

ACUA VITAE

ALBERTA'S UKRAINIAN ARTS AND CULTURE MAGAZINE

Spring/Summer 2011 | Volume 18, Number 1

Cultural Journeys

A window on artistic traditions

Myrna Kostash: Diarizing Our Journey | **The Korovai:** A Symbol of Ukrainian Ethnicity
The Ukrainian Experience in Alberta: Through the eyes of Larysa Luciiv

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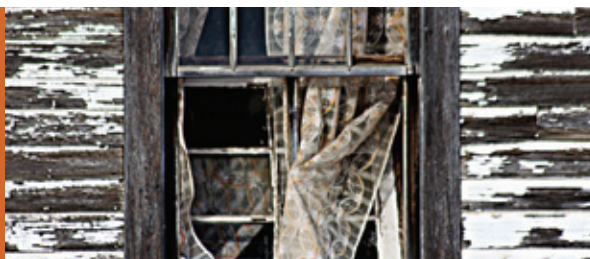
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"Window"

Photograph by Larysa Luciwi




"The life of an artist is a continuous journey, the path long and never ending" Justin Beckett



What would life be without all of our journeys? Everyday I find myself on a journey – it usually involves driving my children to school, but also more personally, every project I tackle adds something significant to my life. This year Ukrainians are celebrating

the 120th anniversary of the first Ukrainian Settlement to Canada—a significant journey that laid the foundation of our community today. In this issue of ACUA Vitae, we explore the cultural journeys of artists from our Ukrainian community. Larysa Luciwna gets behind the lens and captures images of the Ukrainian experience in Alberta; Mary Oakwell takes a look at woodworking; Anna Chudyk explores the art and symbol of korovai; and Lida Somchinsky shares with us Myrna Kostash's literary journey.

2011 also marks a significant milestone for the Alberta Council for the Ukrainian Arts – our 25th Anniversary! We have a year filled with creative workshops, festivals and events – something for everyone. I hope you enjoy this issue, and join us this year as we continue our creative journey in the Ukrainian Arts. 

*Andrea Kopylech,
Editor*

ACUAVITAE

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ACUA: Celebrating 25 Years with 25 Artists

2011 marks the 25th anniversary of the Alberta Council for the Ukrainian Arts. As part of the celebrations, we will be publishing a Special Edition of ACUA Vitae this winter...and we need your input. The magazine will profile 25 artists who have promoted, preserved and developed Ukrainian folk and contemporary art over the past 25 years. From painters to poets, musicians to dancers, pysanky writers to photographers...we will feature artists and groups from around Alberta. Please call 780.488.0858 or email info@acuarts.ca by August 1, 2011 with the names of artists you'd like to see profiled. We want to hear from you! 

John Stetch joins Viter for a Fusion of Song and Dance

Edmonton's Viter Ukrainian Dancers and Viter Ukrainian Folk Choir have taken their place among the major performing ensembles of Canada by infusing the folk art of traditional Ukrainian dance and song with modern themes. Their presentations preserve traditional Ukrainian cultural elements while introducing a contemporary flair.


On Saturday, June 25th at the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium, the ensemble presents *Fusion: Harmony in Motion*, in celebration of the Dancers' 15th Anniversary. This exciting concert performance will feature trademark works from Viter's repertoire and premiere several pieces of original choreography.

One of the innovative works to be featured has been created in collaboration with internationally-renowned jazz pianist John Stetch. Commemorating the Great Famine of Ukraine in 1932-1933, *Sad Memories of Childhood* is a moving piece which focuses on a woman who has lost her family to the tragedy. Through her nostalgic recollections we share her treasured memories with loved ones and ultimately experience her devastating loss. Other feature pieces include *Seasons of Culture* and the tremendous finale—*Hopak*. John Stetch will also be performing solo works as part of the performance. Tickets are available at Ticketmaster outlets, online at www.ticketmaster.ca or through viter@shaw.ca. 

Anna Pidruchney Award for New Writers

Winners were recently chosen for the Anna Pidruchney Award for New Writers. Administered by the Ukrainian Resource and Development Centre at Macewan University in Edmonton, the Award is presented annually to novice writers for a literary work which includes Ukrainian Canadian characters or is based on a Ukrainian Canadian theme.

Three winners were announced for 2011: Colin Matty for *A Short Reminiscence for Babunia Stocky*; Marion Mutala for *Baba's Babushka: A Ukrainian Christmas*; and Natalie Ostryzniuk for *The Blossoming of a Ukrainian Canadian, Savella Stechishin*. (See Colin's short story in this issue.)

Anna Pidruchney (nee Raycheba) was an Alberta homesteader, community activist, artist and author of two books about Ukrainian Canadian pioneer life. She taught numerous writing classes in both the Ukrainian and English languages, and had a special interest in young people. This award was established in 1989 in recognition of her lifelong commitment to encouraging and promoting the works of young writers. 



Valeriy Semenko Wins Cultural Diversity Award

The third annual Cultural Diversity in the Arts Awards were presented on April 5, 2011 by the Edmonton Arts Council and City of Edmonton. Among the recipients of seven awards of \$7,500 each was visual artist Valeriy Semenko. Along with other artistic projects, Valeriy currently runs the Barvy Art Studio with Iryna Karpenko, who won this award in 2010.


