

CANADA 150: A VIEW FROM EDMONTON

BABA WAS AN EDMONTONIAN

From the Eulogy delivered by my father, William Kostash, at the funeral of his mother-in-law, my maternal Baba, Pauline/Palahna Kosovan Maksymiuk, 9 October, 1979 at Park Memorial, Edmonton. The memorial lunch was served at the Ukrainian Labour Temple.

“Baba Palahna was a good mother and, although she had never heard of Dr. Spock, she raised her children on common sense and love, and they returned her love a hundredfold. She was a great inspiration to her four granddaughters and has been immortalized in a National Film Board documentary, ‘Great Grandmothers,’ and in a book, *A Harvest Yet to Reap*. Her womanliness and humanity were the source of inspiration for the book, *All of Baba’s Children*, by her granddaughter, Myrna Kostash.”

Palahna Maksymiuk née Kosovan died in 1979 at age 87 in an Edmonton hospital: she had been an Edmontonian for sixty-eight years.

Baba was not among those whose arrival in Canada, specifically in the Star-Edna district east of Edmonton, is now marked by the 125th anniversary of Ukrainian settlement. But she did make it out of Galicia in time before the guns of August 1914 blew apart the world she had known. Summoned to Edmonton from her village, Dzhuriv, by a man she hardly knew, she planted herself in the wood-frame house he had built for her, address 12518 – 93 street, and that was that. Baba was home.

My maternal grandparents, Nikolai and Palahna, never homesteaded. They are not the Ukrainian settlers tirelessly evoked by our Heritage festivals, villages and monuments as the stout men and women in sheepskin coats who lined up barefoot on the Strathcona railway station platform to have their picture taken. Who then shuffled off stage left to climb aboard a wagon full of farm tools, seed and pots and pans and set off for the now-legendary quarter-section that stands

for all Galician beginnings in western Canada. Canada, the country that, at confederation in 1867, had then promptly and fortuitously laid a rail bed and track to bring the sheepskinners out to "free lands" for the taking.

Baba rode that train but she hadn't married a farmer. Nikolai had quit Dzhuriv as a teenager, expelled by the malignant forces of deep rural poverty and a mean-minded stepmother protective of her own cubs, and he lit out for the coal fields of Silesia. A couple of years later, pockets stuffed with cash, he returned to his village, paid a visit cap in hand to his prospective father-in-law, Petro Kosovan. He promised to send for Palahna from Canada, then set out for Rotterdam and the steamship, Gothland.

Petro Kosovan was poor, land-wise – he made extra cash hauling beer kegs from town to a string of pubs - and was happy enough to get one daughter at least (there were three others) out of the house. There is no record of how Palahna felt about the arrangement except for a fleeting mention by my mother: "When your Baba saw Nikolai come toward the house [in Dzhuriv] she ran and hid in the barn." In her wedding picture taken on the stoop of 12518 – 93 street she looks terrified but also, hanky clenched in her tightened fist, resigned to her fate.

Her fate turned out to be that of wife of a packing plant worker and, within the year, mother of Mary, my mother. Within five years she was a widow, pregnant and with few resources as far as I have heard, except for the bachelor brother-in-law, Andrew Maksymiuk, in the attic bedroom. They married in 1920 and it was then that her life was truly set.

This was the man I knew as Dido (it was decades before I enquired about my biological grandfather, the packing-plant worker) and it was their household I understood to be just another Ukrainian-Canadian home in Edmonton in which my mother and her half-sister were raised. That other Ukrainian-Canadian household of Kostashes on a farm near Vegreville was, to me, the exotic enterprise.

By the time I was aware of Baba's surroundings, the large oval-framed portraits of Lenin and Stalin were no longer on the living room wall, having been consigned to the cellar while my mother was still a teenager. It was a story she enjoyed retelling. A prospective suitor from her high school class had come calling – great

excitement throughout the house - but one look at the Commies on the wall sent him flying out the door in high dudgeon. (There were no more suitors until she met my father, a man who went to church and voted CCF.) But was Baba amused? We all knew the story of how Dido had purloined her Ukrainian prayer book and thrown it down a biffy hole, or perhaps merely ripped out its pages for toilet paper. But we also knew, in the same breath, that Religion had been Baba's best subject in her four years of village schooling.

At marriage, my mother's social life began to revolve around the Ukrainian Orthodox parish church then on 95th street, and its Women's Association whose members raised money for clerical vestments, church banners and Sunday school, and hosted the Bishop's Tea posed behind silver tea sets in large, frothy hats and white gloves. The only time I saw Baba in a church was at my wedding in 1972. (For both her marriages there was benefit of clergy but no record, photographic or anecdotal, of church ceremonials.) But she had an active social life only two streets and two avenues away from my parents' church, at "the Hall" on 97th street, Ukrainian cultural centre and home of the Ukrainian Labour and Farm Temple Association. Here portraits of Marx and Lenin shared the walls with the people's poets, Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko and Ukrainian-Canadians' own Communist tribunes, Matthew Popovich and John Boychuk, and maybe that Anglo-Canadian Party leader, Tim Buck, diminutive and nattily tailored, his oratory much admired by Dido.

