

To Find the Missing “G”: My Roots Trip to the Sanok Lands May 2009

The long road to Sianik

At the end of the late 1970's, after spending many enjoyable days learning Ukrainian dance at the community center on Fleet Street in Jersey City, I developed an unquenchable thirst to know who my Ukrainian ancestors were. Two summers spent in the Soviet Union studying Russian during college further fueled this interest. Back then, I knew very little: my family had come to America during the beginning of the 20th century from Rosil'na in the Bohorodchany region of Galicia near Ivano-Frankivsk, and Siemuszowa in the Sanok region in what is now southeastern Poland. My paternal grandfather Mike Buryk died in 1924 from injuries in a coalmine accident near Minersville, Pa. His wife Julia Czerepaniak remarried soon after, to a Polish co-worker of grandpa, Stanley Marchowsky. Occasionally over the years Baba Julia did mention “Sianik” in passing to her oldest son Wally, but never gave any details about her past.

Julia died in 1972. Six years later my Dad's sister, Aunt Helen, sent me a Xeroxed copy of her baptismal certificate. The black piece of paper with white letters had listed on it the names of her parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, and the village of Siemuszowa with comments in Latin. This piece of paper was the crucial clue that began my 30-year quest leading to my trip to the Sanok area at the end of May 2009.

For a third generation Ukrainian-American, finding the pieces to the family puzzle was quite a challenge. Putting them together after they were painstakingly found proved to be even more difficult. There were lots of dead ends, false starts and endless circular wanderings. But with the help of the LDS (Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints) reading room and their microfilm archives of civil records collected worldwide, the internet and the good offices of the International Red Cross, by 2004 I had tracked down many of my living Czerepaniak and Buryk relations. Now, it was time to visit them. And so, in 2004 I made my first tip and trekked off to Gorszow Wielkopolski in the so-called “recovered lands” of Poland to meet the descendants of my grandfather's youngest sister, Katerzyna Gburyk.

That's not a typo: the name was originally ‘Gburyk’. Along the road from Siemuszowa to Minersville, grandpa Mike had lost his “G”. Not so hard to imagine since Gburyk is virtually impossible to pronounce for any red-blooded, native-born American. And even in the old country, they couldn't make up their minds about their own name. Sometimes it was Gbur and sometimes Gburyk or Gburik, and it even morphed at least once into Burek, written in Cyrillic on the tombstone of one family member that stands among the tall grass and wild flowers in the old cemetery up on the hill beyond the church in Siemuszowa.

Our family like many other Ukrainians and Lemkos were resettled from the Sanok lands before and during the Polish Government's Operation Wisla in 1947. Some of the Czerepaniaks headed East into Ukraine and eventually settled in the Lviv area. The remainder of our family was shipped into Northern, Northwestern and Western Poland. While visiting my Hlib relatives (Katarzyna Gburek had married Michael Hlib in Siemuszowa in 1926) in Gorszow in 2004 had been an unforgettable experience, Gorszow was not our ancestral homeland.

I had dreamed about going to Sanok and Siemuszowa ever since my Gorszow visit. It's not that I didn't want to go, but part of me was challenged by the fact that I speak no Polish and that my Ukrainian can only be used for basic survival to ward off starvation or a sudden emergency. Then there were some minor events like my quadruple heart bypass surgery in 2007 and my wife Rosemary's sudden stroke in the fall of 2008. We both recovered enough by the Spring of 2009 that I considered the trip again. The spirit was willing and the "G" forces were strong and kept pulling me back toward the adventure of my dreams.

In May 2009 I scheduled a business trip to Germany and planned to leave for Poland from Munich at the end of it. Even as the Polish LOT airlines plane sat on the runway the night of May 29th on the way to Rzeszow via Warsaw, I didn't believe it would really happen. I finally landed and went by taxi to the Dwor Ostoya in Jasienka just outside the airport grounds at 1:00 AM Saturday morning. When the taxi driver pulled up to the estate of some former Polish nobleman and the gate was locked, I suspected that someone had called ahead to tell the innkeeper that Buryk the Ukrainian peasant should not be allowed to spend the night. However, I was eventually let in to spend the night.

I awoke early Saturday to the sound of pounding rain, which would be a continuing theme throughout my four-day adventure in Podkarpaska. The Dwor, like most things associated with the old nobility in Poland, had seen better days although it retained a certain ancient charm. After breakfast it was back to the airport to pick up my tiny Avis Opel rental car. Soon I was off on my stick-shift ramble through Southeastern Poland.

First stop: Przemysl. I had convinced Volodya Cherepanyak, the son of my second cousin Myron who lives in Lviv, to come along. Volodya and I go back a few years when I first stumbled across him on the internet in 2001. Since then, he's visited me once in New Jersey during a business trip to the U.S. and hosted my daughter Alexis twice and my son Steve once in Lviv. Volodya's fluency in English and Ukrainian and working knowledge of Polish would prove to be an invaluable asset during the trip. Volodya is a technology entrepreneur with his own internet programming company in Lviv. We share a passion for our family and Ukrainian history, which made him the perfect companion for my first journey to our ancestral homeland.

