

Baba's Other Children

The Ukrainian–Albertan “whitewash” overlooks a much richer and varied history

Last summer Deron Bilous, Alberta’s minister of Economic Development and Trade, announced that 2016–2017 would be the year of the Ukrainian-Canadian. Weeks later he declared that every September 7 in Alberta would henceforth be known as Ukrainian-Canadian Heritage Day.

At the province’s Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village and again in the legislature, Bilous—himself of Ukrainian ancestry—spoke in the boilerplate rhetoric familiar to all ethnic audiences who are beneficiaries of government solicitude: “Generations of Ukrainians overcame many challenges for a new start in Alberta. They helped build this incredible province”; and “From agriculture and industry, to politics, academia and culture, they and their descendants helped build this province.” Which is exactly how we Ukrainian-Canadians speak of ourselves. From the website of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress–Alberta Provincial Council: “The Ukrainian story in Canada is a testament to the opportunities and possibilities that our great country represents.”

Some 332,180 Albertans claim Ukrainian origin. Ever since we climbed up from bohunk status to become poster kids of multiculturalism in the 1970s, we have scarcely changed our tune.

Most of our forebears landed east of Edmonton in 1892 on our proverbial quarter-sections. Descendants have never stopped extolling their wisdom in choosing to settle on “free lands” in an apparent “wilderness” on which railway track had been fortuitously laid for our benefit. Years of the familiar litany of perseverance, fortitude and sacrifice followed, and, hey, presto! Today’s rolling fields of wheat and canola—on farms so big they look like the collective farms, or *kolkhozes*, of Soviet yesteryear—and, in the cities, other fruits of great-great-grandbaba’s resilience: our Ph.D.s and QCs, our SUVs and timeshares, our cabinet ministers and comedians on CBC TV.

We visit the ancestral graves in rural churchyards: headstones written in Cyrillic we no longer know how to read. We vote for politicians with Ukrainian last names who send us Easter and Christmas greetings in our community newspapers in Cyrillic which they can’t read either. We send our kids to Ukrainian dance school—great costumes—because we are so damn colourful, and remember to send money to orphans in Ukraine (there’s a lot of them). We used to eat pyrohy but now we eat perogies, along with everybody else, and wear Remembrance Day poppies because, you know, like, we’re proud Canadians.

Construction of our history in this province since the 1890s is replicated everywhere in summary accounts that begin with Ivan Pylypiw and Wasyl Eleniak, early “catalysts” of Galician immigration, and proceed through the life stories of settlers who persevered and prevailed. Landlessness of the immigrants and “free land” on offer to them are emphasized. Their ultimate success in a Ukrainian bloc in east-central Alberta—stretching almost 130 km from Bruderheim in the west to Vermilion in the east and more than 80 km from Mundare, Vegreville and Innisfree in the south to Radway, Smoky Lake and Vilna in the north, forming “the largest mass of rural Ukrainian-Canadians on the Prairies”—is understood to be a foregone conclusion.

This popular image tells only part of the Ukrainian heritage story.

It's as though the only narrative worth commemorating is the one down on the homestead and small towns in the bloc settlement whence flowed our entire heritage, where there was no misery, no alcoholism, no racism, no abuse and assault on women and children ... and no social and political activists to combat them. And no one lived in cities.

It never occurred to me, for instance, to do the research for my 1977 book *All of Baba's Children* in Edmonton. I went to Two Hills, population 1,200, in 1975. I had grown up entirely in Edmonton, yet, in the introduction to the 1987 edition of the book, I wrote that I had been "willing, even eager, to engage in the construction of neo-Galician prairie identity."

Take the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village—the largest open-air museum in Alberta, composed of 50 heritage buildings, a lake, monuments, a community centre and conservation and curatorial buildings. It showcases the 1892–1930 period of Ukrainian bloc settlement. A promotional video on its website shows us a horse-drawn wagon, onion-domed churches, a grain elevator, a barn, a young woman in a babushka weeding her garden. The amiable narrator in a woolen flat cap tells us that everything on view is "authentic," and a visit here is "a way for Albertans to learn about their past." Given that not everybody has a family farm they can visit, the village is the next best thing, where they can absorb their heritage in a "fun" way, "without barriers."

