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Cultural Identification of a Person in the Works of William Kurelek

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Abstract--Ethnic groups in Canada try not to dissolve in a foreign national environment and to preserve their identity. Polish-Ukrainian relations are an important topic in the context of studying the immigrant Canadian environment. William Kurelek was interested in this issue and managed to prove the role of Ukrainians in shaping a multicultural Canadian society. The authors of this study aimed to characterize the preconditions and history of the thematic series of Ukrainian immigrants and The Polish Canadians on the basis of artistic works. The works of William Kurelek were characterized and special attention was paid to Polish-Ukrainian motives in his work. The models of Ukrainian-Polish relations through the author's prism of understanding and observing the traditions and culture were derived. Issues of religious tradition, prairie duties, folk celebrations, upbringing, ethnic life and friendship were raised. In his paintings, William Kurelek raised these issues.

Keywords--Canada, cultural identification, immigrants, polish-Ukrainian groups, traditions.

Introduction

Much has been written on the émigré themes of William Kurelek. Several catalogues with author's texts were published with explanations of narrative content of his works – The Polish Canadian [Kurelek \(1977\)](#), Jewish life in Canada [Kurelek & Arnold \(1975\)](#), The Ukrainian pioneer ([Kurelek, 1971](#)). Most interesting are numerous publications by Mykola Kolankiwsy in the Diaspora Ukrainian periodicals *We and the World*. These publications include thematic exhibitions in various cities of Canada and Poland, as well as a brief description of the preconditions and motivations in the creation of the paintings. Of further interest is the publication by Carole H. Carpenter entitled “William Kurelek: teller of tales” ([Carpenter, 2000](#)). Here the author analyzes émigré themes in the work of Kurelek, in particular the Ukrainian and Polish stories, through theoretical explanatory texts of the artist himself, regarding each work. The topic of Polish-Ukrainian relations in the immigrant Canadian environment, through the historical and cultural-traditional similarities, did not address a critique of the art, nor cultural analysis ([Thunder Driven 1970](#)). Also, very important to us is research O'Brien M. “William Kurelek: Painter and Prophet”, where the author analyzes the paintings of the Kurelek on the prairie emigrant theme ([O'Brien, 2013](#)).

Several short articles have been written about the “Polish Canadians” in Kurelek’s works in Ukrainian and Canadian periodicals specifically the unresearched issues of “Ukrainian-Polish relations” which Kurelek attempted to describe in the art. In exploring the range of intercultural connections and social transformations that took place in the Polish and Ukrainian groups of the multicultural environment of Canada, it is important to identify and analyze the similarities and differences in the history of the first settlers, their culture and traditions. The main task of every major or minor ethnic group in Canada was to stay and not dissolve in a foreign national environment by preserving the identity of their own culture and language. The biggest problem of national assimilation was the incorrect assessment of the values of their people, their culture and feelings of inferiority and imperfection in opposing themselves with a stronger ethnic group. William Kurelek was interested in the issue of cultural assimilation, which we can divide into three types: structural, cultural and identification. Structural assimilation is the assimilation of personal connections with the people of a new country, joining a new group – “Friends Only in this Life”. Cultural assimilation is the transfer of ways of behavior, thinking, habits, interests – “Hot Day in Kensington Market” and “Halloween games”. Identification assimilation is the identification of oneself with this people, the psychological acceptance of another nationality – “Many False Prophets Will Arise” ([Kotarba et al., 2007](#); [Affek et al., 2021](#)).

Each Ukrainian and Polish community has undergone a process of assimilation and preservation of tradition, having three main components: a local community that encompasses life and social relations, identity and a sense of separateness and cultural tradition. These three factors can be considered as a triangle in which each angle affects the other two and, in turn, is affected by the other two. It is this community of culture of many individuals and groups that makes them a community that has traditions. An example of the preservation and reproduction of tradition in painting is the work “Free Ukrainian Mountaineers” (1968), in

which the author artistically recreates the plot of Ukrainian Carpathian life measured from the fantasy of his childhood (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Buijs et al., 2009).

