

WHY LEARN UKRAINIAN?

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Rev. M. Zolotarev

The Possibility Now Exists

FIFTY or sixty years ago Ukrainian settlers in Alberta used to gather together in their small, white-washed pioneer houses, and in their loneliness they would talk about everything under the sun. Sooner or later their conversation would turn to the long-distance prospects of the Ukrainian people in Canada. On such occasions someone would raise the question whether the Ukrainian language would ever be taught in Canadian schools, collegiates and universities. The possibility was as stimulating to the imagination as the accompanying liquid refreshment was to the body. A lively exchange of opinion would follow, but as the possibility was remote extravagant ideas were freely thrown into the pot and the fermenting bubbles rose to the surface and twinkled in the midnight light. When the grey morning dawned the settlers had to resume the hard labor of establishing their immediate, economic survival in the new land and leave their rosy dreams to the future.

No one then could have foreseen the shape of the future—two world wars, a severe intervening economic depression, the revolutionary technological changes, and a new worldwide political form emerging. Nevertheless something of the old dream persisted. It has now taken a new form imposed by the necessity of recasting it to fit the new community and the world conditions which have emerged.

It was not until 1959 that Ukrainian was accepted by the University of Alberta, as one of the regular subjects among the modern language courses, that the subject was put on the list of accredited subjects in the High Schools of the Province, and that a principle concerning language was

adopted by a Royal Commission which might result in the ultimate inclusion of Ukrainian in the public school courses. Up to this time interest in the Ukrainian language has been kept alive by Ukrainian churches, institutes and societies and through night classes, folk classes, summer schools and special courses. Now that Ukrainian has been adopted in the educational system of the Province on the basis of public policy it remains to be seen what response there will be on the part of that section of the Canadian public which one might presume to be most interested in its success—Canadians of Ukrainian origin.

The Internal Debate

IN the early days when Ukrainian was spoken by the first generation as their mother tongue, and the English language painfully acquired, it was natural that Ukrainian should be cherished as an intimate possession. Now after one or two generations English is spoken as the common tongue and Ukrainian, heavily charged with English words and lamed by uncertain accents, is spoken only on special occasions. The situation in most cases has become reversed. The worth of the all-essential common language of English is taken for granted while the value of the Ukrainian language becomes more and more a matter of debate. There are some Canadians of Ukrainian origin who pride themselves on taking a common sense view of things and who argue that the task of maintaining the Ukrainian language as a series of scattered linguistic islands in a continental English sea is not worth the effort. Their children diverted by a thousand and one occupations and pleasures throughout the day and evening heartily agree with them.

There are other Ukrainian Canadians who deplore this attitude. They have a deep suspicion of the so-called common sense argument. They believe that common sense is often made an excuse for sheer mental laziness and is frequently based on a very superficial view of what constitutes success in life or richness of personality. Honest ignorance can be answered by honest argument but a philosophy of self-indulgence and short-cuts to success is always difficult to analyze and even more difficult to reform.

It must be admitted that where there is so much intellectual fare and other trimmings offered in our academic institutions we must select with care in order to get adequate nourishment and avoid indigestion. If Ukrainian is selected it should be done with due deliberation, and then chewed thoroughly in order to secure the maximum benefit. What are some of the benefits and advantages to be derived from the study of Ukrainian?

The Sentimental Appeal

AN appeal based on sentiment is regarded by some people as a soft and not very convincing justification for action. To hold such a view is to misunderstand completely the part which sentiment plays in the life of everyone. If we understand by the term sentiment thoughts which are prompted by feelings and emotions then we must recognize that a great part of our life is ruled by sentiment. The question is not a matter of eliminating sentiment, which we cannot do, but of attaching sentiment to worthy and enduring objects. One of these objects is the sense of community solidarity, based on

the common experiences of past generations, the common security of the present, and the common expectation for the future. An individual by himself is a poor, thin being whose life is short, whose accomplishments are limited, and whose worth can only be realized in association with others. One of the associations which has magnified the individual has been the historic nation whose identity has generally been revealed through a common language.

By the decree of fate which cannot now be altered Ukrainian Canadians have their origin in a particular historic past. A great deal which has given significance to their lives has a definite historical and cultural background. The key to that background is the Ukrainian language. To ignore this, or to cut themselves off deliberately from the roots of their past is to impoverish themselves as individuals. It is true that we share with other nations a common past, but no past is so intimate and revealing as our own particular national past. Those who are convinced of this have warm and natural feelings with regard to it.