Through the mountains to Sanok

On the map the road to Przemysl from Rzeszow looks like an easy drive. But half the time it's one lane due to continuous construction and the other half the traffic crawls at a snail's pace through Lancut, Jaroslaw and other ancient towns. Volodya was standing at the train station in Przemysl waiting for me after his morning trip from Lviv. The exact location of the train station is a well-kept secret since there are no signs to tell you exactly where it is or how to get there.

After a lot of trial and error and dropped cell calls, we were reunited. Finally, he squeezed in my tiny car wearing his familiar orange windbreaker topped by a very large backpack. We drove off together south from Przemysl down Route 28 on the road to Sanok.

The road became steeper as we reached Bircza and more winding as we climbed through the Pogorze Dynowskie (Dynow foothills) near Kuzmina. Soon we reached Tyrawa Woloska. Volodya and I continued along the winding road that was now descending from the Slone (Salt) Mountains through the village of Zaluz toward Sanok. We were on our way to the home of Katarzyna Czerepaniak-Tympczak, his great aunt and my father's first cousin. Katarzyna's father Michal (a.k.a the miller) and my Baba Julia were brother and sister. After losing our way a few times on ulitsa Przemyska and a few cell calls to Katarzyna's grandson Pawel, we found the place.

Katarzyna's home was a relatively new two-story house that her son-in-law Volodymyr (Walter) Patulak had built for the family. The outside was stucco and freshly painted. There was an old garage-barn in the back and the sound of a rooster periodically pierced the air. But, this was no selo chata (village house). No picturesque thatched roof or white-washed walls here. The house looked like any you might find in Germany today. And yet, it was a kind of a blend between the old and the new. You reached the house from a dirt road that branched off Przemyska to several other houses in the back. The area reminded me of the coal patch in Primrose where my Dad had grown up near Minersville.

An old woman came out, embraced Volodya and then began chatting slowly in Ukrainian. Her hair was covered in a traditional kerchief and it reminded me of the older Ukrainian women who would gather with my Mom's mother near a corner store in Jersey City to chat for a while to pass away an afternoon in the late 1950's. Her conversation ran from aches and pains to life in Siemuszowa to the whereabouts of her daughter Melaniya, her son-in-law and the grandchildren. We declined her invitation to enter the house, but agreed to come back at four o'clock since she wanted to accompany us to Siemuszowa. It made sense since she was born on the Czerepaniak homestead there in 1922 and would know a lot about the village. Volodya and I drove to the Hotel Jagiellonska in Sanok. We dropped our bags, had some lunch and then headed back to Aunt Katarzyna at 4:00 PM for our trip to Siemuszowa.

My first taste of Siemuszowa

We gathered up Aunt Katarzyna, squeezed her into the tiny car and headed out for Siemuszowa. This time we didn't take the serpentine road that snaked its way tediously over the Slone Mountains through Tyrawa Woloska to our village. Instead we followed the wide, muddy brown San river through the ancient area of Trepcza and on to Mrzgolod. At that point there was an old steel bridge that sat precariously over the river. No load limit was listed, but I'm sure if you had two buses and a car cross at the same time their fate would be sealed suddenly with a swift drop into the dark waters below. But, it didn't happen that day. Once across, I followed the sign that pointed to Tyrawa Solna and its ancient tserkva (a Ukrainian Catholic church).

Although neither Volodya nor I had been here before, I already knew the place like the back of my hand. Years of studying various maps helped me know the local geography well. As we drove along the road we came suddenly to a wooden planked bridge in even worse shape than the one across the San. There was a large sign in front that warned ominously in Polish it was dangerous to cross there. So, we slipped down the low hill and ended up next to the Tyrawa Solna church. Volodya and I both realized at once that the bridge was the only way across the Tyrawa river at this point. After a brief conversation with Aunt Katarzyna who gave her blessing, we headed back toward the bridge. At that point a teenage boy came flying across in what appeared to be a small American car and zoomed down the road back to the San river. Volodya and I looked at each other and decided to go for it. We inched across the rickety bridge to the sound of clanking planks and made it to the other side without incident.

Soon, Siemuszowa unfolded ahead of us in all its pastoral glory nestled between dark green mountains and brown hills. The rain had finally stopped and the late afternoon sun was poking through the grey clouds, which were opening up to reveal a very clear, blue sky. You could smell and feel the freshness of the mountain air. We passed several long fields --- some of which appeared to be planted with one crop or another. As we came to the main road that would wind through the village, Aunt Katarzyna told us to go right up along it and then right again up the small paved path that led to the early 19th century church. We were finally here. My long tedious mental journey of 30 years and physical travel of several thousand miles had now led me to my ancestral village and its very old wooden church built in 1841.

