On Gifted Ground

One Ukranian-Albertan reflects on forebears, Ukranian and Aboriginal

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This is just a wisp of a memory, of the Native man at the back door of our 1950s bungalow north of Alberta Avenue, in early January, carrying a pail full of frozen whitefish. He knew his customers. The women were all preparing for Sviat Vecher, Ukrainian Christmas Eve; second-generation Ukrainian-Canadian housewives in aprons, making their choice of fish fillets hauled out of ice-bound lakes at the borders of Aboriginal settlements north of town.

Decades later I read Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, for me a profoundly moving and disturbing experience. His description of the railway laid across the plains—Cree hunters on horseback, watching from a hill the inexorable progress of the iron road—haunted me for a very long time. It had never occurred to me that this much-mythologized "nation-building" event represented the eventual devastation of an entire culture. For the train would bring us, the Galicians in sheepskin coats. And we would plough the so-called *vil'ni zemli* (free lands) of another people's motherland and call it ours, telling ourselves that prior to this prodigious investment of our labour, the land had been useless, unproductive and uninhabited. We made no note of the fact that we had taken homestead title on land ceded to the Crown by Cree signatories of Treaty Six in 1876. We are beneficiaries of that treaty. What, then, is our obligation?

On September 23, 2012, I co-hosted an event in Edmonton rather ponderously called Zemlya/Nanaskomun (The land/We give thanks): A Ceremonial Exchange of Gifts. Deploying Ukrainian and Cree was meant to (symbolically?) bring Aboriginal and Ukrainian Edmontonians back into relationship, or at least to remind our peoples that there had once been a relationship. For awhile at least, stories had passed down through Ukrainian-Canadian families about Native neighbours who gave shelter in a storm, helped deliver babies, concocted medicinal brews, exchanged pelts for blankets—oral testimonies to first-contact "friendship." Or, more likely, pioneer families told such stories once and never again. The enduring story that my forebears constructed was pure "settler," with its tropes of busting the "virgin" sod and "building" Western Canada.

And even I, writing my revisionist text *All of Baba's Children*, which attacked Ukrainian-Canadian multiculti clichés and scored feminist, anti-racist and socialist points, hadn't a word to say about those inconvenient Others consigned to reserves and road allowances so we could get on with the business of turning land into property and eventual wealth.

But, after more than 100 years, we Ukrainian-Canadians love this country and, along with First Nations and Métis peoples in Alberta, call this land home. Some of us feel it is a gift that has been passed on and for which we "suffer gratitude," in Lewis Hyde's words in his classic of anthropology, *The Gift*.

In November 2010, on the 125th anniversary date of the Frog Lake Massacre and the mass hanging of First Nations men in 1885 in the North-West Territory (now Alberta and Saskatchewan), I was forcibly struck by the fact that these shocking events had taken place a mere 15 years before my paternal grandparents arrived to homestead near Vegreville, not so far from Frog Lake. The proximity of those two events—the mass hanging, the sod-busting—was what struck me hard. Ukrainian-Canadian narratives never assumed a history prior to their own on the land. I became determined to evoke that history, not in the spirit of "sorry" and "reconciliation"—First Nations had signed treaty and been removed to reserves well before my grandparents settled—but in the spirit of Edmonton City Council's 2005 declaration called "Strengthening Relationships between the City of Edmonton and Urban Aboriginal People." I would root my efforts in trust and respect.

From the beginning, I knew I wanted the commemoration structured around an exchange of gifts. Pairs of artists, Ukrainian and Aboriginal, would literally exchange gifts of their own making—dances, stories, sashes—in a ceremony witnessed by members of both communities. I wanted this event to take place somewhere in the Alberta Avenue neighbourhood where I grew up—roughly 118th Avenue and 90th Street—at the time home to working-class families of Eastern European descent and now home to Aboriginal families. I wanted to acknowledge that, as we had moved out and these new families had moved in, a kind of "Protocol of Place" still governed entry to and welcome in a community's traditional territory. And of course I needed and wanted an Aboriginal collaborator who shared my belief in the importance of the "exchange" and the means by which to carry it out.

I turned to Christy Morin, the executive director of Arts on the Ave (described on their website as "a community-based, grassroots initiative engaged in developing 118th Avenue as the Community Arts Avenue of Edmonton"). She "got it" instantly—she is half Ukrainian and her husband is Métis, making their children the perfect synthesis—and suggested I contact Sharon Pasula, at that time vice-president of the Métis Regional Council in Edmonton. Pasula liked my proposal, particularly because, as she later wrote on a Facebook page, "Racism and discrimination had blotted out whatever was good about that period in history between the two communities."

Early on, Sharon and Christy argued that the initial proposal (pass the hat!) was too modest. "There's money out there!" they exclaimed. And so began two years of meetings during which the "gift exchange" morphed into an extraordinary series of concepts, now ballooning, now shrinking, as we faced the realities of donors' expectations, artists' availability and our own capacity to manage an event which might have lots of money, or none, attached to it. A file folder of notes, agendas, phone numbers of government and community contacts who never replied, application forms filled out and discarded, budgets drawn and redrawn, all document the process of institutionalizing an idea that had begun in a kind of reverie.

