

## HOW I LOST MY HYPHEN AND FOUND MY GROOVE<sup>1</sup>

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 some [??] kilometres west, on much better soil, and both my parents and several uncles and their cousins had been teachers all around the area. I was born in Edmonton. 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 – a book emerged that has become a classic of Canadian “multicultural” or “ethnic” literature, *All of Baba’s Children*, published by Hurtig Publishers in January 1978. I say a “classic,” because all these years later it is almost certainly the book most of my readers know me by, and it has never gone out of print. Most 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.

Dr Lisa Grekul, for example, who grew up in St Paul, Alberta, the great-granddaughter of Ukrainian immigrants, confesses in her Introduction to her study of literature in English by Canada’s Ukrainians, *Leaving Shadows* (2005): “That I grew up knowing few specific details about Kostash’s book isn’t altogether surprising – no one in my family had actually read *All of Baba’s Children*... [Kostash] might not have gotten all of her facts quite right, but my relatives were willing to forgive her for it. What mattered was that she had written a story about us, about Ukrainians. For members of my family, *All of Baba’s Children* became a cultural artefact, on a par in many ways with Ukrainian Easter eggs and embroidered tablecloths – something to be displayed as a symbol of our culture.”

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

But among those who actually read the book, its reception was more complicated.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Tarnawecy Distinguished Lecture, Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies, University of Manitoba, March 22, 2007

In [197?] while I was completing the writing of *All of Baba's Children*, I had written an article for the Toronto-based magazine, *Saturday Night*, provocatively titled by the editor, "Baba was a bohunk." So, even before my book was published, critics in the *Journal of Ukrainian Graduate Studies* in 1977 were very upset. One found my approach to Ukrainian-Canadian history "grounded in sensationalism," rather than "detached" from my own limited experience. "At times Kostash is like an empty wind bag," she wrote. I was advised to learn something of the nineteenth-century history of Ukraine. The other critic was even more censorious: "I am left with the most distasteful impression," she wrote, "that, in her desire to gain Instant Recognition, Myrna Kostash has resorted to cheap and opportunistic journalism....I wonder why some fuzzy-minded editor permitted her to inflict her neuroses on the Canadian reading public."

In my own defense, I replied to the *Journal* that, in writing *All of Baba's Children*, 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.

I didn't go back to Toronto; I bought a quarter-section near Two Hills.

Thanks to the response of Ukrainian-Canadians to my book, positive and negative, from Prince Rupert, B.C. to Sydney, Nova Scotia, thanks to the challenging questions put to me by 'nationalists' in Toronto and 'Communists' in Vancouver, by Catholics and Orthodox, by schoolteachers and university students and columnists in the Ukrainian-Canadian press, and, of course, by my

relatives, I was hearing over and over again: “We know who you are. We know *whose* you are: Kostashchuks’ and Maksymiuks’. We saw you in *Ridna Shkola* [Saturday school], in *SUMK* [Association of Young Ukrainians of Canada], in church, in the Hall, we saw you dancing in your little Hutzul costume, you came to our house to sing *koliady* [Christmas carols], 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.” I found myself, for once, speechless. The fact of my Ukrainian ethnicity was undeniable; what left me speechless was that I found that I did not wish to deny it.

I had found my “inner hyphen,” and I embraced it.

I did not narrow this identity beyond its hyphen – *Ukrainian* and *Canadian* teeter-tottering up and down but always in balance - but in fact 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. I did not overly concern myself with other kinds; the Ukrainian-Canadianness that interested me was rooted in western Canadian pioneer history and in an immigration from the villages of Austro-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.)

I took this identity very seriously, almost defiantly, for in 1980 I had published my second book, *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada*. Here, for example, is how I represented myself in 1986 at a symposium at Trent University, “Ethnicity in a Technological Age”: “As a writer who identifies herself as an ethnic, a feminist, and a socialist, I for one experience a whole complex of exclusions, but paradoxically, in these excluded cultures I also find a means to resist the dominant ones....When I call myself an ethnic I am signalling

that I situate myself obliquely in relation to Anglo-American culture and that I am interested in uncovering modes of being that represent values and dreams subversive of the dominant culture.”

