Paska and Mustard

Writing the immigrant experience

Nestor Dmytriw (1863–1925) was the first priest of the Ukrainian Catholic rite in Canada.

The following two stories were written almost 100 years apart, but both provide glimpses into life in Alberta for people from eastern Europe.

"RUTHENIAN EASTER—and a French Catholic Priest" is the earliest published work of Ukrainian prose fiction written in Canada. Appearing in the May 20, 1897, edition of a weekly called *Svoboda* (*Liberty*), the story was the first in a series of short fiction and memoiristic sketches entitled "Scenes from Canada," by Nestor Dmytriw.

Dmytriw had emigrated to the United States in 1895 and become the editor of *Svoboda*, which was founded in Pennsylvania in 1893 and is still published today, the oldest Ukrainian-language newspaper in North America. Hired by the Canadian Department of the Interior in 1897 to report on conditions in the burgeoning Ukrainian settlements arising from Sir Clifford Sifton's vigorous immigration policies, Dmytriw travelled extensively throughout Canada. His detailed accounts of these voyages, *Canadian Ruthenia: Travel Memoirs*, appeared first in instalments in *Svoboda* and later as a small book that was circulated widely in Galicia and Bukovyna to educate potential immigrants about life in the New World.

"Ruthenian Easter," datelined "Calgary, 8 May 1897," was probably based on an actual event. And since *Svoboda* had a growing audience among Ukrainian immigrants in Western Canada, the tale would have been read by pioneer settlers in virtually all of the communities Dmytriw had visited.

Dmytriw's most ambitious work of fiction was a documentary novella called *Tymko Havryliuk: A Story from Immigrant Life*, which appeared in eight weekly instalments in *Svoboda* during the fall of 1897. Describing the trials and tribulations of a Ukrainian peasant farmer from the time he decides to sell his land in the old country through his trip overseas to his arrival on a homestead near Edmonton, *Tymko Havryliuk* was intended to provide detailed information about the entire immigration process so as to better prepare any farmers considering a move to Canada.

Although Dmytriw himself had intended to settle permanently in Canada, his personal circumstances changed and after 1898 he spent the remainder of his life as a secular (i.e., in the Ukrainian rite, married) parish priest in the United States, where he died in Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1925.

"Ruthenian" is the Latinized form for "Rusyn," the name commonly used to identify Ukrainians prior to the beginning of the 20th century. The term is derived from Rus', the name for the medieval state that flourished on Ukrainian territory until Kyiv was overrun by the Tatars in 1240 CE. By the time of the First World War, "Ruthenian" had been almost entirely supplanted by "Ukrainian" to denote the inhabitants of what had once been Kyivan Rus'.

Paska (plural *pasky*) is the traditional Ukrainian Easter bread. Because it is made with white flour, it is different from the dark, coarser-grained bread typically consumed by Ukrainian peasants, "white" bread being regarded as a luxury that only wealthy nobles could regularly enjoy. "*Paska*" is also used synonymously for "Easter," being the Ukrainian form for the word *pascha*, originally derived from the Hebrew name for Passover. The original title of Dmytriw's short story is "Ruska paska—a frantsuzkii ks'ondz," which the translator has rendered as "Ruthenian Easter" so as to distinguish it from Dmytriw's more frequent use of *paska* for paschal bread.

Kovbasa (*kielbasa* in Polish, *kolbasa* in Russian) is the Ukrainian word for sausage, often rendered as *kubasa* in popular Canadian usage. Eating meat prior to Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ, was a violation of the traditional preparatory fast during the Great Lent.

In the original, Dmytriw renders Calgary as "*Gal'gary*," but provides a footnote with the correct English spelling.

