

***Robitnytsia*, Ukrainian Communists, and the 'Porcupinism' Debate: Reassessing Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Early Canadian Communism, 1922-1930**

Joan Sangster

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article explore les rapports entre l'ethnicité, le genre et la classe dans la gauche communiste de la fondation du Parti communiste canadien à la venue de la Troisième Période au début des années 1930. Au sein du Parti communiste, l'ethnicité a été une relation contestée et complexe; alors que la section ukrainienne du Parti était numériquement très forte, elle a aussi été dénigrée comme trop 'séparatiste et culturaliste' par les dirigeants anglo-celtiques du Parti. En examinant le journal produite par les Ukrainiens pour les camarades femmes, *Robitnytsia* (La femme au travail), nous pouvons examiner la façon dont le genre, l'ethnicité et la classe ont été concis et vécus au début de l'histoire du Parti. La fondation, l'évolution et le contenu de *Robitnytsia* sont explorés, accompagnés de son éditeur influent, Myroslav Irchan. Une attention spéciale est accordée à un débat prolongé dans *Robitnytsia* à propos de l'égalité et du rôle des femmes dans le mouvement, à ce moment- là appelé le débat du 'porcupinisme'.

Robitnytsia, Ukrainian Communists, and the ‘Porcupinism’ Debate: Reassessing Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Early Canadian Communism, 1922-1930

Joan Sangster

WHEN FEMINISTS in the 1970s coined the term ‘male chauvinist pig’, they were suggesting that some men’s misogynist attitudes placed them in a less-than-human category. Little did they know that similar plays on bestial metaphors had been used decades before in the Communist Left to label as ‘porcupines’ men who displayed a misogynist view of women, preventing them from participating as equals in the communist movement. Porcupinism, a jocular yet provocative term which played on the name of a particularly chauvinist Ukrainian author, became the focus of a heated debate in the late 1920s in the Canadian Ukrainian newspaper *Robitnytsia* (The Working Woman),¹ as both those who favoured his view of women’s political inferiority and those who disagreed used the newspaper to passionately argue their case. Moreover, this spirited discussion about porcupinism emerged from an ethnic milieu perceived by many Canadians, even some on the Left, to be socially backward and uncultured. While some Communist Party leaders labelled Ukrainian female comrades as peasant in background, marginalized by their *own* culture’s patriarchal character, this critique emerged not as much from feminist inclinations as from an Anglo superiority that had deep roots in both Canadian society and

¹Translators sometimes use Workingwoman or The Working Woman. I have used the term most compatible with English throughout this paper. Likewise, *Robitnytsia* is spelled in two different ways, but I have used the spelling on the microfilm that we utilized.



Department of Working Women, East Kildonan, Manitoba.

within the Party itself. Many Ukrainian Canadian women who read *Robitnytsia* did come from rural backgrounds, or were initially illiterate, yet a reading of their newspaper, produced for and, occasionally, by them, reveals an early experiment in gender and class consciousness-raising that remained unique in the history of the North American Left.

An exploration of *Robitnytsia* as a political project offers a fruitful method of re-examining the connections between gender, ethnicity, and class in the early North American Left. Reading *Robitnytsia* underscores the importance of integrating the categories of culture, nationality, and ethnicity into the history of Communism in Canada, recognizing that these forms of identity might reinforce class consciousness but also contradict or complicate it.² Though *Robitnytsia* was aimed at a North American audience, it also offers a cogent reminder of the importance of

²As David Roediger points out in *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York 2005), the term ethnicity is a modern one, and was unlikely to be used in scholarship in the 1920s. Indeed, Eastern Europeans may have been described at that time using a language of racialization. I have utilized it as an appropriate modern term, and am indebted to the definition of ethnicity offered by Kathleen Neils Conzen *et al.*, in "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective From the U.S.A.," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 12 (Fall 1992), 4-5; "Ethnicity is a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes and historical memories."

an international perspective when examining a diasporic Left community. For Ukrainian Canadians, internationalism offered revolutionary idealism and cultural inspiration; moreover, the Comintern urged its affiliates to grant new attention to women's inequality and organizing. But by the late 1920s, the international Comintern connection also constrained post-revolution discussions of gender equality and ethnic-cultural survival, both of which were pressed into heavy-handed Stalinist politics in the early 1930s.

Debates concerning the 'woman question' within Communist parties are not new topics in North American labour history. Second-wave feminist and New Left writing in the 1970s and 1980s was centrally concerned with recovering a forgotten and marginalized history of women in the organized Left; debates in marxist-feminism, at the time defining themes in political and academic circles, animated much of this scholarship. This writing, which incorporated both critique and sentiments of solidarity, helped to make women and gender relations more central to labour and left history, highlighting themes such as the ideology of the family wage and the role of a distinctly socialist maternalist ideology within the Left.³

Subsequent political shifts in academe, politics, and theory since the 1980s have altered the landscape in multifold ways. A feminist critique of the New Left which emerged by the late 1980s encouraged some antipathy to politics associated with the Marxist (but especially the Leninist) Left. Ironically, although the Popular Front remains a welcome, even romanticized topic of historical investigation,

³Canadian writing included Joan Sangster, "The Communist Party and the Woman Question," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 25-56, and *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-50* (Toronto 1989); Andrée Lévesque, *Scènes De La Vie En Rouge: L'Époque de Jeanne Corbin* (Montréal 1999); John Manley, "Women and the Left in the 1930s: The Case of the Toronto CCF Women's Joint Committee," *Atlantis*, 5 (Spring 1980), 100-17. The pre-World War I left was covered in Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto 1998), and Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left, 1900-18* (Montreal 1995). Early American works on the post-1919 Left ranged from a very critical liberal feminist analysis, Elsa Dixler, "The Woman Question: Women and the American Communist Party, 1929-41," PhD thesis, Yale University, 1974, to more sympathetic views such as William Shaffer, "Women and the Communist Party, USA, 1930-40," *Socialist Review*, 45 (1979), 73-118, and Rosalyn Baxandall, ed., *Words on Fire: The Life and Words of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn* (New Brunswick 1987). For more recent views see Van Gosse, "To Organize in Every Neighbourhood in Every Home: The Gender Politics of American Communists Between the Wars," *Radical History Review*, 50 (1991), 109-42; Rosalyn Baxandall, "The Question Seldom Asked: Women and the CPUSA," in Michael E. Brown, ed., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (New York 1993), 143-62. Writing on European women on the Left also proliferated in the 1970s and early 1980s: for example, Sue Bruley, "Women in the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1921-39," PhD thesis, London University, 1980; Barbara Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist* (Bloomington 1979); and Jean Quatert, *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy* (New York 1978), to name only a few writers.

Marxism and revolutionary politics have not fared so well, and are often dismissed negatively as masculinist and sectarian, though some Communist women are being re-presented positively by detaching them from the Leninist (and Stalinist) parties of which they were a part.⁴ A small resurgence in writing on Left women also indicates new attention to representation, subjectivity, family, and the politics of personal life, perhaps suggesting more interest in gender and feminist issues in the Communist Left than women's actual political practice.⁵ Some authors also rely on ahistorical generalizations about the entire Left over many decades, compressing anarchists, social democrats, Communists, and Trotskyists in a singular mould, assuming those Leftists were simply 'all the same'.⁶

Undoubtedly, earlier writing emerging from second-wave socialist-feminist sensibilities left key topics unexplored. Lacking the later-acquired theoretical tools of discourse analysis, this writing did not probe deeply the iconography, symbolism, and language of the Left, being more fundamentally interested in programmatic issues. In Canada, failure to integrate analyses of the Québec and the English Canadian Left was problematic; some key theoretical debates concerning social reproduction deserved more analysis; and last, but not least, some writing failed to fully integrate ethnicity and race as categories of analysis. While later works⁷ were more centrally concerned with the triad of ethnicity, class, and gender, earlier writing on the communist Left, particularly my own, drew primarily on English-language sources and focused disproportionately on the Anglo-Celtic Left,

⁴Kathleen Brown, "The 'Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World' of the Communist Party, U.S.A.: Feminism, Maternalism, and Mother Bloor," *Feminist Studies*, 25 (Fall 1999), 537-70.

⁵American examples include Gerald Zahavi, "Passionate Commitment: Race, Sex and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932-54," *Journal of American History*, 83 (1996), 514-48; Kathleen Brown and Elizabeth Faue, "Social Bonds, Sexual Politics and Political Community on the U.S. Left, 1920s-1940s," *Left History*, 7 (2001), 9-43. Kate Weingard's *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore 2001) offers a positive view of the CPUSA's commitment to gender equality, though she may somewhat overstate the interest of the Party in the woman question. See the debate about this book, especially Rosalyn Baxandall, "Precursors and Bridges: Was the CPUSA Unique?," *Science and Society*, 66 (Winter 2002-3), 500-5. It is important to note that earlier scholars also had an interest in the personal-political dynamic. For example, see Ellen Kay Trimberger, "Women in the Old and New Left: The Evolution of a Politics of Personal Life," and the Peggy Dennis response in *Feminist Studies*, 5 (Fall 1975), 432-50.

⁶Kathleen Brown and Elizabeth Faue, "Social Bonds." The majority of the examples used are Communists, surveyed over a long period of time. This article also reflects a common, unfortunate practice: Canadian historians routinely engage with North American scholarship, while Americans fail to read any relevant Canadian literatures.

⁷Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Gender and Ethnicity in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-39* (Toronto 1992); Varpu Linstrom-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Toronto 1992).

though there was some attempt to indicate the importance of the Jewish, Ukrainian, and Finnish experiences within the Communist Party of Canada [CPC].⁸

In order to rectify this imbalance, this article draws on translations of *Robitnytsia* by Wally Lewyckyj and Svitlana Pcholkina⁹ to create a more holistic picture of the early Communist Left, integrating culture and ethnicity, complicating writing on the Communist Party, and engaging comparatively with a recently edited reproduction of the English-language communist paper for women, *The Woman Worker*.¹⁰ The founding, evolution, and regular content of *Robitnytsia* as a project of Ukrainian communists are first outlined, with special emphasis on its influential architect, Myroslav Irchan. Particular attention is then given to the porcupinism debate as a means of exploring 'the woman question' in the 1920s. By the time that *Robitnytsia* was abandoned in the late 1930s, some of this history was already lost, or was later forgotten, as was *Robitnytsia*'s most dynamic editor, Irchan, having been executed by Stalin in the Soviet Union in 1937, and only resurrected from historical obscurity and slander by the Communist Party three decades later.

The Origins of the Ukrainian Communist Left

Although a Ukrainian Left flourished in pre-World War I Canada, particularly on the prairies, the existing socialist parties and newspapers were profoundly transformed by the war and the Bolshevik Revolution. The Ukrainian Labor Temple Association [ULTA], a re-configuration of the earlier Ukrainian Social Democratic Party [FUSD], was established in Winnipeg in 1918, later expanding its political constituency and changing its name to the Ukrainian Labor Farmer Temple Association [ULFTA] in 1924.¹¹ ULFTA's political centre was unquestionably Winnipeg, where the largest urban concentration of Ukrainian immigrants lived. The Winnipeg ULFTA had an affiliated cooperative and Workers Benevolent Society, pub-

⁸Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 47-8, 147-9.

⁹These translations were done twenty years apart, the first completed in 1982-3. The translators were asked to provide a report on the range of articles printed, the themes that dominated, and full article examples from each section of the journal. They were also asked to provide examples of changing views over time, not only in writing by ULFTA leaders, but also in correspondents. The porcupinism debate was given more emphasis as I asked the second translator to go over it again, so I could double-check the positions articulated. I also asked her to translate more of Irchan's writing, as he was clearly a major architect of the paper. In this piece I have stressed articles up until 1930, but later ones were also consulted. In the twenty-year period, other new sources came to light, including Comintern and RCMP files, as well as Peter Krawchuk's work documenting Ukrainian history.

¹⁰Margaret Hobbs and Joan Sangster, eds., *The Woman Worker* (St. John's 1999).

