ESSAY: The First Ukrainian Businessmen (1902-1929)

Well into the 1920s, a high rate of illiteracy, a rudimentary knowledge of English, and above all a lack of capital and business experience, relegated most of Winnipeg's Ukrainians to menial jobs. Men worked as unskilled labourers on street and sewer construction, in the railway yards, in the contract iron shops, and in the meat packing houses; the relatively small number of young single women who were employed outside the home worked in paper box and garment factories, in meat packing plants, and in hotels, restaurants and cafes. Nevertheless, shortly after the turn of the century, a handful of enterprising immigrants began to establish businesses in the few sectors of the economy that were open to them, often drawing on skills and experience acquired in the old country. Between 1900 and 1930, Ukrainian-owned businesses were confined to corner grocery stores and meat markets; wood and coal dealerships; employment, travel, and real estate agencies; boarding houses and restaurants; barber, shoe repair, tailor and haberdashery shops; billiard parlours; book, musical and art supply stores; photo studios, and, very briefly, just before the First World War, a small theatre on Selkirk Avenue. Whether they offered basic goods and services to immigrants and their families, or catered to the cultural needs of the more literate and sophisticated minority who were active in the burgeoning network of Ukrainian religious, political and cultural-educational institutions, such businesses depended heavily on the assistance of the entrepreneur's family and survived only as long as they enjoyed the support and patronage of the local immigrant community.

All skills and experience acquired prior to emigration could be invaluable to prospective immigrant entrepreneurs. The career of Petro Hawryssyhn, who immigrated to Winnipeg in 1900, provides a case in point. The son of middling peasant farmers, Hawryssyhn had been born in 1878 in Zelena, a village on the Zbruch River in Husiatyn county, eastern Galicia. He had learned to read and write Ukrainian and German from a private teacher, frequently carted grain to market in nearby towns, and was accustomed to handling oars, row-boats and ferries. His first job in Canada consisted of ferrying people and goods across the Red River, between East and West Selkirk. Then, after working on an extra gang for two years and sending his widowed mother $300 to purchase more land, Hawryssyhn found full-time work in Winnipeg with the contractor John Gunn & Sons, carting building materials from Gunn's lumber yard to various city construction sites. Eager to go into business for himself, Hawryssyhn soon purchased his own horse and cart and though he worked another six years for Gunn, he spent evenings privately carting fuel from lumber and coal yards to people's homes. Finally, in 1908, after purchasing a home at 67 Barber Street and renting a nearby lot Hawryssyhn became the city's first Ukrainian wood and coal dealer. He worked dawn to dusk, from early autumn until late spring, importing wood from Ukrainian farms in the Interlake district north of Winnipeg and purchasing coal from the city gas works. Aided by his young wife, whom he had married in 1904, and by several siblings who had been persuaded to come to Canada, Hawryssyhn built up a successful business (Harris Fuel Supply) that allowed him to provide a comfortable lifestyle for his wife and six children. He also found time to join the Ivan Kotliarevsky Drama Society. Although he sold his first wood yard in 1919, and lost a great deal of money by opening a general store in rural Saskatchewan just as agricultural prices began to tumble after the Great War, the trust and reputation he had built up among his customers in Winnipeg allowed him to return to the city and establish Arborg Fuel in 1921, a new wood and coal dealership that he ran with Wasyl Mandziuk for more than 30 years. By 1929, at least four other Ukrainian-owned wood and coal supply businesses existed in Winnipeg - 3 in the North End and one in East Kildonan.