Hence the appeal based on sentiment is not something artificially cultivated and maintained but is something which is fundamental and sound. Like all values of life it may be exaggerated, distorted and misused but Ukrainian Canadians need not apologize any more than Scotch Canadians, English Canadians, French Canadians, etc., who wish to preserve a sense of organic connection with the past. In the case of Ukrainian Canadians the maintenance of this connection involves many of their people learning thoroughly the Ukrainian language which is now possible in the High Schools and University. Without this opportunity the disap-

pearance of the Ukrainian language would be accelerated and ultimately the language in Canada might become an historical curiosity rather than a living historical link. All of us in Canada would be poorer if in fact the language were to disappear in our midst.

The Practical Appeal on the Basis of Education

THERE was a time when the sentimental appeal was the chief or only appeal made on behalf of the formal academic instruction of Ukrainian. That time is definitely past. Indeed the sentimental appeal may be allowed to obscure the situation as a whole, and thus the very practical considerations may not receive the attention which they deserve. These practical considerations have to do with educational principles, international necessities, and Canadian political life.

The study of languages has suddenly acquired a new significance in the field of modern education. It is now fully realized that communication through language has a far greater significance in the process of a changing civilization than had been suspected hitherto. As one of the most advanced and subtle arts developed by mankind human speech must be studied from every angle in order to appreciate fully its great resources and its limitations. This can best be done through a comparison between two or more languages. Even a superficial knowledge of a second language brings out the varied devices used by man to convey meaning. A thorough knowledge of a second language reveals the unbelievably fine shades of meaning produced by grammatical devices. If one might use a comparison from the mechanical field, one

can understand a particular motor car by driving it or taking it apart but one cannot thoroughly understand motor mechanics unless one could operate more than one make of car, could take them apart, and explain the principles of the differences as well as the similarities between the makes. Not everyone needs to have this information to drive his own car, but the maintenance of the motor industry in modern society depends on an increasing number of people who have this knowledge at their disposal. In the same way in a world of increasing, close communication, if one is to avoid the fate of those building a Tower of Babel the precise nature of language must be understood by more and more people.

The Ukrainian language is a fully developed language spoken by some fifty million people. It belongs to a branch of the Slavonic languages. Other large branches of this Slavonic group are Russian, Polish, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, etc. In structure Ukrainian is similar to the Russian, phonetically it approaches the Serbo-Croatian, and in vocabulary it has much in common with the Polish. The Slavonic languages, now spoken by some two hundred million people are part of the much larger family group known as Indo-European. To this family belong not only Greek and Latin, French and Spanish, but also German and English. Thus while the Slavonic languages have their own distinctive features they are not insuperably difficult for English-speaking people. Nevertheless students who have some knowledge of Ukrainian, however slight, have a great initial advantage in a systematic study of it. It would be a great waste of natural resources if such students should not use the advantage which they have and select Ukrainian as

a second language in advanced education. Some knowledge of Ukrainian could only be a handicap for students if they were under the illusion that hard work was still not essential for a full understanding of the language.

Closely connected with the study of any language is the study of its literature. No one can claim to be educated who has not some acquaintance with the best historical literature of his own people. But the understanding of this literature is greatly enlarged for the student if he also has some systematic knowledge of a parallel body of literature in another language. The Ukrainian Canadian student has already some knowledge of Ukrainian literature, if only fragmentary, through folk songs, concerts, and elocution contests. In the regular school courses he has some systematic training in English literature. The learning of both literatures in advanced courses would give him a wider liberal education than is enjoyed by those students for whom a second language has no emotional appeal and a common body of literature no initial association or attraction.

To gain the full benefit of literary study it is necessary to speak the language as well as to read it. This is particularly true of poetry and drama. In the modern study of language more attention is being paid to the oral mastery of the subject. Here too the Ukrainian Canadian student should have an initial advantage. There is still available opportunity for hearing the language and practising the spoken speech. In this respect the student requires the full co-operation of his family, his church, and other organizations. The school alone cannot, as a rule, achieve both reading and oral mastery of a language.