The small church originally named "Epiphany of Our Lord" was built on the land of an earlier church. At that time, the population of Siemuszowa was predominately Greek Catholic and Ruthenian and there were 470 of them. By the 1930's, there were more than a thousand who used this church. But after 1947 and the final expulsion of Lemkos and Ukrainians, the tserkva became a kosciol (Roman Catholic church). Today, the village population is mostly Polish and numbers about 220 residents.

I had seen the old weather-beaten exterior walls of the church many times in photos and its metal roof as well. Two unique Lemko crosses topped its two small cupolas. Tomorrow we planned to return with my cousin Vladek Romaniuk and his wife Zofia to explore the interior so I took a few photos outside and tried to imagine how my ancestors had climbed the steep hill to church on Sundays and for various feast days and family events.

I was very curious about the tiny cemetery that lay at the front door of the church. Apparently, the “new” cemetery used for burials in the second half of the 20th century and beyond did not contain many of the original inhabitants who might be considered Ukrainian or Lemko. It was told to me years ago that only Poles were buried in this cemetery since the tserkva (Greek Catholic church) was now a kosciol (Polish Catholic church). This information proved to be not entirely true. As I wandered around the cemetery I found quite a few names of residents that I knew were not Polish: Stadnyk, Jadchyshyn and even one Iwan Czerepaniak. But there were some Polish names as well. Even Aunt Katarzyna’s husband was buried here and he was a Ukrainian.

Aunt Katarzyna, Voldya and I climbed back into the car and drove slowly up a dirt road covered by tall weeds and wild flowers leaving the church behind us. I pulled alongside the old cemetery high up on the hill overlooking the church and parked in an open field. I wasn’t sure how Katarzyna would be able to walk through the cemetery since it was overgrown with high grass and wildflowers despite the valiant efforts of a Polish-Ukrainian volunteer group that had done a thorough clean up the previous August. Before that time, I’m told it was completely impassable. As we waded through the high grass, it quickly became apparent that there was no Czerepaniak or Gburyk monument anywhere on site. But I did find the grave of a Thecla Burek whose name was inscribed in Cyrillic. We also found some random Szwajlyk and Hlib family monuments in the cemetery along with some curious humps in the ground that only supported blank wooden crosses. I later found out from Volodya that Aunt Katerzyna told him these were the remains of various UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) members from the village. The memory of their guerrilla war against both the Polish and Soviet governments was still not easily honored locally even in death.

We got back in the car and begin to drive down the hill. It was time to find the Czerepaniak homestead as two young boys sped by on a muddy ATV. The 19th century had just met the 21st century head on.

The Czerepaniak homestead

Before my trip, I obtained a digital copy of the 1852 property map of the village painstakingly assembled by the Austrian government for tax purposes over a period of several years. It included a list of the numbered properties that the Czerepaniaks had owned. Volodya and I had studied it together for several months before the trip so that we would know exactly

where to look. Aunt Katerzyna confirmed what the map had suggested: the Czerepaniak family had owned a good chunk of property although they were not nobility. It lay where the main road branches off to the next village of Krecow, not too far from the nobleman's Dwor or manor house and estate. It was very well-situated and included flat land pasture as well as hills and forest, the perfect location for a family farm.

The Czerepaniak family also owned the grain mill. The story told is that my great grandfather, Isidore (Sydor) Czerepaniak had gotten it from the Pan of Siemuszowa as he lay on his deathbed as a reward for his long and steadfast service on the estate. The mill sat on a small canal that had been dug from the river farther up to bring fresh water to turn the millstone. The old mill was long gone since it was torn down after Operation Wisla, but Aunt Katarzyna pointed to a new house that had been built on the spot where it once stood. As we walked along the road that had bordered the Czerepaniak homestead, Aunt Katarzyna told stories from crisp memories filled with the tiny details of life when she was growing up after World War I. Volodya and I were both amazed at the sharp mind of this 87-year-old Baba and wished we could find a way to do a data dump from it to our Mac computers.

The sun was beginning to fade behind the mountains, signaling that it was time to go home. We passed Aunt Katarzyna's old blue house on the road to Tyrawa Woloska and then took the serpentine road back to her new place. Her son-in-law Walter had come back from the celebration of a major church event --- Pentecost. Apparently the Orthodox church (since there were no more Greek Catholic churches in the area) celebrated it as a big feast on Saturday and he was lending a hand. We coaxed some more Czerepaniak family stories from Aunt Katarzyna as we ate a light dinner and were soon on our way back to the hotel in Sanok. Volodya and I were suffering information overload and bone tired from the long drive that day. I called home to let my wife Rosie know that all was well in Podkarpaska and Volodya sent off some e-mail home from his computer. The wireless internet connection seemed to work more slowly than the ones either of us were used to. Soon both of us dropped off to sleep and deep into dreams of the San valley.

