

MY MEL HURTIG

Mel Hurtig fired me twice, and, between, he published my first book.

In 1967, during a gap year between universities, I looked around for a job. I cannot remember how I landed one at Hurtig Books but there I was, for a few months, womanning the front desk in Edmonton's first independent bookstore, thanks to Mel's investment of \$500 back in 1956. It was a store of modest size, on the south side of Jasper Avenue near 103 street, a couple of doors down from the Waffle Shop (this is my recollection).

I do not remember ever having patronized it before I worked there but I must have. (Surely I, an Arts major at university, wouldn't have browsed for books in *Woodward's*.) At any event, I felt quite at home among the shelves of books perused by Edmonton's intelligentsia – professors and grad students were regular customers, as there was always a pot of coffee on the go and a chess set and chairs in a corner – and I sneered a bit when the stock boy shelved Socialism titles under Sociology.

It was well-understood that the boss himself did not have a university education but that he was determined not to do the expected thing – work in the family fur business – and there was general respect for him among us employees that he knew his way around books and what the chattering classes were looking for.

But as an employer he was rather unnerving, perched up there in a corner cubicle under the ceiling with an enormous glass window that overlooked the entire operation – a human CCTV surveillance system. This was his office, and one day, emanating from the PA system, I heard my name: I was being summoned to Mr Hurtig's eyrie. I was in the middle of rubber-stamping, less than fastidiously, a pile of publisher's leaflets - I think I was also chatting with a customer or friend - but in any case my heart was not in this mindless task for which I was massively overqualified. I made my way up the narrow steps to the eyrie and learned my fate. "I don't think you are very happy here, are you? Consider this your last day on the job." And he smiled that wide grin, lips compressed, that I got to know well years later. I was fired.

I went off to Toronto to complete my education, wandered around Europe for a couple of years, settled in Toronto as a freelance magazine writer. In the meantime, always in Edmonton, Mel opened more stores, then sold them in 1972 and started up a publishing company, Hurtig Publishers, all of which I was vaguely aware of on my trips back to Edmonton. I suppose I ran into him here or there but I have no recollection. There was certainly no reason to socialize with him, after my inglorious career in retail.

Then, suddenly, he was back in my life. In 1974, still in Toronto, I applied for and won an Explorations grant (in those days Canada Council's Arts Awards programs did not support nonfiction projects) and my name and value of the grant were duly published in the *Globe and Mail* along with those of all the other lucky recipients. Within days I had a letter from Hurtig

Publishers. Whatever it was I was planning to write, this was an offer to publish it. I was amazed.

Summer 1975, I returned to Alberta to begin the research phase of the book that would eventually be *All of Baba's Children*. Mel took me to lunch in the Edmonton Plaza hotel (now the Westin) to talk contract, about which I had precisely no expertise, not yet being a member of The Writers Union of Canada. What impressed me were the high leather banquettes at which we sat under dim lighting, as though at a gentlemen's steak house. He paid the whole bill! I thought: if this is the writing life, bring it on. The contract included, I had noted, a clause for a sum called "advance".

I researched, I wrote (in long hand and handed sheets over to a typist), I worked with an editor who was too distracted by a love affair to notice that she created errors where none had been. I remember no editorial interference from the publisher's side. Mel engaged the artist Harry Savage to take black-and-white photos of my subjects (Ukrainian-Canadians in Two Hills) and one in colour for the book jacket. So far so wonderful. But then things started to go a bit sideways. Harry's black-and-white photos disappeared, so they were never included in the book (just as well, as this brought down the unit price considerably,). The first printing – now a collector's item – forgot to include author photo and bio on the back cover of the jacket. A copy editor misspelled my name on the first publicity materials. I was given a promotional tour across the country (those were the days) on the understanding I would bivouac with friends. And, what was supposed to be a Fall book for the big selling season in 1977, for some reason I no longer recall, became a book released in January 1978, when no one was buying anything so soon after Christmas and the media had had their fill of book publicists' "pimping out" their authors.

I was already working on my second book when Mel took me out to lunch again, this time to a no-frills cafeteria. We were on good terms, I thought, *All of Baba's Children* had been a great success both critically and with readers, it was coming out in softcover, I was on a roll, ready to talk contract again, for the second book. Instead, I got fired.

How do writers get "fired"? By having signed a contract (industry standard) that obliged them to offer their next book to their current publisher, who had first rights of refusal. In other words, I had no choice but to offer (what would be) *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* to Hurtig Publishers and Hurtig had full contractual right to refuse to publish it. Which is what he did.

I have very little memory of the conversation except that it included Mel's dismissal of a book about Canada in the 1960s as a bad fit for his press; and his accusation that I had been "bad-mouthing" him across Canada, said in a tone that brooked no denial, in spite of that wide, compressed-lip smile. I was learning again that I was "unhappy" in Hurtig's employ. I suppose that was partly true (all writers I know at one time or another, with or without justification, bad-mouth publishers, agents, editors, publicists, not to mention book reviewers) but mainly I

was shocked to learn that he actually knew that I had complained about him – the printing faux pas, the hapless editing, the bivouacking with acquaintances - to friends in Toronto. I took my lumps – and the manuscript of *Long Way From Home* to James Lorimer and Company in Toronto. It was published in 1980.

I did make one more appearance in a Hurtig publication: I was invited to write a contribution to the Canadian Encyclopedia. Titled “Hippies,” it included, as Suggested Reading, *Long Way from Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (1980).

As for the rest of Mel’s life and work in Edmonton, I was an onlooker once he had sold Hurtig Publishers (including the modest building under the 105 street bridge and flagpole with western Canada’s largest Canadian flag flapping in the breeze). He amazed me with the unquenchable energy of his patriotic passion, a so-much bigger life force than the notorious ego on display in his publisher’s offices, and for the string of books he produced as an author. I even read some of them, and was grateful for them, being a cultural nationalist myself. When we did run in to each other, we expressed genuine mutual admiration and affection. He had become Captain Canada and I cheered him on. But I have no idea whether he ever read any other of my books.

My first royalty cheque for *All of Baba’s Children* (ten percent of each \$12.95 hardcover copy sold) was for about \$11,000 – revenue I’ve not seen again from my subsequent books – which I used as a down payment on a quarter section near Two Hills. I used the shack on the property as my summer writing studio for years until it became impractical: I was now writing with a computer and the property had no power. Everyone who I had interviewed in Two Hills gradually passed on and I am now the age they were when I first moved into the Frontenac Hotel in June 1975 and made my way around town with my Sony tape recorder. *All of Baba’s Children* is still in print. (NeWest Press took it up when Hurtig’s went out of business.) And I still get a modest royalty payment 38 years after publication. It is considered a classic of multicultural literature and it is the only book for which I am known when I meet a Ukrainian-Canadian. (This drives me crazy but that’s another topic.) I never went back to Toronto. I became embedded in Edmonton and the Ukrainian bloc settlement region north-east of the city where my paternal grandparents had taken out homestead title in 1900. I moved into a Ukrainian-Canadian socialist feminist housing co-op, Hromada, in Old Strathcona; I learned to speak Ukrainian; I traveled to Ukraine; I rejoined the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, and I am now writing a book about my grandparents, one of whom was the original Baba.

Mel Hurtig changed my life. All is forgiven.

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