

William Kurelek: The Suffering Genius



Michael Ewanchuk

WILLIAM KURELEK: THE SUFFERING GENIUS

Samuel
Michael
Ewanchuk
Sept. 18, 1998

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Dedicated to
My Wife Muriel
and
My Sister Nettie

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Foreword

The soul of a nation, it is often said, is found in the myriad of small everyday actions which give a people their shared experiences and, ultimately, a sense of belonging, common vision and sense of place. Most of us, caught up in the daily round, remain oblivious of this process, and fail to see what is before us, what is special about our actions, our places and ourselves. That requires a special eye and a keen sense of observation, a sense of time, an awareness of place and purpose. Few have these gifts and only rarely is it accompanied by the artistic skill to capture the essence of the moment.

William Kurelek was one of those rare individuals who looked at the same things as his contemporaries, saw what others saw but thought differently about it. He saw beauty in what to others may have been commonplace. He also had the ability to express his thoughts through his chosen medium: art.

The son of a Ukrainian pioneer settler who farmed in Alberta and Manitoba Kurelek was shaped by his experiences of growing up on a bush-country farm in the Stonewall district in the south of Manitoba's Interlake. He captured the Ukrainian pioneer experience on canvass in a way that no other had, before or since. For the most part his subjects were the ordinary everyday scenes of life in the country, life on the farm: people at work and at play. It was his talent to create cultural icons from what, in other hands, could have become the banal.

There was a dark side to Kurelek. As Michael Ewanchuk makes clear in this new biography, Kurelek did not have a happy childhood. His family was not wealthy though neither were they impoverished. Unlike his siblings he was sensi-



Dr. Michael Ewanchuk

tive and introspective. He had difficulty relating to others and his school-days were often hellish experiences. Art was his refuge then, as it was later in life. As an adult Kurelek was also a spiritually troubled man whose sojourn in Europe led to his eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism and, later, the production of some of his most startling paintings with millennialist themes.

It is appropriate that this account of William Kurelek has been written by Michael Ewanchuk. Like Kurelek, he is the son of Ukrainian immigrants who pioneered in the Interlake at the turn of the century. As a boy on a bush farm he shared many of the same experiences and certainly witnessed many of the same activities and experienced the social changes which Kurelek captured in his paintings. Like Kurelek, he is a keen recorder of the Ukrainian pioneer experience in western Canada. In his several books which deal with the history of Ukrainian pioneer settlement in western Canada, he has also captured the breadth and diversity of Ukrainian life in Canada. Both have a common heritage and language and on at least one occasion the two merged when one of Michael Ewanchuk's accounts of an incident of pioneer life was the inspiration for Kurelek's painting of Ukrainian railway labourers celebrating Christmas in a boxcar parked on a siding.

This book is not a critique of Kurelek's art but an account of the artist as a man. Michael Ewanchuk draws upon his personal acquaintance with Kurelek, a personal interview with him, interviews with those who knew him in his youth, and some of Kurelek's hitherto unpublished correspondence. All of this, I believe, makes for an insightful account of a complex individual. Gifted but tortured Kurelek left a lasting legacy to all Canadians. His art has enriched us all.

John C. Lehr
University of Winnipeg

Preface

In researching the development of the Canadian west, and studying the life of the settlers who helped to develop this great agricultural region, the writer restricted his study to the Ukrainian people. And he came to the conclusion that the Ukrainian peasant-farmers who came, in spite of adverse circumstances, have proven to the Canadian society that they had the physical, the emotional and the mental capacity to strive and, now after a hundred years in the New Land, have shown amazing vertical development. True, some were crushed by circumstances, economic depressions, isolation on poor lands, being removed from larger centres; consequently their children were deprived of an opportunity to get a good education.

The settlers were restricted by hard work from mastering the language of the new country, and though derided for adhering too closely to their culture, traditions and church, they forged ahead. The doubts that those from the Ontario backwoods concessions cast, and stressed that they would never become good Canadians - proved unfair and false. The vertical development of the succeeding generations of the Sifton settlers is amazing. Of the larger immigrant groups they have accepted the Canadian way of life and after a space of 100 years, 90 percent of their ethnic groups use the English language as their first language.

Nevertheless, it is true that with Ukraine becoming independent, there is a renewed emphasis of the younger generation in rediscovering and getting better acquainted with their roots. More and more are beginning to appreciate the value of Ukrainian traditions and culture; and in doing so try to help the Ukrainians in the Ukraine to attempt and adopt some aspects of the Canadian ways of life - English is fast becoming the second language in the Ukraine.

To show this successful vertical development of Canadians of the Ukrainian ethnic group and its potential to reach the top, we have decided to restrict this study to one man - William Kurelek.

William Kurelek is recognized as one of the great Canadian artists, who, in spite of difficulties and adverse circumstances, virtually forced his artistic talent on the Canadian society. A genius in his field he made a most worthwhile contribution. His creativity, however, was cut short: William Kurelek died in 1977 when only fifty years old.

Michael Ewanchuk

Acknowledgments

In the first place I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Interlake and Gimli Ukrainian Historical Society, Dr. Tony Kuz president, W. P. Solypa, V.P.; and Miss Anne Smigel, Rt. Rev. John A. Melnyk and Rev. Deacon Michael Woroby, members of the Executive for the guidance and encouragement provided to make the publication of William Kurelek: *The Suffering Genius* possible.

I am grateful to Mrs. Jean Kurelek for her co-operation and approval for the use of certain pictures and the interview tape.

To Michael and Nadia Negrich and Mr. and Mrs. John Tomyk, I hereby express my most sincere thanks for the background information provided and the kindness of providing pictures.

To my good friend, John C. Lehr, of the University of Winnipeg, I express my sincere thanks for preparing the Foreword.

Ms. Anne-Marie Hall was kind, patient and co-operative to type, retype and type again the manuscript for this book, and I appreciate the assistance she provided so willingly.

I gratefully acknowledge the willingness of Ms. Olenka Negrych who utilized her creativity in drawing certain illustrations for this publication.

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And finally I wish to thank The Taras Shevchenko Foundation for assisting financially. Without the grant provided, the writer would have had to bear all the costs alone. The Shevchenko Foundation in utilizing the donations of many hard-working Ukrainian donors to help publish books like the fine volume of Patricia Morley, *Kurelek: A Biography* and Vera Nokony's *Ukrainian Pioneer Women*, published (by Ukrainian Museum of Canada) is making a fine contribution in assisting Canadian writers to provide information about Ukrainians in Canada.

Michael Ewanchuk,
November 1996

PART I

William Kurelek's Background

William Kurelek – The Prairie Painter

According to Anna Balan and Patricia Morley, William Kurelek was an eminently successful Canadian Artist . . . William was able to obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Manitoba and to study art in Mexico and England.

Kurelek, by his inherent character, was driven to offer a commentary on the social conditions of the day or to reveal his deep religious convictions. His realistic representations of life are easily comprehended and are almost a personal communication with the artist himself. His expressions are Canadian in content, and very often are representative of many ethnic groups, but his Ukrainian roots became more evident in his later paintings.

“Paintings were his chief means of communication with other humans. Paintings were also a means of communication with God and nature; they reflected his gratitude and awe in ways that were beyond words”.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1975 prior to the University of Manitoba Convocation, the Alumni Association of the University held a banquet to honour two people who had graduated twenty-five or more years prior to 1975. The graduates selected for recognition at that convocation of 1975 were, Ms Kathleen Richardson, the daughter of a prominent Manitoba financier, and a Canadian artist, William Kurelek, the son of a Ukrainian farmer from Stonewall. William Kurelek was the guest speaker at the banquet. He spoke in a rambling manner making reference to his childhood days, his home, and the attitudes of the community and his parents, stressing the term Ukrainians rather often, it seemed perhaps too often. He depicted himself and his parents as ordinary people; downgraded his home and particularly his father.

After the banquet I introduced myself to the middle-aged artist. He seemed to appreciate our conversation, and anxious to exchange a few sentences in Ukrainian. When he informed me that he would be working in the old Empire Hotel for a few days, a request was made for an interview. He agreed to the interview, but stressed: "I will be working but will be glad to talk to you while I work."

The Empire Hotel Interview

The Empire was an old hotel, and Mr. Kurelek's room faced the C.N.R. where a freight train was shunting. Mr. Kurelek was working on a picture with cows and cowboys. I was informed that that was one picture of the Nativity scenes he was preparing on a trans-Canada basis. When asked why he did not include some cows of the Ayrshire type, he responded; that they were not found among the beef cattle in the prairie. (He kept scratching, rubbing, erasing, using a pencil and now a ball-point pen). "I'm trying to develop more subjects from Western Canada."

"Did you think of including a picture having a religious Ukrainian theme?" I asked. (Being interested in the Canadian Ukrainians as I was researching their settlements in Western Canada).

"What?"

"Well, I can tell you a story connected with Ukrainian Christmas and a boxcar, like the ones we can see being shunted around."

"Well, go ahead, I'm listening."

* * * *

There was a Winnipeg Free Press reporter, Michael Hrushka-Harris, who came to Canada from the Ukrainian province of Bukovyna, from the village of Shypentsi,

close to the village you say your father came from. Michael told me a story which I suggested he publish. Later, he was interviewed and the story was printed in the Winnipeg Free Press. It tells about the un-Christian attitudes he experienced and then the Christian charity he found from his own people in a boxcar on the Saskatchewan prairie.

(The Hrushka story is used here to show how pictures are made and what helps an artist to create.)

The Michael Hrushka-Harris' Story

In arriving in Winnipeg, Michael Hrushka found himself alone and confused:

At that time, the area around the railway station was infested with hustlers, hookers, hype artists and slicks of every stripe all looking to score off the many unsophisticated, often confused immigrants piling off the trains.

In short order, the man sold Michael a train ticket to central Saskatchewan and charged him \$2 for securing him a job there as a water boy on a railway extra gang. He then took the boy to a burlatsky (flophouse) where the man in the next bunk claimed to have had his money stolen from him during the night and borrowed \$10 from Michael.

HUGE DINNER

But, before fleeing Winnipeg the next morning, Michael also tasted the fruits of the land of plenty. He bought "a huge dinner of soup, meat, potatoes and vegetables, salad, pie and coffee for 10 cents," went to his first silent movie and bought an English-Ukrainian dictionary.

Boarding the train the next morning, he learned that the railway hired its own workers and transported them free to the job sites. He worked on the extra gang through the summer and fall, saving his wages of \$2 a day and memorizing each page of the dictionary.

The job complete, Michael returned to Winnipeg to look for work. He stayed through December without finding any. But he did find Georgi, a rakish older man from his village of Shipintsi.

"Georgi said he was a foreman in a coal mine at Pinto, near Estevan, and would get me a job there when he returned. So, I sent most of my savings home for mother to pay the mortgage and I bought train tickets to Pinto for Georgi and me.

Arriving in Pinto, which was just a railway section stop, Georgi found the police were looking for him and he jumped the next train out, leaving Michael out of pocket and stranded.

I was heartsick and lonely. It was about 9 p.m. Sviatij Vechir, Ukrainian Christmas Eve, and very cold. But, I remembered a man

named Iwasiuk from our village who Georgj said was a railway section foreman in the district...I set out to find him."

Michael was wearing a suit he'd bought in Winnipeg for job hunting and a thin topcoat. He pulled his toque down over his ears and struck out for a distant light, the only visible sign of habitation.

"I walked and walked. It was about four miles away and was a farmer's house. The farmer came out and told me I'd been walking the wrong way. The foreman's house was three miles in another direction. My ears and fingers were going numb. The man slammed his door in my face.

About an hour later, almost overcome by the cold, he saw a light in a boxcar on a railway siding and rushed toward it. He tripped and fell repeatedly.

As I came near, I could hear men singing. They were singing *Boh Predvichnyj*, a Ukrainian Christmas carol. I fell again. The tears began and streamed down my face. I was singing the words in my mind. The tears froze on my cheeks and chin.

I sang out loud. Three men came out of the boxcar and took me in. They gave me a hot drink and some food. My hands and ears were swollen with frostbite and they rubbed them with snow and oil to relieve the pain.

I was so happy, my heart was pounding, I barely felt the pain."

It was the first overt act of consideration young Michael had encountered in 10 months in his new country.

Curiously, that first week in January, 1912, was the last date young Michael noted in his journal for years to come. It marked - one senses from the spare, unyielding cant to the subsequent entries - a final departure.

* * * *

William Kurelek was pleased with the story. It was discussed that a series about pioneer settlers, among them Ukrainians, for which group I would suggest pictures and write short comments.

"Good," said Bill, "I like that idea very much, but first I have to finish this project."

After this the interview commenced and was recorded on tape. Having completed the interview, William Kurelek was requested to stop long enough and be the interviewer's guest for lunch at the Fort Garry Hotel, but he refused. "I have not the time."

Before leaving, William Kurelek requested, "Please do me a favour and tell me what you would suggest to help me get a better background in Ukrainian culture."

"You have been to Ukraine once, go again; go right to your roots, to your father's village in the Chernivtsi zone, then you will have a different approach and a greater appreciation."

"Don't leave," said William Kurelek, "stay and talk to me. I have many things to discuss with you as I trust you. You know, I still face serious problems in life - problems not that easy to solve..."

That same week an article was submitted to a United States paper:

William Kurelek Cited By University of Manitoba

William Kurelek, noted Ukrainian Canadian artist, was given the University of Manitoba Jubilee Award by the alumni association of the university. Dr. Ernest Sirluck, President of the University, presented the award at the annual banquet of the organization. Mr. Kurelek received his B.A. degree from the university and chose art as his profession. At the present time he is recognized as one of the leading artists in Canada. He may be called a Ukrainian William Blake as he places considerable emphasis on subjects of religious character. He describes his art as being a socio-religious commentary and an expression of personal nostalgia. Having been brought up on a farm, he depicts rural life, with such themes as a Ukrainian wedding, Canadian winter and life in a lumber camp. Mr. Kurelek worked in the lumber camps of northern Canada after graduating from the university. During our interview with the artist, we found him busy at work completing a "Nativity Scene" on the Canadian prairie. This work is to become one of the many "Nativity scenes" in his new book. Thus far he has written three books, and this winter he plans to go to the Arctic to get background information for his "Canadian Natives" collection.¹

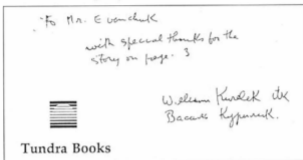
Like Michael Hrushka-Harris and his father before him many Ukrainian settlers came to Canada before 1900 from the Ukrainian province of Bukovyna. They tended to settle as separate groups from the Ukrainians who came from the Ukrainian province of Halychyna, and were in the main Ukrainian (Greek) Catholics; whereas those from Bukovyna were Ukrainian (Greek) Orthodox and church affiliation tended to keep them apart. A large group from Michael Hrushka's village of Shypentsi south of the Dneister River formed a large block settlement in Alberta and named the post office Shypentsi. In the province of Bulovyna north of Shypentsi was a village of Borivtsi from where the Hocolak family came to Canada and settled in the area of Alberta erstwhile post office of Shandro. The Hocolak family did well. Mrs. Kurelek was a Hocolak. Her father became a hotel owner and at least four of the Hocolak family became university graduates.

¹M. Ewanchuk, "Svoboda, Ukrainian Weekly", Jersey City, N.J., June 21, 1975.



Fig. 1. Map of part of the Ukrainian province of Bukovina.

There may have been an exchange of a few letters, but none have been kept; however, contact resumed when a book, *A Northern Nativity* by William Kurelek arrived with the following note penned inside:



On reading the story on page 3 of the book, *A Northern Nativity*, it was observed that the story was modified to take place during depression days about a wanderer in the Prairies like Michael Hrushka-Harris once was. He is presented by William Kurelek as a dejected, unemployed man riding the rods and seeking warmth and kindness, which he finds among the Ukrainian labourers living in a railway boxcar and they show him Christian charity. They ask him in. It is Ukrainian Christmas Eve, January 6, and they are singing Ukrainian carols.

As a consequence of receiving *A Northern Nativity*, it was decided to carry out further research about the life and background of the artist: This book is the result.



Kurelek House in Whitford, Alberta.
(Courtesy of Kurelek Estate.)

Kureleks Settle in Stonewall

William Kurelek was the eldest child of Dmytro and Maria Kurelek. He was born in Whitford, Alberta in 1927. Dmytro, his father was a post W.W.I immigrant who came to Whitford, Alberta from Ukraine to his relatives. While working in Alberta he married his cousin, Mary Hocolak, a Canadian-born girl, who received her elementary education in the local rural school. There were, however, certain experiences during his initial years in Canada that had left life-long impressions on Dmytro Kurelek, and to a degree, established a pattern for his life. It was the treatment he received as an immigrant labourer from the English-speaking Canadians, and the hatred it engendered in him.

The second factor that influenced Dmytro Kurelek's thinking and motivated his actions was the fact that Alberta Ukrainians who settled on good land became successful farmers. They also received guidance and encouragement from provincial agronomists, such as Mr. William Pidruchney who worked in and around the Vegreville area. Mr. Pidruchney did considerable work with young people and his special team of young men went to Chicago to enter in a grain judging contest and came first. Some farmers from Alberta won prizes for their grain and then became classed as master farmers.

This seemed to impress Dmytro Kurelek and it became his burning desire to buy a good farm, develop it and become classified as master-farmer.

For some unknown reason, however, Dmytro Kurelek did not get along well with his in-laws.

Coming to Manitoba

Consequently, through correspondence with his relatives in Manitoba he found that a good farm, with large buildings was available in the Stonewall area.

Therefore, in spite of the fact that depression years were in progress, he acquired a six hundred acre farm, assumed a large mortgage, and moved to Manitoba in around 1933. Dmytro and Maria Kurelek brought with them a family of three children: William, John and Winnie. The Kureleks left Alberta without, even, Mrs. Kurelek bidding farewell to her parents.

William describes the coming of the Kurelek family to the Stonewall farm as follows:

In early spring, Mother and we three children moved away from Alberta and met father in a Winnipeg hotel. From there we took a street car* twenty miles to a farm

*Note: The Stonewall street car used to leave its Winnipeg station east of Main Street at the Landsdowne area, travel toward Selkirk and turn at West St. Paul to Stonewall going through an underpass under the CPR track. M.E.



Stonewall Conveyor.
(courtesy Stonewall Quarry Park)

corner near Stonewall. The Budjaks gave us a wagon left the rest of the way except for a walk down the long lane to the farmyard. It was very dark...Father is pointing out the various farm buildings as we round the big yard.'

Stonewall

In the area north-east of Stonewall, there were several families established on land - on farms as small as forty acres. Heads of these families found work in the Stony Mountain and Stonewall quarries. One of them was Mr. Goresky who was a blacksmith in the Stony Mountain quarry. Several Ukrainian blacksmiths were employed in the quarries. Horses were used to draw carts of stones to the lime kilns and then deliver lime to the C.P.R. cars for shipment. They needed constant reshoeing.

Stonewall was a well-established Anglo-Saxon community of settlers from Ontario. Among them were some who escaped the Red River flood and came to Little Mountain and the Stonewall area.

When the Kureleks moved into the Stonewall district, that Anglo-Saxon community was still basking in its past glories: the Stonewall volunteers of the Saskatchewan Rebellion of 1885, and the large contingent of officers and men, among them medical men, became members of the W.W.I. expeditionary force. One of these, Lieutenant Alan A. McLeod, who on discharge returned to Stonewall and died during the flu epidemic. (He had received the Victoria Cross at Buckingham Palace for his heroism as a pilot).

¹Murray, Joan, Kurelek's Vision of Canada. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON, p. 22.

The town of Stonewall and community played a very aggressive part in provincial and federal politics. The local paper, the *Argus*, was quite influential. Several men, consequently, received jobs as part of the political patronage. One, Ira Straton, was appointed official school trustee to administer the operation of many rural schools among the Ukrainian farmers and showed little respect or consideration for the Ukrainian settlers. He was hated and despised by them. They objected to his coming to meetings fairly often and charging the district car expenses - 33 cents a mile one way. The expensive way in which he ran the school districts; turned the ratepayers against him.

The attitude to the small group of Ukrainians in the area was not good. They were classed as foreigners and placed in the same class as the Germans.

This wasn't a community where a farmer with a name, Kurelek, and the attitude and animosity that he, Dymtro Kurelek, bore against the Anglos could fit. In acquiring land in the Stonewall area, he had to adjust to live in an old established community, and he found it as difficult to accept the people as they did accepting him.



Fig. 2. Map of Victoria School area where Dymtro Kureleks settled. (U. of Wpg.)

Note: Now only the Tomyks and Goreskys remain in the area.

Victoria School District No. 49

In 1934 Dmytro Kurelek acquired and settled on N1/2-3-14-2E in the rural Municipality of Rockwood. According to John Vnuk who became his neighbour and later bought the farm from Dmytro Kurelek - which originally was a dairy farm of over 600 acres. Kurelek paid \$25.00 an acre for it and assumed a substantial mortgage. The farm had good water and good buildings. He also had to acquire animals and equipment and 1934 was not a good year to take a financial risk - a mortgage.

The farmstead was some six miles from Stonewall east of the present P.T.H. #7 and northwest of the "bog" - not far from the present wild bird sanctuary. It was in a very favourable location being not more than a mile from Victoria School #49.

Victoria school was located alongside an old immigration trail that followed the gravel ridge which the Ukrainian settlers followed in travelling to their Interlake homesteads - first establishing the Pleasant home community circa 1897.

Not all of the "master-farmer's" land was suitable for grain growing, as some sloped toward the bog from the ridge. Dmytro Kurelek, in time, came to the conclusion he had to make a change and the depression years settling in did not give a farmer a chance for experimentation.

The Kurelek children, William and John, were enrolled in the Victoria school No. 49. This was one of the early schools formed in the Interlake area after Balmoral No. 44 and Clandeboye No. 47.



Fig. 3. Picture of Victoria School with flagpole on top. (M & N Negrich Coll.)

Victoria School

We were able to find a picture of the children in that school, but no Kurelek children were enrolled.



Fig.4. Picture of the children enrolled in Victoria School in 1932

(Copy provided by Mrs. Pat Barnicki (nee Koroluk)

(Left top row to right)

Gwen Lillies, Lillian Vincent, Irene Vincent, Otto Giesbrecht, Ernie Johnson, Nick Goresky, Millie Washenfielder, Jean Goresky, Gwen Good, Phyllis Pike, Madeline Williams, Bill Heaps, Allan Goresky, Henry Williams, Margaret Washenfielder, Patricia Koroluk, Effie Koroluk, Victoria Goresky, Philip Goresky, Eddie Giesbrecht, Fred Tomyk.

In checking the June 1934 half-yearly report of Victoria School #49 in the records of the Department of Education we find that William Kurelek was enrolled and was in .

Grade I. He was recorded as being seven years old. That term he attended 43 days out of the possible 59. It is likely, therefore, that he started school in April.

The name of the teacher was Louise Irwin, a holder of a second class certificate, and employed at a salary of \$400. per annum.

The following children were enrolled as of June 1934:

Grade I. Good, Donna; Heads, Robert; Hocula, Norman;
Kurelek, William; Teterenko, Nettie; Williams, Virginia.