Grocery stores, which even immigrants with little capital or business experience could operate, were the first and always the most numerous Ukrainian business enterprises in the city. Yurko Panishchak, an illiterate but industrious and thrifty immigrant, who had arrived penniless from Nebyliv with his wife and children in 1893, opened the first grocery store (and what may well have been the first urban Ukrainian-Canadian business enterprise) at 332 Jarvis Avenue in May
1902. Like most urban immigrant business ventures, Panishchak's grocery store had a brief life and its owner soon relocated to rural Alberta. Gradually, others filled the breach. By 1911, when more than half of the 115 groceries and 35 general stores in Point Douglas and the North End were owned by Jewish immigrants, there were still only 5 or 6 groceries and 2 or 3 general stores that were Ukrainian-owned and virtually all of these were capitalized at under five hundred dollars. A decade later, in 1921, Ukrainians owned 4 meat markets, 4 confectionaries and about 40 of the 210 grocery stores in Point Douglas and the North End. Most of the stores were located west of McGregor Street in the North End, a few could be found in Point Douglas, one was in Transcona and another in the small Ukrainian enclave in Fort Rouge. When the publishers of a Ukrainian-Canadian almanac compiled a directory of the city's Ukrainian professionals, businessmen and community activists on the eve of the Great Depression, the list of Ukrainian grocers had grown to 88 - 2 in Fort Rouge, 4 in the Brooklands, 6 in Point Douglas, 10 in East Kildonan and Transcona, and 66 in the North End, predominantly west of McGregor Street and south of Mountain Avenue. By the mid-1920s, Ukrainians were also playing a prominent role in efforts to organize small grocers, a movement that saw the formation of Winnipeg Wholesale in 1926 and the Community Food Stores Ltd a decade later.

The massive influx of Ukrainian labourers, who were recruited to work on railway construction, in the mines and in the forests, and on various urban infrastructure projects between 1906 and 1914, presented enterprising immigrants with a variety of new business opportunities. As thousands of seasonal labourers passed through Winnipeg looking for work, seeking contractual advice, trying to return to the old country with their earnings, or looking for adequate housing in order to bring family members to Canada, a number of educated Ukrainians with a knowledge of English offered their services as notaries, employment, steamship and real estate agents. DM Sloboda opened the Ruthenian Chancery on Main Street several years before he was appointed a notary public in 1909; in 1912-13 Jaroslaw Arsenych, who was about to begin his law studies, and Osyp Boyaniwsky, a community activist, provided notarial services from their People's Chancery (narodna kantseliariia) at 845 Main Street. Antin Karakochuk established what was probably the first Ukrainian employment agency on Main Street in early 1907; several years later Harry Danyliuk was managing the Standard Employment Agency at 191 1/2 Higgins Avenue, and by 1916 he and Theodore Stefanik were running a Ukrainian Employment Bureau at the same address. Stefanik, whose career had already included stints as a city police detective, a bilingual school organizer and a city councillor, to list just a few of his occupations, had been associated with Ossowski & Stefanik Steamship Agents and Notaries prior to 1911, and then with notary Jaroslaw Kuninsky from 1911 until 1913 when he sold the business to George Machula. Among the earliest Ukrainian real estate agencies were the Peace River Information Bureau, established in 1912 and helmed by socialists William Kolisnyk and Eugene Volodin, who claimed to be selling real estate in the Grouard townsit on Lesser Slave Lake to benefit workers and farmers. Ferley, Pankiw & Company, established in early 1914 at 854 Main Street, was owned and operated by Taras Ferley and Wasyl Pankiw; the agency sold city lots and houses, farms in the Manitoba Interlake, and ocean passage to Russia, in addition to preparing contracts.
Ferley, whose business prospered, would become Manitoba’s first Ukrainian MLA, representing Gimli as an Independent Liberal from 1915 to 1920, and he would also serve on Winnipeg city council in 1932 and 1933. He and three other local Ukrainians would still be in the real estate business in 1929. Kolisnyk, who established the General Repair Bicycle Shop at 885 Main Street after his very brief and inauspicious career in real estate collapsed, would become the first democratically elected Communist public official in North America in 1926 after winning a seat on Winnipeg city council.

