

"They Said the Course Would Be Wasted On Me Because I Was A Girl": Mothers, Daughters, And Shifting Forms Of Female Activism in the Ukrainian Left in Twentieth-Century Canada

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Abstract

A generation divided progressive Ukrainian mothers and daughters. Nonetheless, they shared cultural and political lessons learned at the Ukrainian labour temples, in their neighbourhoods, and on picket lines. They absorbed, transformed and put these ideas to work in a variety of ways to build, challenge, change, or leave the Ukrainian left.

Résumé

Une génération sépare les mères et les filles ukrainiennes. Néanmoins elle partageaient des leçons culturelles et politiques apprises aux Temples du travail ukrainiens, dans leurs voisinages, sur les lignes de piquetage. Elles ont absorbé, transformé, et mis ces idées en marche dans une variété de façons de bâtir, de mettre au défi, de changer ou de laisser l'Ukraine qu'elles ont laissée.

Mary Skrypnyk was only twelve years old in 1928 when her Ukrainian immigrant mother Olena passed away. But Olena and her husband had laid a solid foundation for her daughter's radicalism by exposing the youngster to activities at the Timmins Ukrainian Labour Temple. "We were taken to the hall on sleds," Skrypnyk explained, where they slept with other children while the parents rehearsed their plays. On opening night, the children sat in the front row, taking in their costumed parents and the messages the plays imparted about the difficulties of life in the Old Country, Polish occupation of Western Ukraine, labour exploitation, and the need for class consciousness. Olena mentored in other ways as well. When the hall's Women's Section - of which she was a leading member - celebrated International Women's Day for the first time on March 8, 1923, she addressed the audience about the occasion's significance. Skrypnyk attended the Ukrainian children's school. As part of the Women's Section of the Labour Temple, Skrypnyk and other girls raised money for the Ukrainian Left's Red Cross campaign to help Soviet Ukrainians "starving as a result of the drought and the Civil War in 1921-1922" (Skrypnyk 1999). Both inside and outside the formal Ukrainian Left, Skrypnyk the adult worked for the movement in Winnipeg, Hamilton, and Toronto as a cultural teacher, union steward, touring organizer, journalist, coordinator of children's work, translator, and advocate for peace and women's rights. At times, she conducted herself in ways similar to

those of her mother's "immigrant generation"; in other circumstances, she - like the women of her "Canadian-born" generation - actively challenged the roles ascribed to and embraced by their mothers and grandmothers.

This paper offers a multi-generational analysis of the women who helped to build, nurture, and maintain the dynamic cultural world of Ukrainian Canadian radicalism across six decades (the 1920s to the 1970s). Women's work was critical and, though it was not always expressed as such, political. Within the immigrant generation, the women, whose labours were undervalued or rendered invisible, found ways of carving out spaces for their autonomous female activity. Their daughters, building on lessons learned from their mothers and the movement, cast a wider activist net. Ultimately, the Ukrainian left's failure to respond to women's interests and concerns contributed to its decline.

This paper aims to provide a nuanced view of the ways that ethnicity (that is, the particular meanings ascribed to being identified as or self-identifying as Ukrainian), gender (the meanings ascribed to and the interrelationship of masculinity and femininity), and class, as well as age and generation, interacted and interlocked in the formation of identity or identities within particular historical contexts. Age and generation are also historicized and refer to the meanings ascribed to lifecycle position and the temporal relationship to one's parents and children in specific historical circumstances. The essay builds on studies of Italian, east European Jewish, Mexican, Latin American, and other militants in North America which have produced multi-generational portraits of female militants whose radical lives were rooted within a deeply-felt ethnic left-wing culture where family, neighbourhood, community, and cultural ties over-lapped with politics and ideology (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002; Guglielmo 2002; Merithew 2005). At the recent Labouring Feminism Conference in

Toronto, participants addressed the subject from a variety of angles (Candelario 2005; Merithew 2005; Miranda 2005). In tracing the radical bonds that developed between daughters and mothers, these historians highlighted how daughters learned their politics not only in the garment or tobacco shop but also at the kitchen table, and by watching their elder female kin act as labour organizers, run pickets, face ridicule, taunt managers, and get arrested. Daughters were thus initiated into a rough and tough female radical culture where street protests and labour militancy were a normal and acceptable aspect of family and community life and completely consistent with their identities as respectable wives, daughters, and mothers (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002; Gabaccia, Iacovetta, and Ottanelli 2004).