¹¹In 1921, two-thirds of the Ukrainian-born were in the agricultural sector; most were also located on the prairies. William Darcovich and Paul Yuzak, eds., *A Statistical Compendium on the Ukrainians in Canada, 1891-1976* (Ottawa 1980), 381.

lished a number of communist newspapers, and the Winnipeg ULFTA Temple was perhaps the most impressive of all those in Canada, incorporating an impressive formal theatre, built with donations and completed in 1919.¹²

The relationship of ULFTA to the Communist Party, the latter founded in 1921, was complicated, with the links sometimes obscured deliberately in times of state repression. Although not all sections of ULTA initially wanted to affiliate with the CPC in 1922, a key group formed a Ukrainian section of the Communist Party, and by 1923 they had accepted the Comintern's suggested United Front strategy. Sharp disagreements between the Ukrainian and English leadership over 'bolshevization' of the party in 1924-25 (i.e., reorganizing based on workplace cells, not language groups) were eventually overcome only after Comintern intervention, with differences papered over rather than resolved.¹³ Until the end of the 1920s, ULFTA may have felt it could exercise a degree of autonomy, given its numerical strength and its geographical distance from the directives of Toronto headquarters. Nonetheless, ULFTA generally accepted the CPC's and the Comintern's guidance, and there was a direct connection to the party through the overlapping leadership of Matthew Popovitch, Matthew Shalutsky, Daniel Lobay, and John Navis.¹⁴ Indeed, Soviet leaders were reassured by the CPC that ULFTA was "highly centralized and under the control of Ukrainian members of the Party."¹⁵ Yet ULFTA also reminded the Party that, *numerically*, it produced more communists than the Anglo comrades, and it offered to provide leadership to *less class conscious* English workers so that they too might advance politically.

Comintern documents lay bare the long and tangled history of battles, skirmishes, and pure hostility that characterized early ULFTA-CPC relations. Throughout the 1920s tensions existed between the Anglo-dominated leadership of the

¹²On the history of ULFTA see Peter Krawchuk, *Our History: The Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Movement in Canada, 1907-1991* (Toronto 1996). The first convention of ULTA was held in 1920. The early organization stressed its educational and cultural aims, an understandable claim in the aftermath of an anti-ethnic Red Scare in Canada, felt especially in Winnipeg. In 1921, 42 per cent of Ukrainian Canadian women lived in Manitoba, while 23 per cent and 30 per cent lived in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Forty-two per cent of all these women were born outside Canada. Mariusia Petryshyn, "The Changing Status of Ukrainian Women in Canada, 1921-71," in W.R. Petryshyn, ed., *Changing Realities: Social Trends Among Ukrainian Canadians* (Edmonton 1980), 191.

¹³There were parallels with the United States where the Union of Ukrainian Workers Organization "ignored" calls for bolshevization. See Maria Woroby, "The Ukrainian Immigrant Left in the U.S., 1880-1950," in Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, eds., *The Immigrant Left in the United States* (Albany 1996), 185-206.

¹⁴On the early history of the party in the 1920s see Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981); Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band* (Ottawa 1982).

¹⁵National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC], Comintern Documents [hereafter Comintern], reel 3, K 271, 18 September 1922.

party and the Finnish and Ukrainian language groups, with both sides appealing to the Soviet Comintern for legitimation, often threatening to 'tell' on the other side in fights all too reminiscent of child/parent relations.¹⁶ CPC leaders routinely accused Ukrainian comrades of encouraging conservative nationalist identification, of separating their youth organizing from the party's Young Communist League, of pandering to respectability and "watering down politics" in a myriad of ways (e.g., playing the national anthem, inviting mainstream politicians to ceremonies, and so on), and of generally "retreating" to the Temple for cultural events.¹⁷ In 1928, ULFTA tried to send its own report to the Comintern, outraged by the negative view of Ukrainian comrades presented in the Party's official report; the latter, claimed Popovitch, was based on "falsehoods" and "nonsensical accusations" secured through "uncommunist methods." One charge relating to *Robitnytsia* editor Irchan was that the ULFTA youth study groups he led read no Marxist authors. A petition from the students, along with a copy of a reading list, signed also by Irchan and Popovitch, provided their counter-argument.¹⁸

The question of ethnic or national identity was central to these battles: Anglo leaders believed that Ukrainians' narrow ethnic insularity hindered Party growth, while Ukrainian leaders believed the fusion of ethnic and class identity aided the Party. Popovitch argued that ULFTA cultural activities were not conservative but were bridge building, taking members who did "not even know their own alphabet" to an understanding of the "political alphabet." He astutely pointed out that Ukrainians found themselves not only the focus of broader social approbation, but also the objects of party discrimination.¹⁹ Highly placed state bureaucrats ironically agreed that cultural activities produced communists; the RCMP warned the government that Ukrainian youth choirs and orchestras, after one visit to the Soviet Union,

¹⁶Tensions were more explosive in the United States where language federations opposed the leadership so forcefully that the Canadian Party told the American leadership to stop their Ukrainian comrades from intervening in Canada, pushing their "nationalist and anarchistic nonsense." NAC, Comintern, reel 3, K 271, Canadian Central Executive Committee [CEC] to US Secretary Miller, 1 February 1923.

¹⁷The charges were frequent and included everything from participating in tree planting in a Drumheller cemetery to playing nationalist songs at concerts. NAC, Comintern, reel 8, K 276, file 59, CEC Minutes, 5 February 1928 and September 1928. See also Archives of Ontario [AO] Communist Party of Canada Papers [CPC Papers], reel 1, General Correspondence, Becky Buhay to Tim Buck, 7 July 1929: Buhay refers critically to the "less than revolutionary schemes of the Ukrainians" in Alberta. In the United States, too, there were strong hopes that "ethnic differences would disappear creating a shared American working class culture" (American presumably meaning Anglo-Celtic and English speaking). Paul Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps and Communist Political Culture in the U.S.* (New York 1999), 11.

¹⁸NAC, Comintern, reel 8, K 276, file 64, Popovitch to CEC, 26 May 1928.

¹⁹NAC, Comintern, reel 8, K 276, file 64, Letter to Executive Committee of Communist International from a minority of the Canadian CEC, 1928.

would return communist “agitators and propagandists.”²⁰ The state’s fear of Ukrainian communists, as Jars Balan points out, emerged not only because of their socialist politics, but also from Ukrainians’ perceived rejection of “Canadianization and assimilation.” Citing one police informant of the 1920s, Balan notes that he warned the RCMP that Left Ukrainians were sustaining a “rude cultural movement” which had a “contempt for Canada and an antagonistic attitude towards Canadian civilization.”²¹

In 1929, after the expulsion of Trotskyists and the embrace of the ultra-left ‘Third Period’, the Toronto-based Party leadership directed new criticisms at the ‘right wing’ nature of the Ukrainian section,²² threatening to “liquidate” the popular Ukrainian paper, and clearly attempting to foster dissension within ULFTA.²³ Ukrainian leaders were not only angry that Party members were sent to Winnipeg to “smash the Ukrainian leadership” but also, crucially, that they set their disciplinary sights so single-mindedly on Ukrainians, *insulting their culture*: they cited a particularly dogmatic Stewart Smith, who dismissed Ukrainian drama performed in the ULFTA Temple as “not worth much.”²⁴ While Ukrainian leaders complained of “Anglo-Saxon imperialism” among Canadian workers,²⁵ it was probably even more galling that Party comrades also held ethnocentric views, mirroring broader social prejudices about Ukrainian immigrants.

A tense compromise was eventually brokered by the Comintern in 1930. While there remained some leeway in local, cultural, and language-based organizing, significant elements of the party program were still orchestrated from the centre and the Comintern.²⁶ These intra-Party issues were not tangential to Ukrainian

²⁰RCMP Commander Starnes to O.D. Skelton, 26 March 1929, quoted in Bohdan Kordan *et al.*, eds., *A Delicate and Difficult Question: Documents in the History of Ukrainians in Canada* (Kingston 1986), 129.

²¹Jars Balan, “Backdrop to an Era: The Ukrainian Canadian Stage in the Interwar Years,” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 16, 1-2 (1991), 92.

²²“The Right Danger in the Ukrainian Mass Organization of Canada,” statement by Communist Party of Canada, 1929, quoted in Kordan, *A Delicate and Difficult Question*, 55.

²³ULFTA leaders claimed with some pleasure that even Tim Buck’s own ally in these intrigues, Leslie Morris, referred to Buck as a “duplicitous wretch.” NAC, Comintern, reel 9, file 75, CPC Political Committee, 11 January 1929; reel 12, K 280, file 110, Letter from Ukrainian Party Fraction, 9 July 1930.

²⁴NAC, Comintern, reel 12, K 280, file 110, Letter from Ukrainian Party Fraction, 9 July 1930.

²⁵NAC, Comintern, reel 3, K 271, Report of ‘Frank Evans’ on the Canadian Party after the Sixth Congress to the Comintern, n.d.

²⁶While some American authors like Randi Storch, “‘The Realities of the Situation’: Revolutionary Discipline and Everyday Political Life in Chicago’s Communist Party, 1928-1935,” *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas*, 1 (Fall 2004), 19-44, stress local flexibility in the US Party, I would argue that Comintern sources still indicate the immense influence of the Comintern, also evident in the witch-hunt-like fears of being

women. Political decisions made about which Ukrainian women were acceptable members of a women's delegation to the Soviet Union, about the methods of organizing women, and about the contents of *Robitnytsia* were affected by these battles. This turmoil may also suggest why Ukrainian women identified so closely with ULFTA and their national/ethnic background — precisely because it was disparaged by many others, including their own comrades on the Left.

The Ukrainian Women's Sections and Robitnytsia

Despite these tensions, the Women's Section of ULFTA, like its parent, was communist in orientation, even if few of its members were officially party members. (When stock was taken of some Ukrainian women's sections in the late twenties, often only 1 to 3 of 40 to 60 women in each section were Party members.)²⁷ In 1921, in centres like Winnipeg, Women's Committees to Help the Hungry in Soviet Republics were established to raise funds and provide clothing for drought- and famine-stricken Soviet lands. These groups were transformed into the Women's Section of ULTA, officially founded at the Third Congress of ULTA in January 1922. By the Fourth ULFTA Congress in 1923, there were 17 branches of the Women's Section, with 550 members, and only a year later 27 branches, with 600 members. When a conference for the Women's Section was held in 1928, there were 36 delegates from 18 locals; the total Women's Section membership by 1930 stood at 1,250, about half of whom had Canadian citizenship.²⁸

linked to Trotskyism in this period. For a historiographical discussion of the role of the Comintern in North America, see Bryan Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History*, 2 (December 2003), 139-73. In Canada, as in the US, anti-communist writers like Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada* (Toronto 1975), and William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-29* (Toronto 1968), emphasized Comintern control above all else, while New Left writers were more interested in the local and national contours of communism. The historiographic divide in the United States may be less pronounced in Canada, with many writers recognizing the significance of the Comintern, but also some local divergences in organizing. For example, see John Manley, "Starve, Be Damned!: Communists and Canada's Urban Unemployed, 1929-39," *Canadian Historical Review*, 79, 3 (1998), 466-91; Tom Langford and Chris Frazer, "The Cold War and Working-Class Politics in the Coal Mining Communities of the Crowsnest Pass, 1945-58," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 43-82; Andrée Lévesque, "Anniversaires et manifestations des camarades: la culture internationale et l'identitaire communistes au Canada pendant l'entre-deux-guerres," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 83-92; Margaret Hobbs and Joan Sangster, eds., *The Woman Worker*.

²⁷AO, CPC Papers, reel 8, Women's Department, Report to Women's Department, October 6 1930. In one women's section of 69, there were 4 members, and in another section of 45, 1 member.

²⁸The latter statistic underscores why some Ukrainian members feared the deportation that political radicalism might bring. See Krawchuk, *Our History*, 363-88.

РОБІТНИЦЯ

ІЛЮСТРОВАННИЙ ЖУРНАЛ — ВИХОДИТЬ ДВА РАЗИ НА МІСЯЦЬ



1. Травня (Мая) 1925.

Ціна 10 центів.

Long Live the First of May. Working Woman: Illustrated Magazine— issued twice a month, 1925, price 10 cents.

РОБІТНИЦЯ

ІЛЮСТРОВАННИЙ ЖУРНАЛ — ВИХОДИТЬ ДВА РАЗИ НА МІСЯЦЬ



ДЕСЯТА РІЧНИЦЯ СМЕРТИ І КРОВИ НЕВИННИХ МІЛІОНІВ.