In 1935, in **Grade II**, the records show: Giesbrecht, John; Heads, Robert; Kurelek, John; Kurelek, William; and McWellan, Irwin.

That term the teacher was Margaret Houghton, 2nd class certificate, at a salary of \$500. per annum.

In 1937, the group moved to Grade IV and John Kurelek (age 9), William Kurelek (age 10) and John Giesbrecht (age 9) were still in attendance, the others likely moved away, but a new name appears - Marguerite Stanley.

In the half-yearly, December 1940 report, we find the Kurelek boys in Gr. VII, with Marguerite Stanley, and Jesse Strlievant. William Kurelek was 13 years old and attended 78 out of a possible 80. John Kurelek was absent one day only. Other children with names that could be considered belonging to the Ukrainian group were: Donald Budjak (Gr. I, age 5); Emily Yaremovich (Gr. I, age 7); Jean Budjak (Gr. I, age 9); Verna Krzyski, (Gr. V, age 10)**; Winnie Kurelek (Gr. V, age 10); Robert Myron, Mary Panchuk (Gr. VI); William Budjak (Gr. VIII); Gerald Basinski. They constituted 45 percent of the total enrollment. The teacher was Ms. Lois Mabel West, with a 1st - 1B certificate; the salary was \$550. per annum.

It appears that the ratepayers of the Victoria school were changing; however, as employment in the quarries began to decrease and farm sizes increased, some settlers retired, others left.

William Kurelek in enrolling in the Victoria school in the spring of 1934 experienced frustrations, fears and discouragement from the first day. The attitude against his father may have been the primary cause, and then he could not speak English. He was small and physically weak, timid and, no doubt, confused. Then as his brother John was denied enrollment, the degree of stress increased; the situation, according to William Kurelek himself, left a permanent scar on his life and development. He was beaten and abused by the school bullies. It is difficult to understand why the parents of those children did not take some action to terminate the torture of a small boy; but that was one of the failures in many rural school districts.

William was interested in drawing and spent all spare time doing so. On the start he was discouraged, until one day there was a visit from the school inspector. It was inspector J. W. Gordon. He evidently was a very perceptive* man and noticing William Kurelek's drawings, he encouraged him. This led to a change in attitude of his teacher. When his teacher Mrs. Houghton asked William to make a series of drawings and illustrations from Canadian history for her brother; her request gave a happy boost to William's morale. Competition that developed between him and John Giesbrecht also had a positive aspect and served as encouragement. His parents, however, did not see much value in art and the time he spent on drawing was considered wasted.

William stayed in Victoria school as a student and did well in his studies. He took grade nine by correspondence and then it was time for him to go to high school.

**Of those who attended Victoria school with William Kurelek only his brother John, sister Winnie and Verna Krzyski are known to have attended university. Verna became a teacher and married Edward Kowalchuk.

*See Appendix.



Fig. 4a. Beaten and abused by school bullies

Records Show Progress In School

An appraisal of William Kurelek's progress in life, may to a degree, be made on the basis of the Victoria School records. The Half-Yearly Report of Victoria rural school #49 indicates that he started school in spring of 1934 and remained in attendance there until he completed grade nine.

Table 1
Attendance and Grades in Victoria School

	<u>1934</u>	<u>1935</u>	<u>1937</u>	<u>1940</u>
Age	7	8	10	13
Grade	1	2	4	7
Possible Attendance	59	74	83	80
Actual Attendance	43	72	81	78

The 1934 is the only report for June, others are Half-Yearly for December.

Table 1 shows normal passing from year to year. The actual attendance indicates that William lost the minimum of days through illness or other reasons, except in 1934; the year he started school and he reported that it was a horrendous experience. Therefore, in spite of his being a "delicate" boy, he was physically relatively healthy. After the age of thirteen, when he did help with chores and other tasks, on the farm, his parents saw to it that he lost little time from school.

Integration into a Larger Community

It is doubtful whether Dmytro Kurelek would ever adjust to the larger Stonewall, that is Rockwood Community, though other Ukrainian families that remained in the area did. In time intermarriages took place and some people attended the small Anglican church in the Victoria School area. The Goresky boy was buried in that church's cemetery. Things changed when Rev. Wiznuk of the United Church came to Stonewall - he served for several years as a supply minister; - and, was accepted by the parish.

It was during Mr. Wiznuk's* ministry in Stonewall that closer contact was established with Ukrainians in the Victoria School district and then, at least some of the Ukrainian group, attended his church. Dmytro Kurelek, however, continued to attend his Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Winnipeg, be it only once a year.

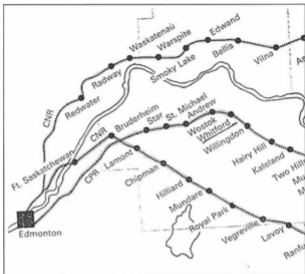
However, until Dmytro Kurelek sold his Victoria district farm, little or no reference can be found in the books written about the non-Anglo-Saxons in the area. And even after William Kurelek attained the status and recognition of a great Canadian artist, publications dealing with Stonewall and Rockwood municipality seemed to ignore writing about William Kurelek's contribution to Canadian art or, for that matter, about the small group of people of Ukrainian lineage living in the area. Therefore, it may be concluded that the social life of settlers not part of a block settlement and living dispersed among the Anglo-Saxons was not a happy one and at times isolation was difficult to bear for them and their children. Conditions changed after WW II, and the "Rockwood Echoes" was kind enough to list, with the

*The late Rev. J. Wizniuk was of Ukrainian lineage and worked with Dr. Andrusyshyn on a very acceptable translation translation of Wasyl Stefanyk's *Kaminsky Khrest, The Stone Cross*.

others, the names of Ukrainian women and men who enlisted and served in the armed forces. There are cases listed of three or four men from the same family who served - and some did not return.

Consequently, the early attitude of the people from Ontario and the church did much to cause unhappiness and isolation and it did so to the small settlement of which Dmytro Kurelek was a part.

This societal disparity did have a great negative influence on William Kurelek. And in spite of this William Kurelek rose to great heights as a Canadian artist and strange as it may seem the harsh treatment he received tended to drive him to find an escape in art. Art work seems to develop in him the powers of concentration what helped him attain above average academic achievement.



Ukrainian settlements north-east of Edmonton showing the Whitford area where William Kurelek was born.

Chapter 3

Friends and Neighbors John and Olga Tomyk Recall

My father came to this area in 1918. He worked in the quarries and acquired a half-section. Basil Goresky also worked in the quarries in Stony Mountain. He was a good blacksmith. He also bought land where his family lived and it was a good arrangement for him as he had a large family. Dmytro Kurelek came into the Victoria School District much later; I think it was 1934. He had relatives here, the Budziaks.¹

I remember the Kurelek children as we went to school together. My name was Olga Hutcula. William spent alot of time drawing on the blackboard. He was not a strong boy and they picked on him. There were two groups and they fought. They even picked on me and I dreaded to go to school. The people were not well-off and had to work hard. I remember going to hoe corn for every third row of the crop. But we had enough to eat. None went hungry - we grew most of our food.²

I did not know William's mother too well; we lived two miles away, but I remember her as a pleasant woman.

Many of the Ukrainians in the district were Ukrainian Orthodox and, at least once a year went to a Ukrainian Orthodox church in Winnipeg - the Disraeli Street church. Mostly at Easter. They did not have cars and went to Winnipeg by street car.

Yes, on the start they got together periodically and had parties. The Kureleks had a big place for dances over their milkhouse. Now and then a clergy man visited the district, and once the Disraeli church people had a picnic on our farm. Then things changed, particularly, after W.W. II.

We, children, however, were unhappy for the Anglos of Victoria district called us Galicians. The attitude of the local children was most discouraging. The parents should have known better.

* * * *

(Mr. and Mrs. John Tomyk now live in retirement in their modern house. Their son, Barry, runs the beef-cattle farm and lives in a new home on the premises.)

* * * *

"William Kurelek used to visit us periodically. He was a nice person to have in your home. He also brought his wife and family over. He wanted the children to know about his background."

¹John and Olga Tomyk interview in their home May 2/95.
²Ibid.



Fig. 5. Mr. and Mrs. John Tomyk in their living room, May 2, 1995.



Fig. 6. William Kurelek and his family. (J. Tomyk Coll.)

Barry Tomyk Recalls³

William Kurelek stayed with my parents when he came to visit his former home and, particularly the bog, and do some sketching. I drove him around the district. On return he would hardly talk to any one, but went to the basement to draw.

One day before returning to Toronto he said to me: "Barry, I want to pay you something for your trouble and help."

"I don't want any pay, thank you. I was glad to do it." I replied.

"Then can I give you a picture or draw one you would like?"

"O.K." I replied, "then draw one of my girlfriend." And he did.



Fig. 7. Mrs. Barry Tomyk (nee Merle Pickell) with a picture William Kurelek drew.
(Painting by William Kurelek courtesy estate of William Kurelek and The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto.)

When he went to school, they say that he always drew pictures on the school blackboard. Children were hard on him and he suffered much. I know that at one time he was a radical and he drew pictures with the devil in them. Most of the time his pictures had him involved in some activity.

³ Barry Tomyk, interviewed Stonewall MB, Feb. 20th94.

Mary Koreluk

"Yes, I knew the Kureleks well. He came to Canada from the next village from which I came in the Ukrainian province of Bukovyna. He first went to Whitford and worked for his relatives and soon married their daughter who was his cousin. William must have inherited some of the characteristics of each, which would be expected. The two Kureleks, however, were two different personalities.

Mrs. Kurelek was a kindly woman, a good housekeeper and a good mother. On the other hand, Dmytro Kurelek, in time, developed into a dure type. Usually he would be lost in thought, and walked around virtually looking at his feet. He was intolerant and tended to be rather abrasive. At the same time he was proud and would not tolerate aspirations thrown his way by some of the less tolerant Anglos in the district. He was a very hard worker and expected his children to apply themselves, to help with farm work. William, however, was a delicate boy who used to hide himself - escape to some secluded spot to avoid work and draw.⁴

After a few years we bought a quarter-section in the Gunton area and saw less of the Kureleks."

* * * *

It was possible to get some additional information about Dmytro Kurelek from John Unuk who now lives on the Kurelek farm. At one time he was Kurelek's neighbor, and got along well with him, but then things changed: "When my horses got into his land, he drove them four miles to the east."⁵

Pat Barnecki Attended Victoria School with William Kurelek

"I was four years old when we came to Canada. We came from the village of Stawnychy in the Province of Bukovyna, Western Ukraine and his people came from the neighboring village of Borvitsi. I remember him as a quiet boy, rather delicate and somewhat nervous. We used to visit in each others homes, but when we started to play, he would walk away to the side and start drawing.

The Kureleks had a large house - it was a three storey building - bare, but it was well-kept. Our parents used to get together - they had parties in the Kurelek's big home.

The parents were hard working people and they expected the children to work and help. Mrs. Kurelek was a good looking woman - not very tall. The girls were good looking, too. All children were fair haired. Both the Kureleks spoke good English. They saw to it that the family was well-cared for. John, though younger, seemed stronger than Bill. He who was very sensitive and would cry if someone pushed him.⁶

William Kurelek attended Victoria school till the end of Grade IX. In time some children would ask him to draw a picture in their exercise book. However, he received little encouragement or notice from some teachers. Finally, he got some

⁴Mary Koroluk, now 97, but an alert woman was interviewed in her hospital bedroom in Teulon, Manitoba in Sept. 1995.

⁵Mr. Unuk now owns the Kurelek farm.

⁶Pat Barnecki (nee Koroluk), interviewed in her home May 1995.

competition: A boy of Mennonite extraction (John Giesbrecht) started to compete with him and that provided some pleasure and a degree of acceptance.

It was through painful stages and years of mental torture and suffering that William Kurelek advanced to attain success in art. It was people who discouraged him foremost among them was his father, and it was people who in various ways encouraged him. Mrs. Irwin, the school teacher, by requesting that he draw pictures from Canadian history for her brother's project made the pupils in his school start to respect his skill."

* * * *

That the climate in the Victoria school was not healthy is further borne out by a story about Andrew Stanley whose father being a section foreman in an area around the Lakehead did not consider that there was a satisfactory school for his boy, sent him to his relatives, the Koroluks in Stonewall to attend Victoria school. Pat Barnicki related further:

"Andrew Stanley arrived in Stonewall to stay in our home and got readied to go to school. On the first day I drove him to school. He was seated on the handlebars of my bicycle.



Fig. 7a. Andrew Stanley Up a Tree.

Now whether some children told him how roughly the Kurelek boys were treated when they started school or whether it was the reception he received on arriving close to the school yard is not known. However, young Stanley recoiled, jumped off the handlebars and ran away, climbing a poplar tree and we had considerable difficulty in getting him persuaded to come down, and even when we did, he would not go to school. He had to be returned home.²⁷

As young Stanley was several years younger than William Kurelek, it seems, that the attitude of the children was slow in changing.

Allan Goresky Adds

"True there were some rough kids in Victoria school and not only boys, but girls also acted as bullies and William suffered. All blame, however, cannot be credited to the Anglos for I, myself, periodically gave poor William a push. Too bad that the parents did not discipline their children more - some bullies were really bad."

Some details of William Kurelek's life in the R. M. of Rockwood

His father Metro Kurelek farmed a part of the N 1/2-3-14-2E1.

We knew the Kureleks as my late father J. H. Slater and myself were his fire insurance agents. We had him placed in the Portage Mutual Fire Insurance Co.

William went to school in the one room former Victoria School which had grades 1 to 8, and it was located on the NE 1/4 -9-14-2E1 across the road and just north of the Kurelek farm on Section 3. It is now replaced by a new house which is the farthest north of the newer houses on the E 1/2-9.

One of his earliest teachers was Ethel Murray who married Alf Houghton and was raised on NW-34 the section south of 3. They are both now deceased.

His later teacher at Victoria was Lily Calderwood who married my cousin Evart Good. They then lived on his home farm SE 1/4-17-14-2E1. Lily and Evart are both deceased.

William Kurelek was much a loner and depended very much on his teachers.

The late Lily Good had a visit from William Kurelek when he came back to the district. His closest friends were the Tomyks at the adjoining farm south of them. John and his wife Olga live on the farm and we suggest that you should contact them before going out to Victoria. Much better than seeing Tony and John Unuk. His son Barry and his wife Merle (nee Pickel) live in the house at the front of the property. And John and Olga live in the house down the lane. John went to school at Victoria and William came back to visit them likely on more than one occasion.

Sincerely,

Charlie and Velma*

²⁷Interview in Winnipeg.

²⁸Telephone interview.

*Letter written to M. Ewanchuk.

Chapter 4

Growing Up on the Farm

Mr. Dmytro Kurelek who aspired to become a master grain farmer soon realized that his farm wasn't totally suitable for grain farming. He, consequently, switched to dairying. This change also brought about a change in William Kurelek's life: He had to herd and after a few years milk cows; and there was no way of leaving a half-milked cow and go to draw pictures, milking cows was hard work. A dairy herd required herding, and to start with the pasture wasn't properly fenced. This task William found odious - he would get lost in his reveries, would read or draw and the cows would get into the grain field. He was not considered a reliable helper.

Patricia Morley observes aptly that when W.W.II started labour was more expensive and more difficult to get. It is, therefore, that Dmytro Kurelek was trying to make ends meet and to continue to pay off his mortgage, had to press the boys into service.



Fig. 8. Old Farm Home.

Consequently, since greater emphasis had to be placed on getting fodder for the cows, William had to help his father with haying. His father taught him and John how to build a haystack. He also assisted in the hauling of sheaves for feed. It was necessary to build a grain stack and again William had a task to perform. Nevertheless, this was easier than pitching sheaves, what his father did.

Summer months were demanding and physically exhausting for a none-too-robust growing youth. There is, no doubt, that every July and August William Kurelek's art was in doldrums. And school to a certain extent was an escape and a refuge, but yet cows had to be milked.



Fig. 9. Milch Cows.

When William worked with his father he got along tolerably well, but not as well as John. Where he got in difficulties was when entrusted to work with horses or machinery. It appears he was afraid of horses, and he made them nervous. He relates that at one time when asked to rake hay while his father was busy in the yard, he lost his nerve and turned the task over to John. John, too, must have been nervous, and yelled excessively and the horses got nervous and eventually there was a run away - damaged machinery and broken harness. And before this there was an incident with the grey team. Here is William's story:

The Grey Team of Horses

"My father wanted nothing, but the best. He needed a new team of horses so he bought a fine sparky team of greys. He also bought a new harness. One day they were harnessed to our wagon still bearing marks of newness that had a brand

new green grain box. Father asked me to hold the horses. I sat on a board used as a seat and held on to the lines. I did not talk to the horses or move the lines. Under such circumstances the horses will develop a type of nervousness, more so, if they are blinkered.

All of a sudden they bolted, I fell backwards into the box, rolled to the back and fell out scratching my back on the rear end of the reach. Away went the horses, all around the large field then jumped the fence and into the pasture. The wagon upset on hitting the stump, the double tree got detached and the neck yoke came off the pole. It seems that one single tree got broken and as they hit a tree, one horse broke the neck yoke strap - the lines were broken and the horses got separated. The horse with the neck yoke and the double tree got tangled in the bushes and the other ran to the far end of the pasture and stopped. My father came running out of the granary, tearing his hair, ran past me unconcerned whether I was alive as I lay on the ground.

The nervous horses were brought into the yard and put in the stable, the old horses were used to bring the wagon and the grain box into the yard. Yes, there was considerable damage done. I did not have the will to run away. And even my mother didn't seem to care that my side hurt. I did hear from my Dad in most unpleasant terms.

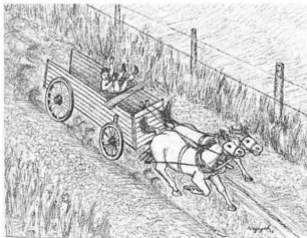


Fig. 10. A Runaway.

In my life the minute something started to develop to give me a promise of happiness, something else would come up to erode it."

* * * *

In time Dmytro Kurelek was able to acquire a milking machine and this eased the work for parents and children.

However, when attending Isaac Newton school in Winnipeg, the boys had to come home weekends to help out.

William Kurelek related that in spite of hard work summer provided a pleasant diversion. There was the bog, and his cousin, Billy Budjack, though not academically inclined, had a specific aptitude for music and played the accordion at dances. William used to go with him. He didn't dance and he wasn't asked to, but as he sat tapping his foot to the music he received pleasure and relaxation.

Farm Work Demanding

Growing up on the farm, children like their parents had to adjust to exigencies that the days and nights brought, and face trial, fear and pressure as a consequence. William Kurelek, it seems, was afraid of thunder and lightning - afraid that the lightning was maybe his fault and lightning could set the house on fire. Watching the barn being destroyed by fire, no doubt, brought the fear of lightning to the fore. Then an unexpected rain storm also made it mandatory to finish some work. In one case it was the need to finish the haystack - to put a rain-proof top on it. William writes:

My parents....roused me at an unearthly hour of 2 A.M. to finish off a stack before an approaching rain cloud. Still aching-tired and half asleep on our feet, we climbed on the stack. Father was already out there yelling and goading the horses at an extra speed...if the stack was not properly topped, the hay would get wet and being to mould).

...Each repeat of performance (thunder crash) galvanized us into an increased frenzy of work. We finished....arrived back at barn and house, both horses and men looking like drowned rats. Then back to bed if there was still time.'

Such were the struggles and trials of life that prepared William Kurelek for his determination to succeed in his personal choice of a career.



Fig. 11. Topping a haystack.

The Bog

The land in the eastern section of Victoria school district sloped into what became known as the "Bog", a low-lying grassy stretch of land that extended into the present bird sanctuary, the Oak Hammock Marsh. Before drainage was established to carry away the water of Wavey Creek a sizable hole was created and that - during the summer months - became the swimming hole for the district. It was frequented by boys, yes, and girls. There was no place for the change of clothing and bathing suits were a luxury for most of the boys. They swam bare - nude. William Kurelek frequented the hole, too; here again he experienced some unpleasant experiences emanating from the bullies, now more brave since there was no teacher to ask questions. And what enjoyment William could have derived at the swimming hole was often spoiled by the pranks, and he continued to suffer.

During very early days of the settlement, it is claimed, that farmers and travellers caught in the bog area at night often got lost and found it difficult to return to the settlement. Whether some did get lost as a consequence of a visit to the open-bar unit then in existence, is unknown; however, once the people realized that a settler was missing, the Victoria school flagpole was put into further use: Most likely

the only such use of a flagpole in the history of the Manitoba rural schools. A lantern was brought and the rope utilized for the hoisting of the Union Jack was then used to pull up the lantern, and it provided a guiding star for the traveller to set his course on and come to safety.

On weekends William Kurelek used to betake himself to the "Bog" area, fairly often....."during my boyhood in Manitoba when I used to feel the call of the great, free, flat bogland to the east of our farm, I found myself walking or cycling out to it....it said to me: 'You and I belong to each other.'"²

²William Kurelek, *Kurelek Country*: Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1975, p. 12.

PART II
AWAY FROM
HOME



Kurelek Stonewall farm house.

From Wilam Kurelek Scrapbook. (Courtesy Mrs. W. Kurelek.)

Chapter 1

High School in Winnipeg

Mr. Dmytro Kurelek wanted his children to succeed in life. He was really educating them away from the farm. And the older three William, John and Winnie are university graduates.

In order to prove himself equal to Basil Goresky who had Isidore, a teacher, school principal, an M.L.A.; Victor was a doctor of medicine and Norman and others were in the teaching or other lines of work, he planned high school education for his children to prepare them for professions.

The Kurelek boys completed their Grade IX by correspondence in Victoria school and then, in September 1943, they were in Winnipeg.



Fig. 12 (St. Mary The Protectoress Ukrainian Orthodox church around the corner from the Kurelek cottage where William Kurelek attended when Rev. P. Majewsky was clergyman. (Photo by author)

Fig. 13 Cottage Dmytro Kurelek bought in Winnipeg so that his children could attend school there. (Picture taken by author.)

My father was ambitious, and instead of sending us to the Stonewall high school, he found a boarding place for us and sent us to Winnipeg. Our boarding place was just superb, we thought. We were happy.

and the first night that we went to bed, we started to horse around. All of a sudden our landlady burst in and stood in the doorway her arms akimbo.
 "Now look here, you farm kids. Don't let me hear this noise and revelling again. You're not up in the hayloft. Let this be the first and last time. Remember."

As the boarding arrangements for the Kurelek boys was not working out well, Dmytro Kurelek bought a home they could have on their own. Later they were joined by their sister, Winnie.

The Kurelek home was on Burrows Avenue close to the Orthodox church and the children started to attend evening classes in Ukrainian, and William fell under the influence of the parish clergyman Rev. Peter Majewsky. So great was the influence of Rev. Majewsky who tried to help the sensitive lad in adjusting to life, and finding out William's propensity for art told him about the Ukrainian artist-poet Taras Shevchenko. Shevchenko, too, had problems in life. His homelife was not happy as he was ill treated by his stepmother. He, too, as he had to be a shepherd and watch the animals on the outskirts of the village, drew pictures. This made William recall his life of solitude as he drew pictures.

