

COAL PATCH DAYS

Family stories of Lemko immigrants around Minersville, Pa.

by Michael Buryk

PART II

Other families from the Sanok region

Kramar (Kramer)

There are still some descendants of other Sanok-region Ukrainian families living in and around Minersville. Wasyl Kramar arrived in Schuylkill County from Zboiska, Galicia (now in Poland), in 1896 at the age of 18. He was one of the founders of the first Greek-Catholic parish in Minersville – St. George's.

St. George's church existed high up on Kear's Hill from the 1890s to the 1930s. Wasyl became a coal miner and worked in the Woodside Tunnel at the Lytle Colliery in Forestville. He died there in 1923 after injuries sustained in a mining accident.

Wasyl's grandson Ron Kramer still owns an old-time barber shop in Primrose and has lived in the area for many years. He is very active along with other local old timers in efforts to preserve the memory of our Ukrainian pioneers there. His barber shop is a treasure trove of miners' memorabilia, including many photos highlighting local history. His neighbor growing up in the patch was the family of Nicholas Bervinchak.

Ron tells many interesting anecdotes about the life of the Ukrainian miners who lived near the Primrose patch. He notes that because the major companies like Lytle began to curtail their operations in the 1920s and went into a tail-spin during the Great Depression families had to turn to "bootleg mines" to survive. Almost half the miners in Schuylkill County were unemployed and this activity was their only means of income.

Individuals using crude equipment dug the bootleg mines close to the ground surface. My Dad's stepfather, Stanley Marchowsky, worked his own bootleg mine down the hill behind the Primrose patch. One day after lunch when he returned to the coalhole, a slow burning charge of dynamite placed during the late morning that failed to ever go off nearly blew him up. When the smoke cleared and Gigi was found shaken but still alive, Baba forbade any of her sons to go work in the mines again.

Olenick (Olejnik)

One large Ukrainian family, the Olenicks, established a significant inde-

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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 is dedicated to the memory of the late Harry Buryk and his parents, Mike Gburyk and Julia Czerepaniak.

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pendent coal-mining operation in Forestville out of their early bootleg activities. The Olenick family of Forestville arrived in the U.S. early in the 20th century. They came from Lisko (now Lesko) in southeastern Poland. Pawel was 27 when he came in 1902 and his wife Aleksandra, was 34 when she arrived in 1905. Their son Harry (Havrila, born 1898) arrived sometime later. Harry married Maria Holubowsky (who had come from Zawadka in the Carpathian Mountains of Galicia) in 1919 in Minersville.

Harry and Maria moved around the area looking for work. He received his official miner's certificate in 1923 and was employed at the Lytle Colliery in Primrose. The couple settled down in nearby Forestville to raise a family of 11 children. During the difficult days of the Depression, like many other Ukrainian, Polish and other immigrant miners, Harry began to dig for his own coal in a bootleg mine behind his house. He also set up a makeshift "breaker" there to process the coal for sale in the area. All his young children pitched in to help with the operation.

Most bootleggers sold their coal to buyers in a 25-mile radius of their operation and typically hauled it by "flivver" (slang for an old Ford Model T car) or in a small truck at night to escape notice. Since they sold the coal for a few dollars below the market price, their product was in high demand. It was estimated that in 1933 the overall size of the bootleg coal business was between \$30 million and \$35 million. During the period 1932-1934, about 5 to 10 percent of all coal sold in the United States came from bootleg mines.

For the Olenicks, this was the humble beginning of an independent coal business that would last until the 1990s. During the 1950s, the family purchased a piece of land near the Lytle Woodside Tunnel in Forestville, and between 1959 and 1960 they built their own large-scale coal breaker. Harry and Maria's sons, John, Nick, Steve and Mike, and a newly arrived cousin, Stiney Holubowsky, ran the Olenick Brothers Coal Co. there. Anna Olenick, one of their five daughters, became the bookkeeper for the business.

Unfortunately, Harry died suddenly on Christmas 1962, when he was struck by a car. But, his sons and daughter continued to run the business successfully for many years after this tragic event.

Olenick's coal breaker was captured for history in a 1968 etching by Nicholas Bervinchak, the Ukrainian American artist whose family was Ron Kramer's neighbor.

In the southern part of Schuylkill



Harry Olenick's bootleg mine circa 1930s, Forestville, Pa., from a 2010 exhibit at the Orwigsburg, Pa., Historical Society and Museum.

County, the Orwigsburg Historical Society and Museum currently has an exhibit showing a memorable scene from the Olenick family bootleg mine operation in the coal patch in the 1930s. It was put together by Harry's grandson Gary MacCreedy (son of Olga Olenick, another of the five daughters) with help from his aunt Anna Olenick.

Katchmar (Kaczmar, Kachmar)

There were Ukrainian families who initially immigrated to the Primrose area whose lives were changed forever by their fate in the mines. Sam Katchmar was born in Forestville in 1928. Although his father Stefan had been born in McAdoo, in the early 1900s (about 30 miles northeast of Minersville), there were still strong family ties to Lemkivschyna and especially their native Wysoczany (south of Sanok).

