

Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: Heroes and Villains

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUN 23 2020

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

I spent more time in Ukraine in the early years of the 21st century, particularly areas of the east and south. In 2002, I applied for a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a project on “The Formation of National History in Ukraine, 1998-2005,” which was successful. It stemmed from curiosity about the different attitudes to the past in the diverse regions. In 2002, I spent time in Donetsk, the twin city of Sheffield, as well as Horlivka, and Yalta in Crimea. Not only were these cities Russian speaking, they were so different from the areas with which I was more familiar, such as Lviv and Kyiv, that they represented an almost alien world. In Donetsk, center of the coal-mining field of the Donbas, my visit coincided with the “Day of the Coal Miner” and I was back in the Soviet Union, listening to patriotic songs, many from the war years.

Crimea, with its hills and castles, and glorious Black Sea coastline was invigorating. I thought it peculiarly appropriate that one of the best statues I had seen of Lenin stood opposite the busy McDonald's. Russian businessmen were omnipresent, and the beaches swarming with human bodies, many without clothing. The Black Sea, incongruously, was teeming with dead jellyfish. The Massandra winery was producing sweet Crimean wine, almost orange in color, and Livadia and Voronsky Palaces brought back memories of the Second World War. At Livadia, one could buy leaflets describing how the Western Allies had betrayed the Soviet Union and, within, one could peruse Nicholas II's simple letters to his wife Aleksandra.

Was this Ukraine? Sevastopol, the most militaristic city I had ever visited, was adorned with monuments to the Crimean and Second World War, the Russian flag flying aloft from many buildings. In 1997, Russia and Ukraine had divided up the Black Fleet in a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, that permitted the Russians 83% of the ships and the lease of two large bays in Sevastopol. Russian sailors were omnipresent. The “Great Patriotic War” had long been the symbol of the might of the Soviet Union and seemingly it had never fully ended. The memory of the war was once again being revived by the new Russian president Vladimir Putin as well as by Aliaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus.

In western Ukraine, however, the memory was very different. In particular, discussions had begun to emerge about the OUN and UPA, which were anti-Soviet and had collaborated at different times with the German occupation forces. It had been forbidden territory in the Soviet period – all were considered traitors or Banderites, after the name of Stepan Bandera (1909-1959), leader of the most militant wing of the OUN from 1940. The Ukrainian scholarly world was engaged in lengthy discussions about these events, including in 2003, the 60th anniversary of the OUN massacre of over 60,000 Poles in villages of Volhynia.

In Edmonton, Toronto, and Detroit, three places in which I had spent much time with the Ukrainian community on speaking engagements, there was little debate about the heroism and valor of OUN and UPA. It was taken for granted. Bandera and UPA leader Roman Shukhevych were widely revered. In Detroit, I had been taken to visit a former UPA fighter, and in Hamilton, Ontario, Professor Peter J. Potichnyj of McMaster University had allowed me to peruse his private collection of UPA documents. Potichnyj had been one of the youngest recruits to UPA at the age of 15 or 16. OUN and UPA had been part of my PhD thesis, though not central; rather they were the opponents of

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collectivization, burning down farms and assassinating Soviet officials in the protracted guerrilla warfare that ended around 1950, when Shukhevych was ambushed and killed.

Memories were perpetuated long after the first Second World War immigrants landed in Canada, the United States, and Europe, in churches, Plast camps, and other gatherings. Ukrainians had been persecuted, first by the Poles, and then much more harshly by the Soviets. In 1941 came German occupation, and in the diaspora narrative OUN and UPA had fought an unequal war against both totalitarian powers that ended in massacres and deportations. Now, similar views were beginning to permeate Ukraine. Politically, right-wing nationalism had little support, and the various far-right movements rarely attained many seats in the Ukrainian Parliament. Ukrainian presidents, too, were usually centrist in their political orientation. Still, Bandera and Shukhevych could elicit both positive and negative emotions in different regions of the country.