THE SECOND STORY, "Mustard," by Andrew Wedderburn, is an excerpt from his novel-in-progress *This is a Gravity Boiler* "about being ten somewhere west of High River with submarines, lemonade stands, meatpacking plants, roman candle fights, Under Queens, Kazakhstan, curling, and the Milk Chicken Bomb." Wedderburn graduated from the creative writing program at the University of Calgary, and nearly completed two courses in Russian. He works in community radio and is an occasional bartender. He has played rock and roll music in the eight contiguous Canadian provinces, and hopes to make P.E.I. and Newfoundland sometime when the snow melts.

Andrew Wedderburn

Ruthenian Easter–and a French Catholic Priest

1897

A Scene from Emigrant Life

by Nestor Dmytriw Translated by Jars Balan Illustration by Larry Bowhay

"Maryna!"

"What?"

"Are we going to eat *paska* this year?"

"Why, you can eat some cruddy disease if you're so keen on Canada," the woman answered angrily, and turned away from her antagonist—her husband, who had brought her somewhere to the ends of the earth, where it wasn't the way it should be among people—indeed, where things were as different as night and day. Somehow things got turned upside down—in the most inhuman way—here in Canada.

The woman snorted out of spite. If only Stepan hadn't mentioned the *paska*—but that pricked her heart, like a Canadian mosquito. Two small children played quietly in the railway car, and for them it seemed as if *paska* did not even enter their thoughts—they held bread in their hands that was whiter than the *paska* at home, and so it was all the same to them—though it wasn't the same for Stepan. The unfortunate man fell silent when his wife responded so harshly, and he sank totally into recollections, into memories of the past. He recalled the pre-Easter times from his childhood years; he could remember well how he pinched raisins from the *paska*, and how he once tore off some *kovbasa* on the Saturday before Easter and gulped it down behind the barn. He couldn't wait for the blessing.

As if it were today, he remembered how, as a young man on his way to the Passion service, he had hit his head on a fence; the poor wretch couldn't see anything—his vision had been clouded from fasting. And was he the only one who experienced that cloudy vision? Everyone had it, the entire village, with the exception of the priest, who could see a little, along with the teacher, though not very well, while the choirmaster, may he rest in peace, couldn't even make out the candles in church. People would marvel at how he could sing with his vision clouded, but he had memorized everything from the chants to the canticles to the harmonies, why, everything—besides, who knew what all that stuff in those big books was called. The deceased fasted—may he enter God's Heavenly Kingdom—he fasted rigorously. It often happened that he would be walking

through the village and was so weakened from the fasting that he would actually stagger—he couldn't even stand on his feet. His enemies would say that the poor fellow was coming back from the tavern, but that wasn't true—why, he became deceased from the fasting. And it happened at Easter.

Lord, what a joy it was! The whole night beginning Saturday they burned gates, wheels, posts—whatever they could get their hands on. The boys roared with laughter, the owners cursed, sinning, so that it was frightful to listen to. And why did they have to sin so much, when that was the custom, to steal gates before Easter?

Stepan pondered, smoked his pipe, glanced furtively at his wife—as if he wanted to say 'And do you remember, Maryna, how I was a sexton, eh? A poor man was afraid to speak to me, because I might have said something nasty to him.' And because Stepan was a sexton, even people in the next village knew him. It often happened that on Easter he personally helped His Reverence to don the white chasuble, lit all of the candles, got the fire going in the stoked incensory—and when they read the Gospels at the twelve stations of the cross, then Stepan would tinkle-tinkle the bell at each station, while in the belfry the bells would be rung and rung.

Lord, will I live to see that in Canada?! Poor Stepan scratched his head—he wanted to reply to his wife, but nonetheless left her in peace. And that blessed *paska*, and that joy! Why, he placed his *paska* at the very end—as was customary for the sexton. And the reverends already knew which *paska* was his, and so they splashed it with holy water—as if to say 'That's for you, Stepan, for so faithfully serving the church and the Divine Father.'

"Oh Lordy, Lordy, what's it going to be like here?" Stepan blurted out loud.

"What are you dreaming about?!" his wife yelled.

"Maryna!"