In addition to providing his children with a home in Winnipeg which gave them a better opportunity to go to school and church, Dmytro Kurelek also arranged for the boys to get violin lessons and learn music from a distinguished choirmaster, Prof. E. Turula.

While at Isaac Newton arrangements were evidently made for students to take classes at St. Andrews' a Ukrainian Orthodox College on Church Street; and there besides the academic work, William got emersed more deeply in Ukrainian culture and language. At Isaac Newton, William liked Mr. Armstrong as a teacher, and at St. Andrews he singled out William Sarchuk, who after a day's work as assistant principal of the Manitoba Correspondence school, taught Grade XII mathematics at St. Andrews. St. Andrews was a theological college, but William was not enrolled in theological courses.³

Consequently, William Kurelek was so impressed by the great Ukrainian nationalist Rev. Majewsky that he said, he wished he was his father.

Another person who influenced William Kurelek during the high school years was Natalie Bilenky who was in his Ukrainian class; and he fell deeply in love with her.

William did well in Isaac Newton school academically and this suggests that he had two attributes, one a good I.Q. to be able to compete with the highly motivated Jewish pupils to come first in the class; and, two he had the requisite quality of concentration to keep up with his studies, though he did not have his parents around to supervise him.

³From interviews.

⁴Information received from Dr. Roman Yarniak, principal of St. Andrews College.

⁵Ibid.

Problems Again

Isaac Newton school was also a place where William Kurelek's life would be frustrating. To a degree he lived briefly through his 1934 years experiences in Victoria school. He was new to the city, his language was accented as he grew up speaking only Ukrainian at home, and though the student body in Isaac Newton was a heterogeneous group: Jewish, Polish German, Ukrainian, and you name it — children who came from homes of the pre-W.W.I settlers. He was a farmer in disposition and often, on the start, they were made fun of and teased. John, again, showed an ability to adjust to the situation better, but William felt miserable.

However, it seems that some of the enlightened parents of children from Ukrainian homes got wind of the situation and took steps to stamp out this unfair treatment of the Kurelek boys. It was Orest Yakimishchak and Tony Fuga who just realized that enough was enough and by simply making themselves understood and without using physical force put an end to the torment suffered by the Kurelek boys.⁴

High School

In September 1943 Kurelek was enrolled in Isaac Newton High School in Winnipeg:

Table 2

**Attendance Records in Isaac Newton School
(Based on Half Yearly Report - December)**

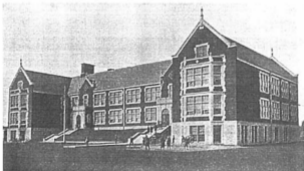
	1943	1945
Age	16	17
Grade	10	11
Possible Attendance	79	77
Actual Attendance	76	77

His attendance again was very good.

Table 3
High School Marks

	1944		1945
	Gr. X		Gr. XI
Literature	A		62
Composition	B		63
Science	A	Physics	73
		Chemistry	94
History	A		76
Algebra	C	Math	77
Geometry	B		
German	A	Latin	74
Shops	A		

From a closer appraisal of the high school marks one may come to the conclusion that his academic potential was good. His marks in Science and Physics were good and excellent in Chemistry. Consequently, had he gone into medicine as his father wished, he would have likely succeeded. He, of course, did try to please his father and shifted from the study of German to Latin, covering a three year course in one year. He was also very good in Shops.⁵



Isaac Newton High School
(Courtesy Isaac Newton School.)

⁵This seems to account for his success as a picture framer.

Chapter 2

University Studies and Years of Frustration

At the university he experienced the same problem as in high school, felt alone and was unable to develop friendships with other students. Socially he was a type of an outcast. And some professors seemed to treat him with disdain. But he managed to pass his subjects and could have gone into medicine as his father pressured him to do.

Why, however, in 1946 he enrolled in Arts General Course at the University of Manitoba is not known. Whether he was guided to do so or it was his own choice is also not known. Nevertheless, he selected courses that were not a prerequisite for the study of medicine.

Years of Adjustment

Kurelek's post-secondary school years provide information on his adjustment problems that reveal that his mood was not constant. He was changing, he was introspective, he was stubborn and seemed to disregard his father's suggestion. He was difficult to understand.

Having graduated he found himself unprepared to earn a living. This was due to the composition of his courses, and the lack of science subjects suggest that he was not qualified to study medicine and a few other fields, except, maybe, go into teaching, law or social work. He did take a course in the History of Fine Arts, but it is incomprehensible why a young student with his interest in art wasn't guided to go into an allied field such as architecture? Of course, one has to appreciate the fact that in the years 1946 - 1949 the universities were too preoccupied in providing programs for servicemen who had the requisite financial backing and came with suitable guidance from competent service personnel councillors. Consequently, people like William Kurelek were left to depend on their own resources.

William Kurelek's winning of scholarships and his high school marks indicate that he could have succeeded in medicine or architecture alike. There was one course, psychology, it was found in conversation, that led him into introspection and unnecessary self-analysis, and tended to accentuate his emotional isolation. Nevertheless, in spite of difficulties and personal adjustment problems, there was nothing that could dissuade him from pursuing his creative bent and choosing art as a career.

Table 4 at the University of Manitoba
Students Record Card¹

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA									
STUDENT RECORD CARD					ADVISOR				
NAME	WILLIAM KURELEK								
ADDRESS	524 Burravau Ave., Winnipeg, Man.								
DATE OF BIRTH	March 3rd, 1927								
DATE OF ENTRY	Winter 4, 1946								
ACADEMIC	COURSE DESCRIPTION	SECTION	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950	1951	TOTAL
	LATIN III		1430						4
	LOGIC I	POETAPROS	2030						2
	LOGIC II		2030						2
	GERMAN I A		4710						4
	HIST III	AMERICAS	3020						4
	PSYCHOLOGY I		4130						2
	June-1947: Bellows scholarship in Arts -- \$100.00								
	Complete Junior Division in Arts = 40 Units								
	LATIN III		6330Y						4.00
	ENGLISH III	A&B	0430I						4.00
	HISTORY III	EUROPEAN	1130I						4.00
	HISTORY OF FINE ARTS		63404						4.00
	1947-1948 = \$200.00 Richardson Scholarship in Arts								
	LATIN IVH	407 & 408	3431						4.00
	LATIN IVH	409 & 412	3432						4.00
	ENGLISH IV	A & B	4401						4.00
	HISTORY IV	ENGLISH	11401						4.00

Clear Junior Matriculation and credit for Eng I, Math 1, Physics 1, Chem 1, and Latin 1.
(30 Units)

MAN Odegrul?
Course 10%

Dec. 1946
Teacher of Arts
General Course

May 10th, 1949.

We read in his 1973 Cornell autobiography *Someone With Me* complaining that other students in his university class were not "interested in being close to me. They were just gentlemanly." He tried, therefore, to get attention, and often in an odd manner:

....I felt so miserable at not being liked that I instinctively did hateful things. As Mr. Henry, a staid older man...was about to seat himself, I pulled away his chair...He just halted his seating motion in mid air and turning to me firmly and coldly pronounced: That is not a smart thing to do.²

In fact, it was outright silly.

It is hard to account how this evidently delicate sensitive boy, just out of his teens undertook tasks that would be considered demanding for a robust man. He was seasoned in physically demanding work on the farm, but he got his first employment in the Ontario lumber camp after the first break with his father which came he was attending university. Much as his father pleaded, he signed up to go into the Ontario bush country to cut pulpwood - other university students were going and he wanted to earn money and be part of the group - to be independent.

¹Courtesy of Bob Raeburn, Secretary, Board of Governors, March 8, 1996.
²James Mee, *Someone With Me* (1973 edition) p. 190.



University of Manitoba Arts Building

(Courtesy University of Manitoba.)

His one time friend, Zenon observed that the trouble with William was that once you accepted him as friend, he would get so attached that it was impossible to get away from him.

It appears that he, in some ways, had the lost-farmyard-duckling complex which when hatched by a hen (more dependable than a mother duck) it would, when detached, follow any moving creature be it a cat, a dog, a goose and often you would see it following a turkey gobbler as it paraded around the farm yard. This would appear as if the turkey had a little duckling in tow.

Ms. Natalie¹ Pohorecky related to the writer, that during the Winnipeg 1948 flood he would join a group of boys to go sandbagging. "Several would come to our home and Mother would serve them lunch - they were tired and hungry and ate plenty, but there was no limit, it seemed, to the amount of food William would consume. And while the others would want to rest, he would go out again, and join another group - he wanted to be with a group - to be accepted."

Cutting Pulpwood in Ontario

William was not a robust lad and falling trees and cutting into cordwood lengths was no easy task, yet he persevered - and while robust lads gave up, he would carry on. William related that in the first job, there was a Ukrainian foreman, who, when some students quit and left unplied pulpwood around he would let William add those to his pile. He, it seems, concluded that there was an ethnic bond that kept people together and appreciated the help received.

In cutting pulpwood each man had to take care of sharpening his axe and saw. Sharpening a saw requires skill, and William had the requisite preparation for it. Likely learned it from his father.

Camp 77

Life in the bush was a great experience for William. He realized that he could earn enough money to be independent - and earning \$600. did much to this end. Camp 77 also provided him an improved social life - he enjoyed the comradery of the other students: all equal, but some more equal than others. Those with ambition and money to invest in a powersaw came to make a "killing" in the bush. But they were ahead of times - the powersaws failed to perform and some had to eat humble pie and resort to the swede saw, with which William started. Others got discouraged and left.

In Camp 77 William Kurelek demonstrated his capacity to persist. He only left after he stayed long enough to have his return train fare refunded as per contract. In a few years he was to utilize his Camp 77 experience to pay his way to England.

¹In conversation with the writer.

Chapter 3

William in Love

Beside his mother five women played an important part in his life. First was, as he said, his beautiful sister, Winnie. He adored and respected her; and also, sister Nancy. When he left home, particularly during the years he was in attendance at Isaac Newton school, two girls became the object of his affection. During his university years there did not seem to be any girl that struck his fancy.

As an artist he had a good eye for beauty, no doubt and during his early teens, shy, as he was, he first admired a girl Betty Olynik and, then, Natalie Bilenky. Both these girls were younger than he. Though they attended Isaac Newton school, he actually came in closer contact with her when he attended Ukrainian classes in the St. Mary, The Protectoress, Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Winnipeg. The Kurelek home, 834 Burrows, was close to the church at 800 Burrows. Winnie, John and William were able to attend this Ukrainian Orthodox church and participate in the activities of the young people. It was there that William first got infatuated with the two girls. Whether he ever entered into conversation with them is unknown. To repeat, the artist, however, had a good eye for attractive girls and, during the Christmas concert, when Betty Olynik was an angel - and he the devil - he adored her features and had his eyes virtually glued on her during the many practices in preparation for the concert. His infatuation did not bring the two together, and he transferred his admiration and showered his secret affection on Natalie Bilenky.

Yes, I remember him from Ridna Shkola and Isaac Newton school but he was in the same class as my sister and I thought he was infatuated with her. Yes, I remember him coming to my father's bookstore where I worked Saturdays as a typist, but I paid no attention to his visits - I was too busy typing. Whether he used to walk by our home, I don't know. In no way did I try to establish any friendship with him. I must say - and I don't want to be unkind - I thought he was "different". I was, therefore, surprised when I received his letter.

You know, I feel badly now for I preserved William Kurelek's letters, but he also sent me a picture he drew of me. It was a fine portrait, but of course, I didn't want it to hang around, and, silly I threw it away!

William Kurelek was twenty-two in his last year of university studies when he wrote his first letter to a girl, this time to a girl he adored yet never spoke to her throughout those years. It seems to gain approval from Natalie's father he wrote his first letter in Ukrainian. First it will be given in translation, and then in the original.

¹Natalie Byrne in a personal interview November 8, 1992.

First Letter² to Natalie

834 Burrows Ave.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
7th of January 1949

Dear Natalie,

It is very likely this letter will surprise you. I don't know how much you remember about me from the *Ridna Shkola*, but you left a permanent mark on my mind (as you will soon find out). To tell you most sincerely, I would be very happy if you would give me an opportunity to get acquainted with you. I suggest that we go to the Civic Auditorium on the 17th of January or the 1st of February to hear the Winnipeg symphony Orchestra or to a picture show of your choice. I am anxiously awaiting your reply and suggestions. After the show I suggest we go to a restaurant for a bite to eat and a conversation. I would like to call on you at about 6:30



Fig. 14. Natalie Bilenky-Byrne.

²The letters have been preserved by Mrs. Natalie Byrne who was kind to make them available to the writer.

so that we would be able to return home earlier. Please make this letter known to your parents; outside of that I would like us to meet informally. This event, Natalie, will be a happy and exceptional one for me. So please respond immediately what you think about this, and whether you agree. Everything rests with you.

William Kurelek

Ten Days Later

Having received no reply to his formal letter, William Kurelek decided to write the second letter ten days later:

834 Burrows Ave.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Jan. 17, 1949

Dear Natalie:

Apparently my first communication has aroused no active response on your part. However, a second approach more business like and logical, may prevail where the formal invitation has failed. Your silence - and silence is an expression of disapproval - breeds an insane number of conjectures and questions from which at least three conclusions arise:

- (1) Your doubts as to my integrity
- (2) Prejudices stemming from past knowledge of me
- (3) Your indifference to any such social intercourse.

On the first point you may judge my moral soundness by considering my intimate association with and my ardent admiration of Father Mayevsky, and my sincere and high ideals from my high school record, my near completion of a university course, and optimistic plans for the future which I cannot relate here.

As for the second it is an established fact that at least six months intimate association is required for a true estimate of an individual's character. You will now be afforded such an opportunity. Moreover although I may not have matured in the past three years you may be certain that our acquaintance will provide sufficient motivation for removing whole mountains of obnoxious qualities.

Lastly I hardly imagine you to be indifferent to human relationships and the untold wealth of pleasure and cultural gains that my program offers.

To lay aside the 18th century literary style and speak more plainly, Natalie, I am still interested in a date with you, and I cannot see any possible objection to it on your part. I want you to share with me in any free time you may have the entertainment which I enjoy so much, but I must first have your word of acceptance. And if not that at least an explanation for your unwillingness. I write to you because I am backward in oral speech, but your acceptance will, no doubt, soon cure me of that. Enclosed is a list of socials you might like to attend.

Yours very hopefully,
William Kurelek

834 Burrows Ave.,
Winnipeg, Man.,
Jan. 17, 1949.

Dear Natalie:

Apparently my first communication has aroused no active response on your part. However a second approach more business like and logical, may prevail where the formal invitation has failed. Your silence - and silence is an expression of disapproval - breeds an insane number of conjectures and questions from which at least three conclusions arise: - (1) Your doubts as to my integrity (2) Prejudices stemming from past knowledge of me. (3) Your indifference to any such social intercourse.

On the first point you may judge my moral soundness by considering my intimate association with and my ardent admiration of Father Mapevsky, and my sincere and high ideals from my high school record, my near completion of a university course and optimistic plans for the future which I cannot relate here.

As for the second it is an established fact that at least six months intimate association is required for a true estimate of an individual's character. You will now be afforded such an opportunity. Moreover altho

Addendum:

1. First there will be a Varsity Choral concert this Thursday, that is, Jan. 20th.
2. Then on Feb.7th there is another Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra concert.
3. In Feb. Mrs. F. D. Roosevelt will speak in Winnipeg. That should be interesting.
4. The United College Film Club shows various very fine foreign films every second Thursday the next being the 27th of January
5. Any local film that you care to see.
6. Roller skating or skiing.
7. Any social affair (that is, any besides dances) which may appeal to you

The second letter, in the first place, shows William Kurelek did profit from his University education and academic conditioning. It basically took the form of an essay using logical proof to get the attention of a "woman he loved". This formal approach and a display of his exposure to philosophy even includes an addendum. As a love letter it becomes ponderous as one goes through the arguments, and Natalie, no doubt, found it boring. However, it did elicit a response.

There is Someone Else

Finally, William Kurelek received the sad news. This is his summary of events: But it was March¹ by the time I screwed up enough courage to write her asking for a date...There was no answer for a week I sent another letter....Then, at last, the fateful letter arrived.....one and only short paragraph: "I'm sorry, perhaps if you'd approached earlier....now there is someone' else."

Letter No. 3

Letter No. 3 indicates that though the young writer was tacitly hurt, he was trying to bring the matter to the formal conclusion; however, as far as Natalie was concerned, there never was a start to any personal interrelationship. William seems to be conscious of the fact that he was different and he acknowledges it.

William Kurelek was persistent and he wrote another letter:

834 Burrows Ave.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
January 29, 1949

Dear Natalie:

Your letter caused a great stir of feelings which I decided should settle before I made my reply. The reply was forthcoming at any rate, first because I wish to satisfy your curiosity about my interest in you and, secondly, because I cannot let this-to-me-all-important matter drop without bringing it to a definite conclusion.

¹March is an editorial error, no doubt. It was January, 1949. He was at the university. He was 22 years old.
²William Kurelek *An Autobiography, Someone With Me*, 1980 ed., p. 102.

In your letter you seemed to be most impressed with the strangeness of my sudden and belated appeal to you. I suppose the easiest explanation is that I am different. That is true in a way, but I am sincere although the following narration is not set here without some hesitation. But I see no other way to explain my position except by telling the truth which now follows.

I was very suddenly attracted to you some three years ago in an incident too lengthy to explain here. I was, however, suspicious because of somewhat similar though short lived experiences and I vowed to give it a three year chance to wear off, after which time if it still persisted I would be in a position to consider serious action. Moreover at the time I felt very unequal to such an acquaintance and three years might suffice for a self-improvement which would do you justice. We were much too young, I thought, and I was then very busy with my studies. Having thus put myself unwittingly in an unnatural position, unusual things began to happen. My mystical, romantic (in the true sense of that word) nature created out of my impressions of you - the composed, proud and silent bearing, the meticulously neat and simple appearance, the perfectly shaped face of angelic innocence - a virtual goddess endowed with all the qualities that are beautiful and good - a deity which in turn demanded of me an idealistic philosophy (Browningian). A relation of the effects that this fantasy had on me would probably appear trivial to you. Suffice it to say that each sight of you (though admittedly not a single word was spoken) only added fresh fuel to the fire. The three years have now come to an end and several circumstances compelled me to take more mature and objective views. I decided that the time for action had come, and so you received those two unexpected letters.

Yes, I realize that my approach is somewhat belated, but you now know why and, if you believe me, you also know that you have long been the object of my admiration, that you still are, and most likely will be for a long time unless I should happen through intimate association with you to become thoroughly convinced that our temperaments do not match. On the other hand should you definitely refuse to see me, and admittedly you have full rights to do so, I have a stretch of pain and loneliness to pass through. Things of this sort don't pass quickly from a sensitive mind and even though I know little of people beyond those in literature, I do feel that you may be missing something.

Again I may appear to be insignificant beside your "interests that lie elsewhere", but it may be that you and they are not as yet too inflexible to allow me to slip in.

The end of all this is my final request. Consider the situation for, say a week and then give your final decision. Remember your decision will have life long implications. I await your letter.

Yours hopefully,
Will Kurelek

Two years elapsed, it was 1951; and in the meantime William had wandered to Mexico and then returned to Canada. He could not forget Natalie and decided to write yet another letter to her. By this time his parents were living in Ontario and he gave his permanent address at his parents' home.

Kureleks Leave for Ontario

By the time William Kurelek completed his degree work in 1949, his father was disillusioned of ever becoming a master farmer and seemed to lose ambition in continuing. He put his land for sale. However, according to John Unuk, since there still was a mortgage on his land, he could not sell it. Consequently he sold his dairy herd and the purebred bull, paid off the mortgage and sold his farm for \$24,000.

That year William returned home. His father needed him for he had his farm equipment up for auction and needed William to keep records of the sales. However, William, though he had a B.A. parchment, proved incapable of doing the task.

"First you worked on the useless art, and now after years at the university you are unable to keep simple records. Of what use is such as education!" Dmytro Kurelek was supposed to have remarked in disgust.

Before the family left of Ontario, William was able to earn some money as a sign painter. And then the whole family except John who was an engineering student at the University of Manitoba left for the Ontario farm Mr. Kurelek acquired.

In the fall of 1949 William enrolled in the Ontario Art School in Toronto. The student body in his class was composed of younger students, graduates of high schools who needed to acquire the rudiments of art - they were learning techniques but not creating art, and William was eager to get some instruction on how to improve his creativity.

While browsing through available books and art magazines, he found out that there was a school in Mexico where instruction was given by the most distinguished Mexican artists. This appealed to him. He wrote to the school and was informed that if he applied "in time", it may be possible to award him a scholarship. He made a change and left the Ontario School of Art.

After leaving the Ontario School of Art, William left for Edmonton where he established contact with his parents' people and found them doing well. He found temporary employment and - then decided to leave for the Fine Arts School in San Miguel, Mexico - hoping, of course, that he would qualify for a scholarship - and decided to travel along the Pacific side of the U.S.A. as this would give him an opportunity to visit the man he admired, Rev. Peter Majewsky.

Travelling around the west coast of the U.S.A. William arrived at the Majewskys' home in Los Angeles. Why he travelled via Los Angeles to reach Mexico is not known. Rev. Majewsky greeted him amicably, but with considerable consternation. William was in a very exhausted state physically, unkempt and unclean. The clergyman extended him a warm welcome, and hospitality.

Eventually, after having eaten several good meals, changed into clean clothing - bought by the clergyman - William was ready to leave. The clergyman placed his

hands on the young man's head and blessed him: "May the good Lord keep you in good health and guide you to reach your goal safely;" then slipping a few dollars into the young man's pocket the two parted company forever. This blessing, it appears, created for William a feeling that he was a saintly soul.

William also related: that on his way to the Mexican Art Institute he began to hallucinate badly. He met with fellow travellers who wanted to take advantage of him. His new experiences shocked him and he began to distrust and fear strangers.

He was a sick man by this time, and to what extent the homosexuals made his life more miserable is unknown.

On arriving in San Miguel de Allende, there was another disappointment: the school of Fine Arts had folded and in its place was one known as Instituto Allende. In this school he found no leading Mexican artists as instructors. The instructional staff was a motley crew, but the Spanish language instructor gave a fairly acceptable oral Spanish course and William Kurelek soon was able to converse in that language tolerably well. According to William's autobiography, there were a few homosexuals hanging around, much to his disgust. Since the cost of living was very reasonable Kurelek did stay in San Miguel for longer than he probably should have. There is very little evidence that his Mexican sojourn did much to help develop him as an artist, and there is not much evidence that the Institute did have any influence on his art.

Eventually he decided to return to Canada. However, instead of returning directly to Canada by travelling the Mississippi River route, he left for New Orleans. Leaving New Orleans Kurelek went to Washington and then via New York he reached Canada. Most of the way he subsisted on little, learned how to ask for food, and since it was getting colder, he could no longer sleep in culverts on bundles of paper he carried for bedding and covers, he acquired a sleeping bag. He, however, was fortunate to hitch rides fairly often.

