

A GUIDEBOOK TO LIFE ELSEWHERE



C.A.T. CONTENT

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WALNUT TREE

GRANDMA

DEGROWTH

03

Valerie Deifel



In the middle of this photograph you see my grandmother in the year 1941. She is standing in front of her house, which was built by her grandfather in 1912 on the outskirts of Vienna. Her parents were vegetable farmers; she followed in their footsteps together with my grandfather. In her diary she described how during the war, when no men were around, she had to go with the horse-drawn cart by herself to sell at the market. This meant getting up before sunrise and undertaking the difficult journey in the dark, crossing the bridge over the Danube to the market at Mexico Square. My grandmother usually wore very thick glasses, but for being photographed she always took them off.



Her aunt, on the left side in the picture, lived to a very old age and my mother remembers her being busy in the household. Her mother, on the right side, suffered from dementia in her last years, and it was hard to look after her during the work days on the farm, but they found a way.

My mother used to tell me how her childhood was defined by the work for the farm and how she was ashamed to bring her friends from school home because they lived such a simple life in comparison. For instance, they had a lavatory without running water until my mother was in her twenties. Furthermore, getting through the winter with earnings from stored vegetables was always a challenge. Education was considered very important, but my mother couldn't always be freed from the work on the farm to do her schoolwork. My grandmother once said that if given the chance she would have liked to study medicine. My mother and her sister were never expected to continue as farmers.

All three are standing in front of a walnut tree. The tree looks slim in the picture. Meanwhile it has grown in size. When spending time in the garden as a child – for me it was a city dweller's playground not a workplace, the farm being retired to a garden for leisure by then – the tree loomed protectively over the passage from house to garden. Even now, when sitting in front of the house for snacks or other activities it casts a pleasant shadow on hot days. In late summer, it provides loads of tasty walnuts.

When I visited Nyzhnje Selyshche (Нижнє Селище) and Transcarpathia the first time, in July 2017, I noticed many horse-drawn carts used for agricultural transportation on the streets. How wood is also often harvested traditionally with the help of horse-drawn carts is shown in the documentary *Lopukhovo* by Jara Malevez from 2005 about the village, also known as Lopukhiv (Лопухів), which is close to the Svydovets mountain region, entrenched in the wood industry. The film also captures how dangerous and threatening to health the hard physical labour is, while hardly yielding much income. Harvesting wood is much safer but also accelerated with high-tech harvesting machines. I encountered recently a Finnish Valmet harvester idle in the Styrian mountain region in Austria. I have also found a picture of my grandmother's parents using a horse-drawn cart full of tubs to bring goods to the market. The picture might be from about 1936. By the 1950s my grandmother and grandfather owned a small truck, which made their lives much easier.

* * *

I feel nevertheless a newfound attraction towards the maintain-

ing of traditional techniques, not disregarding any hardships involved. I also like the well-kept typical small houses in Transcarpathia with a vegetable garden and some chickens. I would like to regain some know-how and stamina for a more self-sustained lifestyle. The cooperative of Longo Maï, which has been operating in Nyzhnje Selyshche since the 1990s, is an example for such a pathway. The movement, originating in the 1970s in France, fosters collectively owned and run agricultural and artisanal production facilities. Their members try to live ecologically by manufacturing their own supplies. Furthermore, the movement also considers it important to be socially and politically engaged. In Nyzhnje Selyshche the cooperative takes care of a cultural centre and organises cultural festivals throughout the year. Currently they are also supporting the activists of 'Free Svydovets', who are petitioning against the creation of a huge skiing resort in the mountain area, which would be an environmental disaster in addition to the ongoing illegal logging. Many people from the region, though, would look forward to an improvement in local job offers, as many are seasonal workers and work away from home most of



the time. As an appreciative guest of the beautiful region, being welcomed with generous hospitality, I hope that the engaged community can find an agreeable solution for improving people's livelihoods, possibly with ecotourism or with profit through emission trading in the International Carbon Action Partnership (ICAP) generated by preserving woodland.

Regarding my own situation, I worry that the ideology of global capitalism has doomed us and is effectively destroying ecological balance and social justice.¹ Our society needs to seriously commit to alternatives and turn to economical degrowth within the next few decades.²

* * *

Somehow I started to sew. I wanted to make specialised clothing for the happening 'The Landing is on Friday' in September 2018, a return to the site of Nyzhnje Selyshche a year later. The materials used (e.g. the fabric, the threads, the hardware) had to be as inexpensive as possible, but also organically and sourced, created, treated, dyed, transported and sold, under socially fair conditions. I had to put my trust in certain labels and certificates to achieve this (e.g. the Global Organic Textile Standard [GOTS]). Nevertheless, I felt quite proud of myself for trying to strictly apply such ethical criteria. Later I realised, through the work of a colleague, that the social criteria in those certificates could be much more ambitious, for instance workers could be company shareholders and their involvement in decision-making could be improved.



