

IN SEARCH OF HOPE AND HOME IS THE RESULT OF VASILIOS VASILAS' ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ON THE UKRAINIAN COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

Svitlana Yakovenko

***In Search of Hope and Home. Stories and Photographs from the Ukrainian Journey to Australia* / Compiled by Vasilios Vasilas ; Introduction: Dr Marko Pavlyshyn. Sponsors: Ukrainian Studies Foundation in Australia, Ukrainian Council of NSW and PLAST Sydney. – 2015. – 278 pp.**



The book's full title explains its scope: *In Search of Hope and Home. Stories and Photographs from the Ukrainian Journey to Australia*. Dozens of Ukrainian immigrants to Australia have contributed stories about their lives to Vasilios, and these form the backbone of the book. Their stories are accompanied by captivating photographs and excerpts from rare documents that were provided by the participants of the project for the publication.

Vasilios Vasilas dedicated several years to collecting materials for his book. The partakers of his project are residents of Sydney and Newcastle, NSW, Canberra, and ACT. The geographical choice of the participants is probably explained by the proximity to the author's place of residence. Here, it should be mentioned that in his subsequent speech that was delivered during the book launch, Vasilios Vasilas expressed a desire to continue to

work with Ukrainian community on the project and to hopefully cover other states and territories of Australia ¹.

The stories offer snapshots of the lives of the Ukrainian people who migrated to Australia during the post-war years. In particular, they reveal some glimpses of the dark days of war-torn Europe, the heartbreakingly long journey to Australia, and their attachment to a newly colonised country beginning to establish its identity in the post-war years. As Marko Shumskyi, a Head of the Ukrainian Council of NSW, writes in his message: "*In Search of Hope and Home* provides insight into what the Ukrainian people suffered during the Second World War and its aftermath. It also captures the hope of finding peace and stability in Australia's embrace" (page 11).

By way of some background on the Ukrainian diaspora in post-war Australia: thousands of Ukrainian migrants arrived as war refugees in the late 1940s. By the mid-1950s, during the Australian Census and other official surveys, around 15,000 residents described themselves as Ukrainian-born ². Australia was at that point encouraging immigrants to work on massive projects such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme. Unlike other ethnic groups, such as the Italians, immigrants from the Soviet-occupied countries like Ukraine had virtually no option of returning to their homeland, and most settled permanently in Australia. In 2011, the Ukrainian community was about 38,000 ³ strong, with most members residing in the cities of Sydney and Melbourne.

There are several good sources of information on the Ukrainian diaspora, but additional studies need to be conducted while the trailblazing post-war immigrants can still add their voice.

Sadly, seventy years on, the Ukrainian community in Australia, though now in great numbers, is losing those pillars that were responsible for the establishment, development and prosperity of the community. *The Free Thought* (Ukr., «Вільна думка» [Vilna Dumka]), a Ukrainian newspaper in Australia that has chronicled the ups and downs of the community since 1949, now regularly contains the obituaries of members of that generation of Ukrainian immigrants. With them disappear their stories. This unfortunate fact is the reason why oral history collections, like the Vasilas project, are so important.

During his project, Vasilios Vasilas recorded stories told by about 45 participants. All of them are known and loved members of the Ukrainian community in Australia, and their names include: Dr Yevhen Hlyva; Y. and L. Mishalovs; M. and Yu. Mentsynskiy, D. and V. Hladkyi, and others. Other community members are revealed as friends or relatives in the stories mentioned. There is also much detail on key Ukrainian organisations, as well as clubs; dance, music and drama groups; schools; churches; and many other institutions that together have formed a well organised Ukrainian community.

Interestingly, the author is not Ukrainian but he has valuable experience in recording the oral history of ethnic communities, as the book under consideration is the second work of its kind that Vasilas has published in recent years. His first book, *Across Lands and Oceans... to Freedom*, was dedicated to the Estonian community in Australia and published in 2013. Its success gave the author the idea to repeat the project with another ethnic community in his home country and, as he puts it: *The community that accepted my work, and me, was the Ukrainian community* (page 8). The fact that the author has a Greek background suggests one particular advantage: that a reader can expect objectivity in the author's retelling of the stories.

The significance of this book for ethnologists, ethnographers and anthropologists is distinct. It provides a voice for those people who were forced to flee their motherland in order to save their lives and documents their efforts to preserve their cultural life – their traditions, language, beliefs and so on – so that it was possible to keep their identity while residing in an English speaking country at the opposite end of the world. As Dr Marko Pavlyshyn rightly puts it, in his introduction to the book: *Their main purpose in maintaining their identity was to keep alive the tradition of Ukrainian culture undistorted by the ideological and colonial depredations to which it was subject in the homeland* (page 8).

Ethnologists and students of people and societies across the world will find some interesting accounts of a distinct group of people. The post-Second World War Ukrainian immigrants and displaced persons who settled in Australia managed to establish a strong ethnic presentation amidst many other communities, many of which were more numerous and had been established on the fifth continent for a much longer time.

This book is not an academic or scholarly work, and it does not claim to be such. For serious research, the information contained in the stories needs to be confirmed and backed up by other sources. However, it is a valuable initial source, where one can obtain a good sense of what individual immigrants and the community as a whole went through in order to preserve their identity beyond their homeland.

Special mention must be made of the captivating photographs that are presented in this book. They tell their own stories and present invaluable material for ethnographers who are interested in the topic of Ukrainian overseas communities or Ukrainian culture in the early to mid-19th century. These photographs are exceptional exhibits of fashion, hairstyles, some architecture, furniture, some musical instruments, and even patterns of Ukrainian traditional embroidery.

Copies of the documents that are reproduced in the book include: a berthing ticket and landing

card of a migrant's travel to Australia, a migrant's medical certificate, a certificate of identity with a person's photograph attached and other rare documents.

In his *Disclaimer*, the author admits to be pressed for time, which probably explains a few shortcomings of the book including some typographical errata. The index placed on one of the last pages lists names of the participators of the project. This publication could greatly benefit from including other indices, such as indexes of

geographical names and of subject matter. Besides, lists of documents and photographs would not be amiss here.

Vasilios Vasilas took on the role of a true traditional ethnographer with this project. He has undertaken field expeditions, visited his sources, and collected a range of oral stories in order to draw a cohesive picture of a singular community. The author, his sponsors, contributors and everyone who supported this project should be commended for their efforts and the result.

¹ *Cotsis B.*, 2015, 'Vasilios Vasilas is not your average author' // *The Free Thought* (Ukr., «Вільна думка» [Vilna Dumka]), Nos. 25–26 (3368–3369), p. 34.

² Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014 // *Community Information Summary: Ukraine-born*, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2014/ukraine.pdf p. 1.

³ Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014 // *Community Information Summary: Ukraine-born*, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2014/ukraine.pdf p. 2. The latest, 2016, Australian Census results are not available yet.