
Not A White-Bread Childhood

Chrystia Freeland's Alberta roots

By MYRNA KOSTASH



TORONTO FREELANCE portrait photographer Markian Lozowchuk (disclosure: his mother and I are second cousins) has photographed Justin Trudeau for *Toronto Life* and Margaret Atwood for *Maclean's*, but his editorial shoot of Chrystia Freeland for *Toronto Life* in 2017, including the cover, was “the most memorable shoot I’ve done.” Even three years later, the pleasure of the day he spent with Freeland in her Toronto home is still apparent in his voice.

After scouting locations in the kitchen, living room, backyard (“you never go into the bedrooms”), in the end “we shot her at her table, and while we were working, she was on three

phones, one with Brazil, another with the UK, and texting. Her ‘workspace’ is at a corner of her kitchen table.” (In 2017–2018 Freeland, as minister of foreign affairs, was leading Canada’s renegotiation of NAFTA.)

Freeland’s older daughter, Natalka, had let Markian into the “nondescript” townhouse. He noticed Ukrainian paintings on the wall, Ukrainian sheet music open on the piano. “I hit it off with Natalka, whose Ukrainian language is impeccable. We knew the same folk songs. ‘Oh, you’re Ukrainian! Mum will love this.’”

For a previous article Freeland had listed a Ukrainian alphabet book as one of the “10 things she can’t live without.” “My kids are four, nine and 12,” she’d said. “They’ve all read this book. I’m Ukrainian Canadian, and I speak only Ukrainian with my children. If they ask me for anything in English, they know they won’t get it. My husband, Graham, is picking up the language, too: he’s had 12 years to practise.”

On this day the *Toronto Life* stylist had found Canadian-designed clothes for the shoot, but Freeland was adamant about wearing her own clothes. “I’m not going to apologize for the stain on my dress. I have three kids.” Markian: “So we ended up with her own outfit for the cover, her red dress, in which she’s so comfortable, and the stylist just had to make sure it was smoothed out.” “I’ll play along for your cover,” Freeland conceded, and submitted to light makeup.

The shoot completed, Markian joined Freeland at that kitchen table, “talking about growing up in the west, our respective times in NYC and what drew us back to Canada, why politics? And the possibility we are distantly related through one of her aunts.”

I asked how a decision is made, among all the photos he takes, for a cover. Once his job is done the magazine’s editorial team takes over, but “usually the best image speaks for itself.” And this turned out to be the case with Freeland’s image on the November 2017 cover of *Toronto Life*. It was Markian’s choice too (and was the source image for a painting now hanging in Rhodes House in Oxford, England). “It truly captures her stature and shows her larger than life force. She is a spitfire, and I feel I captured the essence of her drive and outlook. She’s stately but not arrogant, elegant but not overly glamorous, open in expression, yet firm and grounded in stature.”

SUDDENLY, FROM THE FLAT LANDS of the *grande prairie* you drop into the blue-green shimmer of the valley of the Peace and into the town nestled at the foot of rolling bluffs of the riverbank, strung out along the waterway on its way to the Arctic. In 1977 I was on assignment for *Chatelaine*, shortly after the victory of the separatist Parti Québécois in Quebec. The Rest of Canada was having a fit, and my assignment was to meet with “ordinary Canadians” to find out why. First stop: Peace River, Alberta, to interview Don and Halyna Freeland.

I’d known both of them, before their marriage, as undergrads at the University of Alberta. What better way to get reacquainted than to visit? They agreed to meet. In the photo in the Freeland home taken by *Chatelaine*’s photographer, everyone is on the living room carpet including their two girls, “Natalie, 6, and Christie, 9,” tucked under Don’s arms.

Although himself a Liberal, Don called the defeated Bourassa (Liberal) government “rotten corrupt” and the surprise would have been its re-election. “I’m not like the prime minister [Pierre Trudeau], who says, quote unquote, that [Quebec’s separation] would be a crime against humanity. There have been many crimes against humanity, but Quebec seceding is not such a crime.”

Don Freeland doesn’t speak French and has no interest in learning it. Married to a Ukrainian-Canadian—Halyna Chomiak Freeland—he’s more interested in his daughters growing up as bilingual Ukrainian-English speakers. Halyna speaks only Ukrainian to the girls and Don isn’t fussed. “We’re a long, long way from Montreal. I’ve been to Montreal and it felt like a foreign country. But I feel at home in Billings, Montana.”

