"Did Your Baba Come from Austria?"

by Orysia Tracz©

"Did your mother come from Ireland?" asks the Irish-American song. I have another, more relevant question. If you are of Ukrainian descent, and your grandparents or great-grandparents came from Ukraine to Canada [and the U.S.] in the last part of the 19th century or early part of this century, did your baba or dido come from Austria?

What a silly question, you may think. But is it? Almost every day, in the obituaries of the Winnipeg newspapers, we read about a 70- or 90-year-old individual, with a Ukrainian name, member of a Ukrainian church and Ukrainian organizations, and yet, "born in selo [village] such-and-such, povit such-and-such, Austria." Why? That baba and dido most probably never even saw Austria. When they lived in Ukraine, they would have had to travel completely through Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Hungary to get to the borders of Austria itself. So how could they have been born in selo Dolyna, povit Zelenyi, AUSTRIA? They weren't. Your baba and dido were still Ukrainian, but everything around them was changing every so many years. The western portion of Ukraine was under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1722 to 1918, and under Polish rule within that empire, and later, for a good portion of that time.

The pioneers and later immigrants to Canada arrived with documents and papers in German, Polish, Rumanian, or Russian, because the language used on the documents was the official language of whatever government was ruling Ukraine at the time. From this, some descendants of these immigrants -- and even the immigrants themselves -- thought that because the papers were in German issued by "Austria," they were "Austrian" themselves. How many of our pioneers and their descendants were and are active members of the Polish and Rumanian communities because they thought they belonged there?

It's a long story, and yet it's simple. Ukraine is a very poor rich country -- rich in location, climate, soil, natural resources, and people, to overabundance. But because of these riches, throughout her history, Ukraine has been at the mercy of its greedy neighbours. When one consideres how long the Ukrainian people have existed as an entity, the years of independence [before 1991] were very few indeed.

National identity/ethnic origin and citizenship are two totally different things. Even in this century, your parents or grandparents, while being Ukrainian by nationality or ethnic origin, could have been citizens of Russia, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Austria, or Germany. This does not mean that they changed nationality, if by "nationality" you understand ethnic origin or national identity. They just changed citizenship. Remnants of colonialism and foreign occupations are evident in the Ukrainian language. "Za Avstriyi" and "za Pol'shchi" mean during [the time of] Austria and during [the time of] Poland -- i.e., under the rule of Austria and Poland. "Za nimtsiv" or "za Rossiyi" means during the wartime occupations of the Germans, and of the Russians. Also used was "za bol'shevykiv" -- during [the time of] the Bolsheviks.

The colonists and occupiers came, stayed, and left. The people, and the land, stayed the same -- Ukrainian -- as they had always been. I remember an old wise woman commenting on this topic, patiently explaining again and again: "Just because a kitten is born in the barn, that doesn't make it a calf."