

INTERVIEW
WITH
MYRNA
KOSTASH—
“A Western,
Ukrainian,
Regionalist,
Feminist,
Socialist Writer”



Myrna Kostash

Donna E. Smyth

Myrna Kostash, author of *All of Baba's Children*, and Literary Editor of *This Magazine*, was in Halifax recently to talk about her new book, *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1980).

SMYTH: Your book covers a big subject—how long did it take you to write it?

KOSTASH: The idea is actually 10 years old although I wasn't fully conscious of it as a book idea for 10 years. When I went back and looked at the first pieces I had published as a writer they were all conceived with precisely the theme which I took up, "What was it like to be a radical in Canada in the 60s?" How is that experience not an American experience? . . . I first started having things published in

1970. I was in Europe at the time. And I was sending stuff off to Canadian magazines like *Saturday Night* and I had never heard of the magazine until I found their address in a catalogue. Bob Fulford was the editor at the time and it turned out to be a very congenial place to be publishing because the magazine was still concerned, at that time, to be part of the development in journalism—this came out of the United States in the 60s—new journalism, in *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. I had never read the new journalism as such. I had read individual writers and pieces but I had no idea that there was a style or an approach, in fact, a theory of non-fiction, and it was called “new journalism” but I can see now in retrospect, that I was writing very much within it. My writing at that point was very passionate, outspoken, didn’t-give-a-damn about the effect I was having, the impression I was creating. It was full of myself, in the sense that the subject was me but that whatever I was concerned about—the theme or the topic which at this point was, “What is it to be a Canadian radical”—filtered through this focus.

SMYTH: Very subjective.

KOSTASH: Yes, it was very subjective. It had everything to do with the way I felt about it, what my impressions were, how this was resonating within me, my own autobiography. As a comment and commentary . . . I came back to Canada in 1971 and walked straight into the Women’s Movement. My story of “How I became a feminist” is actually a kind of Saul on the road to Damascus. I had been in Greece and Spain for several months, I got back to England in the Winter of 1970-71. I’d left Canada in January ’69 and there hadn’t been a breath of it then as far as I was concerned.

SMYTH: This was Edmonton in 1969?

KOSTASH: No, Toronto. I left Edmonton in 1965.

SMYTH: So you were in Toronto and you didn’t get it in the “air” there, in the atmosphere there?

KOSTASH: No, although now I know that it was being kicked around among New Left Women as early as ’66/’67 in Canada.

SMYTH: And when you came back from England in 1971 you went to Toronto again?

KOSTASH: Yes, to write, be a writer, you see. What happened was when I got back to England that winter of ’70, I stayed with some friends out in the country and the woman had just received a package of literature from California and she said, “I want you to read this.” Being a good sport, I said, “Alright,” and took this package up to the bedroom. I kid you not—when I’d finished reading it my life had changed. It was absolutely sensational. I don’t remember what I read except for one piece and that was “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm.” But what happened to me in that evening, in that few hours was that I knew all that stuff and this package of materials articulated for me a perspective, an ideology on it. It was all I needed. It was a confirmation that it was okay now. It legitimized these rather inchoate feelings I had. So I came back from England full of this, just fired up. Show me the nearest Women’s Movement organization! And my writing then, I think, I quite deliberately put in the service of the Movement, as much as I could do that and still earn a living. I was writing for *Chatelaine*, *Miss Chatelaine*, *Macleans*, *Saturday Night* trying to both develop my politics and a voice for the burgeoning Women’s Movement at the time. So it wasn’t until I went back to Alberta in 1975 to write this book about Ukrainians [All

of *Baba's Children*] that I got very excited about political possibilities around ethnicity and being a Ukrainian again, and recovering my family and my *baba*. And I had to write some of the book to get it all out. And finally, 10 years after I had begun that first investigation about Canadian radicals in the '60s, I was able to get around to doing the book and answer that question to my satisfaction.

SMYTH: In the book you discuss the experiences of women in the New Left and how this leads into the Women's Movement.

KOSTASH: Yes, there's a chapter about that although obviously there are references to it throughout the book. One chapter talks about the genesis of the Women's Movement as such. I don't think my views on it are very original—I think the basic argument has been made.

SMYTH: It was your experience, was it?

KOSTASH: I was never a political radical. I was just a hanger-on.

SMYTH: What do you mean? Could you make a distinction?

KOSTASH: I joined SDS [Students for Democratic Society] when I was in Seattle for a year and I went to meetings and I passed out leaflets but I was never in a leadership role.

SMYTH: Were you making the coffee?