15. Липня, 1. Серпня 1924.

Ціна 15 центів.

Tenth Anniversary of Death and Blood of Innocent Millions, 1924.

РОБІТНИЦЯ

ІЛЮСТРОВАННИЙ ЖУРНАЛ — ВИХОДИТЬ ДВА РАЗИ В МІСЯЦЬ

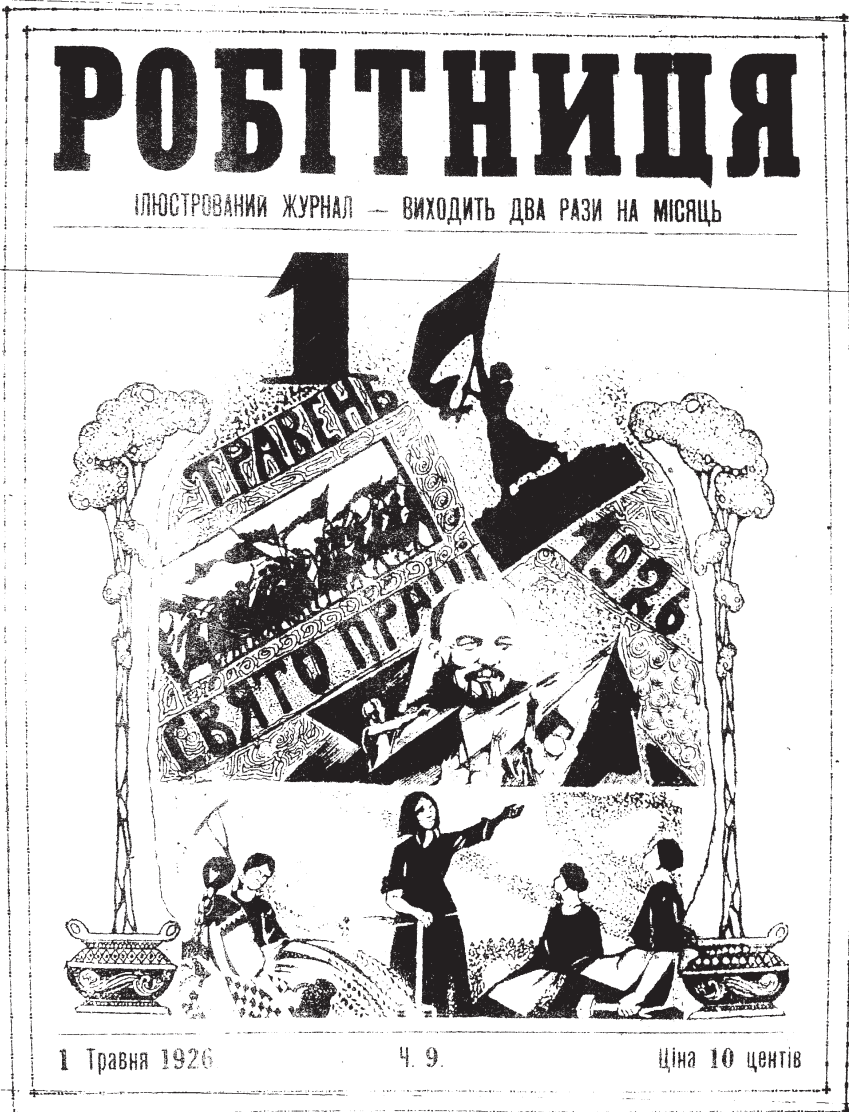


БЕЗ СРЕДСТВ ДО ЖИТТЯ.

1. Липня 1926.

Ч. 13.

Ціна 10 центів



Holiday of Labor, 1926.

These new Women's Sections drew on pre-World War I political traditions of the FUSD, which had offered some Ukrainian women socialists a forum for activism;²⁹ they were also the product of Comintern directives to more effectively mobilize working-class women. From the Toronto headquarters, Florence Custance tried to make these resolutions a reality by resurrecting, uniting, and organizing the Women's Labor Leagues and producing a new English-language paper, *The Woman Worker*. For its part, ULFTA created a new structure to incorporate existing women's groups aiding the Soviet Union, and it founded a newspaper, *Holos Robitnytsi* (The Voice of the Working Woman), which superseded a small column for women in ULTA's *Voice of Labor*. Women comrades saw the establishment of their own newspaper as a key means of political communication: at the 1923 convention, Winnipeg delegate Mary Yarova presented a demand on behalf of her local for "a women's journal that would represent their interests."³⁰ At a time when it was expensive to send out organizers, when few women could travel in such a role, when male party organizers were usually doing more 'important' business, the logical means of organizing women was through the printed word, though every discussion about mobilizing women noted the need to overcome illiteracy as a first step to this work, and subsequent convention reports also revealed women's new, repeated demands for a travelling woman organizer.³¹

The first reports from local women's sections of ULFTA, reprinted in *Holos*, often sounded remarkably similar to those sent to *The Woman Worker*, reflecting emerging women's groups built around traditional female roles of fundraising, yet simultaneously inspired by the Russian Revolution to imagine this work as revolutionary and activist in nature. For Ukrainian women, the task of creating a new political world was also linked to preserving a cultural world of language, music, and dance which offered pride and emotional sustenance in a country which had yet to place much value on such immigrant contributions. A report from the Edmonton Ukrainian Women's Section named for the Bolshevik feminist revolutionary, Alexandra Kollantai (by 1923 actually out of favour in the Soviet Union for her Left Opposition connections), indicated the extent to which women's unpaid labour raised substantial amounts of money to fund the movement. They raised \$1,500 in a year, a sum approximating the annual wages of a skilled worker, while also providing the social and cultural cohesion so important to the sustenance of marginalized political groupings.

²⁹Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto 1998), 127-8.

³⁰Krawchuk, *Our History*, 1923 convention summary, 366.

³¹NAC, RCMP Files, RG 146-3 [hereafter RCMP], vol. 43, 96-A, 00023, ULFTA convention proceedings, 1925. Many convention proceedings from 1922 on contain exhortations to organize women. The 1927 annual report also stated that 6,500-6,700 copies of *Robitnytsia* were printed. While this is not exactly the same as circulation numbers, it does give an idea of its large readership. Krawchuk, *Our History*, 582.

The basic components of ULFTA Women's Section work — fundraising, educational and political support work — continued unchanged, even after increasing Comintern calls to organize around women's workplaces. Like other Comintern directives, bolshevization did not always translate into reality on the ground; for first-generation Ukrainian women especially, language-based support work fit more congruently with their actual family and work lives. When interviewed about ULFTA 50 years later, many participants recalled that the Women's Section "raised money and put on cultural activities"³² for the ULFTA halls, as well as organizing children's classes and musical training so they could learn about their heritage and language. While a former Party leader, notably a second-generation Ukrainian Canadian, put more emphasis on ULFTA's concern with "equality between men and women" in her interview, she also emphasized — like many — that women "needed special attention to *bring them up*" to men's level.³³

In 1924, the *Voice of Labor* and *The Voice of the Working Woman* were merged, and the bi-monthly journal's name was changed to *Robitnytsia*. *Robitnytsia*'s first editor was ULFTA leader Matthew Popovitch, a Galician immigrant with experience as a teacher, writer, and political organizer. By 1920, Popovitch was working full-time for the *Ukrainian Labour News*, and by 1925, after a trip to Moscow, he was head of Ukrainian Agit-Prop for the Communist Party. According to RCMP spies, he was a popular and powerful orator, and so well educated that the RCMP could not fathom his communist proclivities: "he never had to struggle since he came here, so he was not led to his politics due to his experiences of social conditions." The press of material conditions, apparently, the RCMP could understand; the power of revolutionary political commitment they could not.³⁴ Arrested with other high ranking Communist Party leaders in 1931, Popovitch spent time in Kingston Penitentiary, and was interned again at the start of World War II, dying shortly after his release.

Popovitch was succeeded as editor in 1923 by Myroslav Irchan, the pen name of Ukrainian writer Andriy Babiuk, who was recruited to come to Canada to work on ULFTA publications, including *Robitnytsia* and the paper for youth, *Svit molodi* (Youth World). Irchan, also from Galicia, graduated from a teachers' seminary in Lviv in 1914, and fought in the Ukrainian Galician army before going over to the Bolsheviks. He joined the Ukrainian Communist Party in 1921, then the Czechoslovakian Party as he moved to Prague to marry the daughter of a Czech doctor and attend Charles University.

In order to justify his initial immigration, a politically sympathetic farmer in rural Manitoba offered Irchan a farm labourer's job in 1923, but he soon slipped away to Winnipeg, into his new role as editor, writer, and production assistant for the Ukrainian press. There is no doubt that Irchan was a prized addition to the Win-

³²Interview with Kay Hladig, Winnipeg, 16 October 1980.

³³Interview with Mary Kardash, Winnipeg, 20 October 1980.

³⁴NAC, RCMP, vol. 34, Popovitch file, 98-000264, pt. 1.

nipeg ULFTA leadership. An imposing, tall man in his late twenties, Irchan was described by RCMP spies as “a powerful lecturer ... there is not another such speaker in the Ukrainian language in Canada. The house was packed and a few hundred people could not enter ... applause [for Irchan] lasted 15 minutes.”³⁵ Two years later, their reports were still amazed at his popularity; as one ULFTA convention closed in 1925, “Irchan was demanded on stage, and turbulent applause [greeted] his ardent words.”³⁶

Shortly after his arrival, Irchan claimed that Ukrainians fighting in the civil war had regularly read the Canadian *Ukrainian Labour News*, smuggled through the Allied blockade. A transatlantic network of Left Ukrainian writers and intellectuals thrived both before and after the revolution, with radical newspapers one linchpin of this network. Irchan kept in regular contact with Ukrainian writers in North America and the Ukraine, and he attempted to create a North American-wide branch of Hart, a left-wing writers' group in the Soviet Ukraine. Letters to *Robitnytsia* sent from Europe, the United States, or as far away as Argentina indicate that this transatlantic diasporic left-cultural community maintained significant lines of communication. Indeed, letters and articles from the United States were a common feature of *Robitnytsia* and some articles claimed that thousands of copies went there every month, maintaining a pre-World War I tradition of cross-border agitational efforts.³⁷ When a similar American publication for Ukrainian women ceased its existence after a short run,³⁸ a comrade from New York City in the Rosa Luxemburg women's local praised the “popular” *Robitnytsia* for keeping the flames of revolution alive for women.³⁹ While the Comintern usually saw the Canadian party as far less important than the American one, in this case, Winnipeg, not New York, was at the centre of agitational efforts.

Irchan's cultural talents and international contacts helped to define *Robitnytsia*. The dynamic editor was perhaps best known for his many dramas, and in a community with a low literacy rate drama was a crucial means of political communication and recruitment. He commanded such a fervent following that the mainstream *Saturday Night*, normally little concerned with non-Anglo culture, featured a discussion of his plays in 1929, noting that he was probably the “most popu-

³⁵NAC, RCMP, vol. 121, file 2001/00019, pt. 1.

³⁶NAC, RCMP, vol. 43, ULFTA file, 96-A 00023.

³⁷Woroby, “The Ukrainian Immigrant Left,” 199.

³⁸In the US, the radical Ukrainian paper in Cleveland which led the way into the Comintern in 1918, *The Worker* (*Robitnyk*), had a supplement called *Robitnytsia*. *The Worker* was later published as the *Workers Herald*, *Robitnychi Vistnyk*, out of New York, with *Robitnytsia* as a monthly supplement, but this ceased in 1923. Presumably, the Winnipeg version took its place. See Vladimir Wertsman, “Ukrainians,” in Dirk Hoerder and Christiane Harzig, eds., *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s-1970s: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York 1987), 350, 368. One translator estimated that in some issues, as many as one-third of the letters to the editor came from the US.

³⁹“Success of Workingwoman,” *Robitnytsia* [hereafter *R*], 1 August 1924.

lar and influential author in the country,” regularly leaving his audience “spellbound.”⁴⁰ *The Twelve*, a piece describing revolutionary Ukrainian attacks during World War I on Polish landowners (Irchan had been one of the twelve), included long political discussions and supposedly took five hours to perform. Yet it saw 54 Canadian performances between 1923 and 1929.

