

By Lida Somchynsky

The Renaissance Man from Mundare

There is something enthralling about walking into an artist's home. How much will it reflect that individual's mysterious process of creativity—the scope and breadth of emotion that is displayed in their work? The home of artist Harvey Spak is on a quiet street in Mundare where he lives with his wife, Michelle, and their two dogs. When I enter their home, I am awestruck by Spak's many icons hanging on the walls of the entranceway and living room. His use of gold leaf in these vibrant images causes them to overflow with light and energy. This energy mirrors Spak's own exuberance and lively intelligence that have led him to explore various imaginative realms—filmmaking, iconography and more recently, poetry. Interwoven throughout is a tapestry of his Ukrainian prairie roots.

Born in Vegreville, Alberta, and raised as an Eastern Catholic Christian, Spak studied with the Oblates and considered becoming a missionary. Although he took a different path from that, Spak's faith has always been a strong influence. "I have the French Roman Catholic and the Byzantine Christian traditions which are the foundations of my faith," he says.

Spak was also a film buff and in 1968 set off for Montreal to enter a film program at Loyola College (now part of Concordia University). The program was run by Father Jack O'Brian, a Jesuit priest with a Ph.D. in communications, who hired people with hands-on experience in the film business.

With a degree in Communication Arts, Spak returned to Edmonton and became involved with Filmwest, a group that included filmmakers such as Tom Radford and Anne Wheeler. He completed a series of documentaries adding to that fine tradition developed through the National Film Board (Spak's movies such as

Woodmountain Poems, *Movie Showmen* and *Pamiat – Memory of Ancestors* can all be viewed on the current NFB website.)

Pamiat – Memory of Ancestors is a lyrical memoir depicting the time Spak spent in seminary studying with the Oblates.

Spak's favourite is *Woodmountain Poems*, depicting the haunting work of the Saskatchewan poet Andrew Suknaski. In the poems, we visit the poet at his near disappearing village of Wood Mountain in south central Saskatchewan. The vast loneliness of the plains acts as an unwavering witness to the interwoven stories of Aboriginal people and Ukrainian settlers.

Spak also made a series of TV dramas, working with Atlantis Films—a prestigious production company that helped to bring recognition to many Canadian short stories via the screen. Among these is Spak's rendition of 'A Sick Call' by our well-known short story writer Morley Callaghan.

Late Night Calls

A young woman
stands on the shore
of a great lake.
A voice says:
"Strike out for the deep."
The woman hesitates
I see her face.
It's my mother
at the age of 20.
a phone rings
and wakes me.
It's the doctor on call.
She tells me
my 93 year old mother's bleeding.
She's had a transfusion.
She's sleeping,
but she'll never survive surgery.
I drift off
and see
my young mother
with bold strokes
making for
the deep of the lake.