KOSTASH: I suppose I was. Yes, I was. I can't remember. I didn't even do that after awhile. What happened to me was I became more involved in the hippie influence on the counter-culture than I ever was in U.S. politics, but I had an acute awareness of what was going on in terms of issues and develop-

ments. I was never an organization person. This is all new to me. When I did the book, I discovered what had been the organizational life of the New Left. So that my politicization as a feminist did not come out of the New Left experience. It came out of a sexual experience of the counter-culture. I don't have a very good sense of how typical my experience was.

SMYTH: I think that the idea of it being like a conversion is quite typical. When we look back upon the language that people were using, we find the language of conversion and religious experience. That's fairly obvious to us now. Perhaps it wasn't so obvious at the time because, in the midst of conversion, you don't think about the process because you're so involved in it.

KOSTASH: Particularly something political like that, you wouldn't think of it as being involved with anything spiritual. But what I am trying to say about the book in this respect is that the women of the Canadian New Left did not have a particularly unusual experience in terms of their sexual politics. American women had already articulated that. What I find interesting about Canadian women is that, just like the men of the New Left in Canada, the women were much less alienated from their socialist sources—or whatever—tradition, in this country, and the appearance of a radical feminist perspective was quite American and since it came out of . . .

SMYTH: There is a confusion of terms here which I think we should clarify. "Radical feminist" came to be associated with the lesbian feminist movement in the States after awhile.

KOSTASH: What I mean is the feminism which sees in the male/female contradiction a primary social/historical contradiction.

SMYTH: Shulamith Firestone?

KOSTASH: Right, that kind of thing. I don't think that ever really took root in Canada. At least it's not rooted in Canada. It has its adherents and has its arguments but I think that the feminism which was so much more indigenous to Canada was socialist/feminist experience.

SMYTH: Although maternal feminism, coming up out of the prairies with the Nellie McClung generation was very much involved with the party politics of the time.

KOSTASH: I see that movement as very much a part of populism which is quite close to agrarian revolt. Granted, McClung herself was not a socialist but the Movements that she was associated with in the West at the time eventually did generate grassroots. In that sense, the West fascinates me, because people tend to consider it a reactionary region. But when you think of what's been spawned there—including suffragism, CCF, NDP, the Winnipeg General Strike, the Wobblies and anarchism, the Riel Rebellions and the Indian Movement, Native Peoples' Movement of the '60s, it is really very misleading to see it only as right wing. In any event, I feel that the feminism which allies itself ultimately to class struggle is much more a Canadian kind of politics than this radical feminism as I defined it. I wasn't conscious—I don't know if people were conscious at this time—of the divisions that the Movement would ultimately break down into. Certainly what I stepped into in 1971, was, as far as I could see, a pot-pourri of things.

What I became involved in was Worthen's Studies—the program at the University of Toronto. I sat in on it to report on it for *Miss Chatelaine*. I have very belated thanks to give to

the women of the Women's Studies program of 1972-73 because I don't know whether I would have let myself in, at that point. All I knew was that I desperately wanted to be there. It was very, very exciting. I wanted to write about it and I wanted to spread the message around. Well, I'm not sure what I looked like—to the people there, this completely bourgeois . . . (I shouldn't sell myself short) but certainly I was a representative of the mass media which was half the problem of what we were dealing with then—how the media were treating the Women's Movement at that point. But the women running the course said okay. They decided that I could sit in and I sat in for a year and kept a journal which was eventually published in a series of articles in *Miss Chatelaine*. Then I became a teacher myself in the program for the next two years.

SMYTH: What specifically were you teaching then?

KOSTASH: One year it was a general introductory course. I also did a short course on Women in Quebec, Women in Quebec Literature or something like that, or Quebec and the West—it was a regional look at literature. The second year in which I team taught with a very young woman was a marvelous program because they just brought in everyone. The most unlikely people. Only a couple became academics. In any event we team taught a course that was about "Women in Literature," both male-written and female-written literature. I shudder to think of it now—the kind of primitive application of feminist politics to literature at that time. I mean, it was—I don't know what effect it had on women in the class—but really it was pretty rough stuff.

SMYTH: Along the lines of Kate Millett?

KOSTASH: No, not even that. Along the

lines of, "Can anybody be a good writer who's got a bad line on women?" And amusing examples from male literature which were very flagrant, not trusting ourselves to go anywhere near any more complicated or more subtle kinds of literature. That doesn't worry me so much because the really positive thing about doing all that was (a) introducing them to women's literature and (b) to get them to write. There were various projects to get the students to write. Those were the days when you wrote. First of all, you were team teaching. Secondly, the students gave themselves their own marks. There were no required assignments—all that kind of experimentation with the classroom was pretty exciting. I'm very happy that I had the chance to do that because, as I understand now, universities just completely shut out that kind of possibility.

SMYTH: Yes, the growing conservatism of the universities. You were teaching for that length of time and still going on with your writing. What happened then?

