

COAL PATCH DAYS

Family stories of Lemko immigrants around Minersville, Pa.

by Michael Buryk

PART I

Our patch changes

Our patch in Primrose, Pa., didn't look the same. It seemed a lot smaller and greener than the way I remembered it. Twenty years is a long time and places change. Even in "Coal Country." In many ways, Minersville and Primrose always seemed kind of timeless to me.

There are those faded memories of long ago trips as a 5-year-old to visit Baba (grandma Julia Buryk-Czerepaniak) and Gigi (my Dad's Polish stepfather, Stanley Marchowsky), and days spent with no TV except maybe the single snowy channel that sometimes appeared on the set at Aunt Helen's house.

My last trip here with Pop was in 1989 to celebrate Aunt Helen's 75th birthday at St. Nicholas Picnic Grove on the hill just beyond our patch. We took a short tour of the area with my huge video camera in tow, and I managed to capture him on film walking up the back lane to his old house. But now it all seemed really different. Maybe it was the tall "state pines" and hemlocks that had been planted by Pennsylvania in an effort to reclaim the land down the hill in the back of the patch. Or the fact that the deep slope had actually been filled with new dirt and graded level before the trees were planted.

Mike Buryk is a Ukrainian American writer whose research focuses on Lemko and Ukrainian genealogy and the history of Ukrainians in the United States. He will give a workshop on Ukrainian/Lemko genealogy on February 20 at the Ukrainian Homestead in Lehighton, Pa. You can contact him at: michael.buryk@verizon.net. His website is: http://www.buryk.com/our_patch/.

He extends special thanks to Ron Kramer for all his help in making this article possible and keeping the memory of our Ukrainians and Lemkos alive in Coal Country. Also, special thanks go to all those families who shared their precious memories and anecdotes for this article.

This article, published in two parts, is dedicated to the memory of the late Harry Buryk and his parents Mike Gburyk and Julia Czerepaniak.

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Swampoodle Ukrainian wedding, 1908, Forestville, Pa., from the Ron Kramer photo collection.

The area had once been honeycombed with several bootleg mines – including Gigi's. These illegal operations brought some income and a nearby source of fuel to local mining families during the Great Depression, when jobs in the regular mines were scarce. The trees swayed in the strong breeze and covered a chunk of the bright blue sky that had opened up after this morning's heavy rain.

My daughter Alexis and I rounded the bend at the end of the patch and turned up the lane that Pop had walked 20 years ago. Just then Mrs. Hutsko came out of her small yard into the lane. She and her husband had purchased Baba's house after she passed away in 1972. Almost 40 years later Mrs. Hutsko was still here enjoying the quiet and sunny afternoon tending her garden. We chatted a bit about old times and then Alexis and I headed back to St. Nick's to rejoin my wife, Rosie, and my brother Ron to finish our session at Ukrainian Catholic Seminary Day festivities.

Ukrainian Seminary Day

Seminary Day is an annual fund-raiser for the education of young men for the priesthood and a celebration of Ukrainian cultural and religious heritage in Schuylkill County. It first began at Lakewood Park in Barnesville, Pa., in

1934 as a homecoming event for Ukrainians who had left the area. It lapsed for a while, but was revived in Primrose at St. Nick's Grove in 1985 and has continued there each year ever since.

I had heard from a local college archivist, Brian Ardan, that Seminary Day was the event for reconnecting with the Slavic soul of Coal Country. So, Alexis, Rosie, Ron and I made the two-hour drive from North Caldwell, N.J., to Primrose to set up my portable Ukrainian Lemko genealogy exhibit and some of Rosie's handmade beaded jewelry on a big round table in the hall and to drink in the local Ukrainian American culture and learn something about the past.

The heavy rains of the morning gradually gave way to sunshine and blue skies as many descendants of the area's first Ukrainian settlers made their annual pilgrimage to these familiar, sacred grounds.

Coal patch neighborhoods

Minersville was a magnet for Slavic immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Our patch, also known as Red Patch (perhaps because of the dark red color with which most houses were painted in its early days), or Tweedsville to some, was one of many coal "patch" neighborhoods that sprang up to house the workers and their families at the nearby coal mines.

Just like in the industrial cities at the time, there was a natural progression for newcomers from more crowded patches like Forestville (down the road west of Primrose), where everyone lived in wooden tenement housing, to places like Red Patch. Here, the mixed Polish-Ukrainian neighborhood consisted of two-story, free-standing double houses on small plots of land with room for a garden and a smoke house in the back to cure the homemade kvasa and other meats.

