“All That Jazz!” The Avramenko Phenomenon in Canada, 1925–1929

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When Vasile Avramenko arrived in Halifax aboard the Cunard ocean liner *Aurelia* on 12 December 1925, he was a man on a mission, brimming with confidence and purpose. Neglected and abused as a child, a homeless drifter who had wandered to Vladivostok as an adolescent, and illiterate well into his teens, Avramenko had finally found a purpose in life amid the tumult of the Ukrainian Revolution in 1917–18. During the decade prior to his arrival in Canada, he had learned to read and write, qualified as a primary school teacher, entered the world of the Ukrainian performing arts, and in his capacity as a teacher and interpreter of the Ukrainian folk dance, he had gained entry into the highest echelons of Ukrainian émigré society. Most significantly, he had met the three men whom he would try to emulate for the rest of his life: Vasyl Verkhovynets, who was transforming Ukrainian folk dancing into a performing art; Mykola Sadovsky, the grand old man of Ukrainian popular theatre; and Alexander Koshetz (Oleksander Koshyts), who was leading the Ukrainian National Chorus on a triumphant concert tour of Europe and the Americas.

By the time he reached Canada, Avramenko was determined to follow in the footsteps of his heroes by creating a Ukrainian ballet, touring North America with a troupe of dancers, and focusing attention on Ukrainians and their struggle for independence. This was a daunting agenda that would have caused a more circumspect individual to think twice. Nevertheless, during his years in Canada, Avramenko came as close as he ever would to realizing his vision. He taught and popularized Ukrainian folk dancing, toured the Prairie provinces with a dance troupe, generated a great deal of positive publicity for Ukrainians, and became a cultural icon for many in the Ukrainian-Canadian community. In large measure, this success was a matter of timing. Avramenko arrived in Canada at a juncture when Anglo- and Ukrainian-Canadian guardians of middle-class morality were searching for wholesome alternatives to jazz and the shimmy, while Ukrainian-Canadian leaders were also beginning to reflect on cultural assimilation and the place of youth within their own community. Both groups welcomed folk dancing and provided Avramenko with the kind of impetus that launched his career and boosted his reputation.

Success came at a high price. Even at this early point in Avramenko’s career the desire to win glory for Ukraine and build a reputation as one of the pre-eminent champions of the Ukrainian cause came to obsess him. It drove Avramenko relentlessly, impeding his evolution as an artist and jeopardizing his financial status. By the time he and his entourage left Canada for the United States, Avramenko was alienating colleagues, borrowing money, and formulating grandiose projects to settle his mounting debts, a pattern that would characterize his career in the years that followed.

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Avramenko’s first Canadian sojourn began in Toronto where his friend Hassan, a veteran of Koschetz’s Ukrainian National Chorus, was directing the Ukrainian People’s Home choir. Hassan had put up the money to finance Avramenko’s ocean passage, recruited Volodymyr Kukhta (P. W. Koohtow) to publicize his arrival in southern Ontario, and persuaded J. S. Atkinson, director of the Canadian Bureau for the Advancement of Music, to facilitate the dancer’s entry into Canada.

At the time there were over 200,000 Ukrainians in Canada. Although more than eighty-five percent of them were concentrated in the three Prairie provinces, Avramenko had been told that his prospects would be best in Toronto. The city’s Ukrainian labourers and tradesmen had more disposable cash than Prairie homesteaders and southern Ontario was close to the American states with the highest concentration of Ukrainian immigrants. Toronto also seemed to offer Avramenko the brightest prospects because Ukrainian factional disputes were relatively muted in the city. Unlike Winnipeg, with more than 20,000 Ukrainian Canadians, Toronto was not yet divided into warring Catholic, Orthodox, pro-Soviet, and militant nationalist factions.

Aided by Hassan and Kukhta, Avramenko launched his first dance schools in early January 1926. Instruction was offered at St. Mary’s Roman Catholic parish hall in downtown Toronto, at St. Josaphat’s Ukrainian Catholic parish hall in West Toronto, and at the Hrushevsky Society hall in Oshawa. Several weeks later a fourth school was opened in Toronto for members of the pro-Soviet Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association (ULFTA), who did not wish to attend classes with their “nationalist” adversaries. Enrolment totalled about 130 pupils in Toronto and another sixty in Oshawa. The classes attracted Ukrainians of all ages and political and religious persuasions. They included the daughters of the Rev. Paul Crath (Pavlo Krat), a Presbyterian pastor, and most members of the Humenyiuk family, including Theodore Humenyiuk, Toronto’s only Ukrainian lawyer and a leading Ukrainian Orthodox lay activist. Having Crath and Humenyiuk among his supporters was a godsend for Avramenko. Crath was a close acquaintance and collaborator of the poet and journalist Florence Randal Livesay, whose Songs of Ukraine and Ruthenian Poems, published in 1916, had been the first North American translation of Ukrainian verse. When Avramenko arrived in Toronto, Crath and Humenyiuk were helping Livesay translate Kvitka-Osvyianenko’s Marusia. Soon references to and photographs of Avramenko started to appear in Livesay’s articles, providing the dance master with instant credibility.

From the outset, Avramenko wanted to identify the most talented pupils, assemble a dance troupe, recruit singers and instrumentalists, and tour eastern Canada and the northeastern United States. A mere seven weeks after the first dance school opened, Avramenko’s pupils were

2. This article is based primarily on material in the Vasyl Avramenko Collection (MG 31, D 87) at LAC in Ottawa, particularly Avramenko’s correspondence (vols. 2–16), various announcements, programmes and brochures pertaining to his performances (vol. 12), and records of his schools (vols. 15–16). All of this material is in Ukrainian; quotations have been translated by the author.
performing in front of 1,600 spectators at Toronto’s Standard Theatre. The reviews were good. The Toronto Evening Telegram marvelled at the colourful and beautiful embroidered costumes, the complicated ensemble dances, the exotic and “oriental” motifs that characterized Ukrainian folk dances, the virtuosity of five-year-old female soloists, the “fire and fervour” of the male sword dances, and especially the “wonderful agility and pantomime grace” of Avramenko when he performed his solo dances. Even when they noted the “tedious rhythm of the music” and observed, “the dancers were at times a little irregular,” critics invariably concluded that the “dance was always beautiful.” “It is a wonderful thing that Mr. Avramenko has done to bring his people together in this way, and especially to bring out the talent of the little boys and little girls so pleasantly and naturally.” Encouraged, Avramenko scheduled almost a dozen performances in Toronto, Oshawa, and Hamilton.

However, plans to tour Canada and the United States had to be postponed. While performing the hopak at Toronto’s Alhambra Hall on 20 March 1926, Avramenko twisted his right leg for the third time since taking up dancing. The leg was placed in a cast for four weeks and, when this did not help, surgery ensued. As a result, Avramenko was unable to teach until the fall and incapable of performing on stage for almost an entire year. As classes in Avramenko’s first dance schools had already come to an end, some of the most talented pupils dispersed across Canada and the United States. In May Victor Moshuk, a young Bukovynian immigrant and one of Avramenko’s most accomplished graduates, began to teach at a new school in Toronto’s Ukrainian People’s Home. Simultaneously, the ULFTA appointed Ivan Grekul, who had graduated from Avramenko’s dance school, to organize dance courses in ULFTA halls all across Canada, thereby triggering rancorous competition for pupils, spectators, and revenues.

