

Bohdan Medwidsky (14 September 1936 - 28 March 2021)

Andriy Nahachewsky

Volume 8, Number 1, 2021

Empire, Colonialism, and Famine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077118ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus636>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Nahachewsky, A. (2021). Bohdan Medwidsky (14 September 1936 - 28 March 2021). *East/West*, 8(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus636>





Bohdan Medwidsky
(14 September 1936 - 28 March 2021)

Andriy Nahachewsky

University of Alberta

It is with profound sadness that we mark the passing of Professor Bohdan Medwidsky—folklorist, academic organizer, community activist, passionate Ukrainian, fundraiser, mentor—the founder and benefactor of the Kule Folklore Centre and the Bohdan Medwidsky Ukrainian Folklore Archives at the University of Alberta. He was born in Stanislaviv (now Ivano-Frankivsk) and was stranded in Switzerland for the duration of World War II, to be reunited with his family only in the late 1940s. In Vienna and in the Displaced Persons Camp in Lexenfeld, still a child, he (re)learned Ukrainian and developed a strong personal identity as a Ukrainian patriot. The Medwidsky family was sponsored to migrate to Canada and settled into the large Ukrainian immigrant community in Toronto. He studied at the University of Ottawa (BA Humanities, 1963; MA Slavic Studies, 1966) and at the University of Toronto (PhD Slavic Linguistics, 1977). His dissertation involved a linguistic analysis of Vasyl' Stefanyk's novellas. Bohdan married Ivanka Hlibowych, who tragically passed away at a young age in 1975. He taught at Carleton University (1969-71) before accepting a position in

Ukrainian linguistics at the University of Alberta in 1971. That is where he found his professional home and spent the remainder of his career.

Bohdan's research and teaching interests shifted from linguistics to folklore studies in the mid-1970s, responding to the roots movements across North America, expressions of ethnic revivalism in his students, the declaration of multiculturalism policy in Canada, and his own interests. Folklorists, he understood, studied unofficial culture, as experienced by the majority of the population of a given nation, rather than its official elites. Advantages of this field, as he saw them, included its major role in the Ukrainian national movement as well as the groundedness of the subject for his students; many of them experienced fragments of traditional culture directly in their family and community lives. Thinking of the future of Ukrainian studies in Canada, he placed strategic priority on Canadian-born youth, given their large numbers on the prairies from the earlier waves of migration, and the poor prospects of further immigration from Ukraine at that time. Disadvantages of this move into folklore studies were that North American Slavists (with a few key exceptions) had until now focused on elite literature, linguistics, history, and political sciences—many colleagues were negatively predisposed to folklore studies, imagining that it had lost its relevance with the rise of modernism, that it lacked esteem and intellectual substance. North American folklore studies, however, was by then being invigorated and reformulated, not unlike the profound shifts in its sister fields of anthropology, cultural studies, history, literature studies, linguistics, and ethnic studies. After initial setbacks, Bohdan persevered and grew a program: from one class in 1977 to a recognized specialization at the BA, MA, and PhD levels by the end of the 1980s. With some 50 graduate degrees awarded, two permanently endowed professorial chairs (the Huculak Chair of Ukrainian Culture and Ethnography, 1990; the Kule Chair of Ukrainian Ethnography, 2004), the Peter and Doris Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore, the Bohdan Medwidsky Ukrainian Folklore Archives, the Friends of the Ukrainian Folklore Centre, and a string of substantial endowments, the sphere of activity he initiated has grown to become perhaps the most intensive and extensive centre of Ukrainian folkloristic and ethnographic studies outside of Ukraine.

The first main thread in Bohdan Medwidsky's research and publications deals with Ukrainian verbal lore, particularly in Canada. He facilitated republication of texts on "classical" folklore topics (the orally transmitted traditional repertoire of peasants in the nineteenth century) as teaching resources, though his own publications dealt almost entirely with texts from twentieth-century diaspora settings and the newer contextual and theoretical issues that they raise.

