

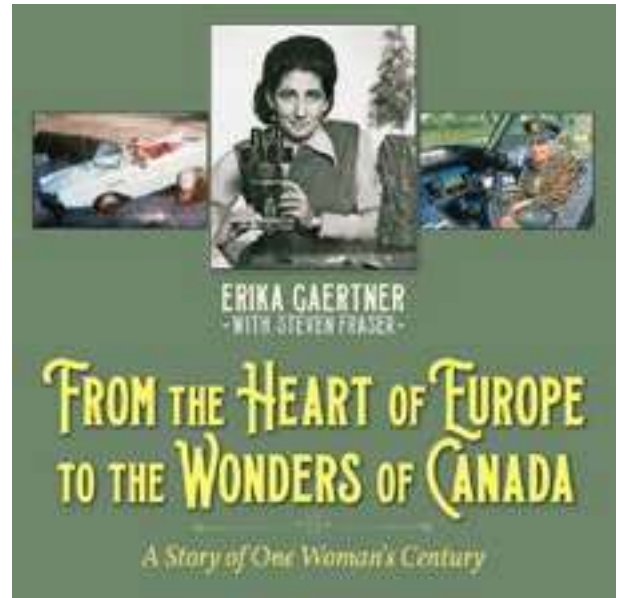
Review: From the Heart of Europe to the Wonders of Canada – A story of one woman's century

Erika Gaertner with Steven Fraser
Burnstown Publishing House, 288 p, ISBN 978-1-77257-272-8

From the Heart of Europe to the Wonders of Canada is a collection of anecdotes and memories of a woman botanist, Dr. Erika Gaertner, who has lived a full life spanning nearly a century. Having followed a somewhat similar life course to hers, I was able to appreciate many of the feelings expressed and comments made in the book. I often found myself drawn into Dr. Gaertner's story; I especially enjoyed accompanying her in her peregrinations through several countries and botanical gardens that both of us had visited.

This book, composed of 46 chapters, seven of which entirely devoted to photographs, retraces the many steps taken by Dr. Gaertner throughout her life. Following the German invasion of her home country of Czechoslovakia, her family immigrated to Canada in 1939, and purchased a small farm in Peters Corners, Ontario. In 1940, Dr. Gaertner entered the Ontario Agricultural College where she began studying *Cuscuta*, an agricultural pest. She continued this work in the lab of Dr. W. C. Muenscher at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, and obtained her PhD in 1949. She returned to Canada in 1950 to lecture at McMaster University.

In 1953, Dr. Gaertner married Dr. Donald Fraser, a plant physiologist and a pioneer in the use of radio-isotopes in the study of trees. As was usual at the time, Dr. Gaertner followed her husband as he developed his career in Forestry at the Petawawa Forest Experiment Station; remarkably, she co-authored several papers with him on the use of radioisotopes in forestry research. In the 1960s, Dr. Gaertner turned her focus to wild edible plants and wrote a number of papers on food harvested from the wild, publishing *Harvest Without Planting: Eating and Nibbling Off the Land*, her first book, in 1967. She also wrote on mushrooms, insects, and medical botany. In 1970, the couple moved to Montreal with their two children when Dr. Fraser became Chairman of the Department of Geography at Concordia University. There, because Dr. Gaertner believed in knowledge-sharing with lay people, she became a regular contributor to a TV show presenting botany to the public. Shortly after her husband retired,



Dr. Gaertner moved with him to Trenton, and then to Ottawa in 1999 where she still lives today, and where she will soon celebrate her 100th birthday.

I found this book challenging for a few reasons. For one, the stream of anecdotes feels somewhat disjointed, as most are connected by chronology only and not by subject or character. Many lack a date or greater context, which I found confusing. (But then, it is likely difficult to write a story that covers an entire century). For another, chapters containing only text separated by chapters containing only photographs is not a reader-friendly format; embedding the photographs within the text would have increased the enjoyment of both. An additional disappointment is that Dr. Gaertner did not delve into her research on *Cuscuta*. As I understand, she was a pioneer in the study of this genus, and I was looking forward to learning more about this plant with its ephemeral root.

