

The Indigenous Ukrainian Relationship Building Initiative

otâkosîhk mîna anohc: вчора і сьогодні: Yesterday and Today On These Lands with Myrna Kostash and Chelsea Vowel Date: October 20, 2021

SLIDE ONE: The Last Best West

This **last best west** had been popularized as empty, a wilderness, and, as a lure to would-be settlers, free. Virgin sod, waiting for the plough. The CPR had been laid for their arrival from the port cities of eastern Canada.

When Hon. Frank Oliver, minister of the Interior in Ottawa, welcomed settlers to the Last Best West, Canada-West, he had earlier succeeded in the removal of Indigenous bands right off their reserves – notoriously, the Papaschase from what is now part of south Edmonton.

Historically, this “home for millions” had been the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples. But now it awaited our forebears in sheepskin coats into the middle of their nowhere to make a go of it.

Eventually they build settlements: we early Ukrainian Canadians moved into areas already carrying English and French names - Vegreville, Royal Park, Lac Santé - to which we added our own names – Ispas, New Kyiv, Myrnam, “Peace be to us.” I wonder when we first asked ourselves where those other names had come from: Saskatchewan, Waskatenau, Wetaskawin.

SLIDE TWO: Site of Mass Grave of Cree and Assiniboine Warriors

Ten days after the hanging in Regina of Métis leader Louis Riel, on November 16, 1885, six Cree warriors, condemned for killings at Frog Lake in April, alongside two Assiniboine men condemned for a murder committed on March 29 near Battleford, were hanged, on **November 27, 1885**, at Fort Battleford, in the largest mass execution in Canadian history. It was the closing act of the Resistance of 1885.

They were buried in a shallow common grave, unmarked, not far from the Fort.

With the disappearance of the plains bison in **the 1870s**, the peoples who depended on them for food, began to starve. Calamity upon calamity followed: malnutrition, famine, tainted government rations, TB and smallpox, deliberate refusal of food despite Treaty obligations. Not to mention the agricultural ravaging of an entire ecology that was the literal clearing of the land with the settlement of settlers

SLIDE THREE: Grave stone of Wandering Spirit

I stumbled upon this grave site while visiting the Battlefords in 2008 – the tipi poles were visible in a clump of bush overlooking the Battle River. As for Wandering Spirit, he was war chief in the band of Plains Cree chief Big Bear. War was his job but the world in which he had emerged as a protector of his people had disappeared. There was no place for a war chief anymore, no place for war anymore, between White and Indigenous armies, as the Battle of Batoche proved at the defeat of the Metis under the superior firepower of the Canadian militia.

There were all those names to read but what struck me forcibly was these men had been hanged a mere fifteen years before my paternal grandparents arrived to homestead near Vegreville in 1900, not so far from Frog Lake.

It was when I put those two dates into juxtaposition – 1885 and 1900 - the mass hanging, the sod-busting – I realized that our settler mythologies had never acknowledged that there was a history prior to our own on the land. The ceding of territory through Treaty with Cree chiefs was never mentioned; therefore we were somehow entitled to ownership.

SLIDE FOUR: Title Slide (the Kostash/Svarich/Maksymiuk/Kosovan settlers)

I have five grandparents because my maternal grandfather, Nikolai Maksymiuk, died when my mother was only 5 years old. His widow, Palahna, married his brother, Andrew, who was also in Edmonton, and it was he who knew as Dido.

These two sets of grandparents, who all came from villages in Galicia that were only a few kilometers apart, had vastly different experiences as newcomers to Alberta. I could see that these outcomes had been prefigured well before emigration, in their very different circumstances in Galicia.

Old man Maksymiuk's "**pitifully small farm,**" had been subdivided each generation; his sons, Nikolai and Andrew lit out for the coal mines of Silesia before **emigrating to Edmonton.** They, and Palahna, were unskilled, often poor, and sympathizers of the Soviet Union. My paternal grandparents were well-educated (grandfather) and deeply religious (grandmother), eventually materially secure thanks to their base on a homestead at **Royal Park**, in the Ukrainian bloc settlement area east of Edmonton. They also had Peter, older son of Ivan,

formidably well-educated, multilingual, and personally ambitious, in charge of their settlement: his parents, all his sisters as well as his brother-in-law Fred Kostash. He was 23 years old.

Peter had a map. He had produced it for an agent of the Immigration Department in Winnipeg, and, nailing it with one finger, he had showed the agent **exactly where on this rectangular grid the group's village was to be located. It would be called Kolomyia.** In the middle of the township, on Section 16, thirty-two parcels of land of ten acres each would be set aside for a farmyard and garden for each settler-family. There would be a church, a school, a post office, a store, a wind- and later steam-operated mill at the centre of the village, and nearby a reading room. Not to mention plans for a blacksmith, a cooper, a carpenter, and a shoemaker – everything that would make the community self-supporting. In other words, a recreation of what they had abandoned in Tulova.