I spent the summer of 2003 in the city of Kharkiv, renting an apartment close to Shevchenko Park and studying at the V.N. Karazin National University. A former resident of the city, Anna Yastrzhemska, whom I had met when giving a lecture at CEU in Budapest, was on hand to show me around and introduce me to some local scholars. She also advised me, wisely, to introduce myself to the Rector with chocolates and flowers, a Soviet tradition that still seemed to work well. Through Anna, I met historian Zhenya Medresh, who had been her teacher, and Mikhail Minakov, an astute and perceptive political commentator.

The city had a very good bookstore and while perusing its contents, I picked out a book on the famine of 1932-1933, published by an organization called MAUP (Interregional Academy of Personnel Management), a private higher educational institute founded in 1989, and described by the US State Department in 2008 as “one of the most persistent anti-Semitic institutions in Eastern Europe.” Among its alumni was David Duke, the former Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, based in Louisiana. The book contained a chapter by Levko Lukyanenko (1928-2018), a former Ukrainian political prisoner, leader of the Ukrainian Republican Party, and the first Ukrainian Ambassador to Canada in 1992-1993. He was a member of Parliament at this time and had received an honorary doctorate from the University of Alberta in the summer of 2002.

The chapter was less an article than a diatribe. It provided a list of people who reportedly were responsible for the famine in Ukraine, and after each one was the word “Jew.” The list even included Stalin and Lenin. The essence of the article was that Bolshevik Jews were responsible for the famine and for the occupation of Ukraine in the Soviet period. I was a frequent contributor to the daily newspaper in my hometown, the *Edmonton Journal*, and duly penned an article about Lukyanenko’s chapter and its anti-Semitism. I felt obligated to do so but without doubt it was the first time I had written something that incensed the Ukrainian community, for whom Lukyanenko would always be a national hero, just like Bandera and Shukhevych. At the time, however, it was an isolated editorial, I was not mounting a campaign.

The following summer (2004) I was asked to lead a group of University of Alberta Alumni to Ukraine. It was a difficult task as the group, consisting mainly of people in their 70s, had their own goals such as wanting to visit their ancestral homes. One woman was always dissatisfied with the local entertainment offered at the hotel, demanding that the vocal group should stop singing and go home. But it was an interesting period with presidential elections scheduled for later in the year. We began in Mukachevo in Transcarpathia where some informal groups such as the youth group Pora were already setting up a tent camp following the April 2004 election for mayor when a successful candidate of the Ukraine Without Kuchma movement was attacked by thugs operating on the orders of local authorities. Subsequently we stayed in Lviv, Kyiv, and Yalta – the latter city had been added at my request.

Later in the year, when the crisis that became known as the Orange Revolution began in Ukraine, CIUS held a number of panels in which I participated at the University of Alberta. Lawyer Dmytro Jacuta, linked to CIUS through a government-funded legal reform program in Ukraine, had spent time in the Maidan and returned with a report of events. At its peak the protests, which began when crowds protested against falsification of election results in favor of the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych, encompassed over one million people gathered in a very cold Kyiv in November.

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The pro-Western candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, became a national hero to Ukrainians abroad as well as to more democratic elements within Ukraine. In Edmonton, local Ukrainians were at the Legislature chanting “Yu-shchen-ko!” The juxtaposition of the good Yushchenko and the bad Yanukovich struck me at the time as simplistic. But there were extenuating factors: the poisoning of Yushchenko by security forces; the interference of Putin in the election and overt support for Yanukovich in Moscow; Yanukovich’s criminal past and convictions in his native Donbas; and not least the obvious problems with the vote count in the Donetsk region.

Though Yushchenko’s presidency (2005-2010) is generally regarded as a failure, marred by the rift between the new president and his first Prime Minister, the meteoric Yulia Tymoshenko, as well as Yushchenko’s constant absences from Kyiv, and his rapprochement with the forces he had ostensibly fought against such as former president Leonid Kuchma and even Yanukovich, who returned improbably as Prime Minister despite cheating in 2004, it was notable for his radical moves in identity politics.

