

Olga Stepanek Biography

Early life

Olga Stepanek was born as Olga Emilla Folda on November 5th 1906 in Linwood, Nebraska. She grew up in a strongly Czech town of Clarkson, Nebraska and both of her parents were of Czech descent. The Foldas were a well-to-do family; Mr. Folda was a president of five small Nebraska banks¹. Young miss Folda liked to play piano and to dance ballet, but more than anything she loved writing and literature. After graduating from high school she left Clarkson to go to college; as a passionate reader she decided to study English and became a freshman at Milwaukee Downer College in Wisconsin in 1923. In college she did all sorts of activities: played on a basketball and hockey team, starred in a Dickens theatre play, and had piano concerts. Olga spoke Czech, French and some German and she was a great student; according to the grade records she never got worse than B-. She graduated in June 1927 and right after her graduation she went with her parents to Europe.

The Foldas traveled along the Mediterranean during the summer and then lived in Prague for a year until August 1928. Olga's stay in Prague was one of the highlights of her life. It was the time of the tenth anniversary of the foundation of Czechoslovakia, and Prague was the liveliest city of Europe, Olga said². And indeed, her journals from 1927 and 1928 show a vivid image of that. Foldas, affluent in Nebraska and even more so in Prague, lived a high society life there. Olga went to theater, movies or opera almost every day. Of many people she met there, two friends were especially dear to her. One was Zina, full name Zinaida Zhuravleva, who was a Russian immigrant living in Prague. The other was a sculptor, Albín Polášek, who was working on the Woodrow Wilson monument in Prague at the time.

After their return from Europe, Olga worked on her Master's degree in English at the University of Chicago. In the summer of 1929 she traveled through Europe once more (Spain, Algeria, France, Italy, Sweden, Norway and Germany) and before finishing her studies she worked as a teacher in the small town of Lena, Illinois (1929 and 1930). After a year there, she returned to Chicago to finish her last semester and graduated in December 1930.

Family

Olga and her future husband, Orin Stepanek, met briefly in the summer of 1930 at the Foldas in Clarkson and they liked each other from the first moment. Before Olga left for Chicago she spent few weeks in Omaha at her aunt's, so that she could see Orin who stayed there over summer. They kept writing each other letters the whole semester and in December they got married in Rockefeller Chapel in Chicago; Orin went to Chicago and they married there without anyone from the family present. Their marriage is said to have been "a fairytale marriage" or "a marriage from heaven", kind of a perfect marriage people do not have anymore.³ They respected each other and loved each other immensely.

Orin was an Associate Professor of English and Slavic Languages (including Czech) at the University of Nebraska and Olga, although she loved writing and her husband encouraged her to pursue the career of a professional writer, chose to be a housewife and mother. At the age of 21 Olga noted in her journal: "What if I should have a daughter someday - that would be the most perfect thing the world could give me."⁴ And indeed, the world gave her four daughters: Olenka (Lennie), Natasha (Tasha), Teresa (Tessie or Earth Tree), and Antonia (Toni). Being married and raising her daughters was the happiest time of Olga's life.⁵

¹ Olenka Folda interview.

² Olenka Folda interview.

³ Olenka Folda interview and Tasha Wist interview.

⁴ Stepanek Papers, B1 F10 p.43

⁵ Olenka Folda interview.

The Stepaneks lived in Lincoln in at 831 South 37th Street near Randolph, and many guests came to their table. Lengthy discussions about literature and all sort of things took place there. The Stepaneks liked to entertain; extrovert Orin was great at that and was usually center of the attention, but Olga, who kept more to herself, was a great conversationalist and story-teller as well. Olga was a wonderful hostess and cook. No wonder, she was a Czech after all.

Writer and Poet

Few people write as much in their lives as Olga Stepanek did. With a single page of notes she made her first attempt to start a diary at the age of 6. Since she was 14 she kept a journal more or less regularly for most of her life. As a housewife she added a lengthy entry every day, writing remarks about her daughters, parenthood, her reading, housekeeping, her friends and problems and surprises of the day.⁶ Later she went through the journal entries and rewrote all remarks about each of her daughters to create personal journals of their childhood. Each girl got her journal as a gift. In an article about this passionate hobby of hers she wrote "It is true, we cannot keep forever the memory of every nuance of emotion that we feel, but now and then we can stop and savor again some of those rare delicious moments when life seemed almost perfect. For me, the mere writing of it intensifies the experience. This verbal expression puts a stamp of unforgettability on it and gives me a sense of taking a more vital part in this fascinating adventure of living!"⁷ Olga enjoyed the mere act of recording daily impressions and appreciated reading them even more with the lapse of time. They allowed her to relive her life again when she read them.

