EMELIA'S STORY: A UKRAINIAN GRANDMOTHER

Sharon D. Stone

Pour surmonter l'invisibilité des femmes dans l'histoire, des féministes tentent de redéfinir ce que des générations d'historiens ont qualifié de "rôles importants". Nous racontons la vie de femmes ordinaires, dont les expériences, les accomplissements et l'endurance sont de grande valeur pour notre recupération du passé. Dans ce récit de la vie de sa grand-mère ukrainienne, Sharon D. Stone contribue à cette importante initiative.

When Emelia came to Welland, Ontario in 1941, she did not like it. She wanted to turn around and go back to her Ukrainian-Canadian community in Canora, Saskatchewan. Her likes and dislikes, however, did not count for much. She was a married woman with four children, she could not read or write, and her English was almost non-existent. Besides, there was no work in Canora, but there was work in Ontario. That was, after all, why her husband had brought her and the children to Ontario. The opportunity to work for a decent wage was an important consideration. So she had to make the best of her situation.

It is important for Emelia's story to be told because she is a survivor. Although Emelia is a unique woman, her story could be that countless other women like her. This is especially evident when her life history is situated within the context of what was happening around her. We have the statistics to tell us how many women were born in a particular place in a particular year, how many were married, how many children they had, or how many went out to work and what kinds of jobs they had: these statistics cannot tell us how women experienced their lives. For the most part, we do not know how women reacted to what happened to them, or how they themselves acted upon their environments. This is particularly true of women who grew up alongside yet outside of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. Women such as Emelia have been silenced by their lack of fluency in English, by their inability to read or write in any language, and by our failure to attach importance to what they can tell us.

As "ordinary" women, we have a hard time understanding why anyone except family and friends would be interested in us. This is true of Emelia. When I interviewed her, using my mother to interpret most of what she said, she resisted telling me very much about what she thought or how she felt about her life. I think she feels that these things are private and unimportant. I'm not even sure she understood why I was interested in her life in the first place. I'm not sure how to explain to her that I'm interested both because as my grandmother, she is important to me, and also because the history of "ordinary" women needs to be told before it is lost forever.

Emelia was born a Canadian, but into a Ukrainian community, and she continues to live her life amongst Ukrainian-Canadians. She was brought up according to Ukrainian values and norms, and these continue to govern her approach to life. Her life has been hard, but with the mediation of her values, she has survived and is now able to enjoy the fruits of her labour. She has survived because she has been flexible, adaptive, immensely resourceful, and she has never lost her "joie de vivre" which lets her take life as it comes and make the most of it.

Emelia's parents had come from the Ukraine to Saskatchewan to homestead there. Land was scarce in the Ukraine, but in Saskatchewan: 160 acres of land could be bought for $10. Ukrainians began homesteading in the area in the 1890s, and Canora came into existence in the first years of the twentieth century. In 1911 Canora had a population of 435 and by 1921, the population was 1,230. The town served as the focal point for the large numbers of Ukrainian-Canadians in the area.

Most of the Ukrainian immigrants were illiterate peasants. When they settled around Canora, they kept their own traditions and many never learned to speak English. In fact, they succeeded so well in maintaining their culture that, in 1931 it was noted that the area was more like a "little Ukraine" than a Canadian settlement.

