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An award-winning poet reflects on the west Ukrainian cultural milieu, the reputation of Ukrainians who cross borders, and on respecting her own boundaries.

IVANO-FRANKIVSK, Ukraine | Halyna Petrosanyak meets me at the railway station. After a few minutes' walk we come to the small house where she lives. There is an unfinished extension at the back of the building. "Here," Halyna says, "we're adding more space. The first floor is ours, the second belongs to the neighbors."

This is important. She knows what it's like, to have no roof at all.

At the end of 1995 the 26-year-old returned from a three-month fellowship in Vienna to learn that she no longer had a job as a junior faculty member in the department of world literature of Ivano-Frankivsk State University. She lost her on-campus housing too. That winter was snowy. Halyna caught a cold and could hardly talk, but she decided to start a journey.

Vienna was her first trip abroad. "It was an important experience, the first time, and everything that follows – amazement, perceiving and understanding why people there live that way, the chance to look at us from the outside," Halyna recalls. In Vienna, she met a Czech researcher also on scholarship. She and her new friend Alicie visited Prague, and Alicie told her, "Ukrainians are starting to come to the Czech Republic for work. If it goes badly for you in Ukraine – my friends have a small hotel in the mountains and they need housekeeping help." Halyna didn't realize how soon she would use this invitation. By New Year's Eve, still getting over the cold, without a Czech word, she got to the mountains. Mountains like those she once escaped.

LIFE ON THE EDGE

Halyna was born at the end of the world.

In Soviet times, it didn't matter that the Earth was round. The Earth was a plane, Moscow was its center, and for most people the world ended at the state border, even if it was at the very heart of Europe. The place Halyna Petrosanyak lived – in the remote Carpathian highlands – was doubly the end of the world: not only because of Soviet isolation, but also because of its natural border of mountain ridges.

This is border country quite unlike that of Ukraine's frontiers with Poland and Hungary, on the far side of the Carpathians, full of life and "go West" zest. Here on the other side the roads go nowhere, the border crossings few and far between.

"Halyna Petrosanyak, born in the wildest mountains (her village lies on the very edge, beyond there are only bears and the Romanian border, farther still there is only Transylvania, the homeland of vampires, and everybody in the village drinks a lot and dies of it from time to time)," Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych once said about her.

This area belongs to the real Ukrainian highlanders, the Hutsuls. This ethnic group has long been an object of interest, inspiration and romanticizing, for Habsburg-era scholars – some dubbed the Hutsuls "Tyroleans of the East" – and for Ruslana Lyzhychko, Ukraine's 2004 Eurovision Song Contest winner with a Hutsul-inspired tune called "Wild Dances." Their rich and original musical culture, colorful patterns built around ancient symbols, their myths, handicrafts, and magic – all this, and the kitschy way it is often presented, attracts tourists and artists. Some Hutsul areas are prospering through tourism, but not Halyna's.

"*Hutsulshchyna* [the Hutsul land] is like Galilee," she replies to a question on the formation of her creative identity. "It's a godforsaken place where people were still living in the Middle Ages, in the 1960s. One needs courage to be proud he or she is Hutsul, if you really know what it's like. Life there is hard and sad; there is nothing to be proud of. I've been trying to run away from there since I was 14."

She talks about arduous toil every day just to have something to eat, about the combination of deep traditions, ancient rhythms, and the nastiest Russian pop at Hutsul weddings, about real "wild dances," about loyalty to any authority and indifference to politics. "I realize that it sounds unpatriotic, but there is no sense in adorning things. It won't help."

In an essay on her earliest memories, Halyna remembered how her young mother's hands ached when she washed clothes in an ice-cold mountain stream. But there were consolations as well: excellent teachers and a good library at school and even a TV set – the only one in the settlement. "We would go watch TV like going to the movies. It made a big impression on me, those Soviet movies," Halyna recalls.

PORT STANISLAV

One thing the village school could not provide was strong language instruction, so Halyna's German was poor when she began studying Russian and German linguistics at Ivano-Frankivsk State University in 1987. Even though she'd spent two years at a boarding high school in the city, she says it was hard to keep up with her city-born classmates. By her fourth and fifth years at university, though, she began to savor German poetry.

"German is a big piece of my personality now," she says. "What the German language gave me then and now, cannot be overestimated." And now the German language gives Halyna her daily bread: she teaches German at a legal institute and translates German texts.

As Halyna was discovering German literature, German writing was being adopted by the "Stanislav Phenomenon." As the 1990s were getting under way, the appearance

of the new underground magazine *Chetver* exposed something not many people knew. It turned out that provincial ex-Stanislav (the name of the city until 1962) was full of talented young writers who lacked official literary biographies and were familiar with good modern and contemporary literature, refined nonconformists alien to both Soviet and patriotic discourse.

The Stanislavians were drawn to local writers like Joseph Roth, Rosa Auslander, and Paul Celan, who emerged from the west Ukrainian cultural miscellany of the turn of the 20th century to enter world literature through the German language, among other masters of German and other languages omitted from the Soviet literary canon. The concentration and intensity of first-rate writing, postmodern some called it, in such a quiet city looked like a phenomenon, and this phenomenon had faces. Yuri Andrukhovych, best known and most successful of them, is the pre-eminent fiction writer in Ukraine today. And Taras Prokhasko, award winner in *Korrespondent* magazine's Best Ukrainian Book prize in 2006 (1st place in fiction) and 2007 (3rd place in nonfiction), *Chetver* editor Yuri Izdryk, Volodymyr Eshkilev, the author of the term "Stanislav Phenomenon," poet Yaroslav Dovhan, and a dozen more. Halyna Petrosanyak was in at the beginning of the Stanislav Phenomenon, though she insists she joined it rather than shaped it.