Other Irchan plays dealing with proletarian life and socialist struggle, such as *The Brushmaker's Family* or *The Unemployed*, were also performed by many local ULFTA groups. The latter used a well-known trope of socialist polemic, the working-class girl forced by poverty to sell herself to the rich bourgeois, and like many of his plays dealt forthrightly with the ultimate need for revolutionary violence to overthrow a cruel capitalist system. So too did *The Brushmaker's Family*, an immensely popular play about relations between a bourgeois family and an impoverished domestic unit of blind brushmakers, with their only sighted son blinded by the use of poison gas — manufactured by the bourgeois family — in the war. Jars Balan's translation of this play reveals a plot in which male-female relationships become one of the multiple dramatic means used to display class relations. There is more than one cross-class romance hinted at in *The Brushmaker's Family*, but they remain impossible, for, as the working-class hero tells the middle-class woman who yearns for him, “we are of contrary worlds ... and I will not be a diversion for you ... to make love you need not only harmony of bodies, but also of souls.”⁴¹ Many of Irchan's plays featured women in prominent roles and also raised issues of women's oppression, either as workers or as sexualized objects in the eyes of bourgeois men. One later play, *Radium*, addressed the maiming of working women in North America, depicting the slow, radium-poisoning death of female workers in an Illinois factory.⁴²

Although Irchan was almost a one-person production show, the paper soon began to secure some writing by the women's sections of ULFTA, providing, for example, meat for the letters section which both described the daily activities of finances, fundraising, and political education, and later offered opinion pieces on particular

⁴⁰ Charles Roslin, “Canada's Bolshevik Drama,” *Saturday Night*, 9 February 1929.

⁴¹ M. Irchan, *The Brushmaker's Family*, translated by Jars Balan. I am indebted to Jars for sharing with me his translation of the play.

⁴² A prolific and imaginative writer, Irchan wrote prose, poetry, and drama. His works are the subject of renewed critical literary commentary. See Jars Balan, “Some Notes Towards the Writing of a History of the Ukrainian Literary Institution in Canada,” in Joseph Pivato, ed., *Literatures of a Lesser Diffusion* (Edmonton 1990), 191-208; “Backdrop to an Era: The Ukrainian Canadian Stage in the Interwar Years,” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 16, 1-2 (1991), 89-113; “A Losing Cause: Re-Fighting the Revolution on the Ukrainian Canadian Stage,” in Andrew Donskov and Richard Sokoloski, eds., *Slavic Drama: The Question of Innovation* (Ottawa 1991), 226-33; Myroslav Shkandrij, “The Rape of Civilization: Recurrent Structure in Myroslav Irchan's Prose,” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 25, 1-2 (2000), 61-72. A short biography written by former ULFTA leader is Peter Krawchuk, *The Unforgettable Myroslav Irchan: Pages from a Valiant Life*, trans. Mary Skrypnyk (Toronto 1998).

issues. The former letters often flooded in after International Women's Day, describing concerts, the always popular forum for celebration. By the early 1930s, when a more militant politic was *de rigueur*, more descriptions were offered of strikes, soup kitchens, and rallies — these were renamed “Reports from the Front of the Class Struggle.” Fewer letters reveal women's opinions on programmatic party issues, and certainly none were directly critical of the Party, though some were self-critical indictments of the need to do more to advance the cause, or pleas for more support from male comrades. They addressed whether there should be female organizations throughout ULFTA, how to deal with religious women entering the organization, and how to counter the negative impact of bourgeois schooling on their children. Some letters — as in the *The Woman Worker* — offered windows into the daily lives of working-class women, including domestics and factory workers: one described the horrendous life for an older woman who fainted because of the unbearable conditions in her factory, while the “manager enjoys fresh air in his office.”⁴³

As well as a letters section, *Robitnytsia* carried material designed to pique the interest of homemakers, in particular a humour page, a cookery corner, and a children's page. At one ULFTA convention, delegates suggested improvements to *Robitnytsia*. Some wanted more information on “breeding, ie bringing up children” as this was “the most important problem for women-mothers, who are the readers of the magazine”; others suggested a ‘health and hygiene’ section with articles on “babies’ health and the diseases of women.”⁴⁴ Since the latter did not appear, it was perhaps not something that the male editors were keen to write about.

Articles on communist politics offered basic information on the significance of events like International Women's Day, as well as profiles of individuals such as Lenin, Clara Zetkin, and Rosa Luxemburg.⁴⁵ Revolutionary women became heroines to emulate, both as political activists and as ‘mothers’ to the movement. At one ULFTA convention, for instance, Matthew Shalutsky (who also wrote for *Robitnytsia*) spoke to the Women's Section about the death of Lenin, emphasizing that Lenin's mother and wife spoke to the mourning crowds, urging them to “continue his work. Revolutionary women have given their lives on the gallows and in Siberia.... This is an example of why women should organize, as they have an influence on children and we will not have a revolutionary generation if women stay away from organizing.”⁴⁶ Invoking this left-wing maternalism, with its complex blend of essentialist sentiments *and* a commitment to social transformation, re-

⁴³Z.A., “Behind the Factory Walls,” *R*, 15 May 1929, 317.

⁴⁴NAC, RCMP, ULFTA, 96-A 00023, 1926 convention.

⁴⁵The journal developed an annual rhythm, with key dates (Lenin's death, International Women's Day, May Day, the Paris Commune, the anniversary of Ivan Franko's death, etc.) sparking related discussions. Christmas and Easter were also reinterpreted in terms of their meaning for the working class, aiding the paper's attempt to critique religion.

⁴⁶NAC, RCMP, vol. 90, Shalutsky file, 98-A-00232, Speech of 3 February 1924.

mained a constant theme in the paper, as it did in other communist publications.⁴⁷ The 'Politics' section also included pragmatic advice on how to organize a meeting, take minutes, deliver lectures, and so on. Organization was a theme repeatedly stressed: organization currently allowed capitalists to exploit workers, the paper pointed out, but it could also provide the means for humanity to liberate itself, though this would only occur through class mobilization.⁴⁸

In contrast to *The Woman Worker*, *Robitnytsia* had a stronger commitment to cultural offerings, including a rich blend of poems, fiction, and cultural commentary; the paper's content was obviously shaped by Irchan's own role as a cultural worker, his literary connections, as well as Ukrainian Canadians' interest in preserving a heritage often seen as marginal in North America. This strong investment in heritage also had deep roots in history. Given the subjugation of the Ukraine by other empires, writers like Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko became emotional symbols of national identity and endurance, so much so that, as Myrna Kostash has observed, the very same writers were sometimes claimed as heroes by anti-Left, nationalist Ukrainian Canadians.⁴⁹ *Robitnytsia* carried stories, poems, short plays, and reflections by proletarian writers, regular features on Ukrainian writers, particularly women writers, as well as commentaries by and on North American progressives like Upton Sinclair and Jack London. Ukrainian poet Lucina Piontek contributed a long discussion on 'Women in Contemporary Ukrainian Literature', while Irchan also wrote on current cultural issues — such as American movies.

Although he was critical of American-made cinema, Irchan urged his women readers to take this cultural form seriously, as a potentially rich aesthetic medium and source of international news: "it is fine (especially for workers and farmers) to be critical about the plot of movies ... it is fine to disagree with the plots in them that are often antagonistic to the proletarian class.... but one should not reject the large meaning that moving pictures has for humanity." Capital, he pointed out, realized how important this genre was, moving quickly to dominate it; movie plots, he wrote, were "controlled by the producers who organize greed, [then] make it [in the plots] holy for American people." However, Irchan was more sympathetic to Euro-

⁴⁷See Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 235, and "Consuming Issues: Women on the Left, Political Protest, and the Organization of Homemakers, 1920-1960," in Sharon Cook, Lorna McLean, and Kate O'Rourke, eds., *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal 2001), 240-8; Julie Guard, "Canadian Citizens or Dangerous Foreign Women? Canada's Radical Consumer Movement, 1947-50," in Marlene Epp, F. Iacovetta, and F. Swyripa, eds., *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (Toronto 2004), 161-89.

⁴⁸Some multi-issue articles pursued the theme of organization over time: for example, M. Chemil, "Can Humanity Exist Without Organization?," *R*, 1 September 1925 to 15 December 1925; M.S., "The Workingwoman Within and Outside the Organization," *R*, 15 March 1927 to 15 December 1927.

⁴⁹Myrna Kostash, *All of Baba's Children* (Edmonton 1977).

pean cinema and he suggested movies might also potentially bring great works of art — by Zola, Ibsen — to the masses.⁵⁰ Drawing on Sinclair's writing, he also noted the oppression of women apparent in the movie business, as young girls were forced to 'pay the price' with their bodies for a part.

Examples of *Robitnytsia* fiction reveal both Irchan's powerful writing and the morals he wished to convey to women. One lesson was that they too could become active revolutionaries. Some stories dealt with recent revolutionary scenes from the Ukraine, as in "Twilights of the Past," in which a longshoreman and a prostitute take up arms against the bourgeoisie, particularly one monstrous man, whom they try to kill. A forceful dramatic piece, with suggestions of passionate romance as well as raw depictions of death, it described the desire to "destroy, blow into the wind" the bourgeois home, so that "nothing sparkled anywhere, so that everybody lived in holes like [the longshoreman] on the quay." Although the woman, Nadia, is later killed in battle, the man cradles her wounded body, and imagining the "blood of all the Nadias," he promises her: "It's fine, Nadia, it has to be this way ... the weapons are still in the hands of the crowd."⁵¹

Irchan's fiction also described proletarian life, including "Mother," a story of the passionate and hopeful romance of a young Ukrainian female factory worker with a miner, torn asunder by his premature death in the mines, leaving her bereft, with only a baby in her arms. "Grow up healthy and strong," she sings in a lullaby, "don't let your heart have compassion for those who do not have compassion for us ... grow up into a severe leader and remove us from our prisons."⁵² Other stories were even more extreme on the question of violence. One described the murderous revenge of a young eight-year-old Ukrainian boy, who, convinced that the Polish masters 'sucked the blood' of the Ukrainian children, prodded some of his friends to help throw the small daughter of the local Polish master into the nettle bushes. She falls into a pond below and drowns.⁵³

Unlike this tale, there was often a more clearly didactic edge to the stories in *Robitnytsia*: the inhumanity of capitalism, particularly for mothers who cannot feed their children, or whose husbands and sons are exploited, imprisoned, or killed in war, was one theme explored, as were the tussles between men and women over questions of women's organization. In one story, for instance, a woman persuades her husband that his reluctance to allow her to join political groups plays into the hands of the bosses. Yet the literature section in the 1920s also contained lyrical poems (which declined in number during the Third Period), and letters from readers indicated the pleasure they took from this verse, as well as Ukrainian plays, for both could be integrated into concert and theatrical productions staged by the local Women's Sections. Female Ukrainian poets were a noticeable presence in

⁵⁰Irchan, "American Moving Pictures," *R*, 1 January, 15 January 15, 1 February, 15 February, 1 March 1926.

⁵¹Irchan, "Twilights of the Past," *R*, August 1923, 9-10.

⁵²Irchan, "Mother," *R*, 15 January 1924, 9-11.

Robitnytsia, as Irchan and later editors probably saw their writing as a means of inspiring Canadian working-class women. There were poems by Myroslava Sopilka, a “worker poet” from Galicia,⁵⁴ with accounts also of her political intimidation by the Polish police, as well as references to Ukrainian women writers Olena Pchilka and Lesya Ukrainka.⁵⁵ A few poems penned by emigré Ukrainian women, located in places as far apart as Vegreville, Alberta, and Buenos Aires, Argentina, were also printed.

Finally, a popular science section, intended to dispel religious beliefs that were assumed to claim women’s loyalties, was featured prominently. Attempts to provide a scientific, as opposed to religious view of the world clearly had a more central role in *Robitnytsia* than in the English publication for women. “How Did the Belief in God Originate,” asked one article, while others explored “Religion and Science,” “Charles Darwin,” even the origins of man.⁵⁶ There were also articles on astronomy, anthropology, zoology, and many on medical science, ranging from sleep and somnambulism to basic anatomy. Science was clearly exalted, portrayed as the means to unmask the superstitions and misinformation of religious belief, including creationism. As a means of imparting a scientific and materialist view of the world (since marxism represented a science), articles drew on references from Engels’s *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* and Bukarin’s *Theory of Historical Materialism*.