In applying this generational approach to left-wing Ukrainian women in Canada, this study also expands on the literature about Ukrainians. Currently, such literature is limited by a narrow focus on the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) and a top-down approach that oversimplifies the relationship of left Ukrainians and the CPC and that obscures broader gendered experiences (Carynyk 1991; Kolasky 1979). With the significant exception of the male leaders, most men and women associated with the Ukrainian Labour Temples, many of whom were cultural workers, did not join the Party nor toe the party line. The Comintern/CPC directives did little to influence the women's activism. Even the male leadership sometimes challenged the Party's directives to reduce or eliminate cultural activities that affirmed Ukrainian Canadian ethnic identity. Since so few Ukrainian women formally joined the Party, studies of Communist women that highlight Anglo-Celtic and Party activists tell us very little about Ukrainian women's lived experiences or subjectivities (Sangster 1989; 2005). The scholarship on Ukrainians has typically excluded women while even the notable exceptions have produced a limited portrait of women. A focus on male directives and

male criticism of women (Sangster 2005), or on proscribed gender roles, and the impact of women on the organizational structures within the left or conservative Ukrainian communities (Swyripa 1993), precludes an in-depth discussion of generational distinctiveness and the role of ethnicity, culture, and agency in the lives of progressive Ukrainian women. By focussing on the women themselves, their recorded activities and experiences and, when possible, their personal recollections, this paper seeks to understand how two different generations of women negotiated and shaped the Ukrainian left according to their own needs and interests.

Left-wing - or "progressive" - Ukrainians created one of the most dynamic working-class movements in Canada, one that drew thousands of women, men, and children. They belonged to the first (1891-1914) and second (1925-1930) waves of peasant Ukrainian emigration from Bukovina and Galicia. Prior to 1900, most settled on prairie homesteads; after that, more gravitated to waged labour in Canadian cities and resource communities. Most were male, and they found work in mines, forestry, on railway gangs, and factories. Their female kin - among whom illiteracy was high because educational opportunities were limited in the Old Country - tended to work as waitresses, cleaners, clerks, and in domestic service and market gardens, often while maintaining their own households and boarders. Radicalized by unfulfilled expectations of Canada, exploitation, and discrimination and often harbouring socialist and anti-clerical attitudes brought from overseas, many Ukrainians became labour activists, often through Ukrainian language-based socialist organizations. Out of this emerged, by the early 1920s, a cross-country network of Ukrainian Labour Temples featuring an impressive array of radical activity. Fighting for social justice, these immigrants took part in strike support, newspaper publishing, fundraising, and campaigning for political

candidates (particularly those from the CPC).

Perhaps more significantly, these Ukrainians also expressed their activism through a range of cultural and social activities. Studies of leftist Jews, Finns, Hungarians, and other radical immigrant communities have noted the rich tapestry of social and cultural activities so central to how they defined their left politics (Frager 1993; Lindstrom 2003; Patrias 1998). Progressive Ukrainians also nurtured what some have called "ethnic hall socialism." Their temples hosted an array of cultural activities - women's embroidery groups, dance, theatre, mandolin orchestras, choirs, and concerts. During periods of economic strife - strikes, the Depression - they acted as makeshift soup kitchens, gathering spaces and even homes for unemployed workers. A leadership composed of deeply committed radicals kept the membership informed about complex political developments, encouraged working-class solidarity, and furthered the struggle against economic and social injustice in Canada and abroad. By 1939, the movement had grown to some 15,000 members working in eighty-seven Ukrainian Labour Temples. Its two Ukrainian language newspapers reached over 20,000 subscribers, and its dramas and concerts routinely played to full houses (Hinther 2005; Krawchuk 1996).

