UNIVERSITATIS COMENIANA BRATISLAVENSIS
FACULTAS PHILOSOPHICA

Tomus 45 ETHNOLOGIA SLOVACA ET SLAVICA 2024

A TRIBUTE TO MYKOLA MUSHYNKA
(February 20, 1936 − September 12, 2024)

«Не забудьте пом'янути незлим тихим словом…»
Don't forget to remember me with a kind, quiet word…
(From the poetry of Taras Shevchenko.
Placed by the Mushynka family
on the official announcement of Mykola's passing.)

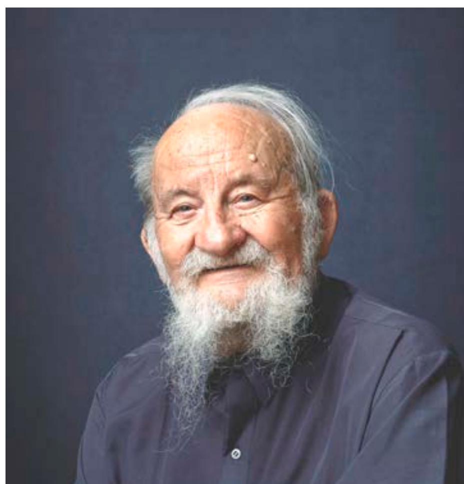

Figure 1
prof. PhDr. Mikuláš Mušinka, DrSc. (1936 − 2024)
Source: M. Štrauch

Mykola Mushynka (Mikuláš Mušinka), ethnographer and folklorist, well known and beloved by many in Europe and North America, passed away on September 12, 2024, in Prešov, Slovakia, at age 88. Several institutions with

which Mykola had a professional relationship and countless organizations, groups, and individuals who treasured him and his work all responded to his passing with sincere condolences. As someone who knew Mykola personally over many decades and visited him frequently in Prešov, I carry several memories which I, as an American Slavic scholar, would like to weave here into this memorial essay about Mykola's life and activities. Mykola himself spoke on many occasions with journalists about his life and his professional path. Because some of these interviews were recorded, we can also draw on his own spoken words as a source of information about him. An especially heartfelt remembrance of Mykola as a young man, written by one of his closest friends from boyhood on, physicist Ján Birčák, also provides a glimpse into his life. I thank Ján for sharing his essay with me. Among other sources, both the *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture* (2002, 2005) and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine* (Struk, 2014) carry entries on Mykola. Thus, I drew on several sources here, not the least being my own recollections.

This essay does not, however, offer a detailed catalog of his publications which can be found elsewhere, nor is it a full and complete step-by-step biography. Rather, it is an attempt to provide a sketch of the man himself linked with the highlights of his life and career – and as I remember him. He was a strikingly unique personality and a hard-working scholar whose particular challenges, convictions, and history shaped his personal life and professional work. That life spanned a stretch of intensely important European history in a world that has radically evolved from the Interwar period through World War II and Soviet political domination of Czechoslovakia, including the "Prague Spring" and the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia; the Revolutions of 1989; the fall of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communism in eastern and central Europe; the "Velvet Divorce" in 1993; and the first twenty-four years of the new millennium which has brought with it the tragic war in Ukraine, a nation of great significance for Mykola. As one blogger expressed: Mushynka's passing in a sense itself heralds the end of an epoch.

Mykola was born in the Carpatho-Rusyn village of Kurov/Kuriv in eastern Slovakia's Bardejov district, on February 20, 1936, and lived there with his extended family – his parents, his four siblings, as well as his uncle's family, and two grandmothers "so at one time there were fourteen of us…all under one roof," as he liked to put it. When we first met in 1983, he was pleased to know that my maternal grandparents' villages, Ruska Voľa nad Popradom and Čirč were both relatively close to Kurov and that I had such a strong interest in preserving my connection with that historical past and that cultural world. It was there in eastern Slovakia that Mykola experienced his formative years in what became post-World War II Communist Czechoslovakia. From birth he was thoroughly steeped in the peasant traditions of his family and village, learning the songs, tales, beliefs, and rituals practiced throughout the region. Ján Birčák recalls how Mykola, like all village children, also learned how to

handle the chores of village agricultural and shepherding, an education which would come in handy later at a turbulent time in Mykola's life.