William Kurelek has been compared to Paul Yuzyk, a Canadian senator of Ukrainian descent who, politically, introduced the Ukrainian community to the social context of multicultural Canada. As William Kurelek through his art shows and proves the experience and important role of Ukrainians in shaping a multicultural Canadian society, focusing on immigrant plots in art, he also sought to find and unravel his past and hidden meanings that his parents did not fully reveal. Kurelek and Yuzyk sought to combine their Ukrainian roots and Canadian childhood. William Kurelek paintings were based on numerous true stories, which were preceded by certain studies, discussions, and numerous interviews with various immigrants. He seemed to be trying to convey important messages from early immigrants to modern society, the so-called “illustration of immigrant news”. The artist himself divided his works on immigrant issues into four categories: the first showed immigrant families and their traditions – “Blessing of the Easter Paska” (1968), the second-hard immigrant work – “Autumn” (1965), the third – the abandoned Old Land and arrival to a new land – “Crossing the Atlantic” (1968), the fourth – depicted the vastness and beauty of Canada through the eyes of newcomers – “A Glimpse of Mount Robson” (1972-1973). He always wrote his moralizing comments for each category. The emphasis has always been on the fact that Ukrainians have never lost their identity and, despite their troubles, have always remained part of the community (Saarinen, 2006; Gurib-Fakim, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to characterize the preconditions and history of the thematic series Ukrainian immigrants and The Polish Canadians. Such characterization encompasses analyzing individual works, highlighting the typology of common compositional content stories, as well as detailing the psychological and cultural climate and varieties of nonconformism of each national group. An analysis of the common and distinct cultural, religious, behavioral and ethnic features of the Polish and Ukrainian immigrant groups in Canadian society is conducted on the basis of these artistic works (Burnett et al., 2005; McIntyre & Lee, 2020).

General characteristics of the works of William Kurelek

After traveling to India in 1969, William Kurelek began to illustrate the history of the lives of the first immigrant settlers in Canada through his art, separating them into thematic “national” series (Irish 3rd & Dantzler, 1976; Cook, 1980). The content in the Ukrainian and Polish series was most familiar to Kurelek. There were specific themes from common Polish-Ukrainian history which were dramatically connected to the Old Country/ as a grandson of immigrant pioneer, it was important for the artist to carry out a “sociometry” of characters – heroes of different nationalities in his art. In general, emigration to Canada formed in several waves: the first wave occurred in 1891-1914. At that time, 200.000 immigrants came mainly from the Western regions of Ukraine, settling in the provinces of Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan, where they began to co-exist with the Polish ethnic group of immigrants. The main motivation behind leaving

their Homeland was the promise of land for farming and building a real future alongside the desire to-obtain favorable economic, political and social development opportunities, which was impossible in their countries. This defined a certain “status” of the individual, outlining its formal (farmer, politician, priest) and informal (enemy, leader, sympathizer) role in one or another socio-ethnic group (McBride et al., 1960; Luijters et al., 2008).

With the same precision in Polish-Ukrainian stories, whether about childhood, religious traditions or farmer's duties, the author denoted the holistic-orientational unity of both peoples with similar nonconformist features and a similar psychological climate. The next defining message emphasized by Kurelek was social facilitation – a certain effect of the presence of another group, with an emphasis on the dominant roles of one with the other, or one against the other. An example of this is found in “Polish wedding at Kaszuby”, where in a single work the author illustrates thirteen scenes of Polish-Ukrainian relations. Through “interlinear” content-subtext in this work, the author demonstrates deindividualization as a loss of self-awareness, and fear of assessing their neighbors with certain stereotypical perceptions of envy, deception or false praise. In this, and overall, in works on Polish and Ukrainian immigrant subjects, Kurelek reproduced the so-called “chameleon effect”, where people in the group are inclined to display gestures, words and facial expressions that mimic one another. Kurelek repeatedly recalled in his memories the friendly relations between the two “neighboring” peoples, however he emphasized a Ukrainian point of view and a certain “national privilege” in the polynomial Canadian society. According to Robin Waples: Kurelek focused his vision of Canada on various national groups that respect the traditions of their former homelands and who live in harmony in their new homeland” (Sovtys, 2020).

Facilitation, as the strengthening of dominant reactions in the presence of others was well exhibited in Kurelek’s subjects in farmer topics, in particular the story of “The Peak Year” Kurelek (1964), and “Story about Old Country” (Kurelek, 1967). In the latter the artist depicts a scene of young engaged in an exciting discussion about political history, foreign occupation and folk legends of their homeland. Through such details we learn about the memories of the artist himself, which he described in the autobiography *Someone with me*. He writes about being a child fond of his father's stories about the Bukovyna region, which were later reproduced in several works. It is necessary to focus on the semantic loading of the colors in the clothing in the Story about Old Country (Kurelek, 1967).