Last Love Letter to Natalie

On his return from Mexico, it appears, that William did establish contact with his parents and while there he wrote yet another letter to his first love, Natalie in Winnipeg. There is no evidence, however, that this letter of March 13, 1951 was ever acknowledged and there is no information on record that he tried to write to her again. In his last letter he shows his magnanimity by telling her that if she were ever in need, he was prepared to give her a helping hand. And then came, no doubt, a final bitter "Goodbye Natalie", and the letter was not signed, William, but Wasyl.

March 13, 1951

Dear Natalie,

I wish I could see you at this moment as you read. No doubt, you are surprised again, and, I fear, somewhat annoyed. But what I am about to say has to be said, and said to you alone, if I am to get peace of mind. It is difficult, extremely so, to write with composure on this subject of love because it can degenerate into contemptible sentimentality in the eyes of a person not involved in it. And it is so easy

for me to feel sorry for myself here. Yet to me it is important to retain at least your sympathy because then you might consider the suggestion I will make.

I still love you, even though you may even be married now judging by the tone of your one and only letter, and although you may consider it ridiculous on the grounds that we hardly know each other I still retain memories of you, and by those memories I am led, rightly or wrongly. They compelled me to send you the drawing from Toronto and I was planning to taunt you with more from Edmonton. You were to see by them and their addresses; how distracted poor Willie was with unrequited love and how he was trying to escape his unhappiness. Foreign-Legion-like in far away places like Mexico and Europe. However, that wasn't entirely honest since I am also wandering for the sake of my art. Still I care for you because though I've seen many women that reminded me of you, I haven't met anyone quite like you in all my travels. When I see in their faces a resemblance to your brow or lips or in their body to your arms memories return and with them a sense of great longing and loneliness.

In the beginning I had known you only as one of the "big girls" in the back row who exasperated Father Mayevsky by whispering with Gelymych about the latest movie you'd seen. But then one fall night when my brother and I were returning from violin lessons a Mountain Avenue street car rumbled by and stopped at the corner. John said, "Look, there's Natalie Bilenky in that street car." I turned to look, and such a strange thrill passed through me that I was dazed. There you sat alone against the window in sweet serenity like a lovely angel. And I couldn't look away from you, until suddenly I realized John might suspect what had happened to me and so said, "Yeah, I see her," and we went along. After that I found myself doing all the things my shyness would permit me. I walked through the snow filled streets behind Mountain about where I thought you lived hoping to pass you or catch a glimpse of you in a lighted window, but I only ended up in the country almost sobbing in the cold and dark. I attended Sunday school because then I could turn restlessly occasionally and my eyes would furtively sweep over your face. I was glad in a puzzled sort of way when you received the trophy in the final year.

On a night of a Shevchenko concert you were across the aisle. I loved you in the only way I could love a woman then - from a distance, and my eyes drank in every bit of you from head to foot. I forgave the most prosaic thing about you for their ordinariness. It was wonderful and divine, the privilege to know this happiness which made me see the people talking, the seats, the floor, the lined walls, all fused into a halo of Rembrandtian warmth about you.

But then came moments of grief when I recollected myself to the bleak realization that you did not know that I loved you, that you didn't care for me, that you hardly were aware of my existence. At that moment I might even have been standing a tiny lonely figure on the plains of Siberia or the salt lakes of Australia. I watched you as you came out of church arm in arm with Alice and Olga, talking. The caraganas in the morning smelt sweet with fresh green in the spring sun. I couldn't move. Someone was talking to me, and I tried to avoid being seen looking toward you, but I didn't hear what he was saying. You were laughing when the three of you turned gaily into the avenue out of view.....A great sadness and regret at my loneliness overwhelmed me and I turned into my way with the terrible realization that because I had not been all there from that moment on I would never

touch or see you again or have you before me aware of me or feel the ecstasy of mutual surrender.

And so I went away because I was sick in resolution and in belief of my own worth before you. I have seen and learned much about the wonder of living since then, but always these memories come back to remind me how much I missed in you. I cannot give to you that which you do not want, but I can hope. I can hope that some day you might want to call me to you or that you may need help, my help at least in return for having been as beautiful as you were and given me a glimpse of what love can be. When that time comes give me the pleasure of writing to my permanent address, and if I still feel then as I do now towards you and I am still my own master, I will come or send help no matter where I am.

I should say no more.

Goodbye, Natalie
Wasył

My permanent address:

Wasył Kurelek
R.R.1 Vinemount
Ontario, Canada¹

In 1951 we see William back in Canada and while in Quebec he accepted employment in a bush camp cutting pulp wood. Since he did not want to seek financial assistance from his father, he was determined to earn enough money to be able to leave for the continent of Europe and England to study art there.

Kurelek's Quebec bush camp experience proved difficult both physically and emotionally. The foreman seemed to assign him to difficult terrain to work. He had not learned any French in school and the lumberjacks in the camp spoke French only. Again William felt isolated, and to a degree rejected. Fortunately, however, there was a robust lumberjack of Slavic origin who befriended William and this made life more bearable.

Left the Sisyphean Struggle in the Quebec Woods

The moving of eight-foot pulp logs up the slope for piling was a demanding task for a robust man and William found this work most debilitating. Consequently, he decided to make a change and go to the bush in Ontario where the logs were cut in four-foot lengths and where he managed well before. But while at work he began to realize more and more that he had to seek psychiatric help, and make yet another try to find an art school to his liking. He decided to leave for England. There was one positive result about his work in the pulp camp: he was later able to use his experiences and observations in painting several good pictures. He also proved that he had determination and the requisite stamina to work long enough to save \$1800. Knowing that his father wasn't interested in giving him further financial assistance, he left without informing his family where he was going.

¹Letters W.M. Kurelek wrote to Natalie Burne (nee Bilenki) not previously published.

PART III

INTERVIEW
WITH
WILLIAM KURELEK
1975



"I liked the bush," - William Kurelek, a lumberjack.
From William Kurelek Scrapbook. (Courtesy Mrs. William Kurelek.)

Chapter 1

Interview with William Kurelek, 1975

The interview with the artist in the Empire Hotel was a pleasant experience and it was possible to receive fine co-operation from William Kurelek: he responded to questions without reservation. He, however, continued to work on his picture which appeared in his Nativity book on page 1. The interview was recorded on tape and later transcribed and is reported herein without changes or any corrections in order to present to the reader his mode of expression and thinking. However, the section that was reported in Ukrainian and was of little consequence as far as this interview is concerned is omitted. Also the part where I and William Kurelek agreed to work on the project dealing with the pioneer Ukrainian settlers did not come out clearly on tape. It is regrettable that the project where I was to provide pictures and background material about the early Ukrainian settlers did not come to fruition for he stated that he had learned from his father about life in his father's village in Ukraine and was more informed on that aspect of the life of the Ukrainian people than he was about the pioneer settlers in Canada.

His personal comments about his life were not recorded on tape or were expunged.

The Interview

M.E.: What is the earliest remembrance you have?

W.K.: I remember when my sister was born. I was about three years old then, and seem to remember seeing my sister lying in bed with my mother. This was in our two-room house in Alberta.

M.E.: Did you live in Alberta?

W.K.: Oh yes, we lived there till I was about seven.

M.E.: Did you start school in Alberta?

W.K.: No, no. There was something going on which I couldn't understand. My parents knew that we were moving to Manitoba so I was not sent to school, though I was nearly six. They did not want me to start school in Alberta - they held me off. So in that way my brother started school with me, though he was a year and nine months younger than me. So in the early schooldays my brother and I were always in the same grade though I was almost two years older than him.

M.E.: How did you find school?

W.K.: Terrifying!

M.E.: Terrifying!?

W.K.: Terrifying. It was a horrible traumatic experience.

M.E.: Why was that?

W.K.: Well, one thing was that the only two words of English we knew were "yes" and "no". One reason was that the district in which we were in Alberta was totally Ukrainian, and the second was that my parents were pretty conscious of being Ukrainian, so they wanted us to speak Ukrainian all the time at home, especially my father. My mother was born in Alberta in Canada so she was more liberal on the subject and my father was anti-English, he had no use for the English. We learned only Ukrainian at home so we started out almost in a zero position when we went to school in Manitoba, and this was already a mixed neighborhood and there was a certain amount of true blue English, what should we call it?....feeling, attitude. This was also at a time of the beginning of the Second World War so we were quite conscious that Canada was British so it was traumatic in that respect, and also we ran into a situation where there was quite a bit of - in a one-room school there is a tendency of too much bullying and feuding and things like that. I was very sensitive to those things - and I ran into them and we were at the butt end of school pranks and all things - tale telling and everything like that.

M.E.: Do you remember your first teacher?

W.K.: Yes, I do. We had a reunion at that school about ten years ago and I went there. She was Miss Irwin and she was extremely conscientious and hard working; but my father, my parents, used to say, they used to admire her, they wondered how long she would last, because they were saying that she was tubercular, and they used to say that she was going to die soon and she also kept a strict hand in the school.

M.E.: Did she ever punish you?

W.K.: No! We were too timid. We did make a lot of boo boos as far as our Ukrainian coming out; but, she realized, I think that we could not be blamed for that.

M.E.: Were there other children who had a kindly attitude toward you?

W.K.: There were very few. One was a boy, a neighbor's boy. He was older than I. He was about two years from leaving school, but he did not stay long...the number of those who were bullies far outnumbered the others had a tendency and they, poor fellows who were kind could not resist, couldn't do too much against the others - they also wanted to be accepted - and as far as young children, children my own age, they were set deliberately by the older children against us.

M.E.: It was not a very happy situation to be in, was it?

W.K.: No, it wasn't that eventually was part of my trouble which landed me in the psychiatric hospital. I am sure at least part of it stemmed from school as well as the home situation.

M.E.: You were living in constant fear were you not?

W.K.: Yes, extremely so, but also extreme animosity. I was helpless, and also I was weak physically, for there were even boys of my own age who just disrespected me. I hated them with all my heart, but I could not do anything about it.

M.E.: Did the teacher ever take your side?

W.K.: When there was a natural confrontation and there was one or two situations that did arise and I couldn't stand it any longer, then she displayed typical British impartiality - parliamentary or British justice ideas so I have no complaints on that score - from the teacher anyway.

M.E.: How far did you live from school?

W.K.: If you measured it, it was about a mile as we did not live on the corner.

M.E.: It was, therefore, no hardship going to school?

W.K.: No, there were other children who had to walk as far as four miles.

M.E.: Did your father know that you had this difficulty in school?

W.K.: Oh, yes.

M.E.: Did he do anything about it?

W.K.: They did and it even made it worse, because my mother even went with us as the bullying proceeded and it seemed that it was part of the neighborhood resentment against my father's ambitiousness. My parent judged that the neighbors were jealous and they took it out on the children via their own children so that my mother went with us finally and she complained to the teacher. That made it worse for the teacher said: "There must be no more bullying on the Kurelek boys." And so they, the bullies, who were in control of the situation had everybody listen to them - they forbade anybody from having anything to do with us.

M.E.: You were ostracized?

W.K.: Ostracized, yes. What made it even worse, my brother was sent home that spring, and for about three months I had to go to school alone. My brother was sent home for he was too young and I did part of first grade, to get used to school. This was even worse, for I didn't have my brother for company - I really suffered then - I was thoroughly ostracized and even the Ukrainian children: they would play with us very amicably when we went to visit them at the neighbors or in our own home, but in the school they just shunned us for they were afraid of what the others, the bullies, would say.

M.E.: That would have a traumatic effect on a young child in school?

W.K.: Yes.

M.E.: Now how long did this last? When were you able to overcome this situation?

W.K.: Well, my brother and I tried to fight, but this was really hopeless for the more we fought the more joined in - when we seemed to be holding our own - and sent more and more people against us. So we saw this as a hopeless kind of fight, so the only thing we could do was to hold, to bide our time for a few years until some of the bigger bullies had "graduated" - left school. So then we were left with rivals of our own age and this continued with one or two particular boys - one was Ukrainian and one was an Anglo-Saxon. This rivalry continued until about grade eight and only in the last grade, only then in grade nine - we got out of that continued real round of hostility.

M.E.: Now, as an artist, did you display any artistic ambitions and were you able to fulfill yourself in any way in school?

W.K.: There was always one day in school - I think it was on Friday - when we had art. Also I noticed very early that I could draw, that I had some ability at drawing and I had rivalry with a Mennonite boy in school work: and he also main-

tained that he could draw better and we had a competition, but we competed only with words, but not physically. So that was the time I did realize, that it seemed to me plain that I could draw better than he - there was nobody else, so because I lacked respect in any other way except my school work, I tended to draw more and more, so maybe in that way I would gain respect from other pupils and the teacher. The teacher used to give me extra things to do, so that boosted my morale. And then there was also inspectors and holidays - like Halloween, Valentines Day and Christmas - all these called for art work. So I could always compete with myself to see if I could draw a better pumpkin or valentine this year than last year. That's how I developed my art. Until that time I used to draw only cowboys, aeroplanes, the way boys do, and pirates.

M.E.: You mention inspectors; do you remember any inspectors coming to the school?

W.K.: Yes, yes that was always a big event for us. I do not remember who he was, but he always came once a year, something like the dairy inspector that used to come once a year. We would always hear from the neighbors and wash the barn. The inspector noticed my art and praised me.

M.E.: You mention dairy inspectors. Did your father - besides growing grain - have a big herd of cattle?

W.K.: My father came from Alberta where he was entirely a grain farmer with the ambition to become wheat king in his district so to speak, but this didn't work out as the land was not suitable for grain farming. Now everybody was dairy farming so he thought he would prove that he would succeed; but it was a bad time to prove anything for the depression was on and also there was crop failure and grasshoppers and drought, rust and everything else, so eventually he was forced to sort of have to concede and he went into dairy farming too, but this was really a wise step for from then on we were able to pull ourselves out form a big mortgage situation.

M.E.: Tell me, when you lived on the farm, did you ever experience want or was there no poverty on the farm?

W.K.: Oh, there was. I did not know that we were living through a depression, but I found out later, when we moved to Winnipeg, as for example during Christmas the neighbors used to give the kids for Christmas presents, in our home we got things too, but such as woolen mitts which Mother knit herself and then they would shrink when washed but we still had to wear them - I hated that kind of practical presents - I hated to wear them. For example, once we were playing in the hayloft and I lost a mitt - and I was glad to part with it, but my parents insisted that I find it and they sent me for three days to look for that mitten until I found it.

M.E.: That was a little hard, wasn't it?

W.K.: Yes, well, as for example, if my kids lose a mitten these days, we may say something to them in the way of reprimand, but, then, they don't bother searching for it. We just buy another pair.

M.E.: Excuse me, what work did you like to do on the farm?

W.K.: I didn't like any work for my father was always down on me because I wasn't really smart at the work. I guess it was a word - but a word that would cover the idea in a proper sense to be smart.

M.E.: What Ukrainian word would he use?

W.K.: "Ne zdib nay" (unskillful) or "ne tsikaway" (not interested) my father would often use the two words. "Ne zdibnay, ne tsikaway" that's the way he always criticized me.

M.E.: That means you were not interested in farm work.

W.K.: No, not really, not that I wasn't interested in anything, but my father wanted me to be bright and interested in everything, be smart (and alert).

M.E.: But, while you lived on the farm you had to drive horses?

W.K.: Yes, I had to do all those things.

M.E.: Milk cows?

W.K.: Yeah.

M.E.: And drive a tractor?

W.K.: Yes, I did everything - although, as he says in the film - but I tried to avoid - though if I had to drive horses, or a tractor, I would, but I tried to get out of it, and someone would take it away from me; but there were situations that I had to do what I hated doing, what I feared doing I had to do anyway. Looking back on it now, I am glad I did, but it was just a pity that it had to be done that way for I could have - even for the sake of my art - had I tried to be what my father wanted me to be "tsikaway" - interested and tried many more things and gone many more places and had been more sociable. He was down on me very hard for being shy and backward, and everything. If I had been more active socially, I would today have a bigger store of ideas from my farming.

M.E.: How about your brother? Was he of the same temperament as you?

W.K.: No, he was lucky. God gave him the power in engineering and he has the talent. He is now chief engineer in a big company - invents machines you know. But you know that on the farm his talent was more in line with my father's desires and although he was two years younger than me, as I have pointed out, he was brighter. If a horse lost a collar, for example or a halter, he would find it and my father would praise him. It hurt me and there was nothing I could do that would impress my father, and my brother could.

M.E.: Would your mother take your side at any time?

W.K.: She would sometimes when my father was down on his children as a group as far as I can remember, but she also was after me in her own way - she tended to nag. So that one of the things that father, my dad went hard about me, and this is one of the things she also went after me. That I was always dumb. They called it "neemay". I dreaded saying anything so that they would not notice me and they would continually nag me about not talking.

M.E.: Well, it was typically Ukrainian: Don't be shy and the rest of it. They did not always respect sensitivity, I imagine. All right, in your home as far as food was concerned, was there any food you didn't like?

W.K.: Food, oh yes, I hated porridge, I hated, apart from that.....then I was finicky about things that could have been better, as, for example, my mother made lunch for us to take to school: too much butter on the bread. That made me feel sick - in Ukrainian I used the word "mlojity",** that sort of made me envy

**mlojity - make one feel sick, to be nauseated.

- the poorer youngsters, our neighbors, for they had some things more exciting, like brown sugar on their bread. We had also chokecherry jam, saskatoon jam, sometimes we bought a tin of strawberry jam from the store. The French mustard we had - I like bologna or the various meats we had; but I had acquired a good taste for Ukrainian foods - even today I sort of regret that I didn't marry a Ukrainian woman so that I could still have some of the food. I love sour food, sauerkraut, borscht and all that.
- M.E.: Can't you buy them in the stores in Toronto?
- W.K.: Of course, but then I would be eating them by myself. My children have no taste for those things either.
- M.E.: How many children do you have?
- W.K.: Four children ranging from seven to eleven years old.
- M.E.: Any of them artistic?
- W.K.: Well, it may seem rather odd to you. Of those four children one is adopted: She seems to have most talent in art.
- M.E.: Of course, that's normal.
- W.K.: Oh yes, but most people ask me that same question fully expecting me to say that one of them is taking after me.
- M.E.: Not exactly. They could probably take after your dad and have a very pragmatic approach to life. Now let's get back, Mr. Kurelek. This is an interesting story you are telling me. What did you like most about farm life?
- W.K.: I really feel nature. My father was somewhat ambitious and worked so hard and worked us kids; and often we did not appreciate nature as much as our neighbor's children - where life was more leisurely - yet some of that did get through. I like birds, I like to explore: to take the measure of water in spring when in my rubber boots, and natural sports like archery....I loved the big display of nature like storms and blizzards and all those things like that.
- M.E.: Well, that was the influence of nature on the farm. Did you like to go for a walk, did you have any woods and bush on the farm?
- W.K.: You know what the Manitoba woods are like - it's all scrawny bush, poplar, oak, willows and red dogwood, but there was, and to this day, I am thankful that there was this area to the east of our farm, called the bog. There was nobody living for about twenty miles. Across the bog there was Selkirk, but between Stonewall and Selkirk there was nobody - there were no fences - and we used to love going out there whenever we could get away from farm work.
- M.E.: There is always work, still you had to help on the farm. Well then you got the impression of nature and, no doubt, by this time you were overcoming your shyness to a degree a little bit and by the time you came to Winnipeg, were you not?
- W.K.: Unfortunately it was getting worse, especially since reaching the age of puberty and girls made more of or became more aware of my backwardness and this made another headache, especially to do things like dancing - which I hated, and also as I felt completely countryish, and the city boys teased us saying that we got hayseed in our hair. The only break though, in that sense, was that we were sent to a Ukrainian night school and I got the respect and admiration of Otes (Rev.) Majewsky our teacher in the Ukrainian night school.
- M.E.: And that helped you?

W.K.: Yes, he became a father substitute for me because I could never approach my own father: I was always terrified of him, but this man was different, although there was a language barrier. He was a highly educated priest from the Old Country and used a lot of literary Ukrainian, and I couldn't talk to him about many personal matters, yet just to be appreciated - the way he appreciated me was a real tonic.

M.E.: That's very interesting. Therefore, a clergyman has to go ahead and do a little more with the young growing boys and young people that need help with adjustment, and someone from outside must help. Whom do you remember as your favorite teachers in Isaac Newton?

W.K.: Do you know any of the teachers there?

M.E.: Well, I did know some of them, I guess.

W.K.: My favorite one was Mr. Armstrong who used to teach us.

M.E.: Yes, I knew him. He is dead.

W.K.: Yes, then some of the others I sort of feared, as for example, Mr. Klassen, the German teacher. Interestingly enough he moved to Ontario and recently he came to my place and we renewed acquaintances. He was also an Art teacher as well as German and P.T. and he had some influence on my development in art. I don't know if there were any other teachers that I was fond of. There were some, and I regret to say today, that I absolute despised. They were the ones that were the "rote" type teacher. I had a feeling that they should not have been teachers in the first place, - these I absolutely despised - they just did it to get a secure position and shouldn't have been allowed to teach. They repeated the same thing year after year to their classes, exactly the same.

M.E.: Now, I happen to know many Isaac Newton teachers, some of them later moved to Sisler. I wanted to ask you about the curriculum in the high school. You know we were developing a new curriculum, and I was a member of that committee. Some of us were saying that a student should have an opportunity to develop his own course or say that this is what he would like to follow on his own. What do you think of that?

W.K.: I would agree in part. However, I think that there are some subjects that the student is not competent of deciding what's good for him. There should be, I would say, a certain amount of freedom to select and the rest should be assigned, for example, I think English should be assigned, mathematics should be assigned, in high school that is, but once you get to university you should be absolutely free.

M.E.: I see. How did you do in high school, did you do fairly well in your subjects?

W.K.: Well, I did quite well the first year. We were put in a room where the teacher thought we fitted intellectually and it turned out that we were a little backward because we were from the country, but we caught up and got ahead of everybody. The only thing is that they swung over to the opposite extreme and sent me to another room for second year, grade eleven; they sent me to a room that was the cream of the crop, that is, and that was fatal because my only source of self respect was my high marks in school. I always used to get 90 averages in public school. Here I just couldn't keep up. I couldn't measure up to those bright students so I collapsed, in a sense that I couldn't study

any more. I didn't have any incentive. So I failed right from being the top of the class, right down to a failure and that was a real blow to me.

M.E.: How did your father react to this?

W.K.: Fortunately I failed on my Easter exams. However, there were still Departmental Exams in June that I could write and I did, and I passed; but another humiliation for me was that my brother who was always behind me did not have to write Departmental Examinations. So I really, really became fanatical about this. I said: Nobody cares - if you lose nobody cares, so I had a sort of Churchillian motto: "Nothing matters now, but victory", and I over-studied in Grade XII.

M.E.: And you succeeded?

W.K.: Yeah, I pulled myself up to a second or third place in class, but I over-studied and I got heart trouble. I actually passed out once.

M.E.: So when you got your Grade XII, what year would that be? What year did you get your Grade XII?

W.K.: Well, I can't remember. It was '46 or '45: It was when the war ended. I graduated from university in 1949 - I went to university for three years. That means that I must have graduated from Isaac Newton in 1946.