Valeriy was born in Bukovyna, Ukraine and began his art education at the School of Fine Art in Chernivtsi. Years later he became a student of the Ivan Fedorov Publishing Academy, Faculty of Graphic Arts, in Lviv. As a graphic artist he designed and illustrated thematic books and art calendars. His artistic and editorial expertise also includes art catalogues,

posters, invitations and more for numerous exhibits in Germany, France, Lithuania, and Ukraine. Valeriy is a member of the Union of Advertisement Makers of Ukraine, and his original artworks are found in private collections worldwide.

The Cultural Diversity in the Arts Awards Program was established in 2009 to encourage

and support Edmonton artists from diverse cultural backgrounds. The recipients in this program come to Edmonton from countries around the world and demonstrate a strong dedication to continuing their artistic practice in their new home.

"We are pleased to be able to invest in Edmonton's artists with these awards," said John Mahon, Executive Director of the

Edmonton Arts Council. "Communities everywhere are realizing just how much arts and culture contribute to innovative, healthy and humane places to live." 

Clockwise from left: Summer Holiday; Kobzar; Valeriy Semenko



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Tanya in Wonderland

Alberta dancer Tanya Chumak takes her place on New York's stages

By Liz Lepper

"We only get one day off a week, which is Saturday. Because I do live in New York, I try to see some of the city when I can. Sometimes I forget to, going to and from work," she laughs. "A friend came to visit, and I was almost a tourist too. I was showing them around and saying, 'Oh, I haven't seen this either, and I've lived here since October!'"

Calgary-native Tanya Chumak speaks to me from Waverly, Iowa, a stop on the current New York Theatre Ballet (NYTB) tour of *The Alice in Wonderland Follies*. The tour, which kicked off a few weeks ago in Kentucky, will see the company perform to audiences in Tennessee, Ohio, Iowa and throughout New York State.

Following graduation from the School of Alberta Ballet's Pre-Professional Program last year, Tanya moved to New York in the fall to pursue her ballet career, one that sparked when she began dance lessons at age three. Tanya danced with the Tryzub Ukrainian Dance Ensemble for a few years, and, at age 16, made the decision to study ballet exclusively.

"Ukrainian dance was a lot of fun, but it was only twice a week, and I wanted a full-time ballet career," says Tanya. "I did miss Ukrainian dance at first, but I

still watch it a lot. My sister still dances."

Although her time with Tryzub was short-lived, Tanya credits her Ukrainian heritage for igniting her passion for dance. "In our Ukrainian community, everyone is open to a lot of different arts," she says. "I was involved in PLAST, where we did a lot of singing and dancing. Ukrainian dance taught me a lot about stage presence and performing, which has been a huge advantage coming here because ballet is such a strict discipline. For me, it's been extremely helpful to grow up in an enriching cultural environment."

In her last year at the School of Alberta Ballet, Tanya decided to put nearly a decade of training to work and flew to New York, home to scores of dance companies and hundreds of open auditions. "I was doing quite a few auditions every weekend and almost every second or third day," she says. "Those were hard because sometimes 200 girls would show up, and (the dance companies) would just cut you really quickly. They would just walk down the rows and call out numbers, and you really didn't get to dance at most of (the auditions)."

It was during a company class

with NYTB, the most widely seen chamber ballet in America, Tanya caught a director's eye. "The director liked me enough in the hour she saw me, so she brought me into her office and said 'Yeah, I'll hire you,'" Tanya laughs. "I said, 'Sure!'"

NYTB has been touring family and adult programs nationally and abroad for more than 30 years. Acclaimed for its theatricality, high production quality, accessibility and for performing in intimate spaces, it's produced dozens of classic masterpieces and contemporary ballets by the likes of Frederick Ashton, Merce Cunningham, Agnes de Mille, José Limón and Antony Tudor.

When asked what she likes most about NYTB, Tanya says, "It's definitely a much smaller company. I've gotten a lot of experience this year, and I've gotten to do a lot of roles I probably wouldn't have had the chance to in other companies." Tanya is dancing the Red Queen role in *The Alice in Wonderland Follies*. "It is probably the most fun I've had on stage ever. That's a really fun role to do. She's very self-centered," she chuckles.

Although Tanya is making her dance aspirations a reality, her career of choice has its downside. "It's very strenuous. When we get into our performances, sometimes we have three shows a day, which can be back to back, and in one show you can be doing three different parts. By the third show, you can't even feel your feet," she laughs. "Ballet's such a perfectionist's art, so you always have to be on top of things. Everyone has off days, and you have to set everything aside and try to do really well every day because it's a competitive environment."

What keeps Tanya going on the days when her feet feel like they're going to fall off? "I like when we get to do meet and greets with kids after the show. Some of them run up to you and hug you and say 'You were my favourite part!' I never thought it would be that neat. It's really cool to have little kids look up to you; it's very rewarding. Just being on stage and getting the chance to perform...It's definitely worth it." 🎭

Liz Lepper is a freelance writer and publicist living in Edmonton.