Olga corresponded frequently with her family and friends creating yet another detailed recordings parallel to her journals. A visitor of Love Library Archives at University of Nebraska-Lincoln where Olga's correspondence and journals are stored can read through parts of her life day by day. The collection also contains her other writings. Before she got married and shortly after Olga wrote short stories and many poems. She wrote the earliest of her poems at the age of 10 and continued through her youth years. Thirteen of her short stories mostly from 1920's and 1930's were preserved as well as a novel called *Exiled*. Olga's early stories were inspired by her travels to Spain, Great Britain, the Alps and Czechoslovakia. Two of them were published; *The Dowry* in *Prairie Schooner*, and *Towers* in *American Czech Magazine*. The unpublished novel *Exiled* telling the story of Russian immigrants was inspired by the actual story of beautiful Zina, Olga's friend in Prague.

Teacher

In June 1955 just a few days after Orin passed away, the head of the English Department Professor James E. Miller, asked Olga to join the English faculty. She agreed and focused all her energy on preparing for the job, ending up so busy that she seemed not to be mourning her loss at all. Olga became an Instructor in English at age of 48, teaching freshmen English classes and she loved it. Even though she liked the teaching job, she took another position and became the Supervisor of College Correspondence Instruction and Evening Classes in August 1956⁸. The University of Nebraska ran one of the largest correspondence programs in the U.S. at the time and having no experience in administrating such a program, Olga found herself overwhelmed by bureaucracy and paperwork at first. Once she adjusted to it she uncovered that there was a great deal of fraud and cheating involved in the correspondence program. "I think I could write a book on the devious means of cheating in

⁶ Stepanek Papers, Box 7, F 11.

⁷ Stepanek Papers, Box 7, F 11.

⁸ Stepanek Papers, Box 5, F 9. Sept. 14.

correspondence courses,” she noted in a letter.⁹ Olga made her best effort to reform the program and to improve its credibility. She worked closely with other instructors, among whom she had many friends as a wife of a faculty member, to structure the courses better, to improve proctoring and to prepare more test variants. Her supervisor, however, was not enthusiastic about that at all and without any previous warning announced to Olga that he would not be rehiring her anymore for year 1960/61¹⁰ - she was a woman of integrity that apparently was not compatible with his own lack of it. Olga returned to the English Department where she taught from then on.

Olga did not return to teach freshmen English though. Her new task at the English Department was to establish and chair teaching of English as a Foreign Language. She spent summer of 1960 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to learn a new teaching approach. The method she used stressed “standard, colloquial English rather than traditional grammar rules.”¹¹ As she observed, most of the students coming to the University of Nebraska had extensive knowledge of English grammar, however, were “far removed from the correct and idiomatic use of [English] as it is spoken by native speakers.”¹² Olga’s challenging task was to help them overcome this gap and she did so by teaching idioms and focusing on speaking in her classes. A typical homework was to go to movies as well as to do reading assignments. In advanced classes she had students read *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather with whom Olga corresponded in her college years¹³. The international students liked to story and easily identified with the story of Czech immigrants.

The program started with 49 foreign students and as it grew over the years, hundreds of Iranian and Cuban exiles, and Chinese, Indian, Turkish, Korean and other exchange students learned English in her classes and they loved it. So did Olga who said “teaching English was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.”¹⁴ Some students felt confident enough in their English that they tried to convince her that they did not need to take English anymore. In most cases they found out that their English was not as good as they thought and that Professor Stepanek would not accept unwarranted excuses. But the fact that she often had students to come over to cook and dine at her house shows that she enjoyed their company.

She traveled a lot, and with her daughters she visited her former students all over the world. Olga was promoted Assistant Professor in 1966; altogether she taught at UNL for 20 years until she retired at the age of 69.