The Romaniuks

Sunday would be an important day in the history of our family. It would be my first meeting with Vladek Romaniuk, a long lost second Gburyk cousin and the grandson of my grandfather's youngest brother Iwan. The excitement was building.

Volodya and I rose early Sunday morning to get a bite to eat before my cousin Vladek and his wife Zofia would arrive. It had been very difficult communicating with them since I neither speak nor write Polish and they know no English. Luckily I had found Zofia listed in the directory for the Skype online phone service about a year ago and occasionally dropped her an instant chat note to let them know that I was still hoping to come for a visit. About two weeks

before this trip, we exchanged Skype text messages with a plan to meet me on Sunday morning at the Hotel Jagiellonska in Sanok promptly at 9:00 AM to drive to Siemuszowa.

You never know what to expect with these reunions. My first one with the Hlib family in western Poland in 2004 was challenging without an ability to communicate in Polish. My distant cousin Maria Walczak-Czerepaniak and her daughter Alex came along and helped with that one. This time I hoped it would be easier. Fortunately, Volodya's Ukrainian visa arrived a few days before he was scheduled to head to Przemysl to meet me. He was my backup translator. Vladek had also mentioned in his note that he would bring along a local boy who spoke English. I really wasn't sure how that would work out, but I was hopeful.

Volodya and I met Vladek, Zofia and Eric the interpreter for the first time on the street in front of the hotel. We all exchanged warm greetings and then hopped into their car. Through Eric, Vladek told us that we would go to his house first to meet some of his family who had arrived that morning to see us. We drove back along Przemyska Street past Aunt Katarzyna's house, which we pointed out to our new family and then to Vladek's house not far in the next area called Bykowce. We turned onto a very pleasant street that looked out onto a broad, flat meadow and then right into Vladek's driveway. Directly in front of me again was not a village chata, but a rather large, stuccoed and tiled two-story house that was as nice as any I had seen before.

We climbed up the stairs into the house and were immediately met by Vladek and Zofia's daughter Renata, her husband Adam Szatankiewicz and their children Jakub and Izabeta. We all exchanged warm greetings and moved immediately into the large and pleasant dining room that looked out over the meadow. This could have been a very nice house built in the 1970's in semi-rural Sussex County New Jersey or a similar place where you could still find traces of a rich farming heritage. But, there were no roosters crowing outside here.

The next two hours were spent getting to know each other with the help of Eric as Volodya jumped in from time to time listening intently to the Polish conversation and then replying easily in Ukrainian. Everyone seemed to understand each other in this modern tower of Babel! I had come armed with a family tree, the 1852 land map of Siemuszowa, family photos and numerous other documents that were quickly examined and passed around. The kids, as they would in any other country, seemed vaguely bored, but polite. Adam and Renata were very interested in all this new information about the Gburyk side of the family that Vladek had never known.

Zofia was warm and supportive of all the family history talk and Vladek shared what little he knew of his Gburyk past. The Turkish coffee was thick, muddy and strong, and the sweets on the table made it all seem like just any ordinary family get together. It was all very comfortable and pleasant. But, the weather outside had turned rainy yet again and so our drive

and visit to Siemuszowa, which was about to commence, would be damp, gray and muddy. So this is life in the mountains! Vladek, Zofia, Volodya, Eric and I hopped into his old model car and we climbed the serpentine road again heading for Tyrawa Woloska where we made a left on the road to Siemuszowa. Our goal was to visit the inside of the old wooden church and to discover the local site where the Gburyk homestead had stood.

Inside the Old Wooden Church in Siemuszowa and the Elusive Gburyk Homestead

It's really hard to describe the feeling that came over all of us as we walked into the church. Here was the place where my Baba Julia and Mike were baptized and married and where their parents and grandparents had done the same. Where all of their brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and cousins stretching back to 1841 had celebrated significant events of their lives. And before that, there was a similar church on the same spot.

The inside of the church was decorated in a style not unlike a few Greek Catholic ones that I have visited before and yet this one was very special. We all walked around very reverently examining each detail as if we had just been doing an archaeological dig and uncovered some ancient relics. Although the day was gloomy, rainy and wet outside, the inside of the former tserkva seemed to radiate its own glow. I could feel the presence of Siemuszowa's long history and its very soul right here. It was hard to leave.

We got back in the cars and drove to the center of the village to the house of Pani Bocak to talk with her about any memories of the Gburyk family and where their property had been. Our local guide Bohdan knocked on the small, red painted wooden door and a few of us entered the house. In front of us appeared a tiny, very old woman who looked like she had lived here forever. Bohdan and Vladek began chatting with her in Polish asking questions that we hoped would reveal something about the Gburyks. No luck. Too much had happened in the village since 1947 when its Lemko and Ukrainian inhabitants had been scattered to the four winds and Pani Bocak's memory did not seem as good as Aunt Katarzyna's.

