

LORD, HISTORY FALLS THROUGH THE CRACKS

Myrna Kostash

110, 11716 – 100 avenue

Edmonton AB T5K 2G3

Tel 780- 433 0710

mkostash@telus.net

WORD COUNT: 3047

LORD, HISTORY FALLS THROUGH THE CRACKS

- Road Map of the Vistula Delta –

Dear Heart: Wacek and Hanna bundle me into the back seat of their car and we clatter down the E16 to its junction with the T83, through stolid towns of scrubbed brick and shaved hedges. We are travelling to Gdansk (Danzig).

I try to follow your traces, my finger bouncing off the blue lines of the road map as we skirt the edges of potholes. Drewnica, Ostaszewa, Szymankowo, Oslonka. Where are those Frisian farms of yours? We are on our way to Elblag; could that be your Elbing?

“Look,” says Wacek, “order and civilization,” indicating the grim slate roofs, the heavy-bottomed Gothic chapels. He is not being ironic. He means: Germans built these towns. Prussians. Not slovenly Poles. Wacek is a Pole.

Disposing of vast, waterlogged estates on the Vistula delta, German Catholic and Lutheran landlords in the early 1500s invited Dutch Anabaptists, among them Mennonites, to come dike and dam their lands. The reclamation of wastelands: it was to become a Mennonite speciality. The Prussians had the cities, the pious Anabaptists the reclaimed swamps. By 1608 the bishop of Culm (Chelm?)

complained that the whole delta was overrun (his word) by Mennonites.

Unmolested at prayer and labour, they had grown prosperous and eventually aroused the envy of their neighbours. This too became a speciality. The Mennonites would move, and move again.

There were elders of your congregation in Danzig from 1607 to 1788. Then they migrated en masse for the steppes of southern Ukraine. They would call it Russia. We would call them Germans. Touché.

- The Sich, the Empress, the German, and the Potato –

On the island of Khortytsia in the bend of the lower Dnipro, the Imperial Official Dmytro Vyshnyvetsky caused a fortress (*sich*) to be built in 1553 and then invited the Cossacks—five thousand Christian males, self-governing and womanless, hunters and fishermen and warriors—to man it.

***Sich*: settlements of Ukrainian Cossacks on the banks and islands of the lower Dnipro River, formerly trade route of Goths and Vikings down the amber road from the Baltic Sea to the salt pans of the Black. And first line of Russian imperial defence against marauding Tatars from the Crimean peninsula. They settled beyond the rapids and so took the name of the Beyond-the-Rapids (*za-porohy*) Cossacks or *Zaporozhian*, scourge of Tatars, Turks, and Poles.**

Dear Heart, I am telling you all this because your Danzig congregations would succeed the Brotherhood as incumbents on the fantastic black loam of the Ukrainian steppes. And because the blood that irrigated it in revolutionary times would also be yours.

***Sich*: A “political monstrosity,” in the estimation of the Empress Catherine, this German czarina whom you would call Great. She proclaimed its destruction August 3, 1775. “Henceforward the use of the words ‘Zaporozhian Cossack’ shall be considered by Us as an insult to Our Imperial Majesty.”**

And so Grigory Potemkin, hero of the Turkish wars and favourite of the queen’s bedchamber, dispatched an army unit to the *sich* and demanded their surrender. Just like that.

One of Catherine’s modern biographers has written that the three thousand Cossacks within the palisades “gave in without a blow”; were then “removed” and “resettled” (in the plain speech of the Mennonite historian GK Epp.) I can’t believe it was so easily done, Cossacks so meekly mustered out from the legendary fort.

The *sich* was razed, ashes ploughed into its foundation (salt sown into the pastures? the horses unleashed and driven to the Caspian Sea?), bits of

embroidered sheepskin caught on the thorns of the bushes on the river bank, and the whole territory proclaimed “empty.”

And what was this all about, this wilful disbanding of one of the Russian Empire’s most effective, if mercurial, military instruments on the borders with Islam, this crushing of the legendary brotherhood of horsemen who would, for the next two hundred years, represent for the nascent Ukrainian people their best historical moment? It was to clear the way for more tractable settlers, among them the Mennonites from the muggy delta of the Vistula.

