

THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE FIRST NATIONS

Comment: I gave this lecture March 2010 to the congregation of St Vladimir's Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Calgary during a spiritual retreat.

This talk is given in the spirit of the Lenten prayer of St Ephraim the Syrian: "Grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother and my sister."

My earliest memories of the relationship between Ukrainian-Canadians and the First Nations (or "Indians," as we called them then) are two: my father, who was born in 1906 on a homestead near Vegreville, in reminiscing about his boyhood on the prairie, often recalled his long walk to school: he would amuse himself by kicking buffalo skulls and running after them, to kick them again. (I wonder now about this memory: the bison were vanished from the parkland by 1879.) The other - just a wisp of a memory, really - is of the Native man (I assume Métis, as the Indians were on reserves) at the back door of our 1940s bungalow just north of Alberta Avenue, in early January, carrying a pailful of frozen whitefish. He knew his customers: the women were all preparing for Sviat Vecher. I don't remember the last time he made these rounds, probably about the same that my *dido* stopped "parking" his broad-beamed white horse in the back alley behind our house on the days he brought his sacks of cabbages, carrots and potatoes to the farmers' market. I struggle to imagine this now: a horse and wagon hitched to a fence beside the car garage; 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.

A pretty meagre memory bank. Oh, and the warning, the caution, about "97th street." I put that in scare quotes, for that is how it was pronounced. As in: scary, dirty, drunken Indians on 97th street. Just pronouncing it the number - "97th" - filled me with childish dread. Where did that come from?

Decades pass. I become aware in the late 1960s of an emerging Red Power movement in Canada to match that of Black Power among African-Americans but I do not associate this with any aspirations or grievances of Ukrainian-Canadians. But in 1973, for a book review commission, I read Rudy Wiebe's novel *The Temptations of Big Bear*. (You may know Rudy as the Edmonton author of many works about Mennonite history and of First Nations' stories in western and northern Canada.)

It was a profoundly moving - and disturbing - experience and now that I look back on it I see it as a turning-point in my own understanding of our Ukrainian-Canadian story on the prairie: his description of the arrival of the railway across the plains, as seen from a Cree point of view, Cree hunters on

horseback, watching from a hill the slow but inexorable progress of the iron road, haunted me for a very long time. Before then, it had never occurred to me that this “nation-building” event, so celebrated, by Pierre Berton and Gordon Lightfoot, to name contemporary mythologists, represented the eventual devastation of an entire culture. For the train would bring the settlers. It would bring *us*. And we would plough the so-called *vil’ni zemli* of another people’s eternal motherland and call it *ours*.

But apparently none of this was on my mind when I wrote *All of Baba’s Children* a mere three years later.

Just two weeks ago I scanned my book for evidence that the question of our homesteaders’ relation to First Nations’ earlier tenancy of the land had concerned me in any way. There is plenty of indignation on behalf of Ukrainian-Canadians who suffered much abuse, whether economic, political or racist, over the generations, and pages of critique of what I called “mythologies” of multiculturalism. But as for those inhabitants removed from the lands we now called our Bloc Settlement – and not so far off, in several cases of reserves contiguous with Ukrainian-Canadian property - I had precious little to say. (I can’t even find a quotation, which I heard several times in my conversations in Two Hills, about how we wouldn’t have survived our first years, especially winters, if Native “neighbours” – I am assuming Métis families – hadn’t helped us out, in ways unspecified. I would be grateful for stories to flesh this out.)

I write in deep sympathy with the first homesteaders who, on arrival in Edmonton, “bought some sacks of flour and a plough, loaded up a wagon and walked fifty, sixty, ninety miles to their homestead, following Indian trails.” (Ah ha!) “What they had chosen was uncleared, virgin brush.” I quote the very typical version of Ukrainian-Canadian settlement (Stephen Mulka, in this case): “Of course they worked hard, harder than in the old country. Our homestead had only seven acres of open land. My parents cleared the other ninety acres by hand with oxen, then ploughed it with a hand plough. It took fifteen years to clear it.” The implication is that, prior to this prodigious investment of labour, this “transformation of prairie into farmland,” the land had been useless, unproductive, and, apparently, uninhabited .