Home is Peace River, where Don and Halyna share a law practice as well as a farm half a mile from his grandfather’s homestead, 1,800 acres, half of it in feed grains, the other in hay for their Hereford cattle. His grandfather had come up from the US and farmed in the valley—according to a relative, “the Freelands had all their land in the valley, fantastic land, not up on the bank”—which Don’s father, Wilbur, inherited, then expanded. “It’s been my home all my life,” said Don.

In the story of the Chomiak-Freelands, it is the Freelands, not the Ukrainians, who are the settlers. Chrystia Freeland said as much in 2012 in *The Atlantic*: “We buried my grandfather last spring. He had died in his sleep in his own bed at 95, so, as funerals go, it wasn’t a grim occasion. But it was a historic one for our small rural community. My great-grandparents were early settlers, arriving in 1913 and farming the land throughout their lives. My grandfather continued that tradition, and now rests next to them on a hillside overlooking the family homestead.”

When we were all still undergrads, and Halyna and Don were in arts pre-law and law respectively, Don liked to hang out with the Left on campus—that would be the New Democratic Youth, where Halyna was active. Halyna’s sister and Chrystia’s aunt, Chrystia Chomiak, remembers the old NDY house next to Tuck Shop with portraits of Karl Marx and Taras Shevchenko on the walls: “Excellent parties!” As soon as they had their degrees, Don and Halyna married in the Chomiak family church in Edmonton, St. George

“The first time I met Chrystia, she looked just like her mother –a fierce ball of energy!”

Anne McClellan



A photo of Chrystia Freeland (above) shot by Markian Lozowchuk for Toronto Life’s November 2017 cover inspired a painting of Freeland (right) by Leslie Watts, for Oxford, UK’s, Rhodes House.



Ukrainian-Catholic, and moved to Peace River. Their law firm did mostly commercial and civil litigation, although, as Don said in 1977, “In a small community you have to do pretty near everything that comes in the door.” Halyna, however, did only criminal and civil law while also setting up a daycare in town and travelling to clients in smaller communities, an experience that would later feed her legal and social activism as a feminist lawyer. While Don ran once for the provincial Liberals, Halyna ran twice for the federal NDP.

Halyna’s mother, Alexandra Chomiak, arrived from time to time from Edmonton to babysit Chrystia (b. 1968, christened Christina Alexandra) and Natalie (b. 1971); Alexandra would do the same when the Freeland family came to Edmonton on weekends and dropped the kids off with Baba and Dido. Halyna’s sisters, including aunt Chrystia Chomiak, were also frequent visitors.

Chrystia Freeland recalled her childhood, as told by Linda Diebel of the *Toronto Star* in 2015: “Memories from Alberta’s Peace River country make Freeland’s heart soar. ‘I had a wonderful childhood. It was magical...’ He loved the Peace River so much,” she says of [grandfather] John Wilbur Freeland. His father was John, so he became Wilbur—wartime flyer, rodeo bronc rider, boxer under the name ‘Pretty Boy Freeland,’ lawyer and farmer.... He put her and her only sibling, Natalka, on a big brown mare named Princess when they could barely hang on. And when she was 12 and Natalka 10, he gave them horses for Christmas.”

In 2012, when then-journalist Freeland was still writing for American audiences from her perch in New York City, she took up the subject of “the family farm,” to refute the usual lamentations about “the good old days in rural areas, the family farm’s decline, and the inevitable loss of the homestead,” and pronounced the regret “obsolete.” Case in point: her father’s operation in Peace River, the third generation on the land but “bigger and more prosperous than ever.”

Don Freeland not only had his own 3,200 acres [1295 ha] under cultivation, he rented another 2,400 acres [971 ha], “all told, a territory seven times the size of Central Park.” The article lists the tonnes of wheat, canola and barley and litres of vegetable oil that he reaps from the land, with the help of two hired hands—two!—and others at seeding and harvesting.

“I remember,” she later told the *Toronto Star*, “coming home from working in the fields with my grandfather one day in the summer, and he stopped and said to me: ‘You know, what I love most about the farm is that every field has a different view and every one is beautiful.’”

