

# A UKRAINIAN ASSASSINATION BALLAD IN CANADA

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An event which took place eighty years ago in Switzerland is still remembered in song by some Ukrainian settlers in Canada. The event was the assassination of Empress Elizabeth of Austria-Hungary in Geneva on September 10, 1898 by an anarchist whose name was Luigi Lucheni. The following is a description of the assassination:

The moment had come. Lucheni cleared the street with a bound, ran swiftly across the path where Elizabeth was walking till he reached the balustrade next the lake, then turned at a sharp angle and as quick as lightning rushed at the two ladies. They both stopped to make way for him and avoid a collision, whereupon Lucheni pulled up short in front of the Countess Sztáray, as though about to stumble; then raising his right hand high in the air, he sprang at Elizabeth with a cat-like bound, stopped, as though to peep beneath her parasol, and with a mighty blow plunged his three-edged weapon in her breast. Silently, without uttering a cry, Elizabeth fell backwards on the ground under the force of the blow like a felled tree; her head struck the pavement and only her luxuriant masses of hair broke the force of the blow. So rapidly had it all taken place that the Countess Sztáray, hardly aware of what had happened, uttered a shriek and, with the aid of a cab-driver who had hurried up, tried to assist the Empress to arise, while the assassin made off at a run. Elizabeth rose to her feet again, crimson with agitation, and tried to tidy her hair which had been disarranged. The Countess Sztáray, who had only seen the man strike her with his fist, exclaimed: "Is your Majesty hurt? Do you feel a pain anywhere?" And an Englishman who had come up made the same inquiries.

"No, no, thank you," replied the Empress, "it is nothing."

The hotel porter had hurried to the spot and asked the Empress to return to the hotel.

"But no, I am not hurt."

"But Your Majesty must be frightened."

"Oh yes, I was certainly frightened." . . .

And now the two ladies walked from the scene of the outrage on to the steamer. But suddenly all the colour was drained from Elizabeth's face, and was followed by a deadly pallor. She must have felt this, for she quickly turned to the Countess, who had slipped her arm around her mistress, fearing she might be suffering from shock.

"Have I turned very pale now?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, your Majesty, very. Your Majesty feels no pain?"

"I think my breast pains me a little."

At this moment the porter came running up again, shouting from a distance: "The criminal is caught."

Elizabeth walked lightly as far as the narrow gangway, when the Countess Sztáray was forced to withdraw her hand from her mistress's waist for a moment. Elizabeth crossed the gangway; but she had scarcely set foot on the deck, before she turned abruptly to the Countess Sztáray:

"Give me your arm now," she said, "but quickly."

The Countess threw her arm round her and a manservant hurried up,

but the two of them together could no longer hold the Empress upright. She sank slowly on the ground and lost consciousness, her head drooping on the breast of the Countess who knelt beside her.

“Water! Water!” cried the Countess, “and a doctor.”

They brought water and she sprinkled it on Elizabeth’s face. The Empress opened her eyes, but they were those of a dying woman. There was no doctor on board, only a lady, Madame Dardalle, who had been a nurse, and now took charge of the suffering lady. Captain Roux came up. The ship had not yet started, and, hearing that a lady had fainted, and not knowing who she was, he advised the Countess Sztáray to have her carried on shore at once and taken back to the hotel. The answer he received was that it was only a fainting-fit brought on by shock. All this had taken place just beside the engine-room, where it was very hot. The captain offered them a reserved cabin, but they preferred to remain in the open air. Three gentlemen carried the Empress to the upper deck and laid her on a seat, where Madame Dardalle tried to revive her. The Countess Sztáray undid her dress, cut her stay lace, and pressed a piece of sugar soaked in alcohol into the Empress’s mouth. She could be heard crunching it between her teeth. She now opened her eyes and tried to sit up.

“Does your Majesty feel better?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The Empress sat right up, looked about her as though waking from a deep sleep, and asked with an unspeakably touching expression on her noble face: “Why, what has happened?”

“Your Majesty has not been very well, but you are better now, are you not?”

No answer came. Elizabeth sank back and never more regained consciousness. “Rub her breast,” said someone sharply. The fastenings of her coat were torn open, and suddenly, to her terror, the Countess Sztáray saw a brownish stain about the size of a florin on the violet batiste undergarment, with a little hole in the middle, and then a tiny wound in the breast above it to the left, with some clotted blood. “Look, Madame, for Heaven’s sake,” she exclaimed, “she has been murdered.” Meanwhile, the ship had started and was turning east-wards. The Countess sent for the captain. “I beg you, for the love of Heaven,” she said, “to return to the shore at once. The lady whom you see here is the Empress of Austria. She has been wounded in the breast. I cannot let her die without a doctor and a priest. Please land at Bellevue, I mean to take the Empress to the Baroness Rothschild’s at Pregny.”