KOSTASH: The culmination of that was a book called *Her Own Woman*. There were 4 other woman journalists who were involved in this: Heather Robertson, Valerie Miner, Erna Paris and Linda McCracken. It was our International Women's Year project. As it turns out, it was published in 1975 although we worked on it previously for about 2 years. And again it's interesting to see what we were attempting to do then because it wasn't written collectively, which is to say, that each of us had our own voice in the book. We each wrote two pieces which were identified with our names but we submitted the drafts to this editorial collective. In other words, by the time we submitted the manuscript to the publisher, the editorial work had been done. We had done it in the sisterly circle. We were very anxious to

have a different kind of experience as writers than the one we had had by working in mass media. We were very anxious to find out what would happen if we were finally able to write without editorial direction in the sense of having to edit and censor ourselves or having our material censored by a chauvinist and bourgeois editor and publisher. So it was a very liberating experience in the sense that we finally did have an experience of writing like that. It was also fascinating for the discussions that got generated out of what was essentially just a straightforward editorial process. The one that was the killer, the one that kept coming up over and over again, and I still haven't resolved it to my satisfaction, was the question, "How was one actually to look at women's culture?" The result was that, at times we felt very disconcerted not by the sentimentality, but by what we felt was the very uncritical celebration of women's culture in the past; i.e., you'll remember this—the days when we used to celebrate needlework and the family journal—all those everyday kinds of things.

SMYTH: Really, it was another version of maternal feminism again. The glory of woman is fulfilled in these things.

KOSTASH: We were disconcerted about that because, on the one hand, it was obviously very important to challenge and resist patriarchal art criticism which, of course, would see no value whatsoever in any of that production—on the other hand, what was to be celebrated in this culture of deprivation? Needlework, after all, is the expression of somebody who's not been able to express herself in any other way. You can make the analogy and say "revering the culture of the peasantry," or whatever.

SMYTH: You find it archaic?

KOSTASH: Archaic, yes. It's stupid. It's the culture of somebody who's been oppressed.

SMYTH: Yes?

KOSTASH: The culture of the oppressed and the exploited. Back and forth and back and forth, we went on this thing. That was one discussion, I remember, being generated. Those were also the days when we were still in CR [Consciousness Raising].

SMYTH: Yes. It's a very important thing that's now missing.

KOSTASH: Young women don't have that experience now and thousands of women were brought into the movement through that process. As a matter of fact, I tried to recreate that a bit in my chapter. How it felt to be inside that CR group. And this group of women journalists doing this book project together very often recreated this CR experience as well. The things that we were writing about provoked and evoked a lot of interesting discussions about mothers and our growing up, our sexuality and our marriages. We were all living with someone at that time. And then very shortly after that I went back to Alberta to write *All of Baba's Children*.

SMYTH: And you felt that this was more or less a continued discovery of yourself as it stemmed from your feminist experience?

KOSTASH: I don't know where it came from. It is the strangest thing because I honestly can't tell you why I decided to go to Alberta to write a book about Ukrainians—I hadn't thought about them in years. And I thought that it did not matter to me one bit. I was living in Toronto. I was living this media life. I was a feminist. What did I care or need to know about these people? But, for some

reason, when I applied for a grant, that's the subject I decided I was going to write about. I was planning to return to Toronto once I'd done the research but I got completely absorbed in it; I found out the endless possibilities for being angry. That was the astonishing thing, to me, when I started to look into Ukrainian Canadian history in Western Canada. I got as angry and upset as when I had first encountered the history of women. Again the book was written out of that passion, that outrage—how dare you do this? Also, I deliberately wrote it as a feminist, as well.

SMYTH: Did you have problems? I've Ukrainian friends and I know that one of my best friends deliberately opted to go back into the Ukrainian community. She'd been living in the community where we were which was very mixed and she married into and became part of the Greek Orthodox Church and more or less declared that she had found herself; she's completely surrounded herself by a traditional culture which holds her like the very beautiful Easter eggs which I remember she used to make for us. So I'm wondering about your experience writing this book as a feminist.

KOSTASH: This might very well have happened to me had I not had my feminist and socialist politics already. On the other hand, maybe it would never have happened because I deliberately left the Ukrainian community as a girl and absented myself emotionally and psychologically from the community because it was so anti-female. I know that now because, when I look at stuff written when I was 15-16 years old, I was already enraged at what was happening to me. So by the time I came back, I was already pretty secure and confident. I knew I couldn't be sucked back into the regional premises of that community. If I was going to be a Ukrainian Canadian, dammit, it

was going to be on my terms! And I have the great good fortune of encountering people that have felt exactly like me. People from my generation who've come through the '60s radicalization and call themselves socialists and feminists and there we all were—confronting these things together.