"What?!"

"Maybe you could bake a *paska*."

"And where is one supposed to bake it? Here, in the railway car?"

"Hmmm… dummy. Why, tomorrow, when we get to Calgary, to the immigration hall, you can bake it there."

Maryna began musing—it was obvious that she wanted to have blessed *paska*—and after a moment retorted, "And so what if I baked it, where are you going to get a Catholic priest, eh?"

They both fell silent, because that was precisely the crux of the whole matter. Stepan even lost all hope of having blessed *paska*. He scratched his head, pondered, fantasized, but couldn't think of anything.

They arrived in Calgary, went to the immigration hall, looked around, and saw our people baking *paska*. Stepan went to his wife, grabbed some money, bought flour, meat, butter, cheese and other necessary and unnecessary things, and soon his wife was baking *paska* while Stepan paced about just wringing his hands in anticipation.

"Oh, my poor head," said one man, "how is one supposed to speak to that priest?"

"How else is one to speak to him," said Stepan, "if not in Ruthenian."

"Don't talk nonsense, because how's a French priest going to know Ruthenian."

"How can that be?" said Stepan. "Isn't there a Ruthenian Catholic priest here? How's a French priest supposed to bless a *paska*—are they the same faith as us?"

"Who knows what he's like, if he's similar or not, but the cross in the church, and the way that it looks, is holy, so perhaps it's not a sin if he does the blessing of the *pasky*. And you can tell from the Catholic church in town, though it's not quite like in our faith, that our reverends wouldn't always be going there on church holidays to give confession, because if it were a sin, then our reverends wouldn't go there, of that you can be sure."

After consultations on the matter, two of our people went as deputies to the French Catholic priest, including Stepan because he was a sexton. Along the way they debated whether the priest knew Ruthenian or not, but they came to the conclusion that anyone with an educated mind like that of a priest would have to speak Ruthenian. They rang the doorbell—and the priest emerged in a long robe, girded with a sash, above which he wore a large metal cross. They kissed the cross first, and after that the chubby hand of the priest, saying, "We ask you, spiritual father, if you would bless our *pasky* because it is Easter for us tomorrow, and we are not some kind of pagans who would eat unblessed *paska*."

The Frenchman's eyes widened, he listened so attentively that he almost burst his eardrums, but in the end he couldn't make any sense of the babbling. He spoke to the people in French, in English, in German—but they, of course, understood nothing. It was an inauspicious moment; what were they to do? The priest was perplexed—the men scratched the napes of their necks—it was utter despair. Stepan, not having served for nothing with a reverend—arrived at a solution. He kissed the priest's hand, so that he wouldn't get upset, and without saying anything, but merely beckoning with his finger, summoned the priest to follow him. The priest took his hat—and everybody went out and walked to the immigration hall.

In the meantime the women had covered the tables, put out the *pasky*, eggs, butter, meat and plenty of breakfast dishes, quickly changed their clothes, and were waiting. The priest entered, and the women ran over to him and kissed both hands of His Grace. The Frenchman stood by the table and looked at everything—thinking to himself, 'What is it that these people want from me?' Stepan

> "We ask you, spiritual father, if you would bless our *pasky* because it is Easter for us tomorrow."

explained, miming what to do—but the priest stood there as if he were dumbstruck and grasped absolutely nothing. Everyone struggled for half an hour and for all it was already reaching a point of desperation, but the priest eventually understood. The Frenchman thought to himself: 'Aha! These are good people, certainly Christians, and they are holding a picnic and want to entertain me—one shouldn't be too proud to accept God's gifts.' The priest put several eggs in his pocket and reached over for a small *paska*—prompting Stepan to snatch his meat and to cry out, "Grab your food, folks, because he'll take everything from you!" The people lurched forward, everyone after his own *paska*—a hubbub ensued, the women began arguing, one saying it was mine, another that it was hers. The terrified Frenchman yelled, "It's alright!" but it was useless. Stepan scratched himself once more on the nape of his neck as if to say 'It's not the same here, the way our reverends blessed *pasky*!'

