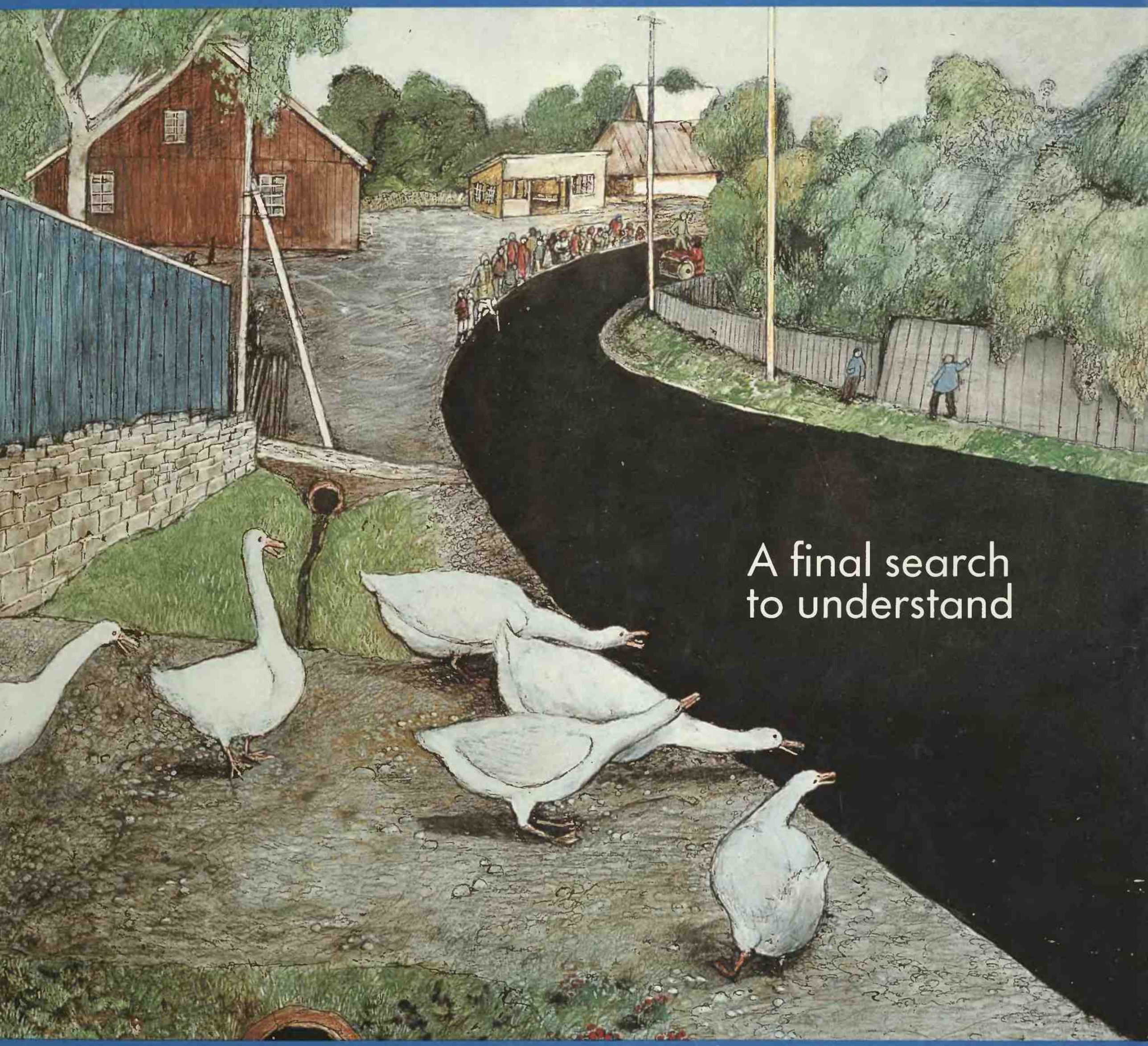
The last days and drawings of

William Kurelek

To My Father's Village



A final search to understand

William Kurelek was already Canada's best-known and most-loved painter at the time of his death in 1977. Since then the public has shown an ever-increasing fascination with his art and life. The two were inextricably interwoven – perhaps never more so than in these, the 100 drawings and six paintings done during the last two months of his life.

They represent an extraordinary act of determination. Kurelek knew he was seriously ill, but he would let nothing stand in the way of the chance to return to his father's village in the Ukraine where he had spent four hours in 1970. It had taken him nearly eight years, he wrote at the end of August, "to get that special visa. That's why I'm going in even if it kills me." When he returned to Toronto a month later, he was so sick he could barely stand, but he brought with him the incredible quantity of art that makes up this book. He continued to work on the drawings during the next month in hospital until a few days before his death from cancer on November 3. He was fifty years old.

Kurelek's obsession with returning to the village of Borivtsi in Bukovyna was, as he expressed it, to know whether he was more Ukrainian or Canadian. His father had emigrated from that village, as had the parents of his Canadian-born mother. But there was more here than a curiosity about ancestors. It was also his lifelong search to understand the father he had grown up both hating and admiring.

The village had a history as troubled as the Ukraine itself. Even after serfdom was abolished there was no real freedom, as outsiders imposed their rule and languages: the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I, Romania until the Second World War and finally, from the 1940s, the USSR. The villagers had survived much as the elder Kurelek would survive on the Canadian prairies during the Depression: by work, determination and refusal to despair.

In his father's time almost everything in the village was made by hand: household utensils, building and farm tools, musical instruments and clothing. As Kurelek draws them here, so lovingly, one feels he is reliving the experience of the craftsmen. He also managed to complete six paintings and a series of sketches for future landscapes. Perhaps, as friends who knew them both have commented, father and son did not differ in strength of character.

All of Kurelek's text comes from letters written to his wife, Jean, during the 1970 trip and the photographs show the affectionate bond he established with his relatives.

A Tundra Book

The last days and drawings of William Kurelek

People, especially officials, keep asking me, "Well, have you decided now, are you Ukrainian or Canadian?" The answer is not a simple yes or no. It is that I've found out how to find out. Things happened to me along the way in bits and pieces – passing through the Boiko village in the foothills of the Carpathians, visiting my father's village. So this is how I'll know.

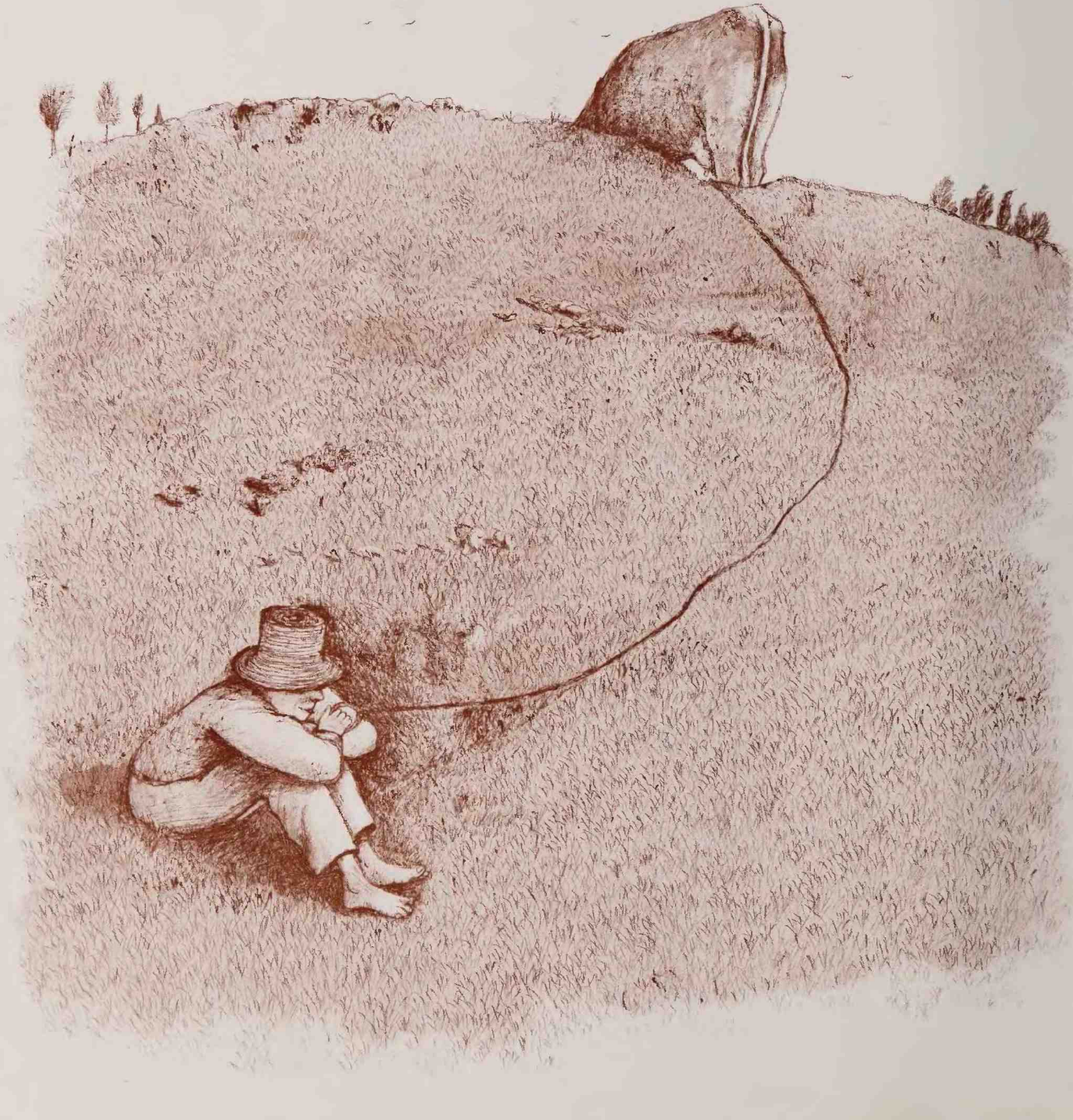
Let the authorities let me come back to spend six weeks painting the real (to me) Ukrainian people in their day-to-day life, not the townspeople, not the intelligentsia. I notice I feel so little a part of them even though they are hospitable and likable. Those peasants, however, that we met in the collective farm's fields, the vast rolling fields, speak to me as an artist.

And so I propose – let me live with these people, dress as they dress, eat their food, sleep on the *pich*. Let me wander freely from village to village in Bukovyna, Boikivshchyna, Hutsulshchyna, as Van Gogh did in Holland and France. This is the real Ukraine and if it speaks louder to me than the farmlands and life of the farm people in Canada, then will I know that I am Ukrainian and not Canadian.

William Kurelek
May 23, 1970

Haystacks are like agricultural fingerprints, different from country to country, sometimes from area to area. These conical haycocks are typical of the countryside around Borivtsi, the Carpathian foothills village in the province of Bukovyna where Kurelek's father was born.

In letters to his wife, Kurelek described the countryside on the way to his father's village: "Along the roadside were planted trees and peasants pasturing their single cows on ropes tied to their horns; and the jackdaws and crows and ravens. Ravens' nests are quite something to see, big blobs filling tall trees over the road. Near the villages or towns were chickens or troops of ducks or geese."



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To My Father's Village

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The artwork in the Estate of the late William Kurelek is represented by the Isaacs Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.

Transparencies of the paintings reproduced on pages 17, 29 and 39 are courtesy of the Niagara Falls Art Gallery, "The Passion of Christ," William Kurelek Collection. The original paintings were donated by the artist to the Association for Cultural Relations with Ukrainians Abroad (Ukraina Society) in Kiev.

Transliteration of Ukrainian generally follows the modified Library of Congress system.

Forty of the drawings along with three paintings are being exhibited at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario, during the summer of 1988.

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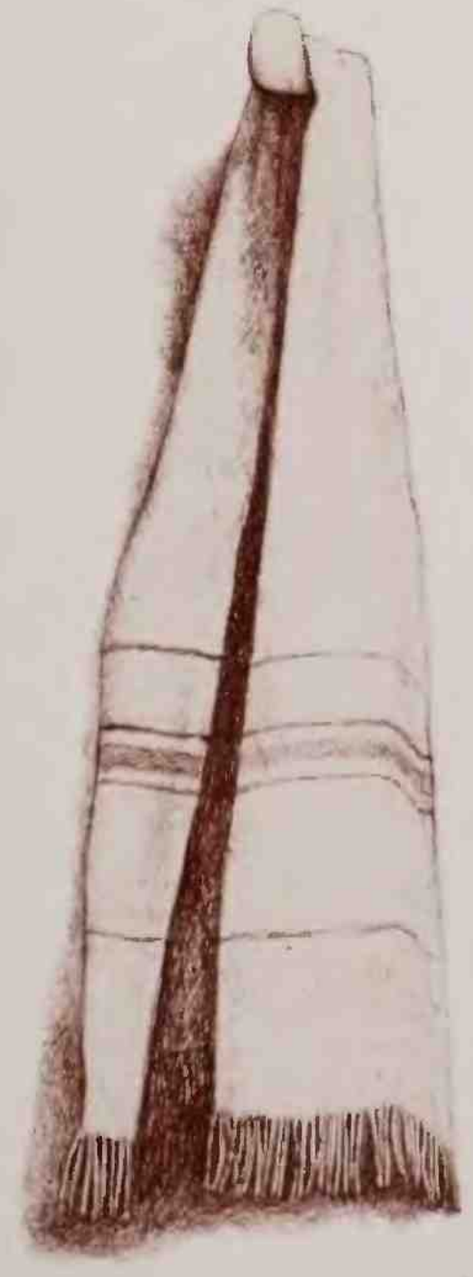
Introduction

In Kurelek's drawings, commonplace objects are icons. Like the towel here, they transcend the ordinary. At the end of the 19th century, a similar towel, striped, plain or embroidered with intricate designs, hung near the water bucket at the door of every village home so those who entered could first wash and dry their hands. It also had a ceremonial use, worn at weddings over one arm, or over a shoulder and tied around the waist.

The artist probably discovered this towel in the Museum of Folk Architecture and Rural Life on the outskirts of Kiev. On his 1977 trip, he spent some time there sketching the old objects because his father's village of Borivtsi was changing. Old buildings, thatched roofs, old wooden objects and technology were being replaced as rapidly as the Soviet economy permitted. But amid the handmade wooden implements in the museum he was returning to his father's youth.

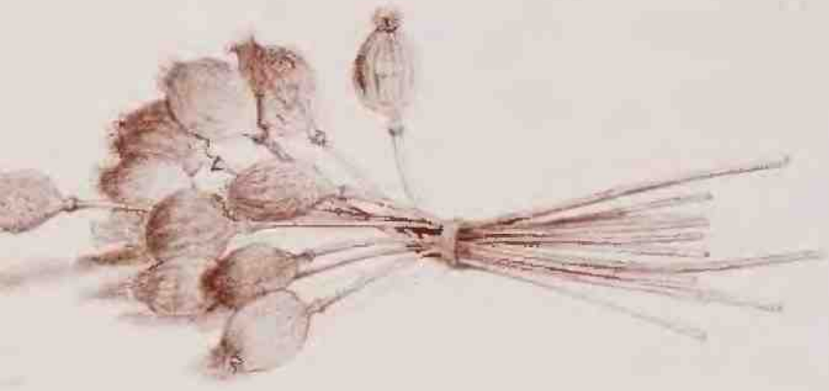


It mattered so much to William Kurelek whether he was more Ukrainian or Canadian that as soon as he returned from his 1970 trip to the Ukraine where he had been allowed only four hours in his father's village, he applied for a visa to go back. He reapplied each year for the next seven years. When permission finally came, he was less than three months away from death, and even though cancer had not yet been diagnosed, he seems to have sensed it. To me, his publisher, he wrote on August 30, 1977, that it had taken him so long to get the Soviet visa, "I'm going in even if it kills me."

Why was he so obsessed about returning? Here was more than the curiosity of a child of the New World about his roots in the Old. His relationship with his father may explain it. Most children want to understand their parents in order to forgive. Kurelek forgave his father first. He did so as a great leap of religious faith, following the command to love, to turn from bitterness and despair. Was the son now trying to find reasons for that love? How would painting and drawing his father's village help him? Why did he want to know it precisely as it had existed in his father's childhood?

Kurelek left for the Ukraine on September 3. When he returned to Toronto three weeks later, he was so ill he could hardly stand. But he brought with him the extraordinary artistic output that appears in this book: 100 drawings and three paintings (another three completed on the trip were left as gifts in the Ukraine). It was an incredible feat of will over physical weakness. Six days after coming home he was in hospital. He died five weeks later on November 3, 1977. He was 50 years old.

The art done in the village presents an almost idyllic picture in contrast to the horrors that transpired there during his father's boyhood. Kurelek's autobiographical writings describe conditions during World War I when "the front lines between the Russian and Austrian armies seesawed back and forth through Borivtsi. Villagers were killed or maimed but all the Kureleks *survived* [Kurelek's emphasis]. My father used to tell stories about the brutality and black comic confusion of war. I see him, nine years old, loading corpses onto a wagon. He had searched in the cornfields for the corpses; and they were easy to find. Dying men refused to die and left their trail of blood and trampled cornstalks. . . . So my father, with only three years of school, had to become a man."



Nostalgia in a poppy pod for all the home-grown, homemade foods that nourished man before the 20th century. In addition to dairy products and pork, the villagers ate wild fowl, rabbits, fish and pigeons. Chickens and geese were raised for their eggs. All was pickled, cured and smoked to preserve it for future consumption. Root vegetables, garlic, mushrooms and a variety of herbs were used for cooking. Dyes came from some herbs. Poppies provided oil and the ubiquitous poppyseed of Ukrainian baking.

The raw will to survive that took Dmytro (''Metro'') Kurelek through his childhood would be needed after his arrival in Canada in 1923. He was only 19 and he came to a West headed for its own disasters: drought, locusts, dust storms, crop failures, with the Great Depression as backup destroyer to anything Nature missed. If this resulted in a harsh, abusive father that young William could never please, it also created an admirably hardworking, hopeful and resilient man, determined to feed and shelter his family no matter the cost. What else might have gone into making this complex individual? Did the answer lie in that little village in the Carpathian foothills?

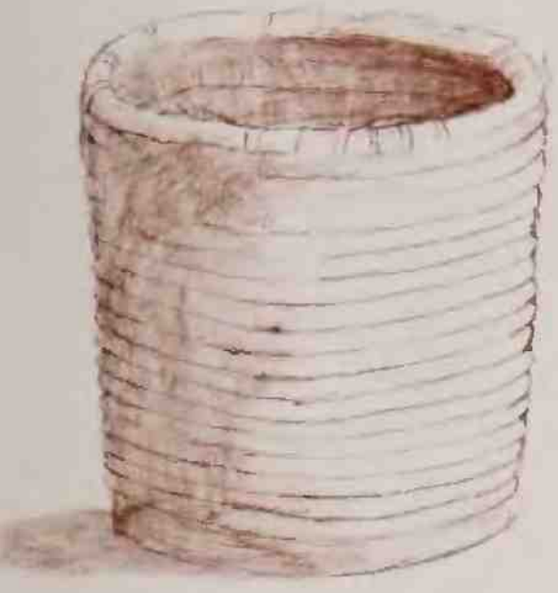
In his father's childhood, almost everything in the village was made by hand. Kurelek had long been fascinated by similar objects brought or copied by immigrants. Ten years earlier he had drawn some in pioneer museums in Western Canada. The community where his father first settled in Alberta was named Borivtsi after the home village and tried to duplicate the life there. Kurelek also seems to be trying to duplicate that village as he draws it, re-experiencing the feel of a dish or broom coming into being, sharing the creative act with the original craftsman. This was the other side of misery, the way art makes life bearable. The makers must have forgotten for a time at least the brutal world around them.

Here was an artist capable of vast landscapes and crowded murals, devoting his final energy to drawing simple artifacts, even continuing to work on them in hospital as long as he could hold a pen or pencil. Did they represent a softer village where no matter how great the destruction, people used whatever was at hand to start again, making objects that were at once useful and beautiful? Kurelek had written of the time the family farm on the prairies had been wiped out by grasshoppers, how his father had gathered the family around him and promised they would start over again next year. Might not that father also have a softer side?

Ebbitt Cutler, editor

Note: Nearly all Kurelek's text in the book comes from letters written to his wife, Jean, during his first trip to the Ukraine in 1970. The photographs are also mostly from 1970, with a few exceptions as indicated. All the drawings and paintings come from the last trip in 1977.

Diary of a Ukrainian Trip



Everything the farmer owned, from his food, clothing, tools and utensils, to his home and farm buildings, came from the land, like this straw basket.

Kurelek's 1970 tour was organized by Mykola and Ola Kolankiwsky, who had just purchased his series "Passion of Christ according to St. Matthew" for the art gallery they planned in Niagara Falls. Slides of the series and the NFB film Kurelek *were shown on the tour. Ed.*

Beginning May 17, 1970 [Vienna]

Dear Jean,

Well, I worked all night till 4:00 a.m. on the two letters, and it sure feels good to get them out of the way. I posted them just now. People have been after me to eat breakfast, but I have resisted so far. I'm offering this up for Ukraine – what little help that would contribute. The Ukrainian Mass is off, as it begins at 10:00, so one of the ladies and I are going now to an Austrian Catholic Mass. Strange how it got light so early here. Even at 4:00 a.m. I could already make out plainly the building opposite my window.

Later at the [Vienna] Airport

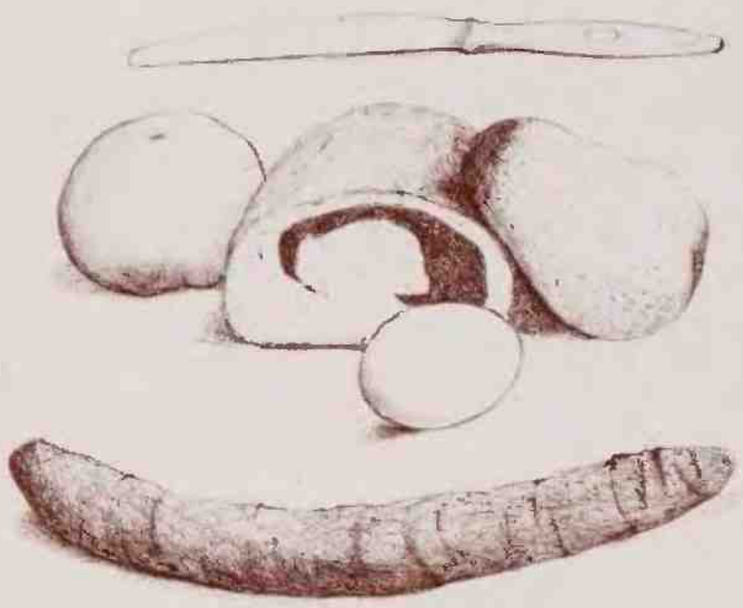
It was some adventure I had getting to Mass this morning. I couldn't find Mr. K [Kolankiwsky] or the lady, and the whole group began to persecute me for no breakfast. So I fled outdoors and began wandering about the streets, seeking a Catholic Church. I found a Lutheran one, then began asking people in German, and it worked! Only I got into a High Mass and couldn't stay all the way to Communion. It was beautiful. A full-fledged orchestral Mass by Schubert (I think). The sermon was emotionally delivered – almost like Hitler's speeches. But of course I couldn't follow it any more than French. I had to ask directions in German again before I found the hotel and the group, anxiously looking for me by the bus which took us to the airport. Now there is a long wait, unpredictable by Western standards, for the Soviet plane. It's there standing on the tarmac, but when will we be invited to board it?