This picture shows one of the sewn garments, a T-shirt, speculating that the days in September were going to be warm and something light to wear would be appreciated. A variety of garments with different functions were available to all participants at the happening (see pages 80–81).



I also got interested in dyeing fabric with plants. In my investigations into the matter I learned that walnut shells are a good choice, because they contain tannin, which is a pigment fixative and makes other chemical mordanting unnecessary. In this way the colour should be washable and non-fading despite daylight.



Already the first attempt was successful. I did the dyeing process of the T-shirt in the garden of my grandmother, using the walnuts from the tree in front of the house.



Here you see how I also experimented with a bleaching technique with lemon juice, which is free of toxic chemicals. Unfortunately, it didn't work well with the hemp fabric that I used. For pattern making it was blurring too much. At first I had tried to source locally produced linen fabric, but this was too expensive. Instead I bought a cheaper hemp fabric at a local organic textile shop in Vienna. The information on the fabric said that it was produced in Romania.



I very much like the simplicity of the process. The plant material has just to be boiled in water for some time to extract the pigments and then the garment is inserted in the pigment solution and boiled some more. I used the hard shells; now I know that also the soft shells of the walnuts would have been an option. But it worked anyway – it just took longer to extract the pigments. During the happening I explored dyeing with different plants on the site. It didn't always turn out well, but mainly because of improvised cooking on the open fire (see page 81).

A

B



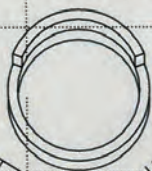
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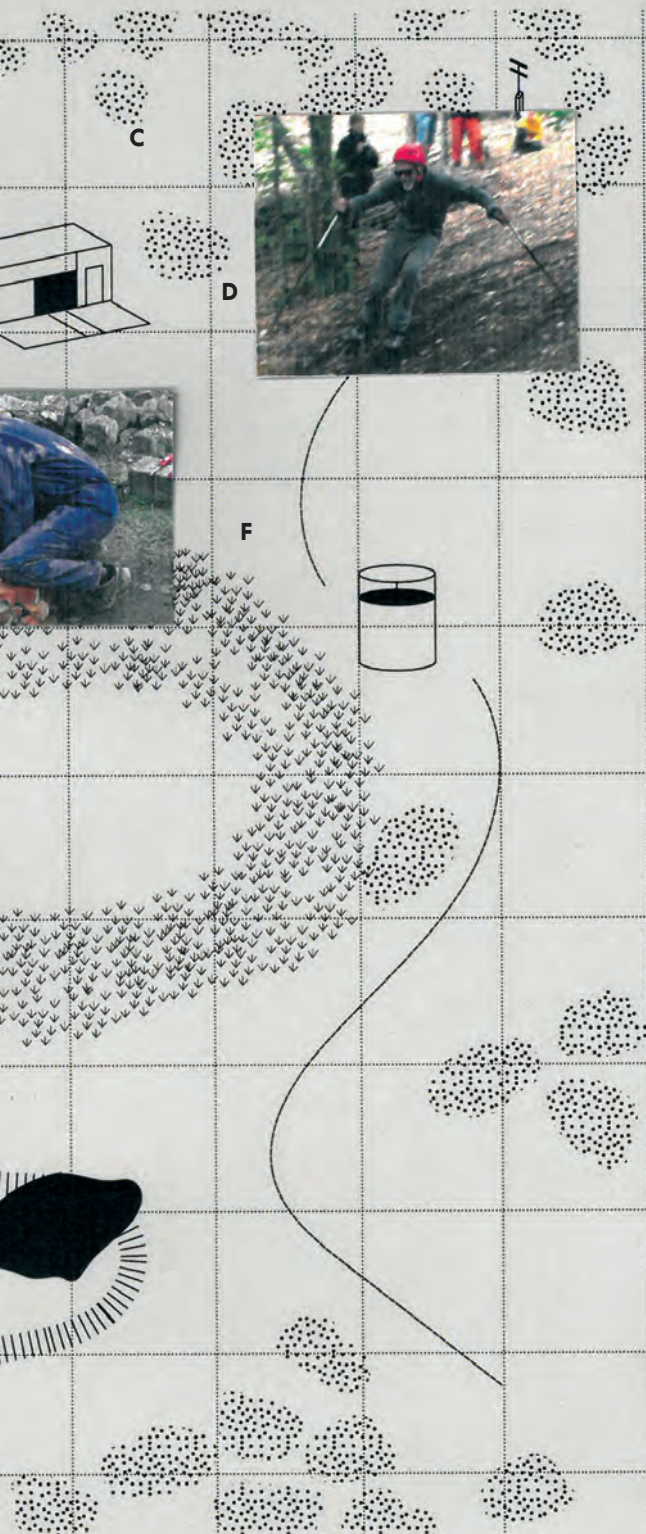


