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BRAIDING THE RIVER: THE WEAVING TOGETHER OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE, FUR TRADE HISTORY AND UKRAINIAN-CANADIAN SETTLEMENT

Reading the River has a subtitle: *A Traveller's Companion to the North Saskatchewan River*.

I had in mind those "literary companions" to Rome or to Travel in Greece or to Geology (these are all books in print). My book would be useful to the traveler making her way along the North Saskatchewan River or visiting historic sites and communities on its banks. Or the traveler curious about all of that from the comfort of her armchair.

But how could we "read" the North Saskatchewan? Is it old enough to have a literature? In fact, the North Saskatchewan River has been accounted for as a real geographic, historical, social, economic and ecological waterway for a millennium. Its valley is some 10,000 years old and Indigenous people have gathered and traded there since time immemorial.

But what is the literature associated with it, if any? Is that even the right question? Some texts were obvious: journals and narratives of explorers, map-makers, fur traders, and missionaries who traversed Saskatchewan River country but what about more literary texts, such as song lyrics and poems and short stories? I went in search of it all, and among the treasure trove were stories of the Ukrainians who settled along its banks.

Here is one. I found it in Harry Piniuta's *Land of Pain, Land of Promise: First Person Accounts by Ukrainian Pioneers 1891-1914* (published 1978).

It's 1899 and Maria Yureichuk, her husband and children have arrived in Strathcona with \$7.50 to their name. This means they have only enough to buy food and certainly not enough to have hired a wagon for \$15.00 for the trip to homestead land 120 miles downriver near Victoria Mission. So Maria's husband, who drove log booms down the Cheremosh River in Galicia, decided to build a raft and travel by water. It must have seemed a good idea, perhaps the only one, at the time.

Now let's unpack the story.

The Yuriechuks, having arrived in 1899, find that the best land in the vicinity of Edmonton has been claimed. The Canadian government had long anticipated their arrival: ***Dominion Land Survey*** (1871) had surveyed grasslands and parklands of the western interior for the transition

to agricultural economies; **Dominion Lands Act** (1872) gave a homesteader 160 free acres (65 ha) the only cost to the farmer being a \$10 administration fee. Thus: the **Vil'ni zemli/Free Lands** so often evoked in Ukrainian-Canadian mythology.

Everyone had a good laugh, and we heard someone say, "Galician go homestead!"...It was already afternoon when we launched our raft and shoved off from shore. The water in the river was very shallow and the raft drifted sluggishly.

They travel by raft, not overland by wagon: thirty years earlier, the first brigade of Red River ox-carts from Winnipeg to Edmonton along Victoria Trail took three and a half months on the journey. [goyette wiki]. Nor, for that matter, do they travel by canoe, which is only for tourists and voyageurs. (Agnes Laut, a travel writer aboard a canoe downstream from Edmonton, is charmed by the sight of Galician women washing linen down by the shore; one wonders what they made of her, perched genteelly in a long shirt and big hat, enjoying the scenery.)

But they have no familiarity with the river nor have they the means to hire a paddler who does. "Saskatchewan" from the Cree: kisiskāciwani-sīpiy,, may mean "swift flowing river" but it is also a shallow river in places in fall season exposing sand and gravel bars. And they were still a week from their destination.

Toward evening of the next day we docked at Fort Saskatchewan, twenty-five miles east of Edmonton. We met some German people who could speak Russian, and we learned from them that Victoria was still a long distance away and that it would take us a whole week to reach it.

The Germans who speak Russian: large numbers of ethnic Germans emigrated from the Russian Empire, peaking in the late 19th century, well before the mass influx of Ukrainians from Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the 18th to 19th century, the only immigration western Canada saw was early French Canadian North West Company fur traders from eastern Canada, and the Scots, English Adventurers and Explorers representing the Hudson's Bay Company. Languages spoken: English, Gaelic, and French. In the 1880s fewer than 1000 non-Aboriginal people resided in the North-West Territories, a figure that jumped to 211,649 by 1901. The cartographer David Thompson, who was the first known European to record his sojourn on Lac La Biche, arrived October 4, 1798. A Roman Catholic mission was established in 1853. The community of **St-Paul-des-Métis** was founded as a Métis colony in 1896. The land around Fahler was known to French-speaking missionaries before it was surveyed in 1909 as an Indian trail that led to British Columbia and later where the railway laid its tracks. Bruderheim

and Josephburg were first settled by Germans c. 1889 . The first Romanian settlers to Alberta, from Boian, Bukovyna, came in early 1898.