In 1934, Sam's father died in a mine accident at the Lytle Colliery in Forestville. His mother became a widow with six small children and no means of support in the middle of the

Great Depression. So, two years later, in October 1936, when Sam was in the fourth grade, the entire family left Pennsylvania and headed back to Wysoczany, Poland. They settled there on a little 10-acre farm with a new house bought with whatever money they had managed to save in America.

There were about 60 families living in this small Polish village (after World War I Wysoczany and the surrounding villages of Lemkivschyna became part of Poland). In the village elementary school Sam and his siblings learned Polish and Ukrainian. When the Germans arrived in 1939, Polish was out and German was taught in the school. Soviet troops arrived in the fall of 1944, and their family situation deteriorated dramatically. In the Spring of 1947, Sam and his family were swept up in Akcja Wisla and were sent to the Szczecin area of northwest Poland.

Since Sam and all of his siblings were still U.S. citizens, the family petitioned the U.S. Embassy in Poland to return to the U.S. Their wish was finally granted in December 1947 and they left Gdynia for Pottsville. Life back in Pottsville (located about five miles east of Minersville) was not easy for the Katchmar family, but they managed to survive and thrive. His sisters worked in sewing factories and Sam joined the U.S. Air Force in 1948. He eventually got his college degree and became an accountant. The rest of his family did well upon their return to America.

Pellish (Pelech, Pielech)

Our patch in Primrose had some long-time Ukrainian residents besides Baba Julia Czerepaniak-Buryk-Marchowsky. The Pellish family were old neighbors there. Bud Pellish tells the story of his grandfather Nicholas



Lytle Colliery, 1915, Primrose, Pa., from the Ron Kramer photo collection.

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Family stories...

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who migrated to the Minersville area from Wolica in the Lemko region of Poland in 1899. Bud's Dad, Alex, was born in 1909 in Forestville, where his father, Nicholas, and his mother, Maria, had settled. Nicholas became a miner, and Alex eventually followed in his father's footsteps.

The Pellish family later moved to the patch where Bud was born. Their house was the first one on the right as you entered the patch from the main road. Across the Forestville Road their neighbor was the family of Nicholas Bervinchak. Bud's Mom, who was a Polinsky (Palinski), was related to the Bervinchak family from the Carpathian village of Rzepedz.

Nicholas Bervinchak actually included Bud's grandmother in several of his etchings of the patch depicting local work in the fields and pulling up coal from one of the bootleg mines ("coal-holes").

Julie Kowalchick-Pellish, the sister of Alex, was my Baba Julia's good neighbor and friend. I can still remember them chatting over the white picket fence whenever we'd go for a visit.

Alex Pellish never wanted his son Bud to work in the mines, although he did help his Dad above ground by pumping water from the family's own bootleg mine near the patch.

Often, men who had been laid off from the "legal" mines, or who were looking for additional income or fuel, would work the thin coal seams that were close to the ground surface. The coal companies could not work these seams profitably, but a few friends or a large family could dig a "coalhole" with primitive equipment and reap some small reward for their efforts. However, underground water seeping into the mines, both bootleg and legal ones, was a constant problem. So the major work on the weekends for the bootleg miners was to bring out as much of it as possible so they could return to the tunnel on Monday.

Bud still remembers once in the early 1950s when he was in the 10th grade Alex took him underground in a mine tunnel and shut off the lamp. In the total darkness with the sound of creaking timbers and running water, he was scared out of his mind. Alex cautioned him that this was the one and only time he would ever set foot inside a mine.

A year or two later, Alex almost drowned in a major flood in the Dando mine where he worked. He never went back to the mine after that near fatal incident and eventually became a watchman in a local manufacturing plant. Bud graduated from the local Cass Township High School in 1955 and in 1959 left the patch for service in the Navy.

After military service, he came back to the Minersville area, married and began raising his own family there.

An artist in Coal Country

Nicholas Bervinchak, a Ukrainian Lemko from Rzepedz, Galicia (now in Poland), symbolizes the miners' thirst to rise above the difficult conditions of daily life to produce a lasting cultural and artistic contribution to American life in Northeast Pennsylvania in the early part of the 20th century.

Nicholas was born in 1903 in Mahanoy City, about 23 miles northeast of Minersville. His parents were Iwan and Fenna Bervinchak, and he had at least one younger brother, Michael, who was also born in Mahanoy City in 1905. Apparently the family was living with Iwan's brother Wasyl there. They made

one trip back to Rzepedz between 1905 and 1907 since their return to the U.S. (under the name "Barvinczak" was noted in an Ellis Island immigration record dated September 9, 1907).

Shortly after their return to the U.S., Iwan was killed in a coalmine accident. Even at age 4, Nicholas knew he could never work in the mines because of the loss of his father there. As he grew older, he took an interest in drawing pictures.

In an interview that appeared in the September 12, 1971, Sunday edition of the Allentown Call-Chronicle, he offers a glimpse of his early efforts. "I first started drawing on paper in which the butcher wrapped meat. Then, on a trash bank near my home in Black Heath [a small village next to Primrose], I found a drawing book. I filled this in and from then my appetite for art work increased."

