

SHEEPSKIN COATS ON THE PRAIRIES

Searching For My Ukrainian Ancestors

2012

by Sharon Aney

I have learned a lot as I looked for the stories of my Ukrainian great-grandparents. I learned about their immigration to Western Canada, how to find documentation of their journey and lives here, and I still hope to find more about their lives in the "Old Country".

A brief description of the recruitment of our Ukrainian ancestors follows in this edited excerpt from Citizenship & Immigration Canada <http://www.cic.gc.ca> "Forging our Legacy"

** The principal planner and promoter of the campaign for western settlement was Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior in Wilfred Laurier's new (1896) government. In his urgent search for suitable farmers and farm labourers, the new Minister was prepared to admit agriculturalists from places other than Great Britain, the United States, and northern Europe.

Describing what he looked for in the ideal settler, Sifton said:

*"When I speak of quality I have in mind something that is quite different from what is in the mind of the average writer or speaker upon the question of immigration. I think that **a stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born on the soil**, (my emphasis. sa) whose forefathers have been farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and a half-dozen children, is good quality".*

Booking agents and steamship company officials based in Amsterdam agreed to direct, whenever possible, agriculturalists to Canada; and received a bonus for every genuine agricultural settler steered to this country. By the time of the outbreak of the First World War, approximately 170,000 Ukrainians settled in this country, attracted by the offer of free land, a sense of space, and an opportunity to make a living in a free and open society. **

Many of us, descendants of those immigrants, are now struggling to find our ancestral story by searching through the adaptations our grandparents made to fit into the Canadian culture. Some changed their names. Others did not communicate their history to the younger generations who were rapidly learning to speak, read, write and prosper in the English-speaking country. The simple sod, log and thatch houses were not a friendly environment for documents to survive. So, two, three or four generations later we try to reconstruct their story.

We begin, as with all genealogy questions, at home. Stories, obituaries, and funeral memorial cards can yield a lot of information, including the names of other family members and the place where an ancestor was born.

Local history books can be found in libraries, local and provincial archives, historical societies, and online at www.ourroots.ca. They also can provide details about the development of communities in the early years of Canada. Even if not mentioned by name, your ancestor was part of the story of the place where he lived. Look for books on the more general theme of Ukrainian Immigration. Interlibrary loan is invaluable here, especially if you can find some of the books by Vladimir Kaye.

Homestead records at the provincial archives of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta are helpful because immigrants often applied for land shortly after arrival. The "Application for Patent" document reflects their struggle and determination and it actually records the advances they made: clearing and breaking and cropping so many acres per year, erecting buildings and fences, raising cattle, etc.

At every stage of the search we need to know the place where they lived, because that is where documents were created. As they lived in their new communities they married and had children baptized. There were only a few Ukrainian Catholic priests who travelled periodically to rural areas from larger centers such as Winnipeg, Edmonton and Saskatoon to perform marriages and baptisms. As a result, these events were possibly recorded in a church far away from where your rural ancestor lived when the priest returned from his circuit. Or your staunch Greek Catholic or Greek Orthodox may have been married in a Roman Catholic church nearby. So do not give up the search easily. When you contact the church, advise them that the ancestor is your "such and such" relative and you are looking for genealogical information, such as his/her parents and home community. A courteous gesture is to include a donation for the church to apply to its charitable works. (**see note at the end of the article*)

It is a genealogical myth that a surname was changed at the immigration point; the officials at ports in Canada and the USA created immigration records based upon passports and passenger lists that were created in the country of origin. Names were more likely to have been changed as the immigrant (who was **not literate** in English) was trying to communicate and complete documentation for land, census, etc with an official (who was **only literate** in English). My great-grandfather and his brother ended up with different English spellings to denote the sound of their names in Canada.