Now we are on the Aeroflot plane and have had our first Soviet meal, which I liked more than any other air meal I've ever had. Something different – *"ours"* – about it. Perhaps the all-pervading odor on board plane helped – BORSCH. I left the caviar, however. The hostess is a pretty petite Ukrainka in a typically Western hostess uniform. All signs are in Russian and English.

The land below is well camouflaged with a cloud bank.

Evening

Well, here I am in Kiev, 11:00 p.m., in Hotel Ukraina, sitting at a desk in my hotel room. Everything is so much more Western than I expected. It's a beautiful city. I just returned from a walk around the block, all by my lonesome. We had supper in a half-Western-style nightclub. What bothers me so far is the degree of Russification, e.g., I have the room radio on now, and there's only one station – in Russian. Nice to see no commercial advertising. However, I gave the group leaders a fit when I was caught with nine rubles (it's illegal) on me, entering the country at the airport. Mr. K says he warned us against it but I don't remember . . . and besides, if I'd known it was wrong, I would not have declared it. Our Soviet guides took us by bus via a lot of parks to the city. My painting, which I've had to carry all the way, has finally been taken from me, thank goodness, and will be presented sometime tomorrow. There's one more snag here. The electric plugs are different from ours, so I can't shave.



"Bukovynian snacks," notes Kurelek – sausage, egg, fruit and what appears to be a loaf filled with poppyseed. The normal midday meal may have included some of these: milk, yogurt or buttermilk; thickly sliced bread spread with bacon fat; perhaps a piece of smoked fish or meat; a vegetable or a fruit.

May 18

Well, that was a big day! To me, guided tours are a bore, this one no less. But I was able to observe and absorb all kinds of things that weren't on the agenda. I got away without breakfast and supper, but had to eat lunch, a large one, in their prize tourist restaurant. The food was so tasty and Ukrainian (something like mother used to make) that I asked the waitress to pass a note of thanks to the chef.

The first place the bus took us was to Sofiskyi Sobor, the leading Kiev church, now a museum. Everywhere in the city there are posters glorifying Lenin – LENIN, LENIN, LENIN. The next place we visited was the Shevchenko* [Memorial] Museum, with room after room of paintings and drawings by him and about him. This I liked – not the guided tour – but seeing the whole Shevchenko story that way before me. The last room had lots of people waiting in it, and T.V. limelights and microphones, and Mr. K and I presented my painting *The Spirit of Shevchenko in Canada*, the Minnedosa farm scene, to the director of the museum. It was so embarrassing that all I could say was thank you. Whether they will actually hang it I don't know. There is a small exhibit there from Canada, but it's by Communist Ukrainian-Canadians.

After lunch we stopped at Pecherska Lavra, also a monastery made over into a museum, and this tour of antique riches was dead boring.

*Taras Shevchenko (1814-61) is known as the bard of the Ukraine. Born a peasant serf, he rose to fame as Ukraine's greatest literary figure. His life story typifies the struggle of the Ukrainian nation during centuries of serfdom and oppression, a subject of many of his poems. Shevchenko spent 10 years in exile in Central Asia, and although he was never free from police surveillance on his release, he continued to write about injustice and his beloved Ukraine.

My architect friend put it in a nutshell when he peered out through a window and remarked, "I'd like to jump out of this prison." I'm in a dilemma about whether to go on tomorrow's trip to Shevchenko's birthplace. It's not obligatory. I'll ask permission to do a painting of it. Maybe that's the solution.

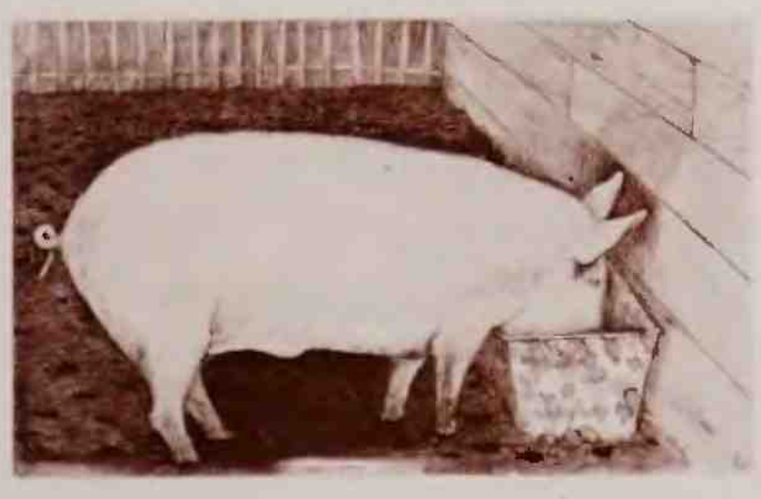
"A cat in the yard of my father's old home," wrote Kurelek in his caption for this drawing. On his Ukrainian trips, the artist spoke only Ukrainian and wrote the captions on many of these drawings in that language.

Among the livestock in the district were sheep, cows and pigs, though it was rare for a village farmer to own each type of animal. As this solid exemplar of his species suggests, pork was the main meat in Borivtsi's diet. Fresh pork was normally available two or three times a year for holiday meals or wedding celebrations. But despite the feeling of plenty this drawing exudes, poorer families sometimes had none for long stretches.

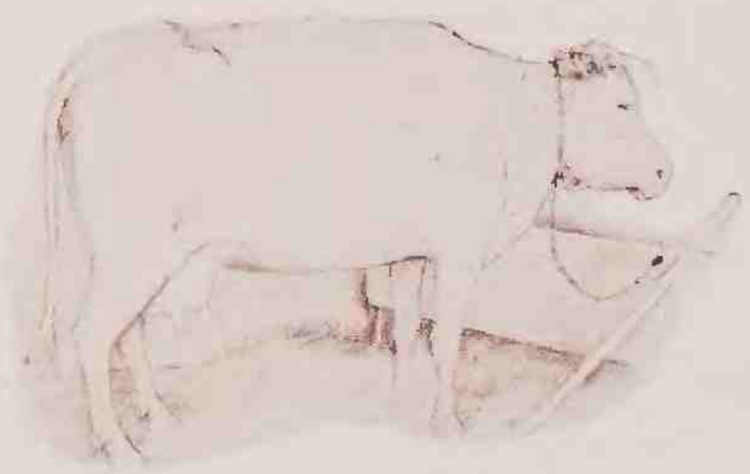
At seven, a group of us went to *La Traviata* in the Ukrainian language. It was well done. The theater is rather decrepit. The floors and seats creak, so it interfered with the performance. On the walk there a young boy tried to sell us Lenin pins or chewing gum. In the theater a student at the opera tried hard to strike up an acquaintance with one of our girls. Failing that, he latched onto me and I sat on the bench outside the hotel talking with him afterward. To my surprise, he began to complain of all kinds of shortages, blaming it on the country's economy geared to "defense" spending. He was hungry for Western rock music, wanted blue jeans like Western students wear ("more durable," he said) and revealed that though students seem well enough dressed, it's a deceptive façade, for they only have one shirt and one T-shirt to their name. He begged me for a shirt, so although I was afraid it might look suspicious to the police, I went up to my room and brought him back my orange one. This room we're in is high ceilinged and old. No toilet paper, except . . .

Tuesday, 19th

This was Shevchenko Day. I spent the early morning avoiding breakfast by sorting out my St. Matthew slides. I just finished when we had to board the bus. As I was saying about our room, it has an old worn leather charm about it, a high ceiling, plenty of room, with two single beds in it. The coverlet is like in Vienna, all included in one sheet bag with a big hole in the top. The bathroom is the most primitive, however (just as "Travel in the USSR" articles warned): no plug for the sink, no toilet paper, poor light, no razor plug and water-bugs.



This was my first view of the Ukrainian countryside. For three hours the bus sped southward through village after village, and by collective farms. There was greenery everywhere and plenty of straw-roofed houses besides tin and tar, chickens, cows in the road, *babas* [grandmas] in *khustkas* [kerchiefs]. People didn't seem to be filling any Stakhanovite quotas. All kinds of construction sites, but not too much evidence of actual labor. Caterpillar tractors seemed to do most, either pushing earth or pulling farm machinery. The road was



At the beginning of the 20th century the average Borivtsi family owned a cow, but beef was hardly ever eaten. It was not unknown for a farmer to harness his cow for field work. But she was chiefly valued for her milk from which the peasants produced butter, buttermilk and a variety of other dairy products and cheese. These included a form of cottage cheese, a "sour milk" that can be compared to "curds and whey" and *budz*, all of which, at one time, were reproduced by Ukrainian settlers in Canada.

broken and narrow, like in India, some pieces cobbled, and little traffic, mostly utility.

At the Shevchenko monument we walked across a large bulldozed sandy area and then up a long flight of wooden stairs. . . . While I sketched the Dnieper below, the film crew worked on me. In his "Last Testament," Shevchenko said,

When I die bury me in my beloved Ukraine
Where I can see and hear the mighty Dnieper sigh and roar.

Today you hear the roar of tractors. There was a huge cross originally there for Shevchenko's grave. I asked the tape-recorder man how come it was knocked off. He hemmed and hawed, but it was evident by the year 1922 that it was destroyed by the sacrilegious Bolsheviks.

In the town of Kaniv itself we visited a church dating to the late 12th century. It's boring to see the restoration of a church into a museum. Another woman and I began questioning a worker about the Ukrainian language, and he was delighted to meet us, his first foreigners, but we didn't get far because the rest of the party, officials and all, came up just then. We continued on another question.

Wednesday, May 20

I arose early, at 4:00 a.m., to pack and take the bus to the station. There were soldiers all over the place. I've not been to a country with so many. There were many poor people because this is where the peasants gather and separate. I didn't get enough sleep, but Mr. K said he'd pinch me if I dared doze off. After all, it's for my benefit that he fought to take the train, so we could see the land.

One of the cities we passed through was – you'd never guess – Vinnytsia, which I did a painting of from photos and descriptions. There was a lot of forest first, much of it planted. The sun was breaking through curdled clouds as in my Shevchenko Minnedosa painting. The vast rolling fields; people, mostly women, bending over working, probably hoeing sugar beets. Here and there were herds of red or red-and-white cattle. But mostly you saw individual old men, women or boys and their private uncollectivized cow with, or without, a rope lead. The same with their private plots, either back of their cottage or on public land alongside the railroad, which they were tending and cultivating.

The breakfast we had was tastier and in an even more modern dining room than on the Rapido – Toronto to Montreal. We get the best of everything. I'm still vague about when or how I reach Borivtsi, but I hear that the film crew is going to follow me there, so maybe that's some guarantee.

Now we've crossed the Zbruch, a minor river, more like a creek. It's the old boundary between Russia and Poland, when each had a piece of our country. And the K's say once you're over the line you begin seeing lots of geese. And how right – flock after flock, young ones, old ones, all over the place, in and around villages. What a lot of paintable, quaint scenes there are here! I'll have to come back some day. Halychyna, the K's say, is more villaged than Greater Ukraine [*Velyka Ukraina*]. This train runs from Moscow to Prague carrying soldiers on leave as well as passengers. Here there are churches visible – the Revolution didn't come here first, just the Red Army in the Second World War. The women just asked our Soviet guide Raya if they could snap pictures, and she said yes.

Now we're in Lviv and what a difference from Kiev. The whole town looks just run down and impoverished like Mexico. And many more people. Our hotel is Hotel Lviv, also more run down. Our room, however, is smaller but nice, and there is toilet paper but it's like newsprint. Still no plug for the sink.

"Ducks in the time of old Borivtsi," wrote Kurelek of a vignette that must have remained much the same over the decades.

We had a nice welcoming committee. I sat with a party official on the bus from the station as another head of something or other gave a lovely speech about the simple things of Ukraine, such as older people remember, like pasturing geese barefoot or being serenaded by the nightingale. We were showered with greetings from all sides; everyone seemed glad to see us. Mr. and Mrs. K kept being interrupted and pulled this way and that by intelligentsia, and I was introduced to so many that it was all a blur to me. I found out things I had wrong notions about. Painters are not supported by the state. They may work on public projects for pay, but they have to rely on sales, and those are to the state if the state chooses them, just as I do. But artists are artists, here as much as elsewhere.

As soon as we got into the hotel Mrs. K invited me (in case I'm not here tomorrow) to see an exhibit – a beautiful thing in fabrics of all kinds – of Hutsul life and legends. They glowed in the somber setting of the dingy and decrepit museum. We left for this show with Mr. K still arguing with officials about my getting to my father's village –

it looks doubtful now. My cousins have been waiting for me for two days already. I guess by now they've given up hope. Next we attended an opening in a place called Architect's House – a small show of sculpture, semi-abstract. And the place was jammed with well-wishers and art-lovers. My head was in a whirl. Next we visited another artist's show – a private viewing. He was an unhappy man; he latched onto me for unburdening himself. He wanted to give me one of his works but they were too large, even rolled up.

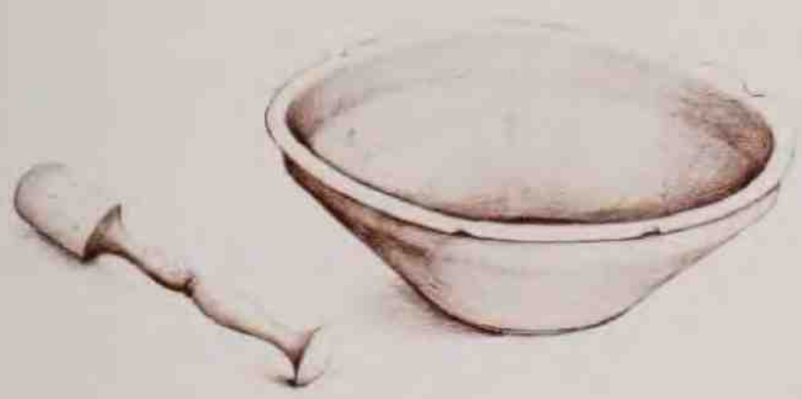
We had a wild ride back to the hotel in an old jeep of one official. It was raining as we rode over the cobbled streets. There have been heavy rains and flooding in the Ukraine this spring. I went to bed instead of having supper and was wakened just as I was dozing off by one of our women asking me for rubles. I've not spent a thing so far except three rubles for the opera. The banks were closed for her and the only place money can be changed here is in the state banks.

Thursday, 21st

I got up shortly after six. That's 10 hours sleep after yesterday's three and a half. Yesterday the K's said they'd pinch me if I fell asleep looking at the Ukrainian countryside so I stayed awake, sometimes only by standing at the train window. Now I went looking for a church. There were plenty of the ones I noticed yesterday. The Polish ones are turned into museums or storehouses. The Ukrainian ones are decrepit but functioning. I asked several people for directions, and they knew where the churches were and answered in pure Ukrainian. That's what I like about this part – people speak Ukrainian. I asked an old lady standing at the closed door of one church how come the door wasn't open. "Don't you know the law in these parts? Churches aren't allowed to be open before 7:30." I came back a little later after waiting in the park under a statue of Lenin. The Lenin Museum is right next to the church. There was the church open, and people coming in to pray and some of them making all the old obeisances like kissing icons and mumbling their prayers and making large signs of the cross. I prayed and sat awhile, waiting for Mass. A *babushka* ["old woman"] came up and asked me if I were waiting for the confession. I said, "No, Mass." "There's one at eight before Our Lord and one at nine before Our Lady." I decided since I may be expected to go to the village, I'd better not risk staying that long. I'll be back tomorrow though, since I know now that breakfast is at eight and excursions begin at nine.

The nightingale on the left, the lark on the right. The drawing is unfinished.

On his Ukrainian trip Kurelek was often reminded of his Alberta childhood. The roost depicted here was reproduced exactly by Ukrainian settlers in Canada and would have been a familiar sight.



Kurelek labels this 19th-century bowl both "Family Bowl" and "The Bowl of Life." The *maister*, or master craftsman, would probably have carved it, along with the *zamysnyk*, or dish shelf, to hold it. In early times the family ate from a single bowl so the shelf would hardly have been overcrowded.

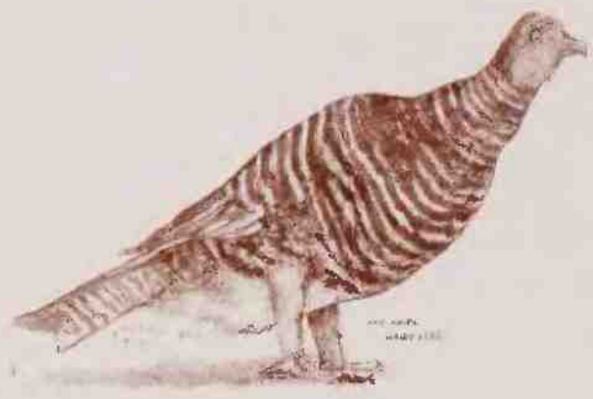
In the late 19th century, every successful village had a *maister*, who made most utensils and furnishings. When it came to other sorts of containers, the *bondar*, or cooper, built any kind of vessel needed, from the smallest milk pitcher to the largest brewery vat. Everyone had to be good at bartering; peasant farmers found it much easier to pay with goods in kind than with cash. Many Ukrainian settlements in Western Canada continued to use such craftsmen.

I went up to my room and began working on my painting, determined that if no one came to ask me to the village I'd at least get some work done. None of this ordeal of guided tours for me. But I WASN'T going to get off so easily. It turned out – no village visit, but a forced tour. Mr. K came to tell me that the officials would be offended, and when I joined the group, to my surprise, there was almost no one present. All had gone to see their relatives. It was now my duty to act as a fill-in.

The remaining few were glum. And soon more trouble came. Stephan, the architect, began to openly laugh at and make sarcastic remarks to the Intourist guide Victoria. It was embarrassing; a very insecure feeling. "That's the town hall where a Red Army corporal climbed up to plant the Red flag when Lviv was liberated." "And he didn't fall down from there?" asked Stephan. "I see you're not happy that Ukraine was liberated from the Fascists, Mr. Stephan," she retorted angrily. I thought the K's would side with her and discipline him. Instead, a little later when we visited St. George, the archbishopric cathedral (functioning, although, under a Red archbishop), the K's began to argue with Victoria too about Archbishop Sheptytsky, a very popular saintly archbishop who died mysteriously in 1944. Things looked black when Victoria took Stephan and me to change money at the bank.

After dinner (the women in our group are complaining about the enormous meals we get and several of them are too fat already), I dutifully turned up for the rest of the tour for the day. I managed to get a card off to you then, while waiting. We went to the art gallery and I had a wonderful half-hour (I had to have some break, you know), first seeing the icons and then late Ukrainian paintings. The first half was deadly boring. The rest of the afternoon and the evening were partly an ordeal, partly interesting. Mrs. K took me and a few others with her to several artists' studios. We sat around while the artist would bring out his works for our criticism or praises. We were at four or five places, all in decrepit apartments like my Cabbagetown one was.

Oh, yes, I forgot, we were taken to a T.V. studio before lunch. It was embarrassing because the officials strung the usual party line and I knew it fell on impatient ears. And the films were so contrived that I couldn't help squirming. And we were expected to applaud. I got several gifts. There's talk of my showing the St. Matthew slides and the Kurelek film here too. As I was checking in my coat and briefcase



The artist thought the prairie chicken was probably familiar to his father during his Ukrainian boyhood.

"The chicken house in dad's yard," Kurelek called this drawing. The chicken houses may have remained unchanged, but by the time Kurelek saw his father's village, more than half the houses were new and no longer only one story high. There were separate kitchens, electricity – and more than one bedroom! And there were buildings unknown to his ancestors – an eight-grade school, a library and a local sports field.

at lunch, the receiver said, "You from Toronto? Well, call at . . . when you get back and tell my brother to write. I don't want anything from him, just that he'd write." I promised to.

On our visits to the artists there were two carloads of us. I sat in the back of the open jeep with several of the other young people. Some passersby seemed amused at the sight of us hurtling along, though most people here look rather grim. One Hutsul painter and graphic (as they call them) turned out to know Dr. Ostafichuk who owns some of my work in Oshawa. And everywhere we go someone seems to know someone over there. That's because emigration was allowed from Poland but not Greater Ukraine under Soviet Russia. And why were so many of our party missing this morning? I saw several of their relatives. At casual glance, people look well enough dressed here, but when you see them up close and together with their relatives, you can see the difference. We see colored and Asiatic students here once in a while. They are on exchange programs no doubt, and to them, coming from much worse conditions, this must look good.

Friday, 22nd

Still no village trip even though our Kiev journalist guide, who has the necessary connections, has arrived this morning. That's three days they've been discussing my case. So now I'm on the bus with the rest (plus some of their relatives), going up to the Carpathian Mountains. I went to church this morning instead of breakfast. So far I've managed to limit myself to one meal a day, most days. Part of the way through the service I realized it was Orthodox – by the Orthodox cross. Actually it's hard to tell in these parts because the Ukrainian Catholics have been forced to acknowledge the Orthodox headship. Mr. K confirmed it just now. The Greek Catholic Church has been wiped out, although their priests now serving in the Orthodox Church still have power to give confession and Holy Communion.

Outside Lviv is some beautiful, hilly, paintable country. Some time later, about where we cross the Dniester River, it turns flat and less interesting. And now I see the foggy outline of the Carpathian Mountains. All along the route you see men and women laboring together. In the cities you see young women operating pneumatic drills and driving streetcars. If you want to see real sex equality, this is the place!

Besides roosters like the one depicted here, chickens and ducks scrabble about Kurelek's drawings and he drew cows, pigs, birds and a cat. But in his re-creation of the village of his father's time there is only one horse, and that only a detail in a landscape. On his trip he did see teams of horses. Still, historians confirm that in earlier times the number of horses in Borivtsi was low and other villages owned even fewer. As the villagers' small landholdings could be tended without them, most peasants regarded horses as a costly luxury. Keeping them meant setting aside too much of the little land a peasant owned to grow feed. And should one need a field plowed, a wealthier farmer, whose property was extensive enough to justify owning horses, could be prevailed on – for a price.

5:00 p.m.

Now we're on our way back from the crest of the Carpathians where we had dinner in a tourist restaurant. Beyond that is *Zakarpattia* (''beyond the Carpathian'') Ukraine. The dinner took two hours. I'm furious with myself. Although the scenery was breathtaking from the crest, it was so vast that it was hopeless putting it on my two small panels. Had I known dinner was going to be two hours I could easily have walked back to the Boiko village and done it. It was three hours really, since, as one of my fellow travelers laughingly pointed out, ''That's socialist order for you. Two-thirds of the restaurant empty and we have to wait till that group ahead of us has finished eating.''