Advertisements for Ukrainian-owned boarding houses began appearing in the Ukrainian press in 1908. The "Ruthenian Restaurant" (Rus'kyi restoran) located in the old Ashdown mansion at 109 Euclid Avenue offered 5 cent meals, a bed for the night at the same price, as well as rooms for $2 a month, or room and board for $10 a month. Such establishments were usually listed in Henderson’s City Directory and claimed to provide "first class" service and accommodation. In general, however, facilities of this kind were exceptional. Most Ukrainian boarding house and hotel owners, who accommodated the legions of Ukrainian migrant labourers that passed through the city or spent the winter months in Winnipeg, had an unflattering reputation. With housing, especially for Slavic migrant labourers, in short supply, many boarding house operators tried to cram as many bodies as they could into their poorly equipped premises. In October 1909, for example, a pair of three- and four-room Ukrainian-owned boarding houses at 37 and 47 Austin Street in Point Douglas were found to contain 25 and 32 boarders living in what was described as 'abominable filth.' Two years later, on 1 May 1911, the police court was crowded with Ukrainians accused of keeping too many boarders in their homes; their defence was that unfavourable economic circumstances left them with no alternative. The city’s only known Ukrainian (Ruthenian) hotel owner, a certain John Tymchorak who had purchased the Ontario Hotel at 860 Main Street in 1907 and also owned the Midland Hotel at 285 Market Street by 1912, was known to get his customers drunk, and then to beat them up. Apparently this was not enough to prevent Harold Trenholme, a local banker, from establishing the partnership of Trenholme and Tymchorak, Private Bankers, Steamship Agents and Insurance Brokers at 856 Main Street.

The first Ukrainian-owned restaurants functioned as adjuncts to boarding houses and served spare meals from an unvarying menu to boarders and migrants. The Ukrainian restaurant and inn (ukrains'ka hostynnytsia) established by Petro Hawryssyshyn's younger brother Matvii at 265-67 Selkirk Avenue in the fall of 1914 was probably the first conventional Ukrainian-owned restaurant. By the summer of 1916 it had become a popular centre of Ukrainian social life in the North End, so much so that versifiers were celebrating it in the Ukrainian press. Old country meals, soft drinks, fruit, snacks, tobacco, cigars and cigarettes could be purchased at Hawryssyshyn's, which remained open until 2 am and offered out of town visitors overnight accommodation at reasonable prices. Like the few Ukrainian restaurants opened during the war- and immediate post-war years, it had a brief lifespan. Mykola Chornii’s restaurant at 49 Higgins Avenue, for example, had been stormed by scores of soldiers in March 1916, its windows broken and its 'foreign' clientele roughed up, apparently in retaliation for a confrontation between 'foreigners' and soldiers a few days earlier. Although Hawryssyshyn's restaurant and inn was still thriving in late 1918, it disappeared when the hub of Ukrainian amateur theatrical activity shifted in
1919-20 from the nearby Queen's Theatre at 239 Selkirk Avenue to the Ukrainian Labour Temple and the Canadian Ukrainian Institute Prosvita, some five to eight blocks west of Hawryshyn's inn. A decade later, in 1929, there were at least 13 Ukrainian-owned cafes, snack bars, greasy spoons and restaurants in Winnipeg, although only two were located in the North End. That the vast majority were located in the immediate environs of the CPR station at Main and Higgins and southward along Main Street indicates that most had been opened to cater to the new wave of migrant labourers that inundated the Prairies during the five years preceding the Great Depression. Most of these establishments would expire during the 1930s.