We had just enough food to last us a couple of days, so my husband dashed to the store at the Fort and bought some potatoes, pork fat and bread. On the raft, we had a pan in which we built a fire and baked potatoes. We smeared them with pork fat, and that was our meal.

So there are a butcher and baker in **Fort Saskatchewan** in 1899. Not surprising, given that the Lamoureux brothers, Francois and Joseph, from Montreal, had set up farming and lumbering on the north bank and may have first claimed some of the river flats back in 1873. In 1875 the NWMP "A" troop, having marched from Fort Dufferin, on the Red River, straggled knee-deep in black mud along the final 10 kilometres of the hideous HBC trail close by the southern bank of the river to build a barracks to be called Fort Saskatchewan.

In 1885 the first "Mountie," Inspector Arthur Henry Greisbach, and family took up residence and were there throughout the events of 1885 known as the North-West Resistance. Griesbach's son, William, in his memoir, *I Remember*, wondered about the "curious disappearance" from the plains of the buffalo on which the Indigenous people depended for their entire substance, and the incoming "tide of advancing white men" settling "on the banks of the Saskatchewan from Prince Albert to the West." A community began to build up alongside the palisades. By 1905 170 teams were reported carrying freight through to Edmonton in one morning alone.

On the third night, heavy snow began to fall. We failed to notice that our raft had run aground on a sandy shoal and come to a dead stop. To free it, we had to get down into the water with our bare feet, but no matter how hard we pushed the raft and struggled with it, no way could we dislodge it from the sandbar... Morning found us there...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 it would be the end of us. I wept bitterly over my fate and cursed my husband and his Canada. It was already late morning when some Indians who lived near the river...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.

"Some Indians" I have long suspected that when Ukrainian settlers told of meeting "Indians," they probably had met Metis, or the Road Allowance people. According to the Indigenous Peoples' Atlas of Canada, "The Road Allowance period (roughly 1900-1960) is a key but little known element of Métis history and identity. As immigrant farmers took up land in the Prairie provinces after the 1885 Northwest Resistance, many Métis dispersed to parkland and forested

regions, while others squatted on Crown land used — or intended — for the creation of roads in rural areas or on other marginal pieces of land. As a result, the Métis began to be called the “road allowance people.” <https://indigenousspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/road-allowance-people/>

I will not forget the incident as long as I live. Just picture what it was like to be out there on a river in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by water, wading in the mud, heavy snow bearing down on you without a letup. You don't know where you are or how far from your destination, and no people around to help you push the raft back in the water. It was a great blessing from God that the Indians caught sight of our raft, for without their help we would have perished there.

In the end, the Yureichuks took the advice of their hosts who pointed out the beaten path they should follow up and over the hill.

A word about these trails. Rivers and cross-country trails were prehistoric trade routes and served the same purpose when the Europeans arrived. The North Route or Victoria Trail of the **Carlton Trail** along the Saskatchewan River connected Fort Carlton to Edmonton along a line of intermediate places.

“Long before the Carlton Trail was used by fur traders, explorers, missionaries, settlers, soldiers, and surveyors, it was an Indian trail, and long before it was an Indian trail, it was the migration path of aboriginal hunters who tracked wild game along its primal contours.” [MHS]

They told [my husband] to follow the path all the way; it would take him to a Galician's place. That was where Steve Ratsoy lived. One Indian spread out all the fingers on both hands to indicate the distance was ten miles. My husband understood and set out....In the meantime, the children and I stayed with the Indians. They had children too, and their children wanted to talk with our children, but unfortunately they could not understand one another. Toward evening, Steve Ratsoy came for us in a wagon and took us to his place at Pakan.

And here at Pakan the history of Ukrainian settlements and Protestant missions and the fur trade overlap. In 1864 the Hudson's Bay Company had opened Fort Victoria on the North Saskatchewan River for the purpose of trade with local Cree. It couldn't compare in size with their post at Edmonton upriver but if it was anything like it, some of the languages spoken at the opening of trading season in the Spring may have included Blackfoot, Cree, English, French,

Iroquois, Michif, Ojibwa and Nakoda. Perhaps visitors sang French and Algonquin canoe songs accompanied by Cree drums and Metis fiddles and the Red River jig.