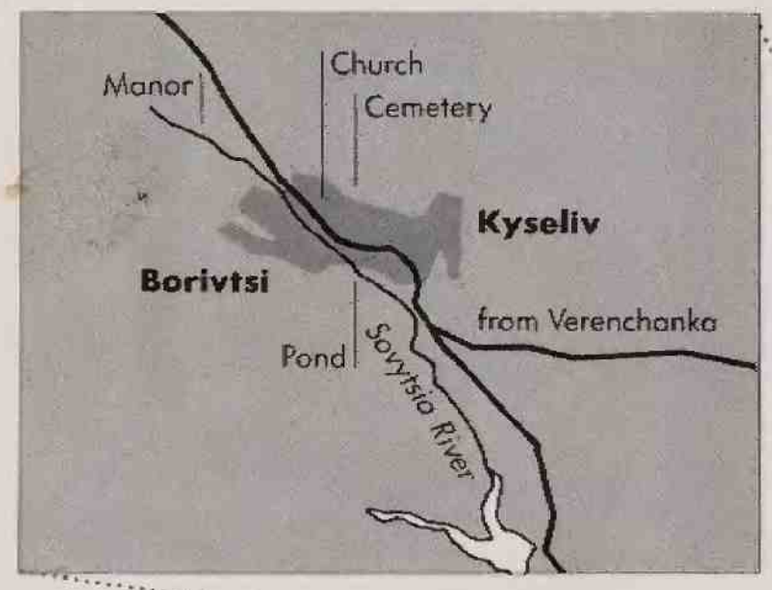
It has rained off and on all day and it's chilly up here in the rarer atmosphere. There was a lot of drinking, laughing and joking. The sculptor [Emanuel Mysko] whose Soviet war memorial we examined this morning in Lviv downed four bottles of vodka with the help of those around him. I was never one for jollity of this kind, and knowing what I was missing in painting outside in the villages doubled my discomfiture.

There are delightful, paintable subjects – steep, straw, gabled roofs; a row of chickens seated on a veranda rail beside a row of people; a cat decorating a roof end; a white gobbler strutting about; all kinds of old wagons, horsedrawn; a small company of workers frying something on a fire beside their truck on the shoulder of the road (Lenin must be turning over in his grave); the sides of a house warmed by rows of firewood. These are Boiko people, not the real mountain people, the Hutsuls. Dad remembers the Boikos coming to Bukovyna, his province, as farm laborers. Their country doesn't give them enough income. Now we see their marvelous wooden churches, but in each village there is an *Agitpunkt,* a Communist propagation center with its banners and blazoned revolutionary texts. Along the roadside and on workshops and on public buildings is *''Lenin, Lenin, Lenin''* and *''Forward to Communism.''* You probably know that communism is not yet. It's the future, natural, unregimented society when socialism has run its course and withered away.

I had another talk with the K's across the back of their seat. ''Do you begin to feel yourself Ukrainian or still Canadian?''

In his attempt to re-create and penetrate the world of his ancestors, Kurelek enlisted even the badger seen here, a farmer's pest common in the Carpathian foothills. See the badger trap on page 44.

When Kurelek returned from the 1970 trip, he told friends how astonished he was that so little seemed to have changed from his father's descripton of how it was nearly 50 years before: the poverty, the deeply rutted mud roads, the two-room houses invaded by the poultry. The villagers, however, now worked on a collective sugar-beet farm. In 1977 the roads to the village were as muddy and rutted as ever, but the stretch through the village had been newly paved with asphalt. The black strip was so incongruous he painted it, joining the squawking geese in mocking its ugliness. He often used animals to make ironic social comment. Always cynical about the dehumanizing effect of machines, he painted the Mechanized Baba *(p. 39) to ridicule overdependence on technical solutions. Even his use of the word* baba *in the title, suggesting grandmotherly care, emphasizes the anomaly. Ed.*



The village map (above) is based on a 19th-century Austrian map.

Geese Hissing at the New Asphalt Road
in the Village of Borivtsi

William Kurelek

Tundra Books

Scarecrow in the
Yard of My Father's Old Home

Tundra Books

On the road

Flax shown here, and hemp, rye, oats, wheat, sunflowers, corn and barley were typical field crops in the Borivtsi district. They were grown because they were hardy, multi-purpose crops. Cereal grains provided straw for other parts of the farm operation. Rye straw was especially valued as roofing thatch. Sunflowers yielded oil and the remaining crushed, cake-shaped by-product was used for feed. Flax and hemp also provided oil and their fibers could be made into cloth.

Kurelek first noted the ravens on the way to his father's village. See his comments on page 2. Their nests in tall trees along the road were spectacular.

Saturday, May 23, 1970

This has got to be it – one of the biggest days of my life. This is the day I visited *The Village*. Talk about the agony and the ecstasy. I'm glad it's over, but I know that in days to come I'll be glad I took the plunge.

It all began last night as soon as we returned from the Carpathian trip. Mr. K came to me all excited, and announced that Kiev had okayed my trip. We went to the Intourist office and there I paid $77 for a taxi to and from the village. Actually Mr. K paid it. . . . Then downstairs, to the Carpathian restaurant where we had a Hutsul-type meal à la gourmet. We finished with champagne – two glasses – which made me giddy. Funny how vodka, which is like pure alcohol, doesn't do it. That made it 12:30, and to bed. And then I couldn't sleep well because of my excitement.

The bell girl rang me up at 5:30. At 6:00 I was ready. Two "journalists" were waiting for me, and that was part of the agony – not knowing if they'd try to convert me as provocateurs do, or whether they'd cut the trip short if they saw I was hearing or seeing too much, or probe my own political views, or incriminate the people I met in the village who did not say the right thing. I almost felt like backing down, especially because as soon as we left Lviv, it began to rain cats and dogs. It's a five-hour trip each way and the road is narrow and pot-holed. (Fortunately there's not much traffic in the Ukraine.) And the taxi driver didn't look all too happy.

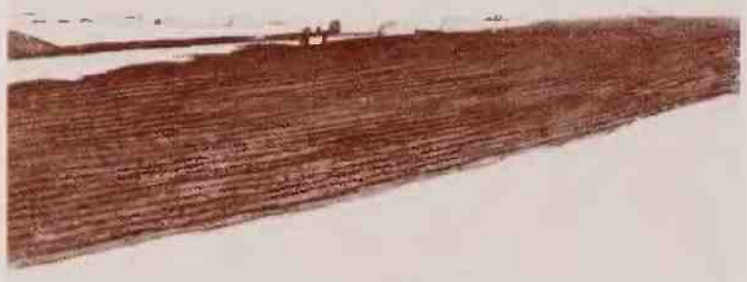
I didn't dare study the faces of my guides. They were two voices behind my back plying me with questions and making conversation. Actually, one soon ebbed into complete smiling silence – thank goodness. I never did catch their names. Thank goodness, too, that they were as discreet as Mr. K is. No political discussions were broached, although many times it came close. I studiously avoided any subjects that might lead to such discussion. I'd prepared an answer in the event. It went like this: "Please, if you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss political issues. It will not convince anyone either way, but will probably spoil the trip." They did approach me in several subtle ways like, "Here the government takes care of everyone's medical and health needs. What do you have there?" Here I explained OHSIP [Ontario Health Services Insurance Plan] and PSI [Physicians' Services Inc.]. There were other questions like, "Do you have horses and wagons in Canada?" He was referring to

Top to bottom: Borivtsi's collective farm, "in black or green, like Alberta," has been combined with that of its larger sister village, Kyseliv, on the other side of the Sovytsia River.

After the abolition of serfdom in western Ukraine in 1848, peasants had to pay landlords in cash or labor for grazing cows or even for picking mushrooms. They became again hopelessly indebted. The number of landless grew alarmingly. Promises of a better life lured thousands to North and South America, including Kurelek's father who emigrated to Canada in 1923.

An old village home in Klynivka, southwest of Borivtsi. Typically there were two rooms, the heated *khata,* which housed the family, and the *siny* or *khoromy,* which served as an unheated entryway and storeroom for everything from animal traps to oven utensils. Some people kept chickens in the *siny* and on his 1970 visit Kurelek still found chickens in the houses.

The road cuts through a village field. In earlier times villages were interconnected by a system of cart trails, often impassable. Only a few were located on somewhat better roads leading to market towns.



the numerous such teams we passed along the way. This I answered with the simple truth, "No, we don't have any." Some of my answers of this kind really seemed to shake them, like, "No, my father doesn't have any horses. He has two tractors in place of them." I'll go into more of this conversation later, but will describe the trip now.

It poured and poured all the way east to Ternopil, where we turned south, and then more. They kept complaining and complaining all the way there and back and apologizing about the weather, assuring me that these flood conditions were most unusual and that the country looked better in sunshine. The country was fascinating to me, despite the rain. Vast fertile rolling fields in black or green, like Alberta – the collective farms with here and there a village or collective complex . . . the onion-domed or tiered churches, the occasional derelict Polish churches. In Chortkiv (which means "City of the Devil") the sun broke through the clouds, smiled at us and then said good-bye to us for the rest of the day.

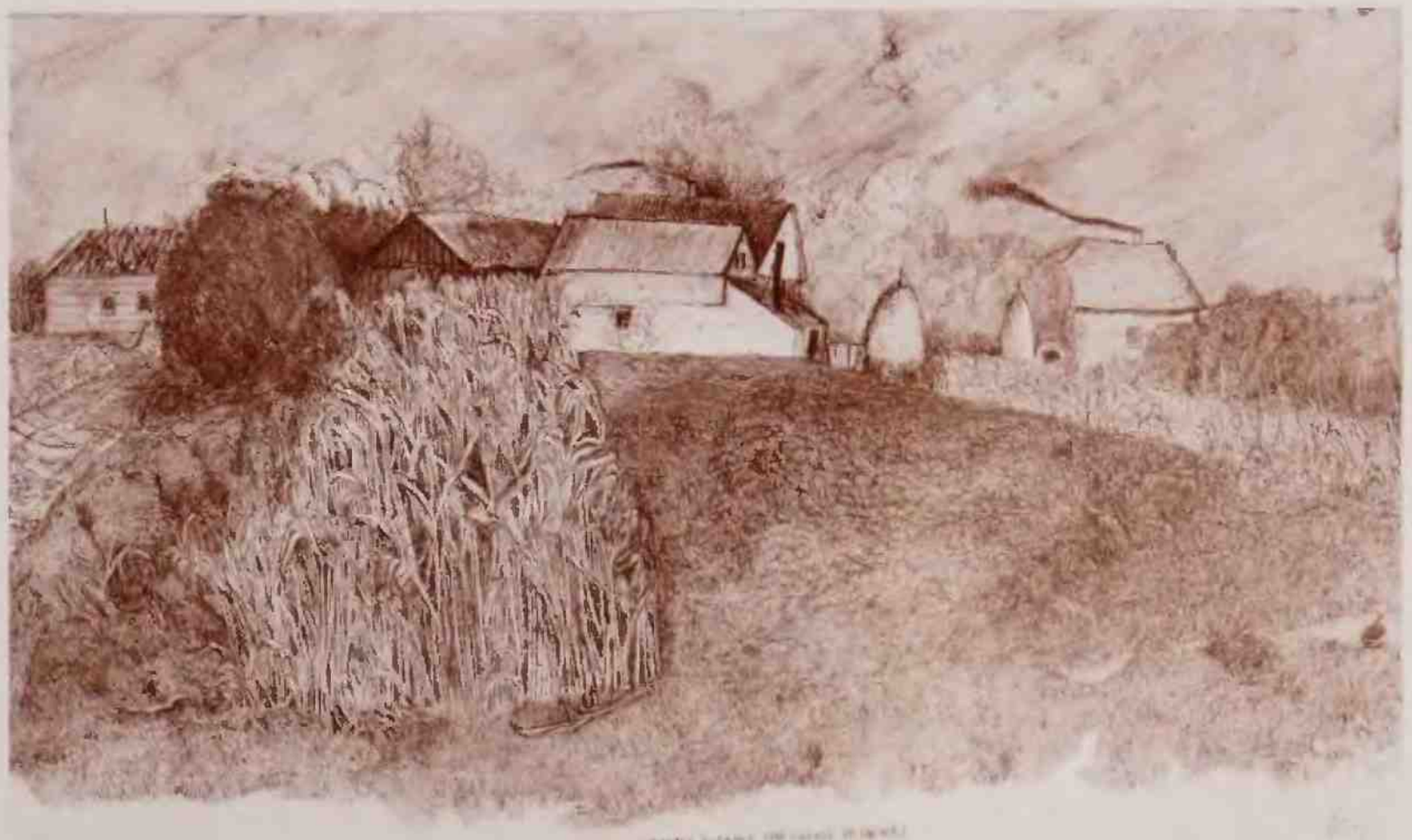
By this time there was another source of ill-at-ease feelings for me. This was the embarrassment of my guides at being unable to find a restaurant for us. I said I didn't eat breakfast but it was a point of honor with them to feast me. So there we were stopping in town and city after city – no restaurant. Finally, at the Dniester River, the old border of occupied Ukraine, Bukovyna and Halychyna, my companion found a tourist-type restaurant and began laughing with relief. We had to wait until they prepared the meal. The chauffeur ate with us but the Soviet law forbids him to drink. We ate our native Bukovynian food with brandy.

Now it was only a matter of time when we set out again. We had to watch the signposts so as not to miss it. It didn't look at all like the country I'd visualized from my father's descriptions, even taking into

Clockwise from top: A typical Borivtsi yard was enclosed and given privacy by its house and farm buildings, which were set closest to the road. Behind the yard was the garden seen here: beyond that the villagers' small plots, and then the fields belonging to the landlord.

Kurelek, who loved rain, caught the village of Klynivka, not far from Borivtsi, under a lowering storm. Wood is plentiful here and in earlier times the walls of village houses were log, covered with clay and chaff which formed a plaster-like surface inside and out. Wooden roof frames were thatched with rye straw from the villagers' fields.

Since World War II, Bukovyna has been part of the Soviet Union. The boundaries that divided the villagers' small individual plots disappeared with the nationalization of private property. Land belonging to the landlords was also redistributed. That led to the formation of a collective farm in 1947, the vista of which lay before Kurelek when he walked through his father's garden in 1977. Everything but the villagers' gardens now belongs to the collective farm.



Kurelek took these photographs on his first Borivtsi trip in 1970. Quotation marks indicate the exact words he wrote on the backs of the photographs.

"Mother and child," wrote Kurelek of the horses and a colt at dinner time – no clue as to which horse is mama. Sugar-beet fields stretch to the horizon.

"Collective farm workers in Bukovyna around 'lunch wagon'." These peasants, who also appear on the following page, were the first encountered by Kurelek's group on the way to the village.

account the changes collectivization would have made. Great rolling fields, figures of people hoeing or others dotting the distant fields. I'd imagined a sheltered, less-windblown, gray country. The road turned into gravel with ruts; later mud. It was a miracle that rain didn't come just in that part, or in that time, or we'd never have gotten through.

The first group of people we met were peasants in the field, mostly women, who were gathered around a wagon buying and eating and drinking primitive drink refreshments. The same *babushka*-like women in sheepskin or quilted coats, the men in boots and quilted coats. They laughed when we piled out of the car and asked directions, and posed readily for photographs.

One more village then Borivtsi and Kyseliv. We passed through Verenchanka, a railway stop and sugar-beet factory town, really a blown-up village, and then round a bend, there was Kyseliv in a low ravine. So we stopped to relieve ourselves after the whiskey drinking, and I snapped photos all around – of the collective farm, and one was taken of me beside the village signpost so as to prove, my guide said, to my father, that I'd really been there. He did a lot of this all

through the village so that even I had to refuse from time to time. At first I thought it was because he wanted some of my pictures for his television or journalistic work, but then I saw the other man use a camera of his own a few times so I knew it wasn't that.

We passed through Kyseliv driving carefully over the fantastically deep rutted road. And following father's map. The three men were quite taken by it. How could he remember the details after 50 years? Sure enough, there was the wee road marking the boundary between the two villages.

"Bukovyna. We asked these people directions. Refreshments – *kvass* and black bread for collective workers." *Kvass* is a soured beverage made from malt or black bread. It is non-alcoholic and what these workers were drinking was probably locally made.

"Private cows coming home from being pastured by roadside on a lead." Kurelek distinguishes the one or two cows the villagers may still keep privately – thus "private cows" – from the herds that belong to the combined collective farm of Borivtsi and its larger sister village of Kyseliv on the other side of the river.

In the village

Clockwise from top: Kurelek posed by the "village pond and dam."

A second shot of the village pond.

"Entrance to my father's village Borivtsi."

He took this photo to show the "awful roads in the village."

Simultaneously we saw the church, just as my father had it marked, then the police station, now a newly rebuilt large house of some sort. I took pictures of the school, then the bridge over the dam that makes the village pond. I'd learned by now that these ponds have been mostly man-made so that cattle could be watered, fish caught, children swim in, ducks and geese dunk in. A little brook trickles over the dam and goes on down the ravine. A fierce wind was blowing, whipping up waves and chilling us. And though we'd already passed several people, we now made our first actual approach to a woman for further directions. The effect was electric. From then on the news spread like – well, not wild fire, but pretty fast. My head was in a whirl. She followed us and gathered more individuals. I found the white cross by the pond and the one in Uncle John's yard, and then Uncle John's house.

Clockwise from top: Kurelek, at right, in front of "dad's school."

"Borivtsi church" with the artist in the foreground.

"An older type house which the officials weren't happy to see me taking pictures of."

"Three-hundred-year-old pear trees such as my father used to hide in if caught stealing." The pear trees are also mentioned in his letters to Jean. See the bottles of pears on page 50.

Kurelek took this "at the end of dad's street – the man who lives in my father's house came in from the collective fields to have a look at me."

Kurelek deliberately looked for evidence of gentleness from his father's time, such as this rare thatched roof house, ignoring the violence of his father's childhood that he had so often heard described to hired hands.

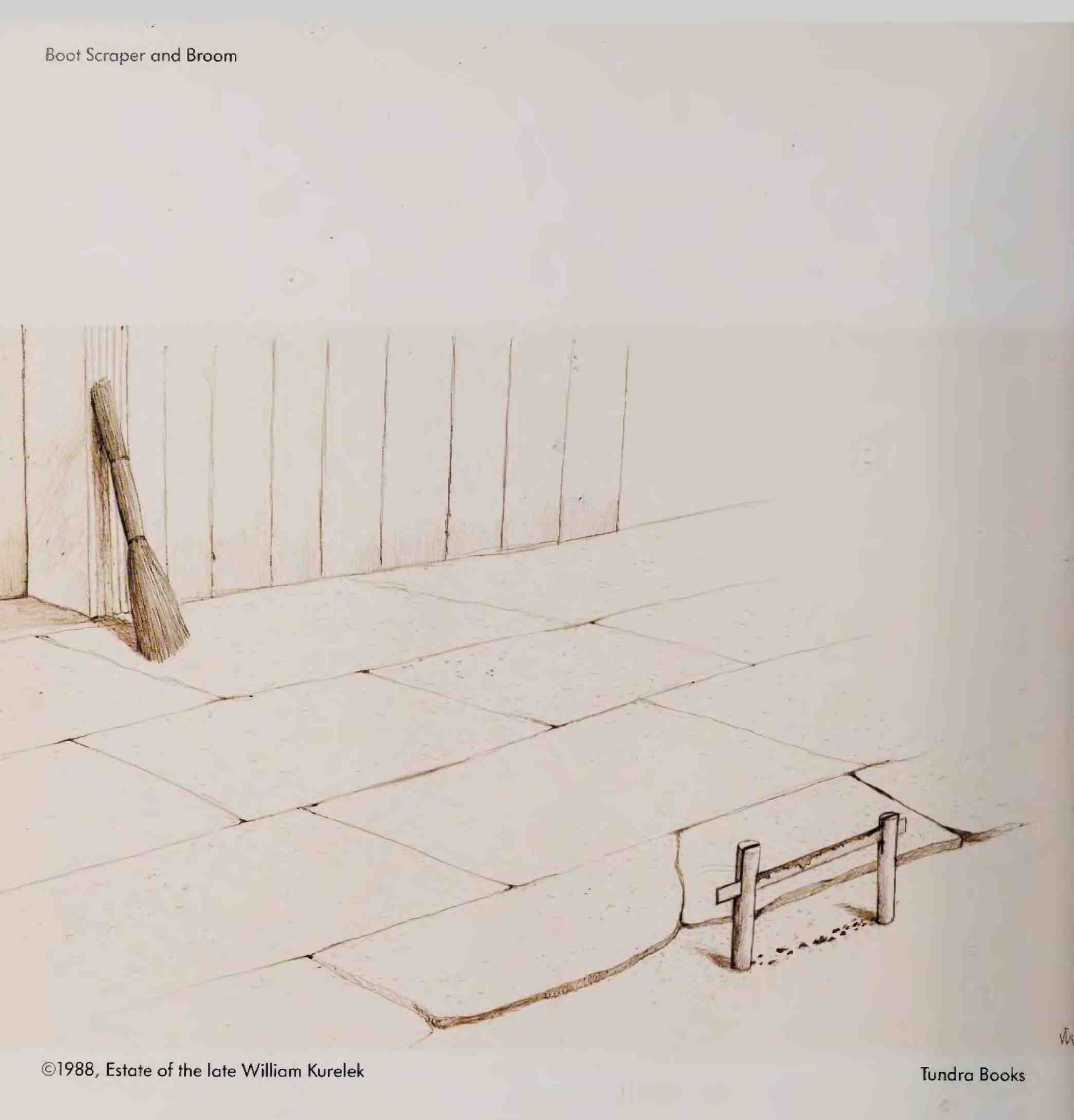
The village is in a part of the Ukraine that God might be accused of having abandoned to ravagers. Ukraina *means "the borderland" and its history from early times is a list of invasions from neighboring peoples, its land an almost continual battlefield. Austro-Hungarian rule ended with World War I but not the horrors. "After the First War," son William would write, "the Ukraine was parceled out. Bukovyna was under Romanian rule. When a war is over, the struggle to survive does not end; people must steal, lie, cheat and kill. The Armistice meant economic failure, crops rotting in the fields and epidemics, people rotting in the dark corners of their hovels." His father left for two reasons: there was not enough land to go round, and he "wanted to escape conscription into the Romanian Army. Draftees returning to the village told of beatings and other humiliations from officers." Ed.*

This was "probably the last thatched barn in Borivtsi," Kurelek noted in his caption. Not many old farm buildings remain. The villagers may keep a cow and some chickens in their yards, but animal husbandry and crop farming are handled by the collective so the need for outbuildings has declined drastically. Sugar-beet farming and a processing factory are now the main sources of work. The population has increased by only a few hundred people since the beginning of the 20th century, when it numbered under 1,800. The village's character, that of an average and typical community of the region, is unchanged.