Oh, there had been others before us, but these were other settlers, and we early Ukrainian-Canadians “moved into areas already named by the Anglo-Saxon and the French.” (Vegreville, Royal Park, Hairy Hill.) Then we added our own names – Ispas, New Kyiv, Shandro. I wonder when we first asked

ourselves where those other names had come from: Saskatchewan, Waskatenau, Wetaskawin....I belabour the shortcomings of official multiculturalism, which in those days was understood to have its foundation in *two* founding nations. In summing up my arguments about Ukrainian-Canadian identity, I chastise those among us who feel all is now fair and square between us and the economic and social elites of Canada, and here, finally, I mention, among other aggrieved Canadians such as youth, unorganized workers, women, “the family of Nelson Small Legs Jr.” (In 1976 he had committed suicide, leaving a note condemning the treatment of native Canadians.) And I make reference to an important essay by George Melnyk which appeared in the *Edmonton Journal* in 1975, in which he argued that we Ukrainian-Canadians could learn something from Native resistance to the label of “ethnic,” in which our culture is reserved for “ethnic activities that don’t jeopardize the political and social status quo.”

Where am I going with this?

About the same time, in 1976, in his ground-breaking collection *Wood Mountain Poems*, Andy Suknaski wrote a poem to Sitting Bull and his son Crowfoot.

Here’s how he ends his poem: he may not have had time to remember

The words he left us with at Wood Mountain:

The great spirit provided for both white and red men

But white man has grown powerful

And defies the gods –

Is trying to undo all wakantanka has done.

Wakantanka is Lakota for Great Spirit or Great Mystery. And we white men and women have grown so powerful that we defy Him.

Decades pass. I start work on the book *Reading the River: A Traveller’s Companion to the North Saskatchewan River*. It’s a collection of stories and reports about the river and communities along the river, from Saskatchewan River Crossing to Lake Winnipeg and it’s meant to be a literary travel guide. First Nations stories stand at the beginning. Until very recently, of course, there has been no written Aboriginal literature, only oral, or what the ethnologists call “orature.” But now there are First Nations voices in print, and so I included what I found. But I was also looking for anything that told a story about First Nations and Ukrainian contact. I found one. It is a story by Maria Yureichuk, whose

family arrived in Edmonton in 1899 and travelled by raft downriver to their homestead near Victoria Settlement.

“It was already afternoon when we launched our raft and shoved off from the shore. The water in the river was very shallow, and the raft drifted sluggishly....On the third night, heavy snow began to fall. We wrapped ourselves in blankets and huddled in the hut [on the raft]. We failed to notice that our raft had run aground on a sandy shoal and come to a dead stop....Morning found us there, crouched at the entrance of our shelter. And the snow came down like an avalanche, as though it were trying to bury us alive....We were so cold our teeth chattered, and we were afraid that by morning it would be the end of us. I wept bitterly over my fate and cursed my husband and Canada.

“It was already late morning when some Indians who lived near the river noticed a strange object sitting on top of the sandbank and came down to investigate. They took us into their home (an old shack), made some tea, gave us some dry biscuits to eat, and we gradually thawed out....

“I will not forget that incident as long as I live....It was a blessing from God that the Indians caught sight of our raft, for without their help we would have perished there.”

Then I began work on the book that was to become *The Frog Lake Reader* (published last October). I know that people who grew up around Elk Point or Marwayne or even Lloydminster have heard of Frog Lake and the massacre of nine unarmed white men that occurred there in April 1885. But I hadn't. I stumbled on the story when I was doing research for *Reading the River* and visited the gravesite at Battleford of the eight Cree warriors who had been hanged, together, in Canada's only mass hanging, for the killings. The story shocked me – why didn't I know about it? I'm a lifelong Albertan, for heaven's sake. And so I was determined to track down every printed account, from any point of view, about the events that took place between the massacre and the hangings: the siege of Fort Pitt, the Battle of Frenchman Butte, the Battle of Loon Lake, the surrenders, the trials, in order to understand it.

It took me two years; I found stories, for instance, by an Anglo-Canadian military doctor, a foot soldier from Quebec, a Métis trader, a Scots Hudson's Bay Co factor, a Manitoba suffragette, an American historian, a Cree history professor, and of course Rudy Wiebe, but I'm sorry to say that I didn't come across a single sentence penned by a Ukrainian-Canadian. So I can't comment on what our community may or may not think or have thought or said or says about the Frog Lake. All I can comment on is my own reactions.