After his stepfather sustained injuries in the mines on several occasions and with their family continuing to grow, Nicholas had to end his formal education in the fifth grade to go to work picking slate as a breaker boy in the Lytle Colliery in Primrose. He began to draw on the walls there, which wasn't appreciated by the breaker boss. But, his working buddies picked up his share of the load, which gave him time to sketch and draw.

In 1922 Bervinchak spent his days watching the church painter Paul Daubner of Budapest decorate the interior of Ss. Peter and Paul Byzantine Catholic Church in Minersville. He was still working the night shift in the mines at the time. Daubner asked for a sample of his work and was so impressed that he offered him an apprenticeship at \$5.62 per day – the same rate that Nicholas earned in the mines.

The relationship with Daubner would last 15 years after which he branched out in the church-decorating field alone in New York, New Jersey, Ohio and Illinois.

Among his better known etchings are those that depict life in and around the mines – especially in the area near our patch in Primrose. Bervinchak had a natural ability for this artistic technique and always preferred to use a victrola needle as his etching tool.

Some of his 180 etchings include: "Miners Driving a Gangway," "Bootleg Coal Miner" and "Buck Run Colliery." Many were done during the period 1933 to 1941. And his close connection with our patch in Primrose is reflected in several of his etchings including four depicting the seasons there and the ones previously mentioned of Bud Pellish's grandmother who was a relative of Nick.

His etching, "Olenick's Breaker,"



"Olenick's Breaker," a 1968 etching by Nicholas Bervinchak, from the catalogue of the 1987 Philadelphia exhibit "The Ukrainian American Experience, 1787-1987," archives of The Library of Congress, Washington.

done in 1968, brings back many memories to me. It was in 1987 that my Uncle John Ondisco took my family on a tour of another coal breaker down the road from Olenick's in Forestville. The Olenick family played an important role in the history of Ukrainians in the Minersville area. The Olenick name is written in my own grandfather Mike's diary from the 1920s attesting to their importance in the Ukrainian immigrant community.

Bervinchak went on to become a world-known artist. Some U.S. presidents such as Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower enjoyed his etchings and hung them in the White House. The National Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian Institution now own many of his works. His etchings were also exhibited at the Whitney Museum of Art and the National Academy in New York City, the world's fairs in Chicago and New York, and in cities around the globe such as Milan, Italy, and Stockholm, Sweden.

The Ukrainian Museum in New York City has a collection of 40 of Bervinchak's works that were donated by his widow, Anna. They were shown there in the fall of 1984 in conjunction with the exhibit "To Preserve a Heritage: The Story of the Ukrainian Immigration in the United States."

Another important public showing of his work took place in November 1987, in Philadelphia at The Port of History Museum, Penn's Landing. The exhibit titled, "The Ukrainian American Experience," had as its guest curator Christina Czorpita and was co-sponsored by the museum with the Ukrainian

American Committee, "We the People 200." It featured several of Bervinchak's better-known etchings, as well as some of the works of the well-known artist Jacques Hnizdovsky, who was born in western Ukraine and eventually emigrated to New York City. He is probably best known for his woodcuts of scenes from nature.

Bervinchak truly made a major contribution not only to Ukrainian immigrant culture, but also to American regional art. In 1975 he and his wife, visited their beloved Ukraine to find out more about their ancestral roots. They returned from this trip with several of his paintings and etchings of scenes from daily Ukrainian life. Bervinchak died in Pottsville, on June 28, 1978.

Ukrainian community lives on

It's been well over 100 years since the first Ukrainian Lemkos made their way to the Minersville area from the foothills and the slopes of the Carpathians. The homeland of these early pioneers is no longer called Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but is now part of southeastern Poland. As a result of Akcja Wisla, the forced resettlement of Lemkos and Ukrainians by the Polish government in 1947, most of the descendants of those who came to settle in the Coal Country of northeastern Pennsylvania have no connection with any of their relatives in Europe who were scattered throughout Poland and Ukraine.

My own effort to reconnect with the families of my paternal grandparents took almost 30 years and a lot of good luck along the way.

But to their credit, the Ukrainian Lemkos of the Minersville area and eastern Pennsylvania have preserved their cultural and religious identity painstakingly passed down to them from their grandparents and parents.

The well-attended annual Ukrainian Seminary Day in Primrose is only one example of this. The Kazka Ukrainian Folk Ensemble, directed by Dr. Paula Holoviak, with its roots in the Anthracite Region of eastern Pennsylvania, is another. The annual festival at the Ukrainian Homestead in Lehighton, also provides the children of Coal Country pioneers a place to gather and celebrate their heritage.

Hopefully these active, richly embroidered memories of our ancestral past in Lemkivshchyna and eastern Pennsylvania will continue to live on in our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren over the next 100 years. The enduring spirit of our patch will never die.



"Ron Kramer's barbershop, November 2010, Primrose, Pa.