What do we make of male editors and writers at the helm of a women’s newspaper, for clearly this stood in contrast to *The Woman Worker*, produced by Custance and the Toronto Women’s Labor Leagues? For one thing, there were fewer women in the ULFTA leadership who might have stepped in during the 1920s to take on such a role; as Frances Syripa points out, the Women’s Section of ULFTA did not have a substantial and influential female elite.⁵⁷ Second, *Robitnytsia* presented itself as a class-conscious journal, useful not only for women, but for men too: imparting a materialist and class analysis was perceived to be fundamental to the education of the broad revolutionary forces — and this strategic emphasis on class solidarities characterized the entire communist movement in the 1920s, despite a concern with addressing women’s oppression. There was, in fact, overlap in

⁵³Irchan, “For Blood,” *R*, 1 February, 15 February 1924, 13-15.

⁵⁴Names were often pseudonyms, which makes identifying the writers difficult. This writer was likely S. Mys’ko (1897-1934), from Vynnykiv, near Lviv. My thanks to Jars Balan for passing on this information.

⁵⁵The Temple held literary evenings at which Hart members like Luciana Piontek (the wife of a Ukrainian trade delegation member to North America) read from their works. Krawchuk, *The Unforgettable Myroslav Irchan*, 25.

⁵⁶*R*, 15 September 1924; 1 January 1925; 1 September 1925; 1 October 1925 to April 1926.

⁵⁷Francis Sywripa, *Wedded to the Cause: Ukrainian Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity, 1891-1991* (Toronto 1992), 16.

Robitnytsia with articles from the *Ukrainian Labor News* [UKN], a fact which led to some irritated readers' claims that *Robitnytsia* had too many reprints from the UKN.

Furthermore, *Robitnytsia* was seen as a means of *improving* the minds of less class-conscious, less educated and less politically aware women: the image of backward women comrades permeated the Left for decades before and after World War I. This was linked in part to high levels of illiteracy among Ukrainian women, and indeed, the 1921 and 1931 censuses did support this contention: in 1921, 56 per cent of Ukrainian women were illiterate, compared to 32 per cent for Ukrainian men, and 5 per cent for Canadian females generally.⁵⁸ And this was not simply a lack of facility with English, but also with the written Ukrainian word. In *Robitnytsia*'s early editions, a Ukrainian grammar was included as a means of aiding literacy, and many Women's Sections reported that reading classes were part of their political work.

In a movement so resolutely tied to the written (and exalted) word of Marx and Lenin, to interpretations of texts, to Comintern documents and their political significance, illiteracy was bound to exclude comrades from political life.⁵⁹ The image of women as rural, illiterate, even ignorant, and thus profoundly less class conscious and politically aware, permeated all the rationales for *Robitnytsia*'s existence. Women members also absorbed this view. Referring to the problems in organizing women into ULFTA, one rural woman noted in gendered language that too many Ukrainian women she knew were under the spell of *two sisters: ignorance and religion*. Even organizer Annie Zen, the Ukrainian member of the Canadian women's delegation to the Soviet Union, referred to women's tendency to be involved in "petty squabbles and personal affairs" as a "barrier to [their] organization."⁶⁰ In a later retrospective, laudatory history explaining the origins of the paper, one male ULFTA writer stressed the grassroots demands of women for literacy and education as the reason for its origins:

The illiteracy of the [women] members presented a serious obstacle to educational and organizational work. With the help of male comrades, literacy courses were initiated, women were trained in reading and public speaking, and a course in public speaking was initiated by women comrades in Winnipeg.... In order to ... extend educational work to all laboring Ukrainian Women, there arose among the Women comrades the desire for their own publi-

⁵⁸Petryshyn, "The Changing Status of Ukrainian Women in Canada," 193-4.

⁵⁹Others did note that women's responsibility for domestic labour was a factor. When asked why there were no female Party theoreticians, Stanley Ryerson responded, "because they did not have wives ... the concentrated immersion in theory necessary needed absolute time." Interview with Stanley Ryerson, 16 July 1981.

⁶⁰Anon., *R*, 15 March 1931; Annie Zen spoke of women's "unhealthy manifestations jealousy, selfishness and settling of personal accounts." "An Organizers Observations," *R*, 1 May 1930, 6-7.

cation, with the help of which they could become more fully aware and develop more widely the task of enlightening working Ukrainian women.⁶¹

However much such male writers congratulated women on overcoming their limitations, there is no doubt that some harboured a paternalistic view of women, as those who needed the most elementary education in politics. In a hour-long lecture to women on International Women's Day in 1924, Popovitch pointed out that, until recently, women "counted for little in community life," and were treated as mere "slaves" of men. He urged the women to join the working women's branch, and "*when the time was ripe*, they should be able to fight side by side with working men."⁶² Popovitch also wrote on the paper's fifth anniversary in this same vein, stressing the arduous process of moving women from complete naïveté to enlightenment about capitalist production, class divisions, and political organization. Unattuned to critical thinking, women had to be prompted and prodded towards political awareness:

It was very difficult at first to get answers from our women comrades to questions that naturally trouble editors: does the journal write about matters that interest readers? Do they understand everything that they read in the journal?... To such and similar questions the typical response was that everything is satisfactory.... On the one hand this revealed an enthusiasm about the journal, but on the other hand it showed ... the underdevelopment of critical thought in general. But soon all this changed for the better. The women comrades not only ensured that the journal was disseminated and financially secure but ... it became noticeable how some comrades were learning from the mistakes in their submissions which the editors had corrected, trying not to repeat them It became evident that ... the class consciousness of readers and their correct understanding of the tasks of their organization and of the whole revolutionary workers' movement was steadily growing and deepening.

ULFTA was also deeply influenced, like the CPC, by the dominant interpretations of Marx and Engels of the time that stressed women's participation in wage labour as a key to sparking their class consciousness. It is true that, in the 1920s, and with increasing emphasis in and after the Popular Front, Communists also saw homemakers as potential Party members, radicalized by their immediate experiences as mothers, wives, and child minders. But social reproduction was never grappled with theoretically or politically in any complex way — indeed, attempts to do so were later stifled⁶³ — so that political activity at the point of production remained *more* important to the movement. This marginalized first-generation com-

⁶¹O.T., "The history of the women's section," *R*, 1 March 1937, 3-7.

⁶²Emphasis is mine. NAC, RCMP, Popovitch, 98A 00264, pt. 1, 13 March 1924.

⁶³The best example was the Party's response to Mary Inman's argument that domestic labour was productive labour in *In Women's Defence* (California 1941). The Canadian Party was involved in the response. See Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 183-5, and for a critical view of Inman and a positive defence of the Party, see Weingard, *Red Feminism*, 28-45.

rades as political players for their participation in the labour force was lower than that of other emigrant women up to World War II, and this in turn reified the image of their backwardness and isolation. In 1921, two-thirds of all Ukrainians were still found in the agricultural sector, particularly on the prairies, and the same census revealed that only 4 per cent of Ukrainian women were found in the labour force, compared to 15 per cent of all women. By 1931, this had shifted, with more Canadian-born Ukrainian women (as opposed to those born in the Ukraine) in the workforce, but Ukrainian women were still *less likely* to be found in manufacturing, more likely to be in service work.⁶⁴

Certainly, those who did work outside the home could be radicalized by their experiences; in former ULFTA leader Peter Krawchuk's *Reminiscences of Courage and Hope: Stories of Ukrainian Women Pioneers*, economic uncertainty, material deprivation, and the raw exploitation of capitalism are recurring themes in women's narratives, whether they were miners' wives, homesteading women, or young female domestics. As these edited narratives are meant to suggest, women's embrace of communism was logical and understandable under such circumstances. But structural and ideological impediments to women's political activity also reveal themselves in these narratives, countering the characterization of Ukrainian women as simply backward. Women who were isolated on homesteads were less able to meet, acquire literacy skills, and learn English; women working in the home were constrained by the long and uncertain hours of domestic labour; and finally, fears of state repression, internment, and deportation, still vivid in the 1920s, were all intensely real for these Ukrainian women.⁶⁵

Women active in ULFTA also recall the difficulties in overcoming fears of being unruly, public, and indecent within their own ethnic community. As Maria Vynohradova remembered, "It must be emphasized that many of the women who had come from the old country were timid and didn't venture to stand up at conferences to ask questions, let alone make speeches.... We shouldn't forget that a woman who went to the Labour Temple two or three times a week experienced difficulties not only at home with her husband, but also with the neighbours who whispered: 'why is that woman going out of the house so frequently?'"⁶⁶ That Ukrainian women often did struggle with the confining strictures of patriarchal families should not be ignored; women's oral reminiscences, both those critical of the Left and those still nostalgically committed to it, often stress this point emphatically.⁶⁷ The question is whether this singularly characterized Ukrainian comrades' ethnic culture, or whether it was a more generalized problem for women at the time. In a

⁶⁴William Darcovich and Paul Yuzak, eds., *A Statistical Compendium on the Ukrainians in Canada, 1891-1976* (Ottawa 1980), 381, 386.

⁶⁵Katherine Shalutsky, in Krawchuk, *Reminiscences*, 332.

⁶⁶Maria Vynohradova, in Krawchuk, *Reminiscences*, 270.

⁶⁷Helen Potrebenko, *No Streets of Gold: A Social History of Ukrainians in Alberta* (Vancouver 1977); Interview with Anna Pashka, September 1980.

revealing comment that both endorsed the image of Ukrainians as more patriarchal, but admitted they did not have a monopoly on such attitudes, Party theoretician Stanley Ryerson remembered that male chauvinism in the Party “grew partly out of the ethnic cultures — the patriarchal peasant culture” of some Europeans, though this was “shared in more subtle ways by Anglos in the Party.”⁶⁸

Not only were Ukrainian women seen by the Party as political problems to be ‘solved’, they also had to contend with broader social prejudices. Ukrainians were not the preferred immigrant in this era, a fact captured in women’s reminiscences of ethnic belittlement, particularly their pejorative and disrespectful treatment in the workplace by Anglo superiors. In one interview, for instance, a former factory worker from Winnipeg recalled vividly the “more important jobs going to the English girls.”⁶⁹ While certainly favoured over immigrants of colour, Ukrainians still occupied an “inbetween”⁷⁰ status between the preferred and the excluded immigrant. Labelled as uncultured peasants, though capable of becoming Anglicized/Canadianized, Ukrainians were described by Protestant reformers like J.S. Woodsworth as a distinct race, and while the word had a different meaning in the early 20th century, Ukrainians were still racialized as an immigrant group, perceived as inferior to Anglo-Celtic immigrants. Well into the 1920s, Protestant churches sent missionaries to the Canadian West to convert Ukrainians, blending religious conviction with a desire to “uplift” immigrants through assimilation to superior Anglo cultural, social, and educational norms. Paralleling colonial ventures, female missionaries often focused on re-shaping immigrant women’s domestic lives, seeing this as a means to move them from ignorant peasantry to white conformity.⁷¹

As Harold Palmer and Donald Avery have stressed, the post-war period saw renewed state attempts to inculcate “Anglo conformity” in Ukrainian immigrants and create more stringent immigration policies,⁷² partly as a response to post-World War I political fears of the Bolshevik sympathies of ‘foreigners’. Both

⁶⁸Interview with Stanley Ryerson.

⁶⁹Thunder Bay Archives, Labour History Collection, Interview of Jean Morrison with Mrs. Stechyshn, 22 August 1972.

⁷⁰The term is David Roediger’s in *Working Towards Whiteness*, 45-50.

⁷¹Cheri Rauser, “Clean Hearts and Clean Homes: The Work of Methodist Women Missionaries Among Ukrainian Immigrants in East-Central Alberta, 1904-25,” MA thesis, Carleton University, 1991.