**Onufrey Budnyk**

Onufrey Budnyk's career as a shoemaker, restaurateur and landlord provides a rare glimpse into the making of a successful immigrant entrepreneur. Born in 1883 in Ilyntsi, Sniatyn county - a very densely populated region where peasant land allotments were substantially smaller than in most of eastern Galicia - Budnyk had been orphaned in childhood and apprenticed as a shoemaker. He emigrated to Canada around 1905 and spent several years working in the bush and then as a labourer and teamster in Winnipeg, where he married Helena Botulinska, a young woman he had met in a market town near his native village. In 1910 Budnyk purchased a building at 594 Selkirk Avenue and began to repair shoes, a job that would occupy him for the better part of the next decade. The money he earned was invested in his building, which was located in the very heart of the Ukrainian North End, a few steps from the corner of Selkirk and McGregor, and no more than two or three blocks from three Ukrainian churches and three of the largest and most active Ukrainian cultural-educational organizations in the city. Three major additions were made to the building and by 1929 the impressive two-storey Budnick Block at 594-602 Selkirk, designed by Max Blankstein, Winnipeg's first Jewish architect, stretched all the way to the corner of Selkirk and McGregor. Beginning in 1912 and well into the 1950s, portions of the ever-expanding structure were rented out to a succession of Jewish and Ukrainian pharmacists, dentists and physicians, including Isaac Kepman, Elias Symchych, Nicholas Zalozetsky, Dr Manoly Mihaychuk, Dr Paul Zakus, Dr A Bloom, Dr Bronislaw Dyma, and Dr Frank Rybak, and to an assortment of confectioners, book store owners, benevolent associations and shoe stores. In 1918 Budnyk gave up repairing shoes and turned his attention to the confectionary and restaurant business, which remained his bread and butter well into the 1940s when he retired. Often working from 6 am to 2 am, and assisted by his wife, who did most of the cooking, and his children, who worked in the restaurant when not in school, Budnyk's new venture prospered, despite competition from several nearby cafes. Although Budnyk, like many Ukrainian immigrants from Sniatyn county, was a Ukrainian Radical at heart - he did not attend Ukrainian Greek Catholic services, had been married in the quasi-Protestant Independent Greek Church, and was a member of the socialist Volodymyr Vynnychenko Dramatic and Educational Society, the Ukrainian Labour Temple, and the People's Co-operative - his regular customers included Ukrainians of all political orientations and religious denominations, among them the pastor of Ss Vladimir and Olga Ukrainian Catholic cathedral, who purchased meals daily and accepted dinner invitations from the Budnyk's every Christmas and Easter; provincial and municipal politicians like TD Ferley, a long time president of the Ukrainian National Home and a prominent Ukrainian Greek Orthodox layman; and many prominent members of the pro-communist Ukrainian Labour Temple, the liberal Ukrainian National Home, and the rather conservative Ukrainian Reading Association Prosvita. This broad support was at least partially attributable to the fact that members of the family belonged to each of these organizations and participated in their cultural activities.
By 1912 the Lesiuk brothers owned the small Leland Theatre, at 572 Selkirk, between Andrews and McGregor. On the eve of the First World War weekly soirées (vechirky) of humour, music and song, organized by local Ukrainian drama circles and choral societies, were held here during the fall and winter months.

A number of skilled Ukrainian craftsmen also established businesses during the First World War. While there were at least a dozen Ukrainian bakers, two dozen barbers, three dozen tailors and four dozen shoemakers in the city by 1920, only a handful became self-employed entrepreneurs. Tailors, the first group off the ground and the owners of the most successful and enduring craft enterprises, were led by Michael Skryha, who established The Ukrainian Tailor shop at 549 Selkirk Avenue in 1910. He was joined, in rapid succession, by Sam Juskow (Yuskiv), who established Ruthenian Clothing and Tailoring, first at 905 and then at 882 Main Street, near the corner of Stella Avenue; Stephan Tychowecky, owner of The Ukrainian Merchant Tailor shop, first at 122 Adelaide Street and by 1916 at 854 Main Street; WK Kuzyk at 788 and later at 820 1/2 Main Street; and Michael Hubicky at 583 Selkirk Avenue. Several other tailor shops were established by Ukrainians (S Tatarowsky, I Dvoranovsky, O Dutchak) during the war years on Higgins Avenue, near the CPR station, but appear to have been short-lived. Most tailors and their wives were active members of Ukrainian dramatic and choral societies, probably because of their skills as costume-designers and -makers. In 1929 there were at least six Ukrainian tailor shops in the city, including the first four listed above. The earliest Ukrainian barbers, bakers and shoemakers left fewer traces (or advertised less) than the tailors. Among the earliest practitioners of these crafts were the shoemakers Onufrey Budnyk (Budnick), who set up shop at 594 Selkirk Avenue in 1910, and Meletiy Terlecky, who had a shop at 819 1/2 Main Street near Selkirk Avenue a few years later; the barbers Slusarchuk and Shastal, at 142 Higgins Avenue, and Fred Tkachuk, who worked out of the Ontario Hotel at 858 Main Street; and the baker Alex Kucher who, with a few Ukrainian partners, established the Ukrainian Workers' Union Bakery (renamed Kucher's Ukrainian Bakery or KUB several years later) at 626 Stella
Avenue in 1923. While there was still only one Ukrainian bakery in Winnipeg in 1929, self-employed shoemakers numbered eight and the number of barbers was also growing.