As a scholar, Bohdan negotiated between the contrasting academic traditions of folklore/ethnography in Ukraine and in North America. He was

well read in nineteenth-century and Soviet Ukrainian folklore studies; however, his theoretical positions and interests were more consistent with North American folkloristics, which he learned by participating in the Folklore Studies Association of Canada and the American Folklore Society, by reading, as well as by interacting with his colleague and friend Robert B. Klymasz. He published case studies of specific ballads, immigration songs, proverbs, and prose genres, focusing most often on verbal lore, which engaged his linguistic training. Reflecting the North American practice of combining folkloristics and ethnography, Bohdan also made brief excursions into material culture (cemetery markers) and performing arts (dance). Bohdan argued that the nineteenth-century clichés about folkloric expressions simply are no longer sufficient (these stereotypes include the following postulates: that they are anonymously, communally, and orally created, that their main value for scholarship is that they preserve archaic worldviews, that they are incompatible with education and mediated culture). Other perspectives are necessary to understand the Ukrainian Canadian situation, rich as it is with a wide variety of traditional expression in continuous flux. With Klymasz, Bohdan acknowledged that the pre-immigration folklore complex of the first-wave immigrants underwent stress with migration, that many genres disappeared immediately or faded away gradually. On the other hand, within these traditional expressions one could also observe innovation, new meanings, contexts, and forms. In particular, non-verbal genres have tended to adapt and take on new potency as symbols of ethnic identity in the second and later generations.

The second major thread in his publications, more frequent than the first, relates to the history of Ukrainian folklore studies, particularly in Canada. His publications shed light on many of the most important Ukrainian Canadian collections that had been assembled throughout the twentieth century, including Hnatiuk (1902-03), Fedyk (1911-27), Svarich (1939, 1999), Plawiuk (1946, 1996), T. Koshetz (1950), Rudnyckyj (1956-63), and Klymasz (1963-65, ff). Most of these materials had been obscure and inaccessible until his publications brought them to light for readers both in Canada and in Ukraine. In each case, he paid attention to the context for recording the texts, the biography and motivations of the collector, and the character of the materials involved. Researching Volodymyr Plawiuk's 1946 publication of proverbs, for example, Bohdan discovered that the late author's family held an extensive but unfinished manuscript for a second volume. Bohdan formatted and edited these notes to be consistent with the format of Plawiuk's first volume (which itself had emulated the approach used by Ivan Franko in his seminal work in paremiology). Together with Klymasz, he is thus largely responsible for identifying the historical canon of Ukrainian Canadian folklore collections. Further, Bohdan was deeply involved in the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village (1971 to present) and

supported its extensive documentation of material culture and folklife in east-central Alberta, as well as in the Local Culture and Diversity on the Prairies project (2003-05), another major collecting initiative.

Bohdan's professional relationship with Ukraine was particular and strategic. He journeyed to Europe some eight times for conferences, developing strong personal connections with particular Ukrainian colleagues. He took an active role in the establishment of MAU, the International Association of Ukrainists. He bought the first computer to assist in cataloguing the massive archives of the Instytut mystetstvoznavstva, fol'kloru ta etnografii im. Ryl's'koho in Kyiv. He sponsored publication of the early nineteenth-century ethnographic watercolours of Damian De La Fliz by the Instytut arkhеografii (1996, 1999), and struck a deal with the Instytut narodoznavstva in Lviv to publish the monumental bibliographies of folklore, ethnography, and art studies by M. Moroz (2 volumes appeared, 1999). Bohdan's own publications about Ukraine deal with earlier periods; the Ems Ukaz, and the history of Filaret Kolessa's rejected monographic manuscript (1948) on the history of Ukrainian ethnography.

Most of Bohdan's publications seem to be written with an audience in Ukraine in mind. Indeed, from the moment of Ukrainian independence, the majority of his studies were printed in Ukraine or for Ukrainian readership: as chapters in books, proceedings from conferences, and in the journals *Narodna tvorchist' ta etnografii*; *Narodoznavchi zoshyty*; *Vsesvit*; *Suchasnist'*. He typically made a point of starting with subject matter that connected well with his Ukrainian readers, then used that as a base to engage with issues that were developed differently in North America than in the Soviet Union: individual authorship of traditional texts; transmission via diverse media; emphasis on the change in traditions rather than preservation; hybridity and macaronic elements; and suppression in Soviet Ukrainian folkloristics. In these and in other issues, his North American intellectual base was unmistakable. His arguments, though usually presented gently and subtly, were all the stronger for his breadth of historical, contextual, and folkloristic knowledge of Eastern Europe, as well as thanks to his careful and serious documentation of each element in his case studies. His explicit and incessant focus on Ukraine was thus undergirded by his developed international academic perspective. In this way, he positioned himself authoritatively as a bridge between the contrasting understandings of traditional culture on the two continents—the resonance of this strategy is witnessed by the fifteen articles that have been (translated and) reprinted by younger folklorists and ethnologists in Ukraine.