To quote Vladimir Lenin on the subject, himself quoting from a Cossack lament:

***Hey, you, Empress Kateryna,
look what you have done.
Boundless steppe and happy land
to landlords you have flung!***

Fourteen years after the destruction of the *sich*, in 1789, the first Mennonites arrived on the Dnipro and the island of Khortytsia. They came as immigrants to a land they believed wild and empty, to build fences and plant potatoes, and they would stay long enough to become landlords, owners of property on which laboured the landless poor, yours and mine.

When the Mennonites finally met the Ukrainians, they called them

“unindustrious.” I can just see them, those Ukrainians, barefooted and weather-beaten, standing sullen at the fence, while the German beat at the bloody clods of the earth on Khortytsia Island with a domestic hoe.

A trade-off: you will feed and pay me decently, you will show me how these Menno things are done (the sheep breeding, the cross-fertilization of pears, the carpentry), and I will work hard and without complaint. Otherwise, you can beat me. I will live in the barn and you will call me “blockhead” and I will try to pilfer what I can, but mainly I am here to watch you and see how these German things are done. One of these days you won’t be here.

We live in your houses. We are your cooks, and serve you our *borshch* and *pyrohy*. We embroider your shirts and sing sad sewing songs. You get all sentimental about the dear Little Russian village. We lie with you, sometimes in love and sometimes in hate. Can you tell the difference?

- Dedication: “To My Dead and Living and Unborn Countrymen in Ukraine and Abroad, A Friendly Epistle” by T.H. Shevchenko, Poet –

The prudent German plants his potatoes at the *Sich*

And you buy them and eat them with relish

**And glorify Zaporozhia.
But with whose blood
Is this soil drenched?
What fertilizes the potato?**

- Mythocartography: Road Map of the Motherland –

Dear heart, I am clattering along the ruinous highways southeast of Kyiv. This was my idea—this cheerless itinerary through a cold and ramshackle countryside. And my wish: to see the old Cossack lands of Ukraine, to see the steppe, to see the phantom carpentry of the *sich* and *heimat*.

Seryozha packed me in the front seat, a straw basket of tomatoes, apples, onions, and bread on my lap, plastic canisters of petrol in the back seat, and we headed south on this gritty, sleety highway that I had expressly marked: Poltava, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhe, Simferopol.

This “savage” unbounded openness was in fact the Ukrainian chernozem, the black earth, prodigiously fertile.

Why did you call this land a wilderness?

It is said that the traveller in the steppelands, wearied by the desolate plains and “squalid” peasant (Ukrainian) villages, experienced considerable uplift of his spirits at the approach to a Mennonite colony. For example, Baron August von Haxthausen in the Khortytsia District, 1843: “The fields are laid out and cultivated in the German manner; the farmlands and meadows are enclosed with German fences. Everything is German: the villages with all their individual farmsteads, the gardens and their arrangements, the plants, the vegetables and above all the potatoes.”

And ten years after that, six million trees. Plantations, forest reserves, orchards, alley-ways. Oak, birch, beech, maple, elm, linden, acacia, and poplar. Apples, pears, plums, cherries, and apricots. Mulberry trees for the delectation of the caterpillar of the silk moth. Sheep! By 1825 the Mennonite farmers were taking their wool of imported Merinos to markets as far as Kharkiv, Poltava, and Simferopol. Some Mennonites were even getting rich. Between 1812–1841 the value of the cattle insured at the Khortytsia colony rose from 480 roubles to 2250 roubles. They produced three times more grain per household than the Lutheran and Catholic colonists (nothing is said of Ukrainian Orthodox households but one can imagine) and began to import threshing machines.

Where are they now, those Menno villages of Khortytsia, of the old home, the Altkolonie, the *heimat*? Your people moved in from the Baltic and built and named them all again: Neuendorf, Schonhorst, Rosental, Einlage, Steinbach, and

Where are your names? Effaced and relettered. There are Ukrainian villages here now, and they hide no clues. Guardsplace, Tankville, Collective Farmford, First of Mayville, Red Startown. *Tankovye, Sovkhozkoje, Pervomaiskoje*. It is the nomenclature of the commissariat. So you too have been utterly forgotten.