As Mykola described it, the Mushynka family home in Kurov in the 1950s often served as the village gathering place particularly for the women who came to spin, chat, and sing. Later, he often referred to their requests that he as a high school student read to them, a request borne out of their curiosity about what he was learning. This he did by lamplight since the village did not yet have electricity. He recalled how they preferred listening to Taras Shevchenko's poetry over the Russian poetry of his literary love at the time, Pushkin, and how this eventually contributed to his understanding of his own ethnic identity. His immersion in the Kurov village environment, no matter how it might have been identified in ethnic terms at that time, clearly inspired in him a love of his people and their native culture and influenced his future professional path.

Mykola completed his early education in Russian-language schools in Prešov and Bardejov in 1953. Soon after, he embarked on university studies at Charles University in Prague with a concentration in Russian Language and Literature and seemed headed in the direction of continued studies in those disciplines in terms of a future profession. Thus, it was a surprise to everyone, as Birčák notes, that as a university student Mykola seemed suddenly and enthusiastically drawn to the discipline of ethnography and folklore. When back in Kurov during school holidays, he visited neighbors and gathered ethnographic information from them, especially from the venerable elderly women. At that time, he also had come to perceive his fellow Carpatho-Rusyn villagers as a subgroup of Ukrainians.

Perhaps Mykola in this last conviction was influenced in part by the Galician-Ukrainian linguist and ethnographer Ivan Pan'kevych (1887-1958) whom he encountered at Charles University. During the Interwar period, Pan'kevych had been commissioned by the Czechoslovak government to study the dialects of the new country's far eastern province, Subcarpathian Rus'. Unsurprisingly, the linguist had concluded that although Rusyn dialects in that province, as well as in the Prešov region of eastern Slovakia, were characterized by very definite specific and unique features, they were nonetheless dialects of Ukrainian, not Russian. Literary standards for Rusyn have by now been established in Slovakia and Poland and have long existed among Rusyns in the former Yugoslavia, but that was not the case in Subcarpathian Rus' or eastern Slovakia when Pan'kevych carried out his research. In addition, during the 1950s, Czechoslovakia adopted the Soviet model of considering the Rusyns/*rusiny* of Transcarpathia – newly appended by Stalin to Soviet Ukraine after World War II – as Ukrainians and applied that model to the Rusyns of eastern Slovakia. That is, by government *fiat*, all Carpatho-Rusyns were now Ukrainians. Myko-

la adopted that stance for his own reasons, and all his future writing and activity, whether journalistic or scholarly, circulated around it.

Eternally an energetic and determined individual with strong opinions, Mykola completed his undergraduate studies in 1959 and continued at Charles University in graduate school. There, he received a three-year stipend for 1963 – 1966 to study abroad at Kyïv University in Soviet Ukraine. During his sojourn in Ukraine, he had an opportunity to travel to Moscow to consult with the great Russian ethnographer and folklorist, Piotr Bogatyriov, since there were no scholars of Carpathian ethnography in Kyïv. Bogatyriov had done extensive field work in Subcarpathian Rus' and eastern Slovakia among Carpatho-Rusyns and Slovaks during the Interwar period when he lived and worked in Czechoslovakia, and he even taught in the 1930s at Comenius University. In an article Mykola wrote much later about that pioneering Russian ethnographer in *Slovenský národopis*, he revisited memories of those consultations with Bogatyriov. He described how Bogatyriov, along with his wife Tamara, welcomed him to their Moscow apartment "like an ambassador of Czechoslovakia which they considered their second homeland" (Mušinka, 1994, p. 63). Unfortunately, Mykola was unable to continue those consultations because in 1965 he was apprehended on the Ukrainian-Slovak border for possession of samizdat materials written by Ukrainian dissidents who hoped for the publication of those materials abroad.

Mykola's arrest on the border crossing at Chop/Čop came as a result of his interactions with several anti-Soviet Ukrainian dissidents while studying in Kyïv. Observers note that it is a miracle that he was soon released to Czechoslovak authorities with only a reprimand. No doubt, also contributing to the Ukrainian Communists' suspicions of Mykola was his folklore research among the people in Volhynia who in the thousands had been enticed to participate in the Volhynian Operation in 1946 when Stalin exchanged Czechs residing in Ukraine for "Ukrainian" emigrants from eastern Slovakia that he targeted for a "return" to the homeland. These so-called "*optanty*" emigrants to Soviet Ukraine from the very start realized that the operation was a fraud and desperately sought a return home to Czechoslovakia, but to no avail. Mykola's folklore research among them turned into a very different kind of research that focused instead on their dismal condition. He then shared details of their plight with officials back in Czechoslovakia, urging support for them, but the Soviet government did not welcome this exposé of their deception and brutality. Considered a provocateur, and then with his arrest at the border, Mykola was forbidden from continuing his studies in Kyïv and was banned from returning to Soviet Ukraine for many years. Fortunately, he was able to complete his dissertation at Charles University in 1967 on Volodymyr Hnatiuk's folklore fieldwork in the Carpathian region, successfully defending his dissertation and achieving the distinguished status of Candidate of Philological Sciences/*Kandidát filologických vied*.

