

A trip 'home' to Ukraine — a place he'd never been

by **Bob Mitchell**
Special to the Beaver

As he stared at the photos of the people killed in the uprising, Oakville resident Jason Woycheshyn couldn't help but think that had his ancestors not immigrated to Canada from the Ukraine, his face might be on the wall.

"They're known as the Heavenly 100 and there were photos and monuments to the individuals, (who were killed by snipers on Feb. 20 in Independence Square in Kiev) and one of the photos looked remarkably like my high school photo," Woycheshyn said.

"That really hit home in the sense that if my ancestors don't immigrate to Canada a hundred years earlier, then that could be have been me fighting for the same things they were fighting for."

The 36-year-old Toronto lawyer was one of 3,000 international observers, including about 500 Canadians, who went to the Ukraine to oversee the recent presidential election — an election that won't be official until June. 5.

Candy tycoon Petro Poroshenko, 48, earned the majority of votes in a first-round ballot amidst weeks of fighting in the eastern regions of the country where pro-Russian troops seized government buildings and battled government troops.

Although there was some trepidation about going, Woycheshyn felt an "obligation" to be on hand.

"For me, it was a sense of obligation to my ancestors, who left (between 1895-1905) and came to Canada for a better life," he said. "My life here is owed to the sacrifices they made."

"I also felt an obligation to my own children to do something to preserve Ukraine as a country with all its beauty, language and tradition. I wanted to do what I could do even though I was playing a relatively minor part."

In late April, there was a call within the Ukrainian community for individuals to volunteer as election observers.

For the Ukrainian World Congress, the organization Woycheshyn went with, it was a straightforward application that needed to be supported by a leader of a professional organization.

President of the Ukrainian Canadian Professional and Business Association of Toronto, and former Oakville resident, Taras Hetmanczuk, vouched for Woycheshyn.

The lawyer was then one of 236 observers from 23 countries representing the Ukrainian World Congress. The Canadian government, led by former Ontario Premier Mike Harris, also led a mission of 42 observers.

Woycheshyn grew up in Vegreville, an Alberta town where everybody, he said, was Ukrainian so he always felt a strong connection to his ancestral homeland. As a young boy, he heard about the struggles the country had endured from the First World War to the onset of Communism to the famine inflicted by Stalin, the Cold War and the Independence of 1991.

"As a child, I remember the celebrations and positive outlook that Ukrainians had that was followed by years of corruption leading to the armed revolution of 2004 that led to another 10 years of corruption until the uprising that was essentially driven by young people, who couldn't tolerate it anymore."

The protests began in November 2013 when President Vik-



Jason Woycheshyn

tor Yanukovych went back on a promise to join the European Union.

"That was a clear sign to me how Ukrainians wanted to rid themselves of that troubled past. Finally the country was unified enough to throw out a corrupt leader, only to have Russia annex part of the country and influence an insurgence in the eastern part of the country," Woycheshyn said.

After finishing their schooling, Woycheshyn and his wife Melanie moved east — from Alberta to Toronto to Oakville.

Melanie is a physiotherapist and used to work at SickKids before starting their family. The couple has two young children.

"So I wanted to do all that I could to make sure whatever happened, that the election reflected the true will of the Ukrainian people," said Woycheshyn.

He flew into the Ukraine on May 20. Even though he had never been there before, it felt like a homecoming. He had a special feeling. His hotel was right in the heart of where the uprising had started with barricades of tires and the encampment of thousands of Ukrainians just minutes away.

"The people didn't know who you were and more importantly what your allegiance was, but once they heard you speak Ukrai-

“It was a bit unsettling that first night. There was a sense of uncertainty. People were walking around in military fatigues with machine guns. There were burned-out buildings. There were tanks. I wouldn't say it felt like a war zone, but it was definitely a revolutionary zone. But at no time did I feel my security was threatened. I always felt safe, but you knew that things could change rapidly so you always had to be prepared. At the same time, it was very European. There were street vendors and people walking around with their children.”

Jason Woycheshyn
Oakville resident

nian they welcomed you with open arms," he said.

"You had the sense you were in an historic place at an historic time."

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After two days of training in Kiev, he travelled to a western province on the Slovakian border where he would observe the election.

"My wife was very nervous when I left so she was very happy that I had been deployed about as far away from the eastern troubles as I could have been," he said.

"My role was to make sure the election process was done in accordance with international standards and nothing nefarious occurred."

As an impartial observer, Woycheshyn said the fact that one candidate appears to have the majority with no run-off election needed indicates to him that the results reflect the will of the Ukrainian people. Poroshenko, running on a pro-European platform, garnered 59 per cent of the vote. His nearest rival earned just 12 per cent.

"It appears this is a leader they want to lead them through this important time, to weather the storm," he said.

Despite the results, thousands of people still remain in Independence Square.

"I don't think they will leave until they believe the new government won't follow the corruption of the past," he said.

Now back home in Oakville, Woycheshyn remains "cautiously optimistic" that one day soon he will be able to return to Ukraine with his wife and two young children.

"The country has so much promise," he said.

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