Wayfinder

On Myrna Kostash’s new book, Ghosts in a Photograph

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I’ve dog-eared the daylights out of the advance-reader copy. I’ve pored over it, moved through it, as I would a guidebook, a reference text. I shared it with my mom, who read certain familiar-sounding passages aloud to me and marked her own pages. As with all of Myrna Kostash’s books, her new one, *Ghosts in a Photograph*, has taught me something vital about who I am, where I come from, what I must know and think about as this person with this background on this land.

The searching that founds this book is for her grandparents and other relatives of that generation, those who left Галичина/Galicia in what’s now western Ukraine and settled in what’s now east-central Alberta, in the “Ukrainian bloc settlement” in the first years of the 1900s. Not only is this book doing the good work of reckoning with that move—its meaning, its aftermath, assisting as it did with the violent colonization of the prairies—but it’s also showing the profound importance of reclaiming the stories, relationships, languages, and knowledges carried over from the home continent, these things so essential to one’s being, and which were often stifled by forces external and internal, as the book also makes clear. Relatives who were writers, who were nationalists, who were deported from Canada for political activity. Relatives who may not have wanted to come to this continent. To cease passing on the stories, in the belief that they are of no use to you in this “new” place, is what Kostash is writing against, a sort of wayfinding mission, following trails intentionally washed out. And to read *Ghosts* as Ukraine withstands invasion and erasure by a genocidal colonizing force feels especially vital now.

The Ukrainian Canadian imaginary was a set of symbols and activities rooted entirely in locations made-in-Canada such as historical sites, community and church halls, summer camps, weddings, dance festivals. I took no umbrage at the time. (7)

The homestead was merely a means to an end: as quickly as possible to send the sons to school, urging them...“Study, boys, so you won’t have to work like I do.” (24)

In short order, the Svariches and Kostashes will have become proficient, and bilingual, in the vocabulary of possession in which land becomes property: title, boundaries, road allowance, ours, mine, homestead, home/place, not to mention “here.” (38)

I had a motherland, a homeplace, Canada, and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, even as a “captive nation,” was not my affair. (203)

I have had the luxury of being a Ukrainian Canadian whose grandfather, having emigrated from the village where such awful choices had to be confronted, freed me from taking part in that history. (213)

Horodenka, Kolomyia, Sniatyn. Place names that in Canada are redolent only of settler nostalgia. (230)

Forty-five years later, I can now appreciate what I had unknowingly done: brought into a single imagined space the two historical sources of my identity: a homestead on Treaty Six Territory and a village in Galicia circa 1900. (250)

Myrna Kostash(chuk)

Laurie G.: Throughout your books, this newest one included, the act of writing seems quite like the act of learning: research, conversation, investigation, stock-taking, listening, interpreting. Is writing learning to you? Or is this learning process something larger, of which writing—and perhaps specifically non-fiction—is one part?

Myrna K.: I can say that from the first instance of my published work in the early 1970s—a foray into the style of New Journalism, i.e., full-tilt boogie first-person narrative reportage—I have been provoked into the act of writing by an intense curiosity about something in the world around me that has reached out and grabbed me. This could be an event, or a conversation, or an encounter with a text. And so begins the "act of learning" about this provocation, this astonishment (that will ultimately lead to something I learn about myself as well). In many ways, this process of learning, this gathering together of the fruits of research, whether as grand as studying a medieval manuscript in a library in Bulgaria or noting a detail in a postcard found in a garage sale, is the initial task, which is profoundly absorbing—there's great fun in going down rabbit holes—finding what I think. A narrative flows from there but not in the first draft: I've learned to be patient.

Laurie G.: And I've learned a great deal from your book, for I'm in the middle of a similar kind of searching: in my case, for the stories of my great-grandparents and their arrival to this continent. The limits can come on quickly, especially with a generation that seemed in some cases determined *not* to pass along their stories. How did you grapple with what you couldn't find out about little known family members? How do you write what you *don't* know?

Myrna K.: In the case of my grandparents, I am separated from them by only one generation, that of my parents, and have my own memories. But their contemporaries and even my parents' generation are no longer among us. Nevertheless, in *Ghosts in a Photograph* I set myself the task of looking again at their lives from the perspective, the gaze, of a Canadian of Ukrainian descent, a seasoned nonfiction writer, a traveller,

a reader, formed in the political cultures of the 1960s and 1970s, a feminist, a Canadian patriot, a settler Canadian, not to mention that of someone who has returned to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In other words, I create a dialogue or relationship between what I can know about their lives and what that knowledge, as skimpy as it may be, makes me think about. This could be the various provocations of lives lived under Nazi occupation in western Ukraine, the history of socialist theatre in western Canada during the Depression, an uncaptioned photograph from my mother's photo album or the encounter with a gravestone in Galicia. As for what I failed utterly to "know"—such as the fates of certain relatives in dramatic circumstances or the inner life of a grandparent I never knew—I write what I call "speculative nonfiction." On the basis of whatever evidence I can summon I rely on the capacity of my imagination to create a plausible narrative that answers the two questions of creative nonfiction: Why am I telling you this? What has it got to do with me?

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