Altogether, it was a harrowing experience. I experienced a tumult of emotions I didn't know I had. It isn't as though I didn't know the broad outlines of the history of First Nations/Canadian relations: the fur trade, the smallpox epidemics, the disappearance of the buffalo, famine and starvation, the Treaties, the Riel Rebellion, the establishment of the reserves, the building of the CPR, the arrival of permanent White settlers, the residential schools and the efforts to eradicate "heathen" culture. Written in a sequence like this, I am impressed by how long and complex and violent this intertwined history is. But two years of reading the deeply personal and dramatic and vivid voices of people directly affected by the Frog Lake events, sympathetic and hostile, detached and implicated, defensive and accusatory, White, Cree and Métis, I was educated in a way I did not anticipate. In reading individual accounts of suffering and injustice, especially that of the Cree people at the hands of White authority, I was smitten by grief, anguish, despair, outrage. And by a measure of guilt that I, as a socially-conscious Ukrainian-Canadian writer, had never said or written as much in public.

And that it has only very recently that I put two dates together – 1885 & 1900 – and realized that only fifteen years separated the hanging of Wandering Spirit from my *dido* Kostash's filing for homestead.

Here's one voice, Fred Horse, elder, about Cree war chief, Wandering Spirit, in 1885:

"Wandering Spirit had been born, had grown to maturity and earned his scars as an outstanding hunting and fighting man. He had fed, protected and served his people in the best tradition of that war-like [Plains Cree] nation. Now he could do none of those things. He had to crawl around after gophers where once he had raced amidst the thundering herds. He had been forced to watch as his children grew thin and listless and shivered in their ragged clothing....Wandering Spirit had been jolted out of his once honoured role, out of the only way of life he had ever know."

You might ask: Why should a Ukrainian-Canadian have anything particular to say about these matters? I would answer that it is very basic, very fundamental: our forebears to western Canada settled on what had been sovereign Indian land but the only story we have been pleased to tell, over and over again, is that triumphalist narrative of our back-breaking labour on "free lands," reaping crops from "virgin" soil, which the government in Ottawa "gave" to us, and on which we built our fences and our barns, our schools and our post offices, our churches and our graveyards, naming them all, as well as the creeks and lakes and ravines, in our own language, with our own ancestral memory and our New World desires, as though they had been unnamed before we got here, as though stories had not already been told for generations about the heroes and gods who walked this same land, as

though Native ancestors' bones had not already been committed for millennia to this very earth that they and now we love and call Mother.

This year, 2010, is the 125th anniversary of the tragic events of 1885. Here is the question I pose today, in the context of this spiritual retreat: What would we like the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, our Church, to say in our name, in this memorial year? Is there a blessing, a Moleben, a message of thanksgiving for the gift of the land, a heartfelt gratitude for the homeland under our feet that the First Nations in effect bequeathed us. It was Cree chief Sweet Grass who said, at the negotiations of Treaty Six which ceded Aboriginal rights to the land to the Crown, who expressed *his* gratitude for the terms of the treaty. Holding out his hand, he said: "I am thankful that the white man and the red man can stand together. When I hold your hand and touch your heart, let us be as one: use your utmost to help me and help my children so that they may prosper."

We are beneficiaries of that treaty. We received his gratitude and turned it into homestead title. What then is our obligation?

In his collection of essays on global concerns, *Facing the World*, Archbishop Anastasios Yammoulatos of Albania, writes (2003) that political and social ferment in our time offer us Orthodox "new reasons to delve more deeply into biblical sources and to reassess their 'witness'" in pursuit of human rights. He quotes from a Pan-Orthodox Conference of 1986 on justice and human rights: "Since we continuously declare the incarnation of God and the deification of humanity, we defend human rights for every human being and every people." At the same time he warns us not to rush off in all directions, as does the Roman Catholic Church (in his estimation), pronouncing judgement on every social and political issue that arises and prescribing solutions. This is what we have social and political scientists for. But we know that, according to the teachings of Christ, the Church must never stand with the rich and powerful, but with the humiliated and miserable. In his book, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (2008), Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew calls for the "transformation of the heart" as essentially a vision of compassion and solidarity with others. "It is the way of acting in community. We Christians have dissociated our spirituality from responsibility for the community."

So I ask us:

How can we best "delve more deeply" into Biblical sources in order to "witness" now our place in Creation, specifically in our inheritance from our forebears and from the First Nations?

How do we make that transformation of the heart that will restore communal responsibility to our spirituality?

Patriarch Bartholomew: "It is the Spirit that blows through Creation that we worship whenever we *share* our resources with other human beings." In contemplating our connection with the First Nations people, can we use the image of the land, the *chorozem*, as a kind of icon of sharing? Think of the icon of the Holy Trinity, Patriarch Bartholomew teaches: it represents the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah – the sharing – when they welcome three strangers from the desert. And, when we came to this country, were we not once those strangers from the desert?