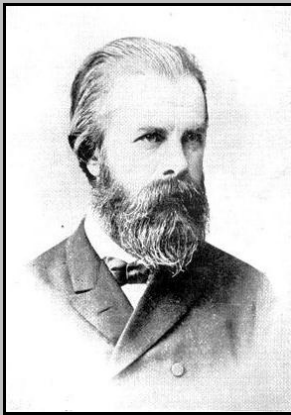


## The Taras Shevchenko Reading Club/Educational Society

For almost a decade, from the fall of 1899 until the spring of 1909, the Taras Shevchenko Reading Club (also briefly known as the International Reading Club at its inception, and as the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society from the fall of 1906) was the pre-eminent secular Ukrainian cultural-educational institution in Winnipeg. Established by early community leaders Kyrylo (Cyril) Genik, Sava Charnetsky, Theodore Stefanik, and Yurko Panishchak, and located in Genik's home at 109 Euclid Avenue until 1905, its membership roll included, at one time or another, virtually every prominent male community activist in the city. Although men of radical and conservative views belonged to the club, the former always predominated, especially during the last few years. Genik, who was the driving force behind the organization during the early years, had been a member of the Ruthenian-Ukrainian Radical Party in Galicia, and it was the spirit if not necessarily the ideology of Ukrainian Radicalism that gave club members their sense of purpose and brought them into conflict with the community's traditional clerical leaders, in particular Ukrainian Catholic priests.



**Mykhailo Drahomanov**



**Mykhailo Pavlyk**



**Ivan Franko**

**Ukrainian Radicalism**, an orientation based on libertarian, populist, socialist and anti-clerical principles, was first articulated during the 1870s by Mykhailo Drahomanov, a Ukrainian scholar and political émigré from the Russian Empire. Drahomanov's ideas were popularized by his most prominent Galician disciples, the writers Mykhailo Pavlyk and Ivan Franko, who helped to establish the Ruthenian-Ukrainian Radical Party - the first modern Ukrainian political party - in 1890. Like their conservative adversaries, the Radicals recognized that the 'Ruthenians' of Austria and the Ukrainians who lived in the Russian Empire constituted one Ukrainian nation with a common language and culture, and by 1895 they called for Ukrainian autonomy in Austria and Russia. Unlike the conservatives, the Radicals argued that the Ukrainian national movement could not confine itself to the promotion of Ukrainian language and culture, and the veneration of time-honoured customs and institutions. To succeed, the Ukrainian movement had to be based on the pursuit of rational universal ideals like democracy, political liberty, social equality, and economic abundance for all. To this end they articulated a pragmatic, ethical socialist program that called for concrete measures to remedy social ills and create the cultural and political preconditions for a just society: the extension of civil liberties, including freedom of conscience, speech, press and association; universal suffrage; free education; and shorter working hours, standardized wages and social insurance for workers. Because the teachings of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches tended to ignore earthly human concerns, and because the hierarchy of both churches was usually drawn from the privileged classes of society, anti-clericalism became a touchstone of Ukrainian Radicalism. By 1900, the precepts of Ukrainian Radicalism were an important influence on literate and articulate peasant activists, especially in the south eastern counties of Galicia and the northern counties of Bukovyna, from which most Ukrainians immigrated to Canada.

Relatively little is known about the Taras Shevchenko Reading Club prior to 1906. At first, members gathered in Genik's home to read newspapers and discuss politics in the evenings. By 1905 the club subscribed to 10 newspapers and had amassed a library of 450 volumes. It was here that the first Ukrainian play staged in Winnipeg was performed by club members in 1904, and a



**Kyrylo Genik**

year later a Ruthenian-Ukrainian Youth Circle exhibited some activity, although by the fall of 1905 the club had become dormant. By the time it was revived in the spring of 1906, by Wasyl Holowacky, a young socialist, and Jaroslaw W Arsenych, an even younger nineteen year-old self-professed anarchist (at the time), the Taras Shevchenko Reading Club had relocated to the North End, where its 75 members found temporary accommodations at Jastremsky's hall on the corner of Stella Avenue and McGregor Street, across from St Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic church. Apparently this location proved to be unsatisfactory, and by July club meetings and events were being held in a hall at 467 Manitoba Avenue and Powers Street. At a special meeting in October 1906, on a motion by Taras Dmytro (TD) Ferley, it was resolved to change the club's name to the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society (*Nauchne tovarystvo im. Tarasa Shevchenka*) and to purchase the hall, which had been placed on the market, for \$4,600. The hall would remain the Society's headquarters until its demise in April 1909.