⁷²By assimilationist, I am thinking of writers like Janey Canuck and Nellie McClung. For a discussion of Anglo-Canadian views see Harold Palmer, “Reluctant Hosts: Anglo-Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century,” in Douglas Francis and D. Smith, eds., *Readings in Canadian History: Post-Confederation* (Toronto 1982); Donald Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners: European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979); Kostash, *All of Baba’s Children*. On the impact of the war years, Frances Swyripa and John Thompson, eds., *Loyalties in Conflict: Ukrainians in Canada During the Great War* (Edmonton 1983).

before and after the war, writers urging the assimilation and ‘Canadianization’ of Ukrainian newcomers, even those of a reform bent, often relayed common stereotypes of the ‘less than white’ immigrants.⁷³ Reverend Ralph Connor’s fictional Ukrainians were wild and exotic, fatalistic and hot-tempered, sometimes lacking in morality entirely, less cultured than their fellow immigrants. Suggestions of similar essentialized attributes were found in the works of other Anglo prairie fiction writers, and even in later post-World War II novels Ukrainian children were often portrayed as outsiders, struggling to come to terms with their ‘foreign’ origins.⁷⁴

Addressing the injuries of ethnicity and class, *Robitnytsia* attempted to construct a left-Ukrainian politic which extolled class solidarity, while also fostering ethnic identity and pride. And the latter did take on the hues of nationalism. Reading Franko, performing Irchan, discussing the revolution in the Ukraine: the cultural validation offered through the pages and outreach of *Robitnytsia* was instrumental in shaping an ethnicized class identity of particular salience to first-generation immigrants and their children, cut off from the homeland but still deeply invested in its fate. As one early ULFTA member — a female laundry worker — recalled, she was drawn to the cultural Left through her passion for acting in plays in her mother tongue — despite her religious mother’s horror at her stage appearances. More than one Ukrainian theatre group “flourished in Winnipeg” in the 1920s, inspired by the indefatigable Irchan, who formed a Workers Theatrical Studio, trained actors, and wrote socialist dramas for them to perform.⁷⁵

The response of these newcomers to racialization may not have been simply the embrace of whiteness as an identity, but rather the creation of a cultural-national affiliation, melded with a new attachment to the communist Ukraine.⁷⁶ As David Montgomery notes of the United States, a seemingly contradictory brew of immi-

⁷³ Kostash refers to Anglos being considered ‘whiter’ than Ukrainians, though she also argues that some Ukrainian communities were anti-Semitic. *All of Baba’s Children*, 153.

⁷⁴ See Natalia Aponiuk, “The Problem of Identity: The Depiction of Ukrainians in Canadian Literature,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 15, 1 (1982), 50-64; “‘Ethnic Literature’, ‘Minority Writing’, ‘Literature in Other Languages’, ‘Hyphenated-Canadian Literature’ — Will It Ever be ‘Canadian’?,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 27, 1 (1996), 1-7; “Some Images of Ukrainian Women in Canadian Literature,” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 8, 1 (1983), 39-50; Mary Kirtz, “I am Become a Name: The Representation of Ukrainians in Ross, Laurence, Ryga and Atwood,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 24, 2 (1992), 45.

⁷⁵ Anna Wasylina, in Krawchuk, *Reminiscences*, 342-3.

⁷⁶ As Vic Satzewich points out of pre-World War I Ukrainians, “racial assignments do not necessarily produce racialized identities”; they may produce national identities. He uses the diasporic experience of Ukrainians to suggest the need to abandon essentialized adoptions of a ‘whiteness’ theory. Vic Satzewich, “Whiteness Limited: Racialization and the Social Construction of ‘Peripheral Europeans’,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 23 (November 2000), 271-89. See also James R. Barrett and David Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the ‘New Working Class’,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 16 (Spring 1997), 3-44.

grants' "class consciousness mingled with internationalism, mingled with ethnic cohesiveness and a desire to resume life in the homeland"⁷⁷ emerged from some left language groups. In Canada, a form of working-class Ukrainian nationalism co-existed alongside a fervent desire to re-make a new nation into a socialist home. For recent female immigrants, especially, ULFTA and *Robitnytsia* also spoke meaningfully to their gendered needs and dilemmas, providing fiction in their own language, discussion of homemaking work, and support for their responsibility of raising children in a new country.

Women's very different work and family roles, many *Robitnytsia* writers feared, might just as easily divide the proletariat. Women thus required a distinct, gendered appeal as encouragement to organize, though this was never to be confused with feminism. Dire warnings of any cooperation with middle-class feminist groups were offered and ULFTA Women's Sections were ordered not to cooperate with labourist women.⁷⁸ While this political sentiment was found also in *The Woman Worker*, there were differences between the papers, perhaps because *Robitnytsia* was published by male editors for women. The English-language paper initially included debates on birth control and abortion, and allowed a small measure of latitude to non-communist women correspondents, even if Custance ultimately disagreed with them. *Robitnytsia* was a more robust cultural publication, but it was also more resolute in its emphasis on the 'woman question' being a class question, and there was no debate on abortion and birth control.⁷⁹ The following passage indicates how the editors saw women's participation, as helpmates, mothers, and activists, for the class struggle. It also highlights their awareness of patriarchal attitudes and domestic violence as problems (referred to as "abuses of women"), but also a highly moralistic view of the family, disapproving of free love or 'promiscuity'. Four key reasons for women's involvement were noted by the *Robitnytsia* writer:

1. They will become conscious working women, who alongside workingmen will fight against the injustices of the capitalist order, built upon the exploitation of labour.

⁷⁷David Montgomery, "Nationalism, American Patriotism and Class Consciousness Among Immigrant Workers in the U.S. in the Epoch of World War I," in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants* (De Kalb 1986), 328.

⁷⁸"We take the view that working women do not have interests separate from the interests of the working class as a whole, and we consider feminism to be opportunistic and harmful to the working class." Central Committee of the Women's Section of ULFTA, "On the Political and Economic Conference of Women Laborites in Winnipeg," *R*, 15 April 1930, 7. For the order to all women's sections not to participate in the Labour Women's Conference held in Winnipeg, see AO, CPC Papers, reel 5, Women's Department District 9 report.

⁷⁹The removal of abortion rights in the Soviet Union was discussed, a sign that it was contentious in North America. See letter of F. Wolf, *R*, 15 July 1936, 9-11.

2. As conscious working women, they will rear their children accordingly, so that they would grow up to be not strikebreakers, not the enemies of the working class, but conscious and honest members of the working family.
3. The working-class organization roots out all the old survivals which keep people in darkness, and shows the true path to a new and better life. It creates a comradely morality and honesty, and fights against such bad habits as drunkenness, promiscuity, etc.
4. Conscious working women will be able to gradually educate those workingmen who still lead a dark life, and who, because of this darkness and the narcotic of religion, abuse women. Through the influence of the women's awareness, the man who today treats his wife savagely may eventually become a human being. Then he will no longer be "king" over his wife, but he will become an honest, intelligent, and cultured comrade and friend to his wife, and together with her will step out against their common enemy, capital.⁸⁰

In other passages, the natural differences between the sexes are stressed, such as women's innate maternal role, but there is also a vision of more egalitarian relationships that would emerge from political comradeship. The "laws of nature" differentiated men and women, but their fate under capitalism was "identical"; moreover, any hostility between the sexes was the legacy of the "bourgeois world" which had to be turned upside down for women to find true equality:

Men and women should be equal, in both married and community life. But in order to understand this word "equality" and how it is to appear in practice, men and women must first be conscious, and look at life through healthy eyes. Only then, when both are conscious, will they understand how to properly conduct their married and community lives. The organization is the school that teaches how we must live, how we are to fight those survivals of the past that barred and still bar our path on the road to progress. Organization roots out, among both men and women, unconscious and superstitious methods of struggle, and directs all its members into the true and conscious struggle for the rights of both sexes.⁸¹

Such sentiments must have held out appeal for women readers, looking for a little equality in many areas of their daily lives. Although revolutionary politics were presented as the ideal, day-to-day issues of survival and dignity were also addressed as a means of drawing women into the movement. While it seems surprising that one male writer actually wrote of a *debate* about whether it was correct to "beat one's wife," the aim may have been to expose and criticize such views. His answer, unfortunately, did not condemn violence but advocated divorce if men and women could not co-exist, thus implying that violence was simply the outcome of

⁸⁰S. Altunin, "Why Workingwomen Should Belong to an Organization," *R*, 15 December 1935, 3.

⁸¹M. Vynogradova, "Comrade Men, Help Your Women Comrades!," *R*, 1 September 1926, 10.

incompatibility.⁸² Drunkenness was also denounced with some frequency. One American correspondent noted that “although capitalism is a great enemy of the proletariat, alcohol is another enemy.”⁸³ Alcoholism was an avenue to working-class demoralization, and women were urged to be in the forefront of this anti-drunkenness struggle, in order to protect their homes from violence and poverty (a view that had some overlap with feminist temperance advocates). Denouncing rural ‘surprise parties’ where moonshine flowed freely, one author argued that women “suffer a great deal from husbands who drink. How many instances there have been where the husband comes home drunk, begins to quarrel with the wife and children and the poor wife is forced to flee ...” For those women wanting a “peaceful and happy home life,” the solution was to encourage the husband’s membership in a militant labour-farmer organization” rather than “drowning [his] dignity” along with his pay packet in drink.⁸⁴

Porcupinism Exposed

Even if the editors saw chauvinist men as a divisive problem for the movement, they also believed that ‘backward’ women might need to be pushed to sharpen their political skills. It was this perception which likely led to the porcupinism debate in 1928. The original article appeared under the pen name Tymko Izhak; the name itself (a play on the word porcupine) indicated that the initial statement was written, if not tongue-in-cheek, then as a means to stimulate debate. Is it possible that it was written by Shalutsky, known for his caustic remarks?⁸⁵ Or, perhaps it was by Irchan, produced before he left the country in 1929. Looking back, one writer for the popular science section, M. Synooverholets (who also went under M. Smith), labelled it the biggest debate covered by the paper:

The biggest discussion conducted in *The Working Woman* was on ‘porcupinism’. Here, *The Working Woman* managed to get many women comrades to write in their opinions, and to get them to think.... We had to think up various themes in order to elicit women’s participation in writing and discussion ... how to conduct a fair and friendly debate. From unpublished articles that still lie in *The Working Woman*’s editorial offices, the editors came to realize just how many “porcupines” — who consider women to be their slaves — there are not only among working men in general, but even among the members of our own organization. And

⁸²Other comments also reveal a complete lack of sympathy and understanding of violence against women: “I cannot understand ... how can you punch a woman more than two to three times when she does not fight back.” *R*, 1 May 1929, 285.

⁸³“Mother — Bootlegger,” *R*, 15 June 1926.

⁸⁴Farmerske Zhyttia, 14 November 1934, quoted in John Kolasky, ed., *Prophets and Proletarians: Documents on the History of the Rise and Decline of Ukrainian Communism in Canada* (Edmonton 1990), 104.

⁸⁵Krawchuk, *The Life and Work of Matthew Shatulsky* (Toronto 1990), 27.

how many ‘porcupines’ are there who did not write, but who secretly sang Tymko Izhak’s praises with body and soul?⁸⁶

The original Izhak article was a list of reasons why women should not and could not organize, a rehearsed litany of ‘old men’s tales’ about women. Here is the porcupine’s statement almost in its entirety:

I have read a great deal about the organization of women. From the first appearance of *The Working Woman* I have read my fill on the need for an organization of women workers and farmers. And I pity those working men, who show so earnestly why women should belong to a labour-farmer organization. My conception of women is directly opposed to that of my comrades. Why do women need an organization?

If we glance into world literature, we will not find there even a single mention of a woman philosopher, inventor, or hero of any battle whatsoever. Not one of the learned authors cites the thoughts of some great or famous woman, no one mentions women in the field of science.

It is true that women are mentioned in novels, stories, and poems, but this is done only to spice up the story. All novelists, playwrights, and poets, including the old Ukrainian writers, represent women as fragile, weak in body and soul, cowardly and tearful. And this is true. Women really are the way writers portray them. Even by nature, women are weaker than men and if they are weaker physically, they are also mentally so. They cannot develop their minds the way men can.

Nature created woman only as man’s helper, only to assist and entertain him. Women play no role in the economy, they are unproductive. They play no role in community life, never have, and never will, because they are only an appendage to men.

There is one set of laws for women in nature and social life, and another for men. Ever since the beginning of time, women have been subordinate to men, because nature created them that way. When a woman marries, she frees herself from all economic and political oppression. It is the man who must now worry about everything. The woman need only cook the meals and clean the house, and fritter away the hard-earned wages of her liberator and keeper — her husband.

