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BOOK REVIEWS

WANSA, Mark: *The Linden and the Oak*. Toronto : World Academy of Rusyn Culture, 2009. 550 p.

Thousands of immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire came to North America between the 1890s and 1920s, many of them "tempest-tossed" and "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Among their scant possessions were memories and stories of Old Country life and of their emigration. While they adapted as quickly as possible, moving into their English-speaking future, in the course of time their personal histories were largely lost. Erratic communication with families in the Old Country often ceased past the immigrant generation. But many descendants of these immigrants, born and raised in the new World and often professionals in their several fields, now yearn to know more about those family members left behind in the Old Country. Who stayed behind? What were their daily activities in the villages? What was their life like especially during World War I, before and immediately after which so many immigrants left home? What of their culture, their dreams, their joys and sorrows?

The impulse to answer these compelling questions inspired writer Mark Wansa to spend several years researching his own Carpatho-Rusyn roots in a journey which took him to Slovakia, Ukraine, Poland, and Hungary countries in which minority populations of Carpatho-Rusyns, an East Slavic people, were and still are scattered. In his first novel, *The Linden and the Oak*, he has transformed his research into a stirring epic about village life, love, war, and ethnic identity. In his Acknowledgements, he admits being deeply moved by the overwhelming response he found to his inquiries about his ancestors and their life in the Old Country. Some informants tearfully recognized in his face a reflection of those long passed, and all generously offered to help him in his search.

Wansa's story is set in the far northeastern corner of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire in an area called Makovytsia, encompassing the districts of Bardejov and Svidník in today's Slovakia. An expanse of lush rolling green hills and valleys heading east toward the Carpathian foothills, dotted with Carpatho-Rusyn villages and their Eastern Christian wooden churches, their taverns, peasant homes, and

farms, Makovytsia witnessed heavy action during World Wars I and II. The narrative begins on the eve of World War I with Vasyl Rusynko's return home to his native Makovytsia after a few years working in New Jersey. He is welcomed by fellow villagers and his extended family, include the two Senchak sisters, Paraska and Yevka, the latter married to Vasyl's older brother but still in love with Vasyl. Life appears about to return to normal, but is interrupted by an Austro-Hungarian recruitment effort for the impending war. Scenes of brutal military action throughout the region follow, all of which – despite the complexity of that war – Wansa handles masterfully.

Wansa likewise handles accurately the Carpatho-Rusyn historical experience of these years which was linked to issues of ethnic identity and national belonging. For instance, he refers to the Carpatho-Rusyns' formation of councils to influence postwar decisions about the creation of a specific territory for this stateless people. Reports and decisions emanating from the councils are conveyed by Vasyl's younger brother, Andrii, who provides a voice perhaps most strongly representing Wansa himself. A student at the Greek Catholic Eparchial School in Prešov, Andrii is vitally interested in the Rusyns' struggle to define their distinct identity, an interest that Wansa clearly shares in writing this book. Andrii by nature is also a prescient poet who hears the voices of absent family members, alive and deceased and is inspired to write about "the memory of something that can never be replaced," about an idea "that comes from loss," about the Rusyn people themselves. Will the humble lives in Stara Polyanka, his home village, be remembered by those who cross the sea to the New World and become Americans, he wonders? Like Andrii, Wansa desires to give voice to those whose voices have been quieted or forever lost. Like Andrii, he refuses to let their memory be forgotten.

Most striking within Wansa's novel is the authentic folklore woven into the narrative. Drawing from his research, he depicts Paraska and Yevka and other women practicing charms and divinations and creating *pysanky* (wax-resist dyed eggs) for ritual use. He portrays a matchmaking ceremony, a wedding, the birth of a baby, and the Christmas Eve supper, describing customs which exhibit the blending of ancient Slavic magic and Christian symbols. As a skilled storyteller, Wansa eases his readers into his epic from the introductory "Prelude," resembling the opening of a folktale, to the epilogue offering the reader not "what happened next," but something very different than that. Among motifs which embellish and link components of the narrative, birds frequently circle above the sweeping landscape, viewing the comings and goings of the people from a broad and distant perspective. Linden tree blossoms invite bees to make honey, and beeswax is used to fashion candles placed in Easter baskets blessed under those very trees in spring-life thus coming full circle. Finally, majestic oaks inspire a poem by Andrii about a tree which loses a limb, but continues to grow: "It is a poem about a tree," says Andrii, "but really it is about our people." Wansa has produced an authentically historical novel, while at the same time enhancing the text with highly lyrical passages.

Readers should prepare themselves to encounter a number of Rusyn words sprinkled throughout the text, almost always followed by a quick English trans-

lation. While this may distract at first, for the reader willing to flow with it, the Rusyn word usages begin to feel natural. The reader actually learns fragments of language along the way. A strong feature of the novel may be the nuanced way the author deals with his main character. Vasyl Rusynko plays a major role in the novel, and this evokes high expectations of him on the part of the reader, but as other individuals move forward, he fades into the background. The novel concludes with these others, including a little boy fathered by Vasyl, undertaking the arduous journey cross the Atlantic to Ellis Island and arriving on American soil. Wansa reveals life in its reality and offering not necessarily what we expect. What we actually get is life replete with many disappointments and some significant victories.

Historians who study emigration at the turn of the twentieth century, readers interested in Slavic history and culture, and anyone interested in Carpatho-Rusyns in particular – a people presently in the midst of a cultural revival – will find this novel intensely engaging and difficult to put down. Might there be another Wansa novel in the wings about the Carpatho-Rusyn immigrants' life in North America? We will have to wait to find out.

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