Like all **reading clubs** and reading associations established by Ukrainian immigrants in Canada, the Taras Shevchenko Reading Club was modelled on the reading clubs (s. *chytalnia*, pl. *chytalni*) that appeared in villages all across eastern Galicia and northern Bukovyna from the 1870s, when the Ukrainian national movement began to penetrate the countryside. The first reading clubs were located in private homes, village schools or in small halls built to accommodate them. Usually young and middle-aged males and some unmarried girls met in the reading clubs on Sundays and holidays. Initially, those who could not read came to hear literate villagers read from popular newspapers, books and pamphlets. Eventually, libraries and reading rooms were added, and activities were expanded to include lectures by urban experts, political meetings, economic self-help institutions, and choirs and drama circles that staged plays and concerts on special occasions. By 1914, the reading club had replaced the tavern and was rivalling the church as a major focal point of community life in many villages.



**Taras Ferley  
(UCEC)**

At the time, Ferley, who would be one of the most active and prominent Ukrainian community leaders in the city for the next 40 years, was a 24 year-old gymnasium (university entrance high school) graduate who had studied briefly at the University of Lviv and belonged to the Radical Party prior to immigrating to Canada in 1902. A pragmatic, soft-spoken, patient man, with a neatly trimmed beard, Ferley believed that Ukrainian immigrants, who were predominantly workers and farmers, were not well-served by their traditional clerical leaders, including the Basilian missionaries, who taught them to "pray, work and be humble," denounced progressive thinkers like Drahomanov, Franko and Pavlyk as "heretics" and "the devil's seed," and tried to limit the circulation of secular and "purely educational" publications. What Ukrainian immigrants needed, according to Ferley, were secular leaders, organizations and newspapers that promoted social and economic equality, and taught the immigrants how to free themselves from economic exploitation and political manipulation. He saw the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society as the

nucleus of a progressive organization that might one day serve Ukrainians all across Canada and the United States.

During its heyday, from the summer of 1906 until the fall of 1907, when membership reached 150-200, the Society was a forum for all of Winnipeg's progressive-minded Ukrainians without regard to political affiliation. Members read newspapers and journals from the old country; discussed popular pamphlets by European radicals, anarchists and socialists; and tried to come to terms with the work of Darwin and Marx. They also hosted lectures by visitors from abroad like the prominent western Ukrainian Social Democrat, Dr Julian Bachynsky, who toured North America; protested the brutal suppression of Ukrainian student demonstrations in Lviv and collected donations for the victims; organized mass meetings which encouraged Ukrainian-Canadian workers to organize and join unions of unskilled labourers; and participated in rallies with progressive Jewish, Russian, Polish and English immigrants to commemorate events like the second anniversary of Bloody Sunday in St Petersburg, Russia. In January 1907 some Society members organized a Ukrainian Freethinkers' Federation to promote socialist and libertarian ideas; several months later they published *Natsionalizm i narodni sviatoshchi* (Nationalism and Sacred National Relics), a booklet containing excerpts from a longer work by Drahomanov that criticized Ukrainian clerics and conservatives who were attempting to build a national movement around the veneration of ancient customs, traditions and institutions. In April 1907, the Society also launched an evening school where newcomers were taught to read and write Ukrainian free of charge, and English for a small fee.

The Taras Shevchenko Educational Society began to unravel in the spring of 1907 when a group of radicals led by Wasył Holowacký attempted to move the Society in a more class-oriented, 'proletarian' and 'international' direction. They argued that Society members were "all workers" who did not need "learned" people to lead them, and they proposed opening membership to workers of all nationalities. Ferley was expelled from the Society for accepting an appointment from the Conservative government as the Ukrainian language instructor at the Ruthenian Training School for bilingual teachers. Myroslav Stechishin, a socialist who had established the Ukrainian Freethinkers' Federation, was expelled because he criticized local Polish socialists who opposed Ukrainian demands for more Ukrainian professors at the University of Lviv. While Stechishin and Holowacký eventually reconciled, Ferley, who believed that Ukrainian immigrants required more than just a 'proletarian' organization that would fight for their class interests, left the Society. By the winter of 1907-8, the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society and its building at the corner of Manitoba and Powers had become the preserve of Ukrainian (and a few Polish and Russian) socialists. When recession paralysed the Canadian economy that winter, the Society's socialist executive had trouble making mortgage payments. Although an attempt was made to save the property by mobilizing several community organizations, launching a fund raising drive, and even changing the hall's name to the Ukrainian People's Home (*Ukrainskyi narodnyi dim*), its fate was sealed. In April 1909, the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society was dissolved, and shortly thereafter the building was sold at auction.

-- Orest T. Martynowych

### **Books**

Orest T. Martynowych, *Ukrainians in Canada: The Formative Years, 1891-1924* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, University of Alberta, 1991).