Calgary, 8 May 1897
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Jars Balan is a writer and translator living in Edmonton. He is co-director of the Ukrainian Canadian program at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies.

Mustard

Excerpted from *This is a Gravity Boiler* by Andrew Wedderburn

Illustration by Larry Bowhay

1987

We walk by the IGA and there's Vaslav, two paper bags full to bursting. Walks up to his pickup truck and sets the bags on the hood. Takes his credit card out of his wallet and scrapes the ice off the windshield.

"Hey, you got some groceries?" asks Mullen. Vaslav puts his wallet away and opens the door.

"Get in, kids," he says. "Snow. Time to make mustard."

"Mustard?" I ask. We get in the truck and scoot up against the passenger door so Vaslav has room to shift the stick, each of us with a paper grocery bag on our lap. Vaslav lights a cigarette and starts up the truck, grinds the gears and coughs and backs up out of the IGA lot.

"Mustard," says Vaslav. "Have to make mustard when it snows."

Solzhenitsyn sits on the porch at the Russians' house, wool mitts and a knit cap with ear flaps. "Snow, snow, snow," he says, when we all get out of the truck. Claps his hands together and spits on the step.

"Solzhenitsyn, Solzhenitsyn, Solzhenitsyn, can I give you a face wash?" asks Mullen.

"No."

"Come on," says Mullen. Dips a mitt in the snow.

"Throw snow at me and I'll tie you to the railroad tracks," says Solzhenitsyn.

"You're not curling in the Fort Macleod briar this year," I say.

"You can't curl if you want to bet," says Solly. "Have to bet sometime."

"Are you going to bet a lot this year?"

He scratches his head. "This year I have it on. The years of trial and error have produced what I consider to be an infallible method for predicting the outcome of curling matches."

"So you're going to bet a lot."

"Fortunately for us," says Solzhenitsyn, "Vaslav's gambling addiction is reliable as Japanese trains. And only getting worse, what with all the checkers. Any bet I make he has to top just to keep his hands from shaking."

Vaslav grunts, kicks the door of his truck shut. "I'll see you in hell."

"You're going to spend an awful lot of time in hell," says Solzhenitsyn, "seeing all these people."

Inside, the radiators hiss and cough and one of the lamps flickers. We all take off our boots, put them on the little wooden shelf beside the door, and shuffle in our socks into the kitchen. Vaslav sets his brown paper bags on the counter, pulls out bottles of white vinegar, jars of spices, cloves of garlic. We sit in the wooden chairs and rock, none of the legs quite the same length. Our feet not reaching the ground.

"Mustard," says Vaslav, "has to be made in the snow. Summertime mustard is bad for the digestion, and rain mustard gives you bad dreams."

"I dreamed I had a beard," says Mullen. "A big beard, all bushy. I could keep stuff in it. Pencils and matches and a harmonica. Can you play the harmonica?"

"Rain mustard gives you mildew dreams," says Vaslav. "Mould and rot and centipedes." He bends down and gets some steel mixing bowls out of a cupboard, a dented pot, a wooden spoon. "In Petersburg we always made mustard on the first snowfall because that makes it the luckiest. First snow mustard makes your sons grow up strong and smart, and melts women's hearts."

"No women in this town to melt," says Solzhenitsyn. He folds up a paper airplane and throws it over Mullen's head. Lands in a potted plant on the window sill. Vaslav coughs.

"Go chase a skirt," he says. "Go down to the post office and buy some stamps."

"Right," says Solzhenitsyn, looking at us. "Stamps."