In the first place, in 2008 he followed an initiative of his predecessor Kuchma and enshrined the Famine of 1933 as a genocide and the defining event of Ukrainian identity. In some respects, this was a logical follow-up to the conferences and publications on the tragedy from Conquest onward. Mace himself was a forerunner. He moved to Kyiv in 1992 and wrote a regular column in *The Day* newspaper, which was bilingual, though Mace’s editorials appeared in English. In one of them he urged Ukrainians to put a candle in their windows on the fourth Sunday of November in remembrance of Famine victims. Ukraine in his view was a “post-Genocidal society,” the suffering passed in from generation to generation. This date was later used by President Kuchma for the annual commemoration of the Famine of 1933, which continues today.

Mace kept in contact after his move to Ukraine but was clearly having some difficulties. His messages often made no sense. In one he informed me that he and John-Paul Himka were sitting on his balcony drinking Kahlua, which forced me out of my office to see whether I really had seen my colleague in the hallway a few minutes earlier. Sure enough, he was there. So, Mace was drinking Kahlua with a mythical person. In 2004, he died at the age of 52. I visited his grave in the Baykova Cemetery the next time I was in Kyiv, just a few months later. Though the headstone was not yet completed, the grave was adorned with flowers. It was located alongside that of Slava Stetsko, the wife of Yaroslav, who had declared Ukrainian independence in Lviv after the Nazi invasion of June 1941. Slava was also Chair of the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists and died about a year before Mace at the age of 82. I think Mace would have been quite content with her as a neighbor.

Yushchenko went on an international tour in 2008 to persuade international governments to support the claim that the Holodomor was genocide. The mission was reasonable but not totally successful: Canada voted unanimously in favor after a passionate Yushchenko speech, whereas the UK, Spain, and others ignored his request. Arguably the vote was dependent on Ukrainian influence in a given country, and Ukrainians were a substantial group in Canada, with several MPs of Ukrainian heritage as well as a former Governor-General.

At this time, I published my most ambitious book to date: *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* with Central European University Press in Budapest. It attempted to lay out the scholarly debates in Ukraine on both the Famine and OUN/UPA – they were obviously related though the events took place in different regions of Ukraine. Only the last chapter offered my own analysis, meaning that if a reviewer read all but the final pages, they would not have known my views. At a talk at Stanford University in 2009, I was praised by a former OUN veteran for writing the definitive account of the organization and suspected that the reader had stopped well before the end.

My feeling in 2007-2008 was that the debates were significant and restrained. Had such matters been left to historians then life for Ukraine would have been simpler. But Yushchenko intended to introduce official narratives and commemorations and link historical memory to current politics, designating Russia and the Soviet Union as the perpetrator, “the other.” He founded the Institute of National Remembrance and opened the official National Museum “Memorial to Holodomor Victims” on the Pechersk Hills in 2008, ironically alongside obelisks commemorating the victory in the Second World War and not far from the official war memorial museum and giant Mother Russia statue.

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The design of the entrance statue – a small girl holding a candle – was replicated in the city of Regina, close to the Saskatchewan legislature and is termed “Bitter memories of childhood.” Behind the museum and overlooking the Dnipro River is a large candle. Within one can find “books of memory” from each region of Ukraine affected by the famine, with the names of victims listed. During my visits there was not much else within other than some posters of the main perpetrators, including one citing the inflated figure of 10 million famine victims in Ukraine, a statement Yushchenko repeated during his international visits. The questions historians had raised in debates in earlier years, including in journals such as *Europe-Asia Studies*, were largely ignored.

Roman Serbyn, a retired professor from the University of Quebec at Montreal, once held up two large signs at a conference in Toronto. One said “Famine” and the other “Genocide.” He would flash them frequently like political slogans during his talk, which was to a Ukrainian community audience, without the slightest pretense of scholarly objectivity.