These drawbacks aside, Dr. Gaertner's stories in *From the Heart* entertain, educate, and inspire in equal measure. Of interest to me as a former teacher were the messages that I think young people could take from the book:

- *Always seize opportunities to meet with, and listen to, other human beings.* Among the many characters that Dr. Gaertner recounts meeting in her life are Dick Feynman, who later received a Nobel Prize in Physics; A. Y. Jackson, a member of the Group of Seven; and Mordecai Richler, the Canadian novelist.
- *Use international conferences to travel to, and learn about, other countries and cultures (and take*

some time to visit museums while there). For example, Dr. Gaertner had the chance to admire the statue of Nefertiti in Berlin in 1965.

- *While at conferences, participate in field trips: they are an effective way to botanize and network.* Following her first International Botanical Conference in 1950, Dr. Gaertner went on a field-trip to Lapland and made friends she would keep for the rest of her life.

From the Heart is also valuable for its demonstration of how much the reality of being a female scientist has changed, or not changed, over a century. For example, a woman in the late 1940s was not encouraged to pursue a career in plant pathology because farmers would likely not accept suggestions from one. Also, despite having co-authored several papers with her husband, Dr. Gaertner would never be truly recognized by his colleagues as a scientist. And at the 1966 World Forestry Congress in Madrid, Dr. Gaertner's sleeping arrangements needed to be changed upon her arrival because, like many scientists, she used initials instead of her full name, and the organizers had assumed she was a man. She was in fact the only female presenter at that Congress!

This book is inspirational as Dr. Gaertner's enthusiasm and energy can be sensed throughout. She never lost her love of travelling and discovering new boundaries. She visited 6 of the 7 continents and attended several International Botanical Congresses: Stockholm, 1950 (the first congress after the war); Paris, 1954; Montreal, 1959; and Seattle, 1969. Like many botanists, she never missed a chance to enter into a botanical garden, visiting over 50 while attending conferences or travelling.

Finally, as a member of the CBA, I was interested by the connections Dr. Gaertner made with the Association. She met Dr. Porsild, who was then Head of the Department of Botany at the National Museum of Canada, on her trip to Lapland. She later hosted him in her Petawawa home and took him to her favorite bog. Dr. Gaertner attended several annual CBA conferences: in the early 1970s when she gave a presentation on fungi she had collected while working with her husband near James Bay; in 1978 in Newfoundland when she went on a field trip guided by André Bouchard from the Montreal Botanical Garden; in 1979 at Carleton University when she participated to the field trip to Mer Bleue Conservation Area; and she joined us in 2017 when she attended the CBA banquet at the Royal Bo-

tanical Garden in Burlington.

Dr. Gaertner's life may not have turned out the way she would have imagined it when she arrived in Canada in the 1940s, but she made the most of it. Her love of life exudes from this book – she loved dancing, eating, drinking, questioning, learning, and travelling, truly living like there is no tomorrow. She is a strong and resilient woman, who paved the way for other women scientists. As such, Erika should be celebrated. We should also wish her the best for her 100th year!



In front, left to right: Dr. Erika Gaertner, Dr. Mihai Costea, and Ms. Anna Ho at the Royal Botanical Garden, during the banquet concluding the 2017 CBA annual meeting hosted at Wilfrid Laurier University.

This book can be found as an eBook (the Amazon link provides access to the opening chapters):

[-https://www.amazon.com/Heart-Europe-Wonders-Canada-Century-ebook/dp/B08HVZX2VL](https://www.amazon.com/Heart-Europe-Wonders-Canada-Century-ebook/dp/B08HVZX2VL)

[-https://www.kobo.com/ca/en/ebook/from-the-heart-of-europe-to-the-wonders-of-canada-a-story-of-one-woman-s-century](https://www.kobo.com/ca/en/ebook/from-the-heart-of-europe-to-the-wonders-of-canada-a-story-of-one-woman-s-century)

It can also be purchased in print through Burnstown Publishing House:

[-https://burnstownpublishing.com/product/from-the-heart-of-europe-to-the-wonders-of-canada-a-story-of-one-womans-century/](https://burnstownpublishing.com/product/from-the-heart-of-europe-to-the-wonders-of-canada-a-story-of-one-womans-century/)

It should be noted that the book's royalties will contribute to the "Dr. Erika Gaertner Scholarship in Botany", which has been set up at the University of Guelph to encourage young scientists who are passionate about botany.

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