A decade later, in 1991, a personal essay, “Pens of Many Colours,” was collected in that year’s *Best Canadian Essays*. Here I referred to my generation’s embrace of militant multiculturalism as “the politics of the inside agitator.” In fact, at the end of the 1980s my particular concern had become my position in Canadian writing: “How do we [ethnics] write ourselves into the dominant culture?” I had recently begun to learn to speak Ukrainian and was fascinated by the possibility that, even when I was unable to speak it, the language was still there as a kind of “natural speech” which had preceded the acquisition of “Mother English.”

Less satisfactorily, I had the very odd experience of finding myself entered in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* as “Kostash, Myrna, See: Ukrainian Writing.” [CHECK] I puzzled over this reduction of my literary identity to “Ukrainian.” “What on earth does it take,” I wondered aloud, “to become a Canadian writer?” and I suspected that the definition was still in the control of what I called the “exclusive gang of men and women who all come from the right side of the tracks.” But I concluded with a visionary flourish – that even into the third generation and beyond, hyphenated writers may still be needing to ask such questions as: “What is my relationship to the English language? Do my memories of ethnic custom bear on the shape of my work? Do I, as a kind of outsider, visualize Canada differently than an insider does? Is the Old Country recoverable?”

There are several aspects of these essays that still interest me. One is that, 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.

And the fourth is that, behind my evocations of a politics of “resistance” among minorities, lay the influence of a once-notorious “cultural formation” based in Edmonton, Hromada, which means “community.”

Among this group of young Ukrainian-Canadian (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 - 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, "Second Wreath: A Conference exploring Ethnicity and Feminism in Commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ukrainian Women's Movement [First Wreath]." 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?"

Immediately upon publication of *All of Baba's Children*, I had been pestered: "Okay, so when are you going to write the sequel?" They meant, when are you going to write about Ukraine? I always retorted that Ukraine had nothing to do with me, certainly not as a writer, and that the story I had to tell had been wound up very nicely in *Two Hills*. I had recovered my *hyphenation*, thank you very much, and had no need of Ukrainian *nationality*.

Then I went to Ukraine, in 1984 when Ukrainian society was congealed in the profound stagnation of the late Brezhnev regime, in 1988 when even my relatives on the collective farm were keen on Gorbachev and perestroika (*perebudova* in Ukrainian), and in 1991, in independent Ukraine. The account of how I tried to harness Ukrainianness to Ukrainian-Canadian ethnicity is told in my two books published in the 1990s, *Bloodlines: A Journey into Eastern Europe* (1993) and *The Doomed Bridegroom: A Memoir* (1997), work which puts 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. For the first time in my career as a professional ethnic, I had become unsure of myself.

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 the "other," and very privileged. I was a 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.

In between trips, I began to write about them in Canadian publications and speak about them at conferences and festivals. So, in Prince Edward Island I told them about Jan Palach, the young Czech student who had burned himself alive to protest the Soviet occupation of his country in 1968; at the Winnipeg Literary Festival I read my account of the Polish literary figure who was an idealist Communist and how he became so; in *This Magazine*, I championed the cause of friends of mine in Belgrade who had been arrested for organizing a "free university" in their homes; in *Border Crossings*, I wrote contentiously about an exhibit of Ukrainian art at the Edmonton Art Gallery. In the Ukrainian-Canadian alternative newspaper, *Student*, I wrote about the profoundly inspiring visit of Ukrainian dissident Leonid Plyushch to Edmonton. I wrote about all these people while I waited to understand what their stories had to do with mine.

In retrospect, Plyushch seems to have been the key. At the end of an interview with him in Edmonton, in which a friend served as linguistic go-between, I paused to ask him: "How is it that, in spite of the vast difference in our experiences, the fact that we have lived on different planets, I feel close to you?" He answered: "Because we come from the same village." I sat stunned, and close to tears.

I think that's when my life changed, again. At that moment all I knew was that some tectonic emotional shift had occurred: this man from Ukraine, this brave and almost-broken Ukrainian patriot, this professed Marxist who had put his life on the line for rights of human beings in the Soviet Union, had said that he and I – I who had lived blithely unaware of his story, had claimed that Ukraine had nothing to do with me and my identity in Canada – he said that he and I came from the same place.