At that point I asked Volodya to take a photo of me with Pani Bocak. As I moved closer to her, she shot back in Polish: "if you get any closer, you'll have to marry me!" We all got quite a laugh out of that. Even in Siemuszowa, an available woman is never too old for matrimony. Bohdan and the rest of us bid her goodbye and headed back to the cars. Shortly we were driving further down the poorly paved road towards the dark forest when the road abruptly stopped with a locked metal pole spread across it. We couldn't go any farther. Vladek then turned the car around in the direction of the second road that had originally run parallel to the first one. We quickly reached a dead end there as well and got out to try to go farther on foot. It was no use. The rain was coming down harder and the grass too wet, slick and muddy for a casual hike to find our Gburyk ancestral homestead near the forest. This happy event would have to wait for another day.

The Polish State Archives in Sanok

Finding traces of the elusive “G” family over the last thirty years was difficult at best and downright impossible a lot of the time. Untimely tragic death, poverty, indifference and the erosion of memory by time had left not many anecdotes about who the Gburyks and Czerepaniaks were and how my own grandparents came to settle in Minersville, Pa., in the 1920’s. So I made it my own personal quest over these many years to find this out and share it with anyone who might be even vaguely interested.

My cousins Vladek, Zofia, Volodya and I climbed the rickety, old stairs in the tiny archives building that stood on Sanok’s main Rynek (market) Square. I let them do the talking with the civil servants who manned the place as they asked us to take a seat in the small room with the grammar-school like desks that overlooked the square. There were several forms to fill out stating who we were, why we came there and agreeing that we wouldn’t put the metryky books under our T-shirts as we left. This would have been virtually impossible since a very stern looking staff member always watched us as we did our research.

Finally, two not so large, A-4 (European paper sized) books with hard green covers were placed on the desks in front of us. Inside them a small window quietly opened up that faced deep into the history of all the families of Siemuszowa who had been born, married or died there since 1784. Record #1. Mykola Szwarzjlyk. Married 1783. Volodya and I plunged into the books immediately. He took marriages and I took births. In the meantime, a very scholarly looking mid-twenties guy with very European looking glasses appeared with a thick packet of photos, copies and a disk. I had e-mailed the Sanok archives a few weeks before our arrival to let them know when I would be there and asked if it was possible to make copies of the metryky records. The archives director replied with a completely incomprehensible bureaucratic answer that made it seem like you would probably need a court order as well as a line of credit to their bank to accomplish this. I gave up thinking about this project and settled into the idea of just taking copious notes.

So it was a pleasant surprise when the staff researcher plopped the package down on the desk and explained it would be 100 Polish zlotys for their research, the copies and the disk. Since this works out to about US\$30 at current exchange rates, it sounded like quite a bargain. The usual hitch was that you could only pay by a funds transfer to their bank account! Cousin Vladek and Zofia came to the rescue and offered to do this immediately while we dug into the books. This had become a real Buryk/Cherepanyak/Romaniuk team effort. Our ancestors would be proud ...

While Vladek and Zofia headed off to either their bank or the local post office to send in the payment, I got a chance to go through the research packet. The archives had taken the time to sketch out a family tree from grandpa Mike Gburyk going back to his great great grandparents

and listing many of the aunts, uncles and cousins along the way. This was really amazing! And, there were both paper and electronic copies of all this. I was in genealogy heaven. Since I hadn't made the same request for the Czerepaniak side because my original query by e-mail seemed to be going nowhere, Volodya began some really serious note taking probably honed in his university days in Lviv. Two hours flashed by in a second and Vladek and Zofia came back with a receipt for their payment in hand. Unfortunately since we didn't want to appear to be ungrateful guests by burying ourselves in the archives for the rest of the day (which we could easily have done for the remainder of the week, or the year ...), I picked up my research packet while Volodya gathered his notebook and we left the wonderful metryky at the archives and joined the Romaniuks again for another adventure.

My first visit to the Polish archives was definitely just a tiny taste of the Olympics of genealogy. Volodya and I were on team Ukraine and closing in on the gold. What a sense of satisfaction I felt as I pored over the birth and marriage records of my grandparents, great grandparents and great great grandparents and their siblings and children. It was only scrawly words on very brown pages of a very old book, but somehow I felt much closer to all of them. Yes, they had all been real people once. They ate, drank, lived and loved like we do now, but this was the only trace of their former presence here in these books. Volodya and I had now seen our family in a way that probably no one had ever seen them before, or might not again. It was a very special day for both of us and I could see it in his face as we left with the Romaniuks to get some lunch at the nearby karczma, a recreated Lemko village tavern.

