

# IN SEARCH OF COMMONALITY—

By Christopher Miller

I watched a weathered old man from my window. He took up an arm load of uniformly split firewood, stepped up onto a wooden bench, and carefully fitted each piece into a tight stack against the wall of his barn. When his wheelbarrow was empty, he disappeared for a while and returned with it full. I watched for forty minutes. I supposed he'd been at it since first light, perhaps two hours. The wall of firewood was thirty feet long and eight feet high.

Looking beyond him, I saw what I could not see when I arrived last night. These houses sat at the edge of a bottomland. Hills rose gently not far behind. Small houses, outbuildings, animals, and trees dotted the hills. The hills grew into short, rounded mountains. Low clouds covered the mountaintops and mist oozed between the hills into the valley.

Hearing a call, I descended the steep steps into an unheated kitchen. A breakfast of hot coffee, cold potatoes, cheese-filled pancakes, bread, and sausage waited for me. As I ate, I remembered the previous night when my host's father showed me his "moonshine" still with a fresh batch dripping from the coil. I also thought ahead to our plans for today—visits to a weaver, a blacksmith, and a dulcimer maker.

It was all so familiar, as if I was in the hills of eastern Kentucky, but it was also quite alien. The cheese, made from sheep's milk, was called *bryndza*. The "moonshine" still produced a drink called *samohan*. The blacksmith put spiked winter shoes on real work horses. The weaver made heavy, colorful textiles called *Hutsul* blankets. The dulcimer was the hammered



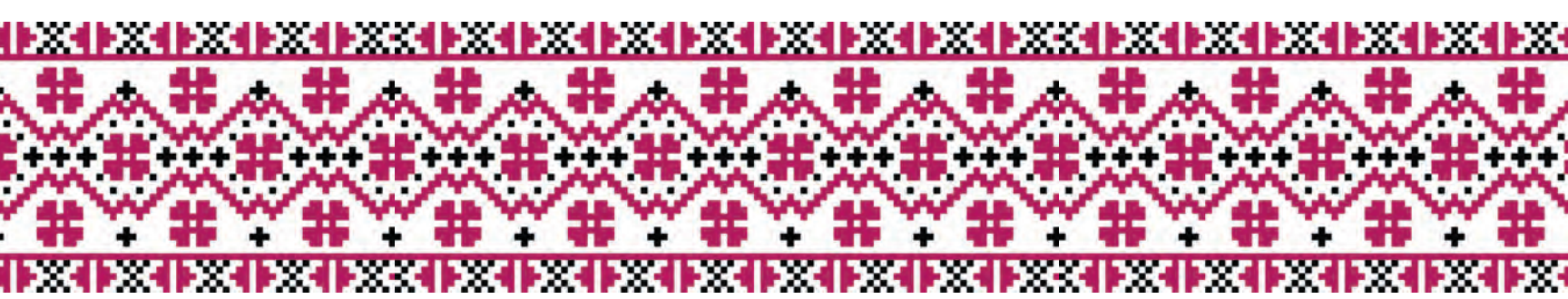
Putting up firewood for the winter in Kosmach.

Christopher Miller

The Village of Kosmach nestled in the Carpathian Mountains.



Christopher Miller



# A JOURNEY THROUGH UKRAINE



Okšana Poyasak

Visiting the home of a modern artist who is inspired by the old ways.

Colorful traditional embroidery at the *bryndza* cheese festival in the Rakhiv.



Christopher Miller

type, known here as a *tsimbala*. I was not in Appalachia. I was nearly seven thousand miles away in the village of Kosmach in the Carpathian Mountains of western Ukraine. It was early December and the beginning of my fourth month living in this place. Many times now, I had experienced the familiar and the alien blending in such a curious harmony. I had come to western Ukraine as a Fulbright Scholar for just such experiences.

## “How big is Ukraine?”

When lecturing in Ukraine, I asked my students, “How big is Ukraine compared to the United States?” I showed them a map with Ukraine nearly the same size as the U.S.A. They chuckled and said “no, no.” Next I showed Ukraine as a tiny speck. They shuffled nervously, perhaps fearing it was accurate. Finally, I showed Ukraine overlaid on the U.S.A. in its correct proportion, about the size of Texas. They relaxed. Then I returned to the map with Ukraine as a tiny speck. I told them that is how small Ukraine is in the minds of most Americans, “most Americans know very little about Ukraine.”

This was true of me for a very long time. As a child of the Cold War, I only knew “Ukraine” as a word somehow associated with the old Soviet Union. I could not even find it on a map. Then in 2006, Professor Donald Davis of Dalton State University brought Ukrainian visitors to Berea College. Davis, Precarpathian National University (PNU) Vice-President Yuri Moskalenko, and English teacher Roman Posnansky were touring Appalachia spreading a message: Carpathian Ukraine and American Appalachia are kindred places. I was intrigued. Later, in 2008, Moskalenko extended an invitation for a



delegation from Berea College to attend PNU's Mountain School Conference. Three of us from the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center went for ten days.

During that first trip to the Carpathians, three things happened for me. "Ukraine" went from being just a word to being a real place. For a practitioner of place-based pedagogy, this is not trivial. Ukraine became geography, history, cultures, foodways, and material culture. It became as real to me as Appalachia but still shrouded in mystery. Second, I built important relationships with people there. I left with a dozen Ukrainian friends and colleagues who were eager to collaborate. Finally, the framework from which I approached Appalachian Studies was permanently altered. There was something bigger going on that I did not yet understand. I wanted to go deeper.