The next few years, of preparing and writing *Bloodlines* and *The Doomed Bridegroom*, were years of trying to find the *idea* which corresponded to that emotional moment. In spite of my insistence on my Canadian autonomy and the completeness of my Ukrainian-Canadian identity, I knew I had not arrived at my "text," my Canadian literary "speech," alone. I was accompanied by all the other texts and speeches – the identities – of those who had preceded the moment of my own self-consciousness. I was *here* – physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually - because they had been *there*. This was most powerful in the case of

the Ukrainians, my relatives surely, but also of the voice of the *kobzar* [blind minstrel], the *khliborob* [lit. CHECK bread-worker] labouring in the fields of the landlord, the clandestine icon-painter, the *zek* in the Gulag, the unburied dead of the Famine, just to name those with whom solidarity was a moral imperative.

In the end, I was reduced to metaphor. I knew that I had arrived at a truth which lay beyond the language of intellectual reasoning – or at least beyond *my* intellectual reasoning. And so I end *Bloodlines* with an evocation of...bread. At the end of everything – history, politics, genealogy, memory – there is: *kutia*, wheat, the sheaf, *didukh*, the harvest, and the small bun left at the feet of the monument of philosopher [WHEN? FIRST NAME?] Skovoroda in Kyiv; the kiss to the bread knife, the last crumbs of consecrated bread that the priest licks up from his hand, the loaves placed at the exhumations of mass graves...and the beginnings of bread in the black earth itself, in Two Hills as well as Tulova.

It would be pleasant to end my account there, of how I lost my hyphen and found my groove in a paroxysm of identification with my primordial Ukrainian self, my own myth of origin. But, *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 it was quickly apparent to me that the least helpful contribution to 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.”

The fact is that the time for such a declaration was past. 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 had known something new was in the air when, in 1990, I sat in the (vastly white) audience in Calgary during National Book Week, listening to three women writers talk about multiculturalism in relation to their own writing. It was an oddly-proportioned group: two Anglo-Canadians (Katherine Govier and Gail Scott) and one First Nations writer (Lee Maracle). But what was truly unusual from my perspective was that, when the audience was invited to ask questions, I did not put up my hand. For the first time since writing *All of Baba’s Children*, I had no question, no declaration, pertaining to ethnic identity to put publicly. Instead, I sat and listened as question after question was put to Lee Maracle. The discussion, in fact, was about her, not me. It was a revelation: from now on the discussion in Canada about “otherness” and “marginalization” and “the wrong side of the tracks” was going to be about race, not ethnicity. As the debate evolved, in fact, a fourth-generation Asian-Canadian university professor would trump a first-generation Euro-Canadian driving a taxi – not least because the question of ‘class’ had long since fallen into analytical limbo.

Eventually, after I had left the Chair of the Writers Union, I would write that I deplored the disappearance of white ethnicity into just plain whiteness. It was impossible to say so at the time – 1993-94 – because of the responsibility I bore toward the membership of the Writers Union as a whole. And, as a whole, we had decided to sponsor a conference about racism and Canadian writing which excluded non-racial-minority writers from the proceedings except for literary events in the evenings. The uproar in the newspapers, among fellow artists, even among parliamentarians, was a truly wrenching experience for the Writers Union, its directors, and its Racial Minority Writers Committee members, when we were pilloried in the media as “politically correct cultural separatists,” and for “reinventing apartheid,” and “marching along with the cultural dismemberment of Canada.” Furious letter-writers to the newspapers called for an immediate cut-off of public funds to the Union.

The debate was one of “much public volatility and cacophonous ignorance,” to quote Roy Miki, the then-chair of the Racial Minority Writers Committee. When I could be sure the last of the indignant Letters to the Editor had been written, I finally responded in a guest editorial in the *Globe and Mail*. In a way, I was in a good position: I was neither a member of the Anglo-Canadian elite who represented the acme of “whiteness,” nor was I a “visible minority” who provoked so much anxiety.

To help me formulate my position, I went back to *All of Baba's Children*, and the chapter “Racism.” I had quite forgotten I had given it that title, and I was surprised to rediscover that I had used that word, racism, back in 1977 to describe what had happened to Ukrainians in Canada. In rereading the chapter in 1994, I realized something very useful: that “whiteness” in Canada is a very provisional identity.

“My great-uncle Peter Svarich,” I wrote in the *Globe and Mail*, “born in what is now Ukraine, was an educated man who spoke several languages, organized school boards and church parishes in Alberta, and had political ambitions. In 1908 he was appointed weed inspector in the Vegreville district. This was too much for the columnist at the Vegreville *Observer*. Fulminating against the investment in a ‘Russian yokel’ of such authority over ‘English-speaking British subjects,’ he warned: ‘We resent it as a humiliation and it is unlikely that white men in this Province will stand for it.’”