House with Thatched Roof

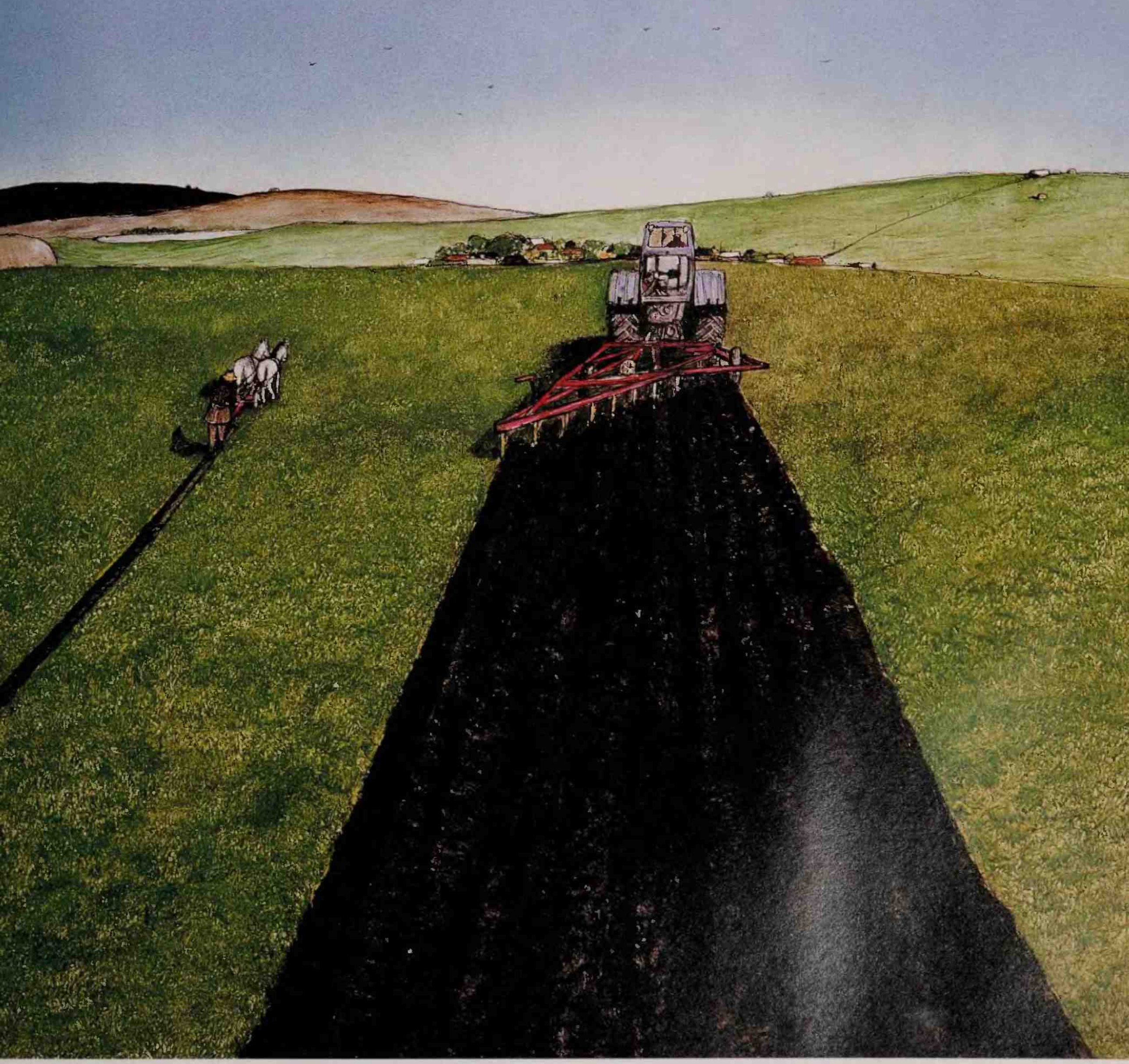
Tundra Books

Boot Scraper and Broom



Tundra Books

Contrast



William Kurelek

Tundra Books

Ducks and Landscape

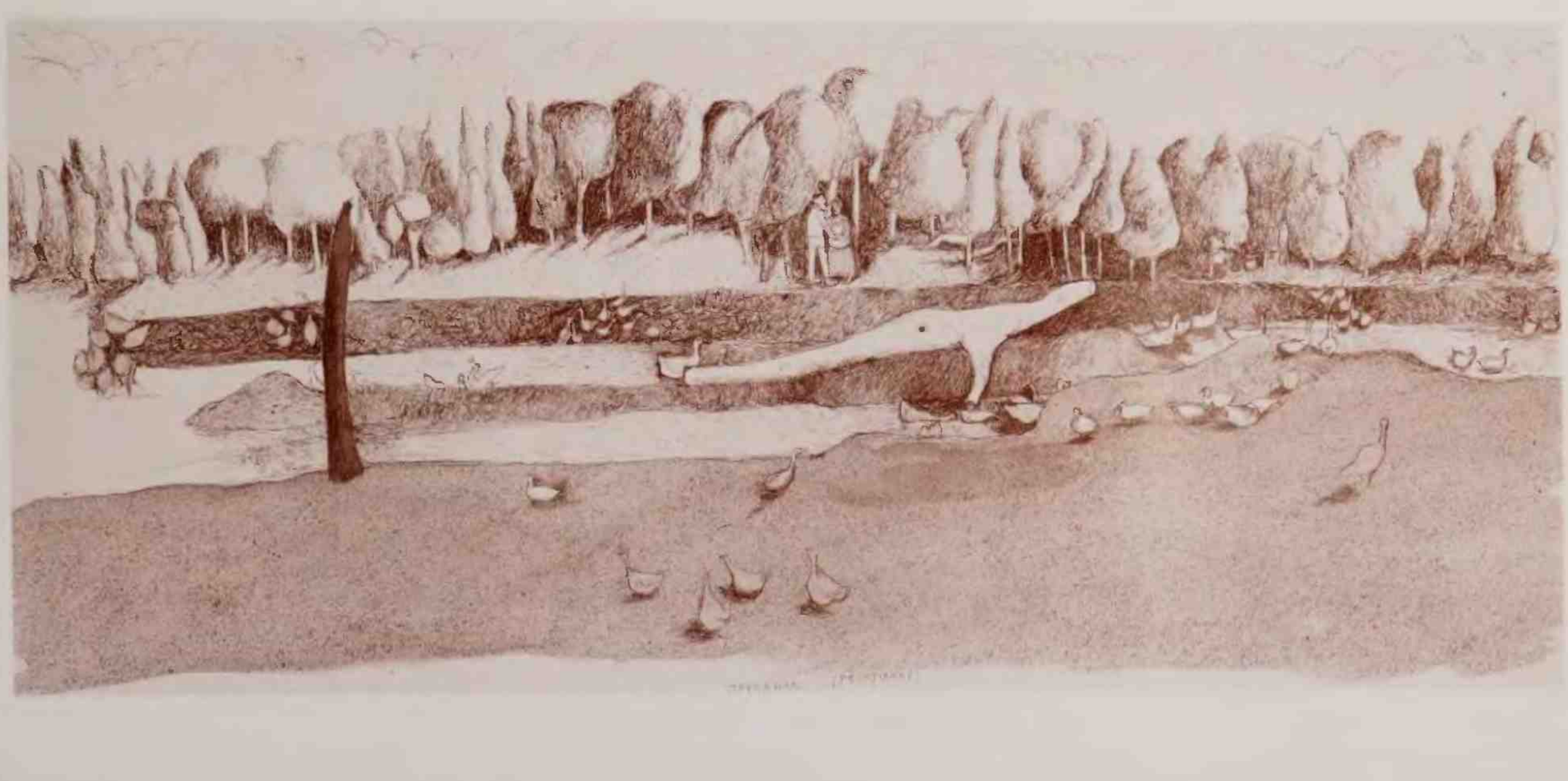
Tundra Books

The crane, that large wading bird at home in the Borivtsi region of waterways and ponds.

Kurelek labels this drawing the "Prusianka (Proostanka) River." It turns the landscape into an idyll, in contrast to the harshness at the end of the 19th century when Kurelek's father and grandfather worked the land by hand, without machinery. More than half of Bukovyna's village farmers owned less than two hectares of land, though five was the minimum required to support a family. Many crops were grown but sometimes there wasn't enough to go around. The yearly cereal crop production for some families fitted into a grain trunk in the *siny*, or storeroom. The peasants survived only by the most careful husbanding of every resource.

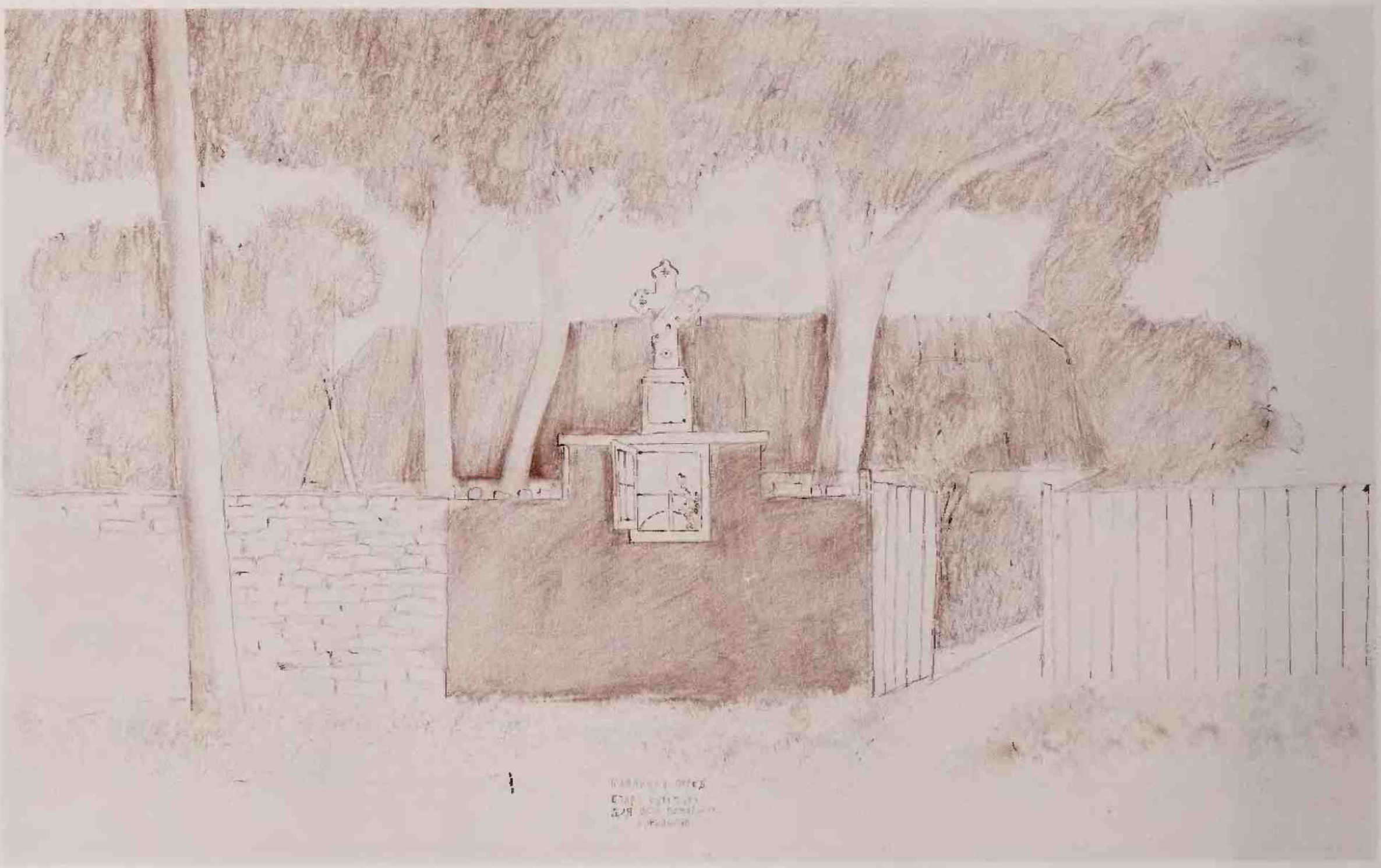
When we entered the yard to ask which house was my father's, my cousin Sando came out, a short grizzled man in baggy trousers. And everyone was the same . . . excitable and as lovable as children. From then on, things were just a jumble of greetings, recollections, being pulled this way and that. No one seemed to know that I was coming despite father's saying they did. It was like I'd dropped out of heaven. Sometimes they talked as if someone from the outside world had been seen, other times, no. That's 30 years they'd been cut off. They had heard of me on the radio. Some even mentioned Nina Khrushchev's remark about me during her visit to the States. Sando took on the leadership. He was shivering violently from the cold. I felt for him, and expressed this concern, but he said it was only because he had just got up. He works in the sugar factory, so was home on Saturday, unlike most others who had to work on the collective farm.

The landscape on the opposite page compared with what seems to be a wash sketch of the same scene below suggests what Kurelek might have done with his other landscape sketches had he lived. He also hoped to do a mural of the village. Ed.



My father's house

We . . . went over to THE HOUSE where father was born and lived. The barn was gone, and beyond that point, streets led to the collective fields. The house was remodeled in part. The roof was new red-painted tin with the same flues, but with a Byzantine cross in the opening (I wonder why) and doves cut out for each roof peak. The lower wall had board veneer on it now, but the windows and doors were the same. And some of the garden walls and fruit trees in front of the house.



Kurelek found a tombstone inscribed with the name of Dmytro F. Kurelek, one of his ancestors.

A shrine in front of the one-time home of Kurelek's father is dedicated to all the dead Kureleks.

Top, then left to right: A typical yard in Borivtsi photographed by Kurelek in 1977.

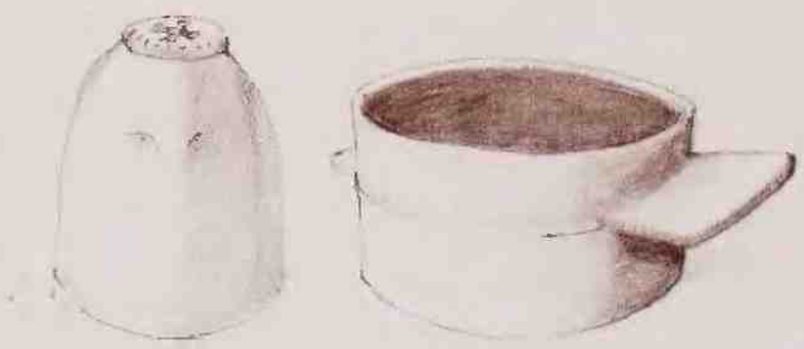
Pots have been washed and hung out to dry on the picket fence in this typical yard scene.

A beet garden behind a Borivtsi home, also 1977.

Although this photo is uncaptioned we assume, from descriptions given in his letters to Jean, that it must have been his father's old home.

Another view of his father's old home, taken on the 1977 trip. The straw piled around the bottom of the walls serves as insulation.

My father's people



By the time Kurelek visited Borivtsi, old handmade objects like these cream containers were becoming hard to find outside museums. The homes in which they were once handled daily were transformed as more manufactured materials were used for renovation and construction. Thatched roofs were replaced by tin and even later by tile. Boards covered the lower portions of vulnerable exterior clay walls. Ceilings and floors were boarded over to increase comfort and decrease maintenance. More recent new homes are built of concrete, stucco and cinder block. This happened first in villages closer to Chernivtsi, but now such materials are more common even around villages like Borivtsi. Older homes have been converted to summer kitchens.

We went over to Aunt Catherine's (now dead) house and found one of her daughters living there. In front of every house (the back rather) there was a series of group photos taken – chickens, dogs, pots and pans, barefoot and unkempt children. The people were so likable and simple. I knew I was with my roots. This is the real Ukraine. As Shevchenko said,

Os de liudy, nasha slava, Ukrainy.
[The glory of Ukraine lies in its people.]

And then I began to go into their homes – very dark, despite the weak electric light. One even had a small T.V. set which didn't work. But all so paintable and alive. There was the *pich* and even the place on it where father said they used to sleep. The cheap calendar icons, the little windows, the loaf of bread on the bed, the pail of slops.

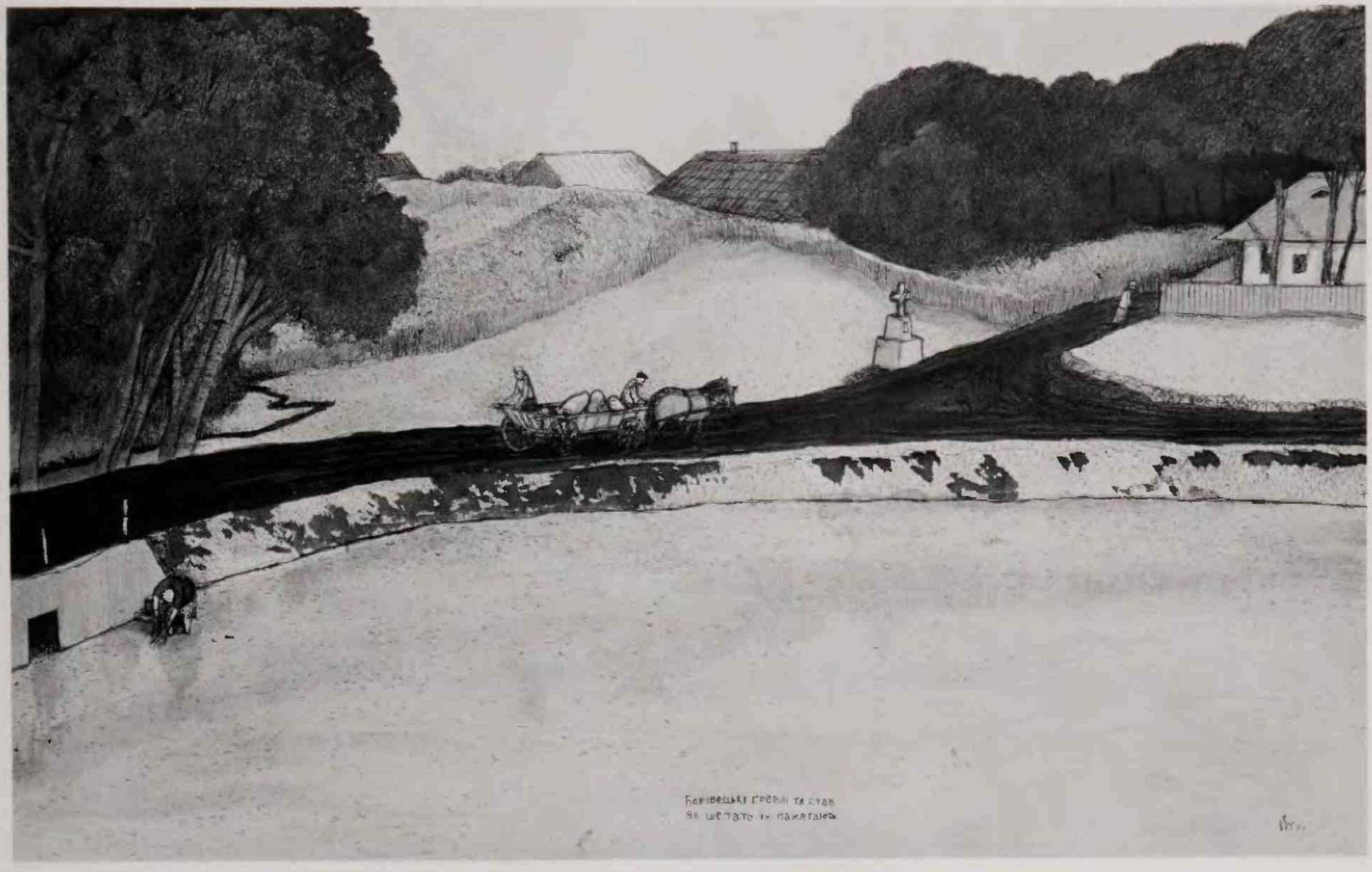
Old Ilena came limping with a cane toward us – here was another cousin we found. Someone said I should keep track of the people and houses on a piece of paper. But it was hopeless. Things happened so fast, and time was so short. I kept worrying about the two other men and the chauffeur waiting. Were they impatient with me? Were they listening to anything I might let slip? These simple people didn't seem to grasp that they weren't friends of mine from abroad, but officials. There were awkward moments and embarrassing ones.

Finally, we walked back down that street to Sando's house where by now a table had been set up with heaping plates of food with mineral water (very popular over here) and whiskey and homebrew; the officials winked at it. (It's called *samohon*, meaning, "self-propelled.") There was a type of chopped omelette, garlic sausage, beet and horseradish, black bread, stewed plums and cherries. About twelve people sat about the table. We clinked glasses for toasts several times during the course of this buffet meal. All helped themselves from the main plate.

The most moving part was meeting my own namesake, William Kurelek, a little boy of three or four. We were photographed together; he was shy at first but hugged and kissed me at the last. He had such a Ukrainian Boy face. His mother too. His little sister held a little baby more like a doll that didn't cry, wrapped up in a cloth looking almost like a rag.

On his first trip to Borivtsi in 1970 Kurelek wrote that his party approached the village "following father's map." Here, drawn by the artist on his second trip in 1977, are the dam and pond, also, the caption reads, "just as Dad remembered them." The fields belonging to such Ukrainian villages as Borivtsi were on the outskirts. Church and cemetery were at the village center.

There was usually a school and perhaps a post office and tavern. Roadside shrines or crosses, as seen here, were common, especially at the village's main approach, often erected to commemorate special community events or milestones in the lives of the property-owners on whose land they stood.