Bohdan was dedicated to his students, often keeping in contact with them for many years after classes ended. He was a very sensitive graduate

supervisor, working intensely and frequently with graduate students who benefitted from such attention, but retreating into the background with others, to allow them to spread their wings. He made a habit of engaging deeply with one or two younger individuals at a time and mentoring them broadly, “adopting them” as those fortunate insiders sometimes called it. Though Ukrainian Canadian folklore studies could be characterized by serious gaps in documentation and analysis, Bohdan did not pre-determine a structure or initiate a systematic survey of topics that his students should examine for their theses. Instead, he allowed each student to follow their own interests, and worked with them to develop methodology and analysis. Interestingly, those supervised works are distributed quite evenly among oral lore, material culture, customary lore, and traditional belief.

The growth of Ukrainian folklore classes and rise of graduate programming necessitated a shift to develop administrative infrastructure, and especially fundraising. Bohdan excelled in this pursuit as well, working with the university and the Friends of the Ukrainian Folklore Centre to establish nine endowments for the folklore program and its students.

Bohdan Medwidsky was not an ivory tower academic but was always wholeheartedly engaged in public and community activities. His dedication to the Plast scouting organization continued actively for decades. He worked with the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies in the 1970s to help develop Ukrainian Bilingual schools in Alberta. He was an important consultant and supporter for the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village. He was an active parishioner of St. George’s Ukrainian Catholic Parish in Edmonton, a leader in the Brotherhood of Ukrainian Catholics of Canada, and in the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. He also provided his time and skills to many other organizations, mostly but not exclusively in the Ukrainian community. As a volunteer, he contributed hundreds or thousands of hours annually, ongoing for decades. A consummate tactician and negotiator, he quietly helped realize many initiatives for the good of the Ukrainian community and for the general public.

Bohdan was recognized by diverse communities for his contributions. He was twice awarded the “Eternal Flame in Silver” in Plast (1997 and 2004). The archives he founded were officially renamed in his honour in 2003. He was presented the “Medal of Service, Third Degree” by Ukrainian President Viktor Iushchenko (2008) and the Shevchenko Medal by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (2010). The Folklore Studies Association of Canada awarded him the Marius Barbeau medal (2011). An evening celebrating his career and presenting a festschrift was hosted by the Kule Folklore Centre and its Friends Society in 2014. In addition to his contributions of time, Bohdan was a very active philanthropist, providing strategic and generous financial support for many causes and organizations.

Bohdan Medwidsky had an original sense of humour and a ready twinkle in his eye. He was steadfast, patient, and above all persevering, deriving great pleasure as he gradually overcame obstacles to achieve his goals. Though he did not typically like to speak about himself, he sometimes noted “я будую Україну”—“I am building Ukraine [in my own way, and here in Canada].” This is profoundly true, and his impact will continue on and on.

Though Bohdan lived in Edmonton for fifty years, he continued to connect strongly with his family in Toronto. He leaves behind in sorrow his extended family, many friends, and diverse colleagues in Ukraine, Canada, the U.S., and beyond. He will be profoundly missed. He was buried in Prospect Cemetery, Toronto.