In the West, as in Ukraine, the Holodomor was now not only the chief subject of commemorations and remembrance, it was the foundation stone of the modern state. The result, hardly surprisingly, was a simplification of its causes down to the single one that Stalin had intended to kill all Ukrainians by starvation. In this respect, Yushchenko, who was unceremoniously dumped out of office in 2010 and the most unpopular president to date, was unequivocally successful. He did not succeed in one quest: namely, to make it a criminal offense to deny that the Famine in Ukraine was a Genocide.

In Canada too, the study of the Holodomor took on a strong political hue – though it was to become much more intensive in future years. I attended a conference at the National University of Ireland in Maynooth, near Dublin, in November 2009, which compared the famines in Ireland in 1845 and Ukraine in 1933. Among the audience were Ukrainian experts on the famine, such as Stanislav Kulchytsky, and Ukrainian government representatives. The Irish contingent consisted mainly of scholars. Curiously while the Ukrainian side was 90% in favor of the genocide theory – Kulchytsky was reticent to use such a description – not a single Irish scholar believed that the British government had committed genocide in the potato famine of the 19th century. A book, based on the conference, edited by its organizer, Christian Noack, was published three years later.

In early 2010, Yushchenko went further, and declared Stepan Bandera, the controversial leader of the OUN, a “hero of Ukraine,” having earlier allocated the same award to Roman Shukhevych, the leader of the UPA. The decision caused considerable international consternation in Poland and other EU countries, as well as in Israel, which perceived and remembered Bandera as a collaborator with the Nazis, and the leader of an organization that carried out a massacre of thousands of Poles in Volhynia in 1943. The decision was to cause me personally many problems, which I could not have foreseen at the time.

The prequel, perhaps was the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism signed on June 3, 1988 by a number of well-known European political leaders, including Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic. It adopted a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, and a few years later added an educational project, on August 23, the date of the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939. The equation of Stalinism and Nazism as twin evils, a form of Double Genocide, was contrary to Europe’s former commemoration of the Jewish Holocaust as the single worst event in 20th century Europe that framed much of the thinking behind contemporary narratives on the war years and their aftermath.

These questions were compounded by Tim Snyder’s book *Bloodlands: Between Stalin and Hitler*, published in 2010, which – unintentionally – provided indirect support for the “double genocide” theory from the geographical region encompassed by “bloodlands.” Internationally, such interpretations, like those on the Holodomor, placed Russia on the “wrong side” of the historical narrative, countering the claims of the Putin leadership, as well as many Russian historians, that the Soviet Union had saved Europe from the “brown plague” of Nazism in 1941-45. This notion of the twin evils of Stalinism and Nazism was to become a prominent theme thereafter, and was deployed by some analysts on social media when discussing Ukraine’s fate.

At the University of Alberta, there were several scholars who made their views known on the topic of Ukrainian

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nationalism and war criminality. They included John-Paul Himka, who had begun to study the Holocaust and its Ukrainian context, and was focusing specifically on the Lviv Pogrom of July 1941, as well as teaching courses on the Holocaust in the department. Himka had made several U-turns in his distinguished academic career, and for the later part of his career he focused on Ukrainian war crimes linked to the Holocaust and “its absence as a component of the identity consciousness of the Ukrainian diaspora.” Though his research brought him deserved accolades at the academic level, it brought him nothing but opprobrium in the Ukrainian community. A fellow member of the choir at his Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Edmonton had even breathed the words “Judas!” at him during a service.

Two of Himka's doctoral students were also researching related topics: Krysztof Lada, a Polish student examining the Volhynia massacres and Grigory Rossolinski-Liebe, a man of German-Polish background, making a study of the life of Stepan Bandera. They were very different in personality: Lada always quiet and reticent, and Rossolinski-Liebe outspoken and even aggressive. He critiqued some of the things Himka and I had written in the 1980s in his book on Bandera, while conceding, more or less, that we had not known any better since we had no access to former Soviet archives. He would also walk unannounced into my CIUS office and offer comments on the topic of Bandera and the OUN. In 1983, I had written, with Myroslav Yurkevich, a somewhat weak defense of suspected war criminals following the announcement of the Deschenes Commission that there were none living in Canada. Neither Lada nor Rossolinski-Liebe completed their PhDs in Alberta: the former moved to Australia and the latter to Hamburg, Germany.

