



## News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Tribute to Chester Kuc

20 February 2013—*The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies is deeply saddened by news of the death of Chester Myroslav Kuc, and wish to express our deepest sympathy to Luba Kuc and family. Please see the obituary written by our colleague, Professor Natalie Kononenko, on this amazing man, who contributed much to the cultural life of the Ukrainian and wider communities in Edmonton.*

Chester Myroslav Kuc was a lover of Ukrainian folk art. He was also a skilled and talented practitioner of many art forms. A dancer, a violin player, a pianist, a pysanka artist, an embroiderer, he was a man of tremendous energy who, in his own words, just could not sit still. Chester was also a man determined to share his love of the arts. He taught dance all over Edmonton and started two premier dance companies, first Shumka and later Cheremosh. He volunteered at Ukrainian events such as Heritage Days in Edmonton and the Pysanka Festival in Vegreville. Chester arranged exhibits of folk art, not just in Edmonton, but also in cities such as Vancouver and Saskatoon. He collected textiles and costumes and other art objects. The Royal Alberta Museum honoured him in 2006 with a show of the pysanky that he had produced. Self-deprecating and funny, Chester made this interviewer laugh many times.

Chester Kuc was born in Edmonton on April 15, 1931 to a Ukrainian-activist father and a Polish mother who named him Czeslaw, a name that the hospital staff misheard as Chester. Later, his godfather suggested choosing a more Ukrainian name and Chester acquired the name of Myroslav. Both names, as it turns out, proved most appropriate, for Chester was a man of honour, as Czeslaw indicates, and a man of peace, the root of the name Myroslav.

Chester quite literally grew up at UNO/UNF, the Ukrainian National Federation. This was and continues to be an organization that promotes Ukrainian culture both among people of Ukrainian heritage and to non-Ukrainians. While Chester was still a boy, UNF which had not had its own space, acquired a building that had apartments upstairs. Chester's father John, a dedicated UNF member, rented one of these apartments for himself and his family. This meant that Chester's exposure to Ukrainian oriented-life was constant and powerful. As a result, Chester acquired an excellent command of the Ukrainian language through the language classes held twice a week. He was also exposed to Vasyl Avramenko every time that this dance master came to town. Chester learned dance from Avramenko and performed on stage at age eight. In fact, this event left a particular impression on him. The time was 1939 and the event was a Shevchenko "concert." Chester's part was to appear in a dance duet and Luba, whom he knew from childhood and who would later become his wife, recited a Shevchenko poem. Chester participated in dance competitions as a child and remembers his childhood disappointment of placing second in Saskatoon.

As he grew older (he believes that it was right after the Second World War) Chester had the opportunity to go to a UNF-sponsored program in Winnipeg which attracted hundreds of students from across Canada and the United States. At this summer program, young people participated in singing and dancing. They watched movies of Soviet performing groups. The young participants often came back to their own communities as Ukrainian activists. Chester was such a young person. He attended the Winnipeg program for four years and, having been exposed to different approaches to dance, began to feel that Edmonton needed a change. He took ballet lessons himself and worked with others to bring new life and new choreography to the local dance scene. Working primarily out of UNF, he helped introduce dance styles that were more complex and demanded greater athleticism. They were just what the community needed. As Chester noted, prior to the changes, young people tended to get bored and to drop out of Ukrainian dance in their middle teens, at the age of 16 or 17. With the reforms in which Chester participated, attrition of teenagers stopped and being a dancer became a most coveted self-descriptor. Another thing that was important to Chester was a sense of exploration, of growth. Chester looked into the various regional styles of dance. He used these to explore the intricacy of Ukrainian dance and to make the Edmonton dance scene more varied, complicated, nuanced, and interesting. Chester shared his enthusiasm and his knowledge not only with the young people at UNF, but across Edmonton. Chester worked a full-time job as a court clerk, yet he still had the energy to go out almost nightly to teach dance at churches of both Ukrainian denominations and at other community organizations.

A major event in the development of Ukrainian dance in Edmonton came when Shumka broke out of the primarily Ukrainian performance venue and staged a show for the general public at the Jubilee Auditorium in 1959. Prior to this event, the pattern was to have children perform at their various religious establishments or at non-denominational, but still Ukrainian, venues such as UNF. With the help of his father, Chester arranged the performance at the Jubilee and helped make Ukrainian dance an entertainment form with mass appeal. The show at the Jubilee attracted a large audience and Shumka has held a fundraiser in that auditorium ever since. As of this writing, Shumka is a major company. It is not just a chance for parents and grandparents to see their little ones on stage. Shumka is a company of international stature which performs in Edmonton, across Canada, and internationally, with tours to Ukraine and China among its accomplishments.