In the end, though, we had our ceremony, thanks in part to some last-minute funding and to volunteers from St. Stephen the Martyr Anglican church, whose hall just off Alberta Avenue was our venue. Guests were seated in a large circle and the entire program took place within that circle. We opened with Sharon's and my welcome and a blessing by St. Stephen's rector, John Gifford, and closed with a Cree prayer by Elder Leona Carter of Onion Lake First Nation and a Ukrainian prayer by Fr. Yuri Suchevan of St. Andrew's Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Sharon and I read excerpts from Treaty Six; City of Edmonton poet laureate Anna Marie Sewell strode among us calling out a poem; Aboriginal and Ukrainian-Canadian participants gave group readings from my *Frog Lake Reader* and of published and unpublished Ukrainian/Aboriginal contact stories; and artist Lena Kostiuk showed her paintings hauled out from storage, each of which illustrated just such contact stories from the homestead era.

But the heart of the ceremony were the three formal gift exchanges: Mark McKennitt, traditional Aboriginal dancer, and Vince Rees, Ukrainian-Canadian dancer and choreographer; singers Natalia Onyschuk, Ksenia Maryniak and Irena Tarnawsky and storyteller Leona Carter; and sash-presenters Sharon Morin, Aboriginal programmer at the Musée Héritage Museum in St. Albert, and Lynnien Pawluk, coordinator for the Kule Folklore Centre at the University of Alberta.

To wind things up we passed around kubasa and bannock while people visited and took pictures. Lots of pictures. A typical response: "Thanks for an inspired event. It was very moving for me, opens up many ideas and dreams." "The statement that we are two peoples who have a relationship should be said a hundred more times in other ways."

Even to those who had not been there, word had gone out: Métis historian Heather Devine of Calgary wrote me the next day that "the long-standing friendships between Native people and Ukrainian settlers in east-central Alberta comprise part of a larger, marginalized vernacular Canadian history that needs to be told." This was immensely gratifying, as far as it went. But the question must be asked: Is there a Ukrainian–Aboriginal partnership to enact this telling?

Of the 85-plus attendees at our ceremony, possibly a dozen were Aboriginal. The disproportionate number of Ukrainians forces me to conclude that the ceremony was something we Ukrainians had to do, more than something Aboriginal Edmontonians needed to do with us.

At a post-mortem over pizza, the Ukrainian-Canadians who had taken part in the gift exchanges mulled over what happened. We acknowledged that, for all our celebration of our own cultural uniqueness (and our collective memory of racism, prejudice and exploitation), Ukrainian-Canadians are members of a settler culture in Western Canada and must expect Aboriginal people to be wary about our initiatives. (Although intermarriage is not uncommon—witness the celebrated fiddler the late Arnie Strynadka of Goodfish Lake—I have never heard of a mixed Ukrainian-Cree person raised as a Ukrainian, away from a reserve.)

Andriy Nahachewsky, a University of Alberta ethnologist who had, in tears, told the story of his grandfather remorselessly punished for speaking Ukrainian in a one-room school in Saskatchewan, came to this thoughtful conclusion about our event: "It was a middle-class project, really, its issues interesting to us in a professional multicultural context of shared ethnic events. We understood the meaning of the event to be a shared experience of that idea of relationship with Aboriginal neighbours, and so our stories included them. But they came as an opportunity to educate us, and didn't mention us at all. I wonder if they have always thought of us as 'white,' in spite of our initial hardships and poverty and our own experience of racism? Maybe we Ukrainian-Canadians walked into the event in the role of the White Settler." Everyone agreed it was problematic in the context of the ceremony that Ukrainians' own narrative of pain be evoked, however sincerely offered.

Nahachewsky's observation was astute. David Garneau, a celebrated Métis artist from Regina, recently rewrote and circulated his keynote talk from last September's Reconciliation: Work(s) in Progress conference at Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie. Provocatively, he titled his talk "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation and Healing." Note that word "Imaginary": Settlers' descendants may be dreaming in technicolour if we believe and insist white privilege and Aboriginality are "reconcilable." Garneau is not a pessimist on this score—he acknowledges the supportive work of non-Aboriginal friends, colleagues and collaborators—but cautions that there is a truly irreconcilable space of Aboriginality, such as "gatherings, ceremony, Cree-only discussions, kitchen-table discussions, email exchanges," of Blackfootedness, Indianness, Métisness and so on "performed apart from a Settler audience." Of course, any self-identified subordinate group (ethnic, racial, gendered, religious, political) requires such spaces away from the dominating gaze of the privileged and powerful. Garneau continues: "Whether the onlookers are conscious agents of colonization or not, their shaping gaze can trigger a Reserve-response, an inhibition or conformation to Settler expectations."

Reserve-response. I am beginning to get a glimmering of understanding of what happened at Zemlya/Nanaskomun, or, more to the point, what didn't happen. Aboriginal resistance to the colonial need to "penetrate, to traverse, to know, to own and exploit" is not necessarily going to be an out-and-out confrontation, but rather a simple refusal to participate, to engage, even to negotiate.

We Ukrainian-Canadians wanted Aboriginal men, women and children to come to the party to remember along with us our memory of "relationship." By largely refusing to participate, they were telling us that our mythologies are not theirs. Are these separate historical and mythological narratives irreconcilable? Perhaps another way of planning the ceremony—inclusive of Aboriginal artists and elders from the beginning, open to constant revision, letting go of the "agenda"—would have produced a different outcome.

Certainly, until we "Settlers" are prepared to be honest within our own communities about our role and identity as people of white privilege, there may be nothing to "dialogue" about. For all the enthusiasm and sincerity of the Ukrainians' commitment to the idea of the "exchange of gifts," we didn't once have that conversation among ourselves while we were planning the event. The only narrative we adhered to was the fond reminiscence on behalf of our forebears that we had once been "friends" with our Aboriginal neighbours out there on the lone prairie, and, nebulously, wished to be again. #

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Published in Vol 16, No 5, June 2013, pgs 40-43