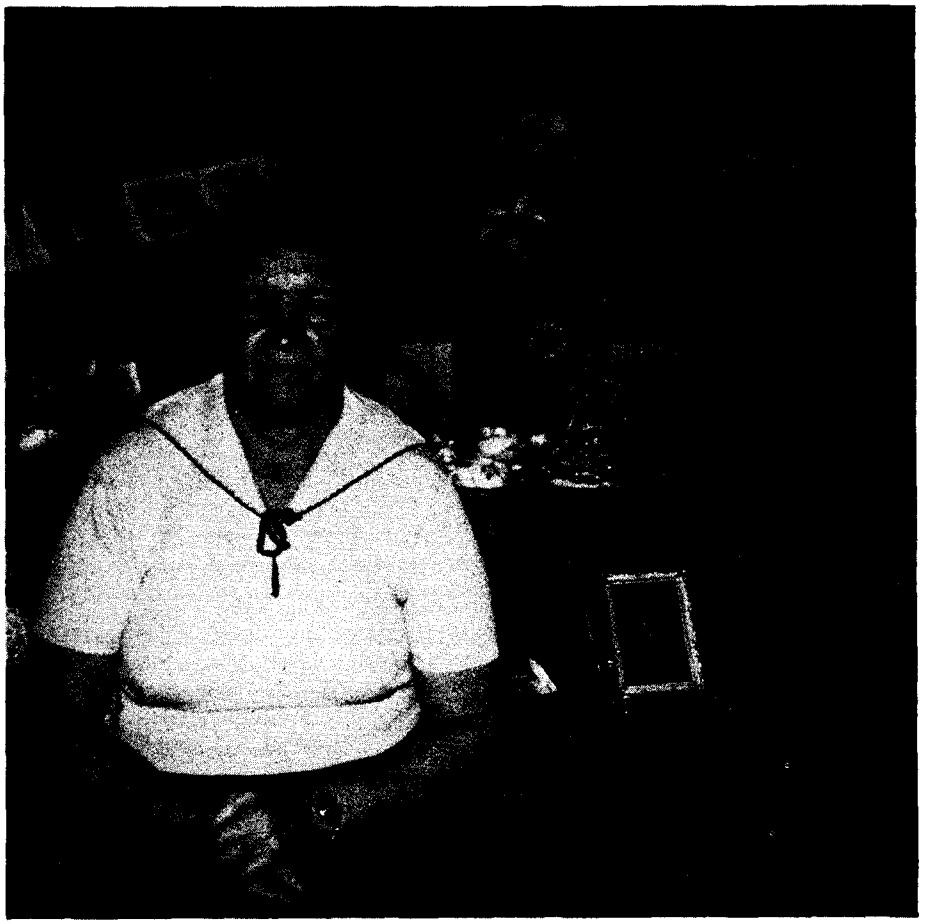
Traditionally, Ukrainians had large families, and Emelia's parents were not exceptions. As the oldest of thirteen children, she was a valuable member of the family. Her sex did not prevent her from being put to work on the farm as soon as she was old enough to handle a tool: all children, regardless of age or gender, were needed to work on the farm.

Emelia's chores included helping out at harvest time, chopping wood in the winter, and in the spring helping to plough the fields. It was arduous work for a young girl who would rather have been playing, Emelia recalls, but she had no choice. So she did what was required of her without complaining, making the best of her situation. Unlike most Anglo-Saxon girls, she did not help her mother with housework or childcare. Although her mother undoubtedly could have used her help, it was her father's needs, in accordance with Ukrainian values, which took precedence.

It was also because she was needed to work on the farm that Emelia never went to school (one of her brothers did not go to school either). In retrospect, Emelia says it would have been nice to go to school, but at the time it was not a possibility.

Growing up in a "little Ukraine," Emelia learned to accept a certain set of attitudes. In particular, she learned to adopt the fatalistic attitude towards life which has earned Ukrainians the reputation of being "heroic sufferers." Emelia believes that one must be content with one's lot in life, since complaining or resisting does not help a situation. This attitude is evident in her life-long tendency to do what she must without complaint. She believes that life is to be enjoyed, and one must make the best of a situation. She has always taken life as it came, and adjusted accordingly.

Emelia was married in 1926, when she was nineteen, to a young man who lived on a farm half a mile from her parents. When I asked her why she got married, she did not understand my question. Young women were expected to marry, usually around the age of sixteen. By wait-



Emelia

ing until she was nineteen, Emelia was leaving it a bit late. Emelia explained, "Everybody get married, I get married too!" It was, for her, as simple as that.