I had a PhD student of my own, Per Anders Rudling, who was fervently interested in these topics though his thesis concerned Belarus in the 1920s. Per, a Swedish-born American citizen who came to Alberta in 2003, had a wide variety of interests, but Ukrainian nationalism was perhaps his most frequent topic of conversation in social environments. He was probably the most prominent Edmonton-based critic of the OUN (Bandera) movement during the period he was working on his thesis, though it was in the period after he moved to Sweden that he made most headlines. He was the one who uncovered a former collaborator responsible for deaths in Belarus, living in Quebec, thus dispelling the myths of the Deschenes Commission. The UCC even wrote a letter to his university to try to have him dismissed, which led several scholars to write letters in his defense.

In 2009-2010, I was on sabbatical leave from the University of Alberta. My personal life was in some turmoil as I had separated from Lan at the start of 2010. It was a terrible decision to make but our lives had become quite separate, not least because of my peregrinations and constant activity. She became very involved in the Chinese community, and with the children now adults, was free to spend her time working on a variety of projects, including with new immigrants and with the Chinese Lions' Society. It is very hard to end a long-term relationship that has also produced two fine sons, but there are always many reasons behind such ruptures. I felt mainly responsible and still do. The brevity of this description should not detract from the enormity of the split.

I had a new partner, Aya Fujiwara, a Japanese former PhD student at the University of Alberta, who was to become my wife a few years later. I was spending the term at the University of Toronto, while living in Hamilton, about an hour's journey by car down the 401 Highway. Aya had ended a job at the Embassy of Japan in Ottawa and taken up a Postdoctoral Fellowship at McMaster University in Hamilton. In January, I drove across Canada in a Jeep Wrangler to join her for the final six months of my sabbatical leave. The scope of the journey can be detected from my GPS, which informed me at Vegreville en route to Medicine Hat, Alberta, to be ready for a “slight right turn in 453 kilometers.”

A month later, while working in Hamilton, I received a phone call from the *Edmonton Journal*, during which I was asked if I could write an editorial on Stepan Bandera, and his significance as a “hero of Ukraine.” The newspaper had received an editorial – I believe, though it was never confirmed, that it was co-authored by Rossolinski-Liebe – but deemed it too extreme to publish, given the likely reaction of the many of Ukrainian origin living in the city. I agreed to the request. The subject was close to *Heroes and Villains* after all. But the result was not altogether satisfying.

I decided to ask Himka for help, knowing of his publications on the 1941 pogrom in Lviv, and he responded to my original draft that I had neglected to mention that Bandera's group had persecuted Jews in that city. I was hesitant,

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so he sent me some documents that he had used for his own research and they seemed to me conclusive. Still, I would maintain today that the editorial, published on February 7, 2010, was quite balanced, other than the headline the newspaper added, which I think was inflammatory: "Hero of Ukraine linked to Jewish Killings: honorary title sure to provoke divisions among Ukrainians today." The Ukrainian community evidently agreed with those sentiments: Daria Luciwi, the President of the Alberta Provincial Council of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC-APC) declared that she was shocked by the editorial. I was able to amend the title in the *Journal's* online edition, but the impact was clear.

Four days later the UCC-APC responded that it was stunned by the "inaccurate column and editor-assigned heading," which was reminiscent "of articles written in Alberta papers a century ago." It requested space to respond, though numerous people, including Stefko Bandera, the Toronto-based grandson of Stepan, Marco Levytsky, editor of *Ukrainian News*, and Zenon Kohut, Director of CIUS. I believe there were dozens of other letters that never made it into print. The article received far more response than the one on the anti-Semitic ravings of Lukyanenko seven years earlier. Himka was already persona non grata in some Ukrainian community circles. Now I was to join him, at least for some time. In 1999, I had received the Shevchenko Gold Medal from the UCC at a ceremony in Winnipeg, nominated by Peter Savaryn. There were some calls for it to be revisited and possibly withdrawn, though they never came to fruition.