Ever looking for new challenges and eager to explore dance forms characteristic of the various regions of Ukraine, Chester parted company with Shumka. But he did not stay away from dance for long. MUNO, the youth branch of the Ukrainian National Federation asked Chester to start another dance company for the many youth who wanted the challenge of serious performance and needed a venue through which they could achieve their goals. In 1969 Cheremosh was born and it too achieved national and international status, performing in England, Scotland, China, Bulgaria, Mexico, and, of course, Ukraine. In recognition of the enormous contribution that Chester made to Ukrainian dance, Cheremosh dedicated its board room to the Kucs in 2010.

Dance was not Chester's only means of musical expression. Encouraged by his parents, especially his father, he studied violin. He also studied piano, an instrument that was his own choice and allowed him to later serve as accompanist for his dance pupils. Although violin was not Chester's love, he did succeed as a player of this instrument and finished the conservatory in Toronto. Luba also studied violin. In fact, she was so talented that she won a scholarship to study in Vancouver. Her teacher wanted her to continue on to a career as a concert violinist.

She, however, decided that this was not the sort of life that she wanted. Luba returned to Edmonton and she and Chester married in 1960. The Kucs became the proud parents of two daughters, Larysa and Daria.

Chester had a keen eye, a love of craft, and a desire to explore. He wanted to learn how to write pysanky and saw a man make the wonderfully decorated eggs with a pen tipped with a metal nib. He acquired the technique and became a master at executing pysanka designs with exquisitely fine lines. As he learned about the use of a stylus, or kystka, in pysanka writing, he mastered that technique as well and became equally expert in the kystka decorating method. He shared his work through shows like the one at the Royal Alberta Museum already mentioned. As with dance, he was more than willing to teach technique to others. He ran demonstrations during the show at the Royal Alberta and conducted workshops at schools, churches, and, of course, UNF. When this writer had to bow out of a pre-Easter event at UNF last year because of time constraints and fatigue, it was Chester who took over and showed children how to write pysanky for several hours.

Both Chester and Luba loved embroidery and both were very good at it. Chester produced wall hangings, embroidered pictures, and a special accomplishment of his: tiny replicas of rushnyk, or ritual towel, designs done in petit point. These are miniatures of designs that would normally be done on a cloth several meters in length. As with pysanky, Chester saw a person working in petit point, became fascinated, and decided to learn the technique. He was able to do his tiny designs, using a single one of the six strands found in standard embroidery floss. He worked on his miniature embroideries until a few months before his death.

Chester's keen eye, combined with his curiosity, led to an outstanding collecting career. Chester was curious about all things Ukrainian and, with dance, with pysanky, with costume, he wanted to have a complete set of styles and forms. With dance, this was expressed through an interest in regional dance variations. With pysanky, this took the form of Chester trying to reproduce designs from every region of Ukraine. Starting in the 1980s, Chester and Luba travelled to Ukraine numerous times and Chester looked and learned. Helped by Luba who photographed museum collections, Chester tried to produce entire sets of designs for every region of Ukraine. Two and one half thousand of these were on display at the Royal Alberta Museum. Many were bought by smaller museums and some were donated to the Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore. Chester and Luba had an outstanding collection of woven wall hangings called kylymy and arranged a show of these for the public. They tried to collect costumes from all Ukrainian regions. Luba, as costume mistress for the dance companies that Chester founded, used the collected pieces to help design the outfits worn by the young performers. She also taught the dancers and their families how to make the costumes that they needed. The originals of the costumes that the Kucs collected became the basis of exhibits. Major shows, based largely on Chester and Luba's collecting work, were held in venues such as St. John's Cathedral. When this writer visited Chester approximately one month before his hospitalization, he proudly showed an embroidered dress that he had just acquired for St. John's. It was a dress with a different sort of embroidery design and Chester saw it as a way to help fill out the regional specifics of the collection he had built. Chester's generosity, coupled with his curiosity, characterized his life even in ill health.

My visit in January was my last visit. I had interviewed Chester several times in the summer of 2012. We had talked about his life and about dance. We had talked pysanky and embroidery. I

planned to have our next interview cover Chester's work as a collector. Unfortunately, that interview never took place. Shortly after our visit Chester was hospitalized. He passed away on February 16, 2013.

Natalie Kononenko  
Kule Chair of Ukrainian Ethnography  
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**Photo (by Nick Howe for ACUA):** Chester Kuc.

The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS) is a leading centre of Ukrainian studies outside Ukraine that conducts research and scholarship in Ukrainian and Ukrainian-Canadian studies. If you would like more information on the Institute, please visit our website at [www.cius.ca](http://www.cius.ca) or contact Dr. Bohdan Klid at (780) 492-2972; [cius@ualberta.ca](mailto:cius@ualberta.ca).

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