

"Show Them What You Can Do": Building the Ukrainian Spirit Across Canada: An Illustrated Biography of Pavlo Romanovich Yavorsky

Marcia Ostashewski

Volume 71, 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr71br04>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

National Museums of Canada

ISSN

1718-1259 (print)

1927-9264 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ostashewski, M. (2010). Review of [*"Show Them What You Can Do": Building the Ukrainian Spirit Across Canada: An Illustrated Biography of Pavlo Romanovich Yavorsky*]. *Material Culture Review*, 71, 119–120.

MARCIA OSTASHEWSKI

Review of

Yavorsky, Darene Roma. 2007. *"Show Them What You Can Do": Building the Ukrainian Spirit Across Canada: An Illustrated Biography of Pavlo Romanovich Yavorsky*.¹ Hensall, Ontario: The Word and Image Studio.

Pp. 112, [personal] journal excerpts, catalogue of selected [archival] documents, bibliography, index, ISBN: 978-0-9784104-0-7, \$64.98 limited edition hard cover, soft cover \$49.98.

This is a unique and exquisite publication, a hybrid with potentially wide appeal among scholars, students and enthusiasts of varied interests. It is not a standard or complete biography, in that it refrains from presenting much interpretation of Yavorsky's life story. Yet, an historian would see this as a valuable primary source. This beautifully crafted book, produced at a quality level, will also serve as a very fine coffee table book. This "illustrated biography" is brimming with full-colour images of artifacts including costumes, certificates, posters, letters, convention ribbons, concert programs, sheet music and Scout badges; photographs of performances, casual events, historical figures and sites; documents compiled from the family's private collection including journals and autograph books, which would otherwise be inaccessible to the general public; and the Pavlo Yavorsky fonds at Library and Archives Canada including notes, newspaper clippings and certificates. Compiled by Yavorsky's daughters, one of whom is a professional writer and graphic designer and the other an academic historian, this publication is like a portable and accessible archive.

As with any archive, issues of representation come into play. The story it tells is partial and necessarily limited in its scope and, without question, the fact that the book has been compiled by family members influences the telling. Yet, owing to the skill and professional and scholarly expertise of the author/compilers, this book succeeds as a thoroughly-researched, well-documented and careful account of Yavorsky's life in relation to his community involvement and dance production. It is also a compelling story of a young man's passion for dance—an uncommon passion for a man of his day—that seems to have been accommodated and even celebrated. Perhaps this was because it was pursued under the umbrella of community organizing, under which he also taught Ukrainian language,

history and literature classes, and calisthenics as physical training for dance performance.

The book focuses on Yavorsky's activities as a community organizer and Ukrainian dance instructor in locales stretching from the west coast to the east coast of Canada. It constitutes a valuable, detailed record of activities in many regions of the country, especially during the decades leading up to the Second World War. At that time, immigrant and ethnic communities from Europe that had begun to establish themselves in Canada during the late 1800s were making a place for themselves within a nation that was becoming modern. Yavorsky's involvement in the shaping of Ukrainian-Canadian traditions and practices was significant. Notably, living in Sydney, Nova Scotia between 1939-1942 among Ukrainians in the Whitney Pier district, next to the steel plant and the coal mining town of Glace Bay, he inspired a legacy of Ukrainian theatrical dance that continues to this day. During my recent field research there, community members warmly recalled Yavorsky's enthusiasm, care and contributions, some details of which can be found in this illustrated biography.

Excerpts of Yavorsky's published memoirs, *Starymy Stezhkamy/Bygone Pathways* (1993), and journal entries from 1932-1937 describe his organizing and educational activities in Ukrainian communities in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and eastern Canada. Yavorsky also travelled with Vasile Avramenko—widely credited with bringing Ukrainian theatrical dance to Canada in the 1920s—as a dance instructor, performer, publicist and fundraiser for some of Avramenko's film productions. Over several decades in his later years, Yavorsky was a columnist for the nationally circulated newspaper *Ukrainian Voice* and other community publications, writing on varied topics of significance to a Ukrainian-Canadian readership

including multiculturalism, arts and literature, history, politics and current events. This biography brings the lived experiences of a single person into intimate focus in the context of a broad history of communities and cultural production.