But neither did I ever hear Baba curse and fulminate against the capitalist bosses and exploiters – as Dido did in a game of warring newspapers with my father, his petit bourgeois son-in-law – nor stand and chant the Russian verses to the Soviet National Anthem (it was I who learned the words from a Red Army Chorus and Band record album). She never went on a protest march; it was her brother, Nick, in Lethbridge during the Depression, who (I'm speculating) marched with the Beet Workers' Industrial Union, was arrested and forthwith deported, further fate unknown. But it was told of Baba by the family that she had to rescue Dido from a jail cell in Fort Saskatchewan when he had inadvertently found himself pressed into a crowd of Hunger Marchers in Market Square (located just to the south of today's Churchill Square, on the site of the present Milner Library). That was about as "revolutionary" as the two of them became but what does one expect –

what did I expect? – of semi-literate, in Ukrainian and English, lumpen proletarians whose radicalized compatriots were being interned or deported and their presses and offices seized and padlocked?

From my father's Eulogy: "Coming from humble beginnings, Palahna's sympathy naturally lay with the working classes and the organizations that fought in their cause. And, within the limits of her income, she supported these organizations. The Ukrainian Centre, of which she was a member for many years, was the centre of her social life. Her concern for humanity extended even to people she did not know. The Maksymiuk home was but a stone's throw from the main CNR line in north Edmonton, and the unfortunates who rode the rods in the Depression years knew that they could always get a sandwich or a piece of bread from the kind lady who lived by the tracks. She made no distinction as to race, colour, or creed when she saw that they were in dire need."

Baba did no harm. At the Hall she played bingo and went with the whole family to see the plays of socialist and Communist Ukrainian playwrights such as Miroslav Irchan. He was hailed by *Saturday Night* magazine in 1928 – that periodical of Anglo-Canadian cultural rectitude – as "Canada's most popular playwright" but, back in Soviet Ukraine, he was executed by firing squad in the Terror of 1932. The men and women and children in the Edmonton hall had loved his stories of crafty workers and peasants who gave the bosses and landlords the old heave-ho but I doubt that it ever occurred to Baba and Dido that they need undertake such dangerous plots themselves. But they did demand an explanation of Irchan's scandalous fate, a demand that remained unsatisfied when the Canadian Party men came back from Kiev with their tail between their legs.

Yet there is a photograph - a large studio photo mounted on a cardboard frame - to which my mother has affixed a sticky note: "Baba's women's Communist group." Really, Baba? But there she is in the back row, already half-way to the stout, sway-bosomed woman I would stretch my arms around to embrace in fondest greeting, but here still dark-haired in a blunt cut and no-nonsense expression to match. There is no banner to identify the group. But, gripped by two women in the front row, there is a very large photo-portrait of the Ukrainian poet, Lesia Kobylanska, modernist writer and feminist, and, unbeknownst to

Baba and her comrades, something of a proponent of same-sex love. She was also lionized by the equally-innocent bourgeois nationalists such as my Sunday school teachers.

But remember: Baba had all her family, except a sister in Lethbridge, still in Ukraine. They were Soviet citizens after 1945 and it was their photos and letters that Baba kept in a pile in her linen closet, to be taken out for repeated, loving, teary examination, opened and spread out by her reddened, swollen gardener's, cow-milking, pyrohy-pinching fingers. Sometimes she would weep inconsolably, her face buried in her apron, growling her anguish about the fate of her brother Yuri, murdered by "bandits" at the stoop of his parents' home in Dzhuriv. It was decades later, long after her death, that I learned that the "bandits" were the anti-Soviet guerrillas who struggled against the Red Army until 1955 from their bases in the Carpathian Mountains. Yuri, a known sympathizer of the Bolsheviks now in control of Dzhuriv, had been targeted as a collaborator, was "disappeared" from his home and never seen again. Did Baba have any inkling of this identity?

Yet even during years of the Cold War (1946-1979) she subscribed to Soviet Ukrainian magazines. On visits, I very much enjoyed looking through the pages of smudgy photographs - ranks of smiling textile workers at their mechanized spools and spindles, youths flashing smiles as they rode their bright red "Belarus" tractors around the collectivized fields, girls in "traditional" costumes handing over bouquets with a curtsy to visiting Communist Party dignitaries from abroad. Later I learned to scoff at the propagandistic naiveté of such imagery – Boy Meets Tractor, Romance Ensues – but would find myself unaccountably weeping over a display case of Soviet textiles in the Guggenheim Museum, rows upon rows of tiny, perfect yellow tractors moving across a crimson red field. I finally understood what Baba and Dido "saw" in those Soviet tractors: the machine that was pulling their family and countrymen and women out of the primordial mud of the village.

