

THE UNIVERSAL IN THE PERSONAL

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

MARTA IWANEK USES PHOTOGRAPHY TO EXPLORE HER BICULTURAL IDENTITY

A second-generation Canadian of Ukrainian parents, Marta Iwanek looks at her kin's past to speak about the legacy of displacement, the arbitrariness of borders, and the importance of providing space for diverse cultural communities to flourish.

“I’ve always felt a belonging to two worlds, not exactly a foreigner of one country, but not exactly a citizen of another,” begins the description of Marta Iwanek’s latest long-term personal project. The first of her family to be born in Canada, she grew up basking in the activities of the Ukrainian diaspora, which, according to the 2011 census, is more than 1.2 million strong. “I grew up learning folk dancing and going to Ukrainian Catholic church. My dentist was Ukrainian and so was my doctor. Thirty of the families that lived in my building were Ukrainians. I didn’t learn English until I went to elementary school, and even then, I went to a Ukrainian school,” explains the 26-year-old photographer.

When her grandmother passed away in 2012, Iwanek felt a strong desire to deepen her connection with her family’s homeland. “Growing up, she was an omnipresent figure, powerful and solid. She was the first to come to Canada. Still, she never lost sight of her homeland or of who she was, and she communicated that to the rest of us,” remembers the Toronto native. She had already been to Ukraine as a teen, but now that she had begun a career in photography—after studying journalism at Ryerson University and photojournalism at Loyalist College—she sensed that her craft could help her look critically at and reflect on her experience as a woman with a bicultural identity. Exploring such a theme can seldom be done in an orderly

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linear fashion, so Iwanek readily started down different paths. She photographed her grandmother’s belongings, including a telephone book, the recipes she wrote by hand, her jewellery and embroidered cloths. “There were also tapes that she had recorded, singing the songs from her village, and I listened to these as well. I felt like I was rediscovering her. I wish I knew she sang. I would have loved to have sung with her,” she admits.

Iwanek also traveled to Ukraine to work on a film about a Canadian-Ukrainian non-profit that runs summer camps and programs for kids living in *internats* (boarding schools for orphaned children or those without parental care). While there, she decided to spend a

week scoping out Kiev, where she was considering moving. That’s when Euromaidan, the civil uprising that led to the ousting of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, happened. “I ended up staying three months there. It felt like such a critical moment, and I wanted to see how it would evolve, cover it and understand it,” says Iwanek.

Upon her return, she took on a job at *The Toronto Star*, seeing it as an opportunity to learn. Yet her yearning to examine her connection to Ukraine remained, and in her spare time, she documented community gatherings and events such as parades, dance shows, recitals, Christmas carolling and smaller celebrations. These pictures go a long way in showing the closeness, pride and vibrancy of the Canadian Ukrainian diaspora without setting them apart as detached from the rest of the country—or, looking at it the other way around, how they have become a part of the nation’s make-up without having to relinquish their cultural distinctiveness. “Canada is this unique place where you can flourish in your own culture and still be welcome. Letting people be themselves, in turn, breeds a certain type of loyalty,” believes Iwanek. She mentions a moment when she asked her father, who grew up in Poland but is Ukrainian, if he ever felt Polish. “He said no immediately. It was

Antonina Bajus, 87, sits in her home in the village of Malastow, Poland. She was deported during Operation Vistula in 1947 at the age of 17 and returned in the 50s with her husband’s family. This was during a brief period when families who filed applications and were approved by the security authorities were allowed to return.



NIKON D810, 35 MM, F2.8, 1/1000 S, ISO 1600. © MARTA IWANEK

as clear to him as the fact that the sky is blue. Whereas, I consider myself Ukrainian-Canadian.”

This complex relationship between Poland and Ukraine, and the role it plays in her existence, are part of another chapter of Iwanek’s work on Ukrainian identity, and it’s perhaps the most involved. After World War II, Poland gained control of lands just west of the Curzon Line, a border between the Polish Republic and the Soviet Union drawn by British Foreign Secretary George Curzon during the First World War. To force the assimilation of the Ukrainians who lived in the area villages, Operation Vistula was launched in 1947 to resettle them across the country. It scattered countless families, including Iwanek’s. Her grandparents were relocated elsewhere in Poland. Still, they sent their offspring to one of the handful of Ukrainian boarding schools in the country. That’s where Iwanek’s parents met. “In my work, I’m trying to convey the

rippling effects of one event, how displacement leaves generations searching for home, and how culture morphs when separated from land,” she explains. “Colonization isn’t the only way to destroy a people. Deportation is another tactic. People lose their home in terms of their community and their sense of self.”

Visualizing the past is no easy task. Little remains: the former Ukrainian villages have either been abandoned or have completely changed. Iwanek grew up hearing many stories about her grandmother’s village of Honiatyn within the borderlands. “The most vivid image I have is her describing the cherry-tree-lined streets that she and her sister would run barefoot along. She said that a person has many sweet memories from their life, but her sweetest are from her childhood,” recalls the young woman. “She also described the day they were deported. They packed up what belongings they could in a horse-drawn cart. Her mother was weeping and left an

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My father sits in the kitchen on Easter Sunday morning.

icon in the house to protect it. She kissed the walls, the threshold, the doorframes. Her father, meanwhile, stood in the middle of the yard frozen; then he sat on the carriage, he crossed himself and then they went.” When Iwanek visited during a road trip with her father, she discovered that it has since become a ski resort. “My dad saw my dejection and reminded me that places are not stuck in time, that they are not museums,” she recounts.

Still, history has a way of leaving imprints. Sometimes it’s commemorative plaques or buildings that have withstood time; sometimes it’s people who managed to stay against the odds or those who’ve returned. These marks, especially those that relate to her extended family, are what Iwanek is collecting through photography and a variety of other mediums, including poetry, music, theater and artefacts. “There’s something really universal in looking at the personal,” she reflects. ■



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