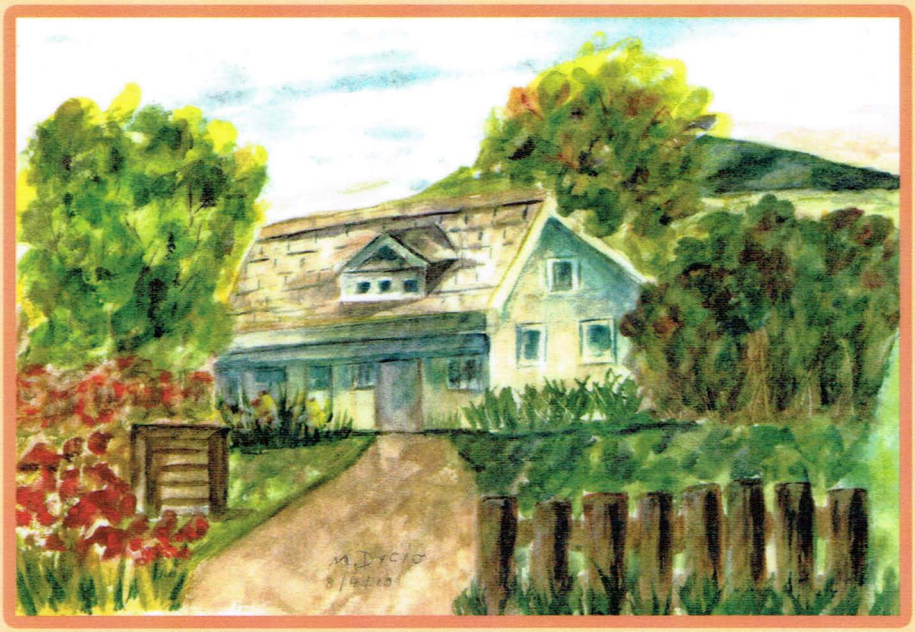
My Life's Journey from Ukraine to Maine



As told by

Dr. Maria Myroslava Tanczak-Dycio

to Martha Stevens-David

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Author Foreword

The reason that I wanted to write my biography is because I never thought I would; after all, I'm not the only one who has an interesting story to tell. But my children, my friends and my relatives all said, "Oh Mary, just do it! You know, you are getting old and there aren't many left in the world like you, and very few people in their old age have had such a good memory, an interesting life or want to write their biography."

So, that is why I postponed it year after year, and then my best friend, Dr. Hector Arrache, when I mentioned it to him, said that he knows a lady who will help me because: "Your English is very good but not that good. She will help you to write your biography. She will help you. Why don't you do it?"

I recently celebrated my ninety-first birthday, and I don't know if I will live another nine years to celebrate my hundredth birthday. So I figured to myself, *What do I have to lose? Let's do it!* If it turns out well, that's good. I hope that it will be a best seller and maybe they will take my story to Hollywood!

I still speak English with a slight Ukrainian accent, and the flavor of my accent and choice of words here in my memoir will show this. I hope you like my story.

Dr. Maria Myroslava "Gloria" Tanczak -Dycio

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Embroidery by Dr. Dycio in a typical Ukraine design

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My Life's Story:

I was born July tenth, nineteen twenty-two in Rybnyky, West Ukraine, a place where my father, a priest, had his parish. But for some reason they made a mistake and they wrote on my birth certificate—July eleventh—which made me one day younger. I don't know if it was the priest who wrote it down wrong or the school, but I really don't mind.

Although I was born in Ukraine, at that time it was really West Ukraine and belonged to Poland. I was born into the family of a Ukrainian Catholic Priest. In the Western world, that would be considered very unusual. People think that I must be Orthodox but I explained to them that I am not Orthodox. My father was a Ukrainian Catholic priest. In the Roman Catholic Church, there are about five different rites which all belong to Rome and all belong to the pope. They have different rites but the same beliefs.

Our priests are different from the Roman Catholic priests because they can get married, but it must be before they are ordained. If a priest's wife dies after they are ordained, then they have to be celibate. Then they cannot marry.

My parents married when they were young. My mother was just twenty and my father was only twenty-six when I was born. My mother was a school teacher. My real name is not Mary. My name is Maria Myroslava "Gloria" Tanczak. At home they called me Marusia.