FEATURE



MYRNA KOSTASH

DIARIZING OUR JOURNEY

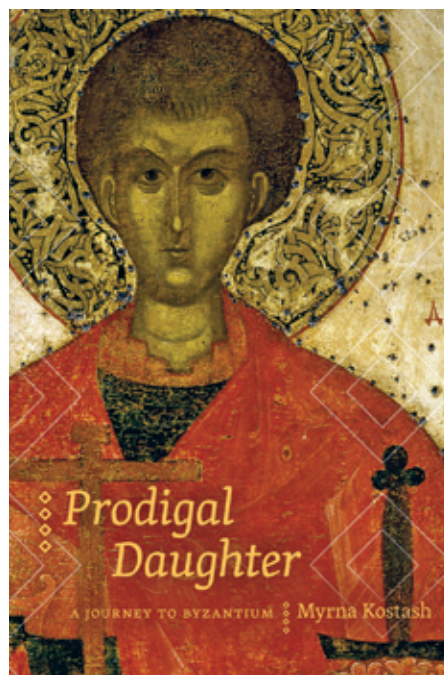
By Lida Somchynsky

It's a snowy blustery Sunday evening but that hasn't stopped a 'happening crowd' from gathering at Leva's. In an Edmonton southside restaurant/bar, where the proprietor happens to be of Ukrainian descent, the Hermeneutics – a group of University of Alberta English students – are hosting a popular monthly event. They've invented an edgy way for artists to showcase their works on a particular theme. On the wall a TV flatscreen glows: 'the art of interpretation.' Tonight's roster includes a beat poet, a Native rapper, a madrigal singer/playright and established writer, Myrna Kostash. Always inventive, how characteristic that she would give a reading here, from her latest book, *Prodigal Daughter: A Journey to Byzantium*. Engaging the mainly twenty/thirty-something audience with down-to-earth humour, Kostash begins with the linguistic origins of her surname. It means "the peaceful cudgel." Questions follow her colourful anecdotes about the political complexity of independent Macedonia. And then the author reads about her quest for an elusive saint.

With infectious free-spiritedness and razor-sharp intellectual curiosity, Kostash captivates this reading public as she has for over 30 years. In her ten books, the Edmonton doyenne of creative nonfiction has explored topics as diverse as experiences of her parents' generation of Ukrainian Canadians (*All of Baba's Children* topped the national best-seller lists in the late 70s), feminism in teenage girls, re-defining Canada in the 21st century, and exploring the North Saskatchewan River through stories of its landscape.

In this latest book, Kostash returns to explore her Ukrainian-Canadian roots but this time through the prism of a

spiritual quest. However, the fascination of her journey is that it begins as an odyssey of the mind: to discover within a historical context, the meaning of a particular saint – a fourth century Christian martyr. Their meeting is accidental yet providential. It happens at a writer's retreat in a Benedictine monastery in Northern Saskatchewan – a place she has returned to every summer for a decade. While in St. Peter's library, Kostash discovers St. Demetrius' icon in a book. And thus a self-described secular humanist undertakes a voyage into the Balkans, uncovering their Byzantine and Slavic history, while St. Demetrius' persona changes from protector, soldier to martyr – as well as having pagan antecedents to the goddess Demeter. The layered narrative structure even weaves humour with lyrical descriptiveness. On an exploratory mission to view Byzantine frescoes, Kostash undergoes a most rudimentary facial beauty treatment in a Serbian town, commandeered by a "[m]adam treating all her clients as long-lost daughters and nephews...working on us...laid out helplessly on small beds and exposed to general view." In a Greek village, when the writer kisses an icon, the church custodian leaps out from nowhere to spray it down with vinegar, so that the icon will be ready for the next supplicant.



The resolution of the Demetrius mystery is both moving and surprising.

Kostash's actual re-entry to her Greek Orthodox faith came about only after her travels. It was an Anglican friend, Father Don, who highlighted the personal significance of this elusive saint. "God is using St. Demetrius to tap you on your shoulder to show you your new life. [Initially] I said, oh no, that is too drastic, too religious." It was when she was writing the book in Saskatoon that Kostash began attending church and eventually joined Edmonton's St. Elias, "a small community of people that were hospitable." Kostash welcomed an active role in her church as a delegate to the Sobor and Eparchy conferences of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada. "I just love it...trying to understand this matrix of what I consider to be Ukrainian and what we are embedded in [and] as Metropolitan Ilarion's reminder, that we are all Greeks and so in a sense Byzantine. We are dealing with terms of historic importance...along with the extraordinary richness of the Orthodox faith, the repository of treasure – the liturgical, artistic, literary and spiritual." Although Kostash struggles with her church's lack of commitment to social causes and wishes for a more liberal attitude towards women, the willingness of this leftist feminist to boldly expand her horizons, brings with it unexpected epiphanies, as made evident in *Prodigal Daughter: A Journey to Byzantium*.

Ever-questioning, Kostash also has concerns about the Kobzar Literary Award, with a substantial financial prize attached to it, and juried by writers of national repute. "Why is it still ignored by the mainstream press and a marginalized event in Canadian literature?"

Myrna's father had foresight into his daughter's commitment to the continuing exploration of the Ukrainian Canadian experience. At the age of 16 he gave her a leather-bound journal, inscribed: 'To Myrna, may she be the Samuel Pepys (a distinguished 17th century English diarist) of her generation.' "If I look through my books, I actually have been moving away from an ethnic identity to one which understands itself as embedded in other layers of identity – political, cultural,


In this latest book, Kostash returns to explore her Ukrainian-Canadian roots but this time through the prism of a spiritual quest.

historical and spiritual and so that initial 'aha' of baba's granddaughter was just the very beginning of understanding identity." Kostash is thrilled that this discourse continues, with the emergence of second and third generation Ukrainian-oriented writers. Among them is poet Elizabeth Bachinsky, (short-listed for the last Kobzar literary award) and her perceptions on the 1933 famine and World War II. Marusia Bociurkiw is a brave artist "who never fails to interest me in terms of what she will do in her next genre...as it is not easy

to be a lesbian and maintain a sense of loyalty to the Ukrainian community."