At the notion of such an Old Country arrangement, the agent of the Immigration Department had a good laugh. Every settler must take a whole quarter section and must live on and cultivate it. "You'll live a half a mile from each other. Even this in time will be too close." **There would be no village.**

SLIDE FIVE: map of bloc settlement area

Their first sight of an established Ukrainian farmstead in the "promised land" near Edna produced **severe culture shock.** Had they really travelled thousands of miles from home only to be met by their probable future: the house was like a little pigsty, the stable but a crude shelter, both covered with sod; a second well was being dug, and still there was no water. The farmland was rock-hard with alkaline and stones, elsewhere soaked in swamps. **"In the Old Country," Peter wrote, "this wretch had a fine home with an orchard, a half-morg garden and a beautiful, productive field. And here he had become a beggar."**

But the **enduring story** that my forebears were busily constructing was pure "settler," with its tropes of thankfulness to the government or Queen for the "free lands" on which they were busting the "virgin" sod and "building" western Canada.

Out of sight were the original inhabitants of these lands now sequestered on reserves, territory meant to be protected from any further encroachment by white settlers. As far as the Galician newcomers were concerned, the land was a gift of the Crown and her Minister of the Interior, Sir Clifford Sifton. Or perhaps even of Queen Victoria herself.

SLIDE SIX: Galician Immigrants arrive

In Tulova Peter Svarich had read aloud to the family reports from the pioneering efforts of Dr. Joseph Oleskiw and his two pamphlets in Ukrainian, “On Free Lands” and “On Emigration.” The Svarich home became a “hotbed of emigration fever.” **Old man Svarich, “the rich man of Tulova, was preparing to leave**

And so, after due deliberation by the patriarch, Ivan Svarich, the decision is made: **sell land (about 30 acres) and implements, pocket a couple of thousand dollars, and be productive almost immediately in Canada.**

The Kostashchuk/Svariches had not arrived penniless, shoeless, or unprovisioned. In fact they **had arrived with “thousands” of dollars**, and two hundred of those had bought the family two starter cows with calves, two piglets, “some” chickens, seed wheat and oats for horse feed. Before starting out, still in Edmonton, patriarch Ivan Svarich had spent a thousand on purchases that included two horses and wagons, a plough, three sections of a harrow, a stove, clothing, and some household items (basins, cheap cutlery, bedclothes).

Yet there is a poignancy to this vision of plenty – oxen! wagon! – on a Canadian homestead. The fact was that the Svariches already had all this in Tulova.

SLIDE SEVEN: labour on the land

The **surveyor’s line** cut straight through the bush and four holes indicated the corners of four sections - the CPR had two - leaving two free sections, kitty-corner. **Fedor claims one quarter-section**, his father-in-law, Ivan Svarich, the other: **“This forest must be mine.”** The Svarich men are pleased with their choice, with its provision of sixty **wooded acres for building materials and fuel**. A natural world that had been deemed “wilderness” and “wild” is suddenly to be put to use, made productive. Their labour is heroic if grueling. Break sod, plough it, uproot trees and bush, seed, swath, stook, thresh...and off to the grain elevator company agents.

They stack hay, fence the house, build corrals, a pigpen, a chicken coop. They buy heifers, a horse, more pigs. ... No longer peasants who consume all that they produce, they become farmers. **They build** two houses, two granaries, two stables... they thresh wheat, oats, and barley, dig bushels of potatoes.

The total yield is more than three times the produce from their fields in Tulova. Old man Svarich now felt like a **wealthy man.**" A few acres of land in Galicia had been transformed into cash; in Royal Park the cash had been turned back again into land.

In short order, the Svariches and Kostashes will have become proficient, and bilingual, in the **vocabulary of possession** in which land becomes property: title, boundaries, road allowance, ours, mine, homestead, home/place, not to mention "here."

There is a spiritual wealth as well: in his Memoir, **Peter records that** "We [Peter and Fred 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." The nuptial metaphor is a little startling, unless one takes it at face value: immigrants these young men may have been to a "New World," but the Old World resided within this image of a sacramental commitment to land stewardship.

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.**

Perhaps it is at a moment like this that "land" and "earth" are synonyms.

SLIDE EIGHT: Women's labour

Women's work on the homestead was "a matter of course" and severely gendered. Baba Kostash milked the cows, fed the chickens, set and monitored the brooding hens, attended the farrowing sows, pounded laundry with a paddle on a smooth rock by the well – it was cold water, and hard. The colonialist enterprise of breaking sod was reproduced at a feminine scale in the kitchen garden. Baba's **enormous garden** meant there would always be something to eat even in the leanest days before Spring planting – with all its provisions for borshch, sauerkraut, pickles, and, for protein, broad beans.

