

## Farm Boy Paints the Town

[KURELEK FINDS SUCCESS IN TORONTO]

*In the myth, the immigrant lands, works hard at low wages, lives poorly (but better than he did in the old country) and dreams. His dreams come true, if not for him for his children.*

*The myth is easily romanticized; we like to think our fathers' or our grandfathers' or our great-grandfathers' lack of conveniences, frozen foods and fancy clothes was balanced by warm family ties, a rich ethnic culture, wholesome labour and a housewife who could convert cabbages into dishes fit for kings. It was seldom that pleasant.*

*The Ukrainians came to the Prairie Provinces in the early years of the century in great streams and they were and remain distinctive in culture, language and religion. They were also typical of those immigrants who had to grapple with a strange new language as well as a strange new world.*

*William Kurelek is today a celebrated Canadian painter, but his road to success was always difficult and often overwhelming. He began on his immigrant father's farm in Alberta and advanced painfully through public schools, hard manual work, the university, loneliness, random travel and a period in a mental institution. He arrived in time at Toronto where he is today, a remarkably balanced and intensely religious man. We offer some excerpts from his autobiography, *Someone With Me*, published by the Center for Improvement of Undergraduate Education at Cornell University, and pictures from his *Oh Toronto*, recently published by New Press, Toronto.*

"I was born on the third day of the third month in 1927 on a farm near Whitford, which is 75 miles northeast of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. My father, Metro Kurelek, had emigrated to Canada as a young man from the village of Boriwtsi in the Province of Bukovina in the Ukraine. My mother was born in Canada, but her parents had also come from Boriwtsi. My father's early life was hard and uncertain despite his own father's being a fairly prosperous village farmer. Bukovina was then part of the powder keg collection of nations which spawned the First World War. Father's education was abruptly cut short in his third grade. The battle front between the Russian and the German and Austrian armies

passed several times over the village. . . .

" . . . my father arrived with a mere nine dollars in his pocket and a small wooden suitcase . . . an uncle was a storekeeper in Willingdon, Alberta. And a Mr. William Huculak, a prosperous farmer of Whitford, had given promise of employment so father could work off his passage. . . .

" . . . fortunately, considering his temperament, my father's first ten years or so of life in Canada were in the all-Ukrainian district around Willingdon. . . . My grandfather (that's my mother's father) was the original pioneer of the District. When he came over as a boy with his father at the turn of the century the land was complete wilderness—bush patches, wild grass, migrant bands of Indians, mosquitoes, bears. . . .

" . . . It was typical of those hard-driving times that my father was immediately put to work. At 4 A.M. the next morning, he was already shovelling a wagon of grain. My earliest impression of grandfather was that of a bluff loud-voiced man who drove his own car and was something of a drinker. . . . He rubbed my father the wrong way almost at once. . . .

" . . . of the hardships of those very first years . . . I have only a kaleidoscopic collection of memories . . . I . . . wasn't even aware of having lived through the Depression until I read about it in school in my late teens. The big crash came, as everyone knows, in 1929, but it was a few more years before the plummeting of grain prices and bad crops finally forced my father to sell his Alberta farm and head for Manitoba to make another ambitious beginning.

" . . . In memory I see these old country women sitting around a table loaded with food. In the next room is a profusely decorated, beflowered open coffin surrounded by burning candles. Behind that, in the corner stands a giant gilded Byzantine cross reflecting the flicker of the candle flame. A similar picture I have of that time, almost like a woodcut printed in blacks, yellows and oranges, is of us arriving by wagon on a chilly spring evening for the Easter all-night vigil. In the Shandro churchyard are many large bonfires surrounded by scattered groups of men folk warming their hands and chatting. The women with their Easter baskets go right in. I stand with mother on the women's side of the