In the 1930s, the Soviet authority, dreaming of cheap hydroelectric power (Lenin: Communism = Bolshevism + electrification), flooded the fertile settlements along the Dnipro to create the putrid seas that lie like bilge-water over the bones of your villages and mine.

Declaration of the historian Olena Apanovych, in *News From Ukraine*, 1990:

Waves of the man-made sea go on to submerge former Cossack lands and undermine the banks. The Island of Khortitsa has lost hundreds of hectares of ancient Cossack land over the past years. The local authorities over the years distributed historical territory to build holiday homes, enterprises, whatever you like. Concentrations of industrial enterprises on this land, and the tons of toxic discharges, exceed several times admissible norms.”

Because no one would give us directions, Seryozha and I wandered a long time on Khortytsia. When we came upon the museum parking lot we decided we must be at the right spot, the site of the *sich*. I stood in the parking lot. Behind me:

phalanxes of pylons, colossi bearing power cables the whole length of the island. Ahead of me: stone crosses, defaced and slumping into the soil, and the hydroelectric works flung across the now-irradiated river in the triumphalist bravado of the first Five Year Plan.

On a fine September day in 1919 the schoolteacher Dietrich Neufeld ferried across the river from his house to the island. He waded through deep sand to get to the pungent woods. There he was surprised to come across what my friend and I had missed, walls of an “ancient fortification,” he surmised the *sich*. Thoughts of Cossacks agitated him—“ferocious rebels”—so he turned again to the “mysterious lure” of the woods, and there in the sylvan silence “felt at one with nature.”

Your Menno arcadia, darling, and my Cossack stockade: past recollection in the motherland.

- Nostalgia of the Steppe -

According to the poets, the vanished Nogai (Tatars), horsemen of the steppes, made the Mennonites feel like intruders even generations after they were gone, when the farmer would cut open their burial mounds and scoop up their funerary articles, to make room for watermelons and potatoes. He felt keenly that his

“German” orderliness of garden and prayer had been established at the price of . . . what? a mystery, an otherness. And, because the Slavs were likewise prior to the Germans in this place, perhaps their spirits haunted you too.

Throughout Arnold Dyck’s *Lost in the Steppe*, the Mennonite boy Hans struggles with an inchoate yearning for something the “Russians” have and he doesn’t, a way of inhabiting this magnificent prairie they both love: they sing, and he doesn’t. They sing with sorrow, with fierceness, with foreboding, and they fill up his emptiness. Compared to them, he has only just arrived, interloper on the steppe, and he strains to feel what they feel: the weight of “a century below the sky.” The songs are their knowledge of a land where Hans feels lost, a tumbleweed, an alien.

So, when the time comes for the melancholic Ukrainian peasants to rise up against their masters and *take back the land*, the Mennonites will say they are lost.

- The Curse -

You will wander far from the source of your faith. Where you settle no one will understand what you say. You will draw yourselves together as though there were no home except where you find your own kind; your neighbours will be strangers. In solitude and labour and prayer you hold yourselves apart from the

temptations of the easeful world, but you will always prosper.

It's funny: I have thought of you as salt of the earth, growing out of it like the infinitely renewing limbs of willow from which we weave our fences. But yours is a story of flight and the roots spread shallow: you have to be able to get up and go when you feel the pressure, the danger; you have to be able to shake off the dirt as though this earth were not beloved. Maybe that's what it means to be Ukrainian instead: to be everlastingly of this homeplace.

You left and we grew back. You are utterly gone. No one remembers you. You called my country *de Kaump*—you always were a plain-speaking folk—and then you took the Ukrainian name, *Khortytsia*, which means “greyhound bitch.” I don't know why.

You taught us how to work for you, you taught us to plant potatoes, and then you left. Left, or were killed or forcibly resettled or hounded, hurled into box cars, and shoved across a border. But we had the folk songs and the name for the place.

- We Want Land and We Want It Now -

On the hundredth anniversary of your settlement, the declaration of the village teacher, Peter Penner: “We swear before God, the Tsar and the Russian people to

instruct our children in solid Christian ideals and love of Tsar and Fatherland.”