### Bus Through the Mountains

The bus ride from Uzhorod to Ivano-Frankivsk took nine hours. It started on the edge of the Transylvanian plateau in a region the Ukrainians call Zakarpattya. The terrain was flat and dotted with small towns and villages. The fields were large. Every house had a grape arbor. Agriculture was dominant and there were a few signs of industry, some modern, some defunct. It reminded me of the Tennessee Valley. As we drove east, the plain became a long valley between mountain ridges and we began to climb. The bus, packed full of passengers when we started, slowly emptied as we stopped at villages along the way. It was Friday. Students and workers from the city were returning to their mountain homes for the weekend. On Sunday evening, the traffic would reverse. Then at each village a few people would board the bus to return to Uzhorod where there were three universities, many employers, and a border with the more prosperous European Union.

The road followed a river into the mountains through passes and narrow valleys. The villages, tucked between steep hillsides, became smaller. The bus stops were just worn spots on the side of the road. The driver knew who got off where. A typical mountain village consisted of a small cluster of homes, a



Teaching tourism students at the Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University.

Andriy Chervinsky

picturesque church, and a small store. Small subsistence farms dotted the mountainsides. Occasionally I saw an old log house in what I call a "dogtrot" layout with a central hall open on each end and rooms on both sides. Eventually we crossed the ridge and began our gradual descent to the foothills and plain on the other side, into the region the Ukrainians called Prykarpattya.

Again for me this world blended the alien and the familiar. Most houses were brick or colorfully painted stucco, many with tile roofs. Those few old dogtrot cabins shared a layout with their Appalachian cousins, but the climate here required the central hall to be closed and a large tile-covered-masonry stove filled one-fourth of each room. The mountain homesteads and village homes had fruit trees, cabbages, potatoes, sheep, workhorses, and hogs. The sheep provided milk as well as wool. The milk became the highly celebrated *bryndza* cheese which, when combined with potatoes, made tasty dumplings called *veranyky*. The hogs provided a stunning variety of *kovbasa*, or sausage, and the Ukrainian national food, *salo*—cured strips of pure pork fat—sliced and eaten plain or on bread. The picturesque churches, Orthodox or Greek Catholic, had domes on the top, and were



The village Greek Catholic church in Kosmach, covered with stamped metal.

Christopher Miller

intricately decorated inside and out. The people of this place believed the house of God must be ornate and high. I once tried to explain to my Ukrainian friends that the religious people of Appalachia typically believed simplicity and asceticism were the means to draw close to God, but this was difficult for them to imagine.



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The familiar nestled among the exotic—western Ukrainian corn shuck dolls amidst color *pysanka* (Easter Eggs)

pottery, and farm tools. Over soup, salad, and pork, my friend and I talked about our recent trip to the mountains. The artifacts were from the mountains; the décor created a sense of place and evoked nostalgia. They suggested a place where people were clever and self-sufficient, where they loved to work with their hands and make beautiful things, where they passed on skills they had learned from their parents and grandparents. A few objects poked a little fun, suggesting maybe that mountain place was also a little backwards, a nice place to visit, with good food, but not where a modern person would want to live.

Once again I experienced the harmony of familiar and alien. This was not Cracker Barrel®; it was a *kolyba*, a popular style of western Ukrainian ethnic restaurant. The soup was wild mushrooms and herbs, the salad was beets and sour cream, and the pork, called *shashlyk*, was cooked on spits over a fire. The artifacts included elaborately embroidered shirts, dresses, and pillows that were nothing like what I had seen in Appalachia. To me they were exotic, but to my Ukrainian friends they were icons of an old spirit and wisdom preserved in mountain people. There was both a sense of hominess and a sense of otherness.

On the way out was a place to buy souvenirs. There I saw it. For sale was a small figurine. It was a kitschy figure of a mountain man, a *Hutsul*; you could tell by his clothing. He clutched his bottle of *samohan* and looked a little inebriated. My four months in Ukraine was convincing me. The Appalachian experience is not unique. People are living a similar story in places around the world. The recipe for such a place is not yet fully described, but it is sure to include these ingredients: mountains, proud and resourceful inhabitants, resource rich lands, and interaction with a dominant outside culture that identifies it as a separate place.



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A traditional weaver in Kosmach making *Hutsul* carpets in her home. *Hutsul* is a Ukrainian word often used in the same context as we use Hillbilly.

this in books, taught it to students, and even put it on the wall of our gallery, but I needed to see it for myself. Is Appalachia really an example of a larger phenomenon in which mountain peoples relate to the land, to each other, and to the societies around them? This is the question that sent me to Ukraine.

But I also knew that I had to be careful. Sometimes when things look alike, it is only a curious coincidence. Other times similarity alludes to deep connections or convergence to common solutions. The mountain landforms are similar, but the Appalachians are very old mountains and the Carpathians relatively young. People in both regions make and sell crafts using wool, clay, and wood. For both groups, highland isolation, limitations on economic opportunity, and the out-migration of the young are challenges. For both places, land development and resource extraction by outsiders create both opportunity and problems. Are these similarities enough to establish a pattern?

### Harmony Between the Familiar and the Alien

Back in the city we ate at a restaurant with artifacts covering the walls—old clothing, a spinning wheel, flax combs,

### “Everybody’s Got One.”

On the wall of the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center we have a quotation by Jerry Williamson: “Everybody’s got one.” He’s talking about places like Appalachia. He’s suggesting that underlying Appalachia is something deeper, something that appears in other places too. I had read

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