While convalescing, Avramenko continued to stage dance-school recitals, produced Kotliarevsky’s Natalka Poltavka, and mounted a tableau vivant of Repin’s painting Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan. In all of these projects, Hassan, Kukhta, and Lev Sorochynsky, another veteran of Koshetz’s Ukrainian National Chorus who directed a Ukrainian choir in Rochester, New York, and commuted to Toronto, assisted Avramenko. The highlight and finale of Avramenko’s sojourn in Toronto was an appearance by dancers from the Ukrainian People’s Home school at the Canadian National Exhibition. From 30 August through 11 September, accompanied by an orchestra and choir, Moshuk’s pupils gave twelve brief eight-minute performances on the CNE grandstand, each witnessed by up to 25,000 spectators. When the dancers gave a special performance at the women’s pavilion, Florence Randal Livesay was on hand to explain the intricacies of Ukrainian folk dancing and to suggest that Ukrainian music and dance had the potential to inject Canada, which was “so grey, so drab,” with colour, laughter and happiness. Not unexpectedly, in the aftermath of the CNE performances, the Ukrainian-Canadian public began to couple Vasile Avramenko’s name with that of Alexander Koshetz, who at that very moment was assembling the Ukrainian National Chorus (including Hassan and Sorochynsky) in New York City for one last tour of North America.

By the fall of 1926 articles about Avramenko and his dancers had appeared in every major Ukrainian-Canadian weekly and in many English-language dailies and magazines. Ukrainian newspapers and magazines in Lviv, Kyiv, and Kharkiv had also published articles about him and there were rumours that authorities in Soviet Ukraine wanted Koshetz and Avramenko to return. As Ukrainian Canadians all across


4. The performance recapitulated Ukraine’s historical struggles: “The trumpets sound a call. On the square before the grandstand come in a long snake-like formation men and women, boys and girls. They hold the formation—they gather for a battle with the oncoming Tartar horde!... Everything seems lost—The little ‘Tschumak.’ From the time of Catherine the Great, comes out with his funny newly born steps, representing the fate of the Cossacks, who because of overrunning of their country by the hordes of Moscovites, had to take up a trade of a free merchant—a ‘Tschumak.’ His dance brings about a will of the besieged people to fight again, and they form into another group, and with the steps called ‘Metelitza’ form a sort of a fort; back to back, they stand ready to fight again. A salvo of cannon, and around them come... The Ukrainian knights, the Cossacks. Like a hurricane they fly into the fray and protect their people from the horde! They do the famous sword dance called ‘Zaporoschetz.’ After this, the people kneel and give praise to the Almighty for deliverance from the foe (Easter khorovod). The Cossacks form a sort of a protective column, and the people joyfully fly back to their homes, in a festival dance called ‘Juravel’” (Toronto Evening Telegram, 28 August 1926).

5. Toronto Daily Star, 7 September 1926.

the Dominion began to take notice of him, Avramenko changed his plans. Instead of leaving Toronto for the United States and making his way toward New York City with a troupe of dancers, Avramenko decided to move to the Prairie provinces where most Ukrainian Canadians lived. He would teach, assemble a new troupe, tour western Canada and then, when the troupe was ready, he would tour eastern Canada and the northeastern United States in preparation for his New York City début.

Avramenko also decided to go west to pre-empt incursions on his turf by local interlopers like ULFTA instructor Ivan Grekul and newcomer Mykhailo Darkovych, who had graduated from Avramenko’s dance school in Brest-Litovsk in 1923. Since immigrating to Canada in the spring of 1926, Darkovych had been performing Avramenko dance solos, including Chumak and Za Ukrainu, offering private dance lessons and preparing to open a Ukrainian dance school in Winnipeg. In Ukraine Avramenko had encouraged his graduates to follow his example by teaching and performing his folk dances and solos wherever the opportunity presented itself, but he showed himself absolutely unwilling to brook competition from such upstarts in North America.

During the second week of October, Avramenko, his manager Kukhta, and assistant dance instructor Moshuk, reached the Lakehead, where they opened Ukrainian dance schools in Pros Vita halls and in one ULFTA hall. Although total enrolment in Fort William, West Fort William, and Port Arthur surpassed 250 pupils and was substantially higher than in Toronto, Avramenko was not prepared to linger in northern Ontario. After staging three dance-school recitals in early December, including one at the Orpheum Theatre in Fort William, Avramenko and his instructors moved to Kenora on Lake-of-the-Woods. Here they taught fifty pupils for a month and staged Natalka Poliatva.

7. For Avramenko’s correspondence with Darkovych from May through September 1926, see LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 2, files 5 and 6, and vol. 6, file 25. Avramenko offered his first Ukrainian folk dancing course at the internment camp for UNR Army veterans in Kalisz, Poland, in 1921–22. Subsequently he offered courses, which usually lasted for two months, in Lwów (on several occasions in 1922–24); in Lutsk, Rivne, Kremenets, Aleksandria, and Mezhynir (between December 1922 and July 1923); in Chełm and Brest-Litovsk (September–October 1923); in Stryi, Przemyśl, Stanisławów, Kolomyia, Deliatyn, Ternopil, and Drohobycz (spring 1924); in Prague and Poděbrady, Czechoslovakia (1924–25); and in Delmenhorst, Germany (November 1925). Assistants taught many of the courses offered in 1924–25, while Avramenko recuperated from knee injuries sustained during his vigorous performances.


9. The dance courses consisted of twenty-five-two-hour lessons at a cost of 55–$10 for pre-schoolers and $15–$30 for adults. Rules and regulations (see MG 31, D 87, vol. 15, file 40) governing the courses stipulated that Ukrainian was the only language of instruction. Regular, punctual attendance and disciplined behaviour were mandatory. Only those who had enrolled could be in the hall during lessons. Gum-chewing, smoking, appearing at lessons in an intoxicated state, wearing hats, using foul language, discussing politics, drinking cold beverages, challenging the instructor’s decisions, and talking during lessons were strictly prohibited. Any pupil who violated one of these rules could be expelled and would forfeit his or her tuition fees. Upon completion of the dance course...
Avramenko and ULFTA dancers trained by Grekul had become very acrimonious, special courses for members of the pro-Soviet organization were not offered in Winnipeg.

The decision to rent the third floor of Steiman’s Hall, which was owned by Jewish immigrants and situated on the North End’s major commercial artery, allowed Avramenko to maintain the “diplomatic neutrality” so vital for success in Winnipeg’s highly factionalized Ukrainian community. It also provided him with a very convenient central location. Soon every Ukrainian in Winnipeg knew that Avramenko had arrived in the city and that he was offering dance classes and preparing to perform on the stage after a one-year hiatus. Once again Avramenko’s pupils represented all religious and most political persuasions and included the children of every prominent Ukrainian businessman, professional, and politician in the city. To cope with the large enrolment, Avramenko added a new dance instructor. Ivan Pihuliak, who joined the entourage, had been a student activist at the University of Chernivtsi and the editor of a literary monthly. He had completed Avramenko’s dance course in Fort William, where he had been teaching in a Ukrainian evening school since immigrating to Canada in 1924. For the next seven years Pihuliak, who was well educated, highly disciplined, and financially responsible, would be Avramenko’s most important and efficient collaborator.

