

In Search of "Dead Relatives"

By Mike Buryk

Very often the search for "dead relatives", as genealogy is sometimes jokingly called, takes some unusual twists and turns. My paternal grandfather Mikhail (Mike) Buryk is a perfect example of this. The virtual blackout that engulfed the Buryk family's collective memory of my grandfather Mike's past in Galicia left no traces of his origins. We knew that he and my grandmother Julia Czerepaniak were already married when they sailed to America in the early 1900's. There was even talk of a baby who died while Julia was en route on the ship. But no one knew the name of the village where they came from. Austria. Galicia. That was it.

Mike and Julia were Ukrainian and Greek Catholic. Julia sometimes mentioned "Sianik" to Uncle Wally (her second oldest son). Where that was, no one knew. All the kids were too young (Aunt Helen Kost, the oldest child of the original Buryks and the only living female, was 10) when Mike died due to injuries from the mine cave-in over in Forestville, Pa. And after that, no one spent much time asking about the past while they were struggling just to survive in the present.

Baba Julia had already gone to her eternal rest 6 years before when I wrote Aunt Helen in Pennsylvania in 1978 and asked for the umpteenth time where her parents came from. Back in the mail came the first hint of the past -- a copy of Julia's baptismal certificate. Not like any baptismal certificate from around here, it listed Julia's date and place of birth, names of parents and grandparents complete with the maiden names of the women. All in Latin!

Ok. This was a start. Julia "Terpanek" had now become Julia Czerepaniak from Siemuszowa, Poland. Where was that? And did Mike come from the same place? No clue. Another year passed before I could locate a map that pinpointed where Siemuszowa was. North of Sianik. Southeastern Poland -- home of the "Lemkos". Great. Who were they? Ukrainians? Poles? Rusyns? Don't ask, they don't live there any more! The more you know, the less you understand. Confusion...

It was time to do some serious digging. I had read about the "Ships Passenger Lists" that detailed every newcomer who came to America during the great immigration of 1900-1920. There was a copy of them at the research center of the Public Library in New York City. Surely, it would

be easy to find a name like "Buryk" on it. When I started to search through them, I hadn't strained my eyes so much on microfilm since graduate school. And all the handwritten name listings were almost indecipherable, but there it was. Buryk, Mihal. Eureka? No, just the beginning.

Next stop, the Family History Center of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (LDS). The Mormons travel all over the world filming birth, marriage and death records to help reunite families through religious conversions even after the intended convert has long since left this mortal world. I found the village of Mihal Buryk listed in the Ships Passenger records. Radosycze. Here were Buryks, hundreds of them, stretching back into the 18th century! Was this our family? Not exactly. The names didn't fit and the records ended in 1860 in the microfilm copy so I couldn't make any final connection to Mike who was probably born around 1890. More digging...

Then came new Buryks. Living Buryks. Buryks here I could talk with! My father, Harry, remembered there was a Theodore Buryk in Newark when he first went to trade school there in the late 1940's. He never met him. After some serious detective work, I found his daughter, Mary, still around at 72 and willing to tell me as much of the story of her father as she knew. He came to America through Boston in 1910 from Wolochyi, Ukraine, near Pidhajci. Great story -- too far east!

Next came Linda Buryk and the Buryks of Staten Island. Linda tracked me down through a newspaper article in which my name appeared in the Jersey Journal in 1994. We agreed to get together for me to meet her family. Over dinner in their kitchen, we talked about her grandfather, Dmitrii, who came from "Ukraine" in the early 1900's. No one knew any more. The names in the family matched many of ours. I was sitting across the table from Mike Buryk, Linda's Uncle. There was also an uncle Harry Buryk living in Central Jersey. I went back to the Ships Passenger Lists and found Dmitrii Buryk. Arrival: 1905. Village: Sokole. Where the heck was that? Gotta dig deeper...

Next came the Internet in the middle of the 1990's. For the seeker of "dead relatives" this place is both Disneyland and your worst nightmare. There are hundreds of Web sites to search for names, phone numbers and email addresses. You could easily grow old and gray wading through it all! Casting around I found two sites that opened up a new world for me in the mysterious Carpathians. On the Infoukes server, Walter Maksimovich has crafted a wonderful site that details the background of the Lemkos of

Galicia from a Ukrainian perspective (<http://www.lemkos.org>). At the Carpatho-Rusyn.org site, Greg Gressa told a slightly different story from the viewpoint of the Rusyn people. Although I did spend a lot of time on this site, it is no longer available online today (2009).