"Halyna was an important person in the overall picture of Frankivsk life, at a time when a big company met every day. Her departures were memorable," Taras Prokhasko recalls. "She brought us lively, apocryphal reports from Vienna, Prague, the Czech mountains ... She was our first ambassador."

CZECH BROTHERS

Halyna's experience in the Czech lands was not that of a tourist. It began as an "emergency entrance," but soon she found her "perfect shelter" in the mountain hotel. The managers were cordial and kind to her, and she soon felt comfortable there. They spoke no German, and she spent her first month washing dishes in the hotel kitchen in silence, learning her first Czech words like a child. She began to absorb Czech culture also, watching TV and video, reading books, and before long even translating some of Milan Kundera's early stories.

Her employers were young, educated, and religious: the hotel was owned by the Czech Brethren church. "They liked me, they understood me. I was the only Ukrainian there, there were no others around – nobody could spoil the reputation of Ukrainians, so no prejudice."

She soon saw the prejudice against Ukrainians, and its reasons. At first, she met Ukrainians only on trips to Prague. Encounters with her countrymen were not always easy. It's hard to imagine slender, soft-voiced Halyna arguing with a bus full of migrant workers, drunk and insolent men mostly. Nevertheless, she says she did. "I told them they ought to be ashamed of themselves, because in a way they were representing the country abroad. Some of them tried to persuade me that life was hard, and I understood nothing, that Czechs deserved to be treated insolently," she says.

But the "gastarbeiter" (a colloquialism for migrant worker) she got to know was a young man who made himself out to be some kind of successful businessman who normally traveled by car and just happened to take the bus that day. He was protective of her as of newcomer, though Halyna was a little afraid of him.

"He didn't seem educated, but didn't look like the other gastarbeiters either. Soon it came out that the guy really was earning good money, not as a businessman, but as a gastarbeiter in a Prague mortuary." He had no cap, and Halyna gave him her beret, bought in Vienna. She has never seen him again, but she warmly recalls this short acquaintance – not an affair, but an act of solidarity.

She picked up more migrant stories in 1999 and 2000 when she worked as office manager and translator for a Prague recruiting firm that found legal jobs for Ukrainian migrants. Here Halyna saw another side of the migrant world, "people who died, who became demented, ruined themselves by drinking."

"I didn't let myself to get involved in gastarbeiter-ing, I stood firm," she says. "I tried to follow cultural life, to communicate with people from the literary world, Czechs and Austrians mostly. Sometimes life seemed hopeless – just earning money. I tried to get out of it, to put up resistance."

"This example doesn't surprise me," Lubov Maksymovych, the director of Lviv's West-Ukrainian Women's Perspectives Center, says about Halyna's experience abroad. "More than 60 percent of Ukrainian women migrant workers have professional or higher education or even an advanced academic degree. Many worked in research institutions." Many more, however, could not find jobs to match their qualifications. "Active people cannot submit to this fact. So they go abroad first."

CITY LIGHTS

Halyna lives in Frankivsk with her husband Leonid, a builder, and little son. She returned in 2000 and defended her thesis on the Austrian Jewish writer Joseph Roth. "About 100 people are the reason to live in this city," Vasyl Ivanochko says, and Halyna is one of them. He runs Lileya-NV, probably the first publisher in Ukraine to issue new and bold contemporary literature in large print runs. Petrosanyak's two published volumes of poetry, *Park na skhyli* (Park on the Slope, 1996) and *Svitlo okrain* (Lights of the Borderland, 2000), bear the Lileya imprint.

Halyna's writing has not brought her the fame of some of the writers she started out with, but connoisseurs of contemporary Ukrainian literature rate her highly. This year she is one of three winners of the Hubert Burda Prize for young Eastern European poets sponsored by the German Burda media group. Earlier in her career and back home, the BuBaBu literary performance group gave her a prize for poem of the year in 1996: an exaggeratedly unofficial honor from exaggeratedly unofficial writers.

Occasionally Halyna translates a document for compatriots who work in the Czech Republic. During our talk, her telephone rings. "That was a woman who lost her brother in the Czech Republic – he was killed by another Ukrainian gastarbeiter from the neighboring village. They're an ordinary family. They just received the body and don't know how to punish the killer. The Czech police are indifferent – their job is to defend Czech citizens, not Ukrainians. There is no reaction from the Ukrainian side either."

Even though the saga of contemporary Ukrainian labor migration has been running for 15 years, it has not started a wave of "migrant novels" in Ukrainian literature. Maksymovych says she knows of no literature on the subject, only a non-fiction book

on women migrants by a Canadian author.

Halyna wrote an essay on her years in the Czech Republic, but when I probe her feelings about writing in other genres, she surprises me.

"I don't trust fiction. Fiction means fantasy, the talent of imagination, and I'm not the person for it. I have a taste for prose, but my talent and skills are not up to my taste and demands. I cannot write what I consider to be good prose."

Prokhasko told me he had hoped she would switch to fiction and essays after reading her reminiscences of childhood in the Carpathians. Halyna agrees but only for essays: "This genre suits me. It's only my voice that is heard; I don't need to pretend to be anybody else but me. To cross the borders of myself is beyond my strength."

English translations of Halyna Petrosanyak's poems are available at [Poetry International Web](#).