

Nai Tebe Kachka Kopne!

January 8, 1977

Kelliher, Saskatchewan

Forty years ago this week, I got kicked by a duck.

I was 22 years old, living in Saskatchewan and dating a Ukrainian girl. Elena invited me to spend Orthodox Christmas with her family in the small farming community of Kelliher. We didn't know each other well, but I worked with Elena's sister and her brother was a friend, so I felt comfortable infiltrating their family celebration.

Christmas in the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition is celebrated during the second week of January.

Elena's ancestors came to Canada in the early 1900's, about the same time as ours. We Paton/Well's immigrated from the British Isles, the Hryziuk's came from the Ukraine - both families fled Europe in search of a better life than their homeland could offer.



Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Our family settled in southern Saskatchewan in a community with other Scottish and English immigrants. The Hryziuk's, and many other Ukrainian families, homesteaded in east-central Saskatchewan. Both families farmed land made available by the Canadian Government.

Our families had a lot in common, but there were differences. Scots were Protestant, Ukrainians were Orthodox. Scots ate porridge, Ukrainians preferred pierogi, Scots would drink a "wee dram" of whisky, Ukrainians liked

their vodka. Scots dressed plainly; Ukrainians wore colour. Scots rolled their "R's" and Ukrainians pronounced "H" like they were priming to spit.

For the first 50 years of co-existence in Saskatchewan, these subtle cultural differences were enough to keep Scots and Ukrainian ethnic communities separate and distinct. But, by the time Elena and I got to know each other, the cultures had assimilated to the point that we were all Canadians first. Until Christmas.

At Christmastime, each family reverted to their own traditions. In our family that meant an increase in community interaction, travel to bring the family together, huge holiday meals, and a Christmas morning gift exchange. Until I shared a Ukrainian Orthodox Christmas, I assumed that all families celebrated much the same as we did.

My first clue that Christmas in Kelliher was going to be different was when I was making my bed in the morning. We had arrived at the Hryziuk home late in the evening and I had been assigned a bed in the basement. The patriarch of the family happened to walk by my room in the morning and saw me straightening the blankets. His reaction took me off guard:

“Leave that for the women – come, have a drink.”

“OK?” I hoped he meant coffee.

Nope – I hadn’t brushed my teeth yet and I was staring at three fingers of raw vodka. Not wanting to offend, I clinked glasses with Grandpa and *‘down the hatch’*. My glass barely hit the table and another three fingers showed up. This, I decided, was going to be a holiday to remember!

The drinking slowed down while we had breakfast but started again mid-morning as the extended family congregated at the Hryziuk home.

It became obvious that everybody in the family had a role to play in preparing for Christmas. Elena and her sisters decorated the tree and the house, her mom and aunts prepared food, and the little girls wrapped gifts. The men, as far as I could tell, were tasked with telling stories and keeping vodka bottles empty, which they were doing very effectively. The stories became ever more hilarious as the men’s vodka duties were fulfilled.

About noon I was rescued by Elena’s brother John. He wanted to visit a cousin who was rebuilding a race car in the next town and asked if I would come along. John gave me a bit of advice while we were driving to Leross: *“You better pace yourself if you are going to drink with my dad and Grandpa, they are pros.”*



We spent the afternoon talking *demolition derby* with Cousin Mike. My head was clearing from the breakfast vodka but, apparently, you can't discuss demolition derby without a beer in your hand, so my buzz was rekindled.

About 7:00pm John looked at his watch and declared: "*We better get going, it's just about time for church.*"

Church?! It's Friday night!

"Christmas Eve - everybody goes to evening church service, then back again for Midnight Mass."

I rarely went to church; never twice in one day, and certainly not pissed to the gills.

I wasn't the only one in church with a buzz on; the senior male Hryziuk's were getting "*shushing*" elbows in the ribs from spouses, and almost every other family in the church could sympathise. Most of the males of my generation were slurring out-of-tune hymns; even the priest seemed a little flushed.

After the service everyone stumbled home to a banquet of home-cooked miracles. Borscht, pierogi, holubtshi, kielbasa and dozens of other exotic wonders, whose names I cannot remember and could not pronounce if I did. All were served with warmth, laughter, and ever-present grain alcohol.

Before the clan went back to church for midnight mass, we exchanged small gifts. Elena gave me a t-shirt, with a picture of a cartoon duck and the words: *Nai Tebe Kachka Kopne* written across the chest.

Elena's baba explained that *Nai Tebe Kachka Kopne* is a Ukrainian verse that can be used as both a gesture of friendship, and to curse an adversary, depending on how it is delivered. Literally it translates, *may you be kicked by a duck!*



My relationship with Elena eventually fizzled and I lost contact with the Hryziuks, but I held on to that t-shirt until it was worn to a thread.

The duck has kicked me, and I will forever carry a kinship with Ukrainian people.

Life is a shin, bruised by a webbed foot.