Harbinger of spring /Mark Graesser

Your Voice

MUN Pensioners' Association (MUNPA) • Vol. 20, No. 2, April 2022
Editor: Bernadette Power • Design and layout: Mark Graesser

Connecting Dots: War in Ukraine and "Old Countries" Left Behind

Steve Wolinetz

Is dotage the time when you spend more time looking backward than forward? I spent most of February dwelling on the siege of Ottawa, only to have my attention diverted to Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. That Putin invaded was no surprise: Chekhov maintained that if there was a gun on the wall in one act of a play, it should be used in the next. If nothing else, the occupation and the invasion helped distract me from the January 6th inquiry and the fragility of democracy in a country whose citizenship I can't bring myself to shed.

This probably sounds more like a hardwired political scientist's brain working overtime than someone looking backward. But it is hard to know who we are if we have no sense of where we came from. For most of us questions like this are largely settled – but not entirely. If nothing else, we have more time to explore and ponder. A student and teacher of politics and things political, I've argued that we can't understand the present without knowing what went before. It's not that those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it – we suffer the same fate, whatever the case – but rather that understanding requires us to know more.

War in Ukraine intensified something I was doing anyway. I've poked into family genealogy without taking a headlong dive into it. Doing so takes me to Ukraine and Belarus, from whence my grandparents emigrated. My mother's mother came from Odessa, my grandfather (for whom I am named) from a nearby village. Already married, Simcha (Samuel) Blechmann, age 21, left with his brother, Mordko, in December 1909, and sent for my grandmother, Sarah, (Nana) a year later. Blechmann became Blackman, and Simcha, Samuel. All sailed from Bremen to Galveston, Texas.

Samuel Blackman was in Oklahoma City when Sarah joined him in May 1911. My mother, Gertrude, was born on May 8, 1912, in Omaha, Nebraska, her birth certificate stating that she was "female, Blackman" because my grandparents had not decided on a name when it was issued. Decades later, she was able to get a passport when her sister, Selma – eleven years her junior – swore an affidavit to her birth. The family moved east, settling in Philadelphia and then, Easton, Pennsylvania, where Samuel was a greengrocer and then a fruit wholesaler. I don't know much about their lives in Ukraine, only that my grandmother, the oldest of seven sisters, came from a middle class family and had been educated in Russian, unusual for a Jewish woman. All ended up in Philadelphia.

Continued on page 7

Inside this issue

From the Editor

Greetings!

I am nearing the end of my term as MUNPA Board member and Editor of Your Voice…one last copy in June. It has been a great experience and I thoroughly enjoyed your many stories.

Our April issue includes Steve's comparative essay connecting the dots of current events and family history (interesting read), Mark's job of packing mules (can't imagine), Philip's tales of academics and butterflies (who knew?), and Joan's unexpected berries and wool (huh?)! This is quite a mixed bag that will undoubtedly pique your interest. Please submit your story for the June issue.

Bernadette

Tribute Award Nominations

Do you know a colleague who might be deserving of a MUNPA Tribute Award?

Please check the tribute awards page at the MUNPA website more information.

Deadline for Nominations is June 30, 2022.

C. Dutton (Chair, Tribute Awards Committee)

MUNPA Contact Information

Office	Room 2003E, Signal Hill Campus
Office Manager	Jackie Collins
Main e-mail	munpa@mun.ca
Phone	(709) 864-6979
Website	www.mun.ca/munpa
Your Voice	yourvoice@mun.ca
St. John's Programme Committee	munpaevents@mun.ca
Grenfell MUNPA Committee	
Mary Sparkes	msparkes@grenfell.mun.ca
Lois Bateman	lbateman@grenfell.mun.ca

President's Message

While preparing for the April MUNPA Board meeting, I noted that there was only one more Board meeting before our AGM in June. It seems only recently that we gathered in the conference room at the Signal Hill Campus for our 2021 AGM. Time has indeed flown by, despite the brakes repeatedly being applied due to Covid. Over the past year, our Programme Committee has excelled in presenting a wide range of activities, mainly virtual, to engage our members. Our special interest groups have also continued to pivot to a range of virtual and in- person activities (depending very much on the Covid regulations at the time) to maintain connections among their members.