IN 1978 DON AND HALYNA FREELAND divorced, and Halyna moved with the two girls back to Edmonton. (Chrystia entered Grade 4.) It was a swift and deep immersion into an urban activist community, Ukrainian-Canadian, leftist and feminist, a life under the tutelage of Halyna and her extended family and her political sisterhood. As Halyna’s obituary (2007) summarized, “She was a lawyer, activist, teacher, community organizer, bookstore founder, co-operative housing pioneer, politician, student and

international legal reformer; she was a single mother, an art collector, a gourmet cook and a voracious reader.”

Halyna’s parents, Mykhailo and Alexandra Chomiak (Chrystia’s maternal grandparents), had left western Ukraine in 1939 and by 1945 were in a refugee camp in Germany, where Halyna was born in 1946. In 1948 the family immigrated to Canada, grateful to be safe. “They never dared to go back” to Ukraine, but, as Chrystia wrote in a 2015 essay “My Ukraine, and Putin’s Big Lie,” “for the rest of my grandparents’ lives, they saw themselves as political exiles with a responsibility to keep alive the idea of an independent Ukraine.”

“‘You don’t judge people by their economic means’ was Halyna’s basic principle.”

Chrystia Chomiak, on Freeland’s mother

Chrystia Chomiak tells me that Mykhailo and Alexandra learned some English in the displaced persons camps; once the family had settled into a house in Jasper Place (a community not yet incorporated into Edmonton), “Mum learned [English] from the ads in the *Edmonton Journal*.” It was already a multilingual household, with Alexandra and Mykhailo speaking Ukrainian and Russian interchangeably with Polish, but without English Mykhailo could not practise journalism nor go back to law school and instead worked “for years” as a lab assistant. Two more children were born in Canada and the family of eight somehow fit into a one-bedroom bungalow on a double lot in Jasper Place, where Alexandra cultivated a “massive” garden (“Mum could ‘speak’ to the plants”) and did a prodigious amount of canning. “Our family was poor,” Chrystia Chomiak recalls, almost wistfully. “But houses were cheap—we had electricity, an outhouse, but no running water until 1953,” when indoor plumbing was installed and a second bedroom was added. “At the store we bought salt, sugar, flour, tea and prepared meats. Credit was not always extended. We collected bottles on the way home from school. We got our clothes at the ‘Canadian’ (Protestant) churches for everyday clothes. But we each had one very good outfit from Holt Renfrew and Johnston Walker. Of course we never afforded a car.”

THIS WAS NEVER A WHITE BREAD FAMILY, literally as well as figuratively: no white bread allowed on the Christmas table in the Chomiak household. Rye bread was *de rigueur* and always provoked a discussion when they visited Vienna Bakery: sour or not, light or dark? But “milk and cream all the time. We were a potato family, in every style.” This explains, perhaps, Chrystia Freeland’s acquisition of poutine as her favourite fast food.

A friend remembers how a social conscience is bred: “During Halyna’s funeral, Chrystia [Freeland] described how their mother would use family domestic events as teachable

moments to get across basic political concepts. One time, when they made their usual Saturday morning stop at Vienna Bakery, Halyna decided it was time to teach the girls about the unfairness of majority rule versus proportional representation, pointing out that under a majority system, Nataalka, who didn't like the rye bread that Halyna and Chrystia favoured, would never get to choose the bread she preferred. Not fair!"

Until Jasper Place amalgamated with Edmonton in 1964, the "border" was at 149th Street and the end of the trolley line. Chrystia Chomiak admits she and her siblings grew up among "lots of very poor and dysfunctional neighbours, the generational poor. Junk and mean dogs in their yards. People were mean—throwing rocks at the windows of the house of the Black family." Nevertheless, the Chomiaks understood that "our family was very much more educated than our neighbours," with all the attendant intellectual and cultural advantages that sent them off, one after the other, to university. "I love Jasper Place," says Chrystia Chomiak, "not Edmonton."

Still, the girls did wish their mum would make Rice Krispie squares instead of Viennese tortes for Halloween at school.