With gutsy determination, Kostash is now 'searching for a theatre' having recently completed a play, (which was successfully workshopped at University of Alberta's Festival of Ideas) about the complex history of a Cree war chief. Recipient of many writing awards, Myrna was recently awarded the prestigious 2010 Matt Cohen Award: In Celebration of a Writing Life -- the first writer of creative

nonfiction to receive this. She was also the recipient of the 2011 City of Edmonton Book Prize at the April 11th presentation of the Mayor's Celebration of the Arts.

"To love what creative nonfiction does; you can use different tones, different registers, and source this from all different kinds of places" is truly the spirit of Myrna Kostash's art. 

Lida Somchynsky is a freelance writer from Edmonton.



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Carving a Tradition

By Mary Oakwell

Ukrainian folk art (to non-Ukrainians at least) means pretty painted eggs and gorgeous hand-embroidered dance costumes.

Not so well-known but equally stunning is the art of wood carving which has also been part of the Ukrainian tradition for centuries. Whether building homes or crafting the domestic utensils within those homes, the people who had the gift for ornamentation, ornamented! From carts and sleighs to dowry chests and platters and to toys and spoons, wood workers added charm and beauty to even the most ordinary of objects. The most beautiful work was of course saved for the shrines and churches, but no object was too humble or practical to be adorned.

There were many different techniques and designs involved, many of them germane to a particular region. Engraving was an early technique that involved small areas of ornamentation, often geometrical motifs, and sometimes rubbed with vegetable oil and soot to enhance

the design. Chip carving involved a chisel and gouge: some of the work done for gingerbread stamps and molds was incredibly detailed – flowers, geometrical designs and even entire scenes.

Toys, of course, were often carved from wood and could be coated with bright aniline dyes. Some of the more skilled workers would carve sculptural portraits of friends, famous people or even book characters – somewhat like an early version of Star Wars figures.

Like so many ancient arts, wood carving is not as prevalent in the 21st century as it was in the early days. In the central region of Ukraine today some logging operations have organized their own workshops and have been reviving these old traditions, enhancing them sometimes with tinting or by adding charming animal figures.

In Alberta, Tony Wispinski has his own take on carving with his bark carvings. He doesn't strip the bark from the trees but rather picks up pieces lying in the woods near his home in Smoky Lake. He often tries out his ideas on site, rather than bringing the bark pieces home. Tony points out, "Carving of wood spirits or wizards dates back hundreds of


years, some say back to the middle ages or before. The tradition that goes with them is that if you have a wood spirit hanging in your home all the bad spirits stay away."

Is wood carving an art or a craft? Tony says "when you develop and design the work yourself, it is more of an art, but there is room for both in wood-carving." And he got started when being laid up with some broken ribs. His mother-in-law brought him a book on wood-carving to keep him amused. He went on to discover his own style of carving and to learn the types of wood that lent itself to the art. He particularly likes basswood (found in eastern Manitoba) for the bark carving because it cuts cleanly, sands nicely and is not brittle.

Another aspect of wood carving Tony enjoys is the incredibly challenging job of carving faces into pencils. His faces include wonderful expressions or signs of ageing – in spite of the very great room for error on these tiny sticks with a thick lead passing through the middle of each, and whose surface paint has to be stripped before any actual carving can be done.

For other wood carvers, there is the camaraderie of the Northern Alberta Wood Carving Association that holds weekly meetings and has a yearly show in Edmonton. There is also the Pumpkin Day Fair in Smoky Lake where they showcase their work.

For examples of the older craft, people can visit the Ukrainian Canadian Archives and Museum of Alberta (UCAMA) presently located at 9543 110 Avenue or the Ukrainian Museum of Canada's Alberta branch at 10611 110 Avenue.

The tradition may have changed for some like Tony, but the art is the same as that handed down from one generation to the next. The small tools have changed and improved but the patience and commitment to making daily life a little more attractive is as present in the present work as it was in a slower but starker century. 

Mary Oakwell is an Edmonton-based author. Her publications include Tea Time in Alberta and Many Foundations: Historic Churches of Alberta.

PHOTOS COURTESY UCAMA

FEATURE

The **UKRAINE** Experience

A Photo Essay by Larysa Luciw




UKRAINIAN

in Alberta

As a young girl I was always fascinated with old abandoned buildings. Driving down any country road in East Central Alberta you are bound to find a church, a school and many deserted farmsteads. I always wondered who lived there, what their life was like and why they just left their homes. What was the Ukrainian experience in Alberta?

Years ago I worked at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village and many of my questions were answered. I learned about Ukrainian immigration to Canada...how they built their houses, churches and halls. This only intrigued me more and lead to several weekend excursions to find old neglected buildings on the prairies. I have found many...a community hall that was still set up as if waiting for a concert or play, a church rustic on the outside but pristine on the inside, and many homes made with logs and clay which are still standing as if just built.

The question still remains about the abandonment of these once "alive" structures. Some look as though someone just never returned home. Furniture, clothing, and books litter the floor. Most of the buildings I see are still standing and the farmers that now live in the area just plant their fields around them. Perhaps they are family homes that are too precious to tear down with too much history to forget. Perhaps the memories contained therein will keep them standing forever.