Virtual meetings can never supplant in-person interactions but do have the advantage of enabling participation by a wider audience. Members who have moved away from Newfoundland were given the opportunity to join their old groups virtually and engage in lively conversation with friends left behind. Presentations once limited to a local audience could be opened up to participants at a distance. We have also been invited to participate in presentations from other Pensioners' Associations in Canada.

Hopefully the challenges of Covid will decrease as we adjust to living with the virus (dare I say 'endemic' rather than 'pandemic'). I trust we will not lose the Covid gain of a wider audience via virtual meetings. I'd like to see more opportunities to sit in on relevant presentations from elsewhere, and to make our own program elements available to an audience beyond Newfoundland and Labrador. MUNPA members can help to inform the Board on virtual opportunities known to them.

As Steve Wolinetz notes elsewhere in this issue, access to real time virtual connections has expanded our reach and we can even now contemplate having Board members participate from a distance. Steve is currently working hard to recruit new members to the Board to present at our June AGM. I highly recommend you consider volunteering, whether you are local or at a distance. I guarantee you will find it a rewarding experience.

Until next time, take care of yourselves.

Grant Gardner

Can you pack a mule?

Mark Graesser

In 1962, age 19, I was in my first year of college in Portland, Oregon and thinking of the summer ahead. I could probably get a job clerking in the village store back in Montana for a dollar an hour, as I had throughout high school. But I fancied something a bit more lucrative, preferably outdoors. The U.S. Forest Service paid more than three dollars for summer workers, making it a choice employer for young "men" like myself.

The problem was that my father was the local District Ranger, ruling out the possibility of work on his district, or any neighbouring district, under strict federal anti-nepotism rules. So I sent off a hopeful application to the northern part of the state. In due course, somewhat to my surprise, I received a letter from the Choteau ranger wondering if I would be interested in the job of Fire Guard in charge of the Gates Park Station in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. "This is one of our most important positions," he avowed. However, it would require basic horsemanship, and by the way, "Can you pack a mule?" The job would entail taking supplies to a fire lookout on the top of a nearby mountain.

Oops! While in my younger years I had "identified as a cowboy," and was familiar with horses and pack mules from life at a rural ranger station, I had never actually packed a mule. Mainly, I knew that compared with horses mules were smart and ornery.

So I sought advice from home. My father counselled honesty, but said he could teach me the rudiments if I had a few days before the job began. Whatever I then wrote to Ranger Pulver, I received a prompt reply: "You're hired. Report for work at 8:00 A.M., June 11, 1962."

Back home I had a few days to gird myself for the summer adventure/challenge. I already owned a battered cowboy hat, but needed to buy a good pair of boots, "packers," which were a cross between "loggers" for fire fighting and cowboy boots for riding. More importantly, there were the lessons in how to pack a mule.

Gates Park Station and Bear Top Mountain

First, of course, you have to catch the mule. Unfortunately, my father's current district did not use pack mules. Assuming I could somehow manage that once at my station, Dad proceeded to set up a sawhorse in lieu of the real thing, then instructed me in the intricacies of placing a "sawbuck" pack saddle on same, and then correctly bundling varied cargo to be attached. "Correctly" was the operative word! Do it wrong, and you're likely to loose the pack on steep trails sending cases of food in all directions. All of the goods were to be divided into two large piles of equal weight, then securely wrapped in squares of heavy canvas called "mantees." These were tied to each side of the saddle. All of this was done with specific rope hitches and knots.

Once on the scene at Gates Park, in the centre of the largest wilderness area in the U.S. (at that time), my primary companion for the summer was a taciturn old packer named George, whose job was to bring supplies over the mountains from the road 20 miles distant, using a string of mules. He gave me some sage advice, such as always keeping one hand on the mule to let it know where you are. However, as a mere college boy I couldn't possibly replicate his loud and uncouth vocabulary in addressing the animals. "Catching up" the mule from its bucolic pasture

Continued next page

involved a well understood ritual of faux trickery using a pan of oats as bait.