The theme of Ukrainian immigration was most sophisticated in the art of Kurelek, fundamentally in the series *Ukrainian Pioneer*, *Ukrainian Immigrant Women* Kwak (2019), *Farmer's Humor* and *Prairie boy winter / summer*. In these series Kurelek attempted to emphasize foremost the Ukrainian identity through difficult conditions of establishing and integrating into Canadian society. “Polish Canadian” was the fifth (Kurelek previously illustrated Ukrainians, Jews, French, and Irish communities) pioneer group of immigrants in Canada, which W. Kurelek began to illustrate. The series was commissioned in 1977 by a member of a Polish farmers family, who was the founder of the Raymond Ted Glist Charity Foundation. Glist wanted to preserve the memory of the Polish settlers' pioneering hardships. Ted Glist eventually bought and presented a series of 26 paintings to

the Hamilton Gallery. In recognition of Ted Glist continued efforts, the gallery organized several thematic exhibitions of this series in Europe, most notably in Warsaw. For example, in June 1978, the exhibition opened at the former Royal Palace of Lazenka in Warsaw. The researcher M. Yurchenko delineates all the paintings of the Polish series into the following sub-themes: (lumberjack, railwaymen, life, beliefs and youth) (Yurchenko, 1978; Kurelek, 2020). In the foreground of each work Kurelek places a person in a historical perspective, that is, he depicts a person and his past contextualized in a modern environment. The artist departs from a realistic image, while clearly depicting reality. The content of the paintings is based on concrete facts, and circumstances, as if illustrating part of the history of "Old" Canada (Oviogun & Veerdee, 2020; Smith et al., 2018).

In analyzing the Polish series, have brought forth the following thematic groups: patriotism (The Wilno pioneers and Polish-Irish fight Kurelek (1977), heroic personalities (Sir Casimir Gzowski, Piotr Jarosz Kear (2017), The courage of Andrew Mynarski folk traditions (Christmas at Otter Lake, Quebec), religious identity (Kaszuby funeral Procession and Brother Antony Kowalczyk OMI), childhood (Damned Pollack and One-room school at Kaszuby), the work and history of the first settlers (Frank and Klementina Pawlowski, Glista story and Immigrants in a Toronto boarding house), and weather (The farmers of Leduc). The project The Polish Canadian, was interesting for the artist due to the close relationship between the Ukrainian and Polish communities, noting the boundary territories in the Old Country with common history and conflicts, as well as many "single-rooted" traditions and folklore. In one of the explanations of the works of this series, W. Kurelek writes: "I avoided the problems of the Old Country. It is impossible to find a middle ground that would be acceptable to my Polish and Ukrainian friends. Being in Canada, it's better to forget about the turbulent past. We must respect the cultural traditions that we have preserved, and utilize past discords for goodness in the New Land" (Sovtys, 2020).

Kurelek was always impressed by Polish patriotism. He often compared them to Irish immigrants who left their homeland against their will, and when they settled in North America, still thought of themselves foremost as a nation. Kurelek often compared the Polish series with the Irish series of first immigrants in Canada. For example, in one of the paintings the subject is seen persuading English occupiers of millions of Irish people to emigrate to Canada. In the Polish series Kurelek dedicated one painting of history of the settlement in Kaszuby which arose as a result of the oppressive Prussian land legislation, and how Kazimierz Gzowski was a fugitive after the Russians suppressed the Polish settlement in 1830 (Kurelek, 1977).

The works often included various heroic personalities, as in the Ukrainian theme Free Moroz Kurelek (1972), and in the Polish series "The courage of Andrew Mynarski" (Kurelek, 1977). In the former, the author emphasized the nationally-identified charisma and victories of the Ukrainian politician, and the latter, the Polish pilot who was part of the Royal Canadian Air Forces. In his art Kurelek sought to overcome the barriers of misunderstandings that lay between the Polish and Ukrainian people, and focus on cultural traditions and experience. Kurelek portrayed many stories in his paintings from his own childhood and adolescent memories as well as from his own dreams (Khan et al., 2021; Suardiana, 2016).