Indoors, she was supervisor of the kitchen, feeding hired men as well as her own large family. A feast for the threshers, for instance, would have Baba serving borshch, roast chicken, corn, new potatoes in cream, beets, preserved saskatoons, and dried apples. Late into the night when her menfolk were already asleep, she baked the next day's bread, washed the pots and

pans, and, tired and sleepy, wearily sewed patches on a pair of overalls, before herself going to bed.

Before heading out to **church** she plucked a rooster, boiled cabbage and rice, washed the milk separator; sorted out socks and stockings and polished shoes with carbon black scraped off the bottom of a stove plate. **Raising the family** in a house, built 1913 - when Baba was hardest at work – that had no indoor plumbing or central heating or running water, and electricity didn't come down the municipal wire until the 1930s.

But out on the fields, the menfolk had machines.

SLIDE NINE: Mechanization on the land

In 1925 they were still breaking sod but **now they worked with a monstrous machine**, an assembly of giant steel wheels propelled by what seems to be its very own steam turbine between the front wheels, trophies of labour in the Machine Age. Even a tractor was something to behold. My oldest cousin, Orest Fodchuk, was unable to recall a single thing about our grandfather, Fred Kostash, but he could reel off the brands and prices of the tractors that the family had owned down through the decades. But it was the acquisition of a *truck* that represented the twentieth century on the land. The triumph of metal over horse flesh.

SLIDE TEN: Svarich family photo c. 1911

To Fred Kostash, however, **the homestead was merely a means to an end**: as quickly as possible to send the sons to school urging them, in his words, **'Study, boys, so you won't have to work as I do.'** His sons finished their public schooling in the substantial town of Vegreville, where they learned to speak unaccented English and all went on to university. It was important **to Canadianize**. "If you *must* go to town," Peter told his sisters, "you will **dress like ladies**." No sheepskin jackets in sight.

In this formula: my Kostash grandparents' emigration from Tulova was a **sacrifice**; they were willing to leave behind material and spiritual goods for the sake of children still to be born. They had the foresight their more timorous neighbours lacked, to see that **the link to the ancestral soil had to be broken** if ever the story of future Kostashes and Svariches were to be written in another script.

Urbanized, it had never occurred to me that the "family farm" at Royal Park had not always been there nor that someone had come along from some other place to build it. But it

had all happened in some other, primordial time, having come to its satisfactory conclusion in our family's secured settlement well before my arrival. **Ground Zero was the homestead**, the fabled quarter-section from which all subsequent benefits of education, middle-class tenure and psychological self-confidence had flowed.

Meanwhile, in Edmonton, things had worked out very differently for my maternal grandparents.

SLIDE ELEVEN: packing plant workers

In **1911**, the largest unskilled group of male Ukrainians in Edmonton was one hundred "**labourers**." ditch-diggers, draymen, housepainters, blacksmiths, slaughterhouse workers. **Nikolai Maksymiuk** never homesteaded. With **forty dollars** burning in his pocket, from his work in the Silesian coal mines, he purchased a small city lot in north-east Edmonton and built a modest house, sent for my grandmother still in Dzhuriv, then struck out for the packing plant. **Seven years later**, he was dead from pneumonia, probably from the conditions on the killing floor, breathing in dried blood.

Hi brother, Andrew Maksymiuk married his widow, my Baba Palahna. He never homesteaded either; he was a **day labourer** in Edmonton when he could get work ditch-digging, snow shoveling, laying streetcar tracks, delivering coal, washing dishes, anything at all. Baba sold eggs and cream in the neighbourhood and took in the laundry of women whose homes she cleaned or from hoeing for ten cents an hour in the acre of carrots of the "Chinese garden" also in the neighbourhood. During the Depression, they endured the humiliation of being on welfare.

Eventually they moved to an **acreage** – a market garden, in fact – just outside the city limits. Bringing an acre of land into production – vegetables for the municipal farmers' market – was the **hardest labour of their lives in Canada**. Except for the winter months, it required sixteen hours a day

The acreage was **the closest Dido came to being a "settler"** in the sense we deploy the word now: "**the colonial usurpation of Indigenous lands** and the dispossession and disappearance of Indigenous peoples." (Lowman 47) It never made them rich, unlike the large-scale farmers out in the Ukrainian bloc settlement who, well into the second generation after immigration, were buying ever more land and bigger tractors.

SLIDE TWELVE: Soviet propaganda poster about Virgin Land

Dido was a socialist, never a communist, although he passionately defended the **achievements of the Soviet Union** made in the name of the working class. There is no evidence that the anti-capitalist groups Dido belonged to – his and Baba’s social life revolved around the Ukrainian Labour and Farm Temple Association - or the socialist press he read in Ukrainian wondered about “white settler privilege.” It was sufficient for his identity that he lived in a working-class part of town and eked out a living as an unskilled labourer, dispossessed from the meagre surplus he produced for the capitalist boss(es).