Once married, she and her husband lived with his parents on their farm, as was the custom. A few years later the farm was sold and the entire family moved to Canora. Emelia is not sure why the farm was sold, but it is likely that it was no longer possible to maintain it. All the farms in the area relied on wheat for income but, beginning in 1925, the price of wheat started to fall. In 1929 large numbers of people began to leave their farms, because of falling wheat prices and a series of droughts that began in Southern Saskatchewan. People left the province altogether, or, as Emelia's new family did, they went to the nearest town.

For the first few years of her marriage Emelia was not happy. It was crowded living with her in-laws. In addition to her and her husband, her brother-in-law's family lived with them. She liked her mother-in-law well enough, but the house was so small and crowded that there were arguments all the time. No one had their own room, and according to Emelia, they all slept "like sardines."

She began having children one year after her marriage. She loved her children, but the responsibility weighed heavily on her. As she said, "Every year babies! I think I never get away from the kids!" She had only four children which, by Ukrainian standards, was not very many, but they were born too soon and too close together for her liking.

The stress of living in such a crowded situation was alleviated somewhat when she and her family moved to their own house on the outskirts of Canora (not a farm, but enough land to have a cow and chickens). There were other stresses, however. In particular, she was not happy with her husband. Emelia did not like being married, although she never wished that she had not got married. It was not something she thought about, since there was nothing else she could have done except to have married and stayed married. She was brought up to be subservient and taught to obey her husband at all times; this did not prevent her from arguing with him. Arguing did not help, however, as he always exercised his right to make all the decisions in the marriage, without consulting Emelia.

Certainly the general economic climate was not helping. During the Great Depression, Emelia's husband did not fare well. Having no education himself, he was extremely limited as to what he could do. For a few years he had a job as a delivery man for a store. It was a good job while it lasted. He lost that job when the store no longer had any deliveries to make. Later he worked for the town when he could, as part of a government-sponsored relief program. Meanwhile, Emelia had done housework for other people ever since she had married. There was no tradition within her community to dictate that a wife should not work: women were expected to earn a living just as much as men. During the Great Depression Emelia's wages became crucial for survival.

Most Canadians during the 1930s experienced a drastic change in their standard of living, but this was not true for Emelia. Both she and her husband usually managed to find some kind of work, and with Emelia's garden, the cow and the chickens, they managed to get along. Emelia was fortunate that one woman she worked for gave her used clothes for the children. From her cultural heritage, Emelia was used to frugal living.

Indeed, when Ukrainians came to Canada, they brought their respect for money with them. Even after they began earning large sums of money (relative to the Ukraine), it was spent only after careful thought. Thus a student of the Ukrainian-Canadians observed many years ago that their standard of living is often independent of their wealth, and that "it is not uncommon to find Ukrainians with the means but without the inclination to adopt a higher standard of living."[1] Emelia has always been a good example of someone who saves as much as possible. To this day, even though she no longer needs to watch her money so carefully, she continues to economize as much as possible.

When the Great Depression was ending and the Second World War beginning, it became known in Canora that high-paying jobs were available in southern Ontario. Emelia's husband set out in 1940 to find work there. He decided to settle in Welland, an industrial city which, in 1941, had a population of 12,500. In February

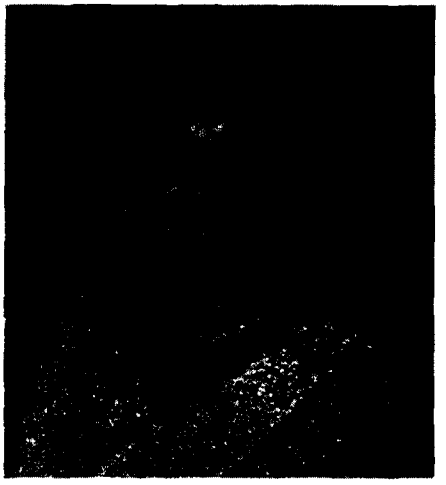
1941 Emelia and the children joined him there.