This is the very visible, very active and very successful face we present to visitors as where we came from, and the Village has a special responsibility for the story it constructs. In fact, as public historian Karen Gabert has argued, "The Ukrainian houses, barns and churches at the Ukrainian Village have become shorthand symbols of Ukrainian identity," a process equally of construction as of preservation, given the authority of museum professionals.

And so at a safe distance we gather artifacts, material evidence of the journey from luckless homeland to ultimate success as householders and proprietors of land in the new country. In August 2016, the ancestral house of former Alberta premier Ed Stelmach, built by his grandparents in 1915, was moved from its moorings on the original quarter-section near Andrew to the Heritage Village. Together with other agricultural mementoes, such as a pig sty, granaries, market square and roadside shrine, the Stelmach house invites visitors to marvel at how far settlers have come: "From untouched bush, settlers carved out farms, and soon turned their attention to building their communities."

The implication is that, prior to the prodigious investment of our labour, the land had been useless, unproductive and uninhabited. Asserting since the 1970s the deep belonging we felt to our place on the prairie that was neither English nor French, we had stepped up as exemplars of and participants in multiculturalism, having earned our right to the status of a "founding people" here thanks to our sweat, toil and tears on the land. Scholars such as Frances Swyrypa and Lindy Ledohowski point out that the home we were claiming was also the homeland of displaced Indigenous peoples.

As far as I know, there is no public acknowledgement at Ukrainian-Canadian memorial sites that the free land offered by the Canadian government to landless Galicians had been traditional Indigenous territory. Nor any account given or acknowledged that the Canadian plains had been cleared for railway and settlement by systematic starvation of the Indigenous population until they submitted to confinement on reserves.

Three generations later, Ukrainian-Canadians struggle to remember the stories great-grandbaba told them of the “Indianny” down the section road who hired on at harvest time—stories told once and never again. Elder Danny Musqua remembers: “They wanted us to work with them, because we helped each other. The Indian worked hard back then. Ask any white man who farmed. The old farmers they can tell you about the Indian that worked hard.” Then why aren’t they invited to our harvest festivals?

At our Heritage Days, our pioneer villages, our pysanky festivals, what do Albertans learn of the remarkable success of Ukrainian-Canadian socialists and communists in organizing immigrants, not on farms, but wherever they could find work? What about our relatives in the cities—such as my own maternal grandparents—who worked on the killing floor of the packing plants, in railway extra gangs, sold eggs, cleaned houses, never went to church? Who went to the labour and farm temples? (By the mid-1930s, 95 Labour Temples were tied to the pro-Soviet Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association, mainly in Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario.) Who subscribed to Ukrainian-language socialist newspapers? Who rallied for Dr. Norman Bethune and sent husbands and brothers to the Spanish Civil War to defend the Spanish Republic from a fascist coup d’état? Who crowded the Labour Temples to see a new play from Soviet Ukrainian playwrights, in which capitalists and landlords got the heave-ho?

Not to idealize this milieu: To the bewilderment and consternation of ordinary members, much socialist leadership steadfastly justified or denied and obfuscated events of Soviet terror in Ukraine, such as the mass starvation during the Holodomor and the persecution and murder of Ukrainian artists and intellectuals. Not even one of the most popular of those playwrights, Myroslav Irchan, whose plays were performed across Canada in the Labour Temples, was spared.

The unsuspecting Albertans at our heritage festivals will be told none of this.

Our Heritage Village has absolutely no reference to these chapters in Ukrainian-Canadian experience. In fact, in an act of what Karen Gabert calls “historical white-washing,” the words “Ukrainian Labour Farmer Temple Association” were removed from a rural building on site and the communist history of the building dropped from its interpretation. Ukrainian-Canadians were CCFers and socialists and communists, pacifists, suffragists, anti-racists, health workers, union organizers, teachers, orchestra conductors, as passionate about their Galician heritage and their place in Canada as any other Ukrainian immigrants and families.