In 1967 Mykola also published an anthology of Carpatho-Rusyn folklore – an immensely valuable book that I have turned to in my own research. This book, *From the Depths of the Ages: an anthology of the oral folklore of the Ukrainians of eastern Slovakia* (З глибини віків: антологія усної народної творчости українців Східної Словаччини) was one of the first of thousands more publications in the form of articles and books to come. He would write further on Rusyn folklore wherever it existed – in Slovakia, the Vojvodina, Transcarpathia. He also wrote about individuals who had contributed in various ways to ethnographic scholarship and society, but not just about significant scholars such as Hnatiuk, Pan'kevych, and Ivan Zilyns'kyi. He wrote about his ancestors, simple peasants, about Kurov's treasured peasant-woodcarver, Andrej Pavúk, and about his beloved Kurov, among many other topics. At this time he also founded the scholarly journal of the Museum of Ukrainian Culture in Svidník, *Науковий збірник Музею української культури у Свиднику*, and prepared its first four volumes (1965 – 1970).

Because of his arrest, though, from 1970-90 during the period of the so-called "Normalization" after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, Mykola was forbidden to work in any academic institutions or to publish in Czechoslovakia. Instead, he had to seek employment as a common worker. He took refuge in Kurov and from 1972 to 1976 labored there at a newly established "agricultural cooperative" or collective farm. Few workers wanted to live out in the pasture for several months at a time responsible for a large herd of cattle, Mykola recalled. When he applied for that job, he got it. He constructed for himself a wooden barn (*sypanec*) as a shepherd's hut where he kept watch over his cows and sheep and a bull and also pursued his academic work. Here, he welcomed visitors from Prague and even from abroad, as well as family members. Birčák notes that at first the unusual presence of an accomplished scholar as a simple farm worker was met with mistrust by his fellows, but he was eventually accepted. He garnered deep respect and even awe as he once "managed to transport a live piglet unnoticed on a regular passenger plane from Košice to Brno." When the State Security (Secret Police) became frustrated with trying to keep tabs on him and his frequent visitors out in the hills, the Bardejov District Committee of the Communist Party forced the collective farm manager to fire him from his job.

At that point, Mykola learned how to be a stoker and took a job with the Municipal Housing Authority in Prešov where he worked from 1976 – 1990. He described how he turned the boiler room into a library and worked cooperatively with other stokers so that he was able to take time away for research, supported by his colleagues. Paul Robert Magocsi, Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto, in his recent book *From Nowhere to Somewhere* recalls meeting with Mykola in the 1970s "in the bowels of a building where… [he] was reduced to stoking and caring for boilers that produced heat for several above-ground apartment buildings" (2004, p. 65). I myself recall Mykola

describing with a twinkle in his eye those years during which he worked at his "lowly" jobs as a time when he felt he was, in fact, the freest to think, research, and write, although forbidden to publish in his own country. No meetings, no reports to write – this permitted him to devote himself to his scholarly work. "No one," he would say with a chuckle, "paid any attention to the simple stoker, and that was just fine!" He was actually able to have his work published abroad, employing an array of creative pseudonyms (Fedir Holovachenko, Mykola Viruk ["Kuriv" spelled backwards], Mykola Hnatiukivs'kyi, and others).