I had a very happy childhood. My parents, especially my father, were wonderful to me. My mother was stricter but she was not too bad, and I had a wonderful, wonderful grandma. She was my mother's

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healing powers and all kinds of people traveled there to be blessed and cured of any and all injuries.

We had made plans to go to Univ and my mother had made all kinds of sandwiches with chicken and cold ham and coffee and apple juice. It was really going to be a beautiful trip and a picnic for us. We got as far as Peremyshlany and then we saw a whole bunch of Polish police and they stopped us. They came up to my father and asked where we were going. We told them that we were traveling to Univ and they told us that we were crazy. They told us that we were going to have a war and that they may need our horses. So we turned around and went back home, and in just two weeks the war started between Germany and Poland.

The Poles were completely unprepared and very ill-equipped for war. The Poles had only horses to fight with and the Germans had tanks. The Germans also had many planes and the Poles had only a few. It was now September first and the war only lasted one week. It was called a "Blitzkrieg" or a "Lightening War."

Before the war broke out, the Poles were always running around telling everyone how they were going to annihilate the Germans, but they were such fools. And we Ukrainians were naive and stupid too, because we thought that when the Germans came, they would save us and allow us to become independent. We believed the German propaganda that Hitler would free all the countries and set us free.

Anyway, from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea, fifty million people were dancing because they believed that Hitler was so good. One day, Polish soldiers came running into our village like crazy, screaming that the Germans were coming. The Poles ran away into the Carpathian Mountains to Hungary and to Italy. They couldn't fight and so they ran away.

My father listened to the radio and they were predicting that within a week, everybody would gain their independence, but that was not true. It was all propaganda. The Poles fell down. We thought that within a week or so, the Germans would come, but nobody was coming. To our horror, the Russians made a "non-aggression" treaty with the Germans. The Germans took West Poland and the Russians took the West Ukraine. For us, that was like somebody had shot us because we thought we knew how bad the Russians really were

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For a few paragraphs I want to digress back to nineteen eighteen to explain what happened previously between Ukraine and Russia.

In nineteen eighteen, Ukrainians were trying to become independent but they were not strong enough. The Poles were fighting for their independence too. The Russians were fighting for communism and everybody thought that if you fought the Russian Czar, then everybody would gain their independence. But that was not true; it was all propaganda. In Ukraine they only had independence from nineteen eighteen until nineteen twenty-two and then the Russians destroyed them too.

In nineteen twenty-four, Ukraine became a "Soviet Republic" of the U.S.S.R., the United Soviet Socialist Republic. Everyone was told that all the war-torn countries would now be free and could have their own government, language and even their own army. They would all be "independent states." Everyone believed this propaganda and again, we were all so naive. Our Ukraine fell, and the Communists took over and destroyed our Ukraine.

The first thing the Russians did when they became the "Communists" in the Central and the East Ukraine was to make the farms co-ops. Our farmers were not used to this way and they didn't want to join the co-ops. So, they started to fight the Russians. The Russians took all their food away and in our country alone, over six million Ukrainians died from starvation. The farmers even used to strip the bark from the trees and then boil it and eat it. Little dead children were lying in the streets with their bellies swollen from hunger and lack of food. Once Stalin, who was Georgian, even invited a big Ukrainian concert singer to his dacha. He plied all of his guests with wonderful drinks and food and he ordered his soldiers to take all of his Ukrainian guests to his prison where they killed them all.

Stalin was so hated that he didn't dare to even taste his food until another person had eaten some of it first. His first wife died from food poisoning but he didn't die because he was so smart. He remarried and he was a womanizer and a sex maniac. He was even worse than The Devil.

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The Germans were coming, that's all we thought about. We were all waiting for them. It is easy to criticize us, but if you have two devils, you look to see which devil is better. After all, *the devil you know is better than the one you don't.* We started to notice in the newspapers every once in a while that things were beginning to change. Russians started to mobilize our young people. We could hear all the tanks and trucks going to the west. Because my father had some connections with people in the Ukrainian underground, he began hearing stories that soon there will be a war between the Russians and Germans. Now I was so worried because my brother Myron was now about the age to be drafted.

Now we began to hear the planes in the sky around our university. I was thinking that pretty soon the Russians would begin their war with the Germans because the Russians began belittling the Germans in the newspapers. The Russians began mobilizing all the young people. They arrested many of our college boys, school boys, and farm boys. Then we heard all the tanks and military vehicles going to the west to the front, we again knew the smell of war.