M.E.: Then you went to university and you found it challenging but you also found your problems of adjustment to social life?

W.K.: Oh, yes. The thing is that I was becoming intellectually proud: That was the time I went from agnosticism to complete atheism. I had a certain pride in being at the university, but I was moving backward socially. I was terribly afraid to open my mouth, also my father had, in high school, forced me in high school to make a decision to be a doctor so I dropped German and I caught up on my Latin - I had to go to summer school and get three years of Latin in one summer school and then I went to university promising my father that I would become a teacher instead, so he kept supporting me. So, even though I started Latin when I was going to university I kept it up - I liked Latin because it was challenging, in a sense it was like doing jig-saw puzzles, so I majored in Latin. I took history, English and Latin. It was in the Latin class that I felt socially very ill-at-ease.

M.E.: Why were you socially ill-at-ease? Certainly it wasn't due to dress.

W.K.: Yes, it was - everything: I just felt that everybody despised me - I smelled, I was smelling - and my posture, everything and I felt they were looking down on me.

M.E.: How did you go to university, by street car or by bus?

W.K.: There was this Fort Garry bus. When I first started to university, I went to Broadway before Broadway* was torn down; and then I went, as long as I could in winter when ice and snow didn't make it impossible I went by bus from our house on Burrows Ave. and remember I hated taking money from my father because he always kept emphasizing that I wasn't a worthy son for him so I hated taking money from him so I tried avoiding any expensive clothing - I remember this time riding to the university on a bike, and I bought the cheapest possible jacket and it rained and it got wet. When I arrived at the university and took off my jacket, my shirt was all brown, the dye had gone through the jacket into my shirt - that didn't help either.

M.E.: Was there anybody at the University that showed interest in you?

W.K.: I did fairly well in Latin and Prof. Huggill and Berry (?) were kind to me. Prof. Johnson¹ was much more remote to me, and I felt ill-at-ease with him, but the trouble was, that this was the time that all the veterans had come back, and the classes were swollen. Some of the classes were so big that they were held in amphitheatres. It was just impossible for any lecturers to have any close contact with the students, unless they were, what my father used to say, tsikawij eager and tchemmyj, such students would approach the lecturer, after class or during class and talk with him - this I didn't do.

M.E.: Do you remember the first dance you went to?

W.K.: I went to dances out in the country. There was one...I don't know if it was as far as Komarno or as far as the Scandinavian district north of Balmoral, somewhere. That was a pleasant experience, because my cousin, Bill Budjak, was a very natural musician. He played for the dances on his accordion and I liked his music. I always had this problem with the people badgering me to dance, you know, to get up and dance and I hated this and I didn't want to. I just froze, completely froze, so the first time I rebelled against my parents was one such occasion. They said I had to go to a dance in Stonewall - to a townhall dance on a New Year's Eve, and I rebelled and said I wouldn't go. They almost evicted me. I was really surprised. I was very slow developing, I rebelled against my parents much later than my brother.

M.E.: He could rebel and get away with it?

W.K.: Yes, I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw him answering my father back - they were working under the verandah at that time, repairing the verandah. He answered my father back and my father just stared at him, didn't jump at him - I couldn't believe it. Then when I got more and more pressure to be sociable, normal, they said that the people were saying that I was sickly and disgraced them socially. It was in high school, I remember, having a dance or two with my sister, Winnie, who was then also attending Isaac Newton. I had one or two dances with her and the principal, Mr. Floyd, came up and he gave me a scolding that I was so backward socially and even the people who tried to be kind to me were cruel. They would say: "Cheer up, Bill. It isn't so bad" - you know.....

M.E.: You mean though they expressed kindness they were really torturing you by their expressions. they thought they were friendly; but what they said hurt.

W.K.: I don't really know what I mean - at that time I blamed everybody, but I realized that, when I went to England finally to get my depression and my art attended to, I found the English very kind to me: a kind of gentlemanly tolerance which they had and which the Canadians didn't have - whether they were of Ukrainian or English origin they were - life was so rough still in a type of pioneer stage - they hadn't refined their sensibilities. I think today - if I were growing up as a boy in Canada - life would be easier.

M.E.: That's an interesting observation. You really had to experience the life of the frontier even at the time you came to Manitoba. You have travelled quite a bit. What country do you like the best?

¹Prof. Skuli Johnson.

W.K.: I like Canada, but at one time when I went to England, I very nearly remained there for good, and if it hadn't been for my conversion - perhaps I realized then that my bitterness against my parents had been wrong: what I had been missing; and when my parents had been wrong and that those people who had hurt me, I should have returned good for evil; and then I wanted to return to Canada to help my father who seemed to have a lot of suffering on the small farm he had in Ontario. Otherwise, I would have remained in England for good; because in the seven years I was there I was so much happier than I was in Canada.

M.E.: Did you work while you were in England?

W.K.: Yes, I did. I had two jobs. First of all I kept saving my money, which I earned in the bush in the lumber camps in Ontario and Quebec, so I took a job - in between sessions in the hospital - and it was taking up tram lines: London was taking up its tram lines and putting in only buses. There I ran into some problems, some social problems that I had with the labouring class, Englishmen also. It wasn't that I was so different, but that I was too honest. There was a tendency among the British labouring classes to steal even though the type of government they had was a labour government. They tended to cheat by having extra long tea breaks; some of the iron that was taking out of the trams was supposed to be set aside so that the London Transport would use it for processing. Well, these workers would throw it on the back of a truck and sell it for themselves. Well, I couldn't stand that, so I wouldn't throw it on the truck and the officers hated me for that, but then I had....then I returned to Canada one summer to make some money to go to the Holy Land. After that, I again returned to England for another two years and on return I went into picture framing, so I started at rock bottom in wages with a picture framing firm in London. I worked with them for two years. That was the longest job I ever had.

M.E.: You didn't study at all in England; or did you?

W.K.: I tried. The first time when I arrived in England at the same time that I went to hospital, I tried to go to art school too - I even went about the Continent. I went to Vienna and Paris. I visualized myself going to Paris - so I decided to back out and look only for an art school in London, England; but wherever I looked, I still couldn't get over this feeling that I had when I was going to the Ontario Art College or the school in Mexico that there was something missing in the scholastic type of art education. So, eventually I gave it up and decided to learn by just painting.

M.E.: When you were working as a picture framer, did you paint a bit?

W.K.: Yes, I was painting then. First of all, the hospital in England had been really good to me about my career; when they took me in for treatment they realized that I was an artist and they gave me a special room to paint in, and they gave me material: I didn't have to worry about a thing. I didn't have to worry about selling my painting - I just painted, which was a great boost to my morale.

M.E.: Did your family know that you weren't well?

W.K.: They didn't. I was so angry with my parents about the misunderstanding that I went off without telling them where I was going. I said I was going to

England, but I didn't tell them I was going to the hospital.

M.E.: Didn't you write to them at any time?

W.K.: I planned not to write or have any communication; but oddly enough, when I was in hospital the first time for a check-up, the first two months that I was there, my sister Winnie came across with her friend to tour Europe - like to hitch-hike. They went to Canada House on Trafalgar Square and they saw my address in the guest book where I had written my address - I don't know why - and for some reason I had given my address in hospital. Immediately my sister came to the conclusion that I had had an accident. She didn't think of any other hospital except one for physical ailments. They came to the hospital - and she was crying when they came - and when she saw that I was walking around hale and hearty she said, "Oh, is this all it is?" So then she either told or wrote my parents that I was in hospital.

M.E.: When you corresponded with your parents - and wrote letters, what language did you use?

W.K.: This may be interesting: I always wrote to my mother in English, and my father in Ukrainian only. That's the language I felt would afford the best communication. My Ukrainian was weak in the things I wanted to tell my father so I used an English-Ukrainian dictionary, and I am sure that some of the words I used were wrong, but it was the best I could do.

M.E.: Yes, but you would at least do honour to your father by doing that: you were writing to him in a language that he could understand. Correct? And that was admirable. So when you came back to Canada, when was your first picture success?

W.K.: Isaac's Gallery, Abraham Isaac's Gallery in Toronto - he was just starting out himself being in business for only two or three years - and I went down to various galleries with samples of my frames. I was looking for framing work. I also took my paintings along and nobody saw any promise in them, that was somewhat the same in England when I went around. At any rate I went to him looking for framing work and he got interested in the pictures that were in the frames that I was showing, and he said: "I would like to give you a show." This was about a month after I came back.

M.E.: Who was this gentleman again please?

W.K.: Abraham Isaac. He was of Jewish origin, originally from Winnipeg, who had finally moved to Toronto; and had taken a course in economics at the University of Toronto and went into business as a picture framer and a gallery owner. So he gave me my first one man show - and it was an immediate success, plus the fact that the Jewish Women's organization also helped a lot by giving me two openings and also bought a lot of my paintings. That was a really big boost morale-wise for me.

M.E.: That was your start, but when did your first book that you have written appear?

W.K.: Another similar situation developed. Now this was a lady of English origin, Mae Butler of Montreal. She was a small, but very high-quality Canadian publisher. She approached me when I had a show in Montreal, and asked me if I would be interested in doing a book - a children's book. So once again she perceived something which nobody else could see - not even Mr. Isaac all that much. So she asked me to do a series on Winter in Canada, so I did the *Prairie Boy's Winter* and she accepted it. For a long time, however, she

was having financial difficulties with it: she could not get Canada Council to support her, so finally she went to an American publisher: Houghton-Mifflin in Boston and they helped her out, so they produced jointly the *Prairie Boy's Winter*. Once the book came out, then it was like another big break through: Immediately it became popular - at one point, in Canada, it was the best seller - non-fiction - just for a week or so it was among the top ten; so then everybody started to get interested in the possibility of me doing more books, so it has been an uphill climb ever since and another publisher is after me, and another two publishers: I keep on producing - like this thing I am working on now will be another book. And now I want to go back to England.

M.E.: You mentioned Margaret Smith. Tell me about her.

W.K.: Well, she was the angel that God sent, that finally broke through my shell: that nobody....I had always needed and wanted a friend that would come close to me. She was an occupational therapist in the hospital....She taught me dancing: tried to get me out of the shell by teaching me dancing; she also brought me material to work with - though she did not know that much about art - but she at least brought....She recognized my art so she helped me out by bringing me material and asking me questions about the paintings, but the thing that really did the trick as far as her help was: the doctors were kind in a clinical sort of way. They did what they had to do; but she did more: she gave some of her own time after hours - what she wasn't expected to do - and that really made a big impression on me. She would come in once a day - she would come in after work and talk to me for an hour whatever I wanted to talk about; and I found myself confiding in her, no matter how intimate the details I described to the doctors; you know, to the psychiatrist you tell everything, and more than was on your mind - even the most embarrassing things - with her I could talk and feel there was no.....It was almost as if she became a second mother to me; and she was ten years older than me, and then gradually - by fluke - we found out that we both liked poetry so she brought me a book of her poems, an anthology of poems - and I found that it was wrapped in a Catholic newspaper, the cover, you know, dust jacket. So then it dawned on me: Was she a Catholic, I thought? So I asked and she said, "Yes, I am." So then - at that time I was a practising atheist - and I was trying to have others give up their faith - and there was at that time a Jewish patient in the hospital I was trying to convert to atheism - but I admired her, so though I made fun of her belief at that time, still, at times, I have to admit I was interested in finding out what made her tick; why would she be interested in helping me out - when nobody else would, in a special way. So bit by bit I began to get curious in being interested in what she believed so I began to ask her questions - some of which she could answer herself and some she couldn't. She used to bring pamphlets she would find on the subjects - in that way I got more and more, better and better knowledge of Catholic and Christian faith and she stuck right with me right until I went out of the hospital, which was about two and a half years - until she saw that I could stand on my own two feet.

M.E.: Where is Margaret Smith now?

- W.K.: She is in England. She's retired now and about a year or two ago she retired from occupational therapy - she is living now - she has a cottage in the country, you know - in Wiltshire.
- M.E.: Do you keep in touch with her?
- W.K.: Yep, but not at any great length - I write to her about two or three times a year.
- M.E.: That's fantastic, that's very good - and then you came to Canada and this success. Where did you meet your wife?
- W.K.: There is a Catholic Information Centre in Toronto - I didn't notice her at first. The Catholic Information Centre, the whole group, there were about fifty people, went to have a picnic on my dad's farm, like a wiener roast, and she was in that group. I didn't even see her, but then there was a group formed, a Legion of Mary group at the Centre that was looking....set out to help prostitutes and dope addicts, that is, go out on the street and try to convince them to give up their ways, and that's when I met her standing in the hall before she went to the Legion of Mary meeting. So then there was a dance at the Centre too, one time, so she was at the dance so I asked her for a dance and after all those many years that I used to hate dancing, and I always visualized meeting my wife always under no other circumstances, but always at a dance. Then I did meet my wife at a dance.
- M.E.: You did, and now you have four children and you are living in Toronto. How do your children look on your art?
- W.K.: Oh...they don't say much and they don't seem to be sort of...at the beginning when they were really small, they used to like to come and sit on the steps of my studio - which is in the basement of our home - and would ask for cardboard and magic-markers and they would draw with me and draw things I was working on but now they went off into interest of their own so they don't. There was rather an amusing thing at school. One of my adopted girl's classmates - her father is an artist, too - that girl came to school and told Barbara that her father was a better artist than me, so that was a source of amusement in our family.
- M.E.: Well, and, no your children will have a chance to grow up in a good artist's home. Are they doing well in school?
- W.K.: The girls are - now the boys are sort of hanging in there.
- M.E.: Do you spend much time with them?
- W.K.: I, well...I don't know whether I told you or it was another interviewer in the Alumni office, what is her name, Lynn or somebody, interviewed me - anyway she asked me the same question. No...there is a barrier between my wife and me on the raising of the children, so that in order to save the family, you know, like it takes two to tango, to save the family from much of such atmosphere we had at home: always hostility, I tended to withdraw, although I play with my children, I am friendly with them, and show them affection, you know, but as actually raising them, the guiding them toward any...I find it is better to wait in a hope that some day my wife will allow me to take more part in their raising. Our philosophy is opposed, diametrically in some cases on the way to raise children or the way to live or anything like that, you know.
- M.E.: Does she tend to be more formalistic. Is that right?

- W.K.: Oh, no, no, it's not that. I have this intuition of hard times to come and I feel that she is overprotecting the children. It is possible to learn to face hardships in life even though we have no need to be (expecting) to face hardships, you can still do without things. For example, I fast: I think fasting is good, but she regards it with horror.
- M.E.: But she is a practising Catholic, isn't she?
- W.K.: Oh yeah, oh yeah. In that sense they get all the formal things, but I feel, there is that barrier, that, I feel that there are hard times coming for Christians and in that sense I would have our children learn some of the old fashioned Christian virtues.
- M.E.: How do your children react to the fact that you are of Ukrainian extraction, how do they accept this? Do they ask questions?
- W.K.: No. I tried to teach them Ukrainian - for several years. I tried, but they regarded it as a chore. First of all my wife said she would learn. She tried a few months and then backed out. And as long as I find that - I feel the mother has influence on the cultural life of the children languagewise, culturewise - I feel I am bucking a stream, you know, so should have...I guess I have the same feeling about my art: they express no interest, they have nothing against it, but on the other hand they do not participate.
- M.E.: They don't understand?
- W.K.: They just don't participate.
- M.E.: What do you yourself feel is the future of people of Ukrainian extraction in Canada, Ukrainian culturewise?
- W.K.: I feel that eventually the melting pot will catch up to us. But I feel that we should - if there is any desire in us to hold onto it (Ukrainian language and culture) - we should...until it feels no longer natural to do so, or any desire...I have a desire: I love Ukrainian music, I keep buying Ukrainian records and I play them while I am working. It really (the language) speaks to me, so in that sense I want to hold onto it.
- M.E.: If you get that reaction from Ukrainian music, do you get that reaction from Ukrainian poetry? Do you like reading Shevchenko's Ukrainian poetry?
- W.K.: Well, no. I like hearing it. The latest thing I was touched by was a recorded reading of Stefanyk's *Stone Cross*. It is really a moving thing.
- M.E.: *Kaminy Khrest*.
- W.K.: I was introduced to it by a family in Thunder Bay when I had a show there. And I illustrated recently *Lys Mykyta*,² seventy-two drawings, which is the first translation into English of *Lys Mykyta*. So I got a little bit acquainted with Franko's³ poetry. And I used to - I used to read the *Kobzar*⁴ and I was quite moved by Shevchenko's ability as a poet. The only thing about it is two things: one, this theme of lamentation, that lamentation running through his work, and also his elements of anti-Catholicism, which was common in

²Renard the Fox story.

³Ivan Franko Ukrainian poet.

⁴An anthology of Taras Shevchenko's poems. First translated into the English language by Dr. J.A. Hunter of Teslin, Manitoba. *Kobzar* is a Ukrainian musical instrument, originally used by wandering minstrels.

Russia at that time. So I can't quite understand it, like in the same way as Gogol was also - it was common in "Greater Russia" at that time.

M.E.: You know that Gogol was Ukrainian?

W.K.: Oh yes, I know that.

M.E.: And, you like Ukrainian poetry, and literature and...

W.K.: Food.

M.E.: Food and music, you really have a normal transition as a Canadian who does not run away from his Ukrainian background.

W.K.: No - my gallery and my studio and my own home are all decorated and hand painted in a Ukrainian design. It is like - it is like a peasant's house.

M.E.: That's very admirable and I don't think anybody expects you to run away from your Ukrainian background. And as an artist you have been able to succeed with your name being Kurelek, and you don't believe in changing it, do you?

W.K.: Oh, no, no - I regard that with horror.

M.E.: And, so there we are in a transition stage. You know here in Manitoba the youngsters have an opportunity to study Ukrainian in the high schools. What do you think of this?

W.K.: Oh, that's a good idea. I am sorry that it wasn't around when I was going to school.

M.E.: Have you made any study of Shevchenko's art?

W.K.: Oh, yes. I was in Ukraine and I saw his art in the flesh so to speak...saw the real things, and I studied books of his. There are volumes, I think three books in one composite volume that was loaned to me for several years, which I studied. Although I think that he was a good painter or draftsman, he wasn't as good a painter as he was a poet. He was not as good in graphic art as he was in poetry. That's my judgment.

M.E.: Whom do you consider to be the greatest Ukrainian artist in work similar to what you are doing?

W.K.: Oh well, there is Hniasdowsky in New York, but when we were in Ukraine, we saw quite a lot. the only trouble is I didn't remember all their names. The only name that sticks in my mind is Repkin. His work I really admire.

M.E.: You are really, so to speak, a Canadian artist.

W.K.: Oh, yeah, yeah.

M.E.: You are a Canadian artist in a true sense: you know the Canadian scene. You really believe in the Canadian landscape. In your painting, what part of Canada would you like to concentrate on mostly, or would that be establishing prejudice?

W.K.: Oh well, I have a tendency to branch off and become an all Canadian artist, to that extent I have travelled throughout the country and tried studying in various provinces. I just follow the trend of whatever the public seems to want. Like I have been in the Arctic once already, and I am going to see if I can paint the Arctic. Now I have been asked to go there by another publisher in October to do some more research on the actual Eskimos. So I am going there in October and will be doing another book, just on the Arctic itself.

M.E.: Do you know Tellenius?

W.K.: Who?

M.E.: Clarence Tellenius.

W.K.: No.

M.E.: You have never met him?

W.K.: No.

M.E.: Well - Clarence is older than you are and Clarence - you were speaking about the Swedish district there around Inwood - Clarence Tellenius grew up in that area, north of Teulon, north-west of Teulon. He is concentrating on animal life. Have you met Mr. Mol?

W.K.: Yeah, and I think he is a great artist, I have no reservation about Leo Mol as a great artist.

M.E.: You would encourage, not only children from Ukrainian homes, but any child who has talent in art to develop it?

W.K.: Oh yes, sure. On the other hand I am against - for obvious reasons - forcing children to take something which they don't want to. For example, my youngest son often says he is going to be a garbage-man. Well, I would agree to that too if he is happy doing it. The important thing is how good a person is, or how moral he is and not what he does; but how well he does what he likes to do. So...but he is changing his mind so I guess he wouldn't be but....

M.E.: Please tell me; have you got any contact with the Ukrainians in Toronto?

W.K.: Yes, yes, I have several friends, mainly among the displaced, among newly arrived people.

M.E.: You actually have a wide circle of acquaintances, and also have a great satisfaction from the work you are doing, yes?

W.K.: Tak. (Yes.)

M.E.: Would you then advise young people of Ukrainian extraction that they not abandon Ukrainian culture?

W.K.: So long as they can adhere to it naturally, it's all right.

M.E.: Have you noticed that there is a change of attitude toward the Ukrainian people in Canada?

W.K.: How do you mean?

M.E.: Over the years.

W.K.: Oh, yes, yes.

M.E.: It's a much healthier and nicer feeling, and that's the way it should be.

W.K.: On the other hand I don't believe in being anti-English. I feel that the British have a lot of qualities which made it possible for us to find freedom and justice and opportunity here in Canada which...

M.E.: And I really want to tell you, Mr. Kurelek, and I hope you don't consider this an intrusion, but I have been very captivated with your art. This is probably the greatest artistic experience I have had; and, so much, is that I see an artist at work. How would you describe your art, tell me?

W.K.: Well, talking about media or medium, I call it mixed. For you see I use a ball-point pen, I use a coloured pencil, I use oils, I use lacquers, pencil, whatever works - I scratch with a knife, a jack-knife.

M.E.: That's what my wife, Mrs. Ewanchuk asks. How does he paint?

W.K.: Now what you are watching right now, is not the basic painting I have done, like this - this that is done today is primarily painting with a brush, but I am finishing off now, so.

M.E.: I want this for the record, you say, and I want you to correct me if I'm wrong, if I didn't read you right. You say that your art or your painting is of two types: socio-reli-

gious.

W.K.: Socio-religious comment.

M.E.: Yes, and the second is!

W.K.: Well, I call it simply farm painting. But it could be more broadly expressed by saying it is nostalgic.

M.E.: For the life that you maybe hated at one time and now....

W.K.: Yeah - but not necessarily: a part of that nostalgia is for the bush. I had at least a year's experience in the bush: and I paint that subject too. I liked the bush.

M.E.: Well, have you drawn a threshing machine, or have they used threshing machines in your day?

W.K.: Oh, yes - many times, oh yeah. As a matter of fact, after my father is finished using his threshing machine I would like to take it from him and have it out at my farm up in northern Ontario where I have a small farm and keep it out there for a souvenir.

M.E.: You have a farm?

W.K.: Yes, a small farm, north of Bancroft, Ontario. It's mostly bush and swamp, but it is a lovely place to retreat to, partly when I am painting or when the family wants to go for a summer holiday.

M.E.: Do you have a nostalgia for the farm? Do you like horses?

W.K.: Yes, I was fond of horses when we had them on the farm. I didn't like driving them, and I had some runaways with them which is a very bad experience, but I felt some kind of kinship with them somewhat the same way as one feels with a dog. The only thin is...I also like some of the other animals too.

M.E.: You say, you do a lot of art that takes place in Manitoba, don't you?