It should be noted that Kurelek never depicted realities of the present, rather his thoughts were set in the memories of childhood and adolescence. It appears some kind of barrier line was formed in 1957, which distinguished artist's life for two periods – before and after conversion. We were all once children and can relate to those works of Kurelek that illustrate the topic of childhood of the first immigrants in the Canadian prairies. In this manner he devoted two main series The Childhood of the Prairie Boy in the Winter and The Childhood of the Prairie Boy in the Summer. These were encapsulated in books “A Prairie Boy's Winter” Kurelek (1973), and “A Prairie Boy's Summer” Kurelek (1974), in eighteen languages and have had great success in Canada and abroad (Al-Sofi & Abouabdulqader, 2020; Suryasa, 2019).

In the Polish series, two works Damned Pollack and One-room school at Kaszuby Kurelek (2020), are devoted to this topic. The central story of both paintings is children's misery set against a backdrop of an elementary one-room school playground in different seasons. Damned Pollack's story is devoted to the real history of the artist's childhood memories about the boy Joe Gajski. Together they attended the school, each speaking in his own language. It should be noted that William Kurelek and his younger brother John, as well as hundreds of immigrant children did not know a single English word when they first started school. Because of this they had suffered greatly from merciless peers, acquiring a certain isolated linguistic trauma which the artist called “racist experience” (Kurelek, 1977).

Polish-Ukrainian motives in the work of William Kurelek

The common feature of Polish-Ukrainian stories was the illustration of labor – the motto of prairie life He wanted to document “the sweat and labor of thousands of nameless heroes, such as his grandparents and parents, who turned the wilderness of Western Canada into productive cultivated land” (Goldstein, 2020). His immigrant series is a peculiar doctrine of life immersed in its own moral discipline. An example of a hard-working immigrant is his mother, who embodies the archetypal image of the Mother, full of “supernatural” life force. Kurelek devoted his work Mom Kurelek (1967), to his Ukrainian mother. In sixteen scenes Kurelek depicted the primary duties of prairie womanhood/motherhood Kurelek depicted a similar scene of prairie women in the Polish series portrayed the Pawlowski family. We see the typical idyll of the Ukrainian family in the art work Beauty and Peace: The Happy Family on Vocation, (Kurelek & Murray, 1968).

Moreover, he created a detailed illustration of the real history that Ellias Wachna told him about Ukrainian-Polish settlements in south-eastern Manitoba, with joint farms, common musical and religious traditions, as well as both Ukrainian and Polish speaking officers and blacksmiths. The central composition is dedicated to the blacksmith Pawlowski family. The composition focuses on the monumental figure of the wife, the mother of six children, with a hammer in her hands and the willingness to always support the head of the family in the difficult conditions of the immigrant experience. It should be noted that with every work the artist traditionally wrote explanatory texts, where the focus was on heavy pioneer immigrant work and the invaluable contribution of the Ukrainian-Polish

community in the development of the Canadian society. These stories, full of facts and precise details that Kurelek collected from eyewitnesses, presently offer important, detailed historical facts that reinforce and help reconstruct the true-life stories of Canadian immigrant pioneers.

In Polish-Ukrainian immigrant scenes a lot of Kurelek's subjects were devoted to weather, and to climatic permutations on which the psychological and emotional background of immigrant communities and their social and material well-being depended on. Kurelek's childhood was influenced by the behaviour and fluctuating moods of farmer parents, whose psyche was in great harmony with the surrounding world of nature. An example of this is depicted in the Polish series *Farmers in Leduc* (Kurelek, 1977). A contrasting example is the work *Thunder Driven* 1970; Espinosa et al., 2018). It speaks to the memories of childhood, which recalls hard work and domestic duties, where terrible thunder is not an obstacle.

The ethnic origin of the artist – folk traditions, which the artist showed in two ways: through folk ethnic symbols (embroidery, wood carving, home interiors) and through ethnic spirituality as a certain experience of the illusion of listened or read stories. A successful example is the work *Christmas at Otter Lake, Quebec* Kurelek (1977), wherein depicting a feast holiday in a Polish Kashub family, the artist uses a contrasting description of the religious and daily traditions preserved from the Old Country. The artist left us considerable explanations for these works. For example, there is an “oplatok” as in the Ukrainian tradition of homemade bread – “kolach”, as the “bread of love”, which occupies a central place on the table on an embroidered napkin placed on hay surrounded by twelve dishes. It displays similarities in the characteristics of the Christmas “diduh” – hay under the table, and a Christmas tree as a symbol of well-being, no matter how poor the family was. Kurelek perfectly reproduces religious artifacts, but never draws them without people. The artist created many religious paintings as a gratitude for the depth of his faith. It is known that he converted to the Catholic Church and many works were devoted to the Catholic priests and their faith. One of them was Brother Anthony Kowalczyk, who spent 37 years in St. John's College in Edmonton. The artist portrayed him in 1977 against the background of a peaceful sky like a corona over the head of a future saint, undergoing the process of beatification. The bottom line of the background is the storyline of the main events of the life of Brother Anthony, who played an important role as a Catholic missionary in the Polish community of Canada (Xhignesse, 2020).