Avramenko spent the next four months teaching, collecting information on Ukrainian folk dances, and preparing a new stage spectacle entitled Dovhusheva nich (Dovbush’s Night) about the western Ukrainian “social bandit” and folk hero Oleksa Dovbush. He also received Ukrainian-Canadian community leaders and several non-Ukrainians, including public school teachers and administrators who were contemplating the introduction of folk dancing classes into the school curriculum. During the last week of February Avramenko traveled to Port Arthur and performed his solo Hore Izraelia (Israel’s Woe) at a school recital in the Lyceum Theatre. The reviews of his first stage performance in more than eleven months were encouraging. Two months later, on 30 April, Avramenko presented a “Pageant of Historical and Festival Dances” featuring 275 pupils at Winnipeg’s Amphitheatre, a venue usually reserved for hockey games and political conventions. The pageant featured a demonstration of dance techniques and exercises, a school recital, and a finale in which Avramenko performed his solo Chumak. Finally, on 3–4 June, Avramenko staged a lavish and ambitious production at the Pantages Playhouse Theatre. In addition to festive Easter dances and a suite of six traditional folk dances, the performance also included Avramenko’s solo Gonta, a tableau vivant based on Repin’s painting, and six traditional songs performed by the Ukrainian National Home Association choir conducted by levhen Turula. The Manitoba Free Press described the event as “a veritable feast of song, colour, grace and rhythmic gorgeousness” and concluded that Avramenko was “peculiarly successful in instilling in his pupils all the sparkle, fire and symbolism of those very wonderful dances.”

During the first week of May Avramenko, Pihuliak, and Moshuk travelled to Saskatoon and Edmonton, delivering lectures and establishing Schools of Ukrainian National Dance. While Pihuliak remained in Saskatoon, where he taught 130 pupils at the Ukrainian National Home and Prosvita Society halls and forty pupils at the Mohyla Institute, a student residence affiliated with the Ukrainian Orthodox community, Moshuk taught one hundred pupils in Edmonton. Avramenko returned to Winnipeg and launched “advanced” dance classes at Steiman’s Hall but had trouble attracting pupils because high school examinations were approaching. By the end of June recitals featuring Avramenko and local choirs had been staged in major venues in Saskatoon and Edmonton. On 1 July 1927 Ukrainian folk dancers under Avramenko, Pihuliak, and Moshuk performed in massive public celebrations marking the Diamond Jubilee of Canadian Confederation at Winnipeg’s Assiniboine Park, Saskatoon’s Exhibition Grounds, and Edmonton’s Victoria Park. During the next few weeks Moshuk and Pihuliak also performed in a number of rural Ukrainian areas with small groups of their best pupils. A performance in Vegreville, Alberta, on 4 July, was especially successful. Some pupils were required to take an examination and, if successful, received a certificate (svidostvo). Avramenko and his instructors usually taught their pupils ten to twelve dances. These included Velykodnia buvika, Kozachok podils’kyj, Kolomyika, Zhuravel, Kateryna, Hopak kolom, Zaporojs’kyi hert, Arkan, Hrechanyky, Zhenychok, Metelytsia, Honyvter, and Chumachok.

10. Avramenko choreographed several solo dances for himself including Gonta, Chumak, Za Ukraina, and Hore Izraelia. The last attempted to evoke the centuries-long plight of the Jewish diaspora and expressed Avramenko’s belief that Ukrainians understood Jews because they shared a similar tragic history.

11. Manitoba Free Press, 2 May 1927; Winnipeg Evening Tribune, 2 and 4 May 1927.
Ukrainian farmers travelled eighty miles to see the show. The audience was very enthusiastic and the only regret was that Avramenko had not been present. While there were few Anglo-Canadians in attendance, those who came said they had never attended a more enjoyable performance.

After eighteen months in Canada Avramenko was eager to tour with a troupe of dancers, singers, and instrumentalists. In the summer of 1927 everything finally fell into place. His leg had healed and had been tested on the stage. Most Ukrainian Canadians had heard or read about his dancers and several Prairie communities had expressed interest in seeing the dancers perform. The talent required to form a troupe was also available. Winnipeg had its share of talented singers, dancers, and instrumentalists and after Koshetz’s final tour of North America came to a premature end in May 1927, Hassan and Sorochynsky were persuaded to join Avramenko. Finally, early in July, Andrii Kist, the last important member of Avramenko’s entourage came to Canada from Czechoslovakia. Close friends since 1917, Kist and Avramenko had served in the Army of the Ukrainian National Republic, toured with Iosyf Stadnyk’s theatre, and crossed paths again in 1924 in Podozdrady, where Kist had been studying agricultural economics. Blessed with a good voice, able to play the bandura, and much more accomplished with pen and ink and a typewriter than Avramenko, Kist had been admitted to Canada (once again with the aid of J. S. Atkinson) to work for the School of Ukrainian National Dance as a secretary, administrator, singer, and instrumentalist.

When the spring and summer dance classes in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Edmonton came to an end in late July, Avramenko focused on touring for the remainder of the year. A brief trial tour was scheduled for the first two weeks of August and then, after his troupe in Winnipeg was reorganized, a second much more ambitious tour was launched in late September. Prior to both tours the Prairies were flooded with leaflets, handbills, and posters that attempted to entice prospective spectators with promises of “Girls that whirl and spin before their partners like the winds that wave the grasses of the steppes.” These would be Avramenko’s first and last tours of Canada and, ironically, the longest tours of his career.

The first tour, 1–13 August, featured a troupe composed of three instrumentalists, two five-year-old dance soloists, and twelve adult singers and dancers, including Hassan, Sorochynsky, Kukhta, and Kist. Eleven two-hour performances were staged in nine towns and cities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Only in Regina, where it gave three performances, was the troupe booked into a real theatre. In Yorkton, the mayor, physician, and several English-speaking guests attended the performance and expressed their admiration for the troupe. Reports in the Ukrainian press stressed the new-found respect that the Ukrainian performing arts and culture were acquiring as a result of Avramenko’s work.

The fall tour, which began on 28 September, included fifty-two performances in forty-eight Prairie centres. With the exception of Portage la Prairie, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Edmonton, Calgary, and Moose Jaw, all the performances were in small railway towns in the middle of remote Ukrainian rural bloc settlements. As Hassan, Kukhta, and Sorochynsky had left Winnipeg to pursue other opportunities, the second troupe consisted primarily of Winnipeggers, many of whom had already toured in August. In small rural communities some of the


14. The tour included Brandon, Regina, Melville, Yorkton, Shelo, Canora, Arran, Dauphin, and Oakburn.

15. The date and place of performance were as follows: 28 September, Portage la Prairie MB; 29 September, Shoal Lake MB; 30 September, Russell MB; 1 and 2 October, Rossburn MB; 4 October, Donwell SK; 5 October, Calder SK; 6 October, Kamsack SK; 7 October, Robin MB; 8 October, Sifton MB; 10 October, Ethelbert MB; 11 October, Pine River MB; 12 October, Swan River MB; 13 October, Norquay SK; 14 October, Goodeve SK; 15 October, Ituna SK; 17 October, Theodore SK; 18 October, Foam Lake SK; 20 and 24 October, Saskatoon SK; 25 October, Vonda SK; 26 October, Meacham SK; 27 October, Waskow SK; 28 October, Tarnopol SK; 29 and 30 October, Cutworth SK; 1 November, Prince Albert SK; 2 November, Krydor SK; 3 November, Hafford SK; 4 November, Radisson SK; 6 November, Whitkow SK; 7 November, Lloydminster SK; 8 November, Vermillion AB; 9 November, Innisfree AB; 10 November, Vegreville AB; 11 November, Mundare AB; 12 November, Lamont AB; 13 November, Zawale AB; 14 November, Braderheim AB; 15 November, Edmonton AB; 19 November, Redwater AB; 20 November, Egremont AB; 21 November, Beiliis AB; 22 November, Radway Centre AB; 23 November, Smoky Lake AB; 24 November, Leduc AB; 26 November, Edmonton AB; 29 November, Calgary AB; 30 November, Moose Jaw SK; 1 December, Moose Jaw SK; 2 December, Melville SK; 3 December, Yorkton SK; 5 December, Canora SK.