The working man is enslaved and exploited from all sides, but not the woman. She, like a helpless child, depends only on her husband’s wages, and her contribution is limited to perhaps occasionally scolding him.

I am therefore of the opinion, that working men need their class organization in order to collectively fight for a better life. When the working man is fighting for a better life, he has in mind, first and foremost, a better life for his wife. She does not need an organization. But if it’s absolutely necessary for women to belong to an organization, or if women are absolutely needed to perform some purely technical tasks in our organization, then they can belong to the same organization as the men. But by themselves they can accomplish nothing. Women have no need of a separate organization. Organization is needed where there is exploitation and social oppression. Neither the one nor the other touches the woman, because her husband suffers them both for the whole family.

What are women good for in organizations?

⁸⁶M. Synooverholets, “Five Years on Thorny Paths,” *R*, 15 March and 1 April 1929, 193-4.

In an educational-cultural organization, women can help only by the playing of roles in theatrical productions. They especially enjoy playing the roles of young women (although they themselves are often no longer young), they like to be praised for their performances, and to be well spoken of in general, regardless of whether they earned it, or not.

Women are often pushy and present themselves as conscious and aware, but if they can't get leading roles in one organization, and especially the role of the heroine, they immediately transfer to other organizations. They have no solid, unshakeable convictions. I know this best from my own wife. Ever since she became a member of the organization (and she remains a member to this day), I go to work without breakfast. She tells me that she has the same rights as me, because the books say so. The trouble is, she does not know how to use these rights. One evening she will come home from the Ukrainian Labor Temple with a big role and she is so "revolutionary" that it's positively frightening, but if on another occasion the director has not given her a big role, or has given her no role at all, she mutters all night that "there is no justice" and immediately suggests to me, that we join the Catholic or the Orthodox association instead.

Say what you will, but I will remain firm: women do not need a separate organization!

All the same, I would be interested in finding out what others think in this matter, regardless of whether they be for me, or against me.⁸⁷

The porcupine's manifesto was so overstated, containing such a long litany of chauvinist arguments that it seems likely it was written purposely to expose negative masculine views in the movement and to encourage women to respond, practising their debating skills in print. But this was not simply a mechanically manufactured debate. Synooverholets admitted that the journal received many letters from unashamed porcupines, and some of those who responded in print to Izhak also claimed that there were "hundreds if not thousands"⁸⁸ of porcupines in the movement. *Robitnytsia* originally said it would publish all responses, but then declined to offer up some of the pro-Izhak letters, an indication that there were more prickly men in the movement than even the editors surmised.

The article did have the one desired effect: women's rebuttals poured in. Some female respondents pointed out that women too absorbed porcupine views and the only solution was for women to "work on themselves intensively" to transform this internalized inferiority. In contrast, others were quick to point to the origin of porcupinism: "if a woman has bad habits — it's her husband's fault ... he did not teach her to lead an intelligent life."⁸⁹ For some women, the debate was as personal as it was political, and they laid bare their own experiences with porcupine husbands. One such letter writer, who could no longer contain her "silence and anger," criticized men who become interested in other female comrades and then noted that her own husband pressed her to stay home with the baby while he went out to meetings. Once, she recalled, he came to a meeting she was at and "ordered her home."⁹⁰

⁸⁷Tymko Izhak, "Do Women Need an Organization?," *R*, 1 April 1928, 196-7.

⁸⁸Synooverholets, "Five Years."

⁸⁹'Member', "In Response to Comrade Izhak," *R*, 1 January 1929, 31.

⁹⁰Malanka, "And Who are You?," *R*, 15 January 1929, 57.

A significant number of writers, perhaps offering the hoped-for response, accepted the concept of women's backwardness but argued that, precisely because they were so ill-informed, they needed a separate political organization. The argument was made forcefully by this respondent:

Listen well and realize this, comrade Izhak! Everything has its beginnings ... Workingwomen, organized in the separate Locals of the Women's Section of the ULFTA, are but the beginning. It is the school in which women must learn what an organization is, why we must belong to the organization, what the organization gives us, and so forth. But to be in the same organization as the men would mean to subordinate once more our thoughts and our wishes to those of men. Because it would be once more the men who'll decide and do, while you, woman, sit quietly, and move your hands either up or down when it comes time to voting. No. This is not work. Women will never become conscious and independent thinkers this way. In such conditions they will always feel secondary, and this harms the workers' movement. Naturally, we are very grateful to our comrade men when they help us with their advice and suggestions, but it would be utterly senseless to propose that women do not need a separate organization.... The workers' movement, the class struggle, involves both men and women, but it is a fact that workingwomen can best develop and enlighten themselves in their own, separate class organizations.⁹¹

Men also replied, using at least three interconnected arguments: first, Izhak's pessimism could only divide the working class; second, women played a crucial role as mothers, raising revolutionaries; third, women's backwardness was a result of their oppression, yet this might well be eradicated with separate organizations.

What would happen if we applied comrade Izhak's theory in practice? First, this would deprive us of those thousands of women, who already take an active part in the struggle of the working class against capitalism.... Second, it would separate from us those masses of workingwomen, who have still to join us in the class.... Apart from this, we should not treat lightly the woman's role as mother and educator of the future generation. The man goes to work, while the mother must teach his children what is "boss," what is "worker," and what kind of struggle goes on between them.... Therefore, if we were to accept comrade Izhak's theory, our children would not grow up to replace us.... In this way comrade Izhak would condemn our movement to certain death, by depriving it of its future — working-class youth.⁹²

Comrade Izhak claims that women do not need an organization, for they are not capable of organizational work, that they are narcissistic, frivolous, envious, inconsistent in their convictions, etc.... Tymko Izhak takes the effects and advances them as causes. All these characteristics are the effect of a limited, cloistered life removed from society ... The one sure cure for these characteristics (envy, frivolity, narcissism) is the organization.... The flaws in women's characteristics ... serve as ... the need for a women's organization.⁹³

⁹¹ T.N., "Do Women Need an Organization?," *R*, 1 June 1928, 323.

⁹² Petro Pertsovykh, "Reply to Com. Izhak from France," *R*, 15 August 1928, 387-90.

⁹³ Synooverholets, "Do Women Need an Organization?," *R*, 15 May 1928, 290-292.

Interestingly, some of the strongest responses, reportedly from women (though sometimes relayed through men), stressed women's domestic labour and the unrecognized contribution women made to the reproduction of the family through unpaid work. Rather than emphasizing women's inadequacies, they accented the inequitable division of labour in society. Their responses suggest that women's political standpoint, evolving organically from their everyday labouring lives, incorporated some recognition of the importance of social reproduction to capitalism — at least, more so than their male comrades.

Here's how it was in the old country. The man sleeps, snores, totally oblivious. The woman has spent the entire night rocking the baby, hurting, crying, singing lullabies, trying to calm it just long enough for her to catch some sleep. But already it's dawning. The cow must be milked, food prepared for the whole day, one child sent out to graze the livestock, another to school, others places with neighbours, there is washing and cleaning to do, and then the husband must be wakened, breakfast served, and it's off to the fields.... The man ties two stacks, the woman — three. The husband goes off to talk and smoke with a neighbour, the woman sits on the haystack to feed the child. And Izhak writes, that the woman "plays no role in the economic sector," that she is only "an appendage of man."

And in the evening the husband ... [bellows] "How long must I wait for supper? ...

But the woman has to milk the cow, listen to all the children's complaints ... and many, many other matters. When you compare the work of men in the village with the work of women, then truly man will turn out to be the appendage of woman.⁹⁴

My husband is a miner. In the morning I rise an hour before him, cook breakfast, prepare his lunch-bucket, wake him, and send him off to work. I busy myself with this and that, there is the wash to do, ironing, the house must be cleaned, food must be cooked, clothes mended, and here one child wants this, another that, there's the chickens to worry about, and so on. My husband returns from work, supper must be made ready. After supper the table must be cleared and the dishes washed, and then the mending and sewing must be resumed. You, husband, have worked your shift and for this you have your pay, but you, woman, where is your pay?⁹⁵

Izhak's diatribe was undoubtedly an attempt to rouse both male and female comrades to take women's organization more seriously. In the two years before the porcupinism debate, travelling organizers, local correspondents, and ULFTA leaders had all criticized women's failure to become more political, as well as men's disinterest in women's organizations. In one 1926 article, "Women's Locals Must Revive," the writer claimed that work had declined dramatically. Perhaps this was an inevitable result of the calls for bolshevization, a strategy that so clearly downplayed the auxiliary work of the women's language sections. Women's locals, wrote one female observer, have excellent reputations as "organizers of

⁹⁴Drapaka, "Thoughts on Izhak's 'Theory'," *R*, 1 May, 1928, 260-1.

⁹⁵T.N., "Do Women Need an Organization?," *R*, 1 June 1928, 323.

dances, picnics or bazaars,” and while this is indispensable, it should not “exhaust our organizational duties” for women needed to advance politically, not “stay in the same place.”⁹⁶ Anna Moisiuk, secretary of the Central Committee of the Women’s Section, also lamented the state of organization after a tour of Eastern Canada in 1927. She pointed out that the leadership women sought from male comrades might well turn out to be non-existent as men often looked upon women members with indifference and disdain. She cited the example of one local where the women invited a male comrade to give direction to their political education, only to find that “He’d come to a reading, sit in a chair, a woman comrade is reading, and he — he’s snoring. We wake him up, but he only gets angry at us for disturbing his sleep. And because of this our women comrades began to grow indifferent, and stopped attending group readings.”⁹⁷

Such laments did not stop with the publication of Izhak’s article. During the Third Period, with its intense self-criticism and calls for a turn to revolutionary struggle, Izhak’s views were revived by M.Ch. (Chemil), who, in 1931, called for the *total liquidation* of the Women’s Section, claiming in exasperation that trying to end the “superstition, gossip” and apolitical “old habits” of women’s groups was as useless as “throwing peas at the wall.”⁹⁸ A second round of defences appeared, with women again stressing their inability to “become leaders, speakers, lecturers” given their double and triple day of work. As one correspondent reminded “Comrade M. Ch.,” “women comrades have many more jobs to do than the men comrades”; “she has to be cook, tailor, rearer of children, wage earner if the husband was unemployed or made little,” and on top of all this, perform her “organizational duties” too.⁹⁹

The Party line, asserted almost immediately, came in a pre-Congress discussion which rejected liquidation, but demanded far more attention to women’s support for militant economic struggles, especially those of workers. What is revealing is how the Anglo CPC leadership’s criticisms of Ukrainians as ethnically isolated were then imposed by ULFTA leadership *onto* the Women’s Section, pejoratively referred to as a “breeding ground of pure burgherism, petty bourgeoisification, intrigue”¹⁰⁰ and countless other bad things. Women were blamed for being the *most*

⁹⁶ Anonymous, “Women’s Locals Must Revive,” *R*, 1 October 1926, 3-4.

⁹⁷ Anna Moisiuk, “Our Accomplishments and Shortcomings,” *R*, 1 October 1927, 578-580.

⁹⁸ M.Ch., “What Do Women Members Say to This?,” *R*, 1 June 1931, 10-11. Again, this came so close to the upcoming congress that the article may well have been written to engender the proper responses — though women do seem genuinely passionate in their own defences of their organization. Other articles made reference to falling membership in the years 1931-33.

⁹⁹ M. Pylypas, “We Are Decidedly Against the Liquidation of the Women’s Section,” *R*, 1 July 1931, 12.

¹⁰⁰ A. Stasiuk, “Down with Liquidationist Attitudes”; Pylypas, “We are Decidedly Against the Liquidation of the Women’s Section”; S. Ch., “No Reason to Liquidate the Women’s Section,” *R*, 1 July 1931, 10-14.

culturalist, isolated, and “ethnically secluded” in their Temples, in a political scapegoating with gendered connotations.