(Thank you to Gord Yaremchuk and Jerry Cordeiro for their help in locating these buildings.) 

Cover: Window, located in Podola Hall west of Mundare and south of Hilliard.

Left: Transfiguration of Our Lord Ukrainian Catholic Church (Spas Moskalyk) located West of Vegreville and South of Warwick. Original church built in 1904, then burned to the ground in 1924 while this church was being built.

Page 14-15, top, from left:

St. Nicholas Russo-Greek Orthodox Church. Built 1908, restored to 1925-30. Located at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village.

Chairs, located in Podola Hall west of Mundare and south of Hilliard.

This home was found in Lamont County fully furnished.

Page 14-15, bottom, from left:

Inside view looking out. This home was located in the area of Barich just North or Smokey Lake.

Bellis Home Grain Company Elevator. Built 1922, restored to 1929. Located at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village.

St. Vladimir's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church. Built 1934, restored to 1934. Located at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village.

Farmstead located between Hairy Hill and Lamont.





Youth Orchestras:

Two Edmonton-area groups preserve Ukrainian song with strings

Struny

By Pamela Shapka

It was just over ten years ago that Marianna Savaryn saw a movie titled 'Music from the Heart.' A vision was stirred. The opportunity for children to become musically engaged at a young age, coupled with a passion to keep Ukraine's rich musical legacy alive, bore the Children's String Society (now known as *Struny*) at St. Martin Ukrainian Bilingual School in Edmonton.


With funds provided from the school parent council, instruments were purchased and instructors hired. Violins, violas and celli first complemented the ensemble. Initial stages housed students within St. Martin Elementary School from grades one through six. The program offered both

private and group lessons on site.

Since then it is truly amazing to see how the program has grown. Additional instruments including guitar and double bass have been purchased to meet the growing needs of the group and size of the children. Currently the program has students ranging from early elementary through high school, and has opened its doors to feed from a much broader pool. Repertoire is predominately Ukrainian, singing to the souls of parents and grandparents alike.

In efforts to share the traditions of the Ukrainian culture in a multicultural society, the group looks for opportunities to perform in public venues such as the Alberta Legislature, West Edmonton Mall (representing the Edmonton Catholic School District), and the Byzantine Festival (on Alberta Avenue).

Being sought by the Ukrainian community in Alberta, the group has traveled to Malanka at Jasper Park Lodge, and recently opened for 'Tales of Ukraine' at the Winspear Centre. In 2010, *Struny* joined forces with the St. Martin's Dance Academy and St. Matthew's Choir to represent the Ukrainian Bilingual Program at the 'Celebration of the Arts' hosted by Edmonton Catholic Schools. This collaborative venture of bringing children of multiple art forms together was a remarkable and memorable experience.

As the language of music is indeed international, *Struny* continues to seek opportunities to perform in the secular community and welcomes the opportunity to stretch their boundaries to share the rich cultural music of Ukraine. 

Pamela Shapka is a board member of ACUA and a supporter of Ukrainian arts in Alberta.

Bandurysty Molodtsi

By Darka Tarnawsky

Wikipedia's definition of the bandura is: *a Ukrainian plucked string folk instrument which combines elements of a box zither and lute, as well as its lute-like predecessor, the kobza.*

Not an instrument typically found on MTV or YouTube.

Yet, every Monday at lunch hour, a group of dedicated young students at Father Kenneth Kearns School skip recess, put away their ipods and gather with Professor Andriy Hornjatkevyc to learn to play the sublime sounds of the bandura. An option for grades four, five and six students of the Ukrainian Bilingual Program in Sherwood Park, the opportunity for instruction on the bandura is rare in Alberta.

First taught by Christine Ryl, the group started over a decade ago when the Bilingual Ukrainian Catholic Parents Society (BUCPS) purchased 12 child-sized banduras from Ukraine in an ongoing effort to introduce more cultural and artistic opportunities to students of the Program. Professor Hornjatkevyc took over leadership of the group in 2004 and has been assisted by Irena Tarnawsky, a teacher at the school and an avid banduryst herself.

Named *Bandurysty Molodtsi*, the ensemble is the only bandura group in the province of Alberta...and likely beyond its borders. Although the number of players fluctuates from year to year, on average the group is made up of at least five young musicians.

Students lugging their bandury from



Struny

PHOTO BY PAMELA SHAPKA




Bandurysty Molodtsi
PHOTO BY WALLY TARNAWSKY

school to home for nightly practice is a common sight around the school. Some of the players are already avid musicians, taking piano and voice lessons. Most however, only dabble in the bandura when it comes to music.

The Bandurysty love the opportunity to learn a new instrument, and to perform on special occasions, often as representatives of the Ukrainian Bilingual

Program. From Christmas concerts to the annual Young Performers Showcase organized by the Ukrainian Music Society of Alberta, from special performances for Bishop David Motiuk and for the 40th Anniversary of Father Kenneth Kearns School, the Bandurysty are proud of their heritage and their talents.

Referred to as *Ukraine's national instrument...* and even *the voice of*

Ukraine, the bandura is a key part of the country's history and culture. Playing the bandura allows these young students to feel this sense of pride – and to preserve and promote it – one string at a time. 

Darka Tarnawsky is an Edmonton-based arts publicist and current president of the Bilingual Ukrainian Catholic Parents Society.