16. The performers included female dancers Pauline Garbolinsky, Olga Kowbel, Anna Kharysh, and Evodkia Pavliukievych; male dancers Avramenko, Philiak, Ivan Pasichnak, and Volodymyr Pylpchak; child soloists Halia Tichoweczka and Pavlyk Trach; and instrumentalists Ivan Fil on violin, Ihmati Gronitsky on dulcimer, and Kist, who used the pseudonym A. Wasiiko, on bandura. In one segment of the performance, Pasichnak and Pylpchak also played the mandolin and guitar, while the women, featuring vocal soloist Evodkia Pavliukievych, sang Ukrainian folk songs.
performances created a veritable sensation because the local people had never seen folk dances performed on stage and were unfamiliar with many of the dances presented. The Ukrainian press continued to praise the good public relations and the respect for Ukrainian performing arts and culture that Avramenko was promoting. A Smoky Lake correspondent stressed the “high moral quality” of the dances and Avramenko’s oratorical and declamatory abilities that moved old men to tears. According to the Edmonton Journal, “The dancers made a colourful picture and their dancing was a revelation. Grace of movement, poise and skill were evidenced in a high degree. They seemed to live the rhythm of the music, and from the beginning to the end of the dances, never missed a beat. The music for the dancing was supplied by a violin and dulcimer, and was full of life and fire.”

On 6 December Avramenko’s troupe returned to Winnipeg. Within a week a decision had been made to organize a second round of dance schools in Saskatchewan and Alberta. Avramenko, assisted by Kist, would teach in Saskatoon and Edmonton, while Pihulíak would offer dance classes in Yorkton and Canora. By 20 December Avramenko and Kist were in Saskatoon, where they found accommodation at the Mohyla Institute. Dance classes commenced at the Regent Hall in Saskatoon and in Edmonton during the week of 10 January 1928. Enrolment was about ninety in Edmonton and 110 in Saskatoon. Simultaneously, Pihulíak launched dance classes in Yorkton and Canora, attracting about fifty pupils in each town. Unfortunately, enrolment in both rural centres declined during the next two months. A special course at the Ukrainian Catholic St. Joseph’s College in Yorkton had to be cancelled when one of the Christian Brothers who taught in the school forbade male students to have any physical contact with girls during dance classes. In Canora controversy erupted in February when parents of Ukrainian Orthodox pupils took exception to rehearsals and a recital during Lent.

For Avramenko the winter of 1928 was an extremely hectic and stressful period. Although Kist now took care of administration and handled all of the correspondence, Avramenko still had more work than he could handle. For more than two months he commuted between Edmonton and Saskatoon and occasionally visited Pihulíak in Yorkton and Canora. He helped prepare Ukrainian Independence Day commemorations in Edmonton and participated in the production of two comedies at the Hrushevsky Institute. Because more than twenty rural public school teachers were attending his Edmonton classes, Avramenko gave them extra lessons so they could teach Ukrainian folk dancing when they returned to their schools. For their benefit, and for all graduates, Avramenko, Pihulíak, and Kist prepared and published a thin volume, Ukrainskyi natsionalni tanky (Ukrainian National Dances), describing all the dances taught by Avramenko. On top of everything, Avramenko had to prepare, coordinate, and perform at recitals scheduled for March, and then examine pupils in all four communities. As a result, by February he was ill, suffering from fatigue, and extremely high-strung. Acquaintances reported that Avramenko was very nervous, extremely argumentative, and rapidly acquiring a reputation as an eccentric.

Rumours about his personal life were also beginning to take a toll on Avramenko. Since the spring of 1927 his name had been linked romantically with that of eighteen-year-old Pauline Garbolinsky, a native of Winnipeg and one of his star dance pupils. Avramenko had given Pauline private lessons, asked her to help teach his youngest pupils, included her in the two troupes that had toured the Prairie provinces, and invited her to accompany him and Kist to Saskatoon in December 1927.

In no time Winnipeg gossipmongers, who had speculated that Avramenko and Pauline cohabited when they were on tour, were writing to Saskatoon to inquire about the couple. By February 1928, when Pauline moved to Edmonton to teach the youngest pupils, Winnipeg was abuzz with rumours that she was living in sin with Avramenko. To complicate
matters, when Avramenko’s friends got wind of the rumours they urged him to act honourably and marry Pauline because her reputation had been ruined. Kist went so far as to suggest that should Avramenko abandon Pauline, he would embitter and alienate many like her from the cause of “holy Ukraine.” Avramenko explained that for the present he simply wanted to help Pauline lift herself above the lot of most Ukrainian girls and insisted that his behaviour had been beyond reproach and that he intended to marry her. His answer seemed to satisfy no one and when Pauline, Avramenko, and Kist returned to Winnipeg in April, malicious tongues continued to wag and spread rumours about the couple. 23

During these hectic months Avramenko and Kukhta also began to plan a tour of eastern Canada and the United States. Avramenko hoped to offer special performers’ classes in Winnipeg during the spring, commission props and stage decorations, and assemble a new troupe of at least twenty-five dancers, singers, and instrumentalists. Unfortunately, when he returned to Winnipeg things did not go according to plan. The special performers’ classes generated little interest and when the school reopened in late April, only beginners’ and advanced classes were offered in the smaller Ukrainian Reading Association Prosвита hall.

By the time the classes got under way Avramenko was considering a new option. In mid-April a Ukrainian women’s committee in Chicago had invited Avramenko to perform at the Chicago Women’s World Fair. The committee indicated that it was already advertising Avramenko and his dancers as “one of the most famous old-world dancing troupes on this continent.” 24 This was an offer that Avramenko could not refuse. He had been itching to move to the United States and appear on Broadway. Because he was not a Canadian citizen, American immigration officials asked for guarantees that Avramenko would be readmitted into Canada and demanded that a $500 bond be posted. Within a month all of the formalities had been ironed out, and on 23 May 1928, Avramenko and Kukhta left Winnipeg and entered the United States on a six-month artist’s visa. Although he was unable to take a troupe or any of his dance pupils to Chicago, Avramenko hoped that Kist and Pihuliak, who remained in Canada, would assemble a troupe and finance an American

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23. For this episode, see the correspondence in the following files: LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 8, file 3 (Hassan); vol. 8, file 12 (Kist); and vol. 9, file 17 (Pihuliak).