Carless, the Chomiak family made the trek into Edmonton on Sundays to St. George Ukrainian-Catholic church. As parents they were not particularly "pious." According to Chrystia Chomiak, the family kept the religious traditions such as the main feast days and fasts. But Mykhailo and Alexandra as grandparents continued to have a strong influence on the granddaughters, who had to have a religious education, end of discussion. Dido Mykhailo would pick up Chrystia and Nataalka and the three of them would walk over to St. George's "because his 'atheist daughter,' the socialist Halyna, wouldn't take them." When the granddaughters stayed with Baba Alexandra in Jasper Place, they would go with her to the Orthodox cathedral, to be with her own Orthodox people. And this, Chrystia Chomiak agrees, was the extent of her nieces' "churching" in Edmonton.

In January 2020, Edward Luce, *The Financial Times's* US national editor, came to Edmonton to have lunch with his former boss, Chrystia Freeland, who was visiting family. They met at Bistro Praha. (Many of us took grave offence at New Yorker Luce's description of this beloved eatery as "somewhat faded.") On Freeland's recommendation, Luce ate prodigiously: "Since Freeland, 51, has frequented this place for 40 years, we



Freeland's maternal grandparents, Mykhailo and Alexandra Chomiak, with their children in 1952. Chrystia's mother, Halyna, is second from left.

Bottom: Halyna with daughter, Chrystia, Peace River, 1970.



Parents Halyna and Donald, with daughters Natalka and Chrystia.

Below: Halyna, Natalka and Chrystia dressed for a wedding, 1978.



agree that she will order for me. ...‘You must try the Prague egg—it’s one of the bistro’s specialties,’ she says ...At this point my main course lands with a thud. It includes serried ranks of Hungarian sausages, a mountain of sauerkraut and foothills of Ukrainian dumplings.” Freeland, however, is fasting: She’s home for the holidays, it’s Ukrainian Christmas Eve, and the rule is you cannot eat before evening, the Holy Supper. “I’m going to cheat,” she says, and orders a cappuccino.

CHRYSTIA CHOMIAK TELLS ME that “the whole family in Edmonton was involved in *Plast*.” This scouting association is essentially a post-Second World War transplant from western Ukraine, where it had been founded in 1911. Vera Pastuszenko Krawec, whose parents had signed her up in Edmonton at age 6, concurs that “we were mainly first-generation children of immigrants. *Plast* was close to the original Baden-Powell model, and still very Christian. Everything starts and ends with a prayer.”

I form a picture of Chrystia Freeland, *plastunka* extraordinaire, who was in summer camps with Krawec. Krawec lists the attractions: “Adventure, companionship, social and survival skills, camping in the woods, roughing it in tents: heck, yes. Ages 6–10 stayed in cabins on Lake Wabamun, but age 12 and over roughed it in tents on the ground. Dug our own latrines, built fencing and benches, learned to forage for food, make meals, tie knots. We turned out as super-capable people; you’d want one of us on a plane if it crashes.” This was particularly true of *plastuny* from Edmonton. Those from Ontario were “super-soft.”

Uniforms were *de rigueur*—boys in pants or shorts, girls in skirts—and festooned with merit badges, “not easy to earn,” as *plastuny* moved up the ranks of achievements in astronomy, bike-riding, gun safety at a shooting range, embroidery, rock-climbing. “Duties and leadership abilities were non-gendered. That’s why I loved it so much. What a glorious organization!” No English speech allowed. Lots and lots of singing of traditional and patriotic Ukrainian songs.

Chrystia Freeland wasn’t in Krawec’s cohort and wasn’t always at the weekly Saturday meetings, but she was always at summer camp. “Her dad would show up at the camp, but because he wasn’t one of ‘us’ [not Ukrainian] and because her parents were divorced, she was a bit of a curiosity. Nobody was divorced in the Ukrainian community in those days.”

Krawec isn’t surprised Chrystia has made such a mark for herself. “She was tiny and very cute and you could tell she was smart. Her Ukrainian

BOTTOM: CHRYSTIA CHOMIAK

language was impeccable. If she hadn't been a 'drop-in,' she would have been a leader. I don't remember her not being good at anything—perhaps not so athletic. Kitchen duties required lots of skills, but I remember she couldn't have the cookies at dinner because she wasn't allowed sugar."