Women and the Interwar Progressive Ukrainian Community

During the early years of the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association (ULFTA), men held virtually all leadership positions and were among the most visible supporters. Progressive Ukrainian women, like other radical women, performed seemingly invisible but critical roles that ensured the movement's financial, organizational, cultural, and political survival. Many did so as members of the ULFTA's Women's Section, which was formed in 1922 and grew to encompass 52 individual branches by 1929 (Krawchuk 1996, 384). They expressed their activism through so-

called support work: raising money, cooking food, and conducting other duties that were an extension of their domestic roles at home. Often with children in tow, they also walked picket lines and marched in May Day rallies. A small handful even taught in the movement's children's schools, where boys and girls learned Ukrainian and participated equally in cultural and political activities, though usually only when a male teacher was unavailable. A 1926 report of the Vancouver Women's Section offers a typical example of how women in locales across the country kept active: "there were in the past year nineteen sessions of the Board, three special meetings...two readings, two entertainments, one concert, [and] two picnics...nine members took part in every meeting and also assisted in the young people's school" (Robitnytsia 15 Feb 1926).

While these women's experiences and their notions of femininity paralleled those of many other socialist women, there were also significant differences. As with Finns, a lack of self-confidence and organizational and public-speaking skills limited many left Ukrainian women. Their situation was exacerbated by their high levels of illiteracy and male dominance predicated on Old World peasant village values that reinforced male privilege by stressing female inferiority (Hinther 2005; Swyripa 1993). It is important, however, that we not fall into the ethnocentric trap of viewing these women as the victims of a supposedly much more deeply patriarchal culture than that of the Anglo-Canadian left. Certain studies have emphasized the Ukrainian leftists' male chauvinism while not sufficiently subjecting the Anglo-Canadian left to the same degree of scrutiny (Sangster 1989). Another difference is that while the Ukrainian left had affiliations with other radical organizations, including the CPC, most Ukrainian women preferred to centre their activism, leisure, and child-rearing within the ULFTA, particularly the Women's Section. Since few of them joined the Party or its Women's Labour Leagues,

they were somewhat isolated from other radical women and from feminist currents. As with Jewish women, language and class barriers also precluded engagement with the middle-class women's movement (Hinther 2005; Kealey 1998; Lindström 2003; Sangster 1989). Ukrainian women rarely publicly articulated theoretically informed challenges to women's oppression or definitions of their particular interests as Ukrainian women workers. But this did not mean they were passive or lacked self-respect. As with Italian women (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002), when male comrades criticized them for failing to measure up to their standards and methods of activism - a common complaint was that women preferred "socials" to the "educational" (that is, political lectures often delivered by the men) - Ukrainian women talked back. Some were quite vocal. The Women's Section of Sault Ste. Marie criticized the men in the ULFTA newspaper, *Holos robitnytsi* for mocking them. "Why do you take it out on us who are workers just as you?" they asked rhetorically, adding that "It's time to stop thinking that a woman is a weak creature whom you can attack at any time because she does not have the means to defend herself" (March 1923). Most often, however, women likely ignored the criticism or discussed it amongst themselves and continued working as they pleased, carving out a female niche rooted in activism suited to their interests, skills, and abilities. Or, as some historians have recently put it, they redefined the political by defining their female work within the Women's Section as fundamentally political work (Guglielmo 2002; Guard 2004).

Nor did their distance from the Party and other women's formal organized activism preclude interaction with women (and men) of other ethnicities. On the job and in their neighbourhoods, they mingled with members of the Finnish, German, Russian or Jewish communities, combining resources and activities. During periods of labour unrest, these women demonstrated remarkable levels of militancy and

cross-ethnic solidarity. When miners in Cardiff, Alberta struck in 1922, Teklia Chaban and Katherine Diachuk, both miners' wives, joined the struggle. Hearing that the company planned to bring in strike-breakers, the two informed the union. "A big fight broke out. Nor did the women just stand by and look on," Chaban recalled. When she and Diachuk saw a policeman trying to handcuff an Italian miner, the women reacted. "Katherine had a baseball bat," explained Chaban, "she hit the policeman across the shoulders so hard that his jacket burst." Diachuk and the miner escaped, but Chaban was arrested and eventually handed a provisional sentence of one year in jail (Reminiscences 1991).