I hoped that would sink in. In 1908, Ukrainians were not white. Two generations later we were. Apparently you can *acquire* whiteness. Everyone should just take a deep breath: this year’s crop of “Canadians of colour” was going to become white, eventually, and then we and they could all start to worry about the next bunch off the boat.



Indeed the sky did not fall in when the racial minority writers had their conference in Vancouver, *Writing thru Race* – indeed, none of the media who had been predicting apocalypse showed up to report on it – and a few years later the Racial Minority Writers Committee renamed itself the [CHECK] ‘human rights committee.’

But something still rankled with me: how to understand Ukrainian-Canadianness in this context of “whiteness,” for all along “whiteness” had stood for “Europeanness.” Forget the hyphen: are Ukrainians Europeans? I took one shot at it in 1994, and then made no further contribution to the debate for almost a decade.

In 1994, in *Border Crossings* arts magazine, I lamented the fact that the shift in public discussion away from ethnicity to race had closed a potentially rich vein of idea and activity among post-immigration “white” ethnics. For example, I wondered how we might all form a kind of Common Front of cultural subversion. But the “politics of difference” had overridden any such utopian solidarity, emphasising the specifics of race and colour, just as the feminist ideal of “Sisterhood is powerful” had fallen to the cleavages of class, race and sexual orientation among women. “Identity” was not a historical given, something passed down through a community’s collective DNA, as it were, but something “imagined,” “constructed,” as that community reflected on its experience over the generations and as the context for those reflections changed. All large and undifferentiated identities, such as “ethnicity,” were now to be “deconstructed,” their “instability” exposed.

There was one identity, however, which seemed to have escaped the post-colonial revision: the identity known as “European.” I had been fretting about the indiscriminate attacks during the “culture wars” by artists on “eurocentric” values, as though the borders of “Europe” have not been contested, revised, redrawn, especially east of the Elbe and south of the Danube. Was Prague still in “Europe” after 1948 when, as charged in a famous polemic by the Czech writer, Milan Kundera, the Soviet Union had succeeded in “kidnapping” Czech culture right out of Europe and hog-tying it to Asia? Were my grandparents “European” when they arrived in Canada as part of an “alien invasion” of “human dregs” who could only be redeemed by assimilation into British culture? I coined a nice term for all of us from the margins of Western Europe: we were hardly *eurocentrics*, we were *euroeccentrics*.

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. *The Doomed Bridegroom* was translated into Serbian, because it was so “stylistically” interesting. And I have not been to Ukraine since 1991, and the Canadian family is once again sending parcels to the relatives in Ivano-Frankivsk. Which is all a way of saying that I have been returned to my pre-hyphenated self.

Dr. Lisa Grekul’s study of Ukrainian-Canadian literature, *Leaving Shadows*, discusses my work at some length. She concludes that it is an example of the notion that “reinvention is the key to maintaining ties to [Kostash’s] ethnic roots. In my texts, I am always “departing, setting out, on the move. [Kostash’s] writing is less about coming home than about the open-ended, perpetual search for home. “ And, “the creative process is key to re-imagining [her] sense of self, community, history, and home.” (201)

That may explain why, in October 2001, 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 Dmitryi Solunskyi, and that should be a clue to what has happened to my hyphen. The young woman who unpacked her bags in the motel in Two Hills in 1975 has packed them up again and gone to Byzantium.

Why Byzantium? Because I have a hunch that, beyond ethnicity, beyond politics, beyond sociology, beyond history, deeper than all these excavations of identity, there lies a primordial self who has dragged herself out of the Carpathian Basin and presented herself at the Golden Gates of Constantinople, banging and shouting: “Can I come in? I want to be baptised!” And baptised I was. In Byzantium. But wait, I was from Rus. I was a Slav. I didn’t even have an alphabet yet. But when I did get one, it would look rather like Greek. Nine hundred years after that, I would be on my way to Royal Park, Alberta, where I would build a sod hut, a log school with a Union Jack on a pole, and a Ukrainian Greek Orthodox church with silver domes.

Would that be with hyphens, or without?

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August 1, 2007