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Korovai

A Symbol of Ukrainian Ethnicity

By Anna Chudyk

PHOTOS FROM THE BOHDAN MEDWISKY UKRAINIAN FOLKLORE ARCHIVE

Bread has always been of great importance to Ukrainian people, not only because it provides physical sustenance, but because it also invokes spiritual and emotional nourishment as well. Bread is used as a symbol in many holiday feasts and ceremonies, from Christmas *kolachi* and Easter *paska*, to welcoming celebrations and weddings. Bread and the ingredients which compose it, all are symbolically significant to life and the events within it. Rye, oats and especially wheat, are known to represent good fortune, wealth, prosperity and even fertility, because the seeds symbolize new life through their biological ability to generate life (Kononenko 66). The presence of wedding bread, or *korovai* as referred to in Central Ukraine and *kolach* in parts of Western Ukraine, during the wedding ceremony possesses these same symbolic qualities of luck, prosperity and fertility. Most recently, it has also acquired a new role as a predominant symbol of Ukrainian ethnicity and culture in Ukrainian-Canadian weddings.

During the process of kneading the dough and baking the bread, only love and good thoughts must be present, for even the slightest bit of negativity or ill-will is believed to have a negative influence on how successfully the bread will bake.

The way in which the korovai is traditionally made emphasizes the importance of community in the lives of the couple. All the ingredients must be collected by several different women who are happily married (Борисенко 136). Together they will make the dough of the korovai while singing ritualistic folksongs; blessing the korovai and the marriage to come (Борисенко 137). Since white wheat flour was only used on special occasions, due to its monetary value, the bread was very special. The generous addition of eggs, butter, milk and sugar, makes the bread taste rich while bidding the couple a sweet, wealthy and prosperous life. During the process of kneading the dough and baking the bread, only love and good thoughts must be present, for even the slightest bit of negativity or ill-will is believed to have a negative influence on how successfully the bread will bake (Борисенко 138). How the korovai turns out once fully cooked, is said to predict the fate of the future marriage; therefore, the more beautiful, well risen and symmetrical the

korovai, the more successful and happier the marriage will be (Борисенко 138).

The shape and ornamentation of the korovai varies from region to region in Ukraine. During the early waves of immigration, most Ukrainian-Canadian weddings contained kolachi. This is because the majority of the Ukrainian immigrants came from the Western regions of Galicia and Bukovyna; kolachi being most common in Bukovyna. The shape of

the kolach is circular with a hole in the middle woven with two or more braids to symbolize eternal life and the interconnections of the couple and their community. In the 1930s and 1940s, the korovai, from Central Ukraine, began to appear in Ukrainian-Canadian weddings more frequently as more Ukrainians emigrated from regions other than Western Ukraine. The shape can vary from being tall and circular, to being a very long single braid, or



resembling a pineapple (Борисенко 137). Decorations can include ornaments made from dough such as swirls, flowers, birds and pine cones, as well as other plants and objects such as a woven handle, apple tree branches, heads of wheat, ribbons, flowers, periwinkle/*barvinok*, myrtle and cranberries/*kalyna* (Борисенко 140). All of these decorations not only add to the aesthetic beauty of the korovai but hold rich symbolism during the wedding. One of the most common decorations, *barvinok*, represents eternal life, for it is a plant that remains green due to its biological nature—even when frozen in the winter or dried in the summer (Борисенко 135). Its presence on the korovai is a symbolic blessing to the couple, wishing that their love may live as infinitely as the *barvinok*. In certain Western regions of Ukraine, *barvinok* wreathes for the bride and groom completely replaced the korovai. This is because the geography of the Carpathian Mountains makes it extremely difficult to grow wheat.

There are multitudes of variations of korovai in Canada, and there is no single correct way to make, bake, or decorate a korovai. Each region, each village, and even each household has their own unique way of making the wedding bread. Such variation has been a result of location, cultural importance and personal taste. Many families that previously may have never used a korovai are now reintegrating the bread into the wedding ceremony. Currently, the korovai is made by a family member, good friend, or a well known korovai baker in the community (Hong 77). The couple can make requests with regard to design and decoration which may be influenced by their personal artistic preference or the way their family historically designed it. Originally, two korovai were made (one for the bride and one for the groom) but more recently it is common to see only one placed either by the reception table, directly in front of the newlyweds or beside the wedding cake at Ukrainian-Canadian weddings (Hong 76). During the reception, the korovai may also be incorporated as part of the parental blessing, or if there is a Ukrainian dance



ensemble, it is presented to the couple at the end of a *Pryvit* (Hong 79). Later in the evening, the korovai may be cut up and shared with all the guests, once more emphasizing the sharing spirit of community. In other cases, the korovai may be dried and sealed in a special glass showcase or protected with a type of varnish to permanently preserve the memory of that day (Hong 79).

In any case, the presence of a korovai at Ukrainian-Canadian weddings, no matter its shape or form, is a clear symbol of Ukrainian ethnicity. Even if the entire wedding appears very Canadian, the presence of a korovai at any point during the reception signifies the importance of honouring Ukrainian roots. There is even a new development in which the korovai is making an appearance at atypical events, such as wedding anniversaries and birthdays. The korovai has become such an important symbol of Ukrainian culture, that those who wish to express their Ukrainian ethnicity appear to be incorporating it in any way possible into their lives, thus declaring how proud they are to be a Ukrainian living in Canada. 🇺🇦

(If you are interested and would like to learn more, the Peter and Doris Kule Centre for

Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore at the University of Alberta offers an abundance of information and Ukrainian folklore courses. To contact the centre, visit their website: www.ukrfolk.ca, email ukrfolk@ualberta.ca or phone 780-492-6999.)