The great achievement of the Polish project was due to Roman Malanczak, a Polish engineer who introduced Kurelek to his culture and traditions, which led Kurelek to illustrate Kaczuby, the first Polish settlement in northern Ontario. He also helped the artist to collect historiographic material for selected themes and subjects of each piece. Michael Pearson, Adolf Pekoski, Ted Glist, Frank Ritz, Wachna and Henry Czapeski also shared interesting stories about their Old Homeland. Many contributed to the creation of compositional motifs in the works of Kurelek's students from India. They included John Pinto, Agnes McLaren and a Chinese student Silvia Chan. Chan painted the details of the natural environment in the work *Our Lady of Czestochowa Outdoor Chapel*. William Kurelek helped many orphans from India and China (Saifer, 2019; Barker, 2018). He took some

of them to Canada and helped them receive an education. Some of them even became his assistants. The creation of Our Lady of Czestochowa Outdoor Chapel also involved a well-known artist of Ukrainian origin and friend of Kurelek, Mykola Bidnyak (Kurelek, 1977).

Kurelek's series "The Polish Canadian" was specially framed using Polish symbolism in white-red colors and Ukrainian geometric shapes of ornaments resembling embroidery and lace. Geza and Sandy Takacs helped in crafting the frames. The series "The Polish Canadian" was first featured at the Niagara Falls Gallery on April 17, 1977. At the opening of this first exhibition of the series the Minister of Multiculturalism for Canada John Monroe noted: "The painter William Kurelek best expresses the idea of multicultural Canada. His work has roots in the traditions of many peoples, and in melting them reflects today's Canada with all its experiences" (Xhignesse, 2020). On June 2nd 1978 the opening of the same exhibition took place in the Former Royal Palace "Łazienki" in Warsaw, Poland. On October 2nd 1979 the exhibition was presented at the Algoma Gallery in Sault Ste Marie in France? According to critic Arnold Edinburgh: "Kurelek is truly original both in word and in art. It is worth appreciating his synthetic vision of Canada, which he sees as the harmony of numerous nationalities" (Sovtys, 2020).

Conclusion

Based on the analyzed works, we derived several models of Ukrainian-Polish relations through the author's prism of understanding and observing the traditions and culture of these first-immigrant groups and their process of cultural integration into Canadian society. The article traces the typology of plots in accordance with social issues, which was the most important in the Ukrainian-Polish "immigrant relations", and which William Kurelek raised and depicted on the canvas. It was important for the artist to conduct a certain "sociometry" of characters – heroes of different nationalities in their art. Defining a certain "status" of the individual, emphasizing his formal (farmer, politician, priest) and informal (enemy, leader, sympathizer) role in a particular socio-ethnic group. With special precision in Polish plots, whether on the theme of childhood, religious traditions or farming responsibilities, the author marked the holistic-oriented unity of this ethnic group with a meaningful psychological narrative that demonstrates a range of intercultural contacts and social transformations. In general, in Ukrainian and Polish artworks, the author raised issues of religious tradition, prairie duties, folk celebrations, upbringing, ethnic life and friendship, demonstrating nationality everywhere.

William Kurelek revealed the topic of a person's social affiliation, origin or identity. In this context, it was important for the artist to emphasize the value of human life, and therefore earthly existence. He was convinced that everything in our lives happens with the knowledge of God, and any human intervention in the natural process will negatively affect future existence. In the Polish-Ukrainian series of his paintings, William Kurelek demonstrated the problem of personality in society (family, community, ethnic group, country), moral and immoral personality, professional and lonely. For him, an important focus has always been his own egocentrism, the starting point of all evolutionary social processes and the role of man in them was himself, his own assessment of social issues was only

through the prism of introspection. It was important for the artist to recognize and show the two-way way of finding the personality of its central principle and its role in key and decisive social processes. Studying the problem of personality, the reference point for William Kurelek was the crisis of cultural identification of this personality, namely – the process and context in which this personality was. The binary compound “we-they” was also a marking concept.

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