Happily, I managed periodically to pack the mule as required, leading it up the 8,100 foot rocky crag known as Bear Top to supply "Pinnacle Paul," the reclusive "lookout" who had been spotting fires from this station for countless years.

Unhappily, it was a "bad year" for fires from the perspective of my primary job as a first responder. That is, there were few fires, and therefore not the lucrative overtime pay which would come from the days and nights required to suppress them. Nonetheless, it was an enjoyable and unique summer, and I am confident that no mule suffered from the experience.

The (unloaded) mule and Paul Hazel on Bear Top

2022-23 Board of Directors and Committees

Only a cockeyed optimist would bother writing this, but MUNPA needs you, if not on its board, then on its programme and other committees.

You in this instance, means not only people in and around St. John's or Corner Brook, but also anyone in a time zone sufficiently proximate that you could zoom into a board or committee meeting. One benefit of the pandemic has been not only time to sort out our sock drawers or old photos – neither of which I have done – but also that we can include members elsewhere in Canada, and insofar as time zones permit, other parts of the world. Having one or more board members elsewhere we ensure that we broaden our reach.

That said, I know that most of us have had our fill of committees and meetings in our working lives and that only gluttons for punishment would seek more – albeit within limits: Recent retirees I've recruited have demurred because they're already doing too much. So, why do it?

Several reasons:

What we do is important: In addition to representing pensioners' interests we organize a range of activities that keep us active, engaged, and connected with others – in theory helping us live longer.

It can be fun – for those of us who never had enough time to get to know colleagues as well as we wanted, MUNPA's events and special interest groups provide that opportunity.

Someone has to: We have a strong working relationship with the university, but problems come up from time to time. The bad news is that we're there to deal with them. The good news is that it doesn't take much time. Most problems can be sorted fairly easily. And, all of us are, like you, retired and have things we want to do.

To offer your services, suggest other recruits, or just get more information, e-mail me at

swolin@mun.ca.

Steve Wolinetz

Past President

The Wool and the Berries

Joan Scott

I knew exactly what I wanted, a ball of specific knitting yarn, colour "Flax," to complete my knitting project. When you live where I do you get used to accepting what is available, and being grateful for it, even when it is not exactly what you want. I was knitting mittens and what is so terrible about mittens of two different colours?

I resisted ordering online. It's been my experience that, in addition to the extra cost and the environmental problems of ordering online, from where I live it does not live up to its main promise, i.e. speed. Newfoundland seems often not to have made it to the maps of distributors who are always far away. When I have complained about tardy deliveries it seems to be my fault for living here, like, what did I expect, obviously their delivery schedule only applies to normal parts of the country, meaning the parts where most Canadians live, and not to areas of lower population density, such as Canada's most easterly province.

However, I might have to seek what I wanted from a central Canadian distributor or perhaps in trying to do that, I could sneakily pick up a clue as to more local distributors and so use a more ecological delivery route. The company had a distributor in the west of the country. On their site, the specific product was not mentioned. Also, the site made it appear that there was definitely no alternative to ordering from them.

Perhaps there was a wool-shop nearer home that might have suggestions.

So where were the local wool shops? I found one I had used long ago, that I remembered as being in a house and dedicated to knitting, with a wide range of yarns, and samples of small garments that had been made with them, and run by people who actually knitted. Surely such shops had all disappeared by now. But no, this one was still in business and offered an email address, so I sent an email asking whether they stocked what I wanted.

I should say that there had been a fairly significant fall of snow the night before, and when I looked out on the beautiful sunlit scene in the morning, with an unbroken field of snow, of unknown depth, it looked as though even my lunch date with Roberta, fresh out of her isolation following holiday travel, seemed unlikely. I sat down to complete as much as I could of the knitting. The man next door, faithful whenever there is any amount of fresh snow to clear, was usually out there early but not so far today. However, he could soon be heard approaching with his snowblower and within less than ten minutes he had cleared all around my car and up the garden path. I went out to lunch after all, and found, as usual, that the worst road conditions were those closest to home.