While the vehemence of these denunciations dissipated, even as the Popular Front emerged, similar exhortations to organize women more effectively, and now to ally with “Canadian” women workers, were heard, with Izhak’s porcupine manifesto echoing a background chorus. In 1934, for instance, an organizer who toured northern Ontario offered a scathing condemnation of male ULFTA members who saw the Women’s Section as “something superfluous” as well as “women comrades, who work too little, or not at all, on their own self improvement, and stand at a very low level of class education.”¹⁰¹ Yet, it was followed by an excerpt which again stressed women’s understanding that the patriarchal organization of domestic labour was central to their political marginalization. Even though many of the men are unemployed, she wrote, “all household work is performed by the women ... in addition, she has to raise the children, so she has no time to give to her education. It is a fact that male comrades, having completed three courses, forbids his wife to attend even one, because then there will be no one to sweep the house, or to throw wood on the fire.”¹⁰²

The final lament of this woman would suggest that porcupinism lived on in the hearts of Ukrainian men. But was this problem any less pressing for other cultural groups on the Left? Was this something of a stereotype, namely the image of the stalwart peasant man, patriarchal and tyrannical, ruling over the family with an iron hand, unappreciative of women’s equality — the image that later survived even in Ukrainian-authored fiction such as *The Yellow Boots*?¹⁰³ Certainly, evidence indicates that culture *did* affect the gendered dynamics of the communist Left; most historians have argued that Finnish and Jewish women were more likely to become involved in political organizing, with some involved at the leadership level. This was likely the consequence of their own distinct European political traditions, cultural and social backgrounds, perhaps their smoother assimilation to English-speaking political culture. And there is no doubt that the Party leadership in these early years desperately wanted a more ‘Canadian’ (i.e., English-speaking) party. When a delegation of women to the Soviet Union was planned in 1929, it was dictated that the Ukrainian delegate *must* be able to speak to English workers on her return. While they were happy to have the numbers and dollars of ULFTA, the Party leadership also feared that the ‘foreignness’ of their fellow communists would prevent the construction of a wider base in the working class. However, even if Ukrainian women were less likely to be politically involved, one can distinguish between an ethnic stereotype of backwardness and ignorance and the structural reasons for

¹⁰¹I. Chikivska, “From an Organizational Tour of the Locals of the W.S. of the ULFTA of the Torold District,” *R*, 15 April 1934, 25.

¹⁰²S.K., “Help Us Women to Become More Conscious,” *R*, 15 January 1936, 16-17.

¹⁰³Vera Lysenko, *The Yellow Boots* (Edmonton 1992).

women's marginalization: rural isolation, illiteracy, long hours of domestic labour, lower numbers in the workforce — making them less important to Party strategies.

Furthermore, the eagerness of Ukrainian women to participate in the porcupinism debate, along with their strong support for *Robitnytsia*, also indicate a robust identification with class politics, despite the problems they faced within the Left. Ukrainian women remember going to ULFTA meetings with young ones in tow when their husbands would not watch the children; others recall women ignoring fathers' and husbands' attempts to discourage their political participation. Some *Robitnytsia* correspondents urged their female comrades to utilize the porcupinism debate as a jumping-off point for renewed political activity. An anonymous Detroit writer noted with surprise that fewer responses were not sent from the United States since porcupinism was a problem which crossed the 49th parallel: it was "deeply embedded in the consciousness of simple men and even working men-activists in the USA." There is a need, the author concluded, for American and Canadian workers to wage an international campaign "to fight porcupinism, capitalism and any other [negative] ism, to spread culture, solidarity and comradely love among the Ukrainian working masses."¹⁰⁴

The Advent of the Third Period and Irchan's Departure

The early years of *Robitnytsia* produced a remarkable mix of gender consciousness-raising, Left politics, and culture, but this did not survive the Third Period unscathed. As the party turned to an emphasis on the advent of the coming imperialist war and more militant, production-based activism in 1929-30, these priorities were increasingly relayed in *Robitnytsia*, with its earlier emphasis on culture downplayed. This inevitably re-shaped the paper in a new mould. It did continue to publish into the Popular Front period but was cancelled in 1937, ostensibly for financial reasons. A subsequent editor of the women's page in the Ukrainian monthly paper argued that *Robitnytsia*'s work was largely complete by 1937: "women had developed to such an extent ... [besides] they still had input on the women's page and could feel part of a broader movement." This explanation, however, may have omitted other considerations at the time, including the Party's aspirations to become a more 'Canadian' party, integrating the Popular Front work of Ukrainian and English-speaking women more thoroughly.¹⁰⁵

In 1929 Irchan left Canada for the Ukraine and a new editor, M. Lenartovych, took over. Irchan's reasons were ostensibly to re-join the struggle at home but one

¹⁰⁴M.V., "The Porcupine and Porcupinism," *R*, 1 July 1928, 390-1.

¹⁰⁵Interview with Mary Kardash. With over 400 subscriptions outstanding, there were money problems; however, the need for a Ukrainian-language paper may also have declined. Before cancellation, articles criticized ULFTA women for not 'integrating' their political organizing with 'Canadian-born' women. See I. Chaikivska, "Today We must Work Well," *R*, 15 January 1935, 8, and M. Popvitch, "The Struggle for a Common Front and the Women's Section of ULFTA," *R*, 1 March 1936, 12.

wonders if the tensions between ULFTA and the Party heads, and perhaps a lack of interest in the intra-party factionalism, encouraged his departure.¹⁰⁶ Still, there is no evidence that Irchan rejected the 1928 political turn of the Communist International, given the plot of his last Canadian play, *Spies and the Communist Party*, and articles indicating his continuing support for Stalin.

He was still immensely popular when he left Canada, revered for his rhetoric, writing, and passionate commitment to transforming both material and cultural life. Ukrainian comrades in Winnipeg packed the Labor Temple for his farewell appearance and two hundred followed him to the train station, singing the Internationale. His intellectual commitment to women on the Left was also clear, as he attempted to portray both the possibilities of their wider political involvement and the specific exploitation and oppression they faced within North American society. As he sped East on a train to Halifax, he penned an emotional letter to *Robitnytsia* readers, expressing sorrow as he left his new comrades, whom he would “never, never forget,” noting the “bright happy moments” he had shared in Canada and declaring he had “strongly bonded with the working woman movement in Canada.... I will always remember that immeasurable industry of women comrades in organization and their persistence when discharging [their] responsibilities.”¹⁰⁷ In keeping with his internationalist leanings, he vowed not to be “chained by borders” and he sent back positive reports extolling changes in his revolutionary homeland. He also discovered ‘by accident’ the Canadian Women’s delegation and counselled them to take back positive images of Soviet women, “how their children were taken care of, how they can go out in the evening,” all this the result of “conscious class struggle.”¹⁰⁸ However, his final article was posted in 1933; the same year he was arrested, along with thousands of other Ukrainian intellectuals, and exiled to Siberia. He was executed in 1937, supposedly for failing to abandon his counter-revolutionary and nationalist politics. A retrospective of *Robitnytsia* by Shalutsky in 1934 mentioned him only briefly, and in 1936, *Robitnytsia* and *The Worker* published negative, damning re-appraisals of his supposedly flawed work and politics.¹⁰⁹ The Party scrambled to explain why he was now a class enemy, and his fate, along with that of other Ukrainian comrades in the Soviet Union, spurred a major intra-party battle in

¹⁰⁶Few available primary sources, other than his writing, are available in Canada. Responding to my Freedom of Information request, the Canadian government asserted that there is no file on Irchan.

¹⁰⁷Maria Saranchuk, “Farewell to Comrade Irchan,” *R*, 1 June 1929, 328; Irchan, “Words of Farewell by Comrade Irchan,” *R*, 15 June 1929.

¹⁰⁸Irchan, “With the Canadian Delegation,” *R*, 1 July 1931, 1, 3. At least one of his articles noted the problems and dissatisfactions Canadian women immigrants had in the Soviet Union commune; some returned to Canada. Irchan, “An Oasis in the Steppes,” *R*, 15 April-1 June 1930; “A Health Factory,” *R*, 15 September-1 October 1930, 17.

¹⁰⁹M. Lysets, “Irchan in the Weeds,” “Irchan in His Plays,” *R*, 15 August 1936, 23, 30.

Winnipeg — the Lobay affair — as some communists refused to accept the Party line.¹¹⁰

Had Irchan stayed in Canada, it is hard to imagine that he would have escaped critique for his writing, with its cosmopolitanism and openness to Marxist interpretations of culture. Indeed, his wide-ranging oeuvre in *Robitnytsia*, which even included interesting articles on Native Canadians and their role in ‘imperialist’ Canada,¹¹¹ stood out as a brief but interesting experiment on the Left — in the same way *The Woman Worker* was an innovative attempt to radicalize women before the Party’s turn to the Third Period led to the paper’s cancellation. In contrast to American scholars of the Communist Party, who dismiss as “minimal and tokenistic” attention to the woman question in the 1920s,¹¹² these newspapers suggest more positive potential for both leadership and grassroots interest in a class-based, radical politics that also addressed women’s unique oppression. Both papers covered similar themes, such as the need to organize wage-earning women, but they also differed, with more emphasis on the birth control issue in the English journal, (soon disparaged in 1930 by rising Party leader Becky Buhay), and a broader cultural program, more anti-religious articles, and addresses to rural women in *Robitnytsia*. The latter also drew on women’s ethnic loyalties far more directly, with underlying hues of Ukrainian nationalism and attempts to offer solace, pride, and meaning to women whose cultural origins marked them as less-than-ideal immigrants in Canadian society. *The Woman Worker*, aimed primarily at white and English-speaking women, the preferred immigrant and citizen, took the category of ethnicity more for granted, though it was eager to lay claim to women’s class solidarities across ethnic identification.

We can only surmise how and why *Robitnytsia* appealed to rank-and-file women, but we must assume that its mixture of culture, popular science, homemaking issues, peace, and revolutionary politics held out strong appeal for its subscribers. It is revealing that, however much the Party tried to criticize ULFTA for retreating to lectures, dancing, and music, it was precisely these cultural activities that drew some women into the communist movement.¹¹³ Women who later be-

¹¹⁰Daniel Lobay, once a ULFTA leader, refused to accept the Party’s line on the trials and executions of Ukrainians in the Soviet Union and, as a result, there was a major struggle within the Winnipeg ULFTA, resulting in Lobay and some others breaking away to found a different socialist group.

¹¹¹Irchan, “In the Land of the Iroquois,” *R*, 15 November 1929.

¹¹²Weingard, *Red Feminism*, 15-16. Weingard contrasts this with Party interest in ethnic and race questions.

¹¹³NAC, Peter Krawchuk Collection, MG 30 D403, vol. 13, f. 112, Helen Weir. See the memorial tributes to Helen Weir (b. Kucheran), a CPC activist. She literally grew up in ULFTA. She was born to a Ukrainian miner and his wife in the Alberta Crows Nest Pass in 1915. “Her parents were founding CPC members, and she acquired a love of music, history and tradition in the ULFTA.” She became a communist as a teen, at 15 or 16, working as a counsellor,

came prominent leaders in the CPC had mothers in ULFTA and grew up on the benches of the local Temple, immersed in youth section activities. The energy and imagination of Irchan, who saw cultural production as one key to social transformation, was clearly important to *Robitnytsia*'s success, as was its attempt to speak directly to women's work lives, to the challenges of child rearing in a new country, and sometimes to the frustrations of living with patriarchal husbands. The voices of women correspondents who spoke so eloquently about the unrecognized burden of their domestic labour suggest that their social and material standpoint produced a prescient, if somewhat inchoate understanding of what marxist-feminists would later refer to as costs of social reproduction. Although maternal and domestic work was sometimes invoked successfully as a means of radicalizing women, their responsibility for social reproduction nonetheless remained a resilient barrier to their full political participation within a communist Left primarily interested, theoretically and strategically, in the politics of wage labour.

By fostering the porcupinism debate, *Robitnytsia* hoped to address some of the structural and ideological barriers to women's participation in radical politics, though the paper's contents also reinforced the more mainstream, dominant, and idealized images of male breadwinning and female domesticity. Addressing emigré women activists who were racialized within Canadian society and perceived as less desirable immigrants needing 'Canadianization', *Robitnytsia* attempted to create a culture of radicalism shaped both by class politics and ethnic cohesiveness. In the Anglo-dominated Party leadership, class consciousness and ethnic identity were feared as conflicting loyalties, mutually exclusive goals in the face of the needs of a bolshevized party. Yet for Ukrainian women, a desire for cultural recognition and socialist transformation intersected more comfortably, reinforcing their radical commitments. *Robitnytsia* represented a small but significant effort to address immigrant women's multiple roles and loyalties, offering a political statement — even for the most isolated — that spoke to their hopes for a better society for themselves and their children.

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