“But,” replied the captain, “you are not likely to find a doctor there, or even a carriage.” It was decided to return to Geneva at once. Meanwhile, as there was no proper stretcher on board, they improvised one out of two oars and some deck-chairs. The Countess Sztáray (sic) knelt beside her mistress in desperation, dried her white face, from which drops of sweat were trickling, and listened to her breathing, which began to rattle more and more ominously in her throat. Elizabeth was laid on the stretcher, covered with the cloak which she had called after her sister the Countess Trani, and six people lifted it, while a gentleman held a parasol over her head. With anguish in her heart the Countess Sztáray walked beside the Empress and watched with terrible alarm how she lay

with eyes closed, turned her head restlessly from side to side. But she still lived, so some hope yet remained.

Elizabeth was carried back to the hotel where she had spent the previous night. They laid her on the bed, a rattling sound was still perceptible, then nothing but profound silence.<sup>1</sup>

The reverberations of the assassination must have been felt throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire and publications about the event and biography of the Empress grew.<sup>2</sup> In the eastern part of the Empire, in Western Ukraine the story of this event soon spread in the form of a folk ballad.<sup>3</sup>

When Ukrainians began to settle in Canada, they brought their songs with them, and the ballad about the assassination of the Empress Elizabeth was one of them. It was not only orally transmitted but was also printed in Ukrainian-Canadian publications. One of the first published versions<sup>4</sup> of this song appeared under the title "Pisnia pro tsisarevu Elysavetu" (The Song about the Empress Elizabeth) in a book about the martyrdom of Elizabeth translated from the German<sup>5</sup>. It contains seventeen verses and its English translation is approximately as follows:

Our lord, the emperor and the empress began to deliberate  
What kind of presents to make to those soldiers.

Glory to God in the highest, that we have lived so long,  
Let us give medals to those who have served us.

Our lord, the emperor and Francis Joseph, he's second to God,  
Our lady, the empress died on the road.

Our lord, the emperor and Francis Joseph is ruling in Vienna,  
And the whole country is grieving for the lady, the empress.

O it's grieving, O it's grieving, there's good cause for grieving,  
The empress was as good as one's own mother

Our own mother was good because she give birth to us,  
The empress was good because she defended the country.

She abolished all chains, gauntlets and canings,  
And now she has suffered tortures from the enemy.

Our lady, the empress of Bavarian lineage  
Went to Swiss waters to bathe.

Were that this Switzerland had become submerged,  
Our empress would have bathed in milk.

O unbaptized Lucheni, born in Paris,  
Did he do this on his own or was he hired

That he threw himself at the emperor's daughter like a mad dog.  
And thrust into her a sharp file, and a poisoned one too.

<sup>1</sup>Corti, E. C. *Elizabeth Empress of Austria* (London: Thorton Butterworth Ltd., 1936), pp. 380-83.

<sup>2</sup>See Corti, E. C. *op. cit.*, Matray M. and A. Krueger, *Der Tod der Kaiserin Elizabeth oder Die Tat des Anarchisten Lucheni* (Munich: Kurt Desch, 1970), Tschupplik, K., *Elizabeth Kaiserin von oesterreich* (Vienna and Leipzig: Dr. Rolf Passer, 1934) etc., and their bibliographies.

<sup>3</sup>Franko, Iv., "Zrazok novozlozhenoi nar. pisni", *Literaturno-Naukovyyi Vistnyk*, Vook IV (L'viv: April, 1900), pp. 54-55; Shukhevych V., *Hutuz' shchyna*, III (L'viv: Naukove tovarystvo imeny Shevchenka, 1902), pp. 183-84.

<sup>4</sup>*Pisn' Rus' ko-Narodna o pokiniu tsisarevi Elysaveti shcho pohybla z ruk anarkhista Liukenoho v Zhenevi dnia 10. veresnia 1898 r.*, no place, no date, may have been published in Winnipeg according to an article by M. Surmach, *Svoboda*, Feb. 4, 1978.

<sup>5</sup>*Elysaveta, muchenytsia na avstriis'kim prestoli u s'viti pravdy*, translated from the German by M. P. B. Yasyniv's'kyi (Winnipeg: Rus'ka knyharhia, 1914).

He thrust into her a sharp file and put poison on it,  
He pierced this beautiful body of the lady, the empress.