Vaslav gets a mortar and pestle out of a cupboard, like on Steadman's pharmacy sign. Pours in yellow mustard seeds and crushes them up. Sour yellow dust rises up in the air. Mullen kicks me with his damp sock under the table and I kick him back. Solzhenitsyn gets a beer out of the fridge, wedges the cap against the counter, pops it off with the flat of his hand. Sits in the corner and folds up the newspaper so he can read it in one hand and drink beer with the other. Vaslav grinds up the mustard seeds and shakes the yellow powder into a steel bowl. Opens a white paper bag tied up with a string. Pours in more yellow. "Napa Valley," he says. "I have to get this by mail. A goddamn headache getting it over the border."

He stirs up all the powders and sets the bowl on top of the toaster oven. Chops up garlic cloves, two, four, six. Smashes them with the blade of his big knife. The air gets thick. Sprinkles salt on the garlic and spreads it down flat on the cutting board. He turns on the gas stove and narrows his eyes at the flame, turns the knob slowly right, then left, then right again, until the flame is the right size. Sticks a finger in the butter dish above the stove, drops a yellow smudge into an iron pan.

"When Brezhnev was in charge we couldn't get butter and had to save soap shavings for fat."

"You're full of it," says Solzhenitsyn. Vaslav drops in the garlic, it sputters and stinks. Brown sugar and salt, and ginger and cinnamon, and other spices. I don't know what they are and he doesn't say.

"The most important part of mustard," says Vaslav, "is vodka."

"Russian vodka," I say. "'Cause it's the best, right?"

"You can't get good vodka even if you drive to Calgary," says Vaslav. He stands up on his tiptoes and cranes up to the top shelf. Grunts. "Good vodka, I mean Russian or Polish vodka, is repeatedly distilled, smooth, doesn't have any crap in it. But good vodka doesn't make good mustard." He gets down the bottle, puffs. Sets it on the table. *Lloydminster's Finest Polar Vodka*, says the label. Has a picture of a mustachioed man in a fur hat, with lightning bolts in the background.

"This isn't good vodka?" asks Mullen.

Vaslav laughs and laughs. "This will take the enamel off the side of a bathtub."

The pan spits and stinks and steams and he opens the vodka bottle and turns it upside down over the pan. A cloud of steam goes up, the pan sizzles. He stands with the bottle upside down and glugs the whole bottle into the pan.

"Lord," says Vaslav. "The earth is hard and cold, we dig in the cold earth, and always, underneath, harder and colder. The stone heart of the earth will freeze the lungs and burst the chest. We cough ice, we gasp, throat full of snow, and die, harder and colder and shovels and picks helpless at the side. Lord warm my fingers, Jesus warm my toes, and I'll dig in your frozen heart no longer."

"McClaghan's going to raise the rent," says Solzhenitsyn.

Vaslav stirs the mustard. "That hot water tank will go any day," he says. "Do you know how often those things need maintenance?"

"Horwitz says McClaghan left a letter under his door." Solly unfolds the newspaper, turns a page, folds it back up. "Says he's going to raise the rent in January. To reflect the rise in property taxes."

"Lord," says Vaslav. "The earth is hard and cold, we dig in the cold earth, and always, underneath, harder and colder. The stone heart of the earth will freeze the lungs and burst the chest. We cough ice, we gasp, throat full of snow, and die, harder and colder and shovels and picks helpless at the side. Lord warm my fingers, Jesus warm my toes, and I'll dig in your frozen heart no longer."

"Every five years. You get scale built up. When did you last see a repair man? It's the water we cook our food in. The water we brush our teeth with." He picks up the steaming pot, moves it to the back burner. Takes the steel bowl with the mustard powder and pours in a stream of cold water. Stirs it into a thick paste.

"The water tank is fine," says Solly. "Not that I'm advocating McClaghan profiting more off our backs."

"McClaghan wants us to get rickets and die in the cold," says Vaslav. He wraps a checkered cloth around the handle of the hot pan and pours it, slowly, into the mustard paste. Stirs with the other hand. "In the cold," he says. "I want a cold wind to blow him into hell."

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