The tone and content of this book include little overt interpretation or narrative explanation. Instead, the materials are presented in chronological order and intertwined with excerpts of texts from journals and memoirs written by Yavorsky, driven by an evidence-based accounting of his community activities. Even the translations of Ukrainian-language writings (by Yavorsky and others) are provided alongside the original Ukrainian text, so that much is left for the reader to interpret. The words of the man and his contemporaries speak resoundingly for themselves. Nonetheless, while this is a useful primary source it is not a critical edition. Although ellipses indicate missing text, it is not clear how much the journals are excerpted, nor how much the excerpts that do appear have been edited, although the translations are excellent.

Through the window this book offers into Yavorsky's life, the reader has an opportunity to learn more about the role of individuals in shaping traditions and cultural practices, and to glimpse a wider cultural and social context. Rather than the perspective of one who looks back at the end of a long life, the book presents the novel perspective of a young man as he observes and engages in current activity. With its focus on Yavorsky's movement from place to place and his relationships with communities and activities in each of them, this biography emphasizes the knowledge and experience he gained through his encounters with individuals, communities and his varied experiences of living and working in community. This perspective demonstrates the fluid and plastic nature of culture and tradition, and challenges more conventional notions of traditions and cultural groups as rooted in place. For example, histories and representations of Ukrainians in Canada typically focus on the prairies. Ukrainian culture and experiences in western Canada are extensively addressed in popular and scholarly literature, by storytellers, journalists, historians, sociologists, religious scholars, folklorists, filmmakers, visual artists, musicians and dancers.

Yavorsky's biography makes evident that, by the 1930s, Ukrainian immigrants and their descendants were established across the country from east to west. These were the communities that welcomed him, where other descendants of immigrants like

him were also actively negotiating identities for themselves as Canadian citizens, including in places like Cape Breton. The evidence presented in this book thus challenges conventional understandings of Ukrainian ethnic identity and histories in Canada, as well as other regional histories. Official discourses in tourism, education and cultural policy emphasize Cape Breton's Anglo-Celtic and Acadian traditions, for which the island is renowned, despite a multi-ethnic population. Clearly, Yavorsky was a central figure in the maintenance of Ukrainian cultural practices and traditions in Canada, involved as he was in dance, music, embroidery, language and foodways. He began his life on a prairie pioneer farm as the son of immigrants, but his life's work suggests a degree of cosmopolitanism and worldliness.

In looking through the pages of dance choreography and music, of concert programs and photos, the reader has a vivid sense of what it might have been like for Yavorsky to be doing what he was. I found myself reading the pages along with him, in a way, and "hearing" his voice through his journal musings. This book offers the reader a rare chance to come closer to experiencing a part of someone's life, rather than reading a narrative of it. Its presentation of primary resources, an astounding variety of material culture items, published materials, photographs and other visual media, means this biography will serve well as an opportunity to engage with archival materials, or as a case study for students of community, history and folklore—especially those interested in investigating life stories, accounts of travel and experiencing life on the move. It is also a fine example of how a research endeavour that incorporates scholarly rigour can have wide appeal. For all its depth and detail as a compilation of documents and artifacts, this is ultimately a high-quality publication of wonderful colour and artistry that will also be appreciated by any Ukrainian, Canadian, community arts or history enthusiast.

Note

1. With selected translations by Donna Anna Yavorska. Information on how to purchase the book can be found at www.wordandimage.ca.

Reference

- Yavorsky, Pavlo Romanovich. 1993. *Starymy Stezhkamy/Bygone Pathways*. Ternopil, Ukraine: Privately printed.