24. See the correspondence between Stephanie Cymbalist and Avramenko, 10 and 18 April 1928, LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 7, file 25.

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tour. On 26 May, the day after Avramenko’s solo performance at the Women’s World Fair, Pauline Garbolinsky left her parents’ home and joined Avramenko in Chicago. Three weeks later, on 16 June 1928, they were married in a Ukrainian Orthodox ceremony in Chicago. Their only daughter, Oksana, would be born in March 1929 in New York City.

During the next few months, while Avramenko, Pauline, and Kukhta offered Ukrainian dance classes in Detroit and Cleveland and then moved to New York City in December 1928, Avramenko’s School of Ukrainian National Dance continued to operate in Canada. In Winnipeg Kist, the administrator, held down the fort, and Ivan Pasichnyak offered dance classes. Pihuliak spent the spring and summer of 1928 in Alberta, teaching and touring in the Vegreville, Innisfree, and Shandro districts. Elsewhere, Moshuk taught in Toronto, Stefan Yemchuk in Fort William, and Sam Hancharuk in Kenora. In addition, at least a dozen Prairie public school teachers who had taken classes in Saskatoon and Edmonton during the past two years taught Ukrainian folk dancing in rural Saskatchewan and Alberta. In September Pihuliak and Kist moved to Windsor, where at least fifty pupils attended dance classes until December. When Kist joined Avramenko and Pauline in New York City, after Kukhta decided to return to Canada, Pihuliak proceeded to Montreal.

Montreal was the last major Canadian urban centre with a large Ukrainian population to host Avramenko or one of his authorized instructors. For three months Pihuliak taught more than a hundred pupils in two schools, one Ukrainian Catholic, the other Ukrainian Orthodox. The recital he staged at the Princess Theatre on 14 April 1929 was a moral victory. He had to compete not only with a local ULFTA dance school but also with the Isadora Duncan Dancers, featuring the late Isadora’s adopted daughter Irma Duncan, which the Princess Theatre booked for a one-week engagement. The arrival of the celebrated company, which had been based in Moscow, earned good reviews in New York City, and enjoyed the support of many ethnic and leftist organizations in Montreal, threatened to take the wind out of ticket sales for Pihuliak’s recital and confuse the non-Ukrainian public on whose attendance Pihuliak counted. 25 Fortunately, Pihuliak almost filled the house, a majority of the spectators were non-Ukrainians, and the reviews

25. See Pihuliak’s letters to various associates commencing on 30 March 1929 in LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 9, file 19.
were very good. The *Montreal Gazette* praised the performance for its “rare sincerity and charm,” reported that “the skill with which [the dances] were performed ... was of a very high order,” and concluded that “New Canadians, like last night’s dancers, who are keeping alive in their new home the beauty of the land from which they came, are making a very real contribution to the life of the country and thoroughly deserve the warm reception that was accorded them.”

Pihuljak did not have time to celebrate. Avramenko was preparing for his New York début at the Star Casino on the Upper West Side and desperately needed Pihuljak’s help. When Pihuljak crossed the border and entered the United States on 29 April 1929, the first chapter of Avramenko’s relationship with Ukrainian Canadians came to an end.

II

At first glance, Avramenko’s first sojourn in Canada was an unqualified success. In three years he and his instructors had established Schools of Ukrainian National Dance in five provinces and the country’s three largest cities, they had offered instruction to more than 2,000 pupils, toured the Prairies, and demonstrated that Ukrainian folk dancing had the potential to become not only a popular recreational activity but also a performing art. They had also generated a great deal of positive press and publicity for the Ukrainian folk arts and Ukrainian Canadians in general. In terms of sheer quantity and consistency, Avramenko had generated much more publicity in Canada than Alexander Koshetz and the Ukrainian National Chorus. While Koshetz and his chorus had received nothing but rave reviews, they had performed in Canada on only two occasions, in 1923 and 1926, and both times only in Toronto and Winnipeg. Avramenko had managed to generate good press in five provinces for almost three years.

When he made New York City his new home, Avramenko was already a phenomenon in the Ukrainian-Canadian community. He was an idol of teenage girls, a model for community leaders, and an example of how the folk arts could be used to preserve Ukrainian identity and mobilize and promote the community. Seventeen-year-old Olena Serdechna, a resident of Kenora, Ontario, who was clearly smitten, wrote Avramenko that she thought about him every day and dreamt about attending his classes and dancing with him every night. Her heart had “stopped beating” when she heard Avramenko was ill and she prayed for his success every day. Petro Bilon, a Ukrainian Orthodox priest, compared Avramenko to Koshetz and insisted that both were geniuses. Ivan Bodrug, a Protestant pastor, believed that God had sent Avramenko to Canada to save “the Ukrainian spirit from drowning prematurely in the great English sea.” Avramenko had been sent by Providence “to renew the spirit of Ukraine among Ukrainian immigrants in North America.”

Nykyfor Hryhoriv, a Socialist Revolutionary politician and publicist based in Prague, who traveled across Canada in 1928, reported that there was not one rural Ukrainian home that did not display a memento of Avramenko and his dancers. While reports of this kind exaggerated his impact, and ignored the unprecedented advertising campaigns mounted by Avramenko and his colleagues, it is clear that by 1929 Avramenko had become a cultural icon.

To understand the emergence of the Avramenko phenomenon in Canada during these years, it is necessary to realize that he arrived at a critical juncture in the history of both the Ukrainian-Canadian community and North American popular culture. As a result, Avramenko’s career received the kind of impetus that may not have been available under different circumstances.

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27. During the 1930s Avramenko authorized several instructors to offer dance courses in Ontario and Quebec. He returned to Canada in September 1937 to raise money for his second feature film, *Zaporozhets za Dunaiem*. Although the movie was produced by the Winnipeg-based Avramenko Film Company Limited and featured Ukrainian-Canadians in bit parts and dance numbers, it was filmed in New Jersey during the summer of 1938. By the spring of 1939, Avramenko had returned to New York City. For more on this episode, see Bohdan Y. Nebesio, “Zaporozhets za Dunaiem (1938): The Production of the First Ukrainian-Language Feature Film in Canada,” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 16, nos. 1–2 (Summer–Winter 1991): 115–30. For Avramenko’s relations with the cult figure who directed both of his feature films see Peter Bogdanovich, “Edgar G. Ulmer: An Interview,” *Film Culture* 58–60 (1974), especially pp. 209–16.


By the mid-1920s, almost sixty percent of the Ukrainian-Canadian population had been born in Canada, and thirty percent lived in urban centres. Because Ukrainian-Canadian community leaders had been occupied with disputes about religion and Old Country politics they had neglected to create an organizational and cultural infrastructure for the Canadian-born. Apart from ULFTA-sponsored mandolin orchestras and youth groups, there were few if any Ukrainian-Canadian youth clubs or organizations in 1926. By the 1920s urban youth, in particular, was losing fluency in the Ukrainian language, and young people who were fed up with the denominational bickering of their elders were becoming alienated from the immigrant community. While traditional Ukrainian-Canadian diversions like amateur theatricals remained popular and provided entertainment for the older generation and the 70,000 newcomers who would reach Canadian shores between 1925 and 1930, they had little appeal for Canadian-born and Canadian-educated youth. Commercial radio, phonograph records, and motion pictures starring Hollywood celebrities exerted a greater attraction than incomprehensible plays set in a distant and foreign land and staged in community halls or church basements.

