My Past and Identities*

John-Paul Himka

Detroit was booming when I was born there in 1949, and it attracted immigrants from all over the eastern half of America: from the Delta, the Appalachians, and the moribund little coaltowns of Pennsylvania. My father was part of the anthracite emigration, as was my mother. I grew up in an extended family in which Polish, Ukrainian, Slovak, and Italian were tossed about by the older generation, above the heads of the monkey-in-the-middle younger generation to which I belonged. It was after the war, most of the men had seen service, everyone was too busy being American to imagine that there was any point in teaching us young 'uns the old languages, which hardly any of them could read or write in any case. The food was a mixture of city chicken, hot dogs, ravioli, and *gołąbki* (or *holubtsi*, depending on who was doing the talking). The older they were, the more old-country they were. My father and mother were the babies of their families and among the most assimilated. Still, there was a constant buzz of ethnicity in the air, even if none of the family had heard the word back then.

There was also my grandmother. My birth mother had passed away when I was a baby, and some years were to go by before my father remarried. In the meantime, I was raised by my grandmother, who came to live with us. She had left the old country in 1909 but had never really gotten a handle on English. When she came to raise me, though, she made a choice that both of us later regretted: she would improve her English by raising me in that language. I later had to learn her native language, and we switched to that as our medium of communication. It would be an understatement to say that I loved my grandmother very, very much, and I spent much of my childhood trying to figure her out. Where did she come from? She said, "Lemberg, Austria," but it wasn't on the map. Eventually I found it in a historical atlas in my father's library and matched the location on a modern map: it was now "Lvov, Russia." By about age twelve I had many things figured out, including that Grandma was Ukrainian, but Grandma was going to be constantly setting puzzles for me to solve, even long after she passed away. Many of the things she told me just didn't make sense in terms of the Ukrainian history I subsequently read and was taught. Long before I could express it, I understood that there was an important distinction to be made between the national codification of Ukrainian history and the actual past that was experienced by people who are counted as part of the Ukrainian nation.

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The big jump in my consciousness came when I was fourteen. I wanted to become a priest and left home for a minor seminary, St. Basil's, in Stamford, Connecticut. I had been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, attended a Roman Catholic School, sang in Latin in Our Lady of Sorrows boys' choir, served as an altar boy at a Roman Catholic summer camp, and heard Sunday mass at the local Roman Catholic parish. But the discoveries of the previous few years had revealed to me that, in spite of this Roman Catholic upbringing, I was nonetheless canonically a member of an Eastern rite and that if I wanted to be a priest, I needed a special dispensation to enter the Roman priesthood. But by then I was all keen to enter Grandma's exotic church, as I thought of it, and off I went to the Ukrainian-rite seminary.

I received an incredible education at that institution over the next five years, taught by remarkable men. My teacher of Latin had done his doctorate with Moses Hadas at Columbia and had written his thesis in Latin; my music teacher was probably the most prominent conductor of the Ukrainian diaspora; my Ukrainian teacher has recently been named to succeed to the metropolitan throne of Lviv, that is, to assume the leadership of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church worldwide. Most of the teachers had doctorates and great erudition in complicated fields like patristic anthropology. Quite a few had serious academic publications to their credit. Devoted to their church and nation, they lavished their knowledge on us ingrate boys instead of making proper careers. We made fun of them all the time, but they inspired us to learn. We played sports, but we also followed the example of our preceptors, each according to his talents: arranging the sacred choral music of our church, painting icons, writing the lives of the saints, studying the traditions of the other Eastern churches.

Aside from this formal education, I learned a great deal about Ukrainians, particularly two kinds of Ukrainians: those whose parents had come after World War II and who were themselves born abroad (in other words: DPs) and those whose grandparents had immigrated before World War I, as mine had. These two groups accounted for the overwhelming majority of the seminarians, and there was always tension between them. Most of the first-immigration kids came from Pennsylvania and from an environment that retained much more of its Ukrainian character than mine had. I fit in well with these guys, from whose number my closest friends were drawn. But I was also impressed by the postwar immigrants: completely fluent in Ukrainian, possessing a worked-out nationalist worldview, tough-minded. With time, I was to gravitate more strongly toward them and to assimilate more of their culture. After I left the seminary, I always sought the company of this postwar immigration and eventually married into it.

My vocation was no match for the spirit of the times. At the end of the 1960s I left the seminary and plunged into the radical culture and radical politics of the outside world. At the University of Michigan, where I continued my education, my life consisted of militant demonstrations against the war, against racism, and against capitalist exploitation, as well as of lectures and seminars.

Michigan was an excellent place to continue my interest in things Ukrainian and develop a deeper interest in all things East European. Once again I had remarkable teachers, and peers. I came under the tutelage of Roman Szporluk, now [1991–2007] the Mykhailo Hrushevsky Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University. I also studied Balkan history with John Fine and Russian history with Horace Dewey.