But by the time the Yuriechuks arrived, the settlement was known as Pakan, on the site of a Methodist mission, established by Rev. George McDougall in 1862, that came to be known as **Victoria Mission**. Seasonal Cree camps were already a familiar sight and this was followed by Metis who settled near the Mission and were eventually strung six miles along the riverbank, farming long and narrow river lots that faced the river, an arrangement that is still visible. Metis resident Jane Livingston avowed the Mission in 1864 wasn't much to look at – a church that doubled as a school, a few log shanties, some skin tipis pitched along the steep river bank.

The mission was a “civilizing one”, through evangelizing and agriculture. A petition by Cree and Metis at Victoria Settlement provides another point of view: “Some [of us] are afraid that when the white man comes our hunting grounds will be destroyed and our lands taken for nothing,...They see some settlers making gardens in our lands. The buffalo tracks are growing over with grass.” [p 151]

The federal **Indian Act** (1876), had set out rules for governing Indian reserves; and the **Ministry of the Interior's** immigration policies, between 1891 and 1914, brought more than three million people to Canada, largely from continental Europe, following the path of the newly constructed continental railway.

J.G. MacGregor: “No sound was ever more welcome to mortal ears than was the sound of a locomotive whistle to a settler.”

Not so for the First Nations, who had the first premonition about what the tracks of steel across the prairie would mean back in 1881. The transcontinental railways were the new Saskatchewan River.

In 1887 Victoria settlement, for the purposes of a post office, became **Pakan** in honour of Cree chief James Seenum Pakannuk or Pakan. “During the 1885 Rebellion he counselled his people against joining Big Bear's band in the conflict, but also refused to let his people aid the Canaian military.” https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Space:Chief_Pakan

The Metis families moved north but the Methodist mission now turned its attention to the incoming Ukrainian homesteaders; in 1901 Rev Dr Charles Lawford arrived as missionary and doctor. I have found no data indicating that the Ukrainians were moved to convert; rather, they built the wooden St Elias Russo-Orthodox Church north of Pakan and consecrated it in 1906.

With the arrival of the Canadian Northern Railway, in 1918 virtually the entire settlement moved away from the river to Smoky Lake. ..Of the Yureichuks, I know nothing more.

POSTSCRIPT

In *Reading the River*, I quote Ralph Steinhauer, the tenth Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, born on the Morley reserve, who reflected on the ultimate impact of the fur trade in Saskatchewan River country: “The trade was a “forced transition from a beloved way of life to one that was totally different.”

This transition may be defined as *the “need to trap fur-bearing animals for barter, over and above what was needed for daily use.”*

Elements of that transition from the mid-1600s were: contact with white traders and participation in a commercial economy, smallpox, measles, alcohol, decline of bison herds and the first cattle drives, treaties, removal to reserves, residential schools and conversion to Christianity – all of it came up the Saskatchewan River.

So, in the Canadian settlement story, Ukrainians (in the form of settlers and their legacy) are part of the *problem* from an Indigenous perspective, It would be interesting for me to learn how the public school curricula now account for this problematic history. (The Catholic schools in Alberta do teach about that other trauma, the Holodomor.)

On lined yellow paper inside a file folder I have labelled “Galicia” I discover that I have already written (undated) what I’ve had in mind to write now.

“In the recitation of the quintessential story that lies at the heart of every Ukrainian-Canadian family in western Canada – How Baba and Dido Left the Old Country and What They Went Through Over Here - there is a recurring image: viewing its quarter-section of parkland bush, the Galician pioneer family rejoices, for here in these poplar groves and tangle of willow and saskatoon bush is an unfathomable bounty of wood. Free. Wood for building, wood for burning. Free, free. This deciduous harvest, even more than the virgin loam (for soil was good and deep and black in Ukraine too) came to represent what the immigrants had come ‘for.’”