Leaving the village

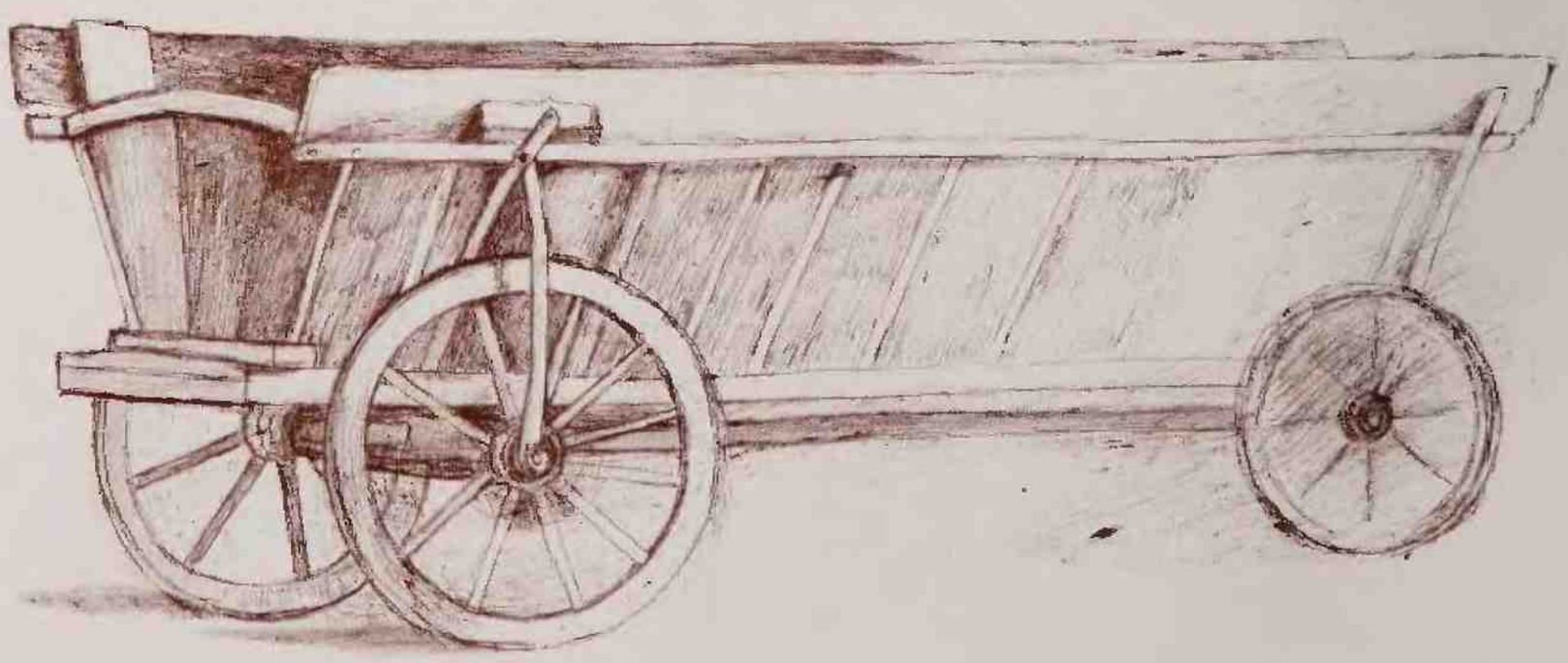
The chauffeur was icy mad by now, but Sando was in the car, and said he'd like a ride to the end of the village. This was only a ploy, for as we passed one house he insisted we stop there as it was one of my cousins. Despite our protests, we had to get out and knock. A man came out and said she was out working in the collective. "Thank goodness," we breathed a sigh of relief. Such was the unnaturalness of the time limit I was forced to be glad when I should naturally have been saddened.

Sando insisted he go with us to the end of the next village. We suspected by now that he had another visit in mind. Sure enough, the last house. It was a relative one more removed this time. We snapped a picture of the house and the people who came out in front. And then scruffy beard and all, Sando embraced me fervently, and kissed me many times. The car was moving as I jumped in, Sando running alongside apologizing to the chauffeur who answered nastily back to him. And so we were gone.

I took a few more pictures along the way at the party-men's suggestion, such as a view of the Dniester River and the collective farm's machinery shed (this was meant to impress my father with the big change since his childhood).

Then it started to rain when we were on the main highway. It was dry enough, nevertheless, for us to get in and out of the village. And so it rained all the way with the officials mournfully commenting on it over and over.

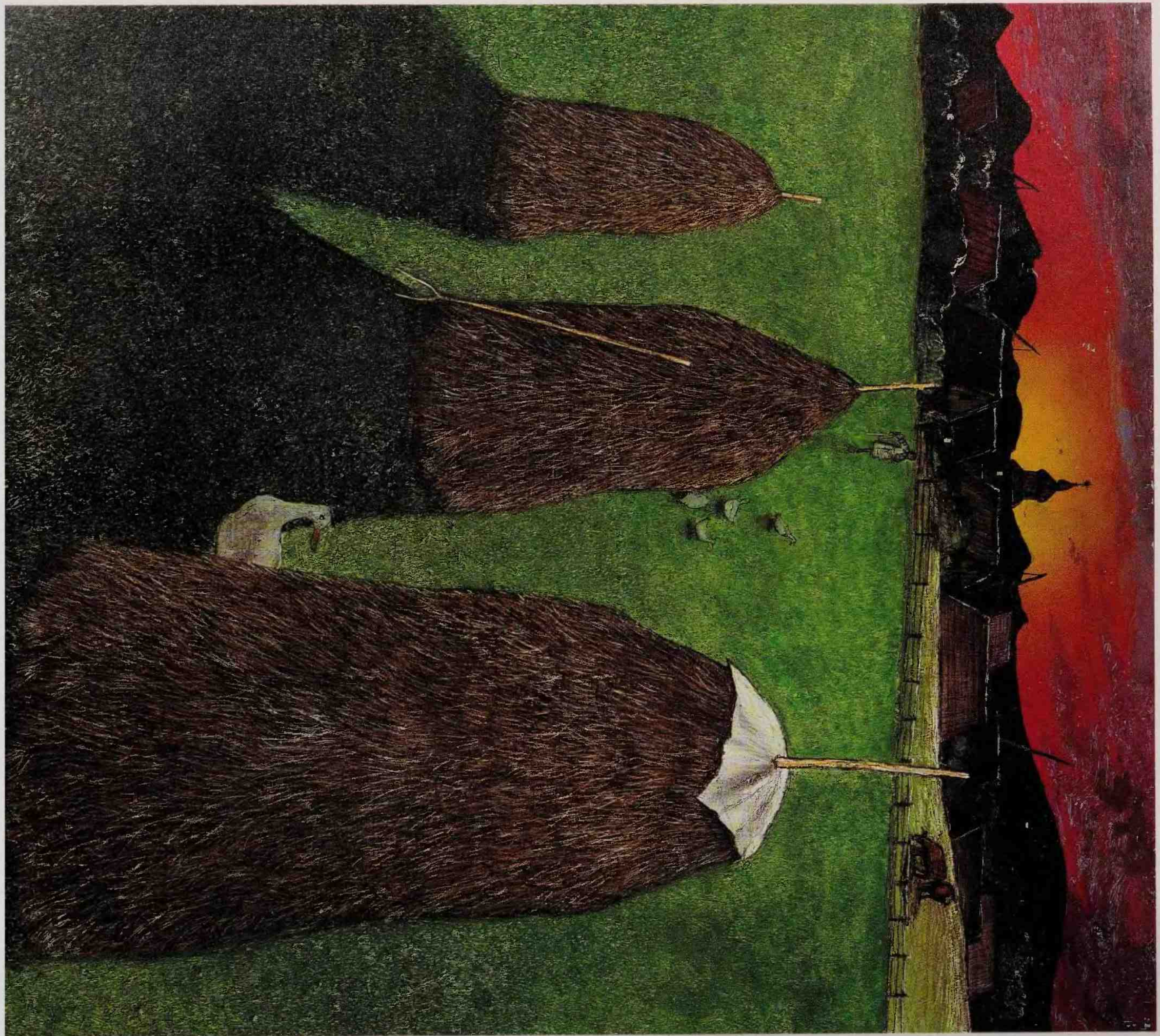
"I started this drawing in the village of Valiava," writes Kurelek in the caption. "Straightaway I was taken to the main buildings and so I never finished the front of the wagon."



The Mechanized Baba Feeds Nine Villages

William Kurelek

Tundra Books



Haystacks

This drawing was intended to show one of several methods of tying sheaves in the Ukraine. In Western Canada they were tied differently.

Nothing demonstrates Kurelek's eagerness to immerse himself in the world of his forefathers than his numerous drawings of old implements such as this portion of a gristmill which he labels "grain grindstone with attaching bolts." Contrast his obsession with the details of the old technology to his reaction to the new. Of an obligatory visit to a giant power station, he wrote his wife, Jean: "You know how mechanical or electrical things bore me." The old implements vividly recall the old way of life. Mechanized tractors and threshers existed by the 1920s, but most peasants could not afford them. Also older wooden implements were lighter than manufactured metal ones and did not get stuck as easily in the *chornozem*, the region's very rich, stoneless black earth.

The tours and social gatherings that had exasperated Kurelek so much before his visit to Borivtsi would plague him for the remaining two weeks of travel.

In Odessa, he talks of more "boring tours" and the unexplained waits of Soviet air travel, of declining supper and "working on my painting on a waiting room table." In Georgia, he worked even on buses: "The rattling of the bus over the rough road didn't allow any straight lines." In Yalta, "I have a room to myself this time, so I'll get some painting done these next two days while the others swim in the Black Sea. . . . I resolved to hide to avoid breakfast and the tour. If I went out I might be followed; if in my room, they might knock on the door. So I figured if I went up to the third-floor sitting room no one would think of looking for me up there. So except for the coming and going of the hotel staff, I worked in peace from seven to eleven . . . I escaped supper by going to bed and not answering the knocks on the door. I couldn't sleep – to my surprise – so I got up and worked until 1:00 a.m."

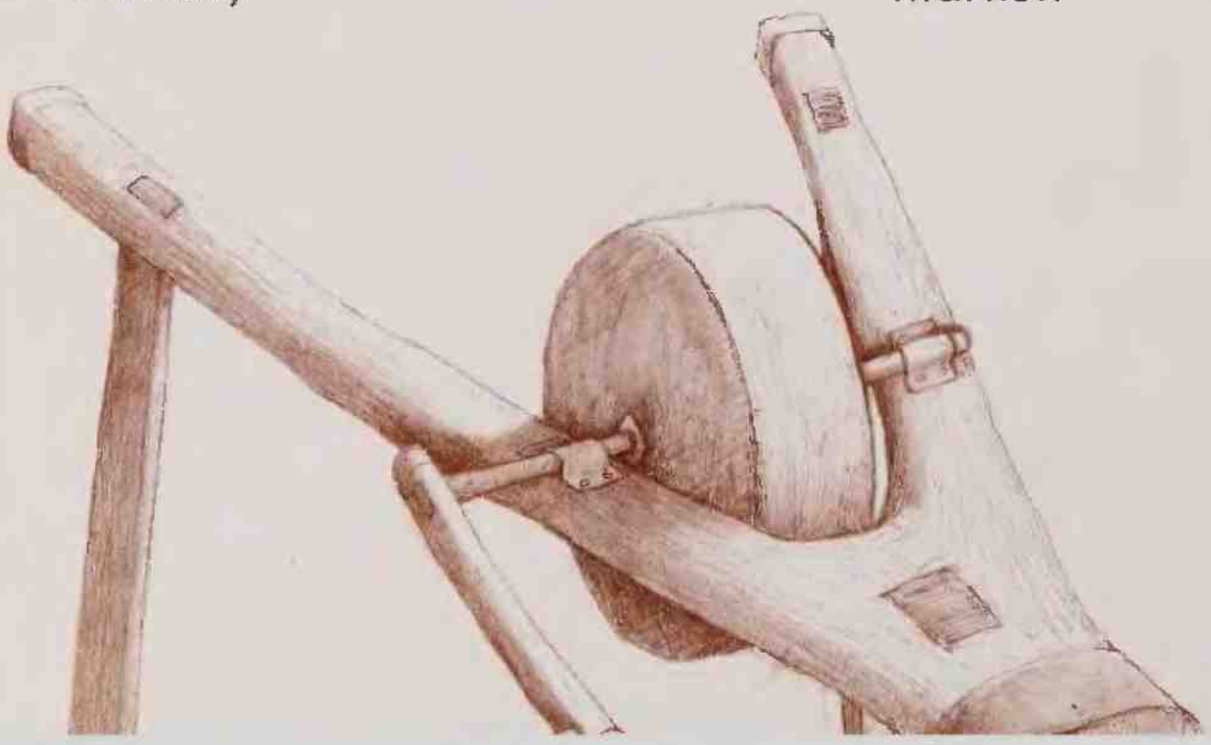
The NFB film and the Passion slides were shown in Lviv, Kharkiv and Kiev. In Kharkiv, Communist party officials were in the audience and he found this quite traumatic. "I spoke telling . . . how I wished my father was here in his native land to see this moment and that I'd seen the film some 70 odd times, but had never been so moved. I had to stop a few times for fear of breaking down and crying."

Mykola Kolankiwsky reported on how Kurelek's traveling companions saw the artist. "From the first day, this quiet and even bashful person became the central figure in our group. Maybe simply because he rarely spoke. . . . Every morning resigning himself from breakfast, he drew." Ed.

Vienna, June 3

An open trough, or manger, partly filled with fodder. It was normally found in the stable, though some peasants never had enough fields or harvest yields to warrant any form of grain storage building and made do with a grain trunk in the storeroom of the house. Given the Catholicism that was the fabric of Kurelek's being – he even prayed for the souls of his Communist guides – he might have thought of the infant Jesus "asleep in the manger."

Any sharpener was called a *tochylo*, as Kurelek labels this grinding wheel for sharpening tools. Sickles, scythes and hoes were important to peasants with tiny plots to look after. When they weren't used in the fields, these tools were readily adapted as weapons during peasant uprisings. Until the 19th century the hardier woods were used even for such large farm implements as plows, harrows and wagons, and even thereafter metal was used only minimally.



As his 1970 letters from the Ukraine show, Kurelek was wary of every word he said or wrote, for fear of creating an incident or causing harassment of his relatives by the Soviet authorities. But as soon as he reached Vienna on the trip home, he wrote what he had not dared to commit to paper while in the Ukraine.

A delay at customs caused the group to miss a connecting flight, and they were obliged to spend a night in Brussels. Kurelek was delighted. The layover gave him an opportunity to view his favorite painters, Brueghel and Bosch. Ed.

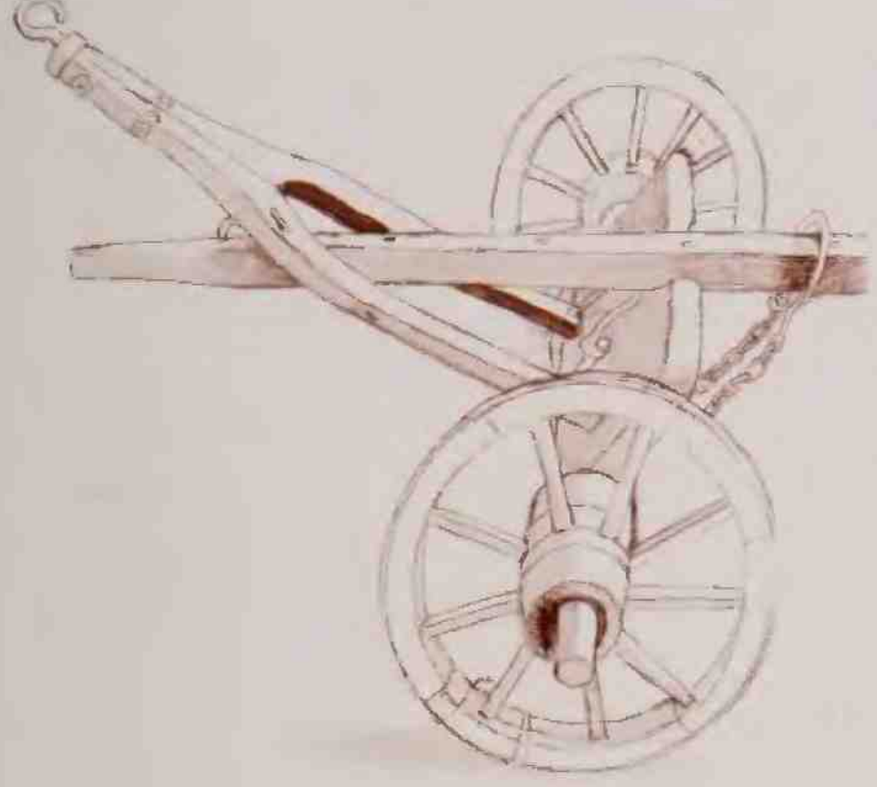
About the village, now that it's safe to say anything I like. One thing sure: from their point of view, they should not have let me in. It wasn't only embarrassing that they couldn't find a restaurant and that the roads were so bad. Even the town streets off the main road were not paved.

The people did seem better dressed than I expected, but below that exterior, I found out that most people's lives are quite hard. Nearly everyone has some licit or illicit side income or is a party member. They have to work Saturday to donate that day's wages for support of North Vietnam and Cuba. You know how loudly so-called progressives in North America protest that the money America spends in the Indo-China war should be used to uplift the Negro people and solve the urban problems. The same could be said of the Soviet Union. They shouldn't be in Vietnam or the Middle East or be in the space race before they improve their economy at home.

A collective farm worker toils 10 to 12 hours a day for approximately $60 to $100 per year. They, of course, get rations of food and clothing. But, for a lot of extras they have to sell things on the black market.

Although wooden implements were made more efficient over the years, it was not necessarily by the addition of metal parts. The wooden *ralo*, or plow hook, for example, was steadily improved to the point where it was transformed into a walking plow supplemented with a front-wheel assembly. Even that, at first, was constructed with a minimum of metal parts. In this drawing Kurelek shows the 18th-century wheel carriage. For its relationship to the *ralo*, see the drawing on page 45, in which he indicates: "The wheel goes here."

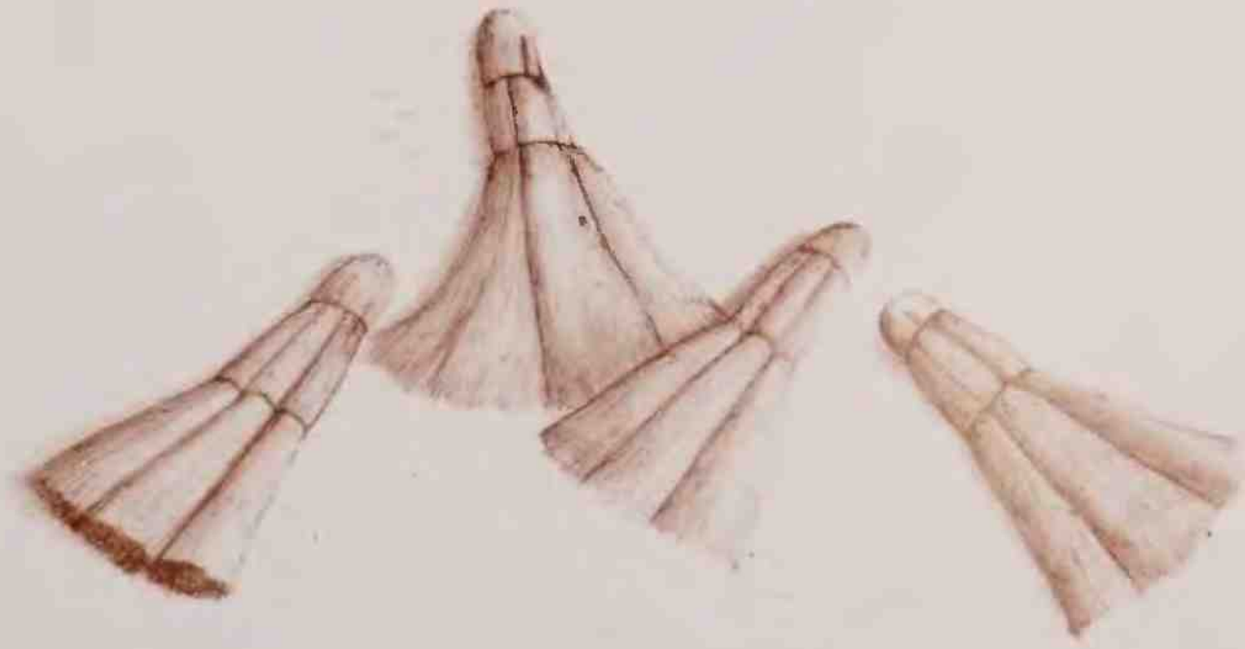
Whitewashing brushes were essential implements in earlier times when all the walls of a house's *khata*, or main room, were routinely whitewashed at least once a year, before Easter, and perhaps more often. During Austro-Hungarian times houses had no chimneys, to avoid a prohibitive "chimney tax." Smoke from the *pich*, or stove, was routed into the storeroom and escaped through the thatch. Walls looked more gray than white most of the time.



Because father asked me to find out how well he could live on his Canadian pension, I asked . . . how much he got, and whether he could live on it, when we were out of earshot of my guide. "Seventeen dollars a month, but I could eat that up in a day," he replied with a bitter smirk. He was exaggerating, but not very much. A meal out costs two and a half to three dollars in a restaurant. The people you see in the very few Soviet restaurants are either on their rare evening out or are party people or have a special meal voucher. The only really cheap items are living quarters and travel fares. From the list I kept of the cost of living in the USSR it would cost about twice as much as the pension father gets.

My two guides to Borivtsi boasted the Soviet Union has twice the population of Canada under pension. But you can see how such impressive figures are really far from impressive. They have to stay with in-laws, looking after their children while the parents are out working for the collective or pasturing the family cow (those private cows we saw so many of along the Ukrainian highways on rope leads) or making something or working the little plot of private land they're allowed.

Make no mistake about it. These people don't believe that the collectivized land really belongs to the people. It was put in a nutshell when Sando made a point of making it clear to me as we passed a giant field of peas. "That belongs to the collective. Our plots only go so far." What's the difference from the time of the landlords? Only that now there is one big overall LANDLORD – the state. And an absentee landlord at that. One of the very first signs I saw on arrival at the village that the peasants aren't happy with the new order is that one of them made the gesture of being fed up by drawing his hand across his neck. "We've had it up to here with the collectives."



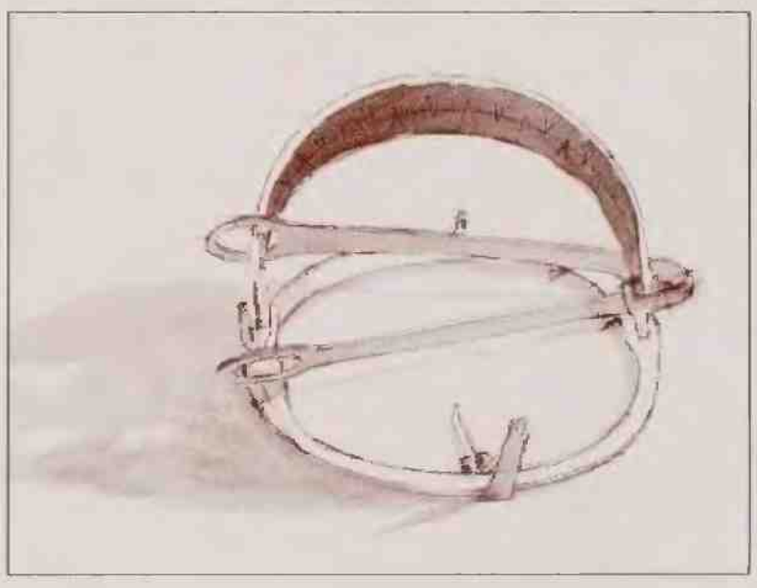
Top, then left to right: The *maister*, or master craftsman, made everything from the old Borivtsian water bucket yoke depicted here to intricate church furnishings. He might be self-employed, or, if retained by the local landlord, might earn extra money by working for the villagers.

