

A Matter of Faith

Yurii Fedechko was ninety-four when he talked to Arkadia Melnyk and Hania Essenhigh about leaving Ukraine but age had not dulled his memories or his convictions. He spoke with passion and his words carried a sincerity that testified to deep convictions and to a compassion that came from a gentle heart.

Yurii was born in 1911 to a Greek Catholic family in western Ukraine in Krasiv, in the Galicia Administrative District in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire that was then under Polish Control. Among the main ethnic and religious groups in Galicia, the Ukrainian Greek Catholics were one of the strongest, on par with the Polish and Jewish populations. The Greek Catholics were sometimes called Uniates after their Union in 1569 with Rome, a decision that was sought by the Vatican who allowed them to keep their Byzantine rite liturgy with its Church-Slavonic language and permitted their lower clergy to marry. The Uniates populated eastern Galicia particularly in the region surrounding the city of Lviv which was their administrative center for all political, economical, and religious matters. In the larger slavic context which included the Orthodox, Ukrainians and Russians, to the east and Catholics to the west, the Uniates were viewed with suspicion by their neighbors, no longer Orthodox yet not Roman Catholic. To complicate matters further, with the advent of communism in Russia and the annexation of eastern Ukraine into the Soviet Union, the religious and ethnic divisions became more pronounced. Under such circumstances, people tended to regard their identity as a precious inheritance and not a commodity to be bartered in the course of ephemeral victories or losses. Yurii knew who he was.

To Arkadia and Hania who had had many contacts with him from his involvement in the Ukrainian community in Columbus and in the St John Chrisostom Parish, this was not news. What was news was the depth of his faith and the role it had played in critical moments of his life.

For Yurii, the first test came with the appearance of Soviet Partisans in his corner of the world in the winter in 1941. The Soviets, following the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact of non-aggression between the USSR and Germany, had the run of the land up to the river Prut in western Ukraine until Hitler decided to abrogate the pact in June 1941. As rulers from October 1939 to June 1941, the Soviets imposed a new civil structure on the population, backed by the Red Army. And the role of the Soviet Partisans, an armed force of people dedicated to all aspects of communism, was to indoctrinate as many new recruits as possible to their cause, including atheism.

Yurii was not a willing recruit. The Partisans had captured him along with some 160 men who had served in the Polish Army after it disintegrated under the Nazi assault. His indoctrination started immediately upon capture. But Yurii was almost thirty and not about to be swayed. He had been under pressure before in the Polish Army and survived

with his Greek Catholic traditions intact. And now he held fast against the teachings of the Camp Commandant.

“From the first day, he wanted me to say that there was no God,” Yurii told Hania and Arkadia, indignation still swelling his voice after so many years. “I didn’t know what to do to make him stop.”

And Yurii’s eyes clouded; his lips curled; his eyes focused somewhere beyond the white table cloth of the dining room table where everybody was sitting around the laptop and the scanner; his voice became raspy; his moustache drooped. Arkadia and Hania thought his age was getting the better of him and he might be getting tired.

“It was bad. I felt cornered.”

Hania and Arkadia closed the laptop and got up to leave.

But suddenly, Yurii’s whole demeanor changed: he lifted his eyes to Hania and Arkadia and winked at them; he put his index finger to his lips; his mouth formed a conspiratorial ‘O’ that promised a twist to his story; he stroked his moustache; and then he leaned forward lowering his voice for the gem he was about to reveal.

“Do you know how I ended the argument with the Commandant?” Yurii inquired rhetorically.

“I asked him a question,” he continued softly. “I asked him if he knew who was at the head of England. ‘Churchill’, the Commandant answered. I nodded – and Yurii nodded to Hania and Arkadia – “and then I asked him if he knew who was at the head of America. ‘Roosevelt’ the Commandant answered. ‘Right,’ I told him. Then I asked him who was running France. And he said ‘de Gaulle’. And then I just looked him in the eyes and I said, ‘Don’t you think there is a greater Power at work here? And don’t you think this proves that God exists?’”