The city's Ukrainian immigrants and their organizations also constituted a significant market for books, musical instruments and art supplies. Even immigrants who were not avid readers needed Ukrainian-English dictionaries, primers on letter-writing and home medical care, prayer books, song books, and cook books, not to mention the books of prophecies and dream interpretations (sonnyky), which were often the only literature in peasant homes. Their more sophisticated countrymen wanted books of Ukrainian poetry, novels, popular history, and current affairs. Drama circles, choirs and orchestras needed play scripts, librettos, sheet music, musical instruments, as well as materials for making costumes and stage scenery. An immigrant entrepreneur who was ready to respond to the demand for these items soon emerged, but he turned out to be a Czech not a Ukrainian. In November 1905, Frank Dojacek, a native of Bohemia and "an astute businessman [who] recognized the power of demographics," established Ruthenian Booksellers and Publishers Ltd, a store and mail-order company that catered primarily to the rapidly growing Ukrainian community, but also targeted German, Polish and other Central European immigrants. Located initially at 435 Selkirk Avenue, Dojacek's rapidly expanding inventory consisted of books, newspapers, musical instruments, and audio-visual items including recordings, gramophones and stereoscopes by 1910 when the store moved to 850 Main Street. To supply his stores and mail order business with an even greater variety of books and pamphlets, Dojacek obtained a printing press that produced original material as well as publications not covered by copyright law. In 1908 he published a Ukrainian guide to letter writing (Domashnyi pysar) and two collections of folk poetry - Dmytro Rarahovsky's Robitnychi pisni (Workers' Songs) and Teodor Fedyk's Pisni pro Kanadu i Avstriiu (Songs about Canada and Austria). While the latter work was dismissed by local Ukrainian critics as "business literature" devoid of any literary merit and published only to make a profit, it went through six editions and sold an estimated 50,000 copies by 1926. Other publications included Jakiv Krett's pocket Ruthenian-English and English-Ruthenian dictionary that ultimately sold 10,000 copies; a pamphlet on Myroslav Sichynsky's escape from an Austrian prison; inexpensive popular volumes on Ukrainian history and Ukrainian heroes; and Tragediia Halyszki Ukrainy (The Tragedy of Galician Ukraine) a political pamphlet on the consequences of war in Ukrainian-populated eastern Galicia. In the fall of 1914 Dojacek purchased the oldest Ukrainian-Canadian weekly, Kanadyisky farmer (Canadian Farmer), and subsequently added Polish, German and Croatian weeklies to National Publishers Limited, a new business venture that he launched in 1919. By the 1920s, when Dojacek changed the name of his store and mail order business to Ukrainian Booksellers and Publishers Ltd (located at 658-660 Main Street) to reflect the immigrants' growing sense of Ukrainian national identity, the store also had a large watch and jewellery section headed by old country
watchmaker Nick Jakimchuk, and a wide selection of Ukrainian records. In particular, Dojacek's large inventory of Ukrainian literature included hundreds of dramatic works and reflected well the popularity of amateur theatre in Winnipeg and all across Canada. Toys, radios, small appliances, as well as patent medicines, embroidery thread and religious items imported directly from Europe, were also added to the catalogue prior to the Depression.