The experience of writing a book in terms of its feminist perspective is very interesting. One tactic was that I deliberately did not use the generic "he" anywhere in the text and used "peasants" or "farmers in the fields" wherever I could so that people could not see the community just in terms of male physiognomy. Nobody's noticed that; nobody's picked up on that. I didn't really expect them to; it's something that will be perceived or apprehended subconsciously. The second thing was that I very deliberately rammed through the text my observations about women's experience in the Canadian Ukrainian Community—statistics where I could get them, anecdotes and so on, just deliberately forcing this material into the narrative because you've got the conventional ethnic history in this country and the women are relegated to the Women's Institute Section and the Women's Auxiliary of the Church. That was one of the aspects of the book that simultaneously excited people and horrified them and I was confronted with that at public meetings. People, of course, were refusing to accept my observations and analyses and saying that the Ukrainians are a very matriarchal society (the way that word gets used—it just drives me crazy), because, you see, we all love our mothers and our grandmothers and they have a very honoured place—sort of the Jewish mother thing. But, on the other hand, you get women coming up to you and saying thank you for writing this story, thank you for telling it the way it is. So I was confirmed or affirmed in what I had done. It was very, very exciting.

SMYTH: After that book, you were really in progress for your next book. What were you doing at the time to make your living? Were you continuing your journalism in Edmonton?

KOSTASH: Yes, I was. I continued to write magazine articles, I was starting to do some television scripts. Giving the odd lecture, a teaching stint, and getting grants to do the first book and the second book. And now a column for the *Edmonton Journal* which brings in an income every week.

SMYTH: And it's possible to make a living.

KOSTASH: Yes, yes. I always have. The first year I only made \$3600 but I'm making into the twenties now, so I can support myself very nicely.

SMYTH: Now after this book, is there going to be another one on the '70s generation or what is the direction?

KOSTASH: No, I think this book brings me to the end of something. And not because I've resolved anything, I don't think, but because I've finally confronted what I think are my problems as a writer.

SMYTH: You're saying then, that this is the last of this kind of book?

KOSTASH: Yes, what I mean by that is that I thought there was some way to reconcile literary and political values in non-fiction and that's what I've attempted to do for ten years—speaking both with a literary voice and the voice of my politics as they get more and more sophisticated—when, in fact, I haven't been able to do it yet. What I have to find out, what I have to explore, is whether that is my own shortcoming politically and as a writer, or

whether there is something about non-fiction Whenever I have presented this dilemma to people, they say that the only way you can resolve it is in fiction. And I don't know whether it's true and I don't want to have to write fiction. I really want to continue work as a journalist. I think that's where I've been most effective in reaching most people. But maybe it's not possible. Maybe I'll have to choose which master to serve, in a way, which mistress to serve, the political one or the literary one.

SMYTH: Just one final question. About the current state of the Women's Movement, which as we both know, is no longer a movement as it used to be. What do you think about the present activities of women who are committed feminists? Sometimes, I suppose, we feel that maybe we're losing ground or are voices in the wilderness. How do you feel as a feminist now in 1980?

KOSTASH: I guess the way I feel about the Movement in general is that it came out of the '60s and that it got dispersed. We got dispersed throughout society and I know, and you know, people who are working away at it in various enterprises and organizations and so on and so forth. I also feel that the world has changed since we first became feminists. The present social and economic configurations dictate a certain kind of politics and not another. I'm not surprised that it looks like it's gone into a slump or it's two steps backward for every one step forward while we evaluate and get our energy back and so on. In a sense, you might say that the collapse of the Movement as such is a strategic retreat or withdrawal. I have absolutely no doubt that over the next ten years the world's going to shift again and it will be reconstituted, perhaps not as that visionary movement that it was in the late '60s and early '70s, but definitely the energy and the forces will be reconstituted. It'll

be a political force to reckon with. I think it will be a unitary thing.

SMYTH: So you see it carrying on in diverse directions. Some people working on the short term aspects

KOSTASH: The critical one, I think, will be the workplace.

SMYTH: Yes, and politics? I mean direct, practical politics?

KOSTASH: I'm not so sure about that. I think that's ancillary stuff. I think the major organizations and major responses are going to have to be done on issues of the workplace and people working because that's going to be the most critical thing. When you consider that the base for the Movement was the fact that women got jobs after the Second World War, earned money and became, if not financially independent, at least earning their own living from factory work up to professions. Then, a challenge to that is going to be a very fundamental, critical threat to women.

SMYTH: A challenge to what?

KOSTASH: To that ability, that capacity to earn a living.

SMYTH: In a society where the very definition of work is changing so radically.

KOSTASH: Yes, I'm aware of some of the research that's being done as to what's happened to women's work.

SMYTH: So you're still a feminist and you're still a socialist feminist?

KOSTASH: Yes, I'm a Western, Ukrainian, Regionalist, Feminist, Socialist Writer!