But there had arisen a powerful challenger, **the Soviet Union**, whose people had made a revolution to put the working man and woman in power, restore them their dignity and purpose. Both Baba and Dido were dedicated readers of the Ukrainian Canadian socialist papers and illustrated magazines from Soviet Ukraine.

Go East, young man! Over there, where the East is Red, workers and peasants were enthusiastically **constructing a new homeland** in Baba’s and Dido’s names. Over there agricultural workers rejoice in opening virgin soil of their own, **earth now owned by the collective in a land of plenty. It’s mechanized too** – there is a long row of trucks at the far edge of the fields waiting to load up with threshed grain, just like in Vegreville! Soviet children were going to school, the commune found new uses for the church (storage for hay, harnesses, firewood), and its members were doled out a regular wage. Dido never belonged to a union – effectively he was never an employee – so it was from Soviet propaganda that he exulted in the dignity of labour.

SLIDE THIRTEEN: All of Baba’s Children

Two Hills, a Ukrainian Canadian town in the bloc settlement area in the late 1970s. I am there in the summer of 1975, doing interviews and research for my first book, *All of Baba’s Children* (published 1978).

On September 30, 1976, the Land Titles office of North Alberta Land Registration District – official seal affixed – certified that Myrna Ann Kostash “is now the owner of an estate,” of the NE Quarter of Section 31 in Township 55 at Range 12, W of the 4th Meridian” – almost six miles due north of the town of Two Hills – **“containing 160 acres, more or less.”**

I had a name for my estate after the ancestral village of the Kostashes, and I nailed a rustic board to the outside wall by the door, inscribed in white paint, **“Tulova.”** To me, the name echoed the western-most point of my forebears’ journey to Canada. By nailing up the

board painted with the letters TULOVA I was **laying claim, two generations later**, to the memory of leave-taking, uprooting, and exodus. I was announcing that their exodus had a terminus: it came to an end, a “somewhere,” a “here,” which, two generations later, would symbolically terminate in the location I called home.

Forty-five years later, I can now appreciate what I had unknowingly done: brought into a **single imagined space** the two historical sources of my identity, a homestead on Treaty Six Territory, and a village in Galicia c. 1900.

SLIDE FOURTEEN: Zemlya/Nanaskomun

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 the two languages, it was meant to (symbolically?) bring back Indigenous and Ukrainian Edmontonians into relationship or at least to remind our peoples that there once had been a relationship, thanks to the Cree signatories of Treaty Six in 1876.

Some of us do feel it is a gift that has been passed on and for which we “suffer gratitude,”

The ceremony was structured around **an exchange of gifts**, pairs of artists, Ukrainian and Indigenous, who literally exchanged a gift of their own making –a dance, a story, a sash - in a ceremony that was witnessed by members of both communities seated in a circle. People sang and danced, told stories, showed paintings, exchanged prayers in Cree and Ukrainian. A typical response: “Thanks for an inspired event. It was very moving for me, opens up many ideas and dreams.”

But the **disproportionate number of Ukrainians** at the event - of the 85+ attendees possibly 15 were Indigenous – led me to conclude that the Ceremony was something we Ukrainians had to do, more than that Indigenous Edmontonians needed to do it with us.

Individuals who were specifically invited but did not attend nor even acknowledge the invitation to attend, included members of the faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, the media including Indigenous, inner city constituency representatives, and staff members of the Aboriginal Relations Office for the City of Edmonton.

That was 19 years ago. I am happy to say that times have changed.

From Peter Svarich's Memoir: Attitudes to Indigenous People

A steady stream of visitors expressed their apprehensions: that in Canada there lived only English people “whose language was difficult to learn and where only buffalo, **Indians and Eskimos** inhabited the land of ice and snow.” Peter only laughed “kind-heartedly.” (Svarich 74)

At the families' leave-taking from Tulova, a “radical peasant” speaks: “But you did not achieve your goal and you have to abandon your homeland to set off for a faraway land across the sea, in a **wilderness**, where you will sow your crops in peace, without anger or dispute with others. You, brothers and sisters, will plant in a **new world** that is **untrampled by human footprints....**”

Peter Svarich's neighbours mocked his ambition to found a “colony of Ukrainian settlers....If I survived the ocean voyage and **found myself among the Indians, if they would not scalp me**, they would certainly paint me from head to foot, give me a crown of feathers and call me their chief.” (Svarich 75)

Peter gazes 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.**” (Svarich 110)

NB: *There have been testimonies to that 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. More likely, pioneer families told such stories once and never again.*