After lunch, as we were leaving the restaurant, I checked my phone. To my surprise, in this post-Christmas pause, time of holiday sloth, supply chain problems, not to mention fear and anxiety at the height of the Omicron onslaught, the wool-shop had replied to my specific inquiry. Their answer was "Yes." Wow! Excited, I hurried there before our short winter day closed in. On the way I recalled that they were on a narrow road with parking at the back, the shop accessed by a narrow alley between two houses. Would it be ploughed? I found the alley and lot, well cleared and sanded. I stopped to put on my mask and grabbed the ski pole I use to navigate winter surfaces. The back door opened and I was smilingly welcomed by the masked and socially distanced owner. I found the shop much as I remembered, with a few focused shoppers assessing patterns and yarn. The shop offered knitters an outlet during the covid related spike in creativity. I identified myself as the woman who had emailed and was instantly shown wooden cubby-holes packed with my yarn in many colours including the specific one I was looking for. For a fleeting moment I regretted that my mittens would now be both in the same colour, but did not seriously question my unbelievable good fortune.

However, I not only got exactly what I wanted but also something else, something excellent. Taped onto the counter was a photograph of blueberries. By this season, local berries have disappeared from the market. The best we can hope for is those expensive, soon-to-rot, imported 'fresh' berries that are three times the size of ours and one third as tasty, with tough indigestible skins made robust for mileage.

Continued next page

The Butterfly In The Room

Philip Hiscock

An academic of any sort usually has two regular audiences — their scholarly peers and the non-academic public. They speak to both, often saying the same basic stuff, but for the first, it is largely within a rhetoric of the theory of how things work. For the latter it is shaped by the brilliant examples, the wow stories and the pretty butterflies, so to speak. In the classroom, though, both are needed. Nonetheless, no academic, some entomologists aside, wants to get a reputation as a "butterfly collector."

So, when I was teaching Folklore, I was at least as concerned that students learn the dry bones of the topics at hand as that they hear interesting, sometimes amusing, examples of them. I tried to have examples at the ready for everything I lectured about. I suspect the butterflies may have sometimes overwhelmed the dry bones, but in retrospect that is not as bad as not having anything flitting around the classroom.

One of my favourite stories was one I used as an example of several aspects of folklore, but I particularly liked it for the quick wit of a man of the working class, responding to another who was a bought-and-paid-servant of the upper class, a servant of a man who had tried to erase his working-class origins. A complicated social matter wrapped in lovely speech play.

Some dry bones: when folklore is successful in what it does, it spreads around, localising itself as needed, changing in some ways, remaining the same in others. Migratory legends are typical, and this story is one: told in a half-dozen different places around the island of Newfoundland, and no doubt further than that, and always about different well-to-do families and with different local heroes. It is as historically true in any of those places as in any of the others, which is to say it probably never happened anywhere. But the "social truths" remain.

Before, the story goes, the Carnell family of St John's found some wealth, they were known by locals as *KARN*les, like the word carnal — and not, as they would now have people call them, karNELLs. (Another story was that, once their business shifted from carriage-making to carrying corpses for funerals, they could no longer risk being known as "carnal.")

Mr Carnell (kar*NELL*, now well-to-do) built a new home where he had a good spot for a garden, but he needed to improve it. So, he asked around and found out that Pat Shea, who lived up near where Bowring Park is today, could supply him with a cartload of well-aged cow manure for the garden. And so he ordered and paid for it, and a few mornings later Pat duly arrived with his horse and cart. He knocked on the front door and asked the butler answering the door if Mr KARNle was at home.

The servant haughtily said "It is Mr kar*NELL*. And Mr kar*NELL* is busy."

So Pat Shea said, "Well then. You tell Mr kar*NELL* that Mr shuh-*HAY* came by with his load of shuh-*HIT*."