Still, of paramount importance to these women was preserving Ukrainian culture and maintaining some connection to the Old Country. Moreover, through the ULFTA, these women were able to lend moral and material support to Ukrainians living under the oppressive rule of Poland or Romania, which governed Galicia and Bukovina respectively by the early 1920s. These efforts were formalized through the ULFTA's Association for Aid to the Liberation Movement in Western Ukraine (AALMWU), whose growth can be directly attributed to the influence of migrants who came to Canada after 1925 with first-hand knowledge of the oppressive conditions they left behind (Krawchuk 1996, 41). The women used cultural activities to teach their children both class and ethnic pride. As Canadian-born Mary Duke-Belchay recalled, her parents moved to Vegreville to be near a Ukrainian Labour Temple because "they wanted [us] to learn music and the language of [our] forefathers" (Reminiscences 1991). These women also combined their cultural work with radical political activism. With their men, they sang revolutionary songs in Ukrainian and, like Olena Skrypnyk, acted in plays with strong socialist messages. They taught their daughters "traditional" Ukrainian embroidery and inscribed their work with symbols of political

resistance. They cooked Ukrainian dishes to raise money and feed convention attendees, protesters, or strikers. The money their efforts raised and saved was critical to the movement's survival and success ("Program" 1939; Reminiscences 1991).

By the mid-1930s, a significant generational shift began to occur as the "Canadian-born" generation of younger women who had been born or raised in Canada slowly began to assume some of the more visible roles once reserved entirely for men. Thanks to the Canadian school system and the Ukrainian children's schools, they were often fluent and literate in both English and Ukrainian. Raised in the spirit of the class struggle, they had received radical training at home and through the Ukrainian left's children's activities. As youths, many of these women had participated in the movement's Higher Educational Courses, an enterprise initiated during the 1920s to train promising young people (preferably and most often men) for leadership or teaching positions.

Less impeded by sexist cultural baggage, the younger women moved beyond their elder female kin's more traditional sphere. Significantly their greater confidence often developed from childhood experiences within the ULFTA. With respect to gender, the youngsters' groups followed remarkably egalitarian lines. The girls were as likely as the boys, for example, to hold executive positions in the Youth Section and to play pivotal roles in choirs, orchestras, and dance groups (Niechoda 1996). They were also more likely than their mothers to be active in the CPC, particularly its Young Communist League (YCL), especially during the Party's post-1935 Popular Front period. As adults, they too confronted the sexism of male comrades opposed to women leaders. Many members, for example, were displeased when the Hamilton, Ontario Ukrainian Labour Temple leaders selected Mary Skrypnyk for the 1938 Higher Educational Course after their first choice, a young man, had to remain in Hamilton to support his newly

widowed mother. "They said the course would be wasted on me because I was a girl," Skrypnyk recalled (1999).

Watershed Years

Training women like Skrypnyk hardly turned out to be a waste. The presence of an active and committed cohort of Canadian-born women was critical to the Ukrainian left's survival during the particularly difficult, indeed, devastating years of the Second World War. In July 1940, the Canadian government interned thirty-three progressive Ukrainian male leaders along with some sixty other Pro-Communist and Communist men for their alleged connection to the CPC and its anti-war stance and the Soviet Union. The men would remain incarcerated until the fall of 1942, in spite of the fact that following Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the CPC and Ukrainian left supported the war and the Soviet Union was now an ally of the western powers. The state had also banned the ULFTA, confiscated the halls, and prohibited the publication of its Ukrainian-language newspaper *Narodna hazeta* (People's Gazette) (Radford 2000; Hinthner 2005). While this state repression threatened to paralyze the movement, the women, though hampered by worry and scarce material resources, supported their imprisoned menfolk and used a variety of tactics to lobby for their release. Ironically, their ability to perform so-called "support-work" was helped by the RCMP's failure to view them as political activists. This gave them the space to carry out critical work that their men could not perform.