Even more noteworthy was the fact that by the mid-1920s jazz, which had originated in the red-light districts of New Orleans, and watered-down versions of Black American social dances like the cakewalk, the turkey trot, the black bottom, the shimmy and the charleston, all of them characterized by rhythmic and throbbing music and spontaneous and sensuous motions, had managed to penetrate the Ukrainian-Canadian community, including the few small and rather exclusive institutions and organizations that catered to Ukrainian-Canadian youth.32 Ukrainian community leaders, who were beginning to realize that something had to be done for the Canadian-born, were now also overwhelmed by the same sense of moral panic that had been provoked by the Jazz Age among guardians of middle-class morality all across North America.33

For example, on 30 April 1927, Julian Stechishin, rector of the Mohyla Institute, attended a student dance in Edmonton. After the dance, Stechishin wrote in his journal that the students at the Edmonton branch of the Institute were a “lost cause”: “Jazz and jazz and nothing else. I tried to initiate a Ukrainian dance, but it was absolutely impossible. They move about the floor just as if they were all insane. I admonished one of them to dance in a more decent fashion, but he just stared me down.... When he started making excuses I told him I would return his fifty-cent admission and throw him out. Later I had to admonish another one. That put an end to the trouble on this occasion, but they could not be persuaded to entertain themselves after our fashion or even try one of our dances.”

As fate would have it, a week later, on 8 May 1927, Avramenko, who was about to launch a dance school in Saskatoon, gave a public lecture. It was the same homily he delivered in every community he visited. Dance, Avramenko insisted, had the power to raise national consciousness; it could vanquish hopelessness and despair and harden national resolve. It had the power to galvanize the Ukrainian people, who were divided and oppressed by four foreign states, and awaken their determination to fight. In fact, Ukrainian folk dancing and the struggle for liberation went hand in hand. This was the reason, Avramenko suggested, why the Poles and Czechs had been so frightened when he performed Gonta and Zaporozhets. “When we put on our national costume and dance the Kolomyika our enemies ... begin to worry.” Moreover, Ukrainian folk dancing and the Ukrainian national costume were the greatest barriers to the alienation and assimilation of youth: “If your little boy, who is growing up in a foreign land, learns to dance the Zaporizkyi

32. “Our weddings and other pastimes are accompanied by the bellowing of modern jazz rather than the sounds of our native music,” lamented Peter Lazarowich and Honoré Ewach. As a result, kolomyiê, kozaciê and other forms of Ukrainian instrumental and dance music were threatened with extinction. Previously, traditional Ukrainian melodies and the instrumentalists who performed them were well known in Canada. “however, since jazz became the ideal inducement to dance, all of these old musicians have fallen silent.” Now a musician who dared to play a kolomyiê in public would only provoke laughter (“V spravi ridnoi muzyky,” Ukraïnskiê holos, 17 November 1926).

33. The moral panic provoked by jazz has been described in the following terms: “The dancers were close, the steps were fast, and the music was jazz. And because popular forms of dancing were intimate and contorting, and the music was rhythmic and throbbing, it called down upon itself all the venom of offended respectability. Administrative officials as well as women’s clubs and city fathers found the dancing provocative and indecent and tried at least to stop the young from engaging in its most egregious forms, if not from the dances entirely. But the young kept on dancing” (Paula S. Fass, The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s [New York: Oxford University Press, 1977], especially pp. 300-6).

34. Diary, LAC, Julian Stechishin Collection, MG 30, D 307, vol. 1, file 10, acc. 84/392. All passages from the diary have been translated from Ukrainian by the author.
kozak, he will know for the rest of his life that he is a Ukrainian." Avramenko concluded by vowing to use Ukrainian folk dancing and the folk arts to awaken the elemental love for Ukraine that was dormant deep within the hearts of Ukrainian youth in North America.35

Avramenko's speech offered a quick fix, an activity around which young people could be rallied and mobilized. Stechishin was fascinated by the lecture and concluded that here was at least part of the answer to the problem posed by Ukrainian-Canadian youth. Avramenko's thoughts on dance and its relation to national consciousness, and his unambiguous rejection of "all kinds of modern dances and ... jazz music" were especially welcome.36 After the lecture Stechishin endorsed Avramenko's plans and urged those in attendance to enrol in Avramenko's school. For the rest of his life Julian Stechishin would remain one of Avramenko's staunchest supporters.

Avramenko's popularity among Ukrainian-Canadian community leaders was greatly enhanced by the ringing endorsements of his dance recitals published in the English-language press. Revealingly, these often praised Ukrainian folk dances precisely because they were so unlike the modern popular dances—especially the charleston and the shimmy—that scandalized some Canadians. Reviews of Avramenko's performances featured headlines like "High steppers from the steppes ... outdo the Charleston"37 and suggested that Ukrainian dancing was pure, virtuous, decorous, and worthy of absorption into the fabric of Canadian life: "When the Ukrainians dance they dance as the winds that wave the grasses of the steppes," the Toronto Evening Telegram had written. "No nigger acrobatics. No hugging matches. Hands and arms are used sparingly. They dance with their feet, which, after all, seems a natural way to dance. But how they can dance.... There was much vigour and no vulgarity. Suggestion was a million miles away. They danced as David might have danced before the Lord. Some of the best dancing was like the best Ukrainian singing, done by groups of men, or by girls singly or in pairs.... Old Ukraine will live forever in new Canada while such good work continues."38

Such reviews marked a sharp departure in the popular Canadian perception of Ukrainians. Previously, Ukrainians and their popular culture had been perceived as a threat to lofty British and Protestant moral standards. Ukrainian dancing in particular had been the object of much opprobrium. Protestant missionaries and earnest public-school teachers bent on Canadianizing immigrants routinely lamented that at Ukrainian weddings and other festive occasions "the attitudes and poses of the dancers are anything but elevating."39 Now Ukrainian folk dancing was being touted by the mainstream press as a socially and culturally acceptable activity, as a pastime capable of upholding rather than destroying the moral standards on which British and Canadian civilization rested.

Ukrainian-Canadian community leaders like Julian Stechishin, who yearned for positive recognition, welcomed such reviews and cheered Avramenko. After the 25 June 1927 performance at the Pantages Theatre in Edmonton, Stechishin was absolutely delighted. His journal contains the following observations: "I was extremely satisfied because I sensed that the public, which included many Englishmen, enjoyed the performance. Perhaps this will improve their perception of us at least partly. After the performance Avramenko spoke to his pupils. He spoke with great passion and delivered a very patriotic speech. He stated that our people must do everything to gain glory for our nation. He introduces our culture to foreigners, thereby acquainting them with us through the medium of the dance, which is a unique Ukrainian art form. He concluded his speech by appealing to his pupils not to forget their dances and to reject foreign..."

35. The speech was published in Preria: Kanadyjski almanakh (Winnipeg: Tovarystvo opiky nad ukraijskymy pereselentsiamy im. sv. Rafaile v Kanadi, 1928).