The Wool and the Berries, continued

I asked about the photo taped onto the counter. It turned out that the owner's husband has a blueberry farm. His main product is jam, but last year's crop was over abundant. His wife described the many berries you got with one rake-through of just a branch of the plant. He had flash frozen the berries left over from the jam process. I asked if I could have some and a huge plastic bag was brought out. It held a number of pounds for $30.00 and they were truly flash frozen - none in clumps. The wool-shop owner had no faith in the plastic bag, and placed the whole in a sturdy paper sac with handles.

So, I went off with exactly the wool I wanted, and, surprisingly, berries enough for most of the winter – an unlikely wonder. This location comes with predictable drawbacks, but there are also unpredicted delights. Sometimes, I feel I am living in the greatest place – but not always.

Connecting Dots, continued

Odessa, I have since learned, was an unusual place: Founded by Catherine the Great in 1792, it was an "open" city, in which Jews, confined to villages or *shtetls* in the Pale of Settlement – the part of Russia in which Jews were permitted to live – were allowed to settle. According to the New York Times, in the early 1900s, Odessa was the third largest Jewish city in the world and a place where Jews could prosper. That connects with the only story that I remember being told – that during a pogrom, the family fled, inadvertently leaving a child, who was hidden by servants, behind. Odessa might have been an open city, but Jews there were not exempt from the periodic violence that the Tsar's minions unleashed.

Pogroms were nothing compared to what would have befallen my father's family, in Antapol, a shtetl between Minsk and Brest in Belarus. Both my grandparents came from the same village. My grandmother, Ida (or Iska) left Russia in 1911, age 19, with a younger girl in her care, sailing to New York, where she was met by an uncle, who was already in Brooklyn – a step up from the tenements of the lower eastside.

There she was pursued by her cousin Jacob, whom she married, perhaps reluctantly. Of Jacob Wolinetz, I know little – that he was a grocer (or a jeweler?), that according to a younger brother, Benny, he had been involved in the uprising of 1905, and that he died in 1931, age 41, falling in the snow and dying of pneumonia, walking on the Sabbath – to me, a senseless death whose indirect cause was orthodox Judaism. It meant my father ended up as a pharmacist, before drugstores, engorged by insurance, began printing money, rather than the doctor he wanted to be.

My grandmother's brother, Morris, and Jacob Wolinetz' brothers ended up in Brooklyn. However, her parents remained, surviving until World War II. Never one to forget – Jews are enjoined to remember – my grandmother blamed Hitler. Knowing that my great grandparents had rented horses to the Tsar's post office, I assumed that it might have been Stalin. Not so: The name of that village was lost to me until a few years ago. In Russia when my grandparents emigrated, Antapol was in the part of Belarus ceded to Poland after 1919. It remained Polish until Stalin seized it in 1939 and was not a good place to be after Hitler invaded in 1941.

Anxious to know more about Ukraine, I've been reading Timothy Snyder's Bloodlands. One of six books that Snyder has written about Ukraine, Bloodlands is a highly readable history, more likely to plunge you into depression than lift you out. Snyder shows how Stalin and Hitler murdered fourteen million people through collectivization, war, and, in the German case, variants of the final solution, of which there were five. Sometimes called the breadbasket of Europe, Ukraine had the privilege of not only being starved by Stalin in 1932-1933, but also by Hitler, who planned to depopulate the Soviet Union and colonize it with German farmers who would ensure that the Reich was never short of food. Things were worse in Belarus. There, neither Jews nor Belarusians stood a chance: Jews were killed because they were Jews, Belarusians because they might be partisans, who had fled to the woods and swamps. My great grandparents would have been too old for the latter.

Arguably, the past is another country, another time, not our concern. Yet, it is. I look back and think of questions I neither asked nor wanted answered. I am also an immigrant, accidentally settling in a place I never intended to stay. However, I could phone home and fly out a couple times a year. Like my grandparents, I've crossed the Atlantic by ship, but I knew I would be going back. Karen and I were astounded when my grandmother told us that she had crossed on the Lusitania – something that I have yet to verify. Although its sinking was one of the things that brought the United States into World War I, that bit of history meant nothing to her. That's not surprising: Living in a Yiddish milieu, odds are that she spoke little English in 1915. Nor would the mother of two young children have had much time to read a newspaper.

