

ACUA TALK
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25 years ago 1986

Where was I as a Ukrainian-Canadian writer?

- Almost a decade after *All of Baba's Children*, I was travelling in eastern Europe to fulfill the spiritual and moral obligation that had been laid on me by Ukrainian-Canadians after they had read *Baba's Children*: when are you going to write about the Old Country? But by that time I also had 2 other books under my belt, *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada*; and *No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls*.
- Note those 2 intervening books: about the experience of my 60s generation in Canada in which I had virtually nothing to say about being a *Ukrainian-Canadian* 60s person but a lot to say about the rapture of being young, politically radical and enjoying sex, drugs and rock 'n roll; and the book about the teenage girls, which was the book that I wrote from my feminist mind and heart. There were, almost accidentally, a couple of Ukrainian-Canadian girls included in my interviews – one a dancer – but for sheer *otherness* culturally and ethnically I interviewed girls of South Asian, Caribbean and Latin American origin.
- The travels of 1986, 1987 and 1988 produced my fourth book, *Bloodlines: A Journey into Eastern Europe* (1993), which in turn yielded the experimental memoir, *The Doomed Bridegroom* (1997). These had deeply-felt themes of my awakened consciousness as a writer of Ukrainian ancestry – including themes of Rus and Byzantium, Shevchenko and the *Kobzar*, the Holodomor, the dissidents of the 1960s and 1970s, not to mention family reunions.

I kept on writing short pieces, essays and lectures from the perspective of Ukrainian-Canadian identity. But the fact is that, over the course of three decades of writing, and the 8 books that came after *All of Baba's Children*, I have never returned to a Ukrainian-Canadian theme in my books.

This may come as a surprise to those who associate my name exclusively with *All of Baba's Children*, that certifiable classic of hyphenated Canadian writing.

But check it out: *The Next Canada: In Search of the Future Nation* (2000) I wrote as a Canadian boomer worried about the Canadians coming after me: were they still the real thing or had they been kidnapped by aliens from the Global Village? *Reading the River: A Traveller's Companion to the North Saskatchewan River* and *The Frog Lake Reader* are contributions to the study of western Canadian history particularly as it must now include Aboriginal history. And my latest book, *Prodigal Daughter: A Journey to Byzantium*, is a narrative of my return to the deepest source I have yet identified, Byzantium, the Mother of us all who have been Christianized through Constantinople not Rome. And that was 1023 years ago. Talk about origins!

So, what happened?

Let's go back to 1978, when *All of Baba's Children* was published. What sort of a time was it?

When I checked into the Frontenac Motel in Two Hills, Alberta, in June 1975, with my tape-recorder and notebook, I had no idea that the project I was embarked on was going to change my life.

Two Hills was then a small town of some 1200 souls located toward the eastern boundary of the Ukrainian bloc settlement which begins just east of Edmonton. My paternal grandparents had homesteaded near Vegreville and both my parents and several uncles and their cousins had been teachers all around the area. I was born in Edmonton but was then living in Toronto as a freelance writer. So I was "from" these people but not "of" them.

From that summer in Two Hills – from the round of interviews and research and neighbourly

conversation and my personal journals – my book emerged, and it has never gone out of print. Almost all of the people I interviewed in 1975 are now deceased, but the next generation has gone on reading the book. Some complain to me now that they are deeply offended that I didn't interview *their* parents (instead of that Communist or that Catholic or that woman with the two husbands). And some confess they have never actually read the book; it was simply there, in the living room, on the shelf with the Bible or the bowl of painted Easter eggs or the Collected Works of Shakespeare, venerated but otherwise unexamined.

And that, I submit, is as good a definition of a literary “classic” as any.

I had found a way of thinking about Ukrainian-Canadians that rejected the idealized experience promoted by official multiculturalism and with which many Ukrainian-Canadian community leaders were complicit. The discovery of this subversive “otherness” of my ethnicity (the word was still widely employed) had been exhilarating and joyful work.

Grand-daughter of Galician immigrants to Alberta, I had barged into Two Hills as a professional Torontonion, freelance writer in the magazines, and asked a lot of nosy questions with a whole lot of attitude. In response, my interviewees told me rich and textured stories from all kinds of lives, farmers, of course, but also grain buyers, teachers, a mechanic, a jeweller, a librarian, two priests, a town councillor – in short, the entire social spectrum you would expect in a once-immigrant community going into its fourth generation.