W.K.: Oh, yes. The odd thing is that they say that the deepest imprint on a person's development is made in the first seven years. Well, oddly enough that's the exact age at which I moved from Alberta to Manitoba, and yet, artwise, the biggest imprint on my visual memory and also interest is the Manitoba years at Stonewall. I cannot explain it, but....

M.E.: How far were you from Stonewall?

W.K.: We were five miles, like three miles east and two miles north of Stonewall.

M.E.: So when I drive to Fraserwood, I will be able to see your farm on the right.

W.K.: Oh yes, yes, but - I was out there the other day- the last building really standing is the milkhouse which had walls of stone about tow feet thick, but even that is coming down. I noticed this year that the roof is fallen off it. So that's the last vestage of the old farm. It's really sad seeing it, but can't stop it - wheels of time I guess.

M.E.: You would have liked to have had it remain as it was?

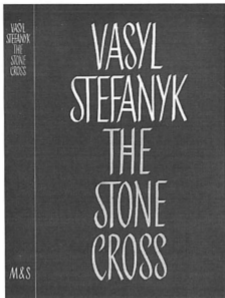
W.K.: Yes, if somebody else had preserved it as it was - fine; but I, myself, don't feel to be enough involved in it to actually try to do something about it.

M.E.: Tell me what you like best?

W.K.: What do you mean?

M.E.: What do you like best in life?

W.K.: Well, I guess God; and then the talent he gave me, may art and...



"The latest thing I was touched by was a recorded reading of Stefanyk's Stone Cross. (Khamenuj Khrest.) It is really a moving thing.

PART IV

**YEARS OF
ADJUSTMENT**

William Kurelek - The Suffering Genius



**A First Meeting of the Ukrainian Women's Association
William Kurelek**

(Courtesy the estate of William Kurelek and The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto.)

Chapter 1

Seven Years In England

On arriving in Winnipeg to commence his high school William Kurelek brought with him a strong aversion to some children in his district and considerable fear of and resentment against his father. He started to attend Ukrainian classes conducted in the church by Reverend Peter Majewsky and in due time he became a devoted Ukrainian nationalist like his mentor. This attachment to the clergyman and the polite treatment he received in St. Andrews College seemed to stabilize him emotionally.

On entering the University of Manitoba he showed good progress academically, but was not warmly received by the instructional staff and the members of the student body. Consequently, due to frustration, by the time he graduated, he considered himself a radical and an agnostic.

During the years after his graduation and his leaving for England, he seemed to have a hard time adjusting to life, his relationship with his family, particularly his father, did not improve.

After earning enough money as a lumber jack, he went overseas. There he explored possibilities for art education in Europe and in England, but could not find any to his liking and his experiences in Canada and the U.S.A. with art education seemed to repeat themselves.

In London William Kurelek realized that he had to get employment in order not to deplete his financial resources. He found employment as a labourer lifting tram-line tracks, and discovered that he was in a different social milieu, and when he reported to authorities about certain misappropriation of discarded material that his co-workers collected and sold, he was ostracized. This did not help his emotional adjustment.

In due time he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Of the seven years he spent in London, four of those years he spent in the hospital. The hospital stay seemed to improve him both physically and mentally. His family, however, did not know of his whereabouts until his sister, while on a European tour, found him in a psychiatric hospital.

While being employed as a labourer, he lived frugally to save money. The hospital established a better routine in his life: his meals improved and he received them on time. Then the director of the hospital put him on a therapeutic program of painting. To encourage him, art materials were made available to him.

Dr. D. R. H. Bird* of Winnipeg who was studying medicine in London at that time recalls that medical students were taken to the Netherne Hospital to observe the treatment the patients there were receiving. He states that it was a virtual art gallery, and among the many receiving treatment they observed that the work of one, a Canadian, was far superior. This Canadian "artist" was no other than William Kurelek.

The art program led to a significant improvement in William Kurelek's health, and in addition to this, a charitable social worker, Margaret Smith, began to visit him. Her sympathetic and affectionate tutelage and concern for his well-being, not only made him abandon his agnosticism, but since she was a devoted Roman Catholic she led William Kurelek to the joining of her Catholic church. This conversion seemed to restore his health dramatically. In time, he was able to go to work again and do more painting. One piece of art dealing with lifting of tram tracks brought him a fine financial return, thus providing much needed encouragement to produce art work to make a living.

In becoming a Catholic William Kurelek severed relations with his Ukrainian Orthodox church; he also acquired new perspectives, as he, it seems, was closely shepherded by the Catholic priests.

While being interviewed, the writer was under the impression that the proselyte often had a feeling that his becoming a Catholic would lead him to some type of canonization or some other elevation in the church. This may have been a temporary spasm of imagination.

However, it is difficult to understand why the clergy did not guide him to join the Ukrainian Catholic church, as it appears that his conversion did not release him from anxiety, and as he stated, he was often mentally tortured about leaving his church.

In chapter XII of the 1980 edition of his "autobiography", *Someone With Me*, prepared and edited by an editorial board, we read that he was to have made disparaging remarks about the Ukrainian church services - Ukrainian Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox, alike. Their services were referred to as "a babble" and further he was to have remarked: "I didn't want to return to the phony lip-service church affiliation I had acted out in Winnipeg."¹

It is regrettable that parts of this chapter (chapter XII) may have been written by someone possessed with a missionary zeal, and do not appear to be consistent with William Kurelek's expressions recorded on tape by Bohdan Kruchko.²

Bohdan Kruchko translated what William Kurelek stated in Ukrainian as follows:

Ukrainian religious customs should be preserved and reinvigorated...

and

That though he (William Kurelek) was a Roman Catholic..."The Ukrainian mass, however, still 'speaks' to me."³

*In conversation January 11, 1996.

¹William Kurelek, *Someone With Me: An Autobiography*, p. 146.

²Bohdan Kruchko, M.M.Mn Oral History Tape #656, Thunder Bay, 1971.

³Patricia Morley, p. 229.

Years of Change

The seven years William Kurelek spent in England - four of these in a mental hospital - did truly lay a foundation in the development of his artistic life. He left the hospital more secure, and though the shock treatment he received may have erased many thoughts that tortured him, they left him much improved emotionally.

Another event that helped him was the fact that the London civic authorities recognized his artistic ability and paid him rather well for the picture he drew about the lifting of the tram rails.

In addition to the recognition he received as an artist, another positive event followed: He received employment with a "Czech Jew", a Mr. Pollock. "Mr. Pollock had a first class reputation as a frame and antique restorer, perhaps the best in the city..."⁴

The kind physiotherapist, Margaret Smith, saved him from tragedy. She was a widow, who came to London from India and was ten years his senior. Her approach to the rehabilitation of William Kurelek was unique: she showed him close affection and William soon fell in love with her. Natalie was the apple of his eye, but he never so much as held her hand: but with Margaret, the situation was different, it was a close love affair - more than motherly love.

Though William developed a close attachment to Margaret he decided to return to Canada; and this is the reason he gives for leaving London and Margaret: "I decided to return to Canada, as I needed to get away from Margaret for a good space of time to find out my true feelings for her." Well, by this time William was thirty years old, and there wasn't any need to spend more time to make up his mind - Margaret was reaching forty.

On returning to Canada, William Kurelek went directly to his parents' home in Ontario.

Things had changed: "My father and mother were already weighing carefully what they said to me ...One of the signs of cautiousness showed in their interest in Margaret. They obviously thought her too old for me... Nevertheless they did have a Ukrainian girl in mind, in whom they hoped William would get interested. However, they did not press the point."

After receiving employment as a labourer and saving \$600, he decided to return to England. And the main reason for this was Margaret.

The big problem as the ship reached England was how to approach Margaret. Finally I decided to make a tentative proposal of marriage... She gave me a firm "no", and went on to explain that I no longer needed her as a crutch...⁵

In praise and appreciation of Margaret's help, William wrote:

Due to my helplessness and dependence on her, it could have been so easy for her to take advantage of me... She allowed physical affection between us so that I could catch up on the affection I'd missed in childhood from my mother. But she always drew the line when passion began to show itself...⁶

⁴William Kurelek, *Someone With Ate: An Autobiography*, p. 158.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 149.

Though William Kurelek seemed to like the English people and could have remained in the country, Margaret's rejection of his proposal made him decide to return to Canada and make his future in his Native Land.

Chapter 2

In Canada after 1957

William Kurelek's rise to the summit of his artistic development was meteoric. It really started in London, England where he sold his first picture for a greater sum than he ever anticipated, and where the exhibition of his paintings and oils was favourably received.

On his arrival in Toronto, he planned to open a shop for picture framing, but lacked the financial resources and business know-how. He tried to peddle his pictures to various establishments and rejection after rejection followed.

Nevertheless, there was a positive aspect: Kurelek saw a great change in his home relationship. He was received warmly. His parents were prepared to help him re-establish himself, and his father was still anxious to see him become a professional man. He, therefore, arranged for a bank loan and William enrolled in the Ontario College of Education. Regrettably, after four days, he was requested to withdraw - too sensitive.

Consequently, since he was unable to utilize his B.A. to establish a career for himself, to earn a living, therefore, he had to fall back on his picture framing skills he acquired in the Pollack shop in London. He was fortunate, however, that Avron Isaacs recognized his ability as an artisan and hired him to work in his gallery, to make frames, and to restore old ones.

Employment at The Isaacs Gallery turned out to be positive and to the advantage of both Avron Isaacs and William Kurelek. William proved to be a meticulous worker. One of his close co-workers in the Gallery observed that William took three times more time in making a frame than he took in painting a picture for it. This suggests that as an artist he started to work at a feverish pace, and some of his art was produced on a "production line" approach.

Avron Isaacs recognized William's talent as an artist and encourage him to devote more free time to his art. This encouragement, in time, proved to the advantage of both.

Eventually, arrangements were made by the Jewish Women's organization, on the suggestion of Mr. A. Isaacs, no doubt, for an exhibition on his art in Toronto.

It was a great success financially and promotionally, too.

Avron Isaacs and William Kurelek worked hard to get together enough pictures. Since, he had given away many to family members and friends as gifts, he had to borrow them for display purposes. This first one-man exhibition proved very successful, bringing into the lime-light, both Isaacs and Kurelek. The latter began to work together publishing some books, for which William provided the art work and considerable script.

Other one-man exhibitions began to follow, and interest in his art increased greatly, and so did press reviews.

However, as William Kurelek's friend from Stonewall, Pat Barnicki observed that it was only after Anne Cameron's C.B.C. interview that William Kurelek began to receive more notice and to surge ahead as an artist of distinction. Consequently, press reviews of his exhibition became numerous and in due time he was considered to be the most written about Canadian artist.

Reports about William Kurelek's intensive application to this art may best be evaluated by his exhibitions. The one dealing with the exhibition of the McIntosh Memorial Art Gallery, University of Western Ontario, London, February 1965, provides the following information: "William Kurelek: The Passion According to the Gospel of St. Matthew", included 160 oil and water colors. A review in the London Free Press by Lorne Cawford read as follows:

"Artist converted to Catholicism exhibits Easter Painting Collection"
and
"Religious Painter Sees Middle Ages Basis for Real Art Revival."⁷

Kurelek returned to Canada in 1959, and by 1965 he produced 160 oils and water colors on a religious theme alone. This could be considered to be a most enviable accomplishment.

As William Kurelek began to be better known and recognized as an artist, success followed success. And then there was one of a very positive nature that led to improved adjustment and stability in his life and, saw the unfolding of a great period of his artistic creativity: It was his meeting of Miss Jean Andrews. Though he had his mind set on marrying a Ukrainian girl as he sated, he married "the smiling red-head...she not only had a charming smile, she was a real beauty."⁸

And here we see that his Ontario home and improved relationship with his parents played a part. He started to visit his home more often and there first saw Jean Andrews who was one of a group of participants from a Catholic centre that held a picnic on his father's farm. The group was from Toronto, and William began to frequent the centre.

On Thanksgiving day 1962, Jean Andrews and William got married. Jean was the fifth woman in his life, one with whom he would share fifteen years of married life. A period during which he not only established himself financially, acquiring a car, a home, a summer home, - a home where he saw his four children have a start in life, a period during which he reached the summit of his artistic development. It actually was a great period in his life when he saw happier days and his talent unfolded leading to him being recognized as a great Canadian artist.

The publicity Kurelek's work received continued to help promote picture and book sales and eventually he was able to feel, as he stated, to be financially secure.

Life was good and he and Mrs. Kurelek could rejoice in their family and the social status Kurelek attained through his art. Canadian Art Galleries acquired his

⁷McIntosh Memorial Art Gallery, London, ON.
⁸Joan Murray, *Kurelek's Vision of Canada*, p. 73.
⁹William Kurelek, *Someone with Me*, p. 169.

pictures and eventually the Americans showed interest. When Mr. Alfred Barr from the Museum of Fine Arts in New York, came to Ottawa and selected one of Kurelek's pictures for his museum, the Ottawa Art Gallery sent a taxi for him and Mrs. Kurelek so that Mr. Alfred Barr could meet the artist. This was a great day of rejoicing for the artist and Mrs. Kurelek.

Awards followed; in 1973 he received a Gold Medal for the best illustrated book, *The Prairie Boy's Winter*. A distinguished Canadian writer, W. O. Mitchell, had his book illustrated by Kurelek. The translated version of Iwan Franko's *Lys Mykita, Reynard the Fox*, was published and others followed.

The list of exhibitions could make a fine volume if listed with the necessary explanations. These helped sell books, and reviews and press reports continued to follow. Distinguished Canadian writers appraised his creative efforts. He appeared in a film by the National Film Board: In 1974 a film was produced by John Griffin about Ukrainian pioneers which showed Kurelek's attachment to the country of his birth, Western Canada, and the ethnic group from which he came.

TABLE 5 REVIEW TITLES OF THE ARTIST AND HIS ART

WRITER	TITLE	PUBLICATION
Robert Ayre	Probing Last Values	Montreal Star
Robert Ayre	Memories of Manitoba	Montreal Star
Ramsay Cook	A Prairie Boy's Vision	Journal of Ukrainian Studies
Gary Michael Dault	One Man's Joy in The Big Land	Books in Canada
Kay Kritzwiser	Honours and Tributes for the Happy Canadian	Globe and Mail
Wayne Edmonstone	Ora Pro Nobis William Kurelek	Vancouver Sun
Virginia Nixon	Kurelek's Message is Sharp and Clear	Montreal Gazette
James Purdie	Peoples' Painter	Globe and Mail
Paul Russel	Masterpieces from the Prairie	Toronto Daily Star
Judith Sanford	Painting Beauty Kurelek's Miracle	Ottawa Citizen
Robert Fullford	Bill Kurelek Remains A Stranger Despite the Success of His Art	Toronto Star

Reviews that followed and their titles suggest wide recognition of the Canadian artist.

In Toronto

In time the Ukrainian community in Toronto embraced William Kurelek. He was entertained at a special banquet given in his honour by the Ukrainian professional and business club. His father, however, though invited - for some reason - did not attend. S. Lantukh, also, reported on his activities among the Toronto Ukrainian Community in a Ukrainian paper.* He delivered a lecture at the Ukrainian literary club; and then the Ukrainian students invited him to a special evening of appreciation of his art, and the viewing of a film by the National Film Board, titled *Wasył Kurelek*. It is regrettable that only recently the greatness of the self-taught artist has become known in Canada and also through the whole world."

"At this evening gathering Wasył Kurelek gave a talk explaining the details of several of his paintings displayed in the hall. They dealt with subject matter relating to Ukrainians.

One picture was that of a whirlwind on the western prairie, which Kurelek said his uncle named the "devil's wedding".

"It is most delightful to have among our people such a talented artist who recorded the life of Ukrainian settlers in Canada with his brush." He added.

In Section 2 in the same issue of the paper the writer, S. Lantukh contributed a full page analysis of William Kurelek's art, stressing his contribution to art and to painting - art that the artist's recognition goes to the credit of the Ukrainians in Canada. He quotes Wendy Mitchner's observations in the *Globe and Mail* that through his art the 40 year-old artist brought acclaim to himself and the Ukrainian people. His pictures sell on the average for \$3000. And that after four years of art work in Canada, he earns about \$12,000 annually, and that before the Exhibition in The Isaacs Gallery 90 percent of the pictures on display were sold. And he concluded:

"Kurelek is a totally Canadian artist who creates pictures of Canadian prairie life as seen through the prism of his own life."

Magnum Opus

William Kurelek, it seems, considered that through the painting of the religious pictures, and the publication of *The Passion of Christ* according to St. Matthew he had reached the pinnacle of his creativity and emotional expression. Providence, however, did not give him time to complete the series as planned. The Konakowskys were fortunate to acquire the completed series which are housed in their Niagara Falls Art Gallery and Museum.

*S. Lantukh, "Canadian Farmer", 30 March 1968.

Chapter 3

William Kurelek In Winnipeg

In 1966 the Winnipeg Art Gallery, with Dr. Ferdinand Eckhardt and Alpha Omega Ukrainian Women's Alumnae Association as co-sponsors, arranged for a one-man art exhibition in Winnipeg, March - April 1966. William Kurelek was to have attended and come to Winnipeg by plane. He, however, according to Mrs. Nadia Negrich, then Nadia Skremetka, preferred to travel by train so that he could spend some time painting.

Mrs. Negrich recalls that:

After the members of the Alpha Omega met him at the C.P.R. station, we invited him to our home and Michael brought us to our place where my Mother was busy preparing a luncheon for William Kurelek and the people we had invited. William informed us that he was fasting, but since it was a special occasion he would graciously make allowances and accept our hospitality. We had a lovely evening; after the reception Michael took him to the Lincoln.

After his period of fasting was over, he came and stayed with Mother and me. My, he was a lovely person, a wonderful person to have in your home, and I began to treat him like my brother and after that I called him, Bill.

According to Mr. Michael Negrich, when William came into the Skremetka living room, - Nadia was busy preparing a reception for the guests invited for the evening -William looked at the pictures on the walls and remarked: "What, no Kurelek picture!?"

The Kurelek Exhibition in Winnipeg was well received by the Winnipeg people and by the Ukrainian community. Some of the Alumnae members of the working committee were: Mrs. J. Krol, Mrs. E. Haag, Mrs. E. G. Berry, Mrs. S. Radchuk, Mrs. G. Ratuski, Mrs. A. Sarchuk and Miss Nadia Skremetka was social convener. Mrs. V. J. Swystun chaired the patrons. The list of patrons included "important" people and organizations of that time.

The arrangement for the William Kurelek Art Exhibition in Winnipeg in was a successful venture and the highlight of the Alumnae activities for 1966. One of Kurelek's large paintings, "A Pool of Sorrows" was presented to the Gallery by the Alpha Omega. The picture cost them \$700., it appears. At the present time at the Gallery there are two Kureleks in addition to the first one, "Despondency" and the third dealing with a Ukrainian subject, "Cross Section of Vinnitsia, the Ukraine, 1939".

¹See Appendix 7.



Fig. 15. At the Kurelek Art Exhibition, 1966: (L-R) Prof. Radoslaw Zuk, President Alpha Omega, William Kurelek, Mrs. E. Hagg (nee Swystun) and Ferdinand Eckhardt, curator of Winnipeg Art Gallery (Mrs. Nadia Negrich Coll.)

Mrs. Negrich made this additional comment:

Each time Bill came to Winnipeg, he was in contact with us. Once he brought his daughter Barbara with him. She was a very quiet child. Bill, however, was proud to have her as a daughter. It seems that Jean Kurelek found out that Barbara needed care and asked Bill if they could do that. His response, evidently was: "Let's take her for our own." He was a big hearted kind person. And Michael informs me that after the Dauphin Festival Committee paid for his trip to Dauphin to the premiere of the National Film Board film, "Kurelek", he gave the money to his foster children, one in Hong Kong, one in India and one in Korea. Michael took a picture of Bill, Barbara and me.

Michael Negrich:

Bill and I became good friends and I drove him to several country points. We went to Vita...

I found out that Bill, though a man of serious nature also had a sense of humour. One blustery wet April day we drove to Stonewall, and as we approached his old home he saw some cows on a manure pile. He asked me to stop. He got out of the car opened wide his arms and started to breathe deeply: "Michael, I am rejuvenated, that smell emanating from the manure pile and the cows make me feel young again, refreshed."

We also drove to Dauphin and....



Fig. 16. Mrs. Skremetka, Barbara and William Kurelek. (M. & N. Negrich Coll.)

Second Trip to Stonewall

Then Bill wanted to visit the Tomyks, the Stonewall Kurelek's neighbours. Since no one was at home, he suggested that we go to visit the bog. The old spring was still active and the water was bubbling up. It was a hot July day, so he took off his shoes and got into the small pool. He was in it for about fifteen minutes. Standing there he looked up in the sky and noticed some ducks flying to the east. "This is a free country."

Next we drove to what was the bog proper. The area was drained and seeded, but since it was a dry year, nothing grew. A skinny gopher drew his attention. He got his camera, got out of the car and "shot" the gopher, and to get a good picture, he did it twice. Then he got on his haunches and began to sketch; a couple of other gophers appeared.

Then we drove around the dry barren heath that was once a bog. He looked and sadly exclaimed: "What a shame! What a loss!..."

We also made a trip to Dauphin and on returning drove through the Riding Mountain National Park and Minnedosa. Bill said: "Some day I would like to come back and do some painting up here." (Up until then most of his scenes were of flat country). As we approached Minnedosa, he was fascinated by a huge old barn in the valley. We stopped and he looked at it for a while.

Some people could not understand Bill's creativity. Mrs. Olga Dolynchuk on seeing his picture at his Winnipeg Exhibition commented to me: "Some of his paintings are too sombre, harsh and depressing - always on flat land."

The Minnedosa Barn Incident

One spring day we received a letter from Bill, posted in Minnedosa asking us to meet him at the bus depot. We were surprised when he arrived in our home. (Nadia and I were married then). He had a large bundle of pictures, which he displayed for the friends Nadia invited. He called them "pot-boilers". "Pot-boilers" was Bill's term for paintings for quick sales.



Fig. 17. William Kurelek displays pot-boilers in M & N Negrich home.
(courtesy of M. & N. Negrich)

One was a beautiful picture of the old red barn in the valley, but no one could buy any of the pictures he had; they were all spoken for. The red barn went to Edmonton, sight unseen, for \$1000.

This story associated with the red barn is interesting.

Though it was springtime with Manitoba squalls and snow flurries, and an occasional sunny break, there was Bill in the barnyard painting this barn. The next day he was at it again. The local farmer did not appreciate the attention his barn was receiving under adverse weather conditions. So, maybe with pitchfork in hand, he accosts painter Bill attempting to prod him to be gone. Bill tried to mollify the irate farmer saying he intended no harm neither to the farmer, nor to his barn. He was just recording it for posterity. Not being satisfied with Bill's explanation, the farmer called the Minnedosa police, who promptly showed up for interrogation which satisfied them, wished him successful painting and good health, and left.

During his visits with us and during our trips to the country he wanted me to tell him about my father's farm, showing special interest in my father's steam threshing outfit. Finally he did paint six murals of the Dauphin area - even the Dauphin train station was included. He called it "The Dream of Michael Negrich". He wanted me to have it after it was displayed in the The Isaacs Gallery. That's where Nadia and I saw it first. It was about four feet by six feet. I declined to accept.