IN APRIL 1983 *CHATELAINE* PUBLISHED "Sisters: The Unbreakable Bond," by Myrna Kostash. Chrystia Freeland is 14, Natalie, 12. Growing up in Edmonton, they like to do things together: go to music lessons, take holidays, cook a meal, and talk, talk, talk when the lights are out and they're in bed. They admire each other's accomplishments without a trace of jealousy (Chrystia: "Nat's always been more artistic and creative." Natalie: "You put your creativity more into writing.") and complain about each other with amazing good nature.

Chrystia: "We share a bedroom, and sometimes I think she's a real slob." Natalie: "Sharing a bedroom has been the worst experience of my whole life." Chrystia: "Nobody babies me the way they baby Nat." Yes, but. Natalie: "On Awards Night, if she gets the Gold Medal and I only get a Silver, that's yucky. I want to show everybody I'm as smart as she is."

By 1983 I had become a member of an impressively large fan club in Edmonton (and well beyond) of Halyna Freeland and had spent considerable time in her home in the inner-city and Ukrainian Norwood neighbourhood, where she settled with her daughters in 1979. She had set up a law practice with a social conscience formed from her childhood: "In her legal practice," Halyna's sister Chrystia reflects, "people would come to her as one who would help poor people who couldn't always pay. 'You don't judge people by their economic means' was a basic principle."

A friend said: "Halyna had a tremendous influence on her daughters' political and social consciousness. Their dining room table was the centre of many feminist and political discussions, events and campaigns. It was undoubtedly the scene of the campaign that Halyna spearheaded in getting women's groups involved in an ultimately successful lobby to change the incredibly unfair matrimonial property laws in the 1970s."

This was the notorious *Murdoch v. Murdoch*, when Irene Murdoch, "a ranch wife from Nanton, Alta., left her home (and 25-year marriage) in 1968 with a broken jaw and collar bone," and claimed, on the basis of the economic input of her labour, half the family cattle ranch, a claim rejected at divorce court and all the way up to the Supreme Court in 1973, where it was rejected again (by an all-male bench). Speaking for the majority (4-1), Justice Martland found that the wife's labour was not beyond what was normally expected of a ranch wife. Up roar upon uproar.

"Chrystia would have been very young when this was all happening, but it illustrates the kind of household that she grew up in."

Halyna whirled on, and drew other women into her orbit. She was active in the Local Council of Women, Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) and International Women's Day. Halyna was a co-founder of Common Woman

Books—and raised her daughters as "voracious readers."

"Halyna was a force to be reckoned with, and you didn't cross her," Marie Gordon, a fellow lawyer and activist, remembers, still in awe. Of course the bookstore meetings were all run as collectives, a "revolutionary process, living our principles." You brought your babies into the store with you and there was a jolly jumper in a doorway. As well as feminist literature, the store sold cookbooks, music and magazines, and T-shirts emblazoned with words from the anarchist Emma Goldman. And daughter Chrystia was "part of the milieu."

Much later Freeland, in the running to be MP for University-Rosedale Toronto, answered a 2015 questionnaire by *Toronto Life*:

Who's your role model? "My late mother."

What do you want your tombstone to say? "'If I can't dance, I don't want your revolution.' This was one of my mother's favourite quotes. Emma Goldman spent some time living in our riding and died in Toronto."

"This attempt at communal living is understandably not her go-to when speaking about her upbringing."

Adam Radwanski

IN 1982 PLANNING BEGAN FOR HROMADA, a "Ukrainian, socialist and feminist" housing co-op in Old Strathcona. Halyna said, "One of my dreams has been that people who are not related can live together as a family."

We met at the Freeland (mother and daughters) home, always at a large oval dining table laden with potluck contributions while Halyna presided as our host and lawyer. As with the bookstore collective, our decisions were made—at Halyna's insistence—only after consensus had been achieved in an interminable "round robin" of opinions and arguments. No winners or losers, no majority vs. minority views.

One founding member I'll call "Nadia" remembers that, at one of the meetings as we ate and argued and drank and smoked like chimneys, Chrystia and Natalka came down the stairs and interrupted our proceedings to announce, "We've been thinking about how, since we are going to be living in this co-op too, we should have a say in the decisions you're making." This was respectfully discussed—and the consensus was, okay, but not until you're 16.

"Nadia" went on: "I liked the people socially—their warmth and generosity—but when I sat in on some Marxist readings I wondered what I'd got myself into." And there were "endless meetings," endless discussions with the architect, and "the fantasy! Sliding doors between units. A communal kitchen. A sauna..."