Many Ukrainian families first started off down the hill in Forestville near the mouth of the Woodside Tunnel of the Lytle Colliery and later moved to Primrose and other more affluent patches as their personal fortunes improved. Some never made the transition during the Great Depression of the 1930s when many of the local mines shut down.

Baba and Gigi left Forestville in 1930 with eight children in tow to move into one side of a double house just up the road in the village of Primrose. The house was bought with the proceeds from



St. George's Greek-Catholic Church, Minersville, Pa., circa 1915, from the Ron Kramer photo collection.

the insurance settlement paid out by Lytle for the accidental death of my grandfather Mike at the nearby Woodside Tunnel mine in 1924.

From Galicia to Minersville

No one knows for sure when the first Ukrainian Lemkos made the long trek from the foothills and the northern slopes of the Carpathians to the rolling hills of Minersville, but come they did. Most were from the villages south of Sanok (Sianik) like Zboiska, Kulaszne and Wysoczany near Bukowsko, but others were from higher up on the mountainous slopes from Rzepedz and nearby.

My own family came from Siemuszowa which is 7 kilometers north of Sanok, but they were in the minority in the Minersville/Primrose area. The trail from Galicia usually twisted and turned by train from Sanok to Berlin and then on to Hamburg, Germany. From there the steamship would carry them via Southampton, England, to Ellis Island in lower New York harbor.

Some of the Lemko pioneers spent time in the industrial areas of New Jersey such as Jersey City, Newark and Perth Amboy-Carteret before making their final move out to Coal Country.

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St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church, Minersville, Pa. (built in 1937), November 2010.

Family stories...

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In those days, there were usually one or two fellow countrymen who paved the way and served as guides on the long, extended emigration trail. Minersville was no exception. A Ruthenian named Michael Boruch arrived in Mahanoy City (about 30 miles east of Minersville) in 1893 at the age of 24. He probably came from the Carpathian village of Szklary in the Sanok district of Galicia.

His uncle, John Zinchak, was already established there as an important local businessman and he took his nephew under his wing. Boruch soon married Ethel Zatkovich and in 1898 they moved to Minersville and purchased the Klondike butcher shop on Sunbury Street (the main road in Minersville).

Mike established a general store where almost anything could be bought. There was also a grain elevator. He became a notary public and, most importantly for the growing number of Lemko immigrants to America, Boruch became a steamship agent servicing the major lines that sailed from northern Germany. These included Cunard, North German Lloyd, Redstar and others.

The local Lemko miners would put money from each paycheck into an account with Boruch and over time there would be enough for a prepaid steamship ticket to bring over another family member to work in the mines.

When the newcomer arrived at Ellis Island, either Mike or his brother John would meet them at the arrivals terminal and escort them by train to Philadelphia, where they would switch lines for a direct train to Minersville. When the immigrant arrived in Minersville, the Boruch general store would outfit them for their new job, open a bank account and provide them with a credit book so that they could purchase food and other supplies. In this way, Boruch played a critical role in the lives of the Lemko immigrants in Minersville.

He was also instrumental in the foundation of the first Greek-Catholic church in town, St. George's, high up on Spruce Street overlooking the railroad station. Over time, St. George's split into several parishes, including the present-day St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church and St. George's Ukrainian Orthodox Church, both located on North Front Street, and St. Peter and Paul Byzantine Catholic Church on South Fourth Street.

Boruch became an important figure in the rapidly growing Lemko community, as well as an important businessman in Minersville. During repeated coal miners strikes in the early 1900s, he would allow his patrons to buy goods "on the book" (i.e., for credit) so they and their families could continue to survive while out of work. This enabled the miners to win some strikes vs. the mine owners, but sometimes Mike was not repaid once they returned to work and began patronizing other stores for their essential supplies in Minersville.

Who were these people?

The complexity of the Lemko immigrants' ethnic and religious identity in the Old Country was reflected in their spiritual and cultural development in the New World. When the Lemkos arrived in America from Galicia at the turn of the 20th century, they were identified in official records by the official Austro-Hungarian term Ruthenian (actually, a Latin name for the people of this region). Most were Greek-Catholic. Many called themselves Rusyn or simply "our people" back home.

The idea gradually took hold that Ruthenians from Galicia and their brothers and sisters under the tsar in the Russian



Ukrainian Seminary Day in Primrose, Pa., July 25, 2010.

