14 January 2008

A Celebration and Festschrift Honor Dr. Frank E. Sysyn

On Friday evening, November 2, 2007, seventy-five colleagues, friends, and relatives of Dr. Frank E. Sysyn gathered at Trinity College of the University of Toronto to mark his 60th birthday, celebrate his distinguished academic career, and announce the publication of a Festschrift in his honor. Dr. Sysyn is director of the Peter Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Research at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS), University of Alberta, Edmonton, and head of the CIUS office at the University of Toronto.

A native of Clifton, New Jersey, Dr. Sysyn began his scholarly career at Princeton University, where he completed a bachelor’s degree (Phi Beta Kappa, magna cum laude) at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs in 1968. He received a master’s degree in history from the University of London’s School of Slavonic Studies in 1969. He then came to Harvard University, at the time that Professor Omeljan Pritsak and the Ukrainian Studies Fund were working to establish Ukrainian Studies there. Soon he became deeply involved in that effort, both as a doctoral student in the Department of History and as an activist and fund-raiser for the project to establish three professorships—in history, language, and literature—as well as a research institute for Ukrainian Studies at Harvard University. In the decade that followed, he held a number of research fellowships abroad, in the United Kingdom, Poland, and the U.S.S.R., and completed his Harvard Ph.D. with a dissertation on the prominent seventeenth-century political figure Adam Kysil. Over the following years, he taught as an assistant professor and then associate professor of history at Harvard, administered the Ukrainian program of the Harvard Summer School, became associate editor of the journal Harvard Ukrainian Studies, continued his research projects in the U.S. and abroad, wrote numerous scholarly works, and served as associate director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

In 1989, Dr. Sysyn came to Canada to join the CIUS at the University of Alberta as director of the new Peter Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Research. At that post he founded and continues to administer a number of research and publications programs. He serves as editor-in-chief of the Centre’s major undertaking, the Hrushevsky Translation Project, which is producing a complete English version of Mykhailo Hrushevsky’s multivolume History of Ukraine-Rus’.

Dr. Sysyn also heads the CIUS office at the University of Toronto. He has continued his own scholarly work in Ukrainian Studies, particularly in the fields of early modern Cossack, political, and religious history, and has an extensive bibliography of publications. He has also found time to conduct courses in history at Stanford University and also Columbia University, where he will be teaching this coming spring.
The celebratory evening’s program opened with greetings by Dr. Zenon E. Kohut, director of CIUS, who spoke warmly of his long personal and professional friendship with the honoree and highlighted some of his most notable achievements. Professor Olga Andriewsky of Trent University spoke of Dr. Sysyn as her teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend, noting in particular his profound influence on her intellectual development as a scholar and historian. Uliana Pasicznyk, managing editor of the Harvard Translation Project, shared some experiences and perceptions in working with Dr. Sysyn on editorial projects over many years first at Harvard and then at the University of Toronto. Ms. Nadia Jacyk, head of the Jacyk Educational Foundation and daughter of philanthropist Peter Jacyk, spoke of the esteem in which her late father held Dr. Sysyn and her appreciation of his accomplishments as director of the scholarly centre Mr. Jacyk founded. Professor Serhii Plokhy, newly appointed Mykhailo Hrushevsky Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard, and previously associate director of the Jacyk Centre at the University of Alberta, spoke of meeting Dr. Sysyn at Harvard in the 1980s and his role in bringing him to Edmonton as a visiting scholar in 1991, expressing gratitude and great regard for Dr. Sysyn as a scholar and friend. Professor Plokhy went on to acknowledge and read greetings and congratulations sent to Dr. Sysyn from colleagues and scholarly organizations across North America, as well as from Ukraine, Poland, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Russia. Professor Andriewsky read a letter by John Sysyn sharing warm personal and family recollections about his older brother. Dr. Sysyn’s aunt, Mrs. Olga Zidowsky, greeted the gathering on behalf of members of the Sysyn family and spoke of her nephew’s devotion and importance to them; she also shared recollection of the family’s painful loss of Frank Sysyn, Sr. in the past year.

Professors Andriewsky and Plokhy then presented Dr. Sysyn with a manuscript of the Festschrift to be published in his honor. The project follows the European scholarly tradition of marking a sixtieth or other important birthday of an eminent scholar by producing a new work of scholarship in his honor and including it in a special collection, traditionally given a Latin title. Dr. Sysyn’s Festschrift, titled *Tentorium Honorum* after a panegyric addressed to Adam Kysil, contains thirty-three articles of historical scholarship written by his colleagues and students on a broad range of topics; the studies deal with Ukraine and other Eastern and Central European countries and encompass early history to modern times. Editors of the collection are professors Andriewsky, Plokhy, and Larry Wolff of New York University, another former student of Dr. Sysyn’s.

The evening continued with two more presentations by the honoree’s CIUS colleagues. Dr. Marko R. Stech, managing director of CIUS Press, expressed appreciation of Dr. Sysyn’s ethical standards and personal qualities and presented him with the institute’s gift of a painting symbolizing Ukrainian Christianity throughout history, by the eminent Ukrainian artist Feodosii Humenuik. On a light-hearted note, Andrij Makuch, editor and Ukrainian Canadian specialist, bestowed an ornamental yet weighty *bulava* (Cossack hetman’s mace) on the honoree, in recognition of his special expertise in Ukrainian Cossack history and commanding leadership in the field of Ukrainian Studies.

Dr. Sysyn himself concluded the program. He thanked those present for gathering in his honor, and expressed particular gratitude to the program’s organizers and speakers. He shared how childhood experiences, especially the influence of his paternal grandparents, sparked his interest in Ukraine and its history, and how
that interest developed during his student years. He spoke of the scholars who were his mentors, particularly Professors Pritsak and Ihor Ševčenko of Harvard, and his good fortune in having challenging students and talented and dedicated colleagues. He voiced his belief in the future of Ukrainian studies and the need for scholarship in the field to continue to develop both in Ukraine and beyond its borders. He expressed gratitude for the love and support of his family and thanked his aunt and his mother, Mrs. Hattie Sysyn, for coming to Toronto to be present. He noted the important career advice once given him by his father and expressed sadness at his absence from this special occasion.

Throughout the evening the gathering was entertained by a slide show of photos depicting events in Dr. Sysyn’s life, created by Marta Baziuk and Professor Taras Koznarsky of the University of Toronto. A special guest was Dr. Sysyn’s godson, first-grader Tymish Koznarsky.

Dr. Sysyn’s Festschrift will appear as a special issue of the *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* published by CIUS Press. Anyone wishing to join in congratulating the honoree may make a contribution toward publishing costs and add their names to the “Tabula Gratulatoria” that will appear in the publication. Donations should be sent to Roman Senkus, Director of the CIUS Publications Program, University of Toronto, 256 McCaul Street, Room 308, Toronto M5T 1W5 Canada.