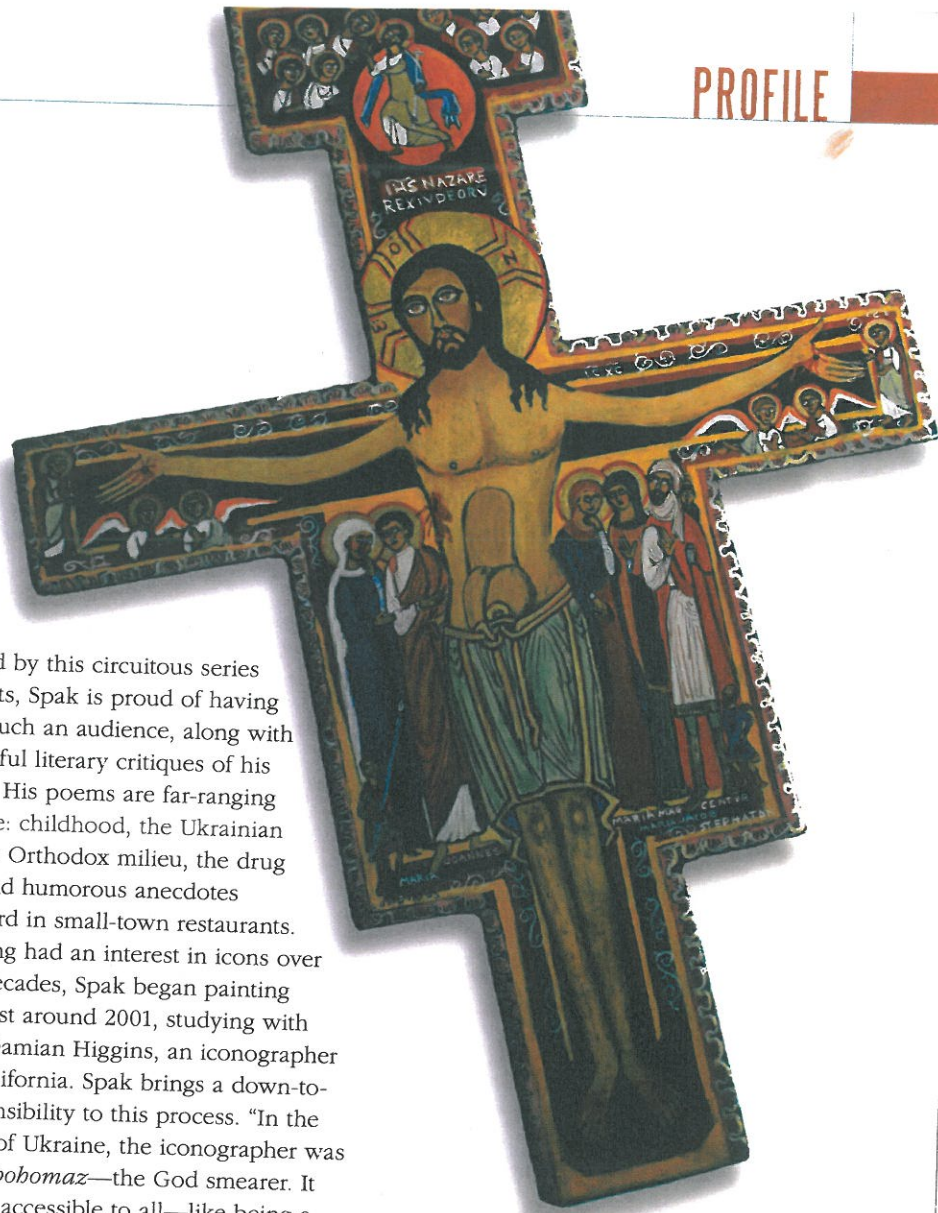
H.Spak

Harvey holding an icon he created of Father Lacombe

PHOTO: PAMELA SHAPKA

After forty years of filmmaking, Spak began exploring other artistic pursuits; yet his cinematic fascination continues. “Recently I bought a drone that runs a Go-pro camera, and I want to do a series of aerial images of churches in the area... I see it as a visual poem. I have also shot photographs of ancient churches in the Pyrenees, west of Toulouse in France—a country I especially adore.”

Spak’s interest in poetry goes as far back as his filmmaking endeavours but it is only in the last year that his poetry has become available to the public. “Basically I write for myself,” he says. “I started during the making of the Suknaski film. Recently, a retired South African doctor, now living in Moose Jaw, solicited my work for an on-line South African publication. And he is also a lover of Suknaski’s poetry.”



Amazed by this circuitous series of events, Spak is proud of having found such an audience, along with thoughtful literary critiques of his oeuvre. His poems are far-ranging in scope: childhood, the Ukrainian Catholic Orthodox milieu, the drug trade and humorous anecdotes overheard in small-town restaurants.

Having had an interest in icons over many decades, Spak began painting in earnest around 2001, studying with Father Damian Higgins, an iconographer from California. Spak brings a down-to-earth sensibility to this process. “In the villages of Ukraine, the iconographer was called *abobomaz*—the God smearer. It is a skill accessible to all—like being a blacksmith; and what that implies is that anybody can become an iconographer. In fact, Father Damian prefers people who have no artistic background to take his workshops. Iconography is a different way of looking at things.”

Spak goes on in his inimitable down-to-earth manner, “I once visited a workshop taught by Frank Turner, an iconographer from Vancouver who said, ‘Okay, now take out your vodka. And if you haven’t got vodka, you can use rye, scotch or gin. It enables you to dissolve the pigment and it works like a damn.’” Later, in a pensive moment, Spak reflects on his on-going artistic practice. “And so you are using everything from God’s creation—animal, vegetable, mineral. The gold leaf symbolizes the light from the beginning of creation, the light of Christ. Gold is the symbol of the eternal. It never degrades.”

Spak’s icons are owned by members of the Ukrainian community, along with other lovers of sacred art, and continue to be purchased by many. Recently, Spak generously donated his icon ‘St. Michael Archangel of the Apocalypse’, a magnificent piece 12” by 16” in hues of burgundy and gold, as part of a fundraiser for the restoration of St. Paraskavia Ukrainian Catholic Church, located in the Cossack township in east central Alberta.

Spak’s Christian belief has given him a bedrock of faith and the joy of exploration. It is his parting words that resonate with me, “An iconographer must constantly return to Holy Scripture and the Gospels to rediscover the beauty, the drama and the constant surprises of the divinity of Christ, of God Who became man and showed us the beauty of His Face.”

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www.stjohnsinstitute.com
info@stjohnsinstitute.com
(780) 439-2320
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