When the empress began to embark onto the ship,  
It was there, that she had to give up her soul to God.

O the captain of the ship began to recognize her,  
And he began to write a sad letter to the emperor.

O when our lord, the emperor began to read the letter  
In his grief he was then unable to respond for two hours.

And in his grief was unable to respond for two hours

O for the grief was immense to the Habsburg family.

The family grieved, the subjects grieved, reasons for grief are there,  
The empress was good like one's own mother.

A comparison of this version with that collected by Shukhevych leads one to presume that we are not dealing with a translated text from the German as is the case with the rest of the publication but with a text very close to the variant of Shukhevych's collection.<sup>6</sup>

Shukhevych's version is not only of interest because it is one of the earliest collected texts of this ballad, but also because its introductory couplet provides a folk interpretation of the authorship:

The girls while hoeing began to talk to one another,  
What kind of song to compose for the lady, the empress.<sup>7</sup>

Another version regarding the authorship was provided to me in an interview by Dr. W. Niniowsky of Edmonton. The following is a translation of his narration (minus my interjections and his answers to them):

I was still a little boy, you know, and all sorts of different people came to my parents. They would gather in the evening and would relate each other various kinds of stories. I was still a little boy. There was a certain old man, an oldster. He was about seventy years old. He smoked a pipe, a long pipe. But what was interesting was that under his nose here, there hung a so-called lump and it shook very much. It was he who was the one who recounted about this lady, the empress, and he related that, as it were, he heard how this person who got an award . . . and the one getting the award was called Kovbasniuk, you see, . . . that he, it means, was there somewhere. He said that he came from Verbizh and then another one contradicted him and said he was from Voskresinets' ( . . . another village close to Kolomyia). Another one again contradicted him saying no, he was not from Voskresinets' nor from Verbizh, but he was from Yabluniv. And again another one contradicted him saying he was from Kosmach (various versions).

Anyway, the one with the pipe was given a chance to recount, that, in other words, he saw this Kovbasniuk and this Kovbasniuk related that he had composed this song, right. And this Kovbasniuk related that when he had composed this song and had been singing it as well, right away a letter was written to the Lord, the most magnificent emperor, that a certain Kovbasniuk had composed such a nice song. When the most majestic emperor received this letter, right away the most majestic emperor wrote back to him. After receiving this letter, he sent this whole song . . . this song he sent somewhere to L'viv. In L'viv, he says, they changed it into such a language so that the lord, the most magnificent emperor would understand.

<sup>6</sup>Shukhevych, V., *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183.

And then, he says, he waited very long, for, he says, maybe five months, maybe six or maybe seven, he says. It was exactly at the time when his cow calved, he got this news from the lord, the most magnificent Emperor. And he remembers this well that the cow had a calf. But his wife, again, said it wasn't a calf, but a bullock. And then when he got this news from the most magnificent lord, the emperor that the most magnificent lord, the emperor had read it and had wept over it and later he was told to come to Vienna. And later he related, so to say, that he had to clean his best shoes, to fix his shoe strings . . . he got his best shoes ready. His wife gave him a white shirt and he put on a wide belt. He placed some money behind the belt. He inserted an Austrian guilder into his belt, well and he set off for Vienna.

He rode and walked for a terribly long time to this Vienna. When he arrived there in Vienna . . . how was he to find the lord, the emperor? That is, he wandered along the streets, got lost, looked around, but there, people spoke differently, right. He doesn't understand, but somehow he got the information he was looking for.

He says he enters this huge, very huge building where the most magnificent lord, the emperor himself lives. He entered the corridor, a very wide and huge one, he says. Everything is of stone, it's so nice it's shining (it's marble). He wonders where the most magnificent lord, the emperor lives . . . in which chamber, right. And somehow he found it. He knocks at the door. The door opens. He enters. He says:

"I look and there sits the lady, the empress on such a nice, nice bench and this bench is so long, long, long and it's decked with such a white, white, really white tablecloth. The lady, the empress is sitting and spinning at the spinning wheel and the spindle goes furr, furr, furr, furr, furr, furr, furr. And the lady, the empress got up and she is wearing a fine, fine white, really white chemise and so nicely embroidered . . . embroidered in our own Hutsul pattern, just so.

And I say: Glory be to Jesus Christ.

And the lady, the empress says: *Eternal glory to God.*

— And what do you say, gazdo? [a landowning peasant] Eh? What do you say?

And I say: Well . . . you know my lady, the empress, I have come, you know, all the way from Kosmach in order to see your most magnificent lord, the emperor, because I have to sing him this song. But I see that your lord, the emperor is not here.