I pause here to make room for my own discomfort. While I accept the sincerity of the sentiment, the ambition, the yearning to escape the economic and spiritual stifling of the Galician village, from my perspective as their Canadian grandchild the assumption of their own

future mastery over the “wilderness” now rings also of mastery over those undefined “others” who were scarcely yet imagined or conceived of. It is a mastery already justified by hopes of future prosperity and “orderliness.” Cue Peter Svarich’s gaze out the train window as the family made its way across Canada: “In several places, looking out the coach windows, we saw some Indians. Some of our people, scrutinizing them closely, thought they looked rather wild and dangerous, and worried that they might have some of them for neighbours.” Cue the “faint trails” through the bush down which they would drive to the eastern edge of the incipient colony to select their homesteads. A mere generation later, from a perspective unavailable to settlers staring out windows, seeing only their future farms, a Canadian-born historian would account for the absence of those who had trampled down the trails: “The crushing of the Riel Rebellion had broken the hearts of the Indians and treaties had pried from their grasp these lands of their fathers.” [*Vilni Zemli* 24]

Peter Svarich Writes a Poem

What kind of hut is this, what are these things,
Where did they all come from?
Especially since but a week ago
There was nothing there? [*p 156 Wm Kostash trans*]

Nothing?

We didn’t puzzle over this omission of Indigenous presence in the family history. Our grandparents had come to Canada in a great gamble to secure a future for their children and grandchildren, a gamble that had already required a leap of the imagination away from the foreshortened future in Tulova. At least, that was how the story was told from my earliest recall – the immigrants’ foundational story that evolved into the narratives of official multiculturalism – whose main elements were gratitude for the security of land tenure, public school education beyond grade three, freedom of religion, universal suffrage eventually, and the right to form ethnic associations. It was narrated in tones of ingratiating thankfulness to Sir Clifford Sifton, Wilfred Laurier’s Minister of the Interior and the man Ukrainian-Canadians most revere for his vigorous immigration policy that opened up the Canadian west to their huddled masses. Sifton: “These men are workers. They have been bred for generations to work from daylight to dark. They have never done anything else and they never expect to do anything else.”

“We [Peter Svarich and Fedor Kostash] felt in our hearts the eagerness of suitors, about to meet their brides for the first time, and somewhat nervous, hoped to make the right choices,” Peter wrote in elaborate metaphor for imminent possession. “Every section [of homestead land] there is good and free for the taking; there were almost no signs of human footprints, only

deeply trodden trails, which had been buffalo trails in former times, but were now overgrown with grass.”

No wonder our families never gave a moment’s thought to the question: Had someone once lived here? And they named their new possession as though the land lay as blank as a slate before them: Look, there was nothing here and then we arrived and named it piece by piece.

A Roman Catholic priest tells of conducting a Galician and his wife to a quarter-section he had helped them secure for homesteading. The man could hardly believe that the land on which he stood was, on certain conditions, to be actually his own. When he was assured that such it might be, he knelt down and kissed the sod. [Strangers at Our Gates p 112]

Who am I, a lucky one, to revile his gesture? I am torn between the obligation to acknowledge that my forebears’ legacy is far from concluded – I am in fact the on-going settler in this story – and my filial duty to honour their lives.

Afterword

While doing the research for *Reading the River*, I visited numerous historic sites along the North Saskatchewan River, including Fort Battleford in Saskatchewan. But it was a gravesite off the beaten track that proved an emotional and intellectual turning point for me as the granddaughter of settlers. It was the mass grave of eight Indigenous warriors who had been hanged, in November 1885, in Canada’s only mass hanging, condemned for the slayings of nine unarmed men at Frog Lake settlement earlier that year. I knew nothing about it. What was even more shocking to me was that, when I put the two dates together – 1885 & 1900 – I realized that only fifteen years separated the hanging of Wandering Spirit from my *dido* Kostash’s filing for homestead. Yet we Ukrainian-Canadians have never put those dates into relationship with each other, as though those fifteen years separated us by eons from our Indigenous neighbours.

You might ask: Why should a Ukrainian-Canadian have anything particular to say about these matters? Well, for one thing, we took out title on land bequeathed to Canada and then to us by Treaty Six, signed in 1876. It was Cree chief Sweet Grass who, at the Treaty negotiations, 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? I would even put it this way: what is our obligation as Orthodox Christians?

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 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 *chornozem*, 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?