Going to Ontario to find work was not discussed between Emelia and her husband. On this matter, as with all other matters, it was entirely her husband's decision. When word came for her to pack up and leave Canora, she did not want to go. She had never heard of Welland; even though it was in Canada, it might just as well have been on the other side of the world. To Emelia, any place outside of her community in Canora was foreign. All her friends and family were there. Hard as life might be in Canora, it was her home.

When she arrived in Welland, there was no shortage of work. As soon as she was settled, she began working, and she continued working until she retired at age sixty-five. While working, she began to pick up bits and pieces of English. During the war, she had a variety of jobs and quit several jobs for better pay elsewhere. In this matter she was never passive, as she knew she could easily find work someplace else. One of the first jobs she had was working in a restaurant, but she quit that because her hands began to crack from being in the water too much. For the most part, she worked in factories. She quit one factory because she found it too noisy. At another factory she was fired because she broke one of the machines. The best-paying job she had during the war was in a factory manufacturing shells for bombs, but when the war ended the plant closed down. After that she went to work in a cotton mill. She ended up staying there until she retired, twenty-three years later.

At the same time that she was adjusting to a new way of life, her marriage was deteriorating rapidly. Heated arguments were constant; in 1944 her husband moved out. They never got a divorce, not because they nurtured hopes for reconciliation, nor because of religious beliefs (they were Greek Orthodox), but because a divorce was perceived as a waste of money. According to Emelia, the only people to benefit from a divorce are the lawyers who make money.

Emelia had mixed feelings about the separation. On the one hand, she had never been happily married and was glad to be left in peace. On the other hand, she was left on her own with three children (her oldest was not living at home then) and no family or close friends. She did not, however, see that there was anything



Emelia

else she could do. So she resigned herself to being a single mother in a strange place, and coped as best she could.

For several years after she arrived in Welland she was very lonely. Because she did not speak English well, it was hard for her to get to know people, and although there was a sizeable Ukrainian community in Welland, she did not have the time to socialize. Her days were spent in the factory and then doing housework at home. She did not even have time to go to church as much as she would have liked. With the passage of time, however, Emelia began to make friends. She got to know people at work and she got to know other Ukrainian-Canadians. This helped to make life in Welland more pleasant, but to this day Emelia has never learned to like Welland.

She says that she stays in Welland because of the children. As with most Ukrainian-Canadians, family ties are very important to her. In fact, when one of her daughters married and temporarily moved to Montreal, she grieved over the loss of close contact and worried about how her daughter would get along in a strange place where she had no family. She has difficulty understanding her grandchildren who prefer to live far away from their parents in cities such as Vancouver and Toronto. Even though she recognizes that they have friends where they live, to her the important issue is that they have no family nearby.

Emelia maintains the traditions she learned in childhood. She still observes Ukrainian Christmas and Easter, she still makes from scratch Ukrainian foods such as pyrohy, holubchi and borscht, and the inside of her house still looks distinctly unlike an Anglo-Saxon home. Emelia, however, is not quaint. She is a dynamic woman, she has lived her life under trying circumstances, and it is not over yet. As feminists, we need to recognize the unsung fortitude of women like Emelia: Canada will probably never again see a generation of women like her.

[1]Charles H. Young, *The Ukrainian Canadians* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1931), pp. 100-101.

Sharon D. Stone is currently studying for her Ph.D. in sociology at York University, and she is a feminist activist. Academically, she is especially interested in the lives of "marginal" women.

the visit

Today roofs glisten with white mounds territorial as the eye's fibre, staring on a changed city. Overhead, sky monitors its purpling tissue to avoid the direct gaze of first snow. Also self-occupied, remains of pavement hold the tar-status of torn interims.

I survey the dark shapes of concrete, bare, reclusive under balconies. My sense of acclimatization inhabits each black cluster whose edges, like my hollows, also are ragged and apposed to the season. The walkway, dessicated from continuum to bits of black shingle, takes the aspect of many hibernating wombs, clenched at cold visitors.

You sleep in a newly-furnished home for tourists. The room: diffuse with shaded desklight, supporting dusk.

11 November

Margaret Christakos
Montreal, Quebec.