I don't know what it was like to cross the ocean and arrive in another country barely speaking the language. But, my grandmother had a cushion: One link in a process of chain migration, Iska – or Ida, as she was renamed, when immigration officials insisted that Iska

Continued next page

was a man's name – was sent to a trusted uncle, Chiam, whom I can remember as a gentle patriarch. Immigrating, she lived in a setting in which family was dense enough that there was little reason to go beyond it. Family was what she knew and valued. Yet – and this surprises me – I know little or nothing of my grandfather, Jacob Wolinetz. I can find his grave – I was taken there as a child – and have found his gravestone online, amid a sea of others in Maspeth Cemetery in Queens, but I can't remember him being spoken of, let alone with affection or love. The few photos in my grandmother's apartment were of my father, my brother and me and cousin Phyllis. I found one or two that must be him, but nothing more.

Samuel Blackman died in 1941. Only my brother Jack had been born by then. Even so, I know much more about him because my mother and Aunt Selma and Uncle Bernie talked about him – not often, but fondly. I know he was a *mensch* and a tease and fun to be with. Wholesaling vegetables in Easton, PA, he rose early, drove to Philadelphia and returned, selling what he could and bringing the rest home. That meant his family had enough to eat and, if they went unsold, (then) exotic fruits like pineapple. Back home, he would nap, and then tease his youngest, Selma, who ironically, married a nudge (tease), my Uncle Marty. He also liked to try new things: a car he didn't know how to drive, a gas refrigerator my grandmother thought would explode. When he died he was in San Francisco, where he intended to settle the family. Named for him, I can't help wondering whether I am like him. In one respect, I am: Like my brother, I am a nudge.

Does this matter? Perhaps not, but I can't help wondering. Connecting dots takes me back. I felt shock, as many of us did, when Putin invaded Ukraine. My younger son, Michael, called and said that he and his wife, Lucie Lhotak, felt unusually upset. Ever the prof, I said that I wasn't surprised: Czech by birth, – Lucie's family fled in 1982 – her mother had been heaving Molotov cocktails at Russians in 1968. Russians are as popular in that part of Europe as Germans were after World War II. In the Netherlands, I heard apocryphal stories about German tourists ringing doorbells and asking if they could show their wives the house because they had been there in 1943. A friend who bundled himself off to Denmark heard similar stories. But that's only part of the story. Born in 1981, Mike had known nothing but peace. Children of the cold war, most of us have known little else. With its threats of nuclear Armageddon and air raid drills, and debates about whom to admit to your fallout shelter, the Cold War was macabre, but remarkably stable, its protagonists – particularly on the Communist side – increasingly risk adverse. Not so Vladimir Putin.

I won't analyze the present; there is too much to say. What I don't know – and can't know – is what my parents or grandparents felt when they saw skies darkening and war approaching in the late 1930s. If they talked about anything, it was the depression and Franklin Roosevelt, a family saint – things that informed their world view and party allegiances, and mine as well. Those worlds are long gone. Curious, I try to connect a few dots, to know a bit more, but not be consumed by it or futures for my children and granddaughters that my hardwired brain tells me may not go well. But it is fun to connect the dots.

My grandmother Ida wasn't cut off from the world. Later, she read a Yiddish language newspaper, the Forward, whose English online edition, I eyeball. Growing up, one of the last things I wanted to know was Yiddish. That was the past, something to put behind, of no interest or importance. Now is different: I am the none too observant president of an alternate Jewish group, the Jewish Community Havura, have begun Yiddish lessons, more for a lark, and realize that if I speak really bad Dutch (a variant of Low German), it sounds like Yiddish, a variant of High German, that many are striving to rescue. I don't want to go back to those worlds, long lost. Even so, they are a part of me that I'm ready neither to discard nor fully embrace.