* * * *

He wrote a letter asking me questions about the threshing machine and wanted to know on which side the "bagger", the spout into which an elevator drops the grain ready for bagging for the granary. (It was on the left side).

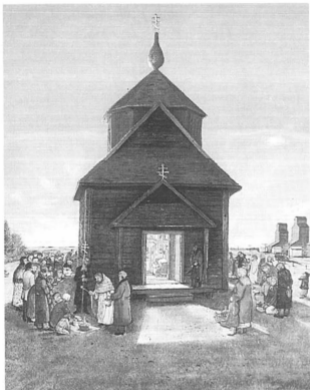
And then what a surprise: one day we received a lovely wedding gift - my father's steam threshing outfit in action.



Fig. 18. Nadia and Michael Negrich with a Kurelek threshing outfit

(M. & N. Negrich Coll.)

(Painting by William Kurelek courtesy estate of William Kurelek and The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto.)

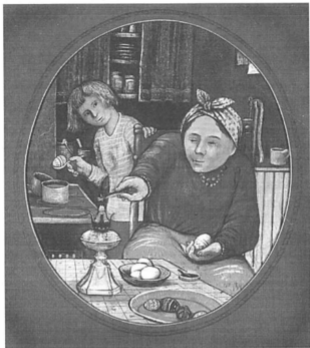


Blessing Easter Paska

(Courtesy Wm. Kurelek Estate and The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto.)

PART V

REAPPRAISAL



Making Easter Eggs
William Kurelek

(Courtesy the estate of William Kurelek and The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto.)

Chapter 1

William Kurelek: The Canadian-Ukrainian William Blake

To establish a keener understanding and appreciation of William Kurelek's efforts and suffering to become a distinguished artist, a comparison between him and the English artist William Blake appears in order.

William Blake, the English poet-artist, died in 1827. A hundred years later a Canadian artist-writer was born. He was, so to speak, a delayed replacement of the "artistic genius". The home backgrounds of the two were different; so was their lineage, but one can discern certain characteristics that developed in later life of William Kurelek to be parallel to those of William Blake. In comparing the two men, the two geniuses, we see them to have their start in the milieu of different cultural heritage. Blake was born into a social setting of an old well-established culture. Kurelek was born into a home detached from the established Ukrainian culture and traditions - though some of their characteristics were maintained. A sensitive child who grew up in a cultural setting modified by the frontier, the culture of re-settled people in the New Land - the prairies of Western Canada.

William Blake produced fine poetry and art; Kurelek, created good art and he also aspired to become a good writer. Nevertheless, the frontier, the prairie region was always with him and he recorded much of it.

Blake, too, was a sensitive child who grew up in a restricted environment of a big city. He was of a creative bent. He could not see open spaces like the prairie, much that he created was a creation of his mind. He saw visions and was bothered by multitudinous hallucinations. As a young boy he told his mother that he saw God looking at him through the window; and was punished¹ by her for making such a "ridiculous" statement; but then his parents relented. They recognized the fact early in his life that school would be hard on him so they did not send the sensitive boy to school. William Blake learned to read and write at home. On the other hand William Kurelek attended a public school, and though he did well academically, it was the difficult experiences he encountered that left a deep scar on his life and made him withdraw into a shell. Whether he had visions and talked to imaginary beings is unknown. In this withdrawal, it seems, he found solace in art.

¹John Bemrose, *MacLeans*, Oct. 6, 1995, p. 80.

Recently Blake's biography appeared in print and so did his poetry. What we can glean from the review of the two publications by Peter Ackroyd appears that Blake's poetry and art may have influenced William Kurelek; and he may have attempted to emulate Blake, though, thus far, competent researchers have not dwelt on this subject in depth.

Although William Blake did attend an art school briefly, he developed his artistic skills as an engraver being apprenticed to an engraver for seven years. His parents did not send him to school, but they encouraged young Blake to write poetry when they pinned his poetry on the walls, and showed them to friends.

In William Kurelek's home art was considered unimportant. His father was pragmatic to the extreme: "you can't earn a living through art, but achievement in school is very important."²

Blake remained an engraver - his engraving skills made it possible for him to earn a modest living.

Both Williams were fortunate to marry women who cared, respected talent, and provided the requisite encouragement and assistance.

William Blake married a woman who tried to help him along during his periods of emotional depression. She was Catherine Boocher who cared and learned to ease his spiritual world; there were many periods of emotional depression in Blake's life. At times he would walk down the streets of London and talk to angles. And even in old age, he physically wrestled with the devil; and yet:

"There is Catherine sitting quietly by the hour to quell his nervous fears as he works"

William Kurelek, too, experienced hallucinations and saw visions in the "bog". It often was his place of refuge - there he could leave the bonds of earth and in his imagination see heaven and beauty in the limitless blue sky above.

Blake's poetry and art have a definite religious orientation and so does William Kurelek's art. Though early in life, religion did not form an important part of Kurelek's life; it did more so during his adult years.

However, when William Kurelek was receiving psychiatric treatment he used to visit art galleries where he was able to study the works of the masters. Kurelek's very competent biographer, Patricia Morley writes: "London school galleries were Kurelek's school of art where eventually he did come in contact with Blake's pictures; he enjoyed Blake's pictures because they were religious in character."

As writers the two were different: William Blake sought enjoyment through imagination, forgiveness and love³, but Kurelek wrote in a mood of judgment rather than love. He was a type of missionary - a propagandist of faith.

In helping William Kurelek to make a complete transition from agnosticism, Father Norton visited the Tate galleries with him where Kurelek seemed to enjoy Blake's pictures. Father Norton tried to have Blake influence Kurelek who became a staunch Catholic. In the sphere of religion, Blake did not seem to have been a

¹William Kurelek. In conversation.

²John Bemrose, MacLeans, Oct. 6, 1995.

³Patricia Morley, p. 124.

⁴Ibid, p. 277.

deeply religious man. He was not a Catholic. Born in the Anglican church, he however, learned to admire Edmund Swedenborg's⁶ philosophy.

Mrs. Blake, according to Ackroyd...⁷ used to minister to him with a single-mindedness...(that) made it possible for him to endure isolation as an artist.⁷ Mrs. Kurelek, too, had to tolerate William's determination to have his way and accepted his "holing" in some hotel, and often in another city at that, to let him do his art:

William Blake's wife once observed that life with her husband was not an easy affair.⁸

And Mrs. Kurelek expressed herself in a kin manner:

To friends and...with whom the Kureleks stayed during their time in England, Jean confided that Bill, "might be a saint but was difficult to live with."⁹

There is, no doubt, that William Kurelek came to appreciate Blake's poetry when he studied the romantic poetry at the University, but it appears that he was more influenced by William Blake's art that he saw for the first time in the London galleries.



William Blake

⁶Alberto Mangual; *Globe and Mail*.

⁷John Bemrose, *op. cit.*

⁸Patricia Morley, p. 185.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 243.



From L-R: John, Dymtro and Bill at Stonewall.
(Courtesy Mrs. W. Kurelek.)

Chapter 2

Father - Son Relationship

In analyzing the Dmytro - William Kurelek relationship and life, we have to accept the fact that we are dealing with ambitious people. Dmytro a man struggling to survive the depression years carrying a burden of a large mortgage, and a sensitive, delicate son who suffered from physical and emotional malaise. Dmytro Kurelek was not a psychologist to understand William's aberration and did not have the requisite understanding of a young lad subjected to shifting emotional moods and experiencing physical problems.

Dmytro Kurelek - with all his best intentions to help his children succeed in life - did not seem to show his children overt affection. And as far as they seemed to feel that was his major failure as a father.

Mr. Kurelek , who in his day was likely one of a few farmers in the Interlake area of Manitoba who owned a farm of much larger acreage than the average. He aspired to greatness and was like the man who was promised that all the land he ran around in a day would be his; and who did run all day and on arriving before sunset at the spot from which he started, collapsed and died. Dmytro Kurelek finally decided to give up his ambitions of being a master farmer, - sold his 600 acre farm and moved to Vinemount, Ontario to make a fresh start. At the same time he gave up, as far as William was concerned, and was very disenchanted that William did not enter a medical school.

On the other hand, William Kurelek who claimed that he could not identify with his father as a hero, "because of my terror of him"; during his university years and when his parents moved to Ontario was, so to speak, cut adrift. During these years he passed through a very stressful period in life. His adjustment with other university students was at a low ebb. His was not a happy life: he suffered emotionally.

He was buffeted by being a social failure. He changed directions as far as his goal in life was concerned. He tried to follow new leads that he discovered in his reading. He was sick, and he recorded:

- that he took iron tonics and had a tonsil operation
- took pills to cure his lethargy, anemia and poor reflexes
- took booster pills for an underfunctioning thyroid
- he felt he had a drug addiction problem
- he gave up alcohol¹

¹Someone With Me (1st ed.) p. 156.

²Ibid. p. 205.

It appears that the only person who tried to ameliorate Dmytro Kurelek's stubborn attitude to William was Rev. Peter Majewsky. He observed merit in William's propensity to art and suggested that the father could well accept him becoming an artist, but Dmytro Kurelek refused to heed. Being a practical man, he couldn't see how one could make a living by being an artist.

While William was away in Alberta and Mexico, that is, during the 1950-51 period there was correspondence between the two, but the letters do not seem to be extant. It would help to explain whether the two were at any point appreciating each other's views.

When William was visiting in his parents' home in Ontario, a pathetic situation arose. While William was in conversation with his father, younger siblings were playing around and the father informed William that he did not have the financial resources to give them a university education and without help they would likely grow up to be factory workers.

Though William Kurelek, in time, began to derive revenue from his picture framing and art work, there is no record that he offered any financial assistance to put his siblings through university. And before long he had his own family to look after.

Both Dmytro and William Kurelek passed through a stormy path of life: one a post WWI immigrant from the Ukraine reaching for the heights as a master farmer in his adopted new land, but eventually had to change course. His son, William, who set his mind on becoming an artist of note succeeded. In many respects they were alike: like father, like son. Though the two had grown apart through the years, toward the end of William's life there was reconciliation, and Dmytro who saw little scope in art as a means of earning a living, finally, when William gained recognition, as a great Canadian artist, changed his mind and was proud of his son's attainment. Tensions that seemed to keep the two apart disappeared and happier days ensued, but there was little time left for William.

During the years William was growing up, he experienced severe chiding and criticisms from his father. At times he was punished, yet his mother very seldom interfered or took William's part. As a consequence, he got estranged from both of them. Yet correspondence continued, but he adopted a different approach in dealing with each parent: he wrote to his mother in English, but always in Ukrainian to his father.

When William returned from England after his first visit, the parents decided to be more tolerant. Yes, they did think that Margaret was too old for him and even found a pretty Ukrainian girl whom William dated at least once; but never established a close relationship and returned to England to see Margaret.

If Dmytro Kurelek was overbearing as far as William or the children were concerned, one has to appreciate the fact that he was neither a psychologist nor a man with keener understanding about bringing up children, and particularly one with severe adjustment problems and personality makeup.

That William had changed by 1977 - and he may be considered to have become more discrete and reasonable and began to recognize the more favourable characteristics of his father's personality and the strong attachment that Dmytro Kurelek had for his traditions and his native village. William, it seems, began to feel guilty for having strayed away from his family while his father maintained the love

and appreciation for his beautiful native Borivtsi. Therefore, during his 1977 visit - his last visit - he did perform an "antic", an obeisance, by falling face down into a furrow and explaining the incident as trying "to get to his roots."

There is no evidence, whether his father ever dissuaded William from leaving his church, or that any pressure was put on him to return. On the other hand the over-zealous shepherding of the artist to adhere to the "act of conversion", may in some respects be considered cruel. It was found during the interview in 1975 that at times William had moments of severe remorse over the change.

Dmytro Kurelek, however, in spite of his difficult manner, his harsh attitude, his erasable nature must be given credit for often being right. In spite of difficult times, however, and as seen toward the end William's life, he never abandoned his son.

Michael Negrich reports that while he and Mrs. Negrich used to visit the Kureleks in Toronto, on several occasions Bill arranged for the Negrichs to visit his parents on their Ontario farm. Bill was proud of his parents and his siblings.

Later in life William used to quote and liked to tell others the many things of interest and facts he had gleaned at the kitchen table as he listened to his father relate his life's experiences....."my father used to say that one could not sleep on the grass (in Canada) but one could in Europe (Ukraine).

It is regrettable, too, that William seldom expressed the good qualities of his father. One finds it difficult to understand why William did not appreciate the fact that, when he was leaving to become a lumber jack in Ontario, in spite of his father's pleading that he needed help, yet his father would not let him go penniless and handed him \$25.00 for the trip.⁸

(Eventually we are to see that William did express his appreciation for his father by dedicating an art show to him. And Dmytro Kurelek admitted, too, that he really did not understand what art was all about.)

Reaching for the Summit

During Queen Elizabeth's visit to Canada one of the pictures, the art of the Prairie Ukrainian boy, was presented to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. Subsequently, William Kurelek records: "My wife and I were invited to Prime Minister Pearson's residence for a State Dinner."⁹ This was not only a great recognition for the artist, but a great honour to Mrs. Kurelek actually a small recompense for the many lonely evenings she spent since her artist husband could not detach himself from his art.

Subsequently, when the Ottawa Art Gallery held an Exhibition of William's art dedicated to his father, both his parents came. In his reminiscences William reflects on the occasion as follows: "I'll never forget the time when at a show I had painted to honour my father, both he and Mrs. Pearson were present. I introduced him to Mrs. Pearson and they shook hands. "I never thought a great lady like her would

⁸R. Bilash and M. Barida, *To My Father's Village: The last Days and Drawings of William Kurelek*.

⁹William Kurelek, *Kurelek Country*, Pagarian Press Ltd., Toronto, 1975, p. 28.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

pay attention to us," he confided to me later. To my big surprise my parents actually had come to my first show and have been coming ever since. At first they (mostly my mother) used to say of my successes - "It's alright - but will it last?" It was in 1967 that my father came right out and said he'd made a mistake about my vocation. This was after seeing me on television describing my early struggles: "I had no idea then what art was about, really," he said...



Fig. 19. R-L: Mrs. L. B. Pearson, Dmytro Kurelek and William Kurelek.
(Courtesy The Isaacs Gallery)

Another event in William's life was the recognition of his vertical development; a son of a Ukrainian immigrant to become a distinguished artist, and consequently was to be awarded an Honorary Doctor's degree by the Assumption University of Windsor Ontario.

It is hard to understand why an honorary doctorate was not awarded him in Toronto, the city he loved.

¹Joan Murray, *Kurelek's Vision of Canada*.
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa 1967, p. 69.
²*Ibid.*

Chapter 3

Kurelek's Ukrainian Connections

William Kurelek was once asked whether he was more Ukrainian than Canadian. There is no record of his reply to the question. However, on close analysis of his artistic development and life it is evident - without any reservations - that he was a Canadian. That he had a strong affection for his ethnic background is also true. It is also true that he was a Canadian with a strong western Canadian bias.

In the Dmytro and Maria Kurelek home he acquired the knowledge of Ukrainian language, traditions and rudiments of culture. He also acquired a good understanding of life in the Ukraine as experienced and told and retold by his father. His father's village of Borivtsi was firmly established in his mind.

However, William Kurelek did not have the same understanding of the life of Ukrainians as the children who grew up in block settlements, as for instance, the children of the Pleasant Home pioneers. He grew up in a small detached Ukrainian community in the school district of Victoria. His interpretation of the life of Canadian Ukrainians tended, therefore, to be biased and based on the life and people and relatives in Borivtsi about whom he knew more than about his relatives in Whitford, Alberta where he was born. While attending Ukrainian language classes in his church, he was greatly influenced by Rev. Peter Majewski:

...I was introduced to Ukrainian nationalism. As he told us the history of the Ukraine, of her natural richness, her cultural beauty, I soon realized that the fire had passed from him to me. Now I was starting to burn, too. I was really moved by the tragedy of Pedkova (sic), Mazepa, Shevchenko and the Ukrainian Free Republic!

His attendance in St. Andrews seemed to intensify his feeling for Ukrainian culture; and with this background he entered the University of Manitoba.

However, his university years seemed to cut him adrift from the Ukrainian connections he had established. Though he had ample opportunity to join his church youth groups, he did not do so. He clearly demonstrated that he was not an organization person, but chose to maintain contacts with people on a one-to-one basis. Consequently, he found himself practically totally isolated and by 1949. When he completed his courses toward a B.A. degree, he had drifted into radicalism and become an agnostic, and thus removed himself still further from the Ukrainian milieu.

William Kurelek, *Someone With Me*, ed. pp. 151-52.

During the years that William Kurelek spent in England, he did not establish any contact with Ukrainian organizations or church groups. The fact that his health presented difficulties makes the situation understandable.

On return to Canada and his employment at The Isaacs Gallery; and having abandoned his radicalism he seemed to find a renewed interest in Ukrainian culture, and culture of other Canadian ethnic groups. When an exhibition of his art work was arranged, and the interest shown for his art by the Jewish women's group, he began to place more emphasis on his Ukrainian background. Ramsay Cook in his introduction to Brian Dedora's memoirs reflects on his attendance at the exhibition.

One Saturday I dropped into The Isaacs Gallery and found myself in the midst of a noisy, well-dressed show-opening crowd. Knowing no-one, I was able to look uninterrupted, at a series of works depicting one of Kurelek's essential themes: the story of Ukrainian settlements on the prairies. Before leaving I glanced around the gallery. There, in a corner, stood an uneasy-looking stocky man, his hair cut unfashionably short for the long haired sixties, wearing an orange shirt, carefully embroidered in traditional Ukrainian fashion. He was alone - not in the universe, or even in the world. But still, alone.⁷

This seems to be direct evidence that he had not forsaken the culture of his forebearers; and in time the Ukrainian community in Toronto became interested in William Kurelek's creative activities. The Ukrainian Professional and Business Club of Toronto even tendered a banquet in his honour. In Toronto his contacts, though, appear to have been closer with the post W.W.II groups than the Canadian born Ukrainians.

Following his Toronto recognition, in 1966 the Ukrainians in Winnipeg in association with the Winnipeg Art Gallery helped to sponsor the exhibition of his art. The Alpha Omega Women's Alumnae was the co-operating group, and the patrons listed in the exhibition program could be said to have consisted of the "who's who" Ukrainian organizations and individuals in Winnipeg.⁸

Interest in Kurelek's art as a Canadian artist grew and he was well recognized. It appears, though, that in time he tried to work hard to produce as much art as possible and sell on his own, as his revenue from royalties of publications for which others acquired copyrights were not great. Consequently, he accepted a contract from the Ukrainian Women's Association to prepare a series of postcard pictures about Ukrainians, mainly Canadian Ukrainians of the pioneer era. This project, regrettably, proved to be disappointing. It appears that William Kurelek developed the series based on his concept of Ukrainians, mainly women as he thought they looked in Borivtsi and not Ukrainian pioneer women in Canada who were hard-working and far from robust, who dressed in Canadian clothing some from the mail order catalogues and who also dressed their children in Canadian clothing.

The members of the association reacted unfavourably. And they appeared to have been justified. Mrs. Anne Balan of Toronto wrote that:

⁷Ramsay Cook, Introduction to Brian Dedora's: *A Memoir of William Kurelek*, p. 9.

⁸See Appendix VI.

Kurelek's simple style was offensive...especially his portrayal of people. Quite often his women and children looked grotesque, dour and very unappealing.⁴

This view was supported by Olga Hamara and Stella Olynyk.

It does appear that the Ukrainian Women's Association did not consider their project a success; and this was one case where the artist required guidance.



Fig. 20. Teaching Ukrainian.

(Painting by William Kurelek courtesy estate of William Kurelek and The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto.)

Seeking Universal Acclaim

In his reminiscences William Kurelek points out that it was the other ethnic groups who first recognized him:

...It was the Jewish community who first discovered and patronized me, followed hard on by the Anglo-Saxons. The Ukrainian community became seriously interested in my work about four years later...⁵

⁴Patricia Morley, p. 212.

⁵Joan Murray, *Kurelek's Vision of Canada*, p. 64.

William Kurelek, consequently, devoted many pictures to show his appreciation to the Jewish community. As far as Ukrainians are concerned one example is his illustration on the front cover of the Wachna book, *Look Who is Coming*¹ where he has a bearded Theodosy Wachna lead the Ukrainians to their first Ukrainian settlement in Manitoba in 1896. This does not appear to be in accordance with historical facts, and therefore, regrettable.

In spite of some of Kurelek's errors, it may be said that today the Ukrainians remember him and take pride in his art work; his vertical development as an artist - his Ukrainian connections remain strong.

Further in reference to the Kurelek's Ukrainian connections it is in order to include an appraisal of his art in the Ukrainian press. In 1968 S. Lantukh² wrote in a Winnipeg paper, published in Ukrainian, that a student body in Toronto devoted an evening to art and had an opportunity to view a National Film Board film titled, "Wasył Kurelek".

In section two of the same issue a full page was devoted to Kurelek's art. S. Lantukh again stressing the value of his achievement in art in bringing to the fore the creative aspect of the Ukrainian people and the wonderful success of the self-taught artist bringing credit to himself and his people in Canada.

S. Lantukh makes reference to Wendy Mitchner's observations in the *Globe and Mail* that Kurelek's pictures, on the average, brought \$3,000 each, and that after four years of hard work, he was able to feel financially secure.

* * * *

Mrs. Anne Balan who was the designated chairman of a committee representing The Association of Ukrainian women of Canada met with William Kurelek in his home. She describes his work place - his studio as follows:

"...a large room with few amenities. In one area...there was a long table flush against the wall. Kurelek painted by fluorescent light as there were few windows in the room. On (one) wall...hung a crown of thorns made from barbed wire; there was a hand-copied psalm for him to read; (there were) descriptions of machinery used in his farm paintings as well as messages to himself...On the floor was a radio that played classical music continuously. On a chair, there might be some dried fruit, for he ate sparingly while working".³

Her observation about William Kurelek as a person she met in 1965 on several occasions to arrange with him the painting of a series of pictures illustrating events in the life of pioneer Ukrainian women in Canada provides us with more details about the artist's personality.

"Visiting Kurelek...was always an unpredictable experience. At times he would talk and discuss many topics - books he read, movies he saw, art he liked. On other

¹Mary Paximadis, *Look Who's Coming: A Wachna Story*, Oshawa, Ont., Maracle Press Limited.

²S. Lantukh, *Canadian Farmer*, Winnipeg, 30 March 1968.

³Vera Nokony, *Ukrainian Pioneer Women*, The Association of Ukrainian Women in Canada (AUWC), M-C Graphics (Introduction), Saskatoon, SK.

occasions he felt a compulsion to talk about the many years of mental anguish he suffered and how important God was in his life. And then there were times when he barely recognized my presence. Physically we shared the same space but spiritually he was in another world.⁷

There was a period in the artist's life that he had little or no contact with people of his Ukrainian extraction. That period was roughly between 1950 to 1957 - a period that beside his years in England, included the time he spent in Mexico and being employed as a pulpwood cutter.