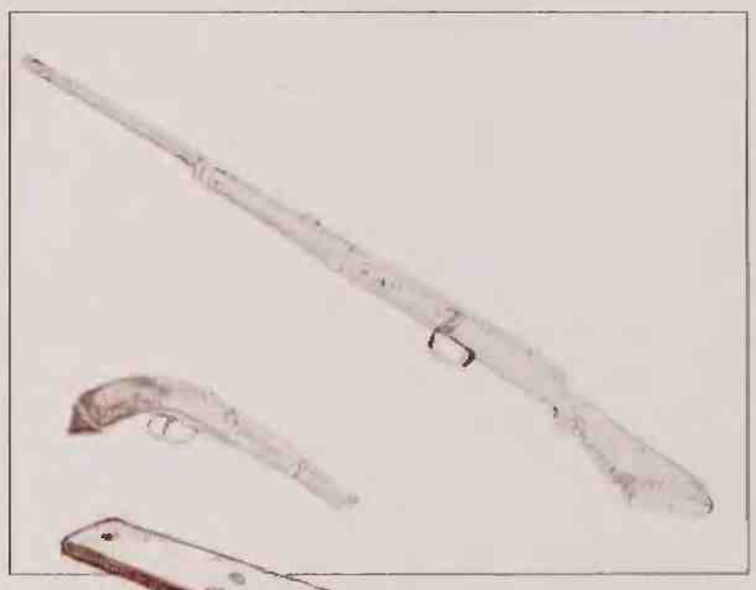
A badger trap. For the badger see page 16.

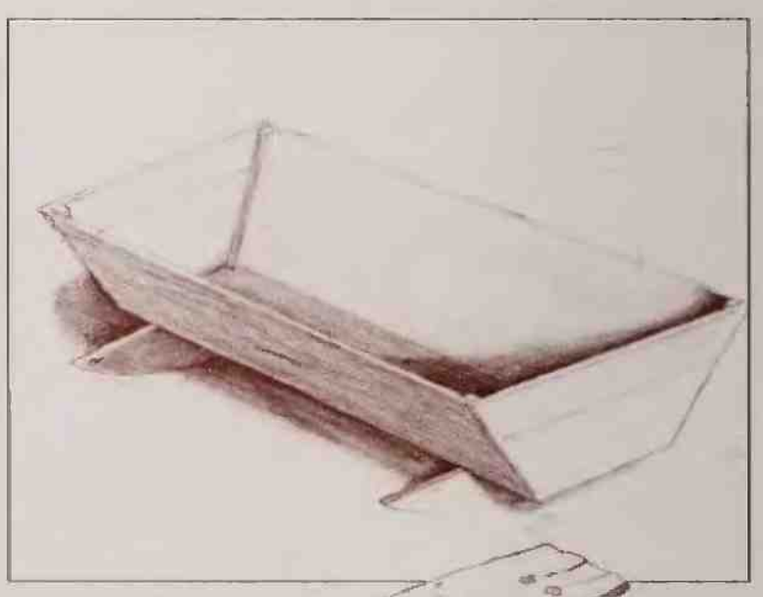
Rifle and pistol of the early 19th century.

This child's cradle looks like the manger on page 42. The *maister* used a basic shape to make a group of objects. Each had a different use depending on accessories. In this case a dough trough or manger shape is transformed by rockers into a cradle.

Kurelek called this "the benches of a Podilian agriculturist at the end of the 19th century." Podilia was a regional zone dealt with in the Museum of Folk Architecture and Rural Life where he sketched. The section on Bukovyna had not yet opened.







Clockwise from top left: Part of a device for making mash for animal feed.

A *tsip*, or flail, is a hand implement used for all types of threshing and husking. A short, stout stick hanging from a wooden handle swings free to do the work.

Kurelek put an arrow where the wheel carriage on page 43 attaches to this plow hook.

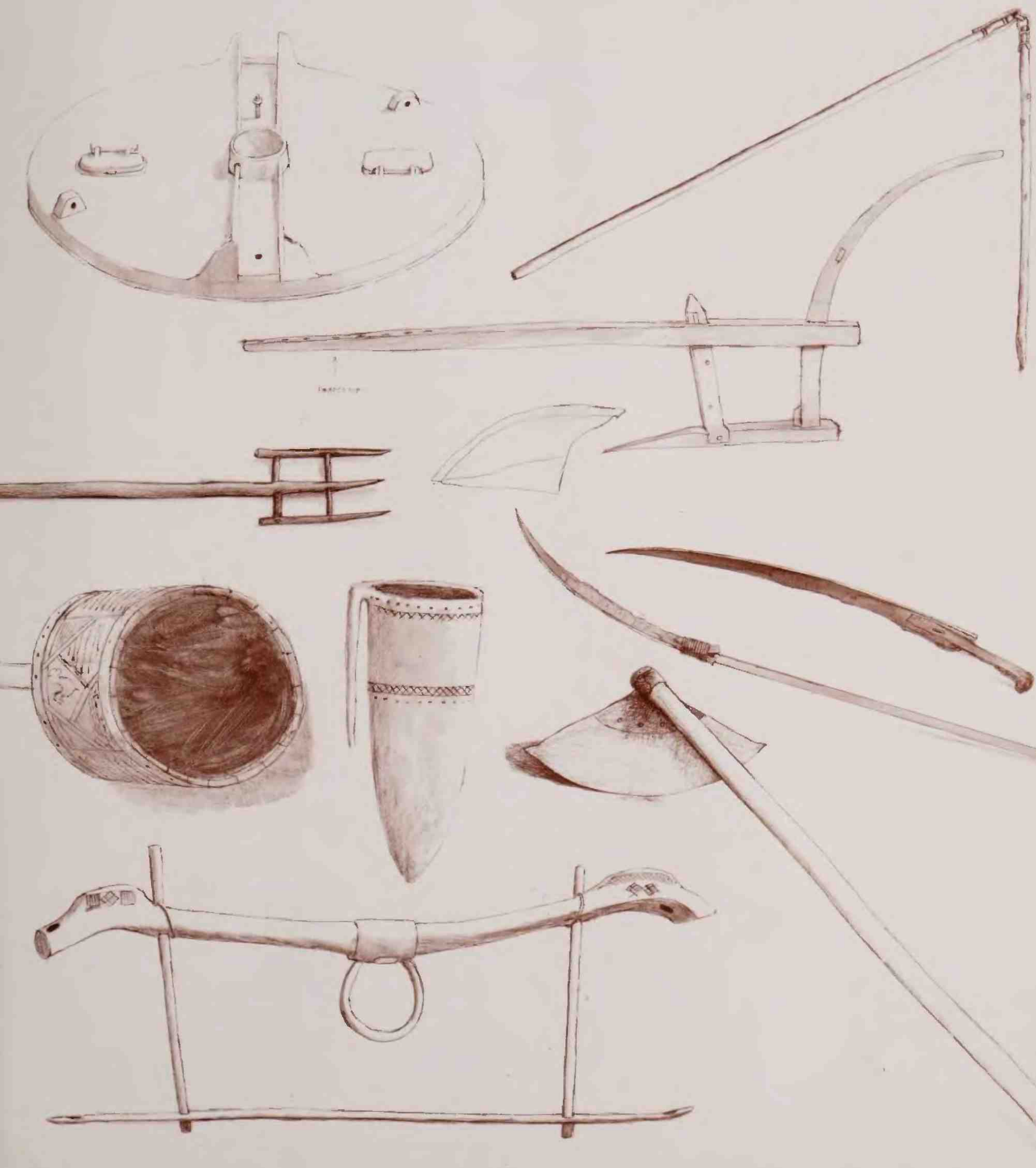
A scythe fashioned into a sword above one transformed into a lance.

This hoe looked old-fashioned to the artist but is still a common shape in Eastern Europe.

An ox yoke, probably sketched in the folk architecture museum.

A cup for measuring grain, and, right, a *kushka*, or wooden whetstone holder. It was worn hooked onto a belt and was filled with water so a scythe blade could be touched up when needed.

A pitchfork.

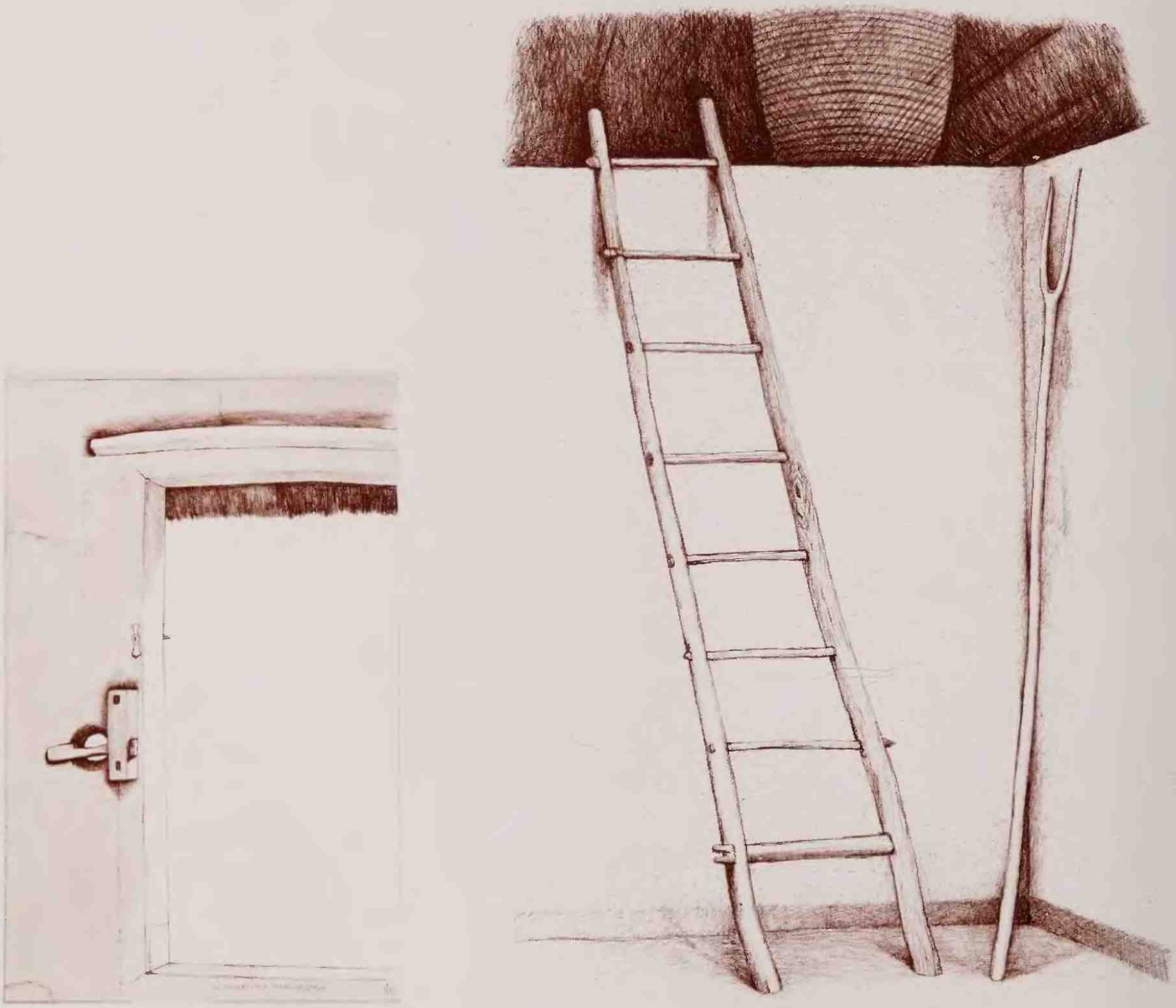


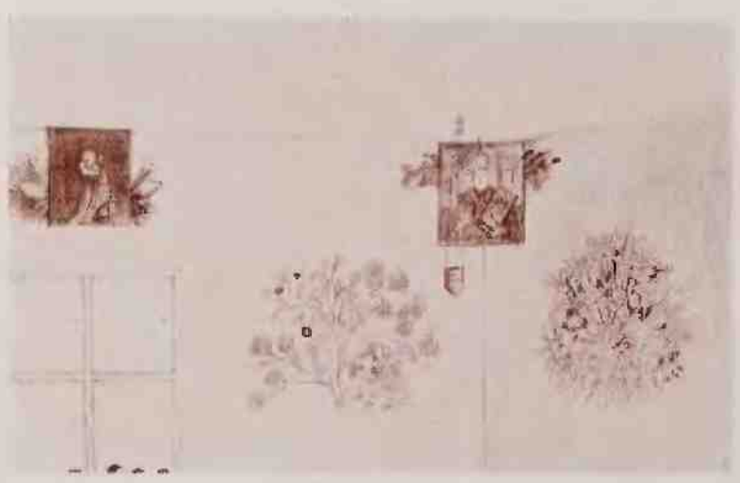
Clockwise from top right: "Ladder to the loft of the house, mid-19th century," wrote Kurelek. A ladder in the *siny*, or storeroom, gave access to the loft. Since smoke from the *pich* was routed through the *siny*, the loft was used as a smokehouse, and drying area for seeds, herbs, mushrooms.

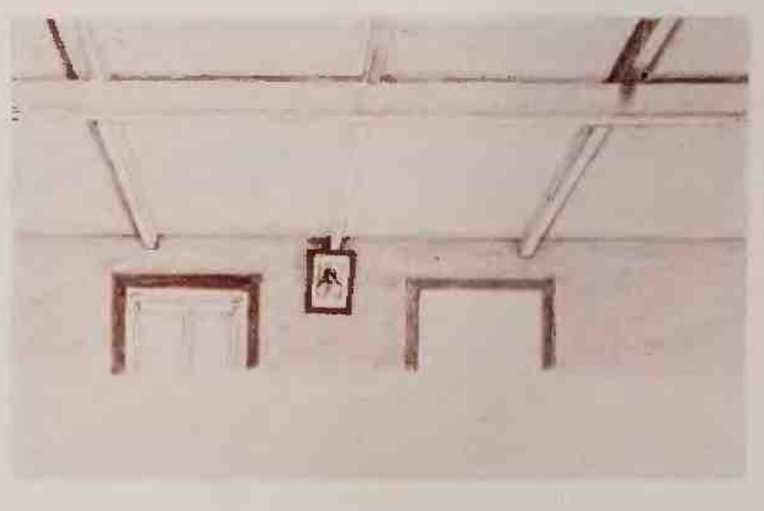
Rafters supported by a main beam. Herbs and other items were stored on top of the beam. Portrait is of poet Taras Shevchenko.

These designs painted directly on walls indicate the period after the *pich* was fitted with a chimney. Earlier decorations consisted of intricate paper cutout designs easily removed from smoke-blackened walls. The main room also contained a table and benches, a shrine to a well-loved saint and a large bed that often held the whole family.

Typical wooden door lock, probably by the village *maister*.







Top to bottom: An ax.

The elbow adz, its blade set at right angles to the handle, is used for shaping wood.

The miter box, a device for guiding a handsaw at the proper angle in making a miter joint in wood, is early 20th century. Individual tastes and techniques of different master craftsmen could be discerned from village to village.

At the next house we visited, an old man shuffled up. Something about the way he was hunched over and his wasted face made me think this man had been through some trying illness. He was quite talkative and took my two guides in tow. In one relative's house we began to study old photos on the wall. "That's me when I served in the Romanian Army." He had on a tall plumed hat that made him look like the Romanian King. "For 10 kopeks I'd have shot so-and-so," the old man said. The Communist official brightened up now. Here was his chance to prove to me how the peasants were liberated by the Red Army from oppression. "So then you must have seen great improvements in the years following the war?" he questioned. "I couldn't really say so. I just returned two years ago from 23 years in Siberia." It was a simple matter-of-fact statement from the old man. Yet the official's face froze, and he recoiled as if he'd been hit. He walked away.

I was trying hard to pacify my guides in case they cut short my stay. Whenever a better-than-average decorated house was seen I photographed that. I drew their attention to the electric wiring (even though the light bulb burned a dim reddish glow) and in one house to a small T.V. set (which had sight but no sound): "My father should be interested to see that." At the first chance that I got the people by themselves I begged, "For God's sake, people, watch what you're saying. Those aren't my friends. They're government officials." They were more careful, but still made fumbles.

In another house I was alone for a while. They gave me a photo of blessing the *paska* [Easter bread], and told me the church was locked up. The government seemed to be playing a game with them – they could use it by someone going to Chernivtsi and getting permission for special occasions like Easter, funerals, etc. The one in Kyseliv, however, was open if one wished to walk there. One of the women greeted me with "Christ is Risen," as I entered a house. The traditional reply is "He is truly risen" but I was afraid the official would overhear that. Old calendar-type icons were still on the wall. The houses were as small as in my father's day.

Little William was barefoot with a runny nose. For the photo of us he was given a pair of dried-out looking shoes which were obviously not his anyway, for when someone picked him up, one of them fell off. . .

Kurelek sketches his cousin Sando, "a short grizzled man in baggy trousers" who wears the old-time *serdak*, or felt coat.

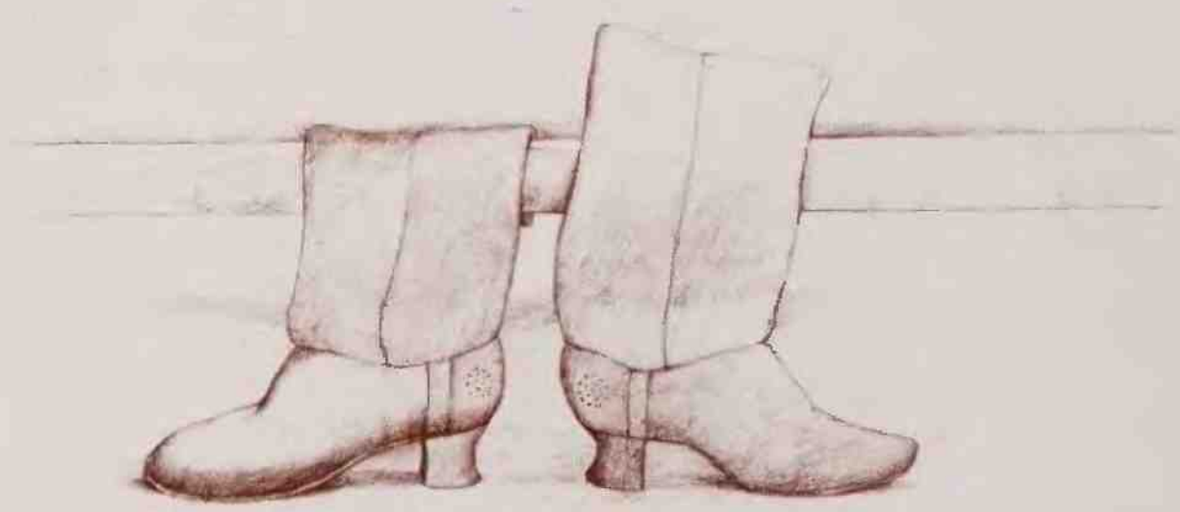
"A maimed veteran," notes the artist's caption of this sad figure, probably a World War II survivor.

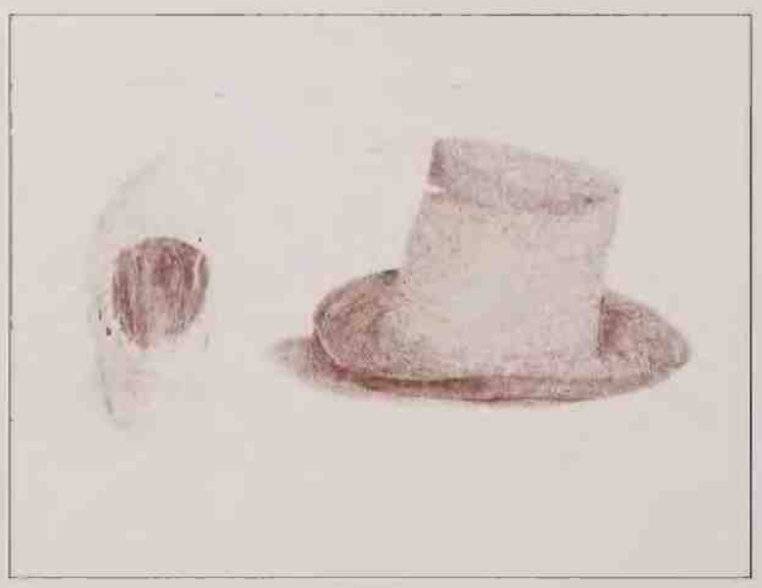
"Eighteenth-century Podilian boots under the table," according to the caption, which suggests the drawing was done in the Kiev folk architecture museum. Feltwork and leatherwork were not as easy to do at home as spinning, dyeing and weaving. The expensive felt and sheepskin coats, and leather boots, often had to be bought. In bad times the whole family might share one or two coats or pairs of boots.

In addition to spinning and dyeing, Ukrainian peasants also wove and plaited straw for hempen baskets, page 7, or hats and primitive footwear shown here.

However, I wouldn't say the people looked undernourished. One age group I saw at least seemed reasonably well dressed and up-to-date in clothes – a group of schoolgirls. The rest of the people seemed to be dressed rather shabbily, and poorly fitted. Certainly the charming old homespun native costume type of dress was gone – except for the rare sheepskin jacket and that looked all worn and grimy.