36. It is interesting to note that concern about the dangers posed by jazz and the shimmy were not confined to middle-class Ukrainian-Canadian community activists. In January 1928 Avramenko received several letters from the aging Ukrainian émigré philanthropist and publisher Ievhen Chykalenko, whom he had last seen in Poděbrady, near Prague in 1925. Chykalenko cautioned Avramenko to avoid arguments with pro-Soviet Ukrainians in Canada and then explained why he wanted him to remain on good terms with supporters of a regime that had driven both of them into exile: "It is absolutely imperative that you return to Ukraine, conquer all of our youth between the Zbruch and the Kuban rivers with your dances, and thereby reclaim them from all kinds of 'shimmies' for our own (ridni) dances." If Avramenko quarrelled with pro-Soviet Ukrainian Canadians he would not see Ukraine as long as the Bolsheviks remained in power and as a result traditional Ukrainian folk dancing would be swept aside by modern social dances (Ievhen Chykalenko's letter to Avramenko, 10 January 1928, LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 7, file 24).

37. Toronto Evening Telegram, 25 February 1926.

38. Toronto Evening Telegram, 27 February 1926.

jazz and unaesthetic contortions." A week later, after the Dominion Day performance at Victoria Park, Stechishin could barely contain himself: "Our dances during the finale were so good that the English shouted 'Good for Ukrainians. Last and best!'... We represented ourselves in a manner that made us proud. We sensed that we had performed so well that the English, had they not been embarrassed [by their own inadequacies], would have praised our numbers much more than their own. That day, in the evening, everyone was happy."[41]

In spite of his flaws, and there were many, in the late 1920s Vasile Avramenko emerged as a genuine icon for many Ukrainian Canadians because, for a brief moment, he had managed to make many of them feel good about themselves.

A closer examination of the Avramenko phenomenon reveals deep cracks beneath the surface. Avramenko’s personal identity and his sense of self-esteem grew out of his involvement in the Ukrainian revolution and struggle for independence. It was the role he had found for himself during those years, as a performer and above all as a propagandist and missionary of the “Ukrainian cause,” which endowed him with a sense of belonging and gave meaning to his life. At the same time, the conviction that his dances could save immigrant youth from assimilation and promote the cause of Ukrainian independence drove him so relentlessly and made him so overbearing that it alienated his closest friends, impeded his growth as an artist, subverted his plans to publicize the Ukrainian cause, and threatened to destroy him financially.

From the outset, Avramenko subordinated the art or craft of the dance to the imperatives of nationalist propaganda. He saw himself primarily as someone uniquely able to generate positive publicity for Ukrainians and promote a sense of Ukrainian identity and pride among Ukrainian-Canadian youth. A gifted, untrained dancer, Avramenko lacked patience and discipline and spent little time honing his craft. By 1928 he was no longer preparing any new material for the dance ensembles he hoped to lead on triumphant tours. Admittedly, many of the performances he staged in Canada during these years received good reviews, especially in newspapers like the Toronto Evening Telegram, which had traditionally appealed to an unsophisticated public. However, even these reviews invariably focused on the “oriental” exoticism of the performances, the colourful and picturesque costumes, and the artless and spontaneous quality of the performers, who behaved on stage as peasants might behave on the village green. All reviews also singled out the cute five-and six-year-old soloists that Avramenko featured in every major performance. Avramenko’s solo dances were also reviewed positively, but it was the wild, unrestrained energy and agility that he brought to his performances, rather than their aesthetic qualities that seemed to draw the attention of the reviewers.

Forthright friends and colleagues urged Avramenko to pay more attention to his craft and warned that his approach would ultimately prove to be self-defeating. Ivan Bobersky had remarked that Avramenko’s Gonna solo, for all its bravura and complexity, was an incomplete work that desperately needed a much more subtle and shaded musical arrangement.[43] Shortly before they left for the United States in 1928, Kukhta told Avramenko that his repertoire was primitive and contained little more than the kernel of a ballet. Bobersky also observed that Avramenko’s dance schools focused on producing good Ukrainians rather than skilled dancers and as a result many of his pupils were ponderous and inflexible when they appeared on stage. Such ensembles might promote Ukrainian identity among the Canadian-born and their performances might stir nostalgia in Ukrainian audiences, but they were of little interest to non-Ukrainians who valued dance for its aesthetic qualities. He also suggested that if Avramenko really wanted to captivate sophisticated audiences with the beauty of the Ukrainian dance, he would have to put together an ensemble composed of accomplished dancers with beautiful faces, attractive figures, supple bodies, and refined movements and provide them with sophisticated choreography and musical arrangements. Both men urged Avramenko to choreograph at least a few dances with North American content that might resonate with non-

41. Ibid.
42. Paul Rutherford, A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1982), 56.
43. Review in Kanadyjskiy farmer, 29 June 1927.
Ukrainian audiences and make them more open and receptive to Ukrainian dance. Avramenko listened but never acted on any of these suggestions. With a repertoire consisting of fifteen ensemble dances and three or four solos, all performed to music that many reviewers described as tedious, repetitive, and monotonous, Avramenko had little hope of succeeding on the provincial stage, much less on Broadway.

Avramenko’s overbearing missionary nationalism also alienated friends, colleagues, and pupils. Even minor lapses of national rectitude provoked Avramenko’s wrath. He declared “there is only room for Ukrainians in my school,” berated members of the troupe who dared to utter so much as one word of English during the 1927 tours and constantly lectured everyone within earshot on how to be a “good Ukrainian.” Lev Sorochynsky, who took exception to Avramenko’s views and lectures because he had been turning down lucrative job offers for eighteen years to work with Ukrainians, left the summer 1927 tour in disgust. Avramenko would not be deterred. During the winter of 1928 he stunned Kist by questioning Pauline’s commitment to the “Ukrainian cause” after she exchanged a few English phrases with her Canadian-born friends. Such behaviour, Avramenko implied, was a “betrayal of Ukraine.” And in April 1928, when internationally acclaimed Ukrainian soprano Solomiia Krushelnyska, the first successful interpreter of Madame Butterfly, performed a Russian opera aria at a recital in Winnipeg, Avramenko could not contain his nationalist indignation. At the banquet, which followed the recital, he unleashed a torrent of accusations and invective at the aging opera singer. While those in attendance gasped and fidgeted uncomfortably, Krushelnyska smiled at her agitated detractor and then, without missing a beat, disarmed him completely by delivering a stirring rendition of the Ukrainian national anthem. Avramenko, who had no sense of irony, believed himself completely vindicated, but his behaviour would be the subject of gossip in Winnipeg for the next six months.

Ready to sacrifice everything for the “Ukrainian cause,” Avramenko not only expected, he demanded as much from everyone around him. Absolutely convinced that his labours on behalf of Ukrainian dancing were a “sacred obligation” that had to be sustained “even if it costs me my life,” Avramenko could not understand those who had more mundane priorities. When his manager Volodymyr Kukhta and eighteen-year-old Genia Ferley, the daughter of a prominent provincial and municipal politician, decided to get married during the August 1927 tour, Avramenko was furious and dismissed both. Several months later, when the selfless Hassan concluded that it was impossible to make a living as a Ukrainian performer in Canada and returned to studies at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, Avramenko berated him for wasting his talents on a farm. Hassan, he insisted, had a responsibility to “work for the glory and liberation of Ukraine.” And when Andrii Kist, who was starving and unable to pay the rent in Winnipeg, indicated his readiness to work as a harvest labourer or soft-drink bottler, Avramenko warned him not to mention the subject again because the “Ukrainian cause” took precedence. Avramenko even expected parents to transport the children who were to tour the United States with him from Winnipeg to upper New York State at their own expense. When no one obliged he was confounded.