Following the Revolutions of 1989 and the demise of Communism first in Czechoslovakia and then in the Soviet Union by 1991, Mykola was rehabilitated and returned officially to the academic world at the University of Prešov. He again was able to openly teach, write, and publish, all of which he pursued with his characteristic vigor into the twenty-first century. Initially, though, over the course of half a year, he continued to work as a stoker until a more stable position opened up at the university, and during this time he rode his bicycle from the boiler room to the university campus. He was finally hired to head up the research section of the Department of Ukrainian Studies at the university's Philosophical Faculty. At this time, he also became a professor at the Ukrainian Free University in Munich. In 1992, he became the first foreign recipient of the degree of Doctor of Philological Sciences (DrSc.) awarded by Kyïv National University. In 1997, he was elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyïv, an honor which he highly treasured. And then, Uzhhorod National University granted him the title of *Doctor honoris causa* in 2005. Indeed, Mykola received numerous other awards, including state awards on behalf of independent Ukraine from presidents Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyi. After retirement, Mykola continued to pursue research and also served as a political commentator and journalist in Prešov.

Mykola's studies and life experiences during his formative years in Communist Czechoslovakia and afterward led him to embrace, as mentioned above, a particular stance regarding the identity of Carpatho-Rusyns – that Carpatho-Rusyns are a subgroup of Ukrainians. Not everyone has agreed with this stance, and at times his writings and statements, among those of others, lent fuel to the fire of controversy over ethnic belonging. To be sure, identity is multilayered and complex, impacted not only by ethnic or cultural proximities, but also by political, personal, psychological, and emotional factors. It is not a simple choice for someone to make in all situations. For Carpatho-Rusyns in Transcarpathia and eastern Slovakia, larger forces and events have tugged and pulled them in different directions for well over a century resulting in a complicated history of identity or identities. Census figures from the past several censuses alone testify to the evolution of the people's consideration of identity.

I cannot speak for others, but in talking with me, and despite any larger ethnic or national context, Mykola always stressed the uniqueness of Carpatho-Rusyn identity. One thing for certain: he was fiercely proud of his roots, of his native village, of his native dialect, and of his people and their rich traditions. During the 1980s and 1990s, as I edited a quarterly newsletter read by descendants of Carpatho-Rusyn immigrants to North America, *The Carpatho-Rusyn American*, we translated and published in English a number of articles on Carpatho-Rusyn customs and rituals which Mykola wrote and happily contributed under the term "Carpatho-Rusyn." His, and our, hope was to educate the children and grandchildren of those immigrants about the rich folk culture which their ancestors had preserved over centuries.

When Prešov University established the Department or Institute of Rusyn Language and Culture (*Ústav rusínskeho jazyka a kultúry*), that institute organized in 2010 an international summer school for Carpatho-Rusyn studies, called the Studium Carpato-Ruthenorum. In the summer sessions of 2013, 2015, and 2016, Mykola as an "external co-worker" of the Institute lectured there in his Rusyn dialect on Carpatho-Rusyn folklore and ethnography. I also participated as a lecturer during the 2015 and 2016 sessions and observed his work with students. Besides offering lectures, Mykola organized two out-of-classroom experiences which were wonderfully memorable for all Studium participants. One of these events was a tour of a mini-skansen or open-air museum which he had managed at great effort to curate in a large yard behind his Prešov house. There we visited a peasant cottage and all the requisite items and farm equipment that he had gathered over the years and had rebuilt and organized as a traditional Carpatho-Rusyn peasant homestead. He clearly enjoyed responding to questions, interweaving ethnographic information with fascinating stories of his own experiences growing up in a village.

The other Studium event was a visit that Mykola arranged for us to Kurov, his beloved native village. In Kurov we visited a small cottage museum where he himself demonstrated how peasants in the past had milled grain by hand and wound flax and other plant fibers to make rope. He also introduced us to a young girl artist with significant disabilities and encouraged us to purchase pieces of her art to help support the family. We witnessed in this a compassionate side of this son of Kurov. Finally, the village's accomplished folk ensemble, "Kurovchan," which he had co-founded, then performed a traditional village wedding with Mykola as the *starosta* or organizer of the wedding reception. He participated in the reenactment and was unforgettably impressive in his shepherd's hat and heavy white woolen cape and pants embroidered in red and black, and carrying a shepherd's staff. This, I thought, was the real Mykola Mushynka as perhaps he most readily envisioned himself – the peasant shepherd, solitary, but also in charge of the proceedings, gracious and strong, totally immersed in the culture he treasured. The wedding reenactment was replete with dancing, authentic rituals, and a feast. Both that reenactment

and the mini-skansen tour were extraordinarily enjoyable as well as educational. Studium participants from other countries in Europe, as well as from North America, lucky enough to have been at those summer sessions will never forget Mykola.