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Anna Chudyk is an undergraduate student in the science program at the University of Alberta, who is double majoring in psychology and biology with an interest in Ukrainian folklore. She is also a musician best known for her vocal and violin performances both in English and Ukrainian, and is an artist having produced several portraits and originals in charcoal and acrylic mediums.

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An Interview With Theresa Sokyrka

Branching out from her Ukrainian roots

By Roman Brytan

Theresa Sokyrka was born in 1981 in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. This Canadian singer-songwriter studied music at Red Deer College. She is drawn to the blues and jazz more than other musical genres, and sings with passion and vulnerability. She loves to scat, adding flare and style to her songs. She comes from a very musical family, and she plays the violin, guitar, and piano.

Theresa attended the Ukrainian bilingual elementary school in Saskatoon. She currently lives in Montreal, Quebec.

On the second season of Canadian Idol, she was the final runner-up to winner Kalan Porter. She distinguished herself with the grace she showed during the judges' critiques, and her friendly personality. Zack Werner once said she was his favourite singer on the show from the first two seasons. During an Idol taping, Lionel Richie said there was "the soul of an old black woman living inside her." A memorable comment made about Sokyrka came when judge Jake Gold said, "Your future is so bright, I've got to wear shades," as he put on his sunglasses. Kalan Porter said it was great ending the show with Theresa, and that she had something really special to offer. The duet they performed during the finale, "True Colors," was arguably one of the most touching moments in Canadian Idol history.

Excerpts taken from *Wikipedia*

In 2010 Theresa returned to the music of her ancestors like never before, releasing the 8-song CD "Ukrainian Roots." Earlier this year I interviewed Theresa for a radio special featuring this album. Here are a few salient moments from that conversation. - Roman Brytan

RB: Let's first take a look at your personal background. Music, I imagine,

was "the thing" from day one?

TS: Yeah, absolutely. My parents started me on the violin when I was about eight years old. I always sang with my family in church and with my sisters at home... it was such an important part of my growing up.

RB: Did you always imagine yourself with music as the central point of who you are?

TS: Yeah, I always knew that music would be in my life, but I wasn't always sure whether or not it would be my career. I remember moments when I was a child, hoping that I could be on stage and having people watch me. It's worked out pretty well, and I'm pretty happy in life right now, doing it for a living.

RB: You're in Montreal now. What are you doing there?

TS: I'm just trying out a new scene... I moved here from Toronto a couple of years ago. In some ways Montreal is a foreign city to me, because I don't speak French very well, but I thought it's time that I learned the language, so that maybe I could even sing or write in French one day.

RB: And your formal training?

TS: I studied jazz in college, and my whole singer/songwriter thing of the past five years has made me really comfortable with music, just finding where my niche is. I'm not doing much jazz anymore, so it's kind of cool to challenge myself with the opportunity to write. It's great.

RB: Your Ukrainian CD definitely has elements of jazz throughout the arrangements...

TS: Yeah, the most appealing part [of jazz] is how you can get up on stage with people you don't even know and

know these songs that were written years ago, and have been interpreted by so many people. And, in a way, I believe that's why Ukrainian music makes me feel so good, too. You can go to any place in Canada and sing these folk songs that everybody knows.

RB: Where do your Ukrainian roots extend musically? I ask because there's definitely an interpretive quality all your own to all your folk repertoire. Did you grow up listening to rural or urban Ukrainian performers?

TS: I grew up singing in a Ukrainian Orthodox choir called "Lastiwka" from when I was about 13, so that's where it started for me. It was wonderful being part of that choir. I was a dancer, too, until I was about 18 or 19. But as far as Ukrainian music goes, I was always playing it on the fiddle or singing in the choir.

RB: Given the high-profile Idol experience, and the success you enjoyed with three original discs, especially "These Old Charms" that went gold in Canada, I'm wondering what path led you back to releasing a collection of Ukrainian standards?

TS: Well, I always toyed with the idea, and my dad was a big catalyst for this to happen. He said, "Theresa, you do these Ukrainian songs in such a unique way that I'm sure people would really

"...in a way, I believe that's why Ukrainian music makes me feel so good, too. You can go to any place in Canada and sing these folk songs that everybody knows."

enjoy an album.” He proved to be right, and not only just Ukrainian people. Here in Montreal, playing for French crowds, French people will come up to me and say, “Wow, that was so beautiful... we can tell that you’ve been singing these songs for most of your life.” It’s really nice to have people recognize that. With the help of the Shevchenko Foundation, they really got the project going; I couldn’t have done it without them.

RB: How did you manage to weed the selections down to the eight songs that made it onto the album?

TS: That was hard. I’m a big fan of Volodymyr Ivasiuk, and I wanted to put a couple of his tunes on there. I also love the music of Kvitka Cisyk... she was such an incredible singer, and died so young. But it was really hard, picking songs. There were a lot that didn’t quite make it... it was a difficult process, but I’m really happy with the songs I decided to put on there.

RB: You really show a wide range of styles and interpretations from song to song on the CD. To what extent were you guided or influenced by others?