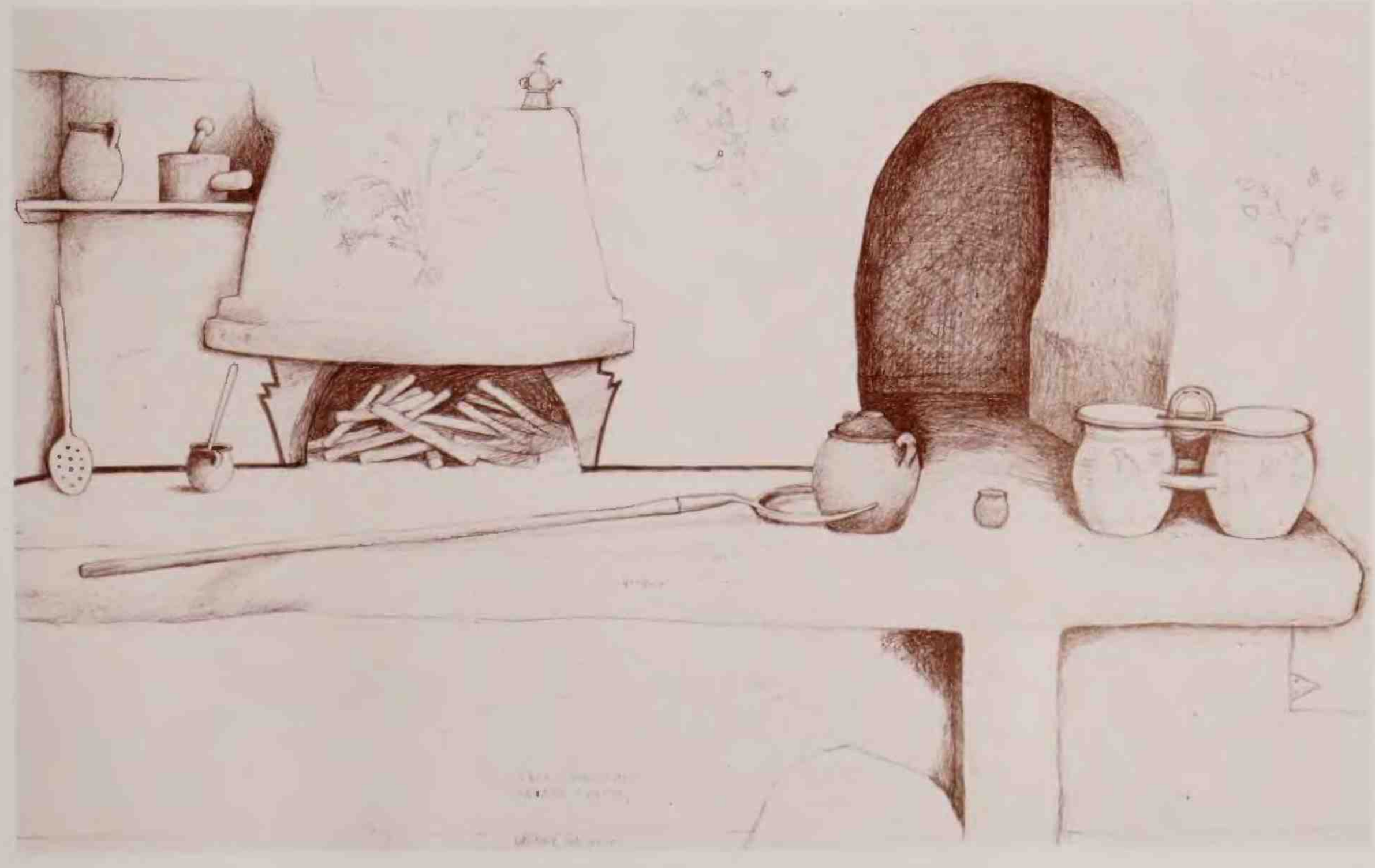
Because of the hardship involved in settling the Canadian West at the turn of the century, the Canadian government actively campaigned with the assistance of shipping companies to attract immigrants. Clifford Sifton, the minister of the interior who defended the case for immigration from Eastern Europe, insisted on the need for "stalwart peasants in sheepskin coats." Kurelek's father came to Canada following a visit to Borivtsi by a member of the Cunard Shipping line. The "sheepskin coat" subsequently became both a symbol of pride and an object of scorn. It is not surprising that Kurelek would deliberately seek one out to draw on his return to the village. He felt very much the story behind the clothing, the life implied in the wear and tear. Ed.





"A kitchen in a poor home in 19th-century Podilia," wrote Kurelek. Notes on these working drawings are reminders of colors for the paintings he would have made had he lived. The *pich*, immediately beside the door, occupied as much as a quarter of the floor space. Baking was done in one part of it, cooking in another and its flat back ledge, unseen here behind the bake oven mouth, was reserved for the old, the sick and the very young, especially in cold weather. Once fired up, it stayed warm for 24 hours and heated the house. Updated versions of the *pich* can be found in Ukrainian homes to this day.

The *pich*, too, seems to have altered, not in the oven shape or principle of operation, but in the type of fuel – in father's day it was wood, corncobs, even cow dung, but now it was something else, but in the avalanche of information I had to absorb in four short hours I didn't get it. I do remember Sando pointing out to me in the porch or vestibule (the *siny* of a typical old house) as we entered his, a naptha-type single burner (such as is standard for every apartment in Hong Kong) cooking a pot of stew. "That's the way we cook now" is what he said. Yet he said it with the double-meaning expression of face and intonation of voice ("enigmatic" I guess is the word) that safely covers up a people's underground rebellion of a system they live under but allows a visitor to grasp that protest if he keeps his ears and eyes open.



Clockwise from top left: A wooden pitcher for carrying water to the fields.

A water bucket once stood in every village home.

"Setting on a poor villager's table," probably drawn in the museum near Kiev.

Narrow-necked jars suggest a pear beverage in the making. Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks were made from a variety of fruits.

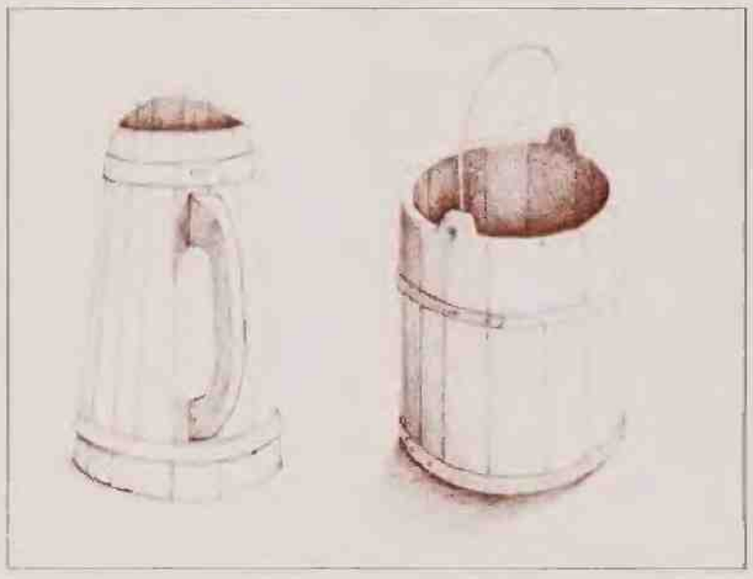
At left of pears is a solid wooden pestle.

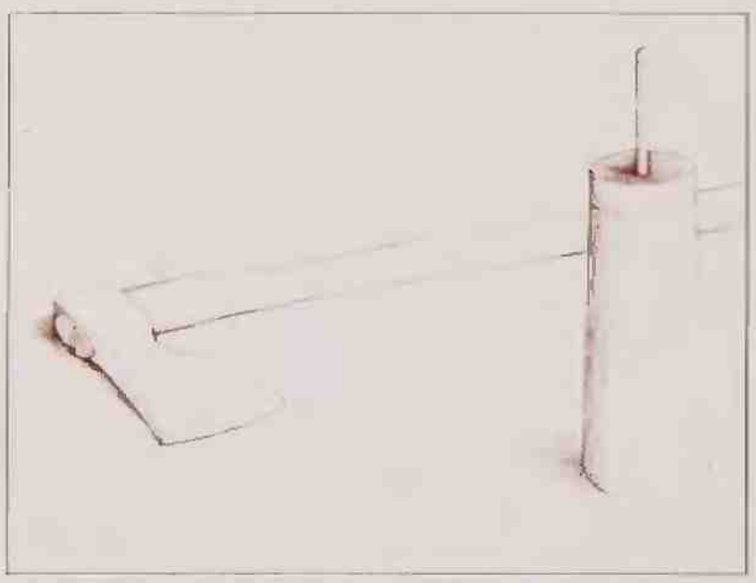
Cucumber seeds were dried for planting next year.

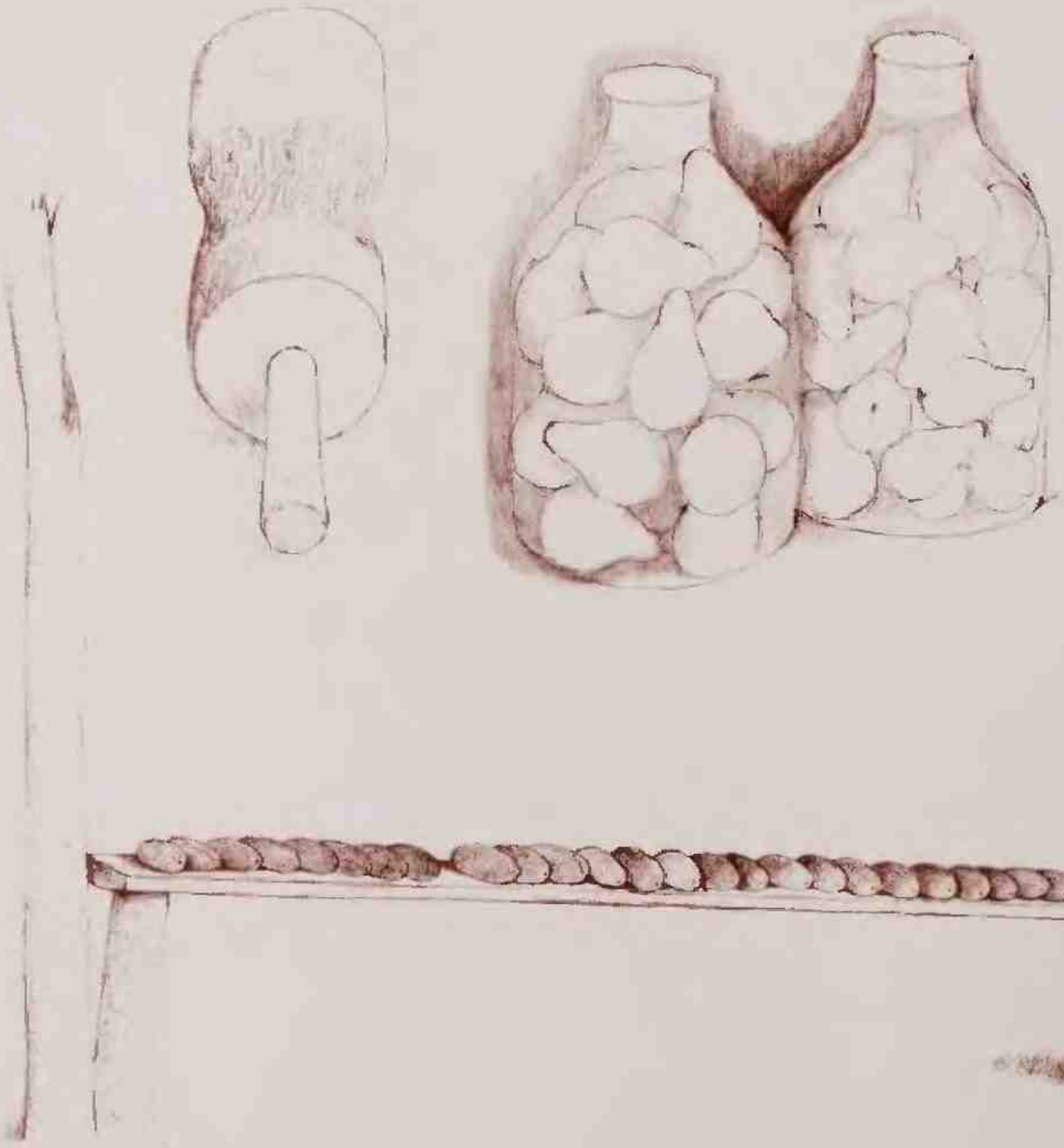
Mortar and pestle for grinding home-grown grains and herbs.

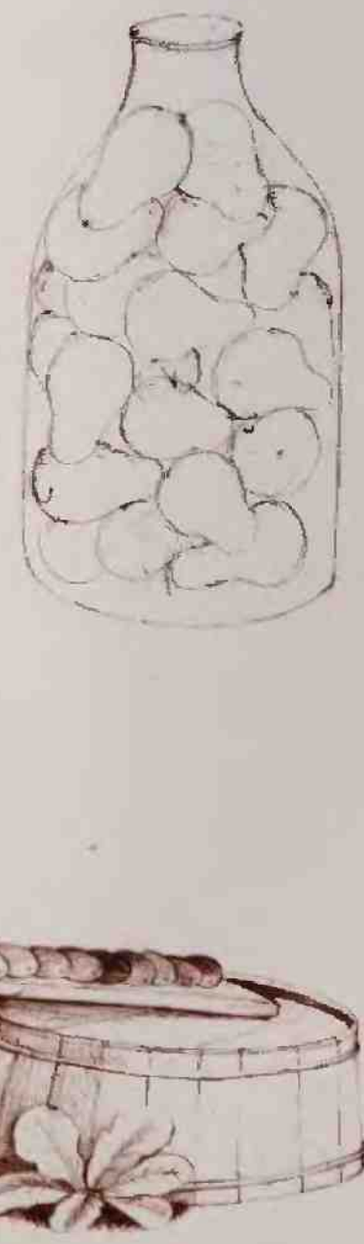
Kurelek's little joke labels the hand showing barrel's scale, "Ivan's hand." "Ivan" is as common in the USSR as "John" is in the West.

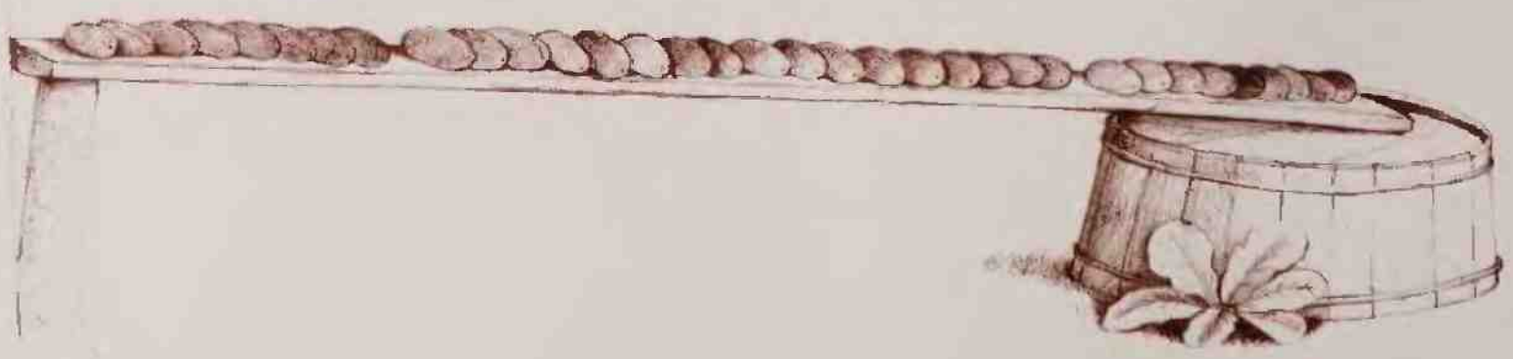
Ax and butter churn are "items found in a Podilian pantry," Kurelek says.





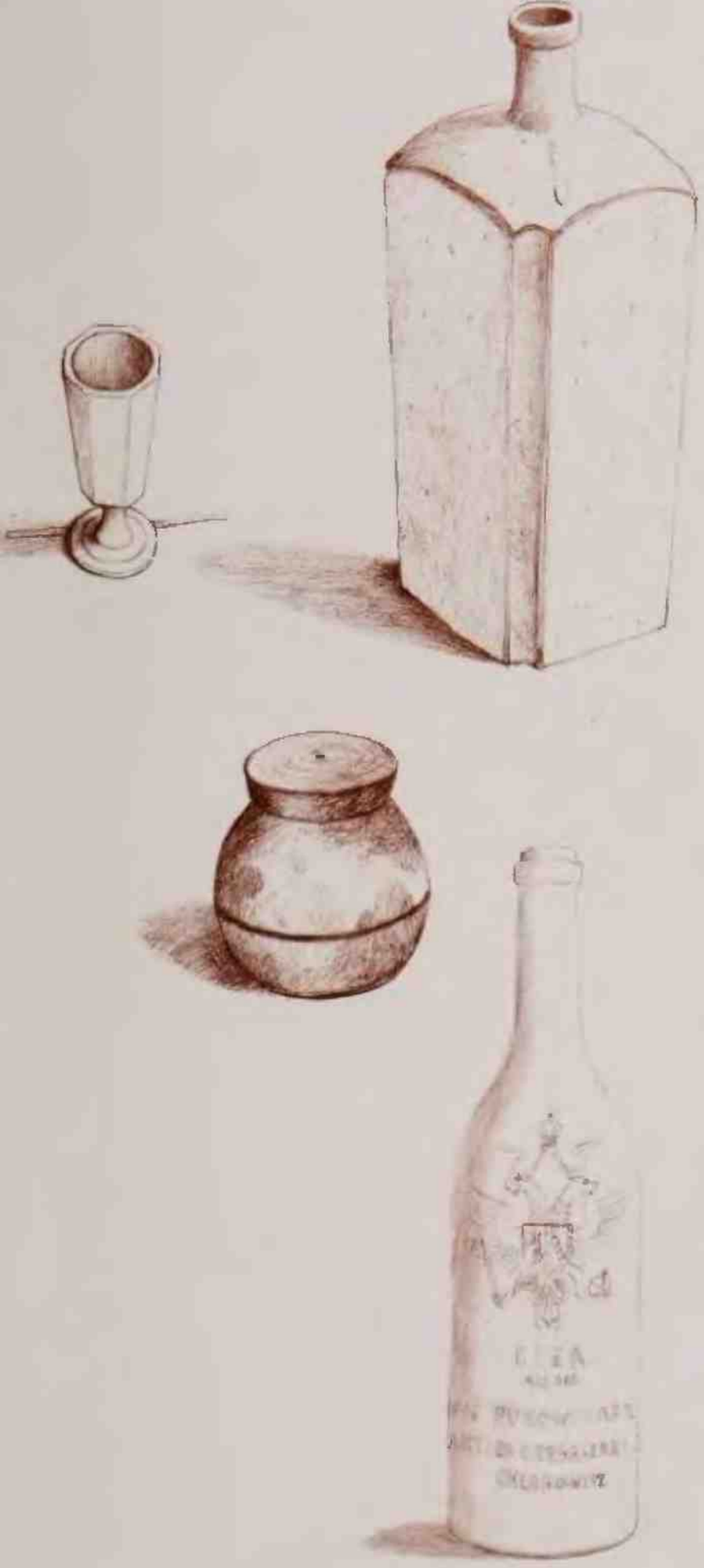






A 200-year-old drinking glass and other objects which the artist probably sketched in the folk architecture museum near Kiev.

"An early 20th-century beer bottle from the first Bukovynian brewery," wrote Kurelek.



As I said, there seemed to be plenty to eat judging by how the plates were heaped for my "welcome home" dinner. And there was now a largish bakery in the village baking bread for that area, perhaps for several villages. But, as you know, it's hard to say whether what's put before a guest represents a people's true daily diet.

The same about the occasional prosperous looking house in the village seemingly recently remodeled or just being remodeled – it certainly didn't indicate equality. But why the difference? Were they party people, or had they received an inheritance from abroad, or were their children professional people? My guides wanted me to photograph those houses rather than the others. Bui if I had been allowed more time in the village, I'd have found out why the difference. These were the signs of the whole falsity of their propaganda. It's been said, "The camera can't lie." Never have I been so aware how much it can be made to lie.

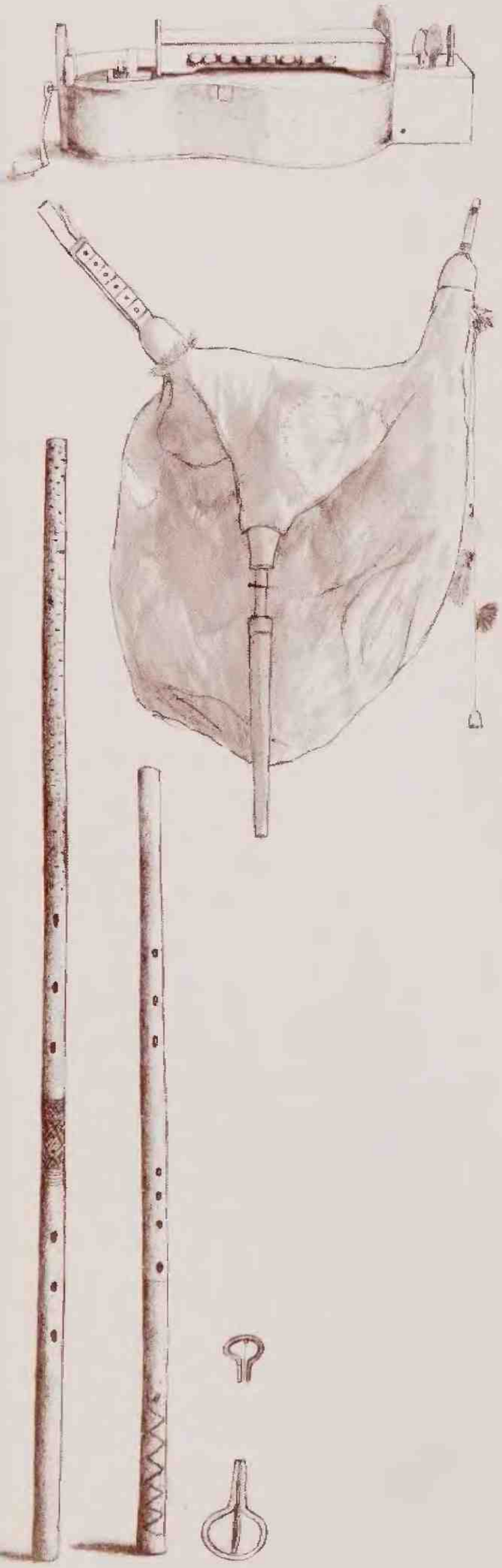
In 1977 William Kurelek got to spend one night in the village in his cousin Sando's house, but he does not appear to have slept on the pich. *Instead he spent the night talking to Sando. He stayed in the neighboring city of Chernivtsi and was driven to and from Borivtsi every day. The village had been "modernized" in the intervening years. Ill as he was, he took photographs of what his father's house now looked like to show his father on his return. His artist's eye never failed him, and even when posing with Sando and his wife, he arranged to do so under Ukrainian wall decorations.*

From Borivtsi comes this story of that last trip and how he kept going in spite of being so sick. Mykola Kolankiwsky reports he was told that "one day when Kurelek was out alone painting in the fields, a small child came running into the house: 'Uncle is ill; he is lying on the ground.' When the relative rushed out to Kurelek, he found him on the path with his face turned to the freshly plowed furrows. Touching his arm, he inquired about his health. Kurelek answered, 'I'm alright – I'm only searching for my roots.' " Ed.

Top to bottom: Many instruments once common to Ukrainian folk music are today heard only in isolated areas. The *lira* sketched here was a hurdy-gurdy type of instrument which flourished in the Ukraine from the 17th to the 19th centuries. It was popular among blind balladeers and epos singers who wandered through the countryside performing to its drone. They accepted shelter and a little food in exchange for their epic songs and regional news.

Bagpipes are common to sheepherding cultures. The *duda*, a bagpipe-like instrument made of goatskin, was known throughout the Ukraine at one time. It remained most popular, however, among the Carpathian peasants whose sheep roamed the foothills.

Two flutes and, at right, two Jew's harps. Stringed instruments carried the tune in Ukrainian folk music, but the peasants also played a variety of flute-like instruments that varied in length, pitch and fingering complexity. The *sopilka, floiara, dentsivka, frilka* and *telynka* were often heard accompanying a small drum and twanging Jew's harp.



Conserving his energy for his art, Kurelek wrote only two letters to his wife during his 1977 trip. The first, dated September 4 and 5, was started "somewhere over the Ukraine." In it he reports that he noticed "no deterioration in my condition so far"; it was finished in his hotel room in Kiev.