At that Yurii paused, a smile of utter satisfaction on his face, waiting for the truth of the argument to sink in with his interlocutors. And through him the truth did come out. It came out shining. It shone through his eyes; it radiated through his face; it burst out through small chuckles in his voice. It dawned on Arkadia and Hania that there was more to the argument than met the cold logic of reason.

Yurii continued his tale.

The day after his discussion with the Commandant a corporal, perhaps a soldier who had remembered the teachings of his pre-communist days, came to him to tell him to flee from the camp for the Commandant had put his name on a list of men who were to be sent to the Kolyma Gulag or to Siberia, no doubt, as punishment for their beliefs or insubordination. Yurii took the advice and fled across the river Prut to Peremyshl (Przemysl now Poland) which was then under Nazi occupation.

His circumstances did improve though only slightly under the Nazis. Yurii, barred from returning to his own town, had no other alternative but to become an ostarbeiter, that is, a laborer from the east working in Austria or in Germany. It meant emigrating. In the event, he was sent to Austria to the village of Maria Rain in the Klagenfurt District as a farm hand. This move entitled him to receive an official Arbeitkarte that was dated March 7th, 1941.

The work was hard but he was used to hard work when he was in Krasiv or in the Polish Army. Eventually he even got a small remuneration from his hosts. And slowly over time, they entrusted him with ever more challenging tasks, such as building the steep alpine roofs that had to withstand the heavy snowfalls of the area. However, best of all, in Maria Rain he met and later married Yulia Chomyk (Khomyk).

By that time the war was over. Luckily for Yurii and Yulia, their place of work happened to be in the American zone and not in the Russian zone where they would have been at risk of deportation back to the Soviet Union. Eventually, they were granted the status of Displaced Persons (DPs) and they settled in a DP camp, St. Martin, in Villach, still in the Klagenfurt District. The barracks at St Martin's were primitive but Yurii built a kitchen and put in a stove so that the conditions improved and not only for him and Yulia but also for others who later came to share those facilities. Seeing this, the Camp Administrator asked him to continue the repairs and put several people under his direction. When Yurii mentioned that other people benefited from his work, his craggy face lit up with an inner glow, Arkadia and Hania were reminded of the arguments he had used with the Soviet Commandant and that had come from the heart, generous and compassionate.

This seems to have been a recurring theme in Yurii's life. In 1950, after he and Yulia got their papers to emigrate to the United States, he again saw the need to help others.

With hard work and careful husbandry the young couple had managed to save some money to start their new life across the Atlantic. When they exchanged the German marks they got two dollars and wondered what those riches would buy them. But before they got to the port in Bremen to take the boat to their new home, they met a family who had two sickly children but no savings whatsoever. On an impulse, Yurii gave the family half of their wealth, a total of one dollar.

Around the dining room table in Columbus, Yurii and Yulia couldn't at first remember the name of the family.

"What happened to them?" asked Arkadia and Hania.

"We don't know. The children were not well. They had to take another boat."

"I remember their name," chimed in Yulia. "It was Yurkevitch. I wonder where they are now?"

"That was such a long time ago," sighed Yurii.

Not by a fluttering of the eyelids or a change in the tone of his voice to indicate the hardship the gift must have represented to them did Yurii express any regret about his generosity so many years ago. For him it was merely what his faith ordered him to do just

as it had prompted him to defend it from the attacks of the Soviet Commandant a long time ago.

Yurii died in peace on February 14th 2006 in Columbus, Ohio. A great number of people, family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances came to his funeral. Some remembered his hard work, some his courage, some his pleasant baritone at social events, some his generosity and some again, his many kindnesses to his fellow men. Arkadia and Hania thought the eulogies were a fitting tribute to a man who, by loosing it all, had gained it all.