Meanwhile, standing in an excited rage below the front porch were the Ukrainians. Illiterate and shoeless. Their villages were the property of absentee aliens, and the Russian institutions as impenetrable as the Church congresses of the Eucharist. They will be dragged with great violence into the world beyond this here-and-now by the impending drama of revolution and the promise of *their own land*. The land had been Mennonite 128 years when the revolution came. A blink of the eye: that’s how long it had been Mennonite.

***Land*. You had it and we didn’t. Eventually we would be given guns and slogans—“Peace, Land and Bread”—and we would march on your estates. But for now we merely kept our accounts. How do I know this? Your own writers tell me. You knew all along what was going on with us—the “glinting eyes” of Ukrainian servants taking in all your wealth: the mill, the studfarm, the silver candelabra. “You in feather beds and three years just straw for me!” The proto-revolutionary grinding his teeth against the pain shooting from the welts on his back: a stablehand, whipped for insubordination.**

You knew we were stealing your horses right from the barns where we tended them during the day and were scooping up contraband sheaves of wheat we had stooked ourselves. “And then the arson last summer at Martens’: wasn’t that done by their own servant!” and then Klassen’s belly slit open by a pitchfork

wielded by the servant he had beaten black and blue.

In John Weier's *Steppe*, there is an uproar in Gruenthal village school when the teacher, Sergei Ilaryonovich Mechnikov (not in fact a Ukrainian surname), in spite of his respectable teaching certificate and status among the Mennonites, loses control of his national feelings. A boy has giggled behind his back; he strikes him across the side of his head. He is a geyser of indignation, as though he had waited generations for just such a moment, a roomful of shocked and weeping children who are being made to learn the lesson their arrogant elders have refused.

There had never been a Ukrainian patriot in their Mennonite midst before, only slacking, half-stupefied *muzhiks*, but here now is one: "You think we're drunk and thieves. . . . We're just dumb Ukrainians," shouts Mechnikov. "You look down on us. You like to laugh, and beat us. Whose land is this? Do you know why we're so poor? . . . Whose land is this? Do you remember how you got it? . . . Someday you'll see the real Ukraine. You won't like it."

I think of those Westernizers and Populists and village schoolteachers on whose shoulders the revolutionaries of 1917 stood, their dogged loyalty to a dream of *uplift* from the dark mud of the czarist villages sustaining them until the real event came along, peasants with pitchforks and their leaders with fire in their throats. And when the hired help and house servants showed up at your front porch

potent with excitement, they “devoured” you with their “smouldering” eyes, and your daughters fainted.

We wanted you.

M Kostash

April 26, 2008

Sources:

The title is from the poem, “flicker and hawk,” by Patrick Friesen, in *Flicker and Hawk*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1987.

For the general history of Mennonites and their period in Ukraine:

Smith, C. Henry. *The History of the Mennonites*. Berne, Ind.: Mennonite Book Concern, 1945. (Also the source of the Bishop of Culm’s complaint)

Urry, James. *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889*. Winnipeg: Hypernion, 1989.

Epp, G.K. “Mennonite-Ukrainian Relations 1789-1945.” In *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 7 (1989)

Baron von Haxthausen’s impressions of the Mennonite lands in *Studies on the Interior of Russi*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

For Mennonite and Ukrainian relations:

Brandes, Detlef. “German Colonists in Southern Ukraine up to the Repeal of the Colonial Statute.” In *German-Ukrainian Relations in Historical Perspective*. Eds John-Paul Himka and Hans-Joachim Torke. Toronto: CIUS Press, 1994.

Dyck, Arnold. *Lost in the Steppe*. Trans. Henry D. Dyck. Mansfield, Penn., 1974.

The poem by Taras Shevchenko is from his collected works, *Kobzar*, which has been published in many editions and languages. This version is my translation.

For the reminiscences of the Dietrich Neufeld: *A Russian Dance of Death*. Trans. Al Reimer. Winnipeg: Hypernion, 1980.

The reference to “that political monstrosity, the ‘Sech,’” is in Isabel de Madaringa, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

For Mennonite-Ukrainian literary treatments of their history:

Reimer, Al. *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*. Winnipeg: Hypernion, 1985.

Weier, John. *Steppe: A Novel*. Saskatoon: Thistledown, 1995.

Wiebe, Rudy. *The Blue Mountains of China*. Toronto: NCL, 1995.