Behind my questions lay my own agenda as a feminist, New Leftist, New Journalist, ex-hippy, with only a sketchy knowledge of Ukrainian-Canadian history. But from our encounter with each other I was able to weave, stridently and passionately and self-confidently, a narrative of the lives of the generation to which my parents belonged. I dedicated *All of Baba's Children* to my parents, because it was precisely the *Canadian* story I wanted to illuminate. I was unafraid of my own voice – after all, I had been away from Alberta and all Ukrainian-Canadians for ten years. Because I was a member of a large protesting generation of the 1960s and 1970s, I could lay bare all the clichés of multiculturalism; I could champion the suppressed voices of the community.

After the book was published, I heard over and over again: “We know who you are. We know *whose* you are: Kostashchuks' and Maksymiuks'. We saw you in *Ridna Shkola*, in *SUMK*, in church, in the Hall, we saw you dancing in your little Hutzul costume, you came to our house to sing *koliady*, and when you decided to write a book, you wrote about us. Some of us are mad at you, others thank you very much. But this is about you too. Love us or hate us, you are one of us.” For once, I was speechless: I found that I did not wish to deny it.

I never went back to Toronto.

The fact was, that I was writing as a very particular kind of Ukrainian-Canadian: a third-generation, English-speaking, western Canadian raised in the Orthodox Church by parents who voted CCF. The Ukrainian-Canadianness that interested me was rooted in western Canadian pioneer history and in an immigration from the villages of Austria-Hungary; the Ukrainian-Canadians I was interested in worked on the CPR extra-gangs, built dairy co-operatives, had Cree Indians for neighbours and worked as cleaning women for middle class Anglo and Jewish matrons in the large towns. These, I could readily admit, were “my” people.

And so for years I was a kind of rabble-rouser for Ukrainian-Canadian ethnic identity and consciousness in the world in which I worked, the world of Canadian letters and media. As a hyphenated writer in the bold new world of official multiculturalism, I was invited to conferences, to community halls, to radio and television programs, I was asked to write opinion pieces, editorials, and Introductions, and to contribute to anthologies. I always said “yes.” Sometimes the experience was perplexing, as at a panel discussion about “ethnicity and writing” during a conference in Vancouver in the early 1980s about women's writing, when the only thing we panellists had in common was a “funny last name,” as I put it. That panel consisted of a First Nations writer, one born in Iceland, a first generation Italian-Canadian, an immigrant from the West Indies, and me. These were still the early

days of appreciating “difference,” and from the point of view of the non-ethnic organizers, we were all seen to belong to ethnic minorities. (Racial minorities had yet to be split off.)

As I matured as a writer and found a permanent place on the literary scene in Canada (by 1990 I had published three books and innumerable articles), I tended less to cast myself exclusively in the mould of “political agitator.” I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist, not just as a “poster girl” for ethnicity. The second aspect is that I had absolutely no idea that ethnicity as a collective identity, and mine in particular, was about to be radically rethought, and that I would fall into a profound silence on the subject. The third is that I had begun travelling extensively to Eastern Europe, and I turned my sights on my ethnicity and my politics as they played out in my generation still behind the so-called Iron Curtain.

Now, let’s go back to 1978 again, in Edmonton, the year *Baba’s Children* was published and I “came out” as a defiantly Ukrainian-Canadian writer. Behind my evocations of a politics of “resistance” among minorities, lay the influence of a once-notorious “cultural formation” based in Edmonton, Hromada.

Among this group of young Ukrainian-Canadian and Ukrainian-American (and one Finnish-Canadian) intellectuals, I finally found the means to be *in* the Ukrainian-Canadian world, not just *of* it. Here were people of my generation who had also been through the “struggles” of the 1960s in the student and anti-Vietnam war and women’s liberation movements, here were Ukrainian-Canadians who were on the Left - but the New Left, not the Old Left of the Soviet-Canadian Friendship Society or the Farm Labour Temple - here were politically progressive intellectuals who were anti-Soviet but also fierce critics of American imperialism. Here were Ukrainian-Canadian patriots of Ukraine who were free of anti-Semitism. Ukrainian-Canadian *men* who were feminists.