Turning “Trash to Treasures”

Not only was Olga a talented writer and great teacher, she was an artist as well. “Everything was artful with Olga,”¹⁵ although she claimed she was doing a craft rather than art. The way she dressed was an art of its own; she is said to have always been looking like a lady even in clothes she bought in thrift stores. She bought her jewelry at Good Will and had a special talent to make it look luxurious. And this very talent of making ordinary things into extraordinary is the underlying theme of Olga Stepanek as a visual artist.

Cleaning in the garage one day, Olga found old cans of paint that no one would use anymore. Being a thrifty person she decided to turn them into art rather than throwing them away. When she dripped the paint on cardboard and canvas window shades, James Pollock-style paintings were born. At the age of 55, Olga became a visual artist. Visual art became her

⁹ Stepanek Papers, B5 F9. Jan 21, letter to Marian.

¹⁰ Stepanek Papers, B5 F11.

¹¹ N.U. Foreign Students Find Difficulty in Understanding U.S. Colloquialism. (October 30th 1960) Lincoln Journal and Star.

¹² Stepanek Papers, B7 F18 p.6

¹³ Stepanek Papers, B3 F7.

¹⁴ Stepanek Papers, B7 F18 p.18

¹⁵ Nan Graf interview.

main hobby in the latter part of her life. She had no formal artistic education, but she found inspiration in many modern art books she had and at various art shows she visited. When she came across art she liked, she simply figured the way to do it and experimented with it. Olga was a versatile artist; a painter, collage-maker, fabric-worker and sculptor. She made tissue paper collages which she dyed and inked. Nailing pieces of wood together and painting them she made wooden collages which were inspired by Louise Nevelson. Nevelson made so-called objectages, collages and sculptures made out of objects of everyday use. Nevelson's method, however, was a waste compared to Olga's method, which utilized things without any other use left.

Eventually, she turned from wooden to metal collages which became the most popular of her pieces. The metal collages were made of scrap metal, cans, old engines, spare parts; stuff that Olga literally got from junkyards. She flattened and cut them and nailed them to plywood boards. The collages were abstract, sometimes with spiritual symbols even though Olga was not religious whatsoever. She also made three dimensional collages, the metal cubes. These were cubes made out of plywood covered with metal from all sides. All her metal work was popular; over 1500 metal collages and 275 metal cubes were sold. Usually Olga sold them for rather low prices, because she wanted art to be affordable to everyone. Of course this was made possible by the fact that she paid close to nothing for materials she used. Moreover one of the reasons she sold them was to get them moving so that she could make new ones. She gave the most beautiful pieces to her family and friends. She made her largest metal collage on commission and it hung in the National Bank of Commerce at 13th and O in Lincoln. However, Olga seldom worked on commissions; she found them rather stressful and was a spontaneous rather than systematic artist. "I never plan what I do, it just emerges from my consciousness." she said.¹⁶

Olga turned her basement into a workshop where she transformed junk into art. Although metalwork was physically demanding, Olga, who practiced yoga, was fit enough to it well into her 80's. She became very knowledgeable with metal and was a master in turning "trash to treasures" as one of the articles about her was titled¹⁷. In a similar recycling way Olga made colorful wall hangings, bed spreads and pillows from second-hand clothes. She washed them, cut them and sawed them together in various combinations; some of them were called Picasso squares for their resemblance of cubistic pieces. Olga liked to keep herself busy even when she was watching television and fabric work was a way to do it.

As an active member of Lincoln Artist's Guild, Olga had her works at annuals art shows of the guild.¹⁸ She also exhibited at other shows; private at her house as well as juried public ones where she often won prizes.¹⁹ In 1987 she was awarded the first Woman Artist Award for Visual Art from Lincoln-Lancaster County Women's Commission²⁰.

Conclusion

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¹⁶ Natasha Wist interview.

¹⁷ Natasha Wist interview.

¹⁸ Linda Ulrich. Her Loves Include Students, Junk Metal. Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star, July 25 1971.

¹⁹ Olenka Folda interview.

²⁰ Ladette Randolph. Olga Stepanek Explores Words, Art. UNL Alumnus Magazine 1998.