Greg painstakingly put together a Web-searchable index of most of the Lemko villages in Galicia. Working closely with him, more Buryks popped up in Lupkiw and Zawoz. And the only Czerepaniaks he could find in his excerpt from a 1787 census of Galicia were in Siemuszowa. Unfortunately, the LDS never filmed the records in Siemuszowa so it was not possible for me to trace any ancestors here myself. I went back to the LDS to search through more microfilm and found no Buryks in Lupkiw but a ton of them in Zawoz. Many of the names in my own Buryk family were carried by the Buryks of Zawoz. Could this finally be grandpa Mike's village? Not quite.

Then there was a long email correspondence with Christoph Buryk of Germany. I found him through an email directory on the Web and we quickly got into a detailed discussion about his grandfather, Nikolaus Buryk. Nikolaus came to Germany via Poland during World War II from the village of Dovha (Dotha) Wojnitowska in Galicia. Could this be the place? Lots more digging, several emails and face-to-face discussions with Jan Popiel, formerly of Dobra, Poland, (Dobra is a short distance north from Siemuszowa) plus the help of the Ukrainian Genealogy Society in Alberta, Canada. As it turned out, Nikolaus came from a village located in eastern Galicia, which was nowhere near Siemuszowa. Next stop.

With the gracious help of Jan Popiel, I met with Walter Polanski, a former resident of the village right next to Siemuszowa. Walter didn't know any Buryks, but his mother was a Czerepaniak! We couldn't quite put together a connection between our two families. If there was it was several generations back, but some old photos that Baba Julia had kept of her relatives in Poland which fell into my hands last summer courtesy of my cousin Delores, jogged Walter's memory. Wasn't that Hanya and George? Walter gave me an address for Hanya Hirniak whom he had met several years ago on a trip back to Poland. More letters. More waiting.

In the meantime, I had started a fresh trail in search of Mike Buryk by putting requests for his birth certificate through the Polish Consulate in New York City. The first two tries with different places and years of birth came back with "no such person listed". The third try with Siemuszowa as the place of birth brought back two different people -- one with the last name "Gbur" and the other "Gburyk". This was going nowhere fast at \$35 a shot!

Then, a letter came from Hanya in Poland. Yes, she was my real cousin, the niece of my grandmother Julia. No, she knew nothing about my grandfather Mike. She was born in Siemuszowa more than fifteen years after they were married and had gone to America. Maybe one more time with the Polish Consulate would work. This time I asked for the marriage certificate for Mike Buryk and Julia Czerepaniak with an estimate of the possible years for the event. More waiting. In the meantime, a letter came from Hanya's brother George. No, he knew nothing of my grandfather either! Maybe it was time to call it quits.

Just before Thanksgiving year 1997, I received a letter from the Polish Consulate in the mail. Struggling through it in Polish, I learned that they had a marriage certificate for my grandparents and I could come and pick it up. I got there as soon as possible the next day. I handed over the \$35 fee to the clerk and sat down to take a look. Yes, there was Julia Czerepaniak and the names of her parents were clearly listed. I already knew their names from her baptismal certificate. However, there was one problem with Mike. His last name was "Gburyk"! Gburyk! All this time I have been searching the universe for "Buryk" and we are really "Gburyk". This will take some time to absorb. Don't start changing the checks yet! We're still Buryk in America.

Since then I have been up and down the Carpathians, through Germany to the West Coast of the U.S. and to Mississippi (on the Internet and by mail, of course!) and back tracking down Gburs and a other Gburyks not directly connected with my immediate family. It seems the Gbur name, while not common, was used by several families in the Carpathian region from Dobra in Poland to Hrabske in Slovakia. As far as I can tell, "Gburyk" initially occurred only in four places: Siemuszowa, Krecow and Smerekovets' in Poland and Vysne Repase in Slovakia. I actually visited descendants of my Gburyk family from Siemuszowa in Gorsow Wielkopolski, Poland, in September 2004. Ah, but that's a story for another day ...

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