

# Irena Kozak. “Zrodylys' my velykoi hodyny . . .”: Spohady [“We Were Born at a Great Hour . . .”: Memoirs]

Piotr J. Wróbel

Volume 9, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088685ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus720>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Wróbel, P. (2022). Compte rendu de [Irena Kozak. “Zrodylys' my velykoi hodyny . . .”: Spohady [“We Were Born at a Great Hour . . .”: Memoirs]]. *East/West*, 9(1), 265–269. <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus720>



**Irena Kozak. “Zrodylys’ my velykoi hodyny . . .”: Spohady** [“We Were Born at a Great Hour . . .”: *Memoirs*]. Compiled by Dina Shul’zhenko, edited by Iaroslav Hrytsak, foreword and biographic note by Roksoliana Kozak and Taisa Kozak, Manuscript-Lviv, 2020. Biblioteka “Ukrainy modernoi,” seria “Spohady, shchodennyky, interv’iu” [Ukraina Moderna Library Series: *Memoirs, Diaries, Interviews*] 7. 464 pp. Illustrations. Appendix. Indexes. \$44.95, cloth.

**O**ne of the most important components of the Ukrainian independence movement in the twentieth century was an element that could be termed “the women factor.” Initially, Soviet authorities did not fully grasp this concept, but once they understood its importance, they became more adept at tearing the movement as a whole apart. The Ukrainian women who were active in the underground saw and understood many phenomena that were overlooked by men, and they were frequently more efficient in their efforts. The memoirs of Irena Kozak-Savyts’ka (Irena Kozak [1925–2014]), *“Zrodylys’ my velykoi hodyny . . .”: Spohady*, provide us with excellent evidence to support this point; an explanation is found in the book’s editorial preface (17–18), written by Iaroslav Hrytsak of the Ukrainian Catholic University (Lviv). The manuscript was penned by Kozak in the 1990s as an emotional response to events going on in Ukraine. The author’s daughter, Roksoliana, and granddaughter, Taisa Kozak, and, to an even greater degree, Dina Shul’zhenko from the National Pedagogical Drahomanov University (Kyiv) prepared the text for publication. The book offers valuable insight into the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (Orhanizatsiia ukrains’kykh natsionalistiv, or OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukrains’ka povstans’ka armiia, or UPA). It also presents a bare look at the narrator’s own prejudices and presumptions and thus is best matched with historical texts. The monograph is quite expansive; it covers the entire history of the Ukrainian independence movement from the 1930s up until a time after the revival of independent Ukraine in 1991.

The memoirs are divided into two parts. Part 1 (which is around three hundred pages long [19–305]) explores the personal side of Irena Kozak’s life. It offers a chronological story reinforced by a multitude of details about Kozak’s family, friends, emotions, and everyday matters. Part 2 (comprising about eighty pages [307–91]) is much more impersonal and general. It focuses on Kozak’s activities in the Ukrainian independence movement during her time abroad. The main text of the book closes with a supplementary interview (thirty-five pages long [394–429]), which was taken with Kozak in 1987 by Iroida Wynyckyj for the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre (Toronto). This conversation sums up the text and closes some of the lacunae in the book’s narrative. But as we

know from the editors, the most interesting fragments of Kozak's manuscript—devoted to the disagreements between Kozak and Stepan Bandera—are missing.

Kozak's life and achievements are prodigious, and she is without exaggeration called a hero. She was born in Lviv to a family with mixed (Ukrainian and Polish) roots. In an early example of the hardships that would follow, her father's medical career was derailed after he refused to abandon his Ukrainian identity. Not surprisingly, Kozak's family considered interwar Poland to be a hostile police state; the author, when comparing the subsequent occupations of Eastern Galicia, writes of a Polish occupation prior to 1939 (151). This distrust and antagonism had a great impact on Kozak's life. In 1939, while still in high school (she passed her final exam [*matura*] in 1943), she joined the Plast Ukrainian scouting organization and the OUN Youth (Yunatstvo OUN; part of the OUN). At that juncture, she became very active in the Ukrainian underground. Kozak accompanied (and belonged among) the most influential builders of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society in the Lviv region. In recognition of her accomplishments, in 1945, she was awarded a Bronze Cross of Merit by the UPA.

In arranging this vast resistance network (which later became a part of the UPA), Kozak regularly travelled across Eastern Galicia to meet with key people and to secure necessary supplies. Most notably, she organized underground medical, military, and political courses for women. With her extensive knowledge of the Ukrainian underground, she became a liaison aide to the renowned UPA general Roman Shukhevych. In early 1946, Shukhevych decided to send Kozak to the West to meet with the leader of the OUN, Stepan Bandera. In addition to carrying a set of important documents and reports for delivery, she had the pivotal task of relaying the desperate situation of the underground's fight against Soviet occupation. This linchpin moment—Kozak's arrival in Munich in December 1946—closes part 1 of her memoirs.

The narrative offers valuable and much-needed fly-on-the-wall observations about the Ukrainian independence movement during World War II. The author describes life in the underground, both in the city of Lviv and in the countryside. This process takes the reader on a literary journey to different hiding places and safe houses, and it examines the crucial relations with sympathetic locals, the structure and transformation of the UPA, and the assistance received from the Greek Catholic Church. Kozak introduces the reader to numerous fighters in the underground movement who supported the cause in various ways and capacities. This includes her mother, who was sentenced by the Soviets to twenty-five years in prison after the war, and her brother, who died battling against the Red Army in 1944. Many characters in Kozak's story have been partially or entirely

forgotten by history. However, both Shukhevych and Kateryna Zaryts'ka were key figures in the author's life and adventures. The latter not only was Kozak's close, personal friend but also was the principal organizer of the Ukrainian Red Cross.