This was an exhilarating milieu in which to be active all through the 1980s, and my participation in it had an enormous impact on my thinking about ethnicity. One was to expose the real parochialism of my western Canadian rootedness. Thanks to my exposure to the more internationalist perspective of Hromada, I was able, for instance, to contribute to that sensationally-interesting conference in Edmonton in 1985 – the year before ACUA was founded - “Second Wreath: A Conference exploring Ethnicity and Feminism in Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Ukrainian Women’s Movement [First Wreath/Pershyi Vinok].” Joining us *Hromadniks* were women who told us of Jewish women’s organizations in Canada in the 1930s, of the role of Missionary and Temperance Societies in western Canada in “elevating” the Ukrainian immigrant woman, of Indian Rights for Indian Women, and of the lives of Soviet women political prisoners.

Into the proceedings an older woman stood up and barked at us: “Ethnicity, ethnicity, ethnicity! Isn’t anybody *Ukrainian* anymore?”

Influenced deeply by the internationalist perspectives of Hromada, I began to take seriously the question of my relationship to Ukraine. Neither of my parents, none of my grandparents, and very few of my relatives had travelled there themselves when, in 1984, when Ukrainian society was congealed in the profound stagnation of the late Brezhnev regime, I made my first trip. I went a second time in 1988 when even my relatives on the collective farm were keen on Gorbachev and perestroika (*perebudova*), and a third and final time in 1991, in independent Ukraine. Then I wrote *Bloodlines* and *The Doomed Bridegroom*, work which put me squarely within the genre of literary nonfiction and away from reportage and tub-thumping. Literary or creative nonfiction is a very supple genre, perfect for a writer beginning to understand the foolishness of fixed positions and the evolutionary possibilities of ambiguity.

I wrote in my Preface to *Bloodlines*: “Take a second-generation Ukrainian Canadian, a feminist, a writer, an alumna of the 1960s, and put her on a train in Belgrade heading north. What exactly is her business?” Confronted by European history, politics and memory, my hyphenated Canadian “otherness” proved unhelpful. In relation to Yugoslav, Czechoslovak, Polish and Ukrainian men and women of my generation – for it was they who were the subjects of my research - I was a privileged

North American, I belonged to the English language, I lived in a democracy (my socialism amused them), I had a very short memory. I did not argue with them, though I was often defensive. I listened intently, I wrote notes feverishly, I read non-stop. I reminded myself that these journeys to their closed cities, their cramped apartments, their smoky cafes, their tragic and gruesome sites of memory was about them, not about me.

This was most powerful in the case of the Ukrainians, my relatives surely, but also of the voice of the *Kobzar*, the *khliborob* labouring in the fields of the landlord, the clandestine icon-painter in the underground, the *zek* in the Gulag, the unburied dead of the Famine, just to name those with whom solidarity was a moral imperative.

Bloodlines was published the same year I was elected Chair of The Writers Union of Canada for the term 1993-94, and when I moved to Toronto to take up the position, I found myself at the epicentre of what have been called the “culture wars,” or the struggle of artists against racism. And here my identity had another shock. The Writers Union had a Racial Minority Writers Committee, who loudly raised issues of Canada’s historically racist laws and policies, racist arts and letters, racist language; I can assure you, the least helpful intervention in that agonized debate among the “races” would have been a (white) Ukrainian-Canadian’s declaration of solidarity with the oppressed (white) people of Ukraine. As friends in Toronto warned me, I would be accused by people of colour of “colonizing their space.” Canadian multiculturalism had moved on, and the story is told elsewhere of how debates in the 1980s about second- and third-generation Euro-ethnicity were supplanted by debates in the 1990s about immigration and racism, historically and actually.

I left it at that and got on with my next project: the book *The Next Canada: In Search of the Future Nation*, published in 2000. In writing *All of Baba’s Children* I had turned back from my own generation to see who these people were who had engendered us; in writing *The Next Canada* I looked beyond my generation to see who we had engendered. The book had an unexpected impact in Europe when I was invited on several occasions to speak to conferences of Canadian Studies scholars, especially in eastern, central and south-eastern Europe, the countries of so-called “east of the west.” They found my ethnicity mildly interesting but they wished to talk with me about the future of Canada and whether it is a post-modern nation.