Kurelek's first strong Ukrainian connection outside his home was established in the Burrows Avenue church he attended. It is likely that under the influence of Rev. P. Majewsky he painted the backdrops for the Christmas play performance in which he took part.⁸

According to Mrs. Nadia Negrich, William Kurelek donated pictures to several Ukrainian churches. And recently it was found that he made a beautiful picture frame for the Honour Roll of the men and women who served in WWII and were members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Mary The Protectress, a church he, Winnie and John attended.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Information provided by Mrs. J.S. Petryshyn.



Dmytro Kurelek third home in Ontario.
(Courtesy Mrs. Wl. Kurelek.)

Chapter 4

Demise of the Suffering Genius

In due time William Kurelek became one of the better known and recognized Canadian artists and:

By the time he died he was easily the most interviewed and written about of all Canadian artists.¹

In 1986 Allan Mills in commenting about his art wrote:

Probably no Canadian artist has been as well known as William Kurelek. His output of paintings was, in his later years, as many as three a day. Through lithographs, prints and published books there are few Canadians without a copy of his work somewhere in their house.²

Such positive appraisals were published by western journalists in western Canadian Press. Nevertheless, criticism of his work was included. Helen Norrie in reviewing Joan Murray's appraisal writes:

In his work, in fact, there's much to hate. (Joan Murray admits he has many faults) as she cites the ever-present green grass and the artist's tendency to over-finish his pictures with intrusive detail. Yet she applauds his sense of awed wonder and his emotional intensity.³

Jeffery Anderson rated Kurelek's work highly:

The Canadian painter, William Kurelek is fast becoming a household word in this country. In time his reputation may rival that of those august figures, A. Y. Jackson and Tom Thomson.

It may be that Kurelek's unique contribution to our culture is exaggerated but, as an artist who has captured the essence of ethnic community life on the vast expanses of the prairies, he stands virtually alone.⁴

¹Helen Norrie, Winnipeg Free Press.

²Allan Mills, Winnipeg Free Press, October 1986.

³Helen Norrie, op. cit.

⁴Jeffery Anderson, Winnipeg Free Press, 25 January 1984.

In the 1970s Kurelek performed prodigious feats of painting, often spending several weeks away from his family. He would check into a hotel, attend morning Mass and work as much as 18 hours a day, fasting at the same time. On such excursions Kurelek would lose ten pounds, and the money he saved on food he gave to charity.⁴

Referring to Kurelek's art exhibition in the Winnipeg Museum of Man & Nature, Jeffery Anderson elaborates further:

This collection of about 50 paintings has been put together admirably from many sources and is certainly representative of the remarkable dualism of Kurelek's approach: "innocent nostalgia and apocalyptic vision." We have Joan Murray of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa to thank for this show. It was her enthusiasm for Kurelek's work in the face of considerable indifference that brought it to Winnipeg and to 13 other Canadian centres.

Kurelek was a prolific painter of anecdotal scenes of rural prairie life; some are merely quaint and picturesque but others forcibly depict humans pitted against an indifferent, often hostile, physical environment. One has to admire much of his compositional skills; they can be daring.

Although both human and animal figures are crucial to his vision of landscape, they are the weakest element in his technique. They have a certain stylized charm but lack vitality and structural reinforcement.

It is a wonderful exhibition, a great tribute to this extraordinary artist who has left us such a marvellous legacy.⁵

When William Kurelek was laid to his eternal rest in November 1977, the Western press reported:

Funeral Service Monday for Prairie Artist Kurelek

TORONTO (CP) - A funeral service will be held Monday for Toronto artist William Kurelek, prolific painter of everyday life on the Prairies and author of six best-selling books.

Kurelek, 50, died of cancer Thursday in hospital. Kurelek overcame an unhappy childhood in Manitoba and confinement in an English psychiatric hospital to become one of Canada's most popular narrative painters.⁶

The span of artistic creativity of William Kurelek was short, but he managed to leave hundreds of first class art for Canadians.

⁴Larry Collins, *William Kurelek The People's Painter*. Reader's Digest, September 1992, p. 138.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Winnipeg Free Press (Toronto CP), November 5, 1977.

Then we read the following appraisal of William Kurelek's work by Jan Kamienski, the Tribune political cartoonist, when he reviewed *Someone With Me*.

William Kurelek...left an artistic legacy, which in the context of Canadian art, is quite unique, in the fullest sense of the word: there simply is no other like it.⁷

And Mr. John McTavish adds, in reviewing Patricia Morley's *William Kurelek: A Biography*, though he calls him a "self-taught artist" he rates his work very highly.

When William Kurelek died...he was Canada's best-known painter at the time and one of the best-loved ever.⁸

The Winnipeg Tribune also presented a Toronto (CP) report:

Prairie Painter Dies

Toronto artist William Kurelek, 50 known for his paintings of the Prairies, died in hospital Thursday of cancer.

He wrote or illustrated 10 books including an autobiography, *Someone With Me*, which tells of a religious vision.⁹

Appraisal of Kurelek's Work and Travels

Then followed the appraisal of his work, his difficulties and contributions:

...William Kurelek was truly a Prairie artist, and much of his work for which he is best known is that he recaptures the scenes and experiences that people of his generation who were raised on the Prairies remember so well.¹⁰

...He has left a legacy that will, in the eyes of Prairie people, at least, enshrine him as an artist who knew and loved this country and could share his love with all who see his paintings.¹¹

Many references have been made about the emotional aspect of his childhood and life.

The artist was a tormented man and this reveals itself in some of his works. But others - in his illustrations, for example, in *Kurelek's Country*, or in his books about Prairie life, reflect simply, but vividly, his childhood surroundings...

Kurelek...as a child was plagued by hallucinations of pain, and suffering...¹²

⁷Winnipeg Free Press (Toronto CP), November 5, 1977.

⁸The Observer, April 1987, p. 44.

⁹Winnipeg Tribune, November 5, 1977.

¹⁰Winnipeg Free Press, 1977.

¹¹Winnipeg Free Press.

¹²Ibid.

To say that getting involved in other people's culture made William Kurelek happier than connections with his own culture is unkind, and what is more, contrary to fact. Kurelek had no opportunity to be involved with his ethnic culture in Europe. In Canada the situation was different. The fact is praiseworthy that The Isaacs Gallery provided him with employment as a picture framer, launched an exhibition of his art, and that the Jewish women got enamoured with his paintings; gave Kurelek a start. These facts made him continue to respect and appreciate them. It is interesting, too, to observe, that as a business venture the involvement and assistance given by The Isaacs Gallery, led to profit, and the gallery may still profit from the endeavour.

The older William Kurelek grew, and the more success he attained, made him diversify his approach and it is necessary to appreciate the fact that William Kurelek was a bright individual who tried to reach the wide spectrum of the Canadian Community.

Avrom Isaacs who worked closely with Kurelek when William provided visual materials for the publication on the Jewish people in Canada, stated:

His documentation of the west of 1930's and 1940's is an important look at that part of Canadian history.¹¹

William Kurelek was a sensitive soul and many incidents along his short term on this earth seemed to add to his suffering - to torment his soul. Religious as he was toward the end of his life, his conversion seemed to distance him from the people of his ethnic group. Eventually, however, in Toronto he established contact with the Ukrainian group, but they, in the main, were members of the post WWII group. They did reinforce his father's details about life in the Ukraine, but he needed closer contact with the descendants of the Ukrainian pioneers to have a better understanding of the rural life in Canada and he tended, therefore, to interpret it in "Old Country" terms. And as he got closer to the Ukrainian ethnic group, he began to have second thoughts about his church affiliation.¹²

However, William Kurelek being a descendant of the Ukrainians from the Ukrainian province of Bukovyna, people whom the other Ukrainians tended to consider stubborn, would not relinquish the church that helped to extricate him from the pangs of his emotional depression; and more so that it was Jean Kurelek's church and she was a woman he adored.

Consequently, when his suffering days were over, credit is due to Mrs. Kurelek for respecting his family's feelings about William's ethnic affiliations: arrangements were made for two funeral services.

Patricia Morley records:

The first for family and close friends. Some one hundred mourners more than filled a local funeral parlor. Kurelek lay in an open coffin wearing a Ukrainian shirt beneath a tailored jacket. Ukrainian music was sung by a church choir led by his brother-in-law, Nat Olynyk.¹³

(Mrs. Kurelek wore a Ukrainian blouse)

¹¹Avrom Isaacs, *The Winnipeg Tribune*, 5 November 1977.

¹²In conversation, 1975.

¹³Patricia Morley, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

Patricia Morley also observes that there were no Ukrainian (Catholic or Orthodox) clergymen present. That they were not present or did not participate is understandable. Very likely none were invited. It is also understandable since he did distance himself from both churches.

The second service was conducted the next day and totally in the Roman Rite. Consequently, there was no Ukrainian "Vichnaya Pamyat", only "In Pace Requiscat".

**Maritimes**

(Courtesy, William Kurelek estate and Isaacs Gallery, Toronto.)

Last Trip 1977 and Conclusion

In 1977 William Kurelek forced himself, it appears, to once again visit the land of his Ukrainian forebearers, - to get to the land of his roots. With a map of Borivtsi, his father's native village, in his possession he felt more secure; and then (1977) the communist administrators gave him more latitude. Arriving in Borivtsi he was amazed how accurate his father's map was. He could locate the village lanes, the church and the homes as his father marked. This, no doubt, modified his appraisal of his father as a man.

In Ukraine he gleaned much historical information and made sketches and took pictures of implements, buildings and other materials he hoped to reproduce. Finally, on leaving the village he really became emotionally upset.

William Kurelek returned to Canada a sick man. He set to work and worked feverishly to draw as many pictures as he could - but then many sketches remained unfinished. When his last picture was painted he died in Toronto on November 3, 1977 leaving his wife, Jean, four children, his parents and his siblings all younger than he.

Nevertheless, a book was published to record as much as possible of the material William intended to be published: It was, *To My Father's Village: The Last Days and Drawings of William Kurelek*. Great credit is due to those who made the book appear in print. Mr. Radomir Bilash and Rev. Michael Barida made an honest transliteration of captions from Ukrainian and presented the historical materials in a precise and clear manner.

It is difficult to learn which of the drawings - sketches of equipment William Kurelek produced were of his first visit to the Ukraine. Nevertheless, the hand-made wooden objects he sketched indicate that William saw some of the same implements in his father's neighbours farms. But many, no doubt, he saw for the first time in his father's village and knew about them having heard them discussed in his home. William, being an intelligent lad, absorbed, sponge-like, alot of information from his parents. This suggests that life in the Dmytro Kurelek home wasn't that austere and that during evenings - when the family sat around the kitchen table - much information was imparted orally to the members of the family.

Many of the objects which appear in the book are important reference materials for those doing research about hand-produced equipment that Ukrainian settlers in Canada made and utilized. Much of such equipment has been destroyed, though some is preserved in museums, others are still found among treasures of individual homes.

(It appears that the best preserved collection is found on the Negrich farm at Venlaw, MB.) In Ukraine the majority of agricultural implements were fashioned out of the beech wood which when seasoned became bone-hard. In Canada preservation of replicated wooden equipment was difficult - as the farmers used soft wood since even oak and ash trees were not in plentiful supply in many western Canadian districts. Therefore, the writers who after Kurelek's demise assembled his drawings to produce a valuable book deserve praise.

And in conclusion as the twentieth year of William Kurelek's passing is approaching, and though he left a rich legacy of art, his name - as an artist of distinction is becoming less bright particularly with the new generation. Ramsay Cook's statement that, "He was alone - not in the universe, or even in the world., But still, alone." holds true, and Robert Fulford's review title also holds true: "Bill Kurelek Remains a Stranger Despite the Success of His Art." And maybe that's the way William Kurelek wished it.

Another writer observed:

Today his legacy lives on in galleries and museums across Canada.....On canvas he is one of our greatest story tellers.

and

When William Kurelek succumbed to cancer on November 3, 1977, at the age of 50, he left behind more than 2000 paintings and had become one of the most successful Canadian artists of his generation. A 60 x 75 cm Kurelek might sell today for \$25,000 and his work is increasing in value....



Fig. 21 *When We Must Say Goodbye, 1977*
(Courtesy The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto, ON)

It is true that eventually William Kurelek reached success in his artistic career and gained financial independence for his family. During the early years of his life, however, his chalice was brimful of suffering, stress, abuse, fears, and derision that eventually led to his emotional breakdown. Nevertheless, after re-establishing emotional stability which he attained through solace in religion while in England, he came home.

In Canada William Kurelek with the typical tenacity of a Western Canadian boy devoted his energies to art; the bitterness of his life diminished and the Canadian society saw a rich outpouring of his creative genius — saw him record life in rich warm tones. In this effort his background stood him in good stead. He painted best what he knew well: the Western Canadian scences and those of Ukrainian traditions he acquired in his farm home.

¹Pioneer Profiles, p. 98f. Also see *Spruce, Swamp and Stone*, and *Vita a Ukrainian Community*.

Once again William Kurelek went to the homeland of his father, the Bukovynian part of Ukraine. On returning home, he was physically spent. But to say farewell to the world he loved, he painted yet another painting, titled, "When we must say goodbye 1977" and laid his burden down.



William Kurelek - The People's Painter.

(Photographer by M. Lainberth, courtesy Isaacs Gallery, Toronto.)

WILLIAM KURELEK: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1927 Born March 3, 1927 in Whitford, Alberta and likely named after his maternal grandfather, Wasyl Hocolak
- 1934 Family settled on 3-4-29 in the Municipality of Rockwood (Stonewall, Manitoba)
- 1934 Started to attend Victoria School #49
- 1937 Grade IV
- 1943 Isaac Newton School, Gr. X
- 1945 Isaac Newton School and St. Andrew's College, Gr. XII
- 1946 University of Manitoba
- 1947 Working in Ontario woods as lumberjack
- 1949 B.A. University of Manitoba and first letter to Natalie Bilenky
Moved with family to Ontario
- 1950 Ontario College of Art
To Edmonton and left for San Miguel, Allende Art School
- 1951 Return to Canada
Worked in Quebec and Ontario cutting pulp wood
Last letter to Natalie
Left for London, England and visited art centres on the continent
- 1953 Working in London, England at manual labour
- 1954/55 Painted several good pictures
First sale of painting to the London Transport Commission
Attended Art School in London
In hospital four years
- 1956 Exhibition of 35 pictures and five oils at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, England
- 1957 Return to Canada
- 1958 Return to London, learning picture framing, Trip to Holy Land, Athens and Rome.
- 1959 Return to Canada, worked at The Isaacs Gallery in Toronto
- 1960 Shows of his art work started
- 1962 Married Jean Andrews
- 1965 Art show in Edmonton
- 1966 Art show in Winnipeg
- 1968 Painting of Ukrainian pioneer women in Canada
- 1969 Received a Fellowship, travelled to Hong Kong, India and South Africa
- 1970 First trip to Ukraine
- 1971 Mural: Ukrainian Pioneer Painting
- 1975 Recognized at convocation, University of Manitoba
Alumni banquet speaker
Interviewed by M. Ewanchuk
Completed "Fox Mykyta"
Irish in Canada

- 1976 Jewish Life in Canada
The Polish Canadians
- 1977 Second trip to Ukraine and second visit to Borivtsi, his father's vil-
lage
Honorary Doctor's Degree, University of Windsor, Ontario
Demise of William Kurelek, 03 November at age 50

Appendices

Appendix I

Michael Hurshka-Harris came to Canada from the same vicinity as the Kureleks did. His father had preceded him. Michael worked hard to master English, took a course in journalism in U.S.A. and was fortunate to be hired by J. W. Defoe as a Free Press reporter. Though he was classed as a labour reporter, and was honoured on retirement by the labour union, he also reported on the events in the Ukrainian community in Winnipeg. Since he had no sons, he said, he changed his name to Harris rather late in life and people continued to call him Hruska.

Appendix II

The Kureleks' neighbors and close associates were the Goreskys. Mr. Goresky worked in the Stony Mountain quarry as a blacksmith and being close to Stonewall gave his children a chance to get a high school education - and then he bought a farm. One of the sons, Victor, became a doctor, and another, Isidore distinguished himself as an educator in Alberta.

Isidore Goresky is now retired and living in Surrey, B.C. After attaining two masters degrees was principal of schools and was elected M.L.A. as member of the Brownlee government. During W.W.II he was F.O. with R.C.A.F. and retired as Superintendent of Schools after heading a curriculum committee that organized Ukrainian courses for the Alberta schools.

The early success of the Goresky children served as a model for the Kureleks and, consequently, they "pushed" their children to become university graduates.

Appendix III

March 27, McLeod and Hammond were on a bombing mission (in a furious fight with the German fighters McLeod's controls were damaged)

McLeod consequently swerving the plane in direction of the British lines (their plane was on fire); McLeod crawled out on the wing and continued to fly the plane. Hammond shot down another German plane...They crash landed near the British lines, and McLeod dragged Hammond into the British trenches. Hammond was wounded six times; McLeod five. Hammond received a Bar to his Military Cross

and McLeod received his V.C. from the King.

When he died the Winnipeg Free Press wrote: "Alan McLeod was the finest flower of chivalry."

Appendix IV

Natalie Byrne (nee Bilenky)

I really did not know William Kurelek that well. True we were in the Ukrainian school and Sunday school together, but seldom engaged in conversation. At Isaac Newton he was in my sister's class and I always thought he had a crush on her. I don't want to be unkind but, to put it mildly, I thought he was "different". Now that's a young girl's impression. Whether he came around to my father's bookstore, I don't recall, but if he says so he must have done so.

Appendix V

Mrs. Pat Barnecki thinks it was Inspector Gordon who visited Victoria school. Inspector Gordon after the closing of the Manitou Normal School, visited suburban schools and schools in the Stonewall area. Few remember this pioneer educator former clergyman who made a fine contribution to education in Manitoba.

While principal of Manitou Normal School, he selected rural school teachers to act as models and critic teachers where students could get practice in teaching. This is what one teacher has to say about him:

"He was a very fine person, sensitive and perceptive. He gave me many pointers about teaching and after two visits, he knew every pupil in my room and was able to discuss them with the student teachers who came to such school by car in groups of five. I was fortunate to work with him for three years.**"

Appendix VI

Ukrainian Master Farmers

Dr. V. J. Kaye in quoting from P. J. Lazarovich's speech delivered to the Historical Society in Edmonton in 1957, provides this information (in summary):

- ...the Ukrainians have remained an agricultural people to this day;

*Mervin Farmer, *Burning of a Century*; Stonewall, MB, 1978.

**Mariel Ewanchuk (nee Smith) while engaged in Wood Bay School out of La Riviere.

- ...between 1930 and 1955...(they) won 12...championships in stock raising...(and) three national grain growing championships...in Chicago, the Ukrainians won 18 major awards in grain growing...William Skakun won the Oat King Crown twice;...Two Ukrainian farmers have won the Master Farmers Award.

* * * *

- It was the successes of Ukrainian farmers in Alberta, Pawlowski, Eliuk, Malenka, Skrupitsky, Fedlun, Salamandyk and Zazula - some of them from his home district in the Ukraine - that inspired Dmytro Kurelek to become Master Farmer of Manitoba.⁷

Appendix VII

THE WINNIPEG ART GALLERY in cooperation with THE ALPHA OMEGA WOMEN'S ALUMNAE

PATRONS

Carpathia Credit Union Society
 Ukrainian Business and Professional Men's Club
 Mr. and Mrs. V. J. Swystun
 Mr. and Mrs. John Cival
 Mr. and Mrs. M. Gosciniak
 Ukrainian Catholic Women's League of Manitoba
 Ukrainian National Home Association, Lesia Ukrainka Branch
 Ukrainian Reading Association (Private)
 Ukrainian Women's Association, Knyahynia Olha Branch
 Ukrainian-Canadian Committee (headquarters)

Dr. and Mrs. V. F. Buchynski, Dr. and Mrs. B. S. Bilko, Dr. and Mrs. J. Barwinsky, Prof. and Mrs. E. G. Berry
 Mr. and Mrs. R. Bryk, Dr. and Mrs. D. J. Charney, Dr. and Mrs. A. H. Gottick, Mr. Simon Dolban, Mr. and Mrs.
 G. Doyle, Mr. and Mrs. N. Dymart, Mr. and Mrs. Mel Guberman, Mr. and Mrs. A. W. Haug, Mr. and Mrs. E. Haig
 Mr. and Mrs. John M. Hawryluk, Mr. and Mrs. N. Hill, Dr. and Mrs. S. B. Hraschovetz, Huron Collection Agencies
 Mr. and Mrs. L. Irwin, Mr. and Mrs. J. G. Karnovich, Mr. and Mrs. M. Kepron, Mr.
 and Mrs. P. Kool, Mr. and Mrs. Bohdan Klynska, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Klynska, Mr. and Mrs. J. M. Koster
 Mr. and Mrs. Barry Krowchuk, Miss Mary O. Krett, Mr. and Mrs. Nestor Kropotekovich, Mr. and Mrs. J. Krol
 Dr. and Mrs. R. Laha, Labatt's Manitoba Brewery Ltd., Mrs. W. Lewicki, Mr. and Mrs. J. Melnyk, Mr. and Mrs.
 Mr. Michael Negrish, Mr. and Mrs. W. Sosaty, Mr. and Mrs. Steve Patrick, Mr. and Mrs. S.
 Rudchak, Mr. and Mrs. G. Ratski, Mr. and Mrs. A. Sorchuk, Dr. and Mrs. P. Shelton, Miss Nadia Skremetko
 Miss Anne Smigal, Mr. and Mrs. N. Swystun, Mrs. Wasyl Swystun, Mr. and Mrs. I. Symchych, Miss O. Ubryniak
 Senator and Mrs. Paul Yuryk, Prof. Radoslav Zak, Mr. and Mrs. G. Zewodski, Anonymous,
 Ladies Auxiliary of St. Andrew College, Society of Holy, Ukrainian Fraternal Society of Canada (Zoryna
 Puzich), Ukrainian Women's Association, Lesia Ukrainka, (Holy Trinity), Ukrainian National Home Association
 Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences (UVAN), Ukrainian Women's Organization, Winnipeg Branch.

⁷V. Kaye, *Early Ukrainian Settlements in Canada, 1895-1900*, The Ukrainian Research Foundation, University of Toronto Press 1964, pp. 359-60.

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Bill's mother, Mary Kurelek with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.
(Courtesy Kurelek Family)

Other books by the same author:

Pioneer Settlers: Ukrainians in the Dauphin Area 1896-1926.

Vita: A Ukrainian Community (a set of three books).

Spruce, Swamp and Stone: A History of the Pioneer Ukrainian Settlements in the Gimli Area.

Pioneer Profiles: Ukrainian Settlers in Manitoba.

Hawaiian Ordeal: Ukrainian Contract Workers 1897-1910.

Young Cossack, a novella.

Reflections and Reminiscences: Ukrainians in Canada 1892-1992.

Back cover:

William Kurelek's painting, *The Second House*

Courtesy estate of William Kurelek and The Isaac Gallery, Toronto.