I moved in, end of 1984, and the sense of community had



Above: Sister Nataalka, mother Halyna and Chrystia, in Myrna Kostash's kitchen in Hromada co-op, circa 1986.

Below: Freeland and her children, Halyna, Nataalka and Ivan, circa 2016.



if anything deepened. I have the photos to prove it: women's vegetarian potlucks, birthday parties (Halyna and I shared the date), the visit of Sviatyi Mykola (St. Nicholas) on December 19, legendary "alternative," i.e., "feminist-socialist" *malankas*/New Year's Eve parties that required months of preparation. We hosted scholars from Ukraine, and Halyna planted an apple tree in the common area where the kiddies played.

What's not to love? Yet, on the few occasions when a journalist profiling or interviewing Chrystia Freeland mentions the (Ukrainian, socialist, feminist) housing co-op where "she spent a good chunk of her childhood," she is reticent. (In 1988 she left for Harvard to study Russian history and literature.) And she's in very few of my photos. "I don't know if this is still what it calls itself," *The Globe and Mail's* Adam Radwanski quotes her musing of the place. He adds: "This fledgling attempt at communal living in a corner of Edmonton...

is understandably not her go-to when speaking publicly about her upbringing.... And no, she has never been a socialist herself."

Chrystia Chomiak put it this way: "Both of her [Halyna's] daughters are very socially conscious, but for Chrystia her economic solutions differ even though she shared the goal with her mother of economic equality and security. Look at what supports were rolled out to deal with economic dislocations during COVID. Her lifestyle and values show this."

In 1988 Halyna Freeland ran for the federal NDP in Edmonton-Strathcona. To implement or not to implement the US-Canada Free Trade Agreement hammered out by Ronald Reagan and Brian Mulroney? The NDP were dead set against it, fearing US domination over all our made-in-Canada institutions.

So of course many of us *hromadnyky* worked on Halyna's campaign. We gathered under balloons and crepe paper streamers, sat in front of a giant TV screen to watch, hearts sinking, as primarily Ontario and Quebec voters gave Progressive Conservatives 169 seats in a 295-seat parliament. "The result fundamentally altered Canadian politics," Stephen Azzi writes. "In the words of historian Norman Hillmer, [the free trade deal] marked 'a final recognition of Canada's inevitable destiny as a North American nation.'"

The irony is stark: In 1988 Halyna Freeland's NDP opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement that three decades later was renegotiated by Chrystia Freeland, Liberal cabinet minister.

In the meantime, in 2008, Linda Duncan ran in and won Edmonton-Strathcona for the NDP, and it's been NDP ever since. Duncan, in retirement, says Freeland is "very approachable," and in the House their relationship was "always convivial."

Duncan was three times an election monitor in Ukraine and shares with Freeland inspiration from the 2014-2015 "Revolution of Dignity" on Independence Square in Kyiv: "Fascinating, because it gave a flavour of participatory democracy on the ground." In 2019 Duncan received an Executive Hetman award from the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, Alberta Provincial Council (UCC-APC). She's chuffed about it. "Liberals and Conservatives compete with each other as to who loves the Ukrainians more. I grew up in Alberta, where the prevailing attitude toward Ukrainians was as ignorant farmers. To visit Ukraine—what an eye-opener, all of it. What a beautiful country."

While Chrystia was at Harvard, Halyna left law practice and, with the declaration of independence of Ukraine in 1991, moved to Ukraine in 1992 to work for an NGO, the Ukrainian Legal Foundation.

She lived in Kyiv for the next 10 years, while Chrystia was up north in Moscow as bureau chief for the *Financial Times*, 1994–1998. Chrystia would visit Halyna in her mother’s Kyiv apartment, which she now owns with her sister.

At that point, both mother and daughter had long since moved on from Edmonton.

CHRYSTIA FREELAND’S CAREER in journalism and politics is much documented. She has written two widely acclaimed books, *Sale of the Century: The Inside Story of the Second Russian Revolution* and *Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super-Rich and the Fall of Everyone Else*. As a cabinet minister she has sometimes been called “The Minister of Everything.”