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I





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ландинг зона		
		Nyzhnye Selyshche Zakarpatska Oblast, Ukraine

In my preparations for the landing I wanted to be in charge of the production process and thought about degrowth in Western Europe. Ironically, I ended up producing more. I was looking into the recycling of old tents when I was producing the tarp/raincoat. For the raincoat the goal was to do so without petrochemical fabrics, such as nylon and polyester, which are toxic and pollutive to the environment in their production. But either the pre-used tents on offer seemed too new and precious to cut them up or they weren't the right size. In the end I used a cotton fabric that I impregnated with a beeswax and plant oil solution. The recycling route was also too difficult for the other garments where I was mainly working with sewing patterns that had to fit on the fabric. Also I wanted to source fabric that is produced organically and under socially fair conditions.

The point was mainly to challenge myself with strict parameters because I am far from leading an exemplary ecological lifestyle. I wanted to return to Nyzhnje Selyshche with a utopian mind-set because the place had inspired a do-it-yourself and hands-on attitude. I chose a crafting practice that I could regularly integrate into my life. The return to sewing seemed not to be the most feminist path as it was taught in my upbringing as a typical women's job, but making the decisions for the garment as well as experiencing some of its workload intrigued me. Normally, the hard labour of industrial textile production and sewing is done by workers, mainly women, in low-wage countries under tough working conditions. While exploring the craft I also thought of both of my grandmothers. My farmer grandmother was used to making her own clothes; only for special occasions would she go to the seamstress. My other grandmother worked professionally as a seamstress from home

under informal labour conditions during and after the war. This dependency on manual labour has changed for me, but this comes with the awareness that in a globalised economic system the monetary profit is generally based on social and environmental exploitation, which means such types of inconvenient labour are translocated to someone else somewhere else.³

In conclusion, with a better understanding of the time and material effort going into a garment, I aim to get along with less. I wonder what my grandparents would say about my review of their way of living.

1. Following the urgency of Latour's manifesto: 'Whereas until the 1990s one could (provided that one profited from it) associate the horizon of modernization with the notions of progress, emancipation, wealth, comfort, even luxury, and above all rationality, the rage to deregulate, the explosion of inequalities, the abandonment of solidarities have gradually associated that horizon with the notion of an arbitrary decision out of nowhere in favor of the sole profit of the few. The best of worlds has become the worst. [...] If the elites felt, starting in the 1980s or '90s, that the party was over and that they would have to build more gated communities so they would no longer have to share with the masses, [...] one can imagine that those left behind also understood very quickly that if globalization were tossed aside, then they too would need gated communities. The reactions on one side led to reactions on the other – both sides reacting to another much more radical reaction, that of the Earth, which had stopped absorbing blows and was striking back with increasing violence.' Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Medford, 2018), pp. 19–20.

2. Starting as a French activist movement in 2001, 'degrowth' stands for 'voluntary societal shrinking of production and consumption aimed at social and ecological sustainability.' See Federico Demaria, Francois Schneider, Filka Sekulova, and Joan Martinez-Alier, 'What Is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement', *Environmental Values*, 22.2 (2013), 191–215 (p. 192). 'Instead of becoming obsessed with economic growth in order to repay the accumulated financial debt and supposedly bring happiness to all, rich countries should (at the very least) change their behavior so as not to add to their ever-increasing ecological debt. A program of moderate economic degrowth (implying a lower social metabolism) in the rich industrial economies is a plausible objective to meet this goal.' Joan Martinez-Alier, 'Environmental Justice and Economic Degrowth: An Alliance between Two Movements', *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 23.1 (2012), 51–73 (p. 64) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2011.648839>>.

3. The anthropologist Alf Hornborg proposes local currencies as a means for turning to local production and trading of vital goods as a possible way out of the looming socio-ecological collapse: 'The contemporary disarticulation of consumption from the resource flows and inputs of human labour that sustain them keeps economy and morality – things and persons – effectively apart. Such commodity fetishism rests on the invisibility of production. Its implications can sometimes protrude clearly in rural economies where this disarticulation is not always guaranteed. A consciously reorganized local sphere of exchange might thus increase our ability to grasp the social and ecological consequences of our consumption, and to reintroduce morality into economic life.' Alf Hornborg, *Global Ecology and Unequal Exchange: Fetishism in a Zero-Sum World*, Revised edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 160.



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