We need to know when our ancestors arrived in this country, because it is fruitless to search in a time frame that did not include them. If you do not know the approximate year of your ancestor's arrival, you could look in these records for clues:

- Local history books, family lore, obituaries, funeral cards, etc
- Check the 1901, 1906 and 1911 census on www.automatedgenealogy.com, a free website. The complete record indicates the arrival year of immigrants.
- National Registration of 1940 asked the immigrant's year of arrival. (note: see info on the 1940 Registration in the Feb. 2012 issue of Roots & Branches).
- Microfilms of the arrival lists of passenger ships (1865 – 1919) to Canadian ports are available for you to search at the Provincial Archives, once you know the timeframe of their arrival date. The films also show the group that travelled together, funds they brought along, length of journey and other information for recreating the story.

- Library and Archives Canada website <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca> has several very useful databases including:
 - Immigration records for the years 1925 – 1935. It has a searchable index that enables you to order a copy of the immigration record from www.pier21.org
 - Immigrants from the Russian Empire (LI-RA-MA Collection): The Likacheff-Ragosine-Mathers collection (LI-RA-MA) contains documents created between 1898 and 1922 by the consular offices of the Russian Empire in Canada. The series on passports and identity papers is comprised of about 11,400 files on Jewish, Ukrainian and Finnish

- immigrants who came to Canada from the Russian Empire. The series includes passport applications and questionnaires containing general information.
- Online Database of **Canadian Naturalization 1915–1951**: a new version of the nominal index with the addition of more than 91,000 names that now covers the years from 1915 to 1936, inclusively.
 - The **Hamburg Passenger Lists** contain the names of millions of Europeans who emigrated through Hamburg during the years 1850 – 1934 (except 1914 – 1919). If you have ancestors who emigrated from central or eastern Europe, the Hamburg Passenger Lists could provide valuable information including their hometown. If you have not yet found your ancestor's birthplace this could be a valuable resource. The lists have been microfilmed by the LDS, and if you go onto the website www.FamilySearch.org click on the Learn tab, then go to Research Wiki, you will find dozens of articles about this resource.

I have found valuable information as a member of the East European Genealogical Society <http://eegsociety.org>. The East European Genealogist journal articles, surname database, query column and helpful members as conference presenters have opened doors for me as I am searching for information about my ancestors' immigration to Canada.

Brian Lenius' "Genealogical Gazetteer of Galicia" is critical to finding the places for records from that area of the "Old Country". It is important to know that Galicia had been under the rule of Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Austria-Hungary at various points in its history, and records were made by those various governments, using their language. For example, the one city was called L'viv by Ukrainians, L'vov by Russians, Lwow by Polish and Lemberg by Germans. The same holds true for the majority of places. Hence the need for the Lenius Gazetteer.

The Gazetteer will tell you in which town, region or church authority to look for the records of your ancestral village. Once you have that information your next step should be to visit the site www.FamilySearch.org and look into the library catalogue to see whether records from that area have been microfilmed. A great number have been. These microfilms can be brought into our local Family History Centre and conveniently searched.

EEGS member Mathew Bielawa provides excellent information for searching in Halychyna / Eastern Galicia. <http://www.hagal.com>

If you have Polish ancestors who came to the USA, you will be interested in the Polish Genealogy Society of America www.pgsa.org with many databases, some open and some for members only. I have found information to fill in the many gaps in my grandfather's family history.

I have just learned of another website and am beginning to explore its many links to many Eastern European countries. You might want to look at East European Genealogy Website: www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~easeurgw "A World GenWeb Project Website".

As you discover the details of your ancestors' lives and co-ordinate them with the history of the places they left, and the Canada that they came to 50, 75 or over 100 years ago you will appreciate their courage, ambition, hopes and dreams, dedication, adaptability, independence, interdependence, thrift, use your own descriptor!

Even though our Ukrainian immigrant ancestors individually played only a small part, collectively they were important in the settlement and growth of this country, Canada.

Note since original publication: Ukrainian Catholic Church officials have told me that they are so overwhelmed with requests, and they have limited resources so they are unlikely to answer general requests. Simple queries such as a baptismal record of grandfather born April 2, 1913 or a marriage celebrated October 4, 1934 are more likely to be answered.

Note: This article won "Best Original Article" at Alberta Genealogical conference, 2016.