On November 25, 2019, as a newly minted Intergovernmental Affairs minister, Chrystia Freeland was in Edmonton for her first meeting in that role with Alberta premier Jason Kenney. Her visit coincided with that of former president of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko, and all three were guests at a banquet hosted by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. Orysia Boychuk, UCC-APC president, sat at the head table with them. I was curious what the atmosphere had been like, given the strained relations between the UCP and the Trudeau feds, and the noncommittal conclusion to Freeland’s and Kenney’s meeting earlier that day: “It was a good start,” Kenney told reporters.

“We didn’t know how it was going to play out,” Boychuk told me. “I mean, would Kenney even agree to attend if Freeland were there?” The UCC hoped there would be common ground between two people who had “passionately defended” Ukraine (Kenney while minister for Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism in Harper’s cabinet). In a word, said Boychuk, “It was beautiful!” Edmonton’s Ukrainian community has long admired Freeland from her days as a journalist, as someone of “depth and breadth, willing to advocate in any way for Ukraine. It was a very emotional evening.” Beyond just behaving well, respectful of and acknowledging their political differences, Freeland and Kenney bonded. Through the entirety of Poroshenko’s speech, Freeland, translating, never took her mouth away from Kenney’s ear. Boychuk: “It was sweet.”

I ask Anne McLellan, the ninth deputy prime minister of Canada, 2003–2006 (Freeland is the tenth—Harper didn’t appoint a deputy), and formerly my MP for Edmonton-Centre, if she thought the “political culture” had changed for women MPs since she was in office 1993 to 2006. Given that more women are in positions of power and influence and Justin Trudeau (b. 1971) and Chrystia Freeland (b. 1968) are of a generation brought up “in a time and place where you assume equality and inclusion,” then, yes. “You’d hear stories from women who were in office in 1984, 1988, when female washrooms were an issue and sexist comments weren’t always called out. But in 1993 my female cabinet colleagues and I were focused on doing our jobs.”

During her time in politics McLellan had “strong support” from the Ukrainian–Canadian community, which is how she came to know Halyna, who, on her visits back to Edmonton

from Ukraine, would gather with her network of women keen to hear reports of her legal activism in Kyiv. “The first time I met Chrystia,” Anne remembered, “I thought she looked just like her mother, a fierce ball of energy. That intensity is what sustained Halyna in Ukraine and now sustains Chrystia.”

When McLellan and I spoke, Freeland had recently been appointed Minister of Finance and the commentariat had expressed trepidation about her fitness for the job, vacated by a businessman, Bill Morneau. At the same time, much was made of her roots on an Alberta farm, and it was this that, “as Finance Minister... proves [Freeland’s] nothing like Morneau,” Andrew Willis argued in *The Globe and Mail*. She had been speaking (virtually) to a business crowd at the Toronto Global Forum, and set their minds at ease: “I am from rural northern Alberta,” she said; Canadians, like farmers, “dream big and spend big and can afford to do so.”

“I speak only Ukrainian with my children. If they ask for anything in English, they won’t get it.”

Chrystia Freeland

Farmers: this resonated for McLellan, who was born and raised on a dairy farm in Nova Scotia: “There is something ingrained in you if you’re born on a farm.” She has been in Alberta since 1980, while Freeland has been away, but the two women share “Alberta perspectives.” Specifically, she says, perspectives gained from families who work on the land, “always living with risk and how to mitigate it. As kids we understood risk—animals get sick!—and we could lose it all because of factors beyond our control. This makes you risk averse.”

But, McLellan emphasizes, there is an uplifting side—neighbourliness—and it makes you respectful of other people’s anxieties and ready to help out if there’s a crop failure. By the same token, there *is* such a thing as society, “and government matters to the quality of life, even of existence.”

In the acknowledgements at the end of *Plutocrats*, Freeland includes Anne McLellan in the “Maple Leaf community [that] has been central to my thinking.” Moving among international political and financial movers and shakers, what in the end does she espouse? “I sometimes describe my own political philosophy as being simply ‘Canadian.’”

From childhood, Chrystia Freeland shared a goal of economic equality and security with the various communities she grew up among. By her own account, that shared goal was already taking shape in “consciousness-raising meetings convened in a kitchen in Peace River.” ■

Based in Edmonton, Myrna Kostash writes literary and creative non-fiction and is the author of All of Baba’s Children.