Empire were actually part of the same nation – Ukrainian. By the 1920s, the term was applied to people from the western Carpathians all the way east to the steppes. In the U.S. federal census of 1920 taken in Carteret where my own grandparents were living, they asked the census taker to write "Ukraina" under the word "Ruthenian" to designate both their ethnicity and their mother tongue. Several other families in their tenement house did the same.

In Minersville, some of the Lemkos clung to the old ethnic identity and formed their own Greek-Catholic churches or became Orthodox. Others, like my own grandparents, were part of St. Nicholas Parish with its Ukrainian orientation. Still another group was absorbed into the Roman Catholic Polish community.

The Roman Catholic Poles and the Greek-Catholic Lemkos had lived in close proximity in the Sanok region for hundreds of years and easily understood each other's languages and customs. In fact, there was intermarriage between these Poles and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholics in the Sanok region as well as in the Minersville area.

The "blended" family

My own family later became a blend of Polish and Ukrainian roots when my grandmother Julia remarried in 1926 after the tragic death of my grandfather Mike in December 1924. Stanley Marchowsky (Maciejowski), a Forestville neighbor, co-worker and friend of my grandfather, had actually emigrated to Minersville sometime in the early 1900s from the village of Markowce, which is south of Sanok. The village was ethnically diverse, with both Polish and Ukrainian families.

As my Dad would say, after the death of his father, his family became a rich borsch mixed with the ingredients of "yours, mine and ours." It was the custom in Lemkivschyna that boys born into mixed marriages of Poles and Ukrainians would follow the father's religion and girls the mother's. However, in our family all the children born of my Baba's first marriage to Mike Gburek always followed Ukrainian ways, and this included my Dad and his brothers and sister. His half brothers and sister who were born later followed the usual Lemko custom.

Their lives in Coal Country

The mass emigration to America from Lemkivschyna began seriously in the late 1870s. Ruthenian males came to work in the anthracite coal mining counties of Northumberland, Columbia, Luzerne, Lackawanna, Carbon and Schuylkill in the northeast of Pennsylvania. Minersville is in Schuylkill County.

The mine owners were actively recruiting Eastern Europeans in an effort to break the growing union labor movement among the local Welsh and Irish miners.

According to Myron Kuropas, the author of "The Ukrainian Americans," an unskilled peasant could potentially earn \$1.20 per day as a miner's helper in the mines for an eight to 10-hour day compared with a \$.12 for a 14-hour day as an agricultural field hand back home. Also, the continued division of land from generation to generation became particularly difficult for family finances as the population in Galicia exploded.

Most men began as helpers, working very long hours for a share of the miner's daily wages based on how much coal the miner could extract. Some came alone and lived as boarders, often taking shifts sleeping in a bed shared with other miners.

Life in the mines was an extremely dangerous undertaking and many young Ukrainian men lost their lives underground in accidents, or received serious debilitating injuries. Some died much later from the infamous "black lung" disease. Others

took their own lives during the Great Depression, when major unemployment within Schuylkill County took a heavy toll.

The Buryks arrive

My own grandfather Mike did not come directly to Coal Country, but first settled with his family in Perth Amboy and later Carteret, which was a major central New Jersey industrial hub. He arrived alone on June 17, 1911, but was later joined by his wife, Julia, and six-month-old daughter, Rozalia, in the fall of 1913. At one point or another at the beginning of the 20th century, probably half of the village of Siemuszowa came to Perth Amboy-Carteret to seek their fortunes. Unfortunately, Rozalia became seriously ill shortly after arriving in Perth Amboy and died in November 1913.

Sometime in the early 1920s, my Buryk family (grandpa lost the "G" in his name along the way probably to make it easier for Americans to pronounce) left New Jersey for Minersville. When my Dad was born in 1922, they lived in Jonestown, which is a small neighborhood just up the hill from Minersville.

Not long after they moved to the village of Forestville to a neighborhood known to the locals as "swampoodle." This place was located just outside the mouth of the Woodside Tunnel of the Lytle Colliery. Nineteenth century Irish immigrants had given the place its name (which in their slang meant "shantytown"), but in the early 20th century a rapidly growing number of Slavic immigrants began to fill the place.

Maybe it was Mike Charowsky, my grandfather's cousin from Siemuszowa, who invited him to come and work in the mines and live nearby where he and his wife, Maria Dzialik (both born in Siemuszowa), had settled shortly after their marriage in Perth Amboy in 1914. No one knows for sure.

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