One thing had not changed in the seven intervening years: the waiting, the postponements and the attempts of his official hosts to get him to tour and meet people when he was so anxious to start work. He had to "haggle for about an hour about the schedule of my stay and what I would do. . . . This afternoon I will be taken by one of the society's cars to a Ukrainian village museum . . . where I will start one painting and several drawings. I am waiting for them to call on the phone. This waiting – no actual work started yet – is getting me down."

The second letter, written September 6, reports his disappointment that he was not allowed to work for the whole day in the museum, but was permitted only two and a quarter hours there. He complains about having to go to more board meetings and take a mini tour of Kiev. "It's amazing these people just don't understand the situation. . . . I tell them I came to work, not as a tourist. They listen and then arrange my day otherwise.

"You know, dear wife . . . I needed lots of things in the line of art supplies . . . essential things like colored pencils, erasers, inks. But it's fun improvising. I whittled off part of my sink plug to get down to clean rubber and used that for an eraser. I use the ashtray for a bowl for my All-Bran. The funniest thing of all was my premature glee at finding I could use my socks as paint rags (they looked just about worn through after two days' wear). That evening after one sock was well smeared with paint, I went to my suitcase for next day's socks. I'd forgotten to pack the bundle of them I'd prepared. I saw myself having to sit at the board meeting in only my shoes. Fortunately, I remembered you'd given me an extra pair at the last minute. That pair I did find. I now have one pair till I get to Chernivtsi where my cousins will help me find a clothing store . . . "

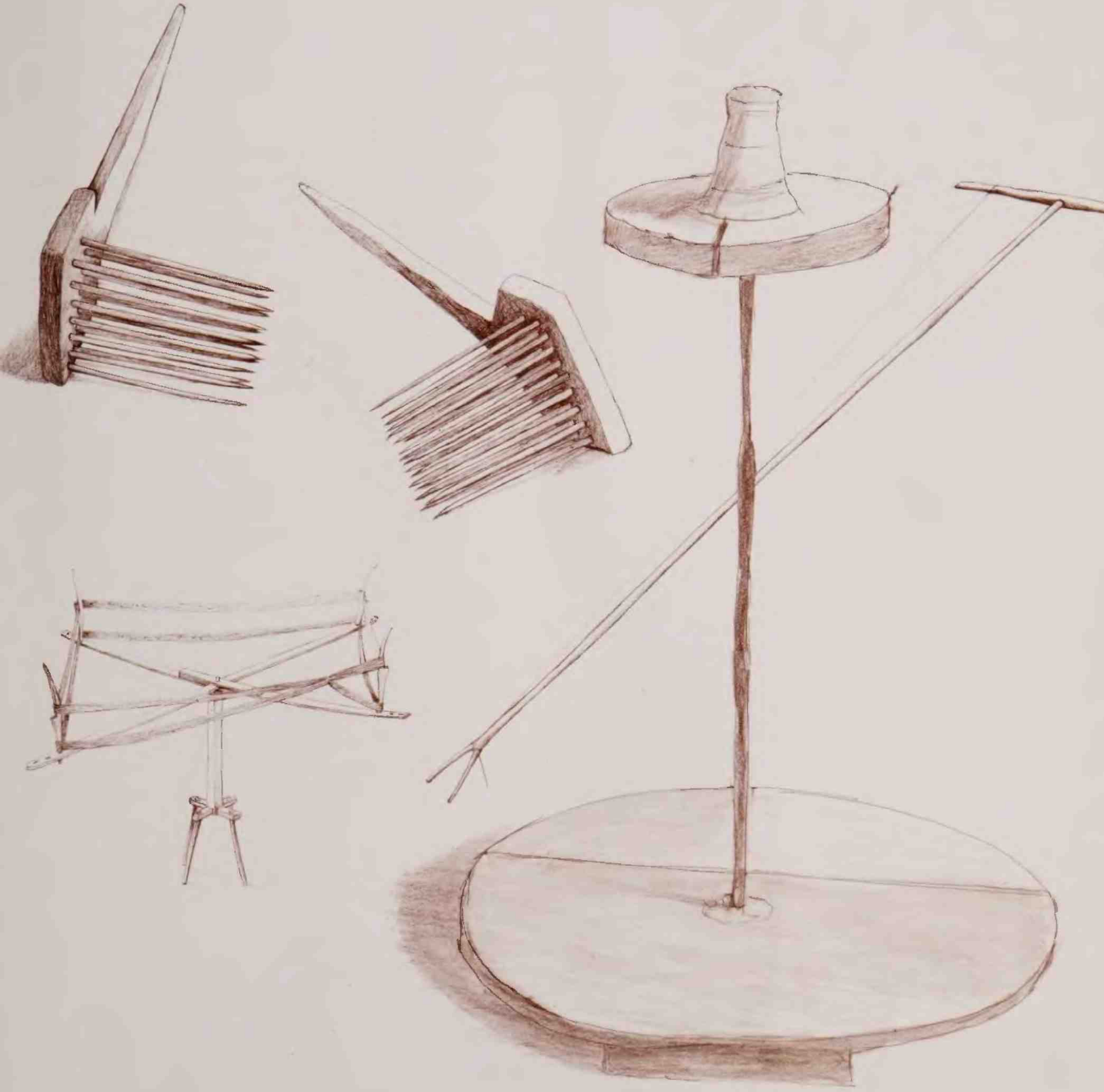
This unfinished letter, along with a two-sentence fragment dated September 8, was found in his luggage after his return home. Ed.

Clockwise from top left: These are hemp combs. Although there were expert weavers, the peasants might spin, dye and weave their own wool, flax, cotton and hemp, to reduce the cost.

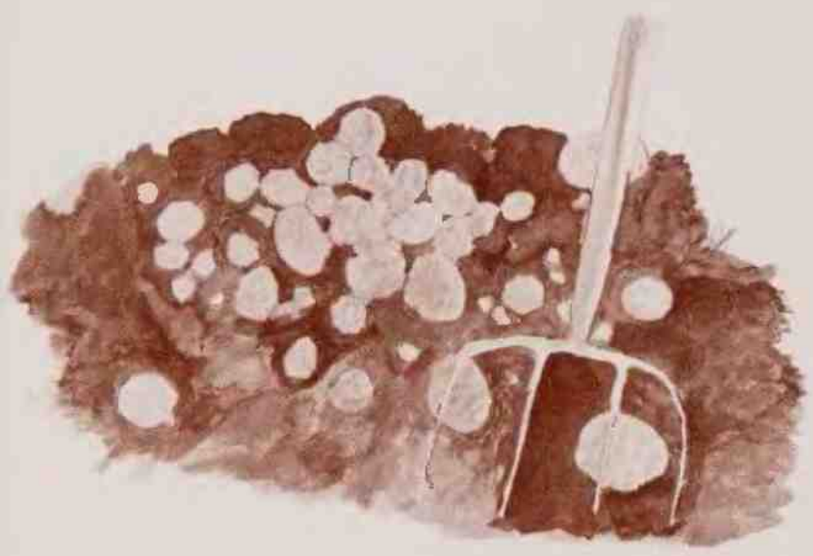
The cooper worked with wooden staves to make needed vessels, but potters might use a wheel like this.

A *motovylo*, or skein pole (seen here crossing the potter's wheel), was used to make skeins of thread of standard length for the loom. Some homes had their own looms, on which women wove cloth in patterns, styles and shapes typical of the village. They made everything from wall hangings and tablecloths to clothing fabrics and blankets. Even if the material was not woven at home, the spinning and dyeing might be.

A winding tool called the *viialka* supported skeins before weaving.



Those who know Kurelek's art can imagine the kind of paintings that would have emerged from the unfinished sketches shown here and on the next page, how he might have used the details in the Ukrainian mural he hoped to paint.

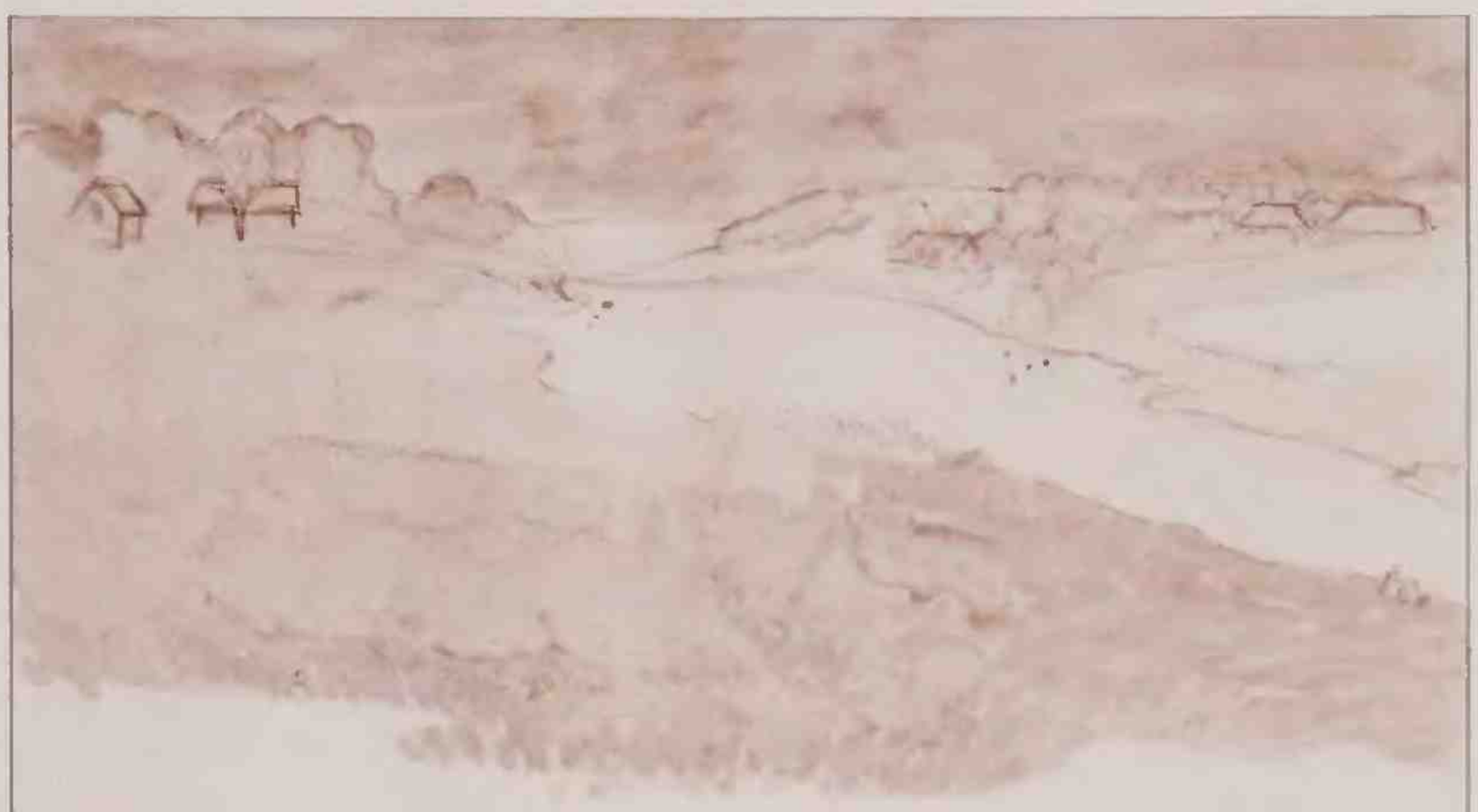


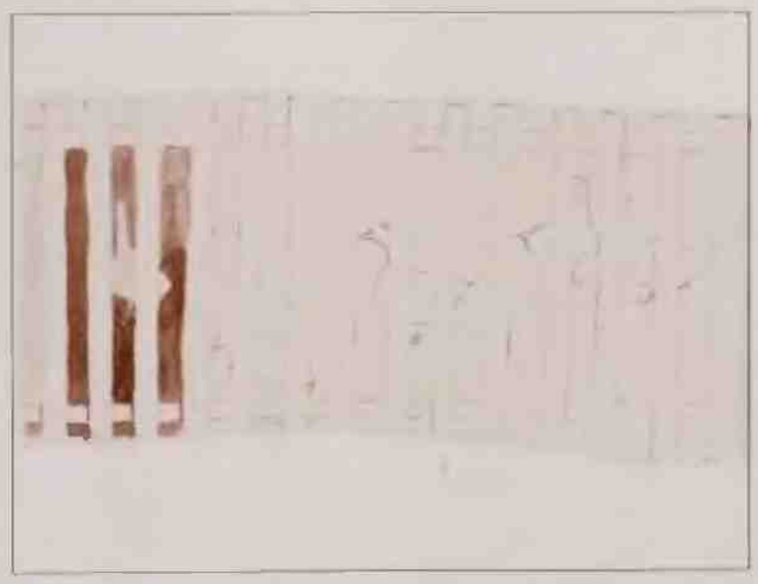
Kurelek did not live to tell us whether he found out if he was more Ukrainian or Canadian, although he liked his relatives and found in the relics of his father's childhood the counteracting gentleness he sought. His wife, Jean, however, gives us a clue to his feelings on his return to Canada.

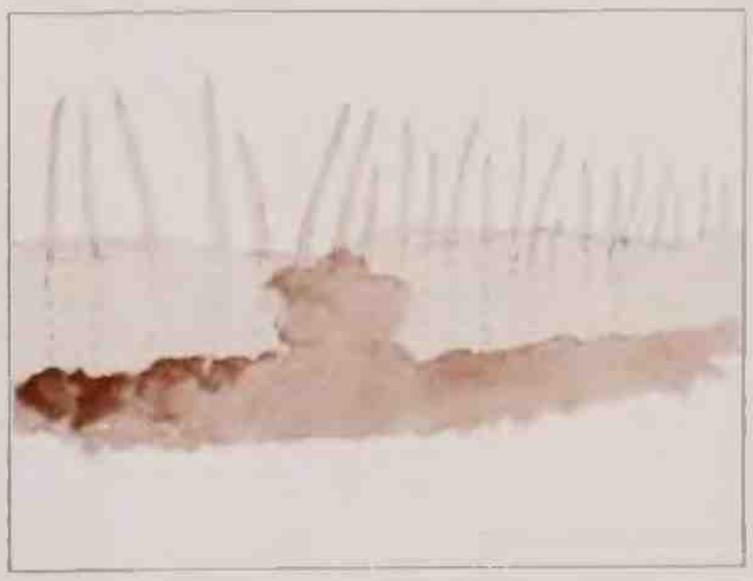
She and three of their four children went to the Toronto airport on Saturday, September 24, to pick him up. He always drove when he was in the car, but when she saw how ill he was, she insisted on taking the wheel. He did not protest, but sat quietly beside her. Then suddenly, without preliminaries or explanation, he spoke to the children in the back seat: "You should be happy that you live in this country."

The following Friday he was in hospital. During the first days he talked of recovering and asked that his parents not be told where he was. Jean felt they had a right to know, and during the last remaining weeks they came several times from their farm near Hamilton to visit. Before going into the hospital Bill had taken film of the trip to be developed. He asked Jean to pick up the photographs and he wanted to show them to his father. But his father, seeing him so weak, refused to let him strain himself. There is something poignant about son and father each trying to do something for the other and somehow missing.

On October 28 Bill underwent surgery in a last-hope operation. He died six days later, November 3, 1977. Afterward his father regretted not having let Bill show him the photographs. In his own way he had tried to show how much he cared for his son. The depression that had sent Bill to hospital in England nearly 20 years before was a demarcation point for the father too. He could not change the hurt done his son as a boy, but he too was reaching out, and the relationship between the two had improved steadily with the years. In the end the father tried to show some of the softness the son had sought in the village. Ed.

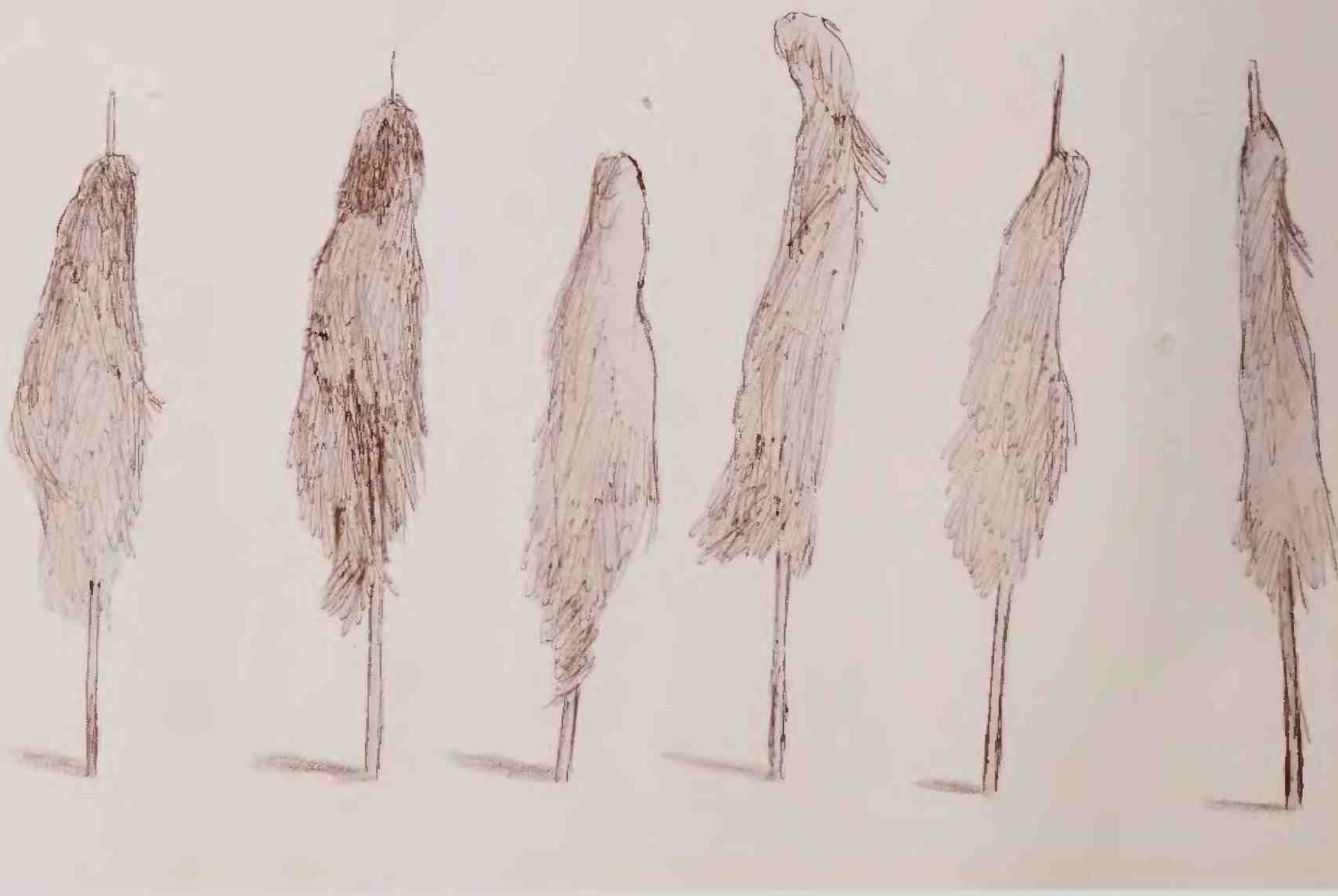






Hard to tell if these are haycocks – or distaffs loaded with raw wool, hemp or other fibers to be spun. This could have been a museum display. Kurelek had longed to be permitted to "wander freely from village to village...as Van Gogh did in Holland and France," and many of his drawings remind one of Van Gogh's intimate rendering of objects.

William Kurelek was born near Whitford, Alberta, on March 3, 1927. At age seven, moved to a farm in Stonewall, Manitoba, north of Winnipeg. Graduated from the University of Manitoba, briefly attended the Ontario College of Art in Toronto and the Institudo Allende in Mexico. Worked in a lumber camp one summer and returned for six months in 1951 to earn money to study art in England. In London was hospitalized for depression, and converted to Catholicism. Returned to Canada in 1959 and worked as a framer for Avrom Isaacs' Toronto art gallery. First exhibit there 1960. Was an immediate success. Married Jean Andrews, 1962, and had four children: Cathy, Steve, Barbara and Tom. First books appeared in 1973: *A Prairie Boy's Winter, O Toronto* and autobiography, *Someone with Me*, followed by *Lumberjack*, 1974; *A Prairie Boy's Summer, Kurelek's Canada* and *The Passion of Christ according to St. Matthew*, 1975; *A Northern Nativity, Fields, Jewish Life in Canada* and *The Last of the Arctic*, 1976. Posthumous books include *Fox Mykyta*, 1978; *The Ukrainian Pioneer*, 1980; *The Polish Canadians*, 1981 and *They Sought a New World*, 1985. Exhibit, "Kurelek's Vision of Canada," toured major galleries across Canada, 1982 to 1984. *Kurelek: A Biography* by Patricia Morley published in 1986.



William Kurelek was born on a prairie farm in Alberta in 1927, the eldest of seven children. The family moved to Manitoba in 1934 where they tried to eke out a living struggling against drought, locusts and fires through the Depression years.

He has left an extensive record of those years in his autobiography *Someone with Me* and in a rich legacy of paintings and drawings, estimated in the thousands. It was a joyless boyhood during which school alone offered respite from the farmwork that could stretch from dawn to midnight, under the demands of a father he never seemed able to satisfy. He would later acknowledge, ''My father had been hard on his children back on the land. But he had set us all a good example with his own industry.''

By working in lumber camps Kurelek finally earned enough money to go his own way. But in England where he went to study art, he experienced the nervous breakdown that resulted in his religious conversion and the faith that sustained him for the rest of his life.

He remained ever grateful for the success he achieved after his return to Canada, for his happy marriage, his four children and the ever-increasing attention his art was getting. Much of the accompanying financial rewards he devoted to charitable works, particularly in the Third World.

Kurelek liked to work in series, often alternating religious and secular themes. Many of these have been published as books: *The Passion of Christ according to St. Matthew*, *O Toronto* and *Kurelek's Canada*. His children's books, *A Prairie Boy's Winter*, *A Prairie Boy's Summer*, *Lumberjack*, and *A Northern Nativity*, were published in half a million copies through North America and Europe and are recognized Canadian classics.

Because he felt very close to the immigrant experience, he wanted to paint the history of all the native and national groups that make up Canada. He completed five such series, and the book *They Sought A New World* brought some of these paintings together posthumously.

An exhibition of his work under the title ''Kurelek's Vision of Canada'' toured 14 cities from 1982 to 1984 and attracted record crowds. Because of the raw honesty of his art, his avoidance of art trends in favor of the simple depiction of ordinary people struggling to live decently, and because his own all-too-brief life was such a triumph of the human spirit, Kurelek has touched and involved audiences as have few artists in our time.

Tundra Books

The last days and drawings of

William Kurelek

To My Father's Village