Rest eternal! *Вічна йому пам'ять!*

Select Bibliography of Works by and about Bohdan Medwidsky

- Medwidsky, Bohdan. "Between Poetry and Oral Folklore: Early Ukrainian Immigrant Verses in Canada." *Canadian Contributions to the Eleventh Congress of Slavists, Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1992, pp. 225-44. DOI: 10.1080/00085006.1992.11091988
- . "Cantors and Godparents in Ukrainian Folklore." *From Chantre to Djak: Cantorial Traditions in Canada*, compiled and edited by Robert B. Klymasz, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2000, pp. 109-23.
- and Robert Klymasz. "Contemporary Expressions of Traditional Slavic Culture in North America." *Canadian Folklore Canadien*, vol. 7, nos. 1-2, 1985, pp. 195-200.
- . "Deiaki prykmetni rysy ukrains'koi narodnoi kul'tury v Kanadi." *Ukrains'ka emihratsiia: istoriia i suchasnist' (materialy mizhnarodnykh naukovykh konferentsii, prysviachenykh 100-richchiu emihratsii ukrainsiv do Kanady)*, compiled by Iu. Iu. Slyvka, Kameniar, 1992, pp. 153-59.
- . "Frahmenty prozovoho fol'kloru v Kanadi." *Fol'klor ukrainsiv poza mezhamy Ukrainy: zbirnyk naukovykh statei*, Instytut mystetstvoznavstva, fol'kloru ta etnohrafii im. M. T. Ryl's'koho, Instytut ukrains'koi arkhieohrafii Akademii nauk Ukrainy, 1992, pp. 41-59.
- . "Katedra ukrains'koi kul'tury ta etnohrafii im. Hutsuliakiv pry Al'berts'komu universyteti: kontekstual'na analiza." *Zakhidnokanads'kyi zbirnyk, ch. 3*, edited and compiled by Yar Slavutych, Kanads'ke naukove tovarystvo im. Shevchenka, 1998, pp. 40-87.
- . *The Language of Stefanyk's Novellas: An Analysis of the Vocabulary*. 1977. University of Toronto, PhD dissertation.
- . "Peredmova do rukopysu Kolessy 'Istoriia ukrains'koi etnohrafii.'" *Proverbs in Motion: A Festschrift in Honour of Bohdan Medwidsky*, edited by Andriy Nahachewsky and Maryna Chernyavska, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and the Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore, 2014, pp. 119-44.
- . "Popular Culture and Folk Culture: Where They Do or Do not Intertwine." *Alberta: Studies in Arts and Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1990, pp. 109-26.
- . "Songs from the New World." *Ukrainian Folksongs from the Prairies*, compiled and collected by Robert B. Klymasz. *Research report No. 52*, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1992, pp. 83-95.
- . "A Ukrainian Assassination Ballad in Canada." *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, no. 6, 1978, pp. 30-37.
- . "Ukrainian Grave Markers in East-Central Alberta." *Material History Bulletin*, 29, 1989, pp. 72-75.
- . "Ukrains'ka fol'klorystyka iak akademichna dystsyplina: praktyka, problemy, perspektyvy." *Druhyi mizhnarodnyi konhres ukrainistiv (22-28 serpnia 1993 r.)*, Mizhnarodna asotsiatsiia ukrainistiv, Akademiia nauk Ukrainy, 1994, pp. 275-80.
- . "V. Hnatiuk—pershyi doslidnyk ukrains'koho fol'kloru v Kanadi." *Vid Naukovoho tovarystva im. Shevchenka do Ukrains'koho vil'noho universytetu: mizhnarodna naukova konferentsiia (Priashiv, Svidnik, 12-15 chervnia 1991 r.): materialy*, Akademiia nauk Ukrainy, Instytut ukrains'koi arkhieohrafii, 1992, pp. 111-14.

- . "Zbyrannia i vyvchennia ukrains'koho fol'kloru v Kanadi." *Narodna tvorchist' ta etnohrafiia*, 2, 1991, pp. 41-52.
- Hrymych, Maryna. *Narysy z ukrains'ko-kanads'koi fol'klorystyky: Bohdan Medvids'kyi*. Duliby, 2015.
- Nahachewsky, Andriy and Maryna Chernyavska, editors. *Proverbs in Motion: A Festschrift in Honour of Bohdan Medwidsky*. Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and the Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore, 2014.
- Nahachewsky, Andriy, and Mariya Mayerchyk. "Osoblyvosti ukrains'koi fol'klorystyky v Kanadi." *Narodoznavchi zoshyty*, nos. 3-4, 2010, pp. 293-309.
- Plawiuk, Volodymyr. *Ukrains'ki pryhovidky, tom 2*. Compiled, annotated, and edited by Bohdan Medwidsky and Oleksandr Makar, Huculak Chair of Ukrainian Culture and Ethnography and the Ukrainian Pioneers Association of Alberta, 1996.
- Svarich, Peter. *Memoirs: 1877-1904*. Translated by W. Kostash, edited by Bohdan Medwidsky, Rita Dirks, and Andriy Nahachewsky, Ukrainian Pioneers Association of Alberta and the Huculak Chair of Ukrainian Culture and Ethnography, 1999.