In Toronto, the Jacyk family wanted to commission a biography of the life of Petro Jacyk, the millionaire who funded programs at CIUS and the University of Toronto. I had been selected as the prospective author and had read through the thin and partially incomplete manuscript once already, thinking that it would be necessary to add a lot of background information. Following the reaction to my editorial, however, Nadia Jacyk, Petro's daughter, asked me to her office and politely informed me that I could no longer be responsible for her father's biography. The reaction in the community to my Edmonton editorial had been too negative. I was an outcast, it seemed. Still, I could at least offer talks at the University of Toronto, in contrast to Himka, who had recently been boycotted, with members of the Ukrainian student organization handing out leaflets requesting students not to attend his guest lecture. He was also disinvited from a major conference on another occasion.

Given my free time, I embarked on a lecture tour of Australia a few weeks later, which was to start in Perth, and continue through Adelaide (my official host university), Melbourne, and Sydney. In Perth, my host was the affable and brilliant Mark Edele, and in Adelaide, Paul Babyi, a law professor and a native of Calgary, Alberta. Paul had arranged a talk for me at the University of Adelaide on "The 2010 Presidential Elections in Ukraine," and added an evening function speaking to members of the Ukrainian community in the city. The university function went smoothly. In the evening I arrived at a packed room full of tables, with a much older audience – indeed everyone present seemed to be over 70 other than Paul and myself. In the background were portraits of OUN founder Evhen Konovalets, Shukhevych and Bandera, as well as a prominent one of Viktor Yushchenko, now ousted as President of Ukraine.

I kept my remarks strictly to the topic of the elections but once question time started, I could do little to keep the comments on topic. One man approached me with a piece of paper shouting "You wrote in *Edmonton Journal* on February 7 that Bandera killed Jews!" In fairness, the overall atmosphere was not hostile though I declined to answer any questions about the editorial. In Melbourne, I got more of the same, though my lecture at the University of Monash went well enough. By then I had been approached by Stefan Romaniw, the Vice-President of the World Congress of Ukrainians, who wanted to arrange a breakfast so that he and some colleagues could question me about Bandera. I had met Romaniw a year earlier at a conference in Adelaide, and though friendly, he had struck me as one of the more fanatical nationalists in the community.

After my talk, I spent the evening at the home of Professor Marko Pavlyshyn and his Ukrainian wife and we were enjoying conversation when my cell phone rang. My sister Jill was calling from England with the news that our mother, then suffering from Alzheimer's, might not live much longer. Thus, I cut short my trip to fly to Singapore the next day, and then on to London to be with my mother during her final days. Living abroad for so long is always difficult as parents grow old, but mine had visited Canada frequently. My mother had become ill not long after my father's death from cancer in 2000, though she concealed it well for some time. My sisters and their families looked after her, almost in shift fashion, until the end of her life. She was an inspirational parent, and a woman of great

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kindness, combined with firmness. She recognized me as soon as I walked into her hospice room, but by then she could not really speak. She died with her family around her bedside, which seemed to me, then as now, an ideal way to end the human life.

Later in the same year, I was invited to contribute to a Ukrainian-language book on Bandera, edited by the German-Turkish scholar Tarik-Cyril Amar, and took the opportunity to moderate the language I had used in the editorial. It included many of the letter writers to the *Edmonton Journal*, thus allowing both sides of the debate to have a voice: Himka, Rossolinski-Liebe, Volodymyr Viatrovych, Alex Motyl, Yaroslav Hrytsak, and others. It was published in Kyiv under the title *Strasti za Banderoiu* (Passions about Bandera) in 2010, but never appeared in an English translation.