In Prešov, Mykola and Magda were the ultimate hosts. Their home was always open to guests who could expect the warmest of welcomes. The house itself is one in a series of row houses, narrow, with at least three floors. As all visitors to the Mushynka household immediately observed, I too noticed that there were books absolutely everywhere--on shelves, along the stairway heading up to the attic, stacked on the floor and on anything resembling a tabletop. After greeting their visitors, Mykola would lead them to the small and cozy living/dining room warmly adorned with numerous art works, various memorabilia, and, of course, more books. His wife Magda promptly produced tea, coffee, cookies, cake, and often full meals including her delicious version of *machanka* (a thick mushroom cream soup). Mykola enjoyed toasting, and in proper Slavic style, alcohol was never absent. He would speak at length, relate various experiences he had had, respond to questions, draw out relevant books when questions required them, and he often regaled guests with copies of his latest publications.

I recall with pleasure my very first encounters with Mykola, as mentioned above, in the mid-1980s. These included, for instance, a few eventful rides around Prešov in his Trabant, a very small car manufactured in the former German Democratic Republic. As Birčák notes, Mykola actually earned a higher salary as a shepherd than a university worker, and so he was the first among his friends to purchase a car – that very same Trabant. Birčák writes that it was "the simplest, lightest, and cheapest car, with a two-stroke engine and a plastic, not metal, body." In that worthy vehicle, Mykola drove my husband and me also to a Romani settlement as he spoke about his concern for the culture and well-being of that population. Some years later, his interest would inspire his young son Alexander, who eventually also studied ethnology and history at Charles University, to pursue Romani Studies. Alek/Oles and his wife Lucia are now researchers and lecturers at the Institute of Romani Studies at the University of Prešov.

A word more about Magda Mushynka, for she was his most steadfast supporter. I never told her that, although substantially younger than my Rusyn maternal grandmother Anna from the village of Ruska Voľa nad Popradom, she has always reminded me of her both physically and in terms of personality. There is something warm, soft, loving about her, but she is also incredibly strong and competent, and all of this is delivered up with a hearty portion of irony and humor. She understood Mykola's personality, his energy and drive, but perhaps also his vulnerabilities, and she was there to support and protect him. Paul Robert Magocsi writes that Magda was always "utterly charming,"

fastidious about making guests feel at ease, offering a table of traditional foods "while Mykola liberally poured drinks, usually vodka or *borovichka*" (2024, p. 64). Birčák recalls that Magda's love for Mykola was channeled into her work as his "irreplaceable universal secretary-archivist, librarian, and typist," proficient at using a computer, something Mykola was not.

Mykola was the consummate ethnographer and folklorist, as his research and publications, as well as his awards and honors, demonstrate. His contributions to scholarship are abundant and deserve attention as invaluable for Carpatho-Rusyns and those who would study their language and culture whether those students see Carpatho-Rusyns as a distinct East Slavic group or a subgroup of Ukrainians. When I close my eyes, I see Mykola's sparkling blue eyes and I feel his enthusiasm that fueled a lifetime of hard work, but also a life of adventure and great accomplishment. As his boyhood friend, Ján Birčák, so appropriately put it, Mykola had one foot in Kurov, in his family's life and grounded "by the entire cultural heritage" of his family and his people, and another foot poised "energetically" in the outside world, in the halls of Academia, in "the heights of world scholarship." This pose, Birčák adds, might be uncomfortable for most, but was just perfect for Mykola.

Among so many others, I will miss Mykola.

May Mykola, the Servant of God and also of his people, now rest from his labors.

Eternal Memory!/*Vichnaia pamiat'*!

Patricia A. Krafcik

References

Magocsi, R. P. & Pop, I. (2002). *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture*. University of Toronto Press.

Magocsi, R. P. & Pop, I. (2005). *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture*. University of Toronto Press.

Magocsi, R. P. (2024). *From Nowhere to Somewhere. The Carpatho-Rusyn Movement. A Personal History*. *Ibidem*-Verlag.

Mušinka, M. (1967). З глибини віків: антологія усної народної творчости українців Східної Словаччини [From the Depths of the Ages: an anthology of the oral folklore of the Ukrainians of eastern Slovakia]. Prešov.

Mušinka, M. (1994). Peter Bogatyriov a zakarpatskí Ukrajinci. *Slovenský národopis*, *42*(1), 62-65.

Struk, H. D. (2014). Mykola Mushynka. *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine.* Retrieved November 4, from *https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CM%5CU%5CMushynkaMykola.htm*