But a year after *The Next Canada* was published, I was in the Greek city of Thessalonica, participating in the Passion Week of the Great Martyr and Miracle-Worker, St Demetrius, patron saint of Thessalonica. He is also known as Dmitry Solunskyi, and that should be a clue to what has happened to my Ukrainian-Canadianness. The young woman who unpacked her bags in the motel in Two Hills in 1975 had packed them up again and gone to Byzantium.

Why Byzantium? Met. Ilarion, 1953: [note the date]

“For Ukrainians to deny the Byzantine, the Greek, is to perform a kind of suicide, it’s to pronounce oneself illegitimate, to humiliate oneself. To reject the ‘Greek’ in one’s own name is to renounce one’s own father and mother. It’s to betray our entire history and one’s nation.”

I am often asked: “Where do you get your ideas?”

Source of idea for *Prodigal Daughter*: after *Bloodlines*, understanding Byzantium; needing to do an excavation toward the matrix, the deep cultural grammar of Ukrainian identity, specifically, and of that “zone” east of Vienna, so profoundly misrepresented, feared and marginalized in western intellectual, cultural and spiritual history.

“Why St Demetrius of Thessalonika?”

A hinge figure between Greeks/Byzantines and Slavs/barbarians.

How did I go about my “excavation”?

Two trips around the Balkans – Greece, Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria, with side trips to Montenegro and Istanbul – as a traveller; as a researcher/scrounger; as an interviewer. Back home: I hit the libraries. Note my Bibliography.

Examples of my itinerary: rural Byzantine chapels in Crete looking for the Saint in frescoes; the ruins

of Mistras, Byzantium's last hurrah after the fall of Constantinople, with its metropolitan church of St Demetrius; the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle in Thessalonica; the UNESCO site of Ohrid, Macedonia, magnificent Old Bulgarian churches; the monastery of Sveti Jovan outside Skopje, Macedonia; excavations of a 4th century Roman imperial villa in Nis, Serbia; excavations of a 4th century basilica in Sremska Mitrovica, north of Belgrade; National Museum of History, Sofia, Bulgaria, and the office of the Macedonian Scientific Institute; the ruins of Veliko Trnovo, Bulgaria, site of the 12th century uprising against Byzantium.

Examples of my research: reading in the library of the Serbian Academy of Science and in the National Library of Bulgaria named for Saints Cyril and Methodius; taking notes in museums and art galleries; religious bookstores [comic book!]; collecting postcards, fridge magnets, miniature icons, bookmarks, all having to do with St Demetrius; watching an anthropology video in Skopje; joining St Demetrius Passion Week processions, vigils and liturgies in Thessalonica.

Examples of interviews: a parish priest in Levadia, Crete; a professor of anthropology at Belgrade U; the caretaker in a church of St Demetrius in Athens; the curator of the Museum of Byzantine Civilization in Thessalonica; a novelist in Skopje; the guestmaster at a monastery in Cetinje, Montenegro; a professor of Slav-Byzantine relations in Sofia, Bulgaria; a priest of the Basilica of St Demetrius, Thessalonica; a professor of Bulgarian History in Veliko Trnovo.

Another turning point for me: a conversation with Dr Ivan Biliarsky:

"It's not a question of Bulgarians, Greeks, Byzantines, but of *Christians* who created a structure that was not a national state but a sacral one - a state of ecclesiastical character.

"It's true that there were invasions of Slavs who almost destroyed Byzantine power in the Balkan peninsula. But they were pagans, barbarians. The Byzantine Empire's grand achievement in the ninth and tenth centuries was the spiritual conquest of the Slavic world and the creation of the community known as the Byzantine Commonwealth. And this is the heritage that must be defended and not cut up along national lines of demarcation."

And that is the heritage that I am now committed to reclaiming for myself.

Oddly enough, it has also brought me to a consideration of the challenges that young Ukrainian-Canadian artists and activists deal with 25 years after 1986.

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