The Ukrainian independence movement used the period of German occupation (1941–44) to prepare for the looming Soviet conquest. The book mentions many of Kozak's friends and relatives who served in the German military (72–73). Some of the most distressing fragments in part 1 are descriptions of the Soviet-German front as it passed through Eastern Galician territories in the summer of 1944; this activity marked the beginning of the cruel new occupation. The populace was subjected to numerous terror tactics, including mass arrests, the destruction of the Greek Catholic Church, starvation, and so on. These actions surpassed the Soviet policies that were implemented in other Moscow-controlled countries at the end of World War II. The book also relates the most impressive and incredible story of Kozak's solo mission to Munich. This odyssey included a difficult crossing of the Polish-Soviet border; a very complicated trek through Poland (Przemyśl–Belz–Kraków–Przemyśl–Kraków–Wrocław–Katowice–Kraków–Gorlice–Kraków); a lucky break with an easy crossing at the Polish-Slovak border; and passage to Prešov, Prague, the Czech-German border, and, finally, Munich (259–97).

Unfortunately, the author shares specific views and perspectives that are similar to those of many members of her generation: She writes sparsely about the Holocaust and almost entirely ignores the Ukrainian contribution to it. She claims that anti-Semitism came to Eastern Galicia with the Soviets in 1939 (23). And she portrays the anti-Jewish pogroms of the summer of 1941 as an act of revenge for Jewish collaboration with the Soviet occupants (29).

As for Kozak's views on Poland, they are blunt and controversial. She claims that both Poles and Ukrainians were responsible for the massacre of the Polish population of Volhynia by the UPA (77). There are various mentions of Poles both in the Gestapo (57) and in the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs [116]). The memoirs argue that the Polish population of Eastern Galicia ("Polish colonists") helped the Soviets after 1944 against the Ukrainians (my trans.; 116; 121). This is done despite Kozak's acknowledgment that ethnic Poles were not allowed to participate in the first, sham elections in 1946 (232). She rarely mentions the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa, or AK) in Eastern Galicia, and she claims that it was used to persecute Ukrainians (71). Finally, she believes that the UPA had only between 40,000 and 50,000 soldiers in 1944 (51) and describes the formation of the Division Galizien in a very defensive manner (never using its German name or the abbreviated addition SS [42]).

Part 2 of the book renders a portrait with broader strokes. The divisions within the OUN are mentioned in part 1, but the author claims that most of the underground fighters did not understand them or considered them to be unimportant (30–31). In part 2, Kozak introduces the reader to the labyrinthine structure of Ukrainian organizations in the West. She writes about the growing conflict with Bandera (330) and does not hide her negative views of him. She also does not mince her words when discussing the OUN Security Service (Sluzhba bezpeky, or SB), which was active in the West for years after the war (330). Consequently, Kozak and her friends left the Bandera faction of the OUN and formed a new organization—OUN Abroad (316–23). Initially, Kozak intended to return to Ukraine, but she soon realized that this would be a suicide mission. Instead, she stayed in Munich and established a new life for herself there (this is mentioned in the book's closing interview). Throughout the entire Soviet occupation of Ukraine (1944–91), Kozak never stopped fighting for the freedom of her home country. She was active in the Ukrainian independence movement and tried to help her former compatriots during periods of difficulty (for instance, after the Chornobyl catastrophe [355]). She was overjoyed when Ukraine discarded Soviet rule (373), and in the early 1990s, she travelled to the place of her birth (374).

Kozak's memoirs are a unique find. They paint a picture of the Ukrainian independence movement during and after World War II from both the top-down and bottom-up views. But we also observe perspectives and omissions that are informed by the narrator's biases. These "products of their time" should not be ignored by any scholar going through the text. In addition, owing to the countless details, meticulous descriptions, and repetitive writing, this book is not an easy read. That being said, anyone who is interested in the history of Ukraine should seek out this valuable primary source: Kozak's life is fascinating in its own right, and she deserves to be heralded and studied. It would probably be best, however, to consume these tales along with other, similar publications, such as *Chervoni sandalyky* (*Little Red Sandals*), by Mariia-Anna Holod, and *Dariia Rebet: Spohady* (*Dariia Rebet: Memoirs*), both produced within the same Ukraina Moderna series as Kozak's memoirs.

Piotr J. Wróbel  
University of Toronto

## Works Cited

- Holod, Mariia-Anna. *Chervoni sandalyky: Memuary*. Compiled by Renata Holod and Oleh Tretiak, foreword by Holod, Manuskrypt-L'viv, 2021. Biblioteka "Ukrainy modernoi," seriia "Spohady, shchodennyky, interv"iu" 8.
- Hrytsak, Iaroslav, scholarly editor. *Dariia Rebet: Spohady*. Introduction and comments by Oleksandr Zaitsev, biography by Mykola Posivnych and Vasyl' Brelus, Manuskrypt-L'viv, 2018. Biblioteka "Ukrainy modernoi," seriia "Spohady, shchodennyky, interv"iu" 4.