At Dwor Szatankiewicz

Around 5:00 PM Vladek and Zofia drove us to their daughter Renata's house about forty five minutes away in Wrobluk. The Romaniuks had once worked there when the house, an old dwor (manor house) from some Polish noble, was part of a rather large collective farm under the Communists. It seems their university education in agronomy had launched their career as staff on the farm. And, as luck would have it when the Polish Communists finally threw in the towel like the governments in several other East European countries in the late 1980's, the dwor was sold off to the Romaniuks and the farmland cut up and sold to new farmers. They had lived there for a while in the 1990's, but eventually passed the house along to Renata, Adam and the children.

It was a sprawling two-story house. Nothing ostentatious but definitely could easily be a restaurant with a very nice bed and breakfast with much room to spare. Not quite as elegant as the Dwor Ostoya in which I had spent my first night in Poland, but it definitely had potential. Renata and Adam are gradually renovating the place and now live in about thirty per cent of it with their children. We all spent a very enjoyable evening eating Polish delicacies like fat mixed with garlic and some better known items like the ubiquitous Polish ham. Old photos both in

print and on Volodya's Mac were passed around and the discussion turned to Vladek's Gburyk grandfather Iwan who had been MIA in France so many years ago. I agreed that I would try to track him down, or rather any trace of his descendants there. I had once come across a Francois Buryk who lived in Brittany in northern France. My letter to him had been returned by the French post office with the word "deceased" stamped in red. But, this search would need to wait for another day.

We headed back in Vladek's car around 8:30 PM and as we bounced along the old, narrow Polish roads from Wrobluk to Sanok passed dark, flat fields and signs pointing to various town like Barwinek, the birthplace of my maternal grandfather George Sych, I shot off a quick e-mail to my daughter Alexis to try to capture the moment and share it with her. In the blue glow of my Blackberry in the back seat of Cousin Vladek's car it was all very magical. Before too long Volodya and I climbed the wide stairs once more to our second floor sanctuary at the Hotel Jagellonska. It was time to get some rest for my last day in the Sanok lands.

The Archives Again and More Dead Relatives

On Tuesday morning Volodya and I rose early as usual and had our usual very filling Polish breakfast downstairs. We packed our bags and dropped them off in my tiny rented Opel, which had sat lonely in the back parking lot since Saturday. Then it was a climb up the long hill to the Sanok archives again to arrive there shortly after 8:00 AM when it opened for the day. We agreed the previous night to meet the Romaniuks at our hotel at Noon for lunch. Our hope was to put in a good chunk of time that morning trying to fill in the blank spots of our family tree. Four hours melted away like 4 minutes as I followed genealogy threads of not only the Gbur/Gburyk families but also the Sz wajlyks and Charowskis, all of whom were distant cousins. Volodya focused strictly on the Czerepaniaks and seemed totally engrossed in his work.

Noon came quickly. It was time to hand back the green covered metryky books that held all the secrets of our ancestral past in Siemuszowa. If only there was some way to digitize both books which would probably not last another 10 years in their current form. Still I was very pleased and grateful for these hours we spent digging for dead relatives and the bumper crop it produced. All the previously disconnected threads on both the Czerepaniak and Gburyk side now led back to the earliest known ancestors who were archived in the Austrian cadester (land census) of 1785. Both Kost (Konstantine) Czerepaniak at house number 43 and Seyka (Simeon) Gbur (Gburyk) at number 35 had an almost complete list of descendants stretching right down to the 21st century. If only little Benjamin Buryk, just six weeks old now and the son of my brother's son Peter and his wife Missy, could know that he now had more ancestors than most European Royals. One day he would get his very own copy of the completed chart.

Volodya and I reluctantly said good bye to the archives and trudged down the long hill to the hotel. The Romaniuks arrived just as we did and we all went down into the basement

restaurant for lunch. The food was good as usual. Volodya got a call on his cell while we were there inviting all of us to Aunt Katarzyna's house so that we could meet the other members of the Patulak family who weren't there on Saturday. Cousin Melaniya, Aunt Katarzyna's daughter, had just come back from a trip to Germany looking for some temporary work picking strawberries. Her daughters Olya and Anna just returned from university. Then there was Pawel and Eric as well. After finishing lunch Vladek drove us down Przemyska Street to Aunt Katarzyna's house.

To Siemuszowa Once More

It was about 2:30 PM and I had still hoped to get back to Siemuszowa one more time to visit the cemetery so that Vladek could point out where he thought our great grandmother Maria Gbur was buried. I also wanted to search for the former homestead of the Gburyk family any trace of which had escaped us on our Sunday morning trip. So as we all sat with Aunt Katarzyna telling her stories of who married whom from Siemuszowa and who left and went elsewhere, I brought out my digitally printed copy of parts of the village land map from 1852 in the hopes that something would jog her memory and she would immediately give us the important clue as to where to find the Gburyk land.