But none of this is to be found at our neo-Galician memory sites, where visitors are brought into the Ukrainian-Canadian narrative as a story that is now about all of us who are descended from settlers and share a legacy. Ed Stelmach once told CBC radio that his grandparents’ home at Heritage Village will be a “lasting legacy... not only [from pioneers] of Ukrainian descent, but

Polish and German—those that came to break the sod here.” Visitors to the Harvest Food Festival learned from David Makowsky, its head of communications, that, “We want people to get a sense of natural history, cultural history and just the human history of early Alberta.” (Visitor Randy Grant’s immediate answer to what brought him out was one word: “Perogies.”)

Responding to the Ukrainian-Canadian Heritage Day declaration, Ricardo Miranda, Alberta’s minister of Culture and Tourism, spoke movingly in the Legislature as a refugee inspired by the Ukrainian settlers: “I too started my journey elsewhere. . . . My family left our country, our home in search of a better life, in search of a safe place to be, and we found it here, just like our Ukrainian pioneers did.”

The Ukrainian-Canadian has become the default “prairie ethnic,” or, as Gabert writes, “Visitors of all ethnicities are encouraged to see the universal relevance of the pioneer story and thereby place themselves within a broader Albertan and Canadian collective.” But not all Albertans can read themselves in.

Frances Swyrypa, a retired history professor who has written about ethno-religious identity and the Canadian prairies, observes the emphasis settler groups put in their myth-making on settlement and cultivation of the land by their immigrant forebears. In this way, they are “elevating to iconic status both the settler generation and the land they tamed and brought into production.” This was a self-conscious process of asserting the group’s rights to their heritage on the land “by preserving their stamp on their surroundings and redoing the map in their memory.” By 1931, 57 per cent of Ukrainian-Canadians were Canadian-born, so this is the work of the generations who have long left the homestead quarter behind but make the pilgrimage to the Heritage Village, to harvest festivals and pysanka festivals to reconnect to roots in land and land title.

The enthusiastic celebration of 125 years of Ukrainian-Canadian settlement in Canada belies how complex settler identity really is. A family of landless Galicians in bare feet, disembarked on an Edmonton station platform, could also be unwitting occupiers of Indigenous land. Nevertheless, their grandchildren would also call this land mother and give thanks for it through their own labour in the face of economic despair and dispossession. Their descendants might grapple with what public intellectual Lindy Ledohowski calls “white settler guilt.” Or, conversely, they may want to honour their forebears’ courage and imagination on the land. The word “settler” derives from Middle English, *settlen*, to come to rest. To have a home, as it were. The much-maligned settler-Albertan has the same fierce attachment to the land ceded from the First Nations as had its Indigenous peoples. It’s complicated.

Lumpenproletarian grandparents (with names such as Mykola, Paraska) might rear a generation of schoolteachers (named Mary, Walter) who rear IT graduates Tiffany and Coady. Canadian patriotism vies with Ukrainian nationalism as Trump and Putin strike up a bromance. Symbols long disassociated from their first embodied meaning survive as ethnic kitsch (Vegreville’s giant pysanka), and artifacts whose purpose has been superseded are nevertheless lovingly preserved in even the most modest rural museum (a cream can).

Some forebears skipped the homestead altogether and worked as ditch-diggers in Edmonton, inspired on their picket lines by Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) from Butte, Montana; worked as laundresses for the English families who handed down much-appreciated winter coats. Lit out for the coalfields of Pennsylvania and returned to Edmonton, broken.

The alternative stories are legion, and I am learning some of them as I prowls through my own family's archive, which includes that ditch-digger, that laundress and even a great-uncle who was deported from Canada as a labour agitator in Lethbridge, and vanished.

Each ethnic minority community faces the challenge of historical cleansing of its constructed heritage. The alternative stories offer us a welcome opportunity to turn our attention to our narrative not in nostalgia but in critique and re-imagination.