup of coffee, and we went into the pristine front room to watch television together. She clammed up and I had nothing more to say.

*I saw Baba once more*, in a hospital after her first heart attack, and she was as chipper as ever, the bright, bubbly public front firmly in place. My dad and I brought her some extra night things. She couldn't be without the ever present bobby pins and rollers she used to curl her hair each night. My dad and uncle fixed some things around her house, we visited and then I had to go back to Ottawa to work, and she returned to her home a few days later. But a second heart attack claimed her life not long afterwards, and less than 5 years after Gido passed away, Baba followed him. She was 75. Baba's mother, Steadababa, continued living comfortably in the hospital for a number of years afterwards, living until she rejoined that old triangle at the ripe old age of 104.

I look once more at Baba's choir photograph and suddenly see that we never

would have shared musical shop talk. She would never let me closer than what I had been. It's tempting for me to think that music would have brought us closer together, but the truth is she already knew I was heavily involved in musical groups, and she neither asked me anything about them, nor shared her own experiences. And she didn't tell me about this concert. The Baba in my heart and my memories is the only Baba I will ever have because it's the only Baba the world had. The real Mary Costeniuk, the person who had left Ukraine, laughing and hopeful in search of adventure and who kept searching all her life, was locked up tightly inside the woman, wife, mother and grandmother who kept the world at a distance. And long though I may look at her photograph, she will not let me closer.

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