— And she says to me: He will be here right away. He went to brush his horse.

— I think, O this must be such a fine . . . fine horse if the very lord, the emperor is brushing him.

— And then she says: Sit down, gazdo!

— "I hold my hat", he says, "in my hand and sat down like this. And I am very careful not to move anything anywhere," he says, "with my footwear." He says, "I look, the most magnificent emperor is entering. Wow! And he is wearing such a uniform! Wow! . . . Such a fine, fine one. And he entered and he looked at me and I say: Glory be to Jesus Christ!

— And he says: *Eternal glory.* And what do you say, gazdo?

— And I say: Well, please, O magnificent emperor, I have come to you from so far, from Kosmach, because do you remember that you wrote me such a letter . . . so long ago . . . when my calf was still little and you told me to sing this song to you and I have come to you.

— And he says: Good gazdo! Sit down and sing it!

— And I sang this song to him:

Our lady, the empress of imperial lineage,<sup>8</sup>  
Went to bathe in the waters of Karlsbad. /twice/  
And this unbaptized heathen, born in Paris,  
Thrust a poisoned file into our empress. /twice/

— You know I sang more to him. It's a long one . . .  
what I had composed is a very long . . . long song. But, you know, he  
gave me two acres of land for this. He sat down immediately and wrote  
down with his own hand that I was to have two acres of land and I have  
the two acres.

Another informant, Mr. Y. Elyjiw of Toronto, gave a much more concise  
yet possibly contradictory opinion about who the author of this song was. He  
stated (as translated from the Ukrainian):

Kozak gave me this text.<sup>9</sup> Maybe it's the original text. A convict was  
supposed to have written it. It was right then, where this event occurred,  
that Lucheni murdered the empress in Switzerland. And the former  
while sitting in jail composed something there. He worked at it for a long  
time to give it rhyme and form and there he composed this very song.  
Nobody knows who he is, the author of the song, and maybe somebody  
knows him, however, that is, these things are not written down any-  
where.

Anyway, when he finished this song, the warden of the prison gave  
this song to the government officials and it went all the way to the  
emperor. A translation was made into German. And this emperor (the  
irony which is there could not be felt in the translation), he thought it  
was serious (when it was translated the irony was lost), and in a moment  
of rejoicing let him out of prison. He granted him a pardon, and it seems  
he was given a monetary award, possibly 300 Austrian guilders.

Although Elyjiw had provided me with the information about the potential  
original text, he himself sang a version which differed markedly from it. In his  
version only three verses are nearly identical. There are some similarities in  
two or three more verses but the rest, the majority, are totally different from  
this early edition. Elyjiw's version certainly qualifies as an irony-filled text:

Our lord emperor and the empress began to ponder  
What kind of gifts to present to his faithful subjects.  
And their eminences decided to mint coins  
And to distribute them to the faithful army and the whole country.  
The lady empress herself drew up this plan,  
When they were giving out the medals she was no longer alive.  
Our lady, the empress fell gravely ill  
So that for almost three weeks she did not get up from bed.  
Our magnificent lord stood at her side and is looking down on the bed  
But since he is not a doctor he can't help her a bit.  
Our magnificent lord stood at her side and spoke the following words:  
Maybe if you somehow took a bath then you will feel better.  
Our lady the empress of Bavarian lineage  
Went to bathe in Swiss water.  
She had not yet taken off her resplendent vestments nor gotten into the  
tub  
And already treachery is being plotted against the most beautiful lady.

<sup>8</sup>The melody of the ballad can be found in Klymasz, Robert B. *An Introduction to the Ukrainian-Canadian Immigrant Folksong Cycle* (Ottawa: National Museum, Bulletin No. 234, 1970), p.25.

<sup>9</sup>See footnote No. 4 *Pisn'* etc.

Some unbaptized scoundrel, born in Paris,  
 Threw himself at our lady like that mad dog.  
 Lukyn the unbaptized scoundrel born in Paris  
 Thrust a poisoned spindel into the empress.  
 He entered the poisoned spindel, blood was flowing,  
 Not two minutes passed, she gave up her ghost completely.  
 He thrust the poisoned spindel between the white breasts  
 And the lady, the empress will not breathe anymore.  
 The very lord, the emperor is weeping for her, Holy Rus' is weeping,  
 And on the sky a fiery broom appeared.  
 Were that this Switzerland became submerged  
 The empress would have bathed in our parts.  
 She would have had a thorough bath  
 And she would not have suffered a spindel in her left side.  
 O emperor my dear emperor, emperor Franciscus  
 I won't sleep with you on a spring bed anymore.  
 A little bird came down on the loft, puffed up against the wind,  
 I would not sing this in this way if it were not like that.

