

Medwidsky and Me: Welcoming Ukrainians to Alberta - Past, Present and Future By Matthew Tinsley

Alberta is one of the most culturally diverse places in the world, and Dr. Bohdan Medwidsky was a big contributor to that. In 1936 he was born in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine, and at age two travelled to Switzerland for health reasons. World War II broke out and he was stranded there for the duration of the war and grew up speaking French and German. He was placed into the Lexenfield displaced persons camp and was reunited with his family in 1948, in Vienna, Austria at age twelve. However, they did not speak the same language and he had to relearn Ukrainian as a teenager. In the camp, young Bohdan was amazed; everywhere he went, people were singing in Ukrainian, practicing their religion, and celebrating this culture in many ways. Once he had relearned the language, he began developing his identity as a Ukrainian patriot. When he finally settled in Canada, he wanted to spread his culture, and he did it in many ways, including teaching Ukrainian, volunteering at many churches and events, and most of all, founding the Kule Folklore Centre at the University of Alberta. That was the crowning achievement of his life, eventually earning him multiple awards and lifelong friendships. His pride and joy was his wife, who died very young, leaving him a widower. Many of the students he mentored became his family.

When Medwidsky came to Canada, there were very few people who knew Ukrainian. He could communicate with very few people, and he was living a very difficult life. Once he learned English and got settled, he received his Ph.D. in proverbs and linguistics. He started to teach Ukrainian and Russian as university courses. He volunteered in numerous leadership roles, including the Friends of the Ukrainian Village Society. He was a driving force behind the implementation of Ukrainian immersion schools in Alberta. He knew he wanted to spread his culture and he thought these ideas were great. However, he decided to do something bigger, something that would share Ukrainian culture with others. He founded the Ukrainian Folklore Program at the University of Alberta. This program is dedicated to Ukrainian religion, language, and culture and is the largest North American repository of Ukrainian and Ukrainian-Albertan folklore. According to Mrs. Haydey*, during the Soviet occupation, many Ukrainian traditions were lost in Ukraine. It was in places like Alberta and the Kule Folklore Centre where the traditions were preserved, and where Ukrainians came to relearn their culture, ensuring a stronger Ukrainian-Albertan community. According to his co-workers, he was “legendary” at convincing people to donate to his program. He inspired many students to continue sharing his work and legacy through teaching. For his work, he received an honorary award from the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, but he never thought of himself as superior to others. One of his favorite proverbs was “тримаймозія”, which translates to “Let’s keep holding together.” I think this says a lot about his personality, given that that was one of his last words.

I am one of 345,000 (9.3 percent) of Albertans with Ukrainian heritage who are interested in our roots. Medwidsky was also involved in the founding of more Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox churches. He also spent a lot of time at the University of Alberta and the Kule Folklore Centre, even after retirement. In his honour, after his passing, the archives were named the Bohdan Medwidsky Ukrainian Folklore Archives, and flags at the University of Alberta were lowered to half-mast.

Medwidsky is most relevant today, due to the current situation in Ukraine. There will be a large immigration wave of Ukrainians fleeing to our safe and peaceful Canada. According to Olena Kovpak*, there have been more than 80,000 Ukrainian applications for temporary residency in Canada. Bohdan Medwidsky's work has prepared us for this wave more than we realize, as we are much better prepared today than we were when Medwidsky came to Canada. Today we have Ukrainian churches, schools, museums, clubs, and, of course, the Kule Folklore Centre. When Bohdan Medwidsky immigrated, there was none of that. Now, there are many more resources in place, so today and in the future, we can support new immigrants.

Medwidsky has motivated me in many ways. Through his work, he has inspired many people, including me, to learn about our culture. He inspired me to go to St Vladimir's Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian museum situated there. I also plan to visit the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village outside Edmonton this summer. Given the current situation in Ukraine, I have dedicated some time to making backpacks for new refugees, so that they can have a better start when they come to Alberta. Medwidsky inspired me, as when he came to Canada, he had very little. I want to make sure that doesn't happen this time, and that new immigrants do not need to struggle, with no one knowing their language, not being able to communicate and struggling to connect with others. I suggest a program called the Ukrainian-Albertan Linguistics Club. It would let new immigrants learn English taught by their fellow students, with adults on hand to assist. They would teach basic phrases and show the corresponding pictures. I have always wanted to learn about the Ukrainian language, so it would be a great opportunity to trade languages, me teaching them English, and they teaching me Ukrainian. It would be a great opportunity to learn new things and make new friends.

I think Bohdan Medwidsky was an Alberta Champion in many ways, as he was dedicated to spreading his culture throughout his whole life. Even after his death, his work continues to provide Albertans with exposure to Ukrainian culture and learning new things. He was a champion for multiculturalism and second language education by helping create many new

schools and churches. He was a champion for sharing his culture. He was a champion for dedicating his life to the greater good.

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