



Montana Woman

Olga Horak

by Cindy Branch

I've become aware that the steps and phases of my life over the course of the sixty-one years have brought me to where I am today. It's like I needed to go there in order to get here.

Olga, tell us a little bit about your background.

I was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1943 and it's been a circuitous route from there to Montana. I'd like to share a little history on Czechoslovakia and my cultural heritage, which shaped my parents and in turn was the foundation that shaped my life and me. In 1930 a great depression hit German-speaking districts of Czechoslovakia and set the stage for the country's increasing militant nationalism in the years before World War II. Bolstered by the desperate economy, the political tension increased and the situation became progressively malignant – ripe for Hitler. In March of 1938, as a prelude to his plan, Hitler boldly “annexed” Austria, with Czechoslovakia in the offing.

Six months later Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier (French Prime Minister) met in Munich and jointly signed an agreement. The essence of the agreement directed the Prague government to yield to the Third Reich all Bohemian and Moravian districts, with German population of fifty percent or more.

This agreement was an appeasement tactic. The strategy was to give up Czechoslovakia in order to avoid a war. The diplomatic, but ruthless maneuver cost Czechoslovakia one-third of its population, rendered it defenseless and proved to be its coup de grace. And tragically, it did not prevent a war.

At the end of the war Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Russians, who filled key political posts with communist party members and some left-wing Social Democrats. Industry was nationalized, agriculture was collectivized, churches were restricted and educational/cultural/intellectual life was revamped along Marxist precepts. Anti-Communists were sent to prison and labor camps. Thus began the exodus of non-communist political leaders, intellectuals and people who refused to live under Communism. It was at that point that my family (Mom, Dad, brother John, sister Vera and I) escaped and my life changed completely.

Over a period of some months, we went from point to point as we trekked toward what would be our final refugee destination in Frankfurt Germany. I was almost five and remember a good bit of our escape. None of the memories qualify as pleasant. After about two years our immigration quota came up and we had a sponsor. We arrived in America in May, 1950, via Ellis Island. The sponsors arranged jobs for our parents and a boarding school for John, Vera and me.

Those years at the boarding school were three rigid, frigid and love-less years. The nuns always seemed angry. Anger was the pattern in the fabric that wove their behavior toward us. Not just stern, but mean.

During those early years, I felt like an outsider and with my accent I felt so apart from kids my age. This was at a point in my life when fitting in was important. Reading was my escape from the rejection I felt. Animals and nature have always been a passion and so I read anything that had to do with dogs, horses, cats, mice, etc. If it had four legs and a tail, I read about it. I dreamt of being surrounded by animals with plenty of land for all kinds of critters to run and play. This, then, was my dream since the sixties – to live someplace in America's West.

I spent most of my younger years in New York and New Jersey with stints in Missouri and Chicago. When I was older, I moved to France for three years, just across the border from Geneva. After three years, I married a German and moved to a suburb of Munich and lived there for five years. After my marriage failed, I moved back to the United States, to Florida.

After Germany, I immersed myself in the warmth that Miami offered. I learned to

sail and spent glorious times sailboat racing and cruising to the Florida Keys. Wherever I was, I soaked up the beauty around me. From Europe's incredible Alps and awesome skiing to Miami's tropical climate, somber ocean and the sailing it afforded. Hot or cold it really didn't matter where I was as long as I was close to nature. Until I came to Montana in 1999, I had to drive out of a city or suburb to be in God's raw creation.

What, then, finally brought you to Montana.

Well, after Florida, I moved to California and worked as marketing manager for a few semiconductor companies. Eight years before I came to Montana, I started my own graphic design business. Finally I got pretty good at it (laughs). I started making plans to realize

my dream, wasn't sure if I would move to Wyoming, Montana or Colorado. Then in 1998 I decided it was time to make my move...to horse country. I put my house on the market, but it took nine months to sell. I had no idea of my destination until my realtor suggested I move to Missoula, Montana, and so I started some serious research on the Internet. It sounded like the perfect area in

which to live out my dream.

Towing a small trailer, my dog Charlie, three cats and a parrot made our way to God's Country. It was an adventure, but mostly it was a scary time. I had moved to a place without a job, without a home or apartment, and did not know anybody. I expected that with my credentials and experience, finding a job would be easy. Couple of months, max. Yet, over the course of fourteen months I had less than a handful of interviews even though I sent out hundreds of applications. After nine months I



Olga in Prague

widened my job search to other states (including California), expanding to anywhere in the U.S. and finally to anywhere in the World. I crawled further and further into myself out of fear.

In April 2000, I found a posting on the Internet that Semitool (in Kalispell) had an opening for Marketing Manager. I applied, came up for an interview, and was hired. I commuted for a month and during that time found my current home – it had plenty of space for animals. I live about thirteen miles outside of Kalispell. No more cities for me. Things had finally fallen into place. I now have five cats, four dogs, two llamas, and two horses. My dream had finally come true! Well, so I thought.