In contrast to Elyjiw's version one may take the text of Mrs. J. Masiowsky<sup>10</sup> where the irony if there is any is much less obvious:

Well our emperor and the emperor's daughter began to deliberate  
 What kind of presents to make for those soldiers.

Fifty years have already passed since we have reigned,  
 Let us give them medals so they will remember us.

And our emperor, empress of noble lineage  
 Went to bathe in Swiss waters.

Were that Switzerland had become submerged,  
 (Then) the emperor's daughter would have bathed in our land.

She would have bathed in milk and in honey  
 And she would not have suffered poison in her left side.

An unbaptized Bakyr buker born in Paris,  
 And he threw himself at the empress like that mad dog.

And he took a sharpened file treated with poison,  
 And he threw himself at the empress like that mad dog.

Our lady the emperor's daughter in a silk chemise,  
 And there was no trace anywhere only in one floweret.

Our lady the emperor's daughter started to embark onto the boat.  
 The master, the captain of the steamboat began to recognize (her).

The master, the captain of the steamboat began to recognize (her).  
 He began to write a sad letter to the emperor.

And he wrote sad letters to the whole family  
 That she gave up her soul to God at four o'clock.

It is likely that the versions familiar to me can be classified into ironic and factual if not respectful texts insofar as the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is

<sup>10</sup>Mrs. John Masiowsky's *Song* is from Dr. R. B. Klymasz's collection, KLY-B-50.22, Archives, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Ottawa.

concerned. Moreover, what may also be ironic is the fact that this event is still being remembered in song via the medium of Ukrainian language in Canada.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Ukrainian Canadian Archives and Museum in Edmonton, for the use of *Elysaveta muchenytsia na avstriis'kim prestoli u s'vitli pravdy*, Winnipeg: 1974, and to the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies in Ottawa for the use of Mrs. J. Masiowsky's version of the ballad collected by Dr. R. B. Klymasz.

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Résumé: Le Professeur Bohdan Medwidsky parle d'une ballade Ukrainienne d'allure historique décrivent l'assassinat, en 1898, de l'Impératrice Elisabeth d'Autriche-Hongrie à Genève, en Suisse. Il offre une ample description de l'assassinat et donne ensuite la traduction d'une ballade traditionnelle Ukrainienne inspirée de ce sujet. Il parle également des entrevues qu'il a eues avec deux Canadiens de descendance Ukrainienne dont les renseignements diffèrent quelque peu à propos de l'origine de la ballade; puis il fournit les traductions de deux versions de la ballade recueillie au Canada.

#### MEDAILLE LUC-LACOURCIÈRE: ETHNOLOGIE D'AMÉRIQUE FRANÇAISE

En juin 1978, le Centre d'études sur la langue, les arts et les traditions populaires des francophones en Amérique du Nord (CELAT), de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université Laval, créait, en l'honneur du fondateur des Archives de folklore de ce Centre, la médaille Luc-Lacourrière.

Cette distinction sera attribuée annuellement par la CELAT à l'auteur qui aura réalisé une étude marquante en ethnologie historique d'Amérique française (folklore, technologie traditionnelle, art populaire).

En janvier 1979, le comité d'attribution de cette médaille examinera les travaux qui auront été publiés au cours de l'année 1978. Les auteurs doivent soumettre leurs travaux, en deux exemplaires, avant le 15 janvier 1979.

Veillez adresser les ouvrages proposés à: Secrétariat du CELAT, Faculté des lettres, Université Laval, Cité universitaire, Québec, Canada G1K 7P4.

#### RECORD NOTES

LaRena Clark, a traditional Ontario singer, is in the process of recording her entire repertoire of family songs on Clark Records (Box 242, Orillia, Ontario L3V 6J4). Discs already available include *Songs of an Ontario Family*, QC 903; *Heritage of Folk Songs*, QCS 1311; *Family Legend in Song*, LCS 106; and *Canada's Traditional Queen of Song*, LCS 107.

Joe Glazer's *Songs for Woodworkers* recorded for the International Woodworkers of America (1622 N. Lombard St., Portland, Oregon 97217), includes seven Canadian lumbering songs.

Tish Stubbs and Sam Richards, two British singers, have issued *Invitation to North America: The New World Seen Through English Folk Song*, Saydisc SDL 280 (The Barton, Ingleton Common, Badminton, Glos. GL9 1BX).