During the crisis, the Canadian-born women often took on leadership roles, forging a cross-ethnic base of support with other CPC women through an advocacy group called the Committee for the Release of Labor Prisoners (CRLP). Women of both generations generously opened their homes for strategy meetings (and even cultural activities), united to devise and

circulate petitions and protest telegrams to Ottawa - usually translated or composed by the Canadian-born women (Prokop 1982) - and encouraged their children to get involved (Shatulsky 1942). The Canadian-born women spoke at demonstrations, and, with the immigrant generation, campaigned for political candidates opposed to the internments (Kardash 1941). Some even journeyed to Ottawa with the CRLP to demand the men's release (Navis 1942; Nielsen 1941; Prokop 1982). These efforts drew significant public attention to the plight of the internees and their families.

At the same time, these women also volunteered their energies to aid the war effort, taking jobs in war production, volunteering for the Red Cross, and knitting for the troops (Reminiscences 1991). This work intensified after June 22, 1941, when the Soviet's transformation into an ally made the internments seem unjustified to many Canadians. In addition, the women's public demonstrations of loyalty to Allied efforts overseas created a positive impression of the Ukrainian left. This ultimately aided in the men's release in the fall of 1942. Hitler's attack also meant non-interned men could be openly active again, and with that, gender roles began to shift slowly back to familiar prewar patterns. Nonetheless, the women's work continued. Through the newly-established Ukrainian Association to Aid the Fatherland (UAAF, which would become the Association of United Ukrainian Canadians - AUUC - by war's end), they raised money to aid those in the Soviet Union and Ukraine affected by the war. They also participated in the redress campaign that resulted in the return of the Ukrainian Labour Temples to the community (Prokop 1982).

In many locales, these younger women, many of them married to men serving overseas, established separate English-language "Young Women's Victory Clubs" that were linked to the Red Cross and the war effort and that also gave them the space to socialize

with women like themselves. Increasingly, Canadian-born women preferred to work in English and in venues outside of the Women's Branches controlled by the immigrant generation (Popiel 1998; Krall 1962; Reminiscences 1991; Semanowich 1998).

Mothers and Daughters in the Postwar Ukrainian Left

At war's end, these Ukrainian women, like all women, felt the pressure to return to pre-war roles, yet they could also take advantage of certain new opportunities; for example, an increased opportunity for contact with Ukraine allowed some Canadian-born women and men to travel to Ukraine to study (usually language or dance). The Canadian-born women also found paid work within the movement. Most jobs were in service positions or related to women's and children's activities, thus mirroring women's traditional subordinate place. Organizations that traded or facilitated cultural exchanges with Ukraine found it especially useful (and cost-effective) to hire the bilingual Canadian-born women (Shatulsky 1998). Those who studied in Ukraine might return to work as cultural teachers or journalists (Skrypnyk 1999). For some, these jobs could be positive. Others, however, such as the Canadian-born Mary Semanowich who worked at the Ukrainian left-founded People's Co-op Dairy in Winnipeg, quickly discovered that the movement's ideals of equality did not extend to its treatment of its female workers. "Women did not hold the same positions as men, they were paid less, women got the smaller jobs, men got the promotions," she explained. Semanowich quit but returned part time in 1977, finding little had changed. Angry, she approached then head Bill Kardash, arguing that when it came to women "management did not practise the socialist policies they preached" (Semanowich 1998). When women did move up, it usually had little to do with enlightened male thought, but, rather, because the movement could not afford salaries high enough to

tempt men away from more lucrative positions elsewhere

in Canada's prosperous postwar economy.