I returned to Australia in the spring of 2011 for a conference at the University of Western Australia in Perth. Afterward, I flew to Sydney to meet some friends, and took a taxi from the airport to the Holiday Inn in the St. Pancras area. As I went through the hotel door, carrying my suitcase, I was astounded at the reception. The entire staff was facing me and applauding as I entered. It was without doubt the most remarkable reception I had ever received. Before I reached the lobby desk, however, something prompted me to look behind me. And there with a large grin on his face and hair flowing was entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson. He hung around the lobby all evening, mostly on the phone, but was very sociable with all the guests.

The first decade of the 21st century was without doubt my most successful one in terms of accolades, largely thanks to the initiative of a brilliant department Chair, Robert W. Smith, a renowned scientist of the US space program and universally regarded as the leading expert on the Hubble telescope. Robert nominated me for the university's research prize in 2003, which I was awarded at a ceremony, with the Dean, Daniel Woolf, reading out my letter of nomination. In 2005, I received an Alberta Centennial Medal, for which one had to be nominated, though I was never sure who had nominated me. In 2006, with the support of Woolf, I was given the title of "Distinguished University Professor," which came with a permanent research salary of \$20,000 per year, reducing my need to apply for external grants.

Some of these awards served as inducements for me to remain in Alberta, which politically was always too conservative for my political tastes though I loved the countryside, especially the Rockies, and the village feeling of Edmonton as a city. In 2008, I received the University of Alberta's highest award, the University Cup, for teaching, research, and public service, at a ceremony held at Edmonton's Jubilee Auditorium. I invited all my friends. My mother was too ill to attend, but my younger sister, Enid, came over for the event.

I had also joined the Canadian Army. Around 2000, Brian McKercher, a Professor from Royal Military College of Canada, visited several university departments trying to recruit people to teach courses at the Edmonton Garrison, both for officers and regular troops. I was persuaded to take part and for several years would drive north to the base and teach seminars and regular lectures on war-related topics. It was a very different atmosphere from my regular university classes. Some students knew far more than I about military technology but much less in terms of historical background.

The best class I ever taught was a seminar with a group of very talented and bright officers. The group included Wayne Eyre, then a Captain, but today a Lieutenant-General and Commander of the Canadian Army; Michelle Gallagher, a brilliant student, also at the rank of Captain, who eventually became a lawyer; Sean Bridgeman, a tank commander; Bryan Hamilton, an intelligence officer, who wore a lengthy grey coat and would always try to bait me in a friendly way, with comments about "pinkos" on campus; and Chris Chodan, a soft spoken but incredibly witty officer, who was Commanding Officer of the 6th Intelligence Company then based in Edmonton. After the classes ended, Chris nominated me for the position of Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel of his company, and after about a year, by 2004, I was awarded the position by the Minister of Defense, and continued until obliged to retire by longevity, in 2014.

I attended several field courses at the base in Winnipeg, which is adjacent to the International Airport, and countless ceremonies and dinners. I had a full uniform, and would often present medals to the ranks at the end of courses. Chris soon stepped down and was replaced by Greg Stead, formerly of the Canadian Navy, and he in turn was

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succeeded by Mark Godefroy. The preoccupation during the time I was there was service in Afghanistan and I would listen closely to their stories, many of which were far more hair-raising than I anticipated. I watched a video of long-range screening and destruction of an enemy truck carrying weapons, for example, shown to me by Corporal Ernie Kuffner, a gruff but kindly soul who died of heart failure shortly after I left the unit.

The hierarchical army system was something to which I probably never would have adjusted. One day a General visited our company, and when I entered the building with him, soldiers – mainly reservists – simply froze on sight so that the hallway was a sea of rigid statues, all saluting until he asked them to desist. He dressed down a Captain during a meeting for asking a direct question that was “well above his rank.” And yet he was also a civilian, who worked part time at the airport handing out boarding passes at the check-in counter. While everyone below my rank addressed me as “sir,” I found it difficult to speak to the General in the same fashion, though I was always respectful and not only to him.

About the author:

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