Close friends of my Michigan years included Roman Solchanyk and Patrick Moore, now prominent analysts of Ukrainian and Balkan affairs respectively, as well as Robert Donia, the Bosnian specialist, and Marian Krzyzowski, longtime editor of *Studium Papers*. In these years I also met the scholars connected with the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute; later I was to spend time with them at their home institution, and some of them were to end up with me in Edmonton.

During this period I had to reconstruct my own Ukrainian identity. The religious underpinnings had been shuttered. Moreover, I needed a Ukrainian identity that could accommodate the extreme leftism that I now espoused. My grandmother and one of my teachers at the seminary had already left me with some clues that I followed until I came upon the rich traditions of the Ukrainian socialist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And Professor Szporluk guided me to the Ukrainian socialist thinkers that exercised the largest influence on me for many years thereafter: the father of Ukrainian radicalism, Mykhailo Drahomanov, and the Marxist historian and interpreter of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, Roman Rosdolsky. I eventually was to write my doctoral dissertation (and first book) on the history of the socialist movement in Galicia and translate one of Rosdolsky's books into English.

I was not the only one trying to reconcile a Ukrainian identity with the radical North American zeitgeist. I came across the journal *New Directions* from New York and, really much more exciting for me at the time, the journals coming out from the Ukrainian New Left in Toronto: *Meta* and *Diialoh*. Later I was to move to Canada and marry *Meta*'s co-editor.

Before that, however, in 1974–76 I embarked on my first trip to Eastern Europe, spending a year in Cracow, six months in Leningrad, and a month each in Lviv and Kyiv. It was my first encounter with the other Ukrainians, the ones who had not left for the West. In Cracow the Ukrainians were similar to the postwar Ukrainians I knew back home: well versed in Ukrainian lore, nationalist, religious, antisocialist. We got along well in spite of many differences of opinion. In Leningrad I encountered greater variety: displaced Galicians with the nationalist worldview; other displaced Ukrainians who, like the national poet Taras Shevchenko over a century earlier, found that the alienation they experienced in the northern Russian metropolis only led them to a deeper appreciation of their roots, although, unlike Shevchenko, they did not know as much about these roots; others yet who could still remember some words of the Ukrainian language but had basically melted into "the Soviet people."

Ukraine itself offered me even more variety. On that first trip and on many other trips over the next twenty-some years, I engaged in close encounters with mighty and fledgling scholars, illiterate peasant women, enraged dissidents, simpatico and obnoxious Russians (whether one or the other, their days in authority were numbered), writers, artists, stamp collectors, crooks, saints, and *biznesmeny* on the make. Over the years I watched my friends rewrite their autobiographies, redefine their present and past selves, and reconstruct their identities (I should add: as I myself am perforce doing in this essay).

In 1977 I left the United States for Canada, where I was offered a contract position at the University of Alberta. Again, I was fortunate in the company I encountered. The professor of Ukrainian history was one of the great luminaries of the diaspora, Ivan Lysiak Rudnytsky. We became close friends, even though he was a conservative and by this time I was an orthodox Marxist. Until his death in 1984, he continually gave me

things to read and engaged me in discussion and debate, turning our friendship and working relationship also into a seminar. In Edmonton I was able to join the editorial board of *Diialoh*, which had moved there from Toronto. We had a slogan that captured our politics perfectly: "For socialism and democracy in an independent Ukraine." (Most of us later settled for the partial fulfillment of our program that history offered.) We published a journal in Ukrainian and, spicier yet, set up a modest smuggling and intelligence network in Eastern Europe and Ukraine. In addition to the deeply conspiratorial *Diialoh*, we also established a left-wing Ukrainian cultural society, Hromada, which in turn gave birth to the Hromada Housing Co-operative, where some of the old stalwarts (myself included) still live. In the late seventies/early eighties life was intense, all cigarettes and public forums and layouts and debates. Key figures in the milieu included Bohdan Krawchenko, whom we nicknamed "Captain Ukraine" and who later became director of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and still later an adviser to the independent Ukrainian government; Myrna Kostash, author of *All of Baba's Children* and later head of the Writers' Union of Canada; Halyna Freeland, founder of Common Woman Books and presently executive director of the Ukrainian Legal Foundation in Kyiv; and many, many others, not least of whom was my wife Chrystia Chomiak, an indefatigable activist in many progressive Ukrainian causes.

In the later 1980s things began to change, most dramatically on the international scene, but also in my personal life. Chrystia and I had children, and I also ended up in the position formerly occupied by Professor Rudnytsky, with all the responsibilities that entailed. I managed to finish my second book, on the impact of the Ukrainian national movement on the Galician countryside, the most consistently Marxist book in my oeuvre. I decided that as my third monograph I would write a study of the Greek Catholic church in its relationship to the nationality question. It took me about ten years to write that book, during which time I re-examined and re-evaluated many of the premises I had been working with hitherto. It has been a time extremely fertile in ideas and, especially, doubts, one fruit of which is the study of national identity published in this volume.**

** That is, John-Paul Himka's article "The Construction of Nationality in Galician Rus': Icarian Flights in Almost All Directions," in *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*, ed. Suny and Kennedy, 109–64.