Confronted by Dojacek's retail and publishing empire, would-be Ukrainian cultural entrepreneurs were at a distinct disadvantage. Appolinarii Novak, a writer and editor, ran a mail order Ukrainian bookstore out of his home at 259 Austin Street from early 1908 until late 1909, apparently without much success. A Ukrainian Worker's Bookstore opened at 569 Selkirk Avenue in 1915, moved to 796 1/2 Main Street in 1916 and expired at 917 1/2 Main Street in 1923. Maksym Pasichniak, the musical director of the Boyan Society, opened a musical supply and printing business in 1918 and ran the Accord Ukrainian bookstore in Dojacek's old premises at 850 Main Street for the better part of the interwar years with negligible success. Several other bookstores, established as the war was coming to an end, vanished without a trace before 1920. (A similar fate befell another cultural enterprise, the Artistic Painter's Atelier, established at 579 Selkirk Avenue in late 1919 to paint scenery and create decorations for Ukrainian halls, at a time when the number of amateur theatrical productions was skyrocketing; when the frenzy abated in 1921, the Atelier folded.) Successful and enduring Ukrainian bookstores emerged only in the 1920s. In 1923, Vasyl Kazanivsky, the stage director of the Ivan Kotliarevsky Dramatic Society and the author of several plays, purchased the Ukrainian Worker's Bookstore at 917 1/2 Main Street, and renamed it the Ukrainian Bazaar; a few years later Vasyl Bilenky, formerly a bilingual school teacher and active member of the Maria Zankovetska Drama Circle, opened the Narodna Torhowlia bookstore at 788 Main Street. These bookstores survived into the 1960s and 1970s.

The most ambitious Ukrainian-Canadian economic venture during the early years was the Ruthenian Farmers' Elevator Company, a cooperative enterprise chartered in May 1917. Organized and directed by prominent Winnipeg activists led by Taras Ferley (the company's president), Ivan Petrushевич (an economist) and JW Arsenych (a lawyer), with the assistance of several prosperous farmers and rural municipal officials including Wasyl Kolodzinsky of Syuartburn and Nicholas Hryhorczuk of Ethelbert, the company operated grain elevators and traded in agricultural products. From two elevators, built in Ethelbert, Manitoba and Jasmin, Saskatchewan, in the fall of 1917, the company expanded to 14 elevators in 1919, almost all of them in the Dauphin and Shoal Lake, Manitoba and Yorkton, Saskatchewan districts.

By 1920, as a result of rising wartime agricultural prices, the company had 1200 shareholders and profits of over $22,000. Although the company was represented on the Winnipeg Grain Exchange and continued to turn modest profits through 1927, it failed to survive falling grain prices after 1928 and the Great Depression. In March 1931 the company's six remaining elevators were sold and the enterprise was liquidated.

By 1929 a small but growing Ukrainian business community existed in the North End and to a lesser extent in the other city enclaves populated by Ukrainians. In addition to the grocers, bakers, restaurateurs, wood and coal dealers, tailors, shoemakers, barbers, bookstore owners and real estate agents mentioned above, a handful of insurance agents, an undertaker (John
Zawidowski at 561 Selkirk Avenue), a church goods store (Jacob Majdanek's Providence Church Goods at 579 McDermot Avenue), and two photo studios (Dubchak's at 591 Selkirk Avenue, and Pauluk's at Main and Pacific) had also emerged. So too, had a number of professionals - lawyers, doctors, dentists, music teachers - but that is another chapter in the story of Winnipeg's Ukrainians.

-- Orest T. Martynowych

**Books**


Websites

David Bellhouse, "Onufrey Budnyk (1883 - 1959): A North End Winnipeg Pioneer"  
http://www.stats.uwo.ca/faculty/bellhouse/budnykhistory.pdf

Paul Robertson, "Frank Dojacek and Mail-order Shopping in the Prairies, 1906-1975"  
Before E-commerce: A History of Canadian Mail-order Catalogues  
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http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/cpm/catalog/cat2108e.shtml

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