My utopia lasted eleven months...until I got laid off. I was stunned. My credit card bills had built up during my dry spell in Missoula and I'd spent all my savings. It was a real low point in my life. I was consumed with a fear of loosing my animals and I entered into a state of depression; at one point I flirted with the thought of suicide. It was a very difficult time.

How did you handle that?

To this day I'm not quite sure how it came together. A major factor, certainly, was the unconditional support of my brother and sister. In daily contact with them by phone, I managed to pick myself up. Determined not to give up my dream, nor my animals, I would do whatever it took. I began a daily regiment of meditation and yoga combined with three cups of fresh vegetable juice every morning. I've maintained this program to this day. I somehow knew I needed to support my physical and emotional body in its time of stress. It also provided a structure to my life.

Since the Flathead is not known for its pool of jobs or high pay rate, I determined my best long-term option was to restart my graphic design business. The first year was tough and I finally declared bankruptcy. It went against everything I believed in. The physical nausea I experienced at the very thought of a bankruptcy got me to realize that there was something deeper going on. I took myself back to my time in the boarding school and the indoctrination and guilt, which was still a part of my present. During meditation I had an "ah-ha" – the little child in me equated bankruptcy with not being able to go to Heaven. Translation: if I were a bad girl (and bankruptcy was bad), I would not go to Heaven. Once I made that connection and dealt with it, my anxiety attacks stopped. It's still difficult for me to think about, but it was the

only solution available to me. (Tears)

What is your biggest challenge today?

I have been working on being comfortable with being me. I've actually been figuring out who "me" really is. It seems that all my life I'd been a Chameleon being who I thought I should be, who I thought someone else wanted me to be, or who I wanted someone to think I was. I'm finishing my autobiography and it's proven to be a cathartic, therapeutic process. For many years I allowed others to define who "me" was. As a child, the pressure to conform was immense. I'm also working on not judging myself.



Olga's High School Graduation Photo

Another challenge is to learn how to release fear and embrace love. To overcome my ingrained fear-driven habits and patterns and to allow more and more love and light into my life. This basically means letting go of my past and living in the moment.

And I'm please to say, I'm doing well. In the past few years I've come to like myself much more.

Has living in Montana helped you find what you are searching for?

Yes. Me. I cannot figure out if I've become more open or if the people here are just so great. Maybe it's both. Before I moved here, I was aggressive. Fear governed my life and that showed in my attitude. Here I find myself surrounded by caring and warm people. Everywhere. My neighbors are awesome. The people in Montana are one of the State's greatest assets.

Also, surrounded by nature as I am it's easier to develop spiritually. My relationship with God fluctuated throughout my life. In boarding school, I was going to marry God...I was going to become a nun. There was never a doubt or question. Over time that changed. The nuns portrayed God as judgmental and vengeful. In looking back I think they were creating Him in their own image. I eventually rebelled against their idea of God and for the longest time doubted Him. I finally settled into a spiritual relationship with God, rather than a religious one. Through the indoctrination with the nuns I had come to believe I was God's biggest mistake. Now that I'm settling into a comfortable relationship with The Creator, I

realized He hadn't made a mistake in me. In fact, I am a special treasure! (Smiles)

Besides animals and nature, what are some of the things that are important to you?

Since I have made the Flathead my home, I've worked to establish roots. My neighbors, Timi and Bob Burmood run an equine-assisted therapy program. Through them and my neighbor, Bonnie West, I connected with the non-profit organization, Human Therapy on Horseback. I'm on the board of directors and it's been such a rewarding association for me. I get to help children and adults diagnosed with conditions such as Autism, ADD, Down's Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy as well as hearing, speech and visual deficits. In addition to raising funds, I've had opportunities to lead the horses during therapy sessions and through that I become part of the miracle. I get to make a difference.

I am president of the Kalispell chapter of BPW (Business and Professional Women – we're part of a large national organization). And, my writing has provided another avenue of involvement. I am a member of the Authors of the Flathead. I'm currently working on my autobiography as well as an anthology of biographies entitled "Men of Montana".

And, I get a chance to do something that is such an inspiration to me – I teach Adobe Photoshop at Flathead Valley Community College through the adult education department. I love teaching.



In Miami, Olga learned to sail and spent time sailboat racing and cruising to the Florida Keyes

But, it's not enough just to be involved in the community. I've chosen areas that particularly touch my heart and soul. In addition to the personal rewards and satisfaction I get from, I hope to increase recognition and awareness of my business, Bear's Nest Design.

How did you come up with the name for your company?

