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**«LETTERS FROM THE OLD COUNTRY»:
EXPLORING AND DEFINING UKRAINIAN CANADIAN
VERNACULAR LETTER WRITING**

Ukrainian Canadians have exchanged letters with their overseas families and relatives for as long as they have been living in Canada. Despite this, scholars have little understanding of how this vernacular practice of modernity has been lived out by Ukrainian Canadians. This paper addresses the existing gap in scholarship with respect to the study of the immigrant letter and offers a general overview of the phenomenon of transnational letter writing in the Ukrainian Canadian context. Research presented here is based on the analysis of the archival collection of personal correspondences assembled at the Prairie Centre for the Study of the Ukrainian Heritage (PCUH) at St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan, Canada. The archive contains more than one thousand personal letters housed in several extended collections.

First, trained as an anthropologist and folklorist, I see this cultural phenomenon of transatlantic letter writing as a *vernacular* phenomenon steeped in folk tradition. Second, unlike other researchers who specifically focus on immigrant letters, I consider Ukrainian transnational letter writing as a long-lived vernacular practice sustained through generations. As an outcome, and this brings us to the third point, continued throughout the century, this letter writing practice experienced many phases in its development and acquired many features of a tradition of its own. Fourth, the phenomenon of letter-writing, though it is usually traced through individual letters, is best understood as a phenomenon, rooted in and sustained not only by *individual* agency but a *corporate* agency generated within the kinship networks.

Given this long-lived practice of letter writing, I identify three distinct phases of letter writing in the Ukrainian Canadian context in the 20th century. The earliest transatlantic exchanges unfolded in the immediate families. It is this kind of correspondence, labelled immigrant letters, that received much academic attention outside the Ukrainian studies and minimal attention within the Ukrainian studies as discussed earlier. I will refer to this *first phase* of letter writing as the *initial (transatlantic) correspondence*. With time passing and all kinds of changes taking place in the lives of the authors of the letters, correspondence, if continued, moved into its next phase. The writers, engaged in this *second phase* of letter writing, often were the same people who started corresponding with the overseas relatives in the first place. Yet, their social roles as family members (as children, siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts/uncles, and great aunts/uncles etc.), their expectations of kinship relations in the local and transatlantic context changed as well. Correspondence in this phase was carried out in a rather ritualized manner, with letters sent at intervals (a couple of letters per year) often as Christmas and Easter greetings (making letter writing itself even more ritually constructed). Letters became highly repetitive, formulaic, and contained, as a rule, minimum information about the local lifeworld. Maintained for years at such sparse intervals, this correspondence would dwindle with time, especially if the initial writers passed away. I refer to this second phase as *habitual (transatlantic) correspondence*. Since the 1980s, the writers who entered long-lived their families' transatlantic letter writing in this period, possessing little to no knowledge of each other, engaged in very different letter-writing projects, representing a new round in transnational correspondence I named as the *revival (transatlantic) correspondence*. Since this phase continues to unfold, the letters' unassuming nature prevents this phase of transatlantic letter writing from being easily recognized by the researchers as an important cultural practice of late modernity.