TS: The way the album was actually recorded, I started by doing most of the pre-production in my apartment in Montreal. The feel of each tune at that point was mine, and that’s how the album was built, with just acoustic guitar and voice. Then things started happening with the producer I worked with, Benoit Morier. He’s not a Ukrainian guy, and didn’t know much about Ukrainian music... that gave such a cool flavour to it. He would challenge me by saying things like, “Well, let’s make this song into a Spaghetti Western.” Okay, that’s out of left field, but let’s go with it! (laughs) Also, I relied heavily on the talents of my friend, Carissa Klopoushak.



She’s one of the most amazing musicians I’ve ever had the opportunity to work with. They really helped with the arrangements, and it all sort of came together. It was actually really easy. I thought it would be a lot more difficult, but it just fell into place.

RB: What are you working on now?

TS: Well, I have a bunch of new songs, and I’ll probably start recording with Benoit again. I’m also working on a film soundtrack right now. I can’t say much about it yet, but it’s very challenging and pretty cool. I’ve only worked on one film before, and that was just two songs, so it’s a whole different thing doing an entire film... it’s actually going to be filmed in Alberta. We still have a lot of work to do, but I’m very excited about it.

RB: You haven’t shied away from social media. For instance, you have a myspace page... what sort of response have you

been receiving from outside Canada?

TS: It’s so strange... it’s been really great hearing from people. I have a great following in Peru, because I played on MTV Peru... a lot of people from Australia, and basically everywhere. And lately, because of this album, [I’ve been hearing from] people in Ukraine. Hopefully in the fall, if all goes well, I’ll plan a trip to Ukraine and bring the music to them. I’ve never been, and it’s time to go and see what I’ve been missing. I need to go there... I need to go there soon. 🇺🇦

Roman Brytan is Program Director at Edmonton’s 101.7 World FM Radio, where he has hosted a daily Ukrainian show for the past 28 years.



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A Short Reminiscence for Babunia Stocky


By Colin Matty

I never knew my Grandmother. She passed when I was nine, and I chose not to go to her funeral. I do not know why.

My memories of her are largely constructed, or shambling and murky in nature. When I conjure her, I see caramel and mint candies growing stale in a wooden bowl. I see swarms of wild strawberries growing thick by a brown fence. There is a lot of grass and a lot of flowers. On the front door, there is a duck flying through the air – the brown and gray and dusk-muted green, all reminiscent of the perpetual autumn that pervades the rest of her home. I see withered and gnarled hands sheathed in loose, soft skin that holds bones thin and deft at what they do. Her hands do not shake, and she leaves her ring on as she kneads her dough.

The night of her funeral, I dreamt of dinosaurs and all terrain vehicles and woke in the middle of the night feeling confused and oddly fixated on my Grandmother. Some part of her was mixed up in my visions of triceratops, and I think that it was then I first tasted guilt. Despite having seen her only a few times in my young life, a strange sense of allegiance wronged was welling up in my chest – that I had somehow done a disservice to those spotted hands that once thrust hard candy into mine, that plucked tiny flecks of red from a sea of green leaves, that pressed and folded her dough into nourishing pockets of potato, green onion, bacon, and salt. So strong was the feeling of guilt that, along with my other few imaginations and recollections, this dream and the waking that followed serves as the strongest, most affecting memory I associate with her: Sitting up alone in my small bed, trying to puzzle out feelings of what I might later call neglect or denial, binds me more to her than any half remembered trips to her silent home of burnt and earthen colours. For me, her death passed with only this inexplicable waking. I let her go without ceremony, without question, and without tears.

The only other event I can tie to her is the first and only time my father made perogies. Flour all over the kitchen, and six small rows of neatly placed pads of dough. It was winter – dark and bitter cold wrapped around our house, hot from the stove. We had fogged up the windows with our breath and our singing, and if waking in the night was my first knowledge of remorse, then this was my first knowledge of celebration. My brother and my sister ceased their squabbling, my mother and father did the same – and I stood in the midst of it all: united to them and to my Grandmother by this uncharacteristic dip into an ancestry we all shared, and all ignored. And for that, Grandmother, I thank you. And for that, Grandmother, I am sorry. I am sorry I did not go to your funeral. I am sorry that my father, your son, forgot how to make perogies before I thought to

ask. I am sorry that I know you only as Grandmother, and not as Babunia. I am sorry that I have denied your blood in my veins, and that it is only now, after falling in and out of love with a very Ukrainian girl from a very Ukrainian family, that I see how rich it is. I promise that my children, and their children will know where you are from. They will know that it is your blood that turns their bruises blue and yellow, and I will teach them how to make perogies - even if I first will need to teach myself. 

Colin Matty recently graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Alberta, majoring in both Drama and Philosophy. A budding writer, poet, actor and improviser, his work in the arts has only just begun. Look for him in arts festivals around Edmonton this summer as both performer and playwright.

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*By Anatoli W. Murba, President,
Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus*


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Windsor area, but also Toronto, St Catharines, Syracuse, Cleveland, New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Hartford, Virginia, San Diego and Edmonton. Scheduling is a monumental task, as is raising the funds just to hold one rehearsal. All members are volunteers. Finding talented bandura players and choristers is also a challenge. We only can have the best in order to maintain high artistic standards.

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older. Our youngest member is 17 and most senior member is 85. All members work together to fulfill the mission of the UBC and the *kobzari*. Our satisfaction comes from the audience. When we see people smiling and singing along with our music, or shedding a tear, we know we have truly been able to express and share a moment with the audience.

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