Plenty of young women were dissatisfied with these prospects. While their elders kept working through the Women's Branches, many of the Canadian-born continued to work separately through the Young Women's Clubs (as the Young Women's Victory Clubs were renamed after the war). Some also joined with Canadian-born men to form "English-speaking Branches." Many, too, began to extend their activism beyond the parameters of the Ukrainian left, sometimes through CPC-connected groups, forging enduring alliances with like-minded women, and men, of other ethnicities. These women were critical to the postwar Housewives and Consumers Association (HCA) (Guard 2004) and, later, to the peace and feminism-oriented Congress of Canadian Women (CCW) and Voice of Women (VOW). Within the halls and the Ukrainian press, they also began articulating a socialist-feminist analysis that brought together the labour temples' class consciousness, their experiences as women and workers, and the ideals of the emerging postwar feminist movement. The presentation Mary Skrypnyk made in 1968 on behalf of the AUUC to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada illustrated their perspective. The demands included universal daycare, equal pay for work of equal value, maternity leave, guarantees of higher education for girls, state-funded birth control and abortion and old age security for women at age sixty. The Canadian-born women found enthusiasm among the immigrant generation women, and they jointly celebrated International Women's Day and held Mother's Day teas to raise funds for and celebrate these causes. Polite indifference was at best often the male leadership's reaction: "Nobody cared that [Canadian-born] Mary Kardash and I went to women's meetings," Canadian-born Beth Krall recalled (Krall 1998).

Women and the Decline of the Ukrainian Left

In the mid-1950s, it was becoming apparent that membership was declining across the Ukrainian left, including in the Women's Branch and the Young Women's Clubs. By 1966, only three Young Women's Clubs and nineteen Women's Branches remained in existence (Krawchuk 1996, 439). The Cold War, Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin in 1956, and general postwar upward mobility drove many - female and male - away. Many of the Canadian-born women, moreover, left in the ongoing wake of persistent male sexism and marginalization of women's issues or because they had little time to participate in the movement because of the demands of permanent full-time labour outside of it. Upward mobility, economic stability, and assimilation, too, meant that the political-economic-cultural interests that so occupied their parent's generation often seemed less relevant or even old-fashioned. Cultural activity still held some appeal, and many sent their children to Ukrainian school or dance classes. As the youngsters came of age, though, they, too, followed their parents' exodus from the halls. If they were politically active, it was usually - like other "red diaper babies" (Mishler 1999, 135) - through the 1960s New Left, particularly the feminist and peace movements.

The Women's Branch suffered for different reasons. Because they were Ukrainian-speaking branches, they received few members from the Canadian-born generation. Moreover, they had virtually no new Ukrainian-speaking female recruits from the post-1945 wave of Ukrainian immigrants who generally opposed Communism. In 1972, when national celebrations were held to commemorate the Women's Branch's Fiftieth Anniversary, the majority of these groups had ceased to function, were nearly defunct, or had merged with the also dwindling immigrant generation Men's Branch to form Senior Citizens Clubs. By 1974, the RCMP, who had long

spied on the Ukrainian left, was characterizing the AUUC as "primarily...made up of old timers" ("RCMP").

Conclusion

Women of all generations played crucial and defining roles in the progressive Ukrainian community. The radical motherhood and radical daughterhood of the Ukrainian Left - so similar, as other historians have shown, to that of other ethnic and political communities - helped to build and nurture a vibrant, dynamic, multi-layered working class Ukrainian community. While a variety of internal and external circumstances - including gender, class, ethnicity, age, and generation - circumscribed and contoured their work, the women employed numerous strategies to shape their activism as best they could according to their needs, experiences, and interests. Mothers and daughters shared lessons learned at the labour temples, through the press, and on picket lines, absorbing, transforming, and putting these ideas to work in a variety of ways to build, challenge, change, or leave the movement. Intergenerational currents were critical to both creating and dividing a diverse and empowering women's culture within the Ukrainian left. This culture was distinct from men's experiences and challenged - to varying degrees - male authority and women's own oppression as women and members of a radical immigrant/ethnic community. It differed, too, from the experiences of other Ukrainian women and other radical women. These women's experiences hint at the diverse array of feminine and feminist activism, experiences, dissent, and division waiting for scholars to continue teasing out of the histories of other radical communities around the globe.

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