It didn't happen. But, the forty five minutes or so we visited the Patulak homestead on Przemyska street was full of contrasts. Aunt Katarzyna and the Patulaks spoke only in Ukrainian along with Volodya. The Romaniuks only spoke in Polish. There were the melodious sounds of Ukrainian folks songs floating from the kitchen into the dining room where we all sat. And yet, everyone understood each other. It was as if we were all part of the same family and had known each other for years. I really felt at home.

Finally, it was time to go. Some family photos were taken to record the historic moment and Cousin Melaniya agreed to come along since she had grown up in the village and knew her way around from herding cows there. The three of us hopped into the Opel with the Romaniuks chugging behind us up the serpentine road one last time over the Slone Mountains. Before long there was the usual left turn at Tarawa Woolskin, past the official Siemuszowa green sign and up the main road into the village. We then drove up the steep hill and parked next to the church.

Cemetery Etiquette and the Unmarked Graves

Melaniya's father, Jozef Tymczak, was buried in one of the rows of the "new" cemetery in front of the church. She immediately went hunting to try to find something with which to light a covered candle on his grave. In Poland, this is the thing you must do. The dead are never forgotten and never left alone for long. Unlike in America where we bring flowers to place at our family graves only on special occasions, the custom in Poland and probably the rest of Eastern Europe is to keep that candle burning as long as possible. Volodya and I had seen this the previous day when we visited the recent grave of Vladek's mother, Paraska Gbur-Romaniuk.

I had also seen it several years ago during my visit with the Hlibs in Gorszow. And so all of us were immediately tasked with finding some spark of fire with which to light Jozef Tymczak's eternal flame. And Cousin Vladek came to the rescue by digging deep for a piece of tissue in his pocket and borrowing a light from a candle on another grave. Apparently, this tactic was entirely acceptable. After a short moment of silence at the Tymczak grave with its re-lit white candle, we all headed up the hill to the old cemetery.

Now as luck would have it, the usual unpredictable and constant rain had stopped and the sun broke through the clouds. It was as if our Siemuszowa ancestors were rolling them back to give us a brief opportunity to search the old cemetery once more for hints of long gone relatives and then to look for the Gburyk homestead.

As we waded through the tall, thick grass and wildflowers, Vladek pointed to the grave of one Rozalia Hlib, one of his great grandmothers. He said that next to her was buried Maria Gbur, our common great grandmother who was the mother of my grandfather Mike. Nothing distinguished the grave from the rest of the grass in the area. I took a photo of the area for future memory. Melaniya then pointed out where at the top of the hill by some birch trees was probably the final resting place of Sydor Czerepaniak and Ksenia Hirniak, our great grandparents on the Czerepaniak side. Similarly, nothing distinguished the site. Hopefully, one day there will be a monument or at least some marker to show where these very important people in our lives had finally come to rest on this beautiful hill overlooking the green rolling hills of Siemuszowa.

At Last the Missing "G"

It was time to complete our final task of the day and the roots trip. There had been some discussion previously about the best plan of attack this time to find the Gburyk homestead. We all drove down the steep church hill again and turned right into the heart of the village instead of heading directly past Pani Bosak's house to the dead end by the rented cottage near the forest. We then made a left at the fork in the road and drove up a steep hill to park on the property of a very newly built stuccoed house with a red tiled roof. No one objected there since the owner obviously was no where around so we jumped out and began to head to the top of the grassy hill on foot.

Volodya and I were armed with my copy of that part of the village in the 1852 map that the Przemyśl archives had thankfully sent me two months earlier in return for about US\$60. It was a steal at any price! It was the digital version of this map that had allowed us to locate the Czerepaniak homestead and now we were closing in on the Gburyk property. Melaniya soon caught up and then the Romaniuks and all of us headed down the other side of the hill toward the forest. Volodya pointed out that there was a small stream on the map that ran parallel to the Gburyk property that encircled the house on building lot #103 (and house #35). Melaniya immediately remembered where it was from her days of cow herding and so we set off through a

thicket of trees and tall grass. Now the Romaniuks were not exactly dressed in L.L.Bean style since they had on their Sunday best, but wore high rubber boots on their feet. They really got into it anyway and I was beginning to work up quite a sweat since the day was humid and we were doing a lot of walking up and down hills and through thick clumps of trees.

Finally, Volodya and I arrived at the spot on the map where it seemed that the “G” family had lived, grown, married, died and emigrated to the four corners of the earth. I walked around a bit taking a panorama in photos of this very special place close by the forest of the Slone Mountains. There was tall grass in the fields and pine trees everywhere. But we searched in vain for any trace of a wooden hut. The house had long since been recycled into the earth. Volodya suggested that one spot with a particularly thick growth of bushes could be the place where the house had once stood. He took a few photos of me standing there with my map on my chest pointing back to the bushes. It worked for me ...

