Nikolai Maksymiuk 1886 – 1918

I know five things about Nikolai Maksymiuk.

He died in 1918 when my mother was four years old. That's one. After labouring in coal mines somewhere in Poland or Germany, he emigrated to Canada in 1911. That's two. He settled in Edmonton and sent for his betrothed, my grandmother, Palahna Kosovan, from the village of Dzhuriv in Galicia. That's three. He worked at a packing plant. That's four. By age thirty-three, he was dead. That's five.

I ask my second-cousin, Petro Kosovan, in Zabolotiv, Ukraine, what he remembers of family lore about Nikolai. "Nikolai went to Germany, earned extra money to go to Canada, went there, built a house and then brought your grandmother over in 1912 or 1913. At first they were poor. They worked very hard." End of story.

I had hoped for more from Ukraine, some thread of the story of Nikolai that they had passed on about the (fantastical?) journey away from the village that had also taken their kinswoman, Palahna Kosovan, with him. The point of view of those who stayed behind. Something to add to his biography as we told it in Canada. But it turns out that from our very different vantage points, a century after the main events and on different continents, Petro and I "remember" exactly the same things.

But there are places, nooks and crannies, where I go looking for my grandfather, or someone like him. He does leave a trace of his brief life in a couple of civic and church documents, a school report, and three photographs; in the transcript of an interview with my mother for the Ukrainian Folklore Centre's "Local Culture and Diversity on the Prairies Project," and in my father's unpublished memoir, *A Gift to Last*; in a video ballad, on websites, in a Soviet Ukrainian Gazetteer; and, finally, in a cemetery of the City of Edmonton.

I open dad's memoir, *A Gift to Last.* He begins when Nikolai was 17 and his brother Andrew 15, and there was nothing to hold them in the village, neither their father's "pitifully small farm,"

subdivided each generation, nor the grave of their mother. Ivan Maksymiuk had married three wives and buried two of them when the boys, old enough to shift for themselves, shook the mud off their boots and tramped out of Dzhuriv for the Silesian mines.

My father had obviously done some research, for he claims that the coal mines of Silesia were expanding production and required all sorts of brute labour – the cheaper the better – just when young men like the Maksymiuk brothers were seeking it: "Poor and untutored young Ukrainians were leaving their homes to seek fortunes elsewhere."

Nikolai gave four years to the mines until "he got the itch to go to Canada." But he wasn't after the land, the "free" quarter-section. Land – earth, soil – the true measure of a peasant's wealth. But if there wasn't enough of it, it was just muck. He never homesteaded, sinking his luck into a small city lot and the modest house he built on it in Edmonton, then, having sent for my grandmother still in Dzhuriv, struck out for the packing plant.

Nikolai/Nick was on his way to becoming an Edmontonian, and I look for him and try to picture him in the urban institutions of "Anglo" Edmonton that had the resources to give a semi-skilled, semi-literate immigrant a hand-up. Methodist clergy, for example, Ukrainian converts among them, founded Missions and perhaps Nick wandered into one of their Ukrainian-language services grateful too for their storefront operation on Kinistino Avenue, not far from the farmers' market, where the Methodists helped publish a Ukrainian-language newspaper. They competed for Galician souls with the Presbyterians, who opened a Mission on the same avenue, in a converted smithy.

What was in it for Nick? Assimilation of a sort, into the city, its civic institutions (schools, hospitals, tax offices), an economy (that farmers' market, a lumberyard, coal mines in the river bank, a stockyard), roads that intersected as streets north-south with avenues east-west, and houses erected on narrow lots that formed Edmonton's rudimentary neighbourhoods. And jobs: ditch-diggers, draymen, house-painters, blacksmiths, slaughterhouse workers.

The Swift Canadian Company had opened operations in North Edmonton in 1908. By 1913, the plant employed 400 people slaughtering cattle, hogs, sheep and poultry.

In 1914, Nikolai Maksymiuk is twenty-eight-years-old. He has a wife, a house, neighbours, and a job for seventeen cents an hour as a labourer at Swift Canadian packing plant.

In his memoir, my father included some brief notices about my mother's origins, that she was born March 27, 1915, in Edmonton to Nikolai and Palahna Maksymiuk, but was "orphaned" at the age of four when Nikolai died. Dad wrote that "no one at the time seemed to know what ailed him," but my mother was sure: "My father died of pneumonia, walking to and from the meat-packing plant."

The Maksymiuks did not live in Packingtown but a kilometre west of it in a working-class neighbourhood with "Anglo" neighbours among the Ukrainians, families who raised chickens and even, as in Baba's case, grazed a cow along the railway tracks across the street. The question arises: if they had lived in Packingtown, sparing Nikolai the long slog to and from Swift's in all weathers, might he have been spared the pneumonia?

Or was it the work itself that weakened him, a working day in which 350 cattle, 1200 hogs, 500 sheep and lambs and 500 calves were slaughtered, their carcasses hauled around by men not machines? Workers on the killing floor lost fingers, hands, whole limbs, to their own butcher knives while, in the tankhouse where all the inedible parts of an animal, its bone, guts, horns and hooves were rendered into oils and fertilizer, a "dirty place to begin with, you know, all the guts and the blood and the hair." (Alex Goruk worked at Canada Packers in the 1940s.)

If Nikolai worked in the room where blood was dried to a powder for use in animal feed, this job alone, month after month, may have killed him. When the blood was dry, workers scooped it into gunny sacks and, after about ten minutes of this operation, "you couldn't see the fellow holding the bag and he's standing only two feet away." The tankhouse air was thick with fine dust, blood dust, and for the next two days, you spit and choke, coughing up blood. Is this what happened to Nikolai? Yet my father wrote that no one seemed to know what "ailed" him and my mother, grieving and mourning a father she never knew, narrated no details of his dying that would pinpoint a cause.

I don't suppose Nick died in a hospital. Who would have had the money for that? Was a doctor even summoned - who would pay? Perhaps neighbours were summoned, or were roused by the sounds of my grandmother's unintelligible panic, my mother's wails. When it came time to bury Nikolai, I hope it is true that, according to a history of Ukrainian labour in Canada, funeral costs were paid from the wages he had earned but never collected. Not a pauper's grave, then. It was winter. Who dug his grave?

Postcard 1920s

You could buy this image of the Swift Canadian Company Plant as it stood in 1914 and mail it to someone to impress, that Edmonton had its own "industrial centre." And over it loomed the great stacks of the packing plants, as slender and upright as the abattoir and packing operations were squat, crouched under the weight of a million bricks. In the 1920s, the Swift Canadian plant was merely functional – swathes of featureless cubes of brick, walls punched with rectangular windows no better than squint. But the smokestack soars right out the top of the frame. The first time that I contemplate this image, I think: "If my grandfather has a grave, it may as well be here."

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