So Baba made the rounds of the Hall, the shops on Alberta Avenue (118th avenue) including a co-op grocery and a shambolic "general store" run by "the Jew," the only merchant she ever really trusted even while she loudly deplored his prices. Occasionally she ventured into the downtown precincts of Woodward's basement food floor, there to meet up with friends. They stood around in a clump with their homespun cloth shopping bags, heads in *babushkas*, chattering in Ukrainian, to

my intense embarrassment. Farther afield still, when she and Dido briefly farmed a market garden (now subsumed by residential neighbourhoods north of 137 avenue and 82 street), and, bent now in a permanent stoop, she lopped the heads off the cabbages and rolled them into gunny sacks that Dido, with horse and wagon, hauled to the city market

No more ditch-digging for Dido nor, for Baba, peddling cream and eggs around the neighbourhood and taking in laundry. Yes, right there at the house on 93 street, a haystack and a cow (I've seen the photos) and somewhere a chicken coop, unless the eggs are fictitious.

Of her Ukrainian heritage I learned very little. She cooked simple meals in the Ukrainian fashion (cabbage rolls, borshch, baked cornmeal, boiled carrots) but did bake creditable braided breads for our Christmas and Easter tables. Her cross-stitchery was rudimentary, she never painted an Easter egg, and I learned no songs from her although she would sing them, tapping her foot while strumming a mouth harp between verses. She brought no photographs with her from the village and never owned a camera. Baba was poor most of her life, or at least frugal, although, as a child, I didn't realize that this was what I was seeing – her stooped body lumped inside the home-made dresses she sewed on her pedal Singer (she never wore trousers), patched dish towels made from sugar sacks, chipped enamel ware in which she baked the *holubtsi*. I grew up on mum's stories of the family on relief during the Dirty Thirties, to the intense shame of Dido – and perhaps it was shame that held them both back from public demonstrations of protest against their condition. But there was always a dollar bill slipped into a birthday card she gave us together with a greeting in Pidgin English.

Baba and I had only “kitchen” versions of each other's language; we more or less understood each other but could not carry on a decent conversation. Our effective communication was in smiles, hugs and kisses, and even though I did go on to study and speak Russian, I wonder now if she was pleased. I imagined her admiration of my skill with the language of the Victorious Working Masses but, really, perhaps she only wanted me to speak to her the simple Ukrainian phrases of familial affection.

I did learn to speak Ukrainian, five years after her death. Now I could ask my questions: How did your first husband, Nikolai, die? Why didn't my mother know

where he, the beloved husband and father, was buried? Had she and you never visited the grave? (I've since found it, in Edmonton Cemetery, unmarked.) Who were your siblings and their spouses and children - all relatives of mine too, after all?

Baba, I never heard you speak of your mother: did she love you? How did you get your cow, the big black and white beauty in the photo inside the snow globe mum gave me one Christmas? Why are you called a Presbyterian on your marriage certificate? You never returned to Dzhuriv – I did – perhaps because there was no one there you wanted to see again on this earth? What about the Revolution of Glorious October: didn't you want to see how that turned out? Did you ever want to go to church again, light a candle, kiss an icon of the Mother of God, ask her for something? Should we have called a priest as you lay dying?

The life of Baba the Edmontonian was lived with little documentation until her daughters each bought a Brownie camera in the 1930s and there she is, in her backyard, at celebrations, sitting behind birthday cakes, holding her grandchildren in blankets while we fuss. But her life is told also in embarkation papers, a marriage certificate, an *Edmonton Journal* description of the dress and corsage she wore to mum's and dad's wedding party at the Shasta café, a letter she wrote to the Old Country but never mailed (I have it now: she complains of rheumatism), a Premier's congratulation on fifty years of marriage, an obituary. I'm hauling her out of these data and calling it *The Ghost Notebook*.

From the Obituary in Zhyttia I Slovo, [Word and Life] 12 November, 1979, by Mykhailo Holovchak

[in Ukrainian] “Palahna Makysmiuk, pioneer, member of AUUC [Association of United Ukrainian Canadians successor to the Farm Labour Temple Association] and the Ukrainian Community Seniors' Club, has passed away.

“...With her husband and daughters, she very much enjoyed attending concerts and other events at the old Ukrainian Labour Temple on 96th street and later at the new one, the Ukrainian Cultural Centre.

“Palahna Maksymiuk was a subscriber to *Life and Word*, and contributed according to her means to the press fund of *Life and Word* and *Ukrainian*

Canadian, to the children's camp at Sylvan Lake etc. Our beloved mother and grandmother, outstanding member of progressive organizations, honest and hard-working citizen of Canada, has gone to eternal rest. May the Canadian land, which she loved and for which she laboured, lie lightly upon her."

Sit tua terra levis. It's a Roman funerary epitaph and an Epigram of Seneca *May the earth rest lightly upon you*. The comrades chose well. Baba knew earth, under bare feet, in the creases of her hands, clotted around beets and potatoes, seedbed of life. We dug her grave, and earth took her in.