

Melbourne International Arts Festival acknowledges the Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation on whose country these events take place.

We pay our deepest respects to all Elders— past, present and emerging.

Ancestors and Elders: Ukrainian-Canadian Settlers and the Myth of “Vil’ni Zemli”

This is just a wisp of a memory: of the Native man at the back door of our 1940s bungalow in Edmonton in early January, carrying a pailful of frozen lake fish. He knew his customers: the women were all preparing for Sviat Vecher. 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.

This came back to me decades later in 1973, when I reviewed a book, the now-canonized novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* by Mennonite-Canadian writer Rudy Wiebe. It was a turning-point in my own understanding of our Ukrainian-Canadian story on the prairie: there I read his description of the railway laid 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, a point of view that 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 the settlers. It would bring *us*, the Galicians in sheepskin coats. And we would plough the so-called *vil’ni zemli* and we would call it empty and a wilderness; we would plough it and call it *ours*.

As a Canadian writer of Ukrainian heritage, I have written in deep sympathy with those 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 “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.

In 1978 my first book was published: *All of Baba’s Children*, about the life experiences of my parents’ generation, the first-born Canadians. It has never gone out of print and is in fact something of a classic of multicultural literature. Recently I scanned the 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, I had precious little to say. I 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. (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" hadn't helped us out, in ways unspecified.)

We early Ukrainian-Canadians had moved into areas already named by Anglo-Celtic and French settlers and missionaries who had preceded our arrival. *Vegreville, Royal Park, Hairy Hill*. To these we added our own names – Ispas, New Kyiv, Myrnam, Dickie Bush. I wonder when we first asked ourselves where those other names had come from: Saskatchewan, Waskatenau, Wetaskawin...

I have since read the now-classic poetry collection, *Wood Mountain Poems*, by Polish-Ukrainian-Canadian writer Andy Suknaski, who wrote with great compassion both about First Nations figures such as Crowfoot and Sitting Bull and about the *narid*, "the people" from Galicia and Bukovyna, his people. And about how the spirits of them all jostle for space in his imagination. In the poem, "Indian Site on the Edge of Tonita Pasture," he writes:

"I stand here listening for the possible/ancestral voices/as the wind passes rustling/the rosebushes and taller grasses/by the creek/and I try to imagine who passed here so long ago/possibly becoming this dust/I breathe."

The fallen gods gone to dust in the *chernozom*, the deep black humus of the prairie.

In 2005 I began work on the book that was to become *The Frog Lake Reader*, a narrative anthology of broadly diverse texts that told of a "massacre" in April 1885 at Frog Lake settlement of nine unarmed white men at the hands of Cree warriors. I had stumbled on the story when I visited a national historic site at Ft Battleford, Saskatchewan, which led me to the gravesite 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 was struck by the fact that these shocking events had taken place a mere fifteen years before my paternal grandparents arrived in 1900 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 our own on the land, yet in 1885, almost still within historical memory, a Cree uprising on the North Saskatchewan River had violently protested the Homestead Act of 1872 and their own removal to reserves.

The *Frog Lake Reader* was published in 2009. I have kept on writing about the meaning and implications of the events at Frog Lake for a third-generation "settler" in western Canada. I've written and narrated a radio documentary, I've been working on a play, I've written several personal essays. I became familiar with "alternative" settler narratives that mentioned contacts between Indigenous people and Ukrainian settlers. This led to an event I co-hosted with an Indigenous activist in Edmonton in 2012, rather ponderously called *Zemlya/Nanaskomun: The Land/We Give Thanks: A Ceremonial Exchange of Gifts*. Deploying Ukrainian and Cree, it was meant to bring Aboriginal- and Ukrainian-Edmontonians back into relationship, or at least to remind our peoples that once there had been a relationship: testimonies to first contact "friendship," in stories 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. Or, more likely, pioneer families told such stories once and never again.

Guests were seated in a large circle and the entire program took place within that circle, opening with a welcome and a Cree prayer by an Elder of Onion Lake First Nation and closing with a Ukrainian prayer by Fr Yuri Sucheivan, of St Andrew's Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Between, My co-host, 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 Ukrainian-Aboriginal contact stories; and artist Lena Kostiuik hauled out her paintings from storage, each of which illustrated just such contact stories from the homestead era.

But the heart of the ceremony was 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 Cree story-teller Leona Carter; and sash-presenters Sharon Morin of the Metis Heritage Museum, and Lynnien Pawluk, of 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 from those who had not been there, word had come back: Métis historian Heather Devine of the University of Calgary wrote me that "the long-standing friendships between Native people and Ukrainian settlers in east-central Alberta comprise part of a larger, marginalised 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 for this telling?

Of the some 85 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 Aboriginal Edmontonians needed to do it with us.

At a post mortem over pizza, the Ukrainian-Canadians who took part in the gift exchanges mulled over what had 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 wariness of Aboriginal people toward our initiatives is to be expected. 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: "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.”

All of us agreed that it was unthinkable in the context of the ceremony that Ukrainians’ own narrative of pain should be evoked.

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 irreconcilables? 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.

Six years later in April of this year Edmonton’s Shumka Dance Company worked for a year with Indigenous dancers and choreographers to produce *Ancestors and Elders*, “the culmination,” in the words of Shumka’s artistic director, Joe Hoffman, “of an amazing story that has brought voices and hearts from two different legacies together to explore the power of tradition and truth.” (Well, not quite the whole truth and nothing but the truth...)

Since the 1970s, we Ukrainian-Canadians in western Canada have asserted the deep belonging we have felt to our place on the prairie that was neither English nor French. We had stepped up as exemplars of and participants in multiculturalism, having earned our right to the status of a “founding people” here thanks to our sweat, toil and tears on the land. Scholars such as Frances Swyrypa and Lindy Ledohowski have also pointed out that the home we were claiming was also the homeland of displaced Indigenous peoples.

But as far as I know, there is no public acknowledgement at Ukrainian-Canadian memorial sites that the free land offered by the Canadian government to landless Galicians had been traditional Indigenous territory. Nor, until very recently, any account given or acknowledged that the Canadian plains had been cleared for railway and settlement by systematic starvation of the Indigenous population until they submitted to confinement on reserves.

Three generations later, Ukrainian-Canadians struggle to remember the stories greatgrandbaba told them of the “Indiandy” down the section road who hired on at harvest time— stories told once and never again. Elder Danny Musqua remembers: “They wanted us to work with them, because we helped each other. The Indian worked hard back then. Ask any white man who farmed. The old farmers they can tell you about the Indian that worked hard.” Then why aren’t they invited to our harvest festivals?

The enthusiastic celebration of 125 years of Ukrainian-Canadian settlement in Canada in 2016 belies how complex settler identity really is. A family of landless Galicians in

bare feet, disembarked on an Edmonton station platform, could also be unwitting occupiers of Indigenous land. Nevertheless, their grandchildren would also call this land mother and give thanks for it through their own labour in the face of economic despair and dispossession. Their descendants might grapple with what public intellectual Lindy Ledohowski calls “white settler guilt.” Or, conversely, they may want to honour their forebears’ courage and imagination on the land. The word “settler” derives from Middle English, *settlen*, to come to rest. To have a home, as it were. The much-maligned settler-Albertan has the same fierce attachment to the land ceded from the First Nations as had its Indigenous peoples. It’s complicated.

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 Great Spirit 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, 2018, is the 100th anniversary of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada. Here is the question I pose today, in the context of this Jubilee: 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?

We acknowledge that St. Elia Ukrainian Orthodox Church was founded in Treaty No. 6 territory

In his book, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (2008), Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew wrote:

“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?