I'm glad you asked. As I've said, I love animals, so my company's name had to pay tribute to that passion. I chose a bear because to me it symbolizes this area. Also, a bear is strong and powerful, but generally not the aggressor. I admire that. Connecting "nest" with the "bear" was an attempt to soften the whole concept.

Fundamentally, though, it's a marketing ploy. I wanted something that would also be memorable. The fact that bears have dens rather than nests causes a person (even if for the briefest moment) to pause at the incongruity. That pause helps build retention. The idea is that the apparent inconsistency will increase recognition in the marketplace.



"In Memory"

How does Bear's Nest Design help local businesses?

This is where my thirty years of marketing come into play. Most design is done in a marketing void. Bear's Nest goes beyond that. We strive to create our solutions to fit within a strategic and positioning vision for each client. We offer a range of services including, logo development, marketing, brochures, web sites, advertising, public relations, animations, writing, presentations, video and photography. I partner with Don Thompson. He and I had worked together at Semitool. We extend, reinforce and compliment each other's talents, giving our clients outstanding service, design and range of solutions. And we're thrilled to be doing that in the Flathead. Don was born here.

Just look at the statistics. The Flathead Valley is growing, and by some measures faster than most areas in the U.S. For example, from 2000 to 2001 personal income in the Flathead grew by 5.7% (4.9% for all of Montana), compared to a 3.3% increase for the United States (source: U.S. Dept of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis).

In the five years from 1996 to 2000, the population in the Flathead increased 4.6% and the number of businesses has grown by 9.8%, with total full-time and part-time employment up by 10.1% (source: U.S. Dept of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis). Flathead businesses have swelled the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce ranks by 22.8% (from 1998 through 2002).

Bottom line, new businesses have grown faster than has the influx of new consumers. And there's a twist – these new consumers are more demanding in their shopping patterns and expectations.

That's where Bear's Nest Design comes in. We help local businesses get (or maintain) a fair share of the potential dollars in this Valley.

Earlier you spoke of your brother and sister. Where do they live?

John is two years older and lives with his two sons (Brandon & Bryan) in Kansas City. He and I talk every day. One year younger, Vera lives in Arizona with her daughter Desiree and Andrew and Evan (Desiree's sons). I've always felt so close to my sister. We nurtured each other through the hard times in our childhood. Without the

unconditional love, support and acceptance of both of these beautiful people, I just can't imagine how I could have made it during the hard times.

Tell me about your art – your photographic essays?

The photographic compositions I create are a unique combination of multiple photographs blended together to create a story of an evocative nature. It's exciting and satisfying! While my essays are a manifestation of my creative concepts,

I've also developed some to commemorate special events or relationships. At FVCCI I teach the same techniques I use to create my art. I've posted some of my compositions on my web site (www.bearsnestdesign.com).

Tell us a little about this beautiful creation you made of your mother.

"In Memory" is a tribute to Mom's strength and beauty. It's been years since I've done this piece and it still touches me when I look at it. My mother and father had a love/hate relationship for as long as I can remember. After a couple of breakups they finally did divorce.

They'd been divorced over 25 years and lived a continent apart (she in California and he lived in New York). Separated by thousands of miles their spiritual ties ran deep and so within three weeks of Mom's death (age 73), Dad died at the good age of 92. I've heard of the second spouse dying shortly after the first, but in all cases it's been when both have lived together.

What piqued your interest in graphic art design?

My pent up need to express myself creatively is what led me to graphic design. Throughout my thirty-year marketing career I've continually brushed up against design and writing. And I've dabbled in pen and ink, oils, and acrylics. While I have a natural creative talent and am a good designer, I was never an artist. Yet I always felt this need to "burst through"...but I didn't have the skills. Then I discovered an incredible tool...Adobe Photoshop! This was a way to unleash my creative potential.

I am fortunate that I am able to express myself creatively and earn a living doing something I enjoy.

What message would you like to share with Montana Woman readers?

We all have traumas and tragedies in our life, but I think it helps to realize that we are not alone. Based on my experiences and growth over recent years, I think we need to find a way to overcome our past and not lug it around. My past has caused so much trauma in my present.

As humans – and especially as women – we have a lot of power, which we can use to build up someone or to destroy them. I guess this is kind of mundane, but it's where I am. I feel we need to be aware how every thought and act ripples outward. We are – each one of us – part of a greater whole. The challenge is to overcome a fear-riddled past and to use our power to encourage, support and nurture each

other. Pretty much the way you're able to do with "Montana Woman."

I've become aware that the steps and phases of my life over the course of the sixty-one years have brought me to where I am today. It's like I needed to go there in order to get here. Unfortunately, I carried my past with me too long. And I sure don't want that anymore. I want to embrace the Love that created me and release the fear that's crippled me. Now I need to figure out how to do that. Fortunately, I am in a place that is conducive to that, among people who support it. **MW**



"Glacier"