We didn't have any idea what Hitler or his army was really like. We had no one to tell us. We didn't know that Hitler had persecuted the Jewish people, that Hitler only wanted a "white" race and he had all the gypsies and those of mixed race and handicapped people exterminated.

Then I received a few horrible letters from my cousin who was interred in Kazakhstan. She told horrible stories about how hungry they were and how hard they had to work. Their father died after one year in a Siberia mining camp under horrible inhuman conditions. His son, then a medical student, was drafted into the Polish army and the Germans interred him and later he was freed.

It was turning nineteen forty-one and I finished my first year of university. At the beginning of June, we were supposed to return home for vacation.Now it is getting very bad. We found out through big newspaper headlines that the German people were destroying all the freedom of the people. There were all kinds of Russian propaganda.

I was still studying like crazy and I received a note from my father

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Hitler called him back to Germany and told him to shoot himself. And Rommel killed himself. The Germans and Hitler were shrinking by the day. Then we heard that Stalingrad had fallen and the Germans were in full retreat. Whoever was left was lucky to still be alive and hundreds of soldiers were put in Russian prisons.

Life in Lviv was still very hard. The Germans were still being very vicious and we still were going to medical school. We would return to our home in the village and bring some hidden food, but really, we were starving. We were starving because my father was so afraid to bring us what little food he had.

Now it is spring but it was still very bad. I was in my second year and I was still taking my exams. For me, it was very important because I wanted to finish pre-clinics. We needed to follow the German rules in school. The Germans have two parts of medical school, pre-clinics was two and a half years of chemistry, biology, pathology and physiology, etc. You have to pass all your exams and then you go to the clinics where you would study human physiology and human diseases, etc. Medical school lasted about six years.

* * * * *

During the German occupation, I forgot to tell you many things about how mean and cruel the Germans were to us. In the next small town, maybe ten to fifteen miles from us, there was a very good, religious priest. He was a widower with six children. His name was Father Kowcz. One of his children, a daughter, was my age. I became acquainted with her when she came with her father to visit before the Germans came or before the Russian invasion. Her father was a very good man. When the Germans started to send the Jewish people to the ghettos and concentration camps, the old priest felt so sorry for them. He had a big parish house, very large and beautiful, and he hid these people in his house or in his church. Then one day, someone sent a notice to the Gestapo that the priest was hiding Jews, and the Gestapo came and arrested him and the others. Four or five months later, my father found out that this lovely priest had died in the concentration camp.

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was hearing! He said, "Why don't you pack your suitcase and while it is still quiet here, go to your uncle's. Maybe you will be safe there." So, I packed my suitcase, took my books, and went to the train station.

Peremyshl now belongs to Poland, but at that time, it still belonged to our Ukraine. I had to go to Dobromyl through Peremyshl, and with my luck I had to wait all day and finally there came a little, old, slow moving train. The trains were packed with people, but through sheer luck I pushed myself onto the train steps and boarded the train to go to Peremyshl. It was only going about ten miles per hour, but finally I arrived in Dobromyl.

My uncle lived about ten miles away from the train station and I had to walk. I didn't have time to write to my uncle that I was coming because there was no mail service, and my poor uncle almost dropped dead when he saw me. He thought there was a catastrophe at home or that my father had died.

I told him the latest news story about the German's retreat and he didn't believe it. He thought that the Germans were still fighting in Kiev. He couldn't believe that my father was frightened too.

At that time my uncle had three children, and then my uncle's friend came and told him that the situation was very grave and he said, "Let's pack our suitcases and take the horses and go somewhere south to the Carpathian Mountains."

My aunt started to scream that the Russians will never come here but my uncle was not so sure. "Slava," he told her, "maybe we should go to Slovakia."

Then we heard that the Russians were running wild through the countries. Maybe they will destroy our house. Maybe the Carpathian Mountains will be a much safer place to hide. So they decided to go.

Two or three days later, his friend came with covered wagons and his own family to my uncle's place. My aunt didn't want to go to the mountains. It would take many long days of traveling, but my uncle was adamant that we go. Then we started to pack everything that we could in the big wagon. I didn't know where my parents or my brother were. Finally we left and we were driving the horses. The kids were always crying. I think we were going south to the mountains, twenty to thirty miles a day.

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