And, not only did he subject his pupils to endless harangues on the decadence of modern music and dance, the evils of gum-chewing, and the immorality of using lipstick and make-up, he also lectured them on Ukrainian history, Ukrainian language, and the beauty and superiority of the traditional Ukrainian folk costume. Friends begged him to stop these lectures and to focus on dance lessons, but Avramenko would not be denied.

46. See the humorous letters Bobersky wrote Avramenko in the fall of 1927 in LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 7, file 19; Andrii Kist’s letter to Avramenko, 3 June 1928, LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 8, file 12; and Volodymyr Kukhta’s letter to Avramenko, 3 March 1928, LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 8, file 25.
50. See the correspondence between Avramenko and Hassan, 17 April–10 May 1928, LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 8, file 3.
52. Kist’s letter to Avramenko, 10 July 1928, LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 8, file 12.
For Avramenko the Ukrainian folk costume was the primary emblem of Ukrainian identity, and his preoccupation with it surpassed even that of the most ardent nineteenth-century Ukrainophiles. He taught dance classes dressed in boots, an embroidered shirt, baggy pantaloons or sharavary, and a knee-length black jacket or svyta. Indeed, he wore this outfit and a lambskin hat at all public appearances and just about everywhere else. The mere suggestion that he abandon it in favour of contemporary western dress infuriated him. When Kukhta hinted that Avramenko wear a business suit when he was not on stage, Avramenko refused to consider the possibility, insisting that he would not become “an internationalist insofar as clothing is concerned.” Avramenko wanted to compel Ukrainians “to love their superior native attire.” When he married Pauline in June 1928 Avramenko used the occasion to showcase the beauty of the Ukrainian wedding ritual and traditional Ukrainian dress: the 200 invited guests were asked to wear Ukrainian folk costumes. In later years Avramenko upbraided Ukrainian singers and instrumentalists who were photographed in frock coats rather than embroidered shirts, and it would take much effort and energy to persuade him to wear a business suit when crossing the Canadian-American border.

Most significantly, almost every Avramenko’s performance was a financial disaster, notwithstanding the good reviews. Unshakeable in the belief that he was working for the glory of the Ukrainian people and their cause, Avramenko saw no reason to pinch pennies. Denying himself all but the most vital necessities of life, Avramenko spent very liberally to promote his school, rent attractive venues, and advertise performances. Rehearsal halls, accommodations, instructors’ salaries, costume storage fees, and incessant travel from one school to another drained much of his income. There were also expenditures on publicity photos, newspaper advertisements, stationary, certificates, diplomas, posters, window cards, handbills, leaflets, librettos, sheet music, and the illustrated handbook published in March 1928. The last two items cost almost $1,000 to publish but failed to yield any income. And, instead of staging one quality production at high admission prices in a good theatre, Avramenko always put on a second and a third show and also appeared in every Ukrainian community and parish hall that was available. As a result, much of the income from his dance schools was wasted because more recitals were scheduled than the public was willing or able to attend.

By the spring of 1927, largely as a result of his lack of business acumen and inability to take advice even from his best friends, Avramenko had debts totalling more than $1,000. The two tours of the Prairie provinces only added to his financial woes. Because he ignored warnings about the great distances; the cost of halls, theatres, transportation, food, and accommodation; and the likelihood that harvest and post-harvest farm work and inclement weather would hurt attendance, the tour yielded a $700 deficit, and by January 1928 Avramenko had debts totalling more than $2,000. When he left Canada in May 1928 his personal debts were in excess of $3,000, and in the United States Avramenko’s financial predicament would only get worse.

As his financial problems grew, certain patterns emerged that would characterize Avramenko for the rest of his life. Every financial failure spurred him to formulate an even more grandiose project by means of which he hoped to cover his mounting debts. He also began to borrow money and issue public appeals for donations. Invariably, such appeals declared that Avramenko was not working for personal gain but for the “Ukrainian cause,” as if he had a moral right to such largesse, while the Ukrainian-Canadian public had a moral obligation to provide it. In Winnipeg, where he had many creditors, Avramenko’s popularity waned, but elsewhere in Canada, for the time being, his reputation remained untarnished.

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59. Avramenko’s letter to Havrylo Avramenko, 19 January 1929, LAC, MG 31, D 87, vol. 7, file 3. To put these debts into perspective, in 1929 the average annual wage in Canada was $1,200 and fewer than five percent of Canadians earned more than $2,500 annually. See John Herd Thompson and Allen Seeger, Canada 1922–1939: Decades of Discord (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 138.
When Avramenko arrived in December 1925 Canada did not have an indigenous professional theatre. There were only two symphony orchestras in the country, and dance, as a performing art, was virtually unknown. For someone with Avramenko’s raw talent and drive, Canada offered limitless possibilities. He was quickly catapulted to prominence by the mainstream press, which contrasted chaste Ukrainian folk dances with the libidinous social dances of the Jazz Age and marveled at the colour and exoticism of Avramenko’s spectacles. At the same time, Ukrainian-Canadian community leaders hailed him as the man who would acquaint the Canadian public with the beauty of Ukrainian culture and save the Canadian-born generation from assimilation. There can be no doubt that Avramenko’s work as teacher, performer and popularizer during these first three years made him the “father of Ukrainian folk dancing” in Canada.

Although Avramenko’s most celebrated achievements—the Metropolitan Opera House performance, his tour with Koschetz and their appearances in Carnegie Hall, the spectacle at the Chicago World Fair, and the production of two Ukrainian-language feature films—would take place in the United States during the 1930s, they would fail to generate the kind of popularity and public acclaim that he had enjoyed in Canada during the 1920s. It was much more difficult to attract media attention in New York City and Chicago than in Toronto and Winnipeg, and Avramenko’s subordination of art to nationalist propaganda finally caught up with him in the United States. Ukrainian-American community leaders and opinion makers soon lost patience with the man who had arrived promising to create a Ukrainian ballet. They concluded that his spectacles were too bombastic and that Avramenko lacked the will and discipline to elevate his work to the level of genuine art. Ultimately, however, Avramenko’s fiscal irresponsibility, more than anything else, would destroy his reputation. Driven by an obsessive need to promote the “Ukrainian cause” and sustain his own reputation, Avramenko consistently overestimated the drawing power of his spectacles and exceeded his budget. As a result, all of his major projects in the United States were financial disasters. As his personal debts soared and his marriage disintegrated, Avramenko found himself being pursued by hapless creditors who had entrusted him with their savings. Shunned and ostracized, he would move to Hollywood in 1940 in a desperate attempt to evade his creditors. His productive years behind him, he would spend the rest of his life trying to cash in on the good memories and run away from the bad ones.61

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60. Avramenko and Pauline separated in the spring of 1936 after several years of estrangement.

61. These themes are developed further in my forthcoming biographical sketch, Avramenko: The Rise and Fall of a Legendary Ukrainian Showman (Edmonton: CIUS Press).