It was getting late and I still had a two hour drive back to the Dwor Ostoya that night in Jasienska near the Rzeszow airport. So it was time to go. Everyone gathered up some wild flowers from the fields and gave them to me as a memento of our visit to the Gburyk homestead. We climbed the hills once more and finally reached our cars. Once again I shot off a quick e-mail to Alexis, Steve and my brother Ron to let them know of our triumph and to digitally stitch the 18th century with the 21st. As usual in Poland, my Blackberry worked like a charm and those e-mail communications packets went floating off into some Internet connection in space. It was all rather difficult to comprehend, but it worked like a charm.

Our Good Bye at Jurowce

Vladek agreed to lead us down together to the nearby town of Jurowce, which would bring me to the road that lead to Rzeszow and Jasienska. Volodya and Melaniya climbed into my Opel once more and we wound our way down hilly Siemuszowa and made a left to the wooden, clanking, rickety bridge near Tyrawa Solna. Volodya ran out to take several photos of me in the car with Melaniya as we crawled our way across the bridge. I had tempted fate once more and won! Then it was across the old steel bridge that precariously spanned the swiftly flowing San River and down the road to Jurowce.

Volodya, Melaniya and I continued to chat in Ukrainian. Yes, for some strange reason I could understand everything they were saying and could answer back with a few words or very short sentences. It made me think that if I spent any amount of time with the both of them I'd be chatting away like a pro. Unfortunately, we soon reached Jurowce after passing several very old former Greek Catholic and now Orthodox churches. We all got out of our cars and it was time to say good bye. My intensive Ukrainian lesson was over for now.

The Road Back to Jasienska and the Dwor Once More

My roots adventure was winding down quickly. Volodya's plan was to spend the night with the Patulaks and then take the train the next day from Sanok to a nearby border crossing into Ukraine. Once in his homeland, he'd board a bus for the not too long ride back to Lviv. And so it was time to part. Vladek had agreed to drive Melaniya and Volodya back to Sanok. I made a point of saying "Do zobaczenia" (see you soon) instead of "Do widzenia" (good-bye) to let the Romaniuks know that I hoped to return one day. Do pobachenia (see you later in Ukrainian) was appropriate for Melaniya and Volodya. I gave him an extra hug and called him "miy brat" (my brother) since our relationship did seem like that of an older and a younger brother. There were hearty hugs all around and the usual three-cheeked kisses for the ladies and it was time to go. Now it felt like I was emigrating to the New World for the first time. I could only imagine what it must have been like when grandpa Mike and Baba Julia left Siemuszowa in the early 1900's never to return again.

It was time to go. I hopped in the Opel, waved good-bye as I passed Vladek's car and drove off to the right up the road to Jasienska. After several heavy downpours and a few late breaks of sunshine from the setting sun, I arrived about an hour and a half later at the Dwor Ostoya once more. This time I knew my way around so I picked up my key at the big house and headed for the peasants quarters. After cleaning up a bit and a quick dinner of pierogies served in the dining room, I settled in for the night in my tiny room. It seemed like home here too. I had my one bottle of "strong" Polish beer, a couple of Polish potato chips and a wireless Internet connection that just would not stop. A Polish evening soap opera droned on in the background while I dashed off a few final e-mails for the evening before falling into a very deep sleep. Wednesday would take me back to Frankfurt, Germany, once more where I would stay the night before returning to America on the Thursday 11:20 AM flight to Newark, NJ. Mission accomplished!

Postscript

As I sit here writing the last few sentences of my Sanok-Siemsuzowa trip travelogue, it's still hard to believe it all really happened. I'm back in the throes of IEEE recruitment, family life with my kids leaving for various U.S and international destinations and cutting the grass each weekend in North Caldwell. But, both my day and night dreams are filled with scenes from Siemuszowa and Sanok. The family tree is now fully hung with as many relatives as Volodya and I could capture in our notebooks and on disk. And, we've both exchanged a lot of e-mail since then talking about this or that ancestor. I'd definitely like to go back again one day to see all the local sites that four intense days in this very pleasant country wouldn't allow. Hopefully I will be able to keep the communication lines open with the Romaniuks despite the very high Polish language hurdle.

And despite some serious medical problems that threatened to keep me permanently sidelined here in North Caldwell if not worse, I walked in the footsteps of my paternal grandparents. The circle is now whole again and the fog has been lifted. Maybe I'll go back again or possibly not. Who knows what the next year or two will bring? But, my ancestors are shadows no more. Siemuszowa is as familiar to me now as North Caldwell and I'll always see its green rolling hills in my mind and that church by the old and new cemeteries where hundreds of years of our family lives have steadily passed. And it's a very, very good feeling.

Copyright 2009 Michael J. Buryk

All Rights Reserved