The Practical Appeal—Ukrainian Scientific Achievement

THE study of science may be as much a humanistic pursuit as is the study of literature but in most cases it is pursued for more limited ends which have to do with industry, business, and power. This is particularly true under communistic regimes which emphasize the subjection of all activity to the interests of the state and its philosophy of material advancement. Terrific emphasis is placed on the study of science. The result is a great outpouring of scientific achievement. It is a common error to designate all scientific work in the Soviet Union as Russian. In the Republic of the Ukraine science is pursued no less avidly than in the Federal Republic of Russia. In the Ukraine, so it is claimed by the Soviet Literary Magazine, *Vitchyzna* (Vol. 1, 1958, p. 208), there are 438 scientific research centres, employing 32,000 research workers. The Soviet Ukrainian Academy of Science alone has 50 scientific research centres with a staff of 9,000. It publishes 14 scientific periodicals in the Ukrainian language. In order to keep up with Ukrainian scientific work in mathematics, engineering, physics, chemistry, radio-astronomy, agriculture and medicine it is absolutely essential that numbers of our Canadian scientists should know Ukrainian. In a few years we can no longer depend on the displaced Ukrainians in our midst for this valuable translation service but we will have to rely on our own Canadian scholars trained in our own institutions. Any student therefore who has ambition for a scientific career and can master the Ukrainian language will have valuable additional qualification to ensure his success. Canada is one of the places in the Free World where such

students should be available. The Government of Alberta is doing its part in making the courses available.

The Practical Appeal—Social and Business Connection

IT is extremely difficult to adjust our thinking to the changes in communication and transportation which have occurred in the last fifty years. There are now, relatively speaking, no isolated or remote areas on the earth. Many people previously learned to read other languages but did not bother to speak them because there was little likelihood that they would have the occasion to hear or use them. We are now crowded on our little planet, with speech-laden airways circulating in seconds about the earth, and jet-propelled, giant passenger liners reaching distant places in eight hours which formerly required in older forms of transport eight days, eight weeks or eight months. The Soviet Union, our near neighbor, which was formerly separated by the Polar ice-cap is now joined by short-wave radio and easy arctic flight. Part of that Soviet Union is the Ukrainian Republic. Communication is inevitable and business connection is likely to increase. In the High Schools of the Ukraine English is being taught. We cannot do less than learn Ukrainian if the communication on the social and business level is not to be entirely one-sided. A linguistically blind man is at a great disadvantage when confronted with a person who has both eyes open. Newspapers, novels, radio, television, and movie pictures originating in the Ukraine as well as from other centres and using the Ukrainian language are

going to be commonplace by the time the boys and girls who are now in High School grow up to full adult life and begin to take over the affairs of our country. Those who are farsighted now will begin to prepare for the future.

The Practical Appeal—Political and Diplomatic Needs

IN the last twenty-five years Canada has found herself pushed into the centre of the world affairs. She can no longer bask in the security provided by the British navy and her own isolation and insignificance, nor can she rest in the comfortable shade provided by the gay umbrella of stars and stripes. She must now play a positive part in that dangerous world of international affairs which has suddenly emerged. Canada has responded to this challenge by enlarging its diplomatic staffs, entering into alliances such as NATO, and playing a small but active part in the affairs of the United Nations Organization. However the general popular basis of its world-wide political knowledge must be enlarged and deepened. This involves a wider knowledge of the Soviet Union, among other regions. An extremely important factor in Soviet politics is the complicated relationship between the dominant Russian Republic and the subordinate Republics. The largest and the most important of the latter is the Republic of Ukraine. To understand the Ukraine one must know its language and read widely of the literature relating to it. The production of scholars who have this knowledge will not take place haphazardly, or through spontaneous birth. There must be planning, cultivation and encouragement. If parents have promising sons and daughters, and children are

possessed of ambition as well as intelligence and industry, there is no reason why there should not appear in Alberta, as elsewhere in Canada, the type of trained personnel which is so urgently needed in our public, political and diplomatic circles.

Conclusion

GREAT civilizations and little minds cannot exist together. We have the possibility before us of a free and abundant life. But we cannot achieve this unless we strengthen every sound element in the structure of our society. Among these elements is the unused, uncultivated and undeveloped linguistic resources of our people. The existent knowledge of Ukrainian is one of these linguistic resources. Whether to use it should not be left to casual decision, superficial consideration, or to the languid mood of choice suitable to the selection of a colored shirt or a spotted tie.

“Each man’s fate is special to him
And his own broad highway
One man builds, another ruins
Looks a third beyond the horizon.”

—Taras Shevchenko.

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