

Faith Going Far Beyond The “Iron Curtain”:

Family History Testimony Building

by John Kuzmich, Jr.

Having ones entire paternal and maternal family history behind the “Iron Curtain,” I fully understand the difficulty of doing my European family history since 1969. After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, I was finally optimistic that the time would eventually come when I could progress beyond the limitations I had faced the first 29 years of doing genealogical research under communism governments in Poland and Slovenia. To counteract this limitation, I had specialized in doing American family history first which also resulted in determining geographical fixes and timelines for my Eastern European family history. And while I was ready for a new era in doing family history in Poland and Slovenia and had made a productive trip to these eastern European countries in 1996 for my maternal ancestors. But I also discovered that there was a paternal direct family line of descendants of my grandparents’ step-brothers who were all ethnically cleansed from Poland to eastern Ukraine in 1947 that I knew almost nothing about since my grandparents had immigrated to the USA in 1898 a hundred years before. With such little information and blind faith of wanting to unite the surname’s family history, I attempted to find these ancestors in Ukraine. Since there were no published phone books and no computer records available in the Ukraine, my research was unproductive. Upon contacting the mission president in the Ukraine in 1997, I was informed that the church could not assist me. But I did receive a referral to an elderly lady in Kiev and a translator at the mission office.

After sending my rather limited data of names with misspellings of potential villages, these ladies prayed about accepting my assignment of finding my ancestors after hundred years had transpired since their immigration to the USA in 1898. To everybody’s surprise, the elderly lady was given a positive answer by receiving a spiritual visitation from an Ivan Kuzmich to her prayers to accept the assignment of traveling nearly 400 kilometers to eastern Ukraine for 14 hours on a rather uncomfortable primitive eastern European pre-World-War II train with no air conditioning. Ivan told the elderly lady that my relatives were very pleased with my efforts in doing family history. But traveling to eastern Ukraine was also very difficult because the train tickets were only sold for certain days in advance, making it very difficult and inconvenient since one could not arrange ones departure dates in advance at all. But the genealogist, Mrs. Olga Roytsina, was again inspired by prayer when she attempted to purchase the train ticket on a certain day and to her surprise, she was able to book her trip without difficulty. Thus begins a rather interesting genealogy odyssey.

Ethnic Cleansing

In 1945, the Polish government reacted to the cruel Russian occupation of Poland during World War II because it was worse than the German occupation of Poland by forcing its citizens who were of Russian ancestry to immigrate to Ukraine to replace Jewish people who were immigrating to Israel or western Ukraine to replace German soldiers. Those who left voluntarily could take everything they wanted to Ukraine. If not, they would be forced in 1947 to move but without any property. Therefore, villages like Snietnica and Stawisza, Poland which were primarily comprised of Ukrainian people became instant ghost towns. My ancestors of Peter Kuzmich (born 1870), step-brother of my grandfather, Anthony Kuzmich (born 1880), left voluntarily in June, 1945 for eastern Ukraine of the Donetsk Region. Two children of Peter KUZMICH who left with their families were: Ivan Kuzmich (born 1904 in Snietnica, Poland) and Maksim Petrovich Kuzmich (born 1910 in Snietnica, Poland).

The Genealogical Trip of Trips

My America relatives had completely lost contact with Peter's relatives long before 1945, so these relatives now living in Ukraine were completely lost to us and vice versa. In 1997, I was fortunate to find two dear Ukraine citizens in Kiev (Mrs. Lydia Lyubarets and Mrs. Olga Roytsina). Mrs. Lyubarets acted as my translator and Mrs. Roytsina agreed to search for my lost Ukraine relatives based on only three surnames and one incorrect death date for Ivan (John) KUZMICH. In only three months time, Ms. Roytsina traveled to eastern Ukraine and found my relatives living in Maximilianovka in Maryinka district near Donetsk. What was so amazing is that there are no computer records in Ukraine and no published phone books to aid in doing family research. At one point she also very frustrated and went to the Ministry of Defense in the Donetsk Region as a last effort. There, she demanded assistance much like Nitka Khrushchev did at the United Nations on October 12, 1960 by pounding his fists on his desk in protest as Lorenzo Sumulong of the Phillipines continued to speak. And to Olga's surprise, these officials excused themselves and ten minutes later, she soon learned of the location of two relatives living next door to each other in Maximilianovka, Maryinka district, about 30 kilometers west of Donetsk in a rather rural farming village. She was given only a street but no house number.

After traveling by bus to the village and through trial and error, she found the house of my relatives: Anatoly KUZMICH and Ivan KUZMICH. But upon finding the right house, she could not enter the property because of fences and a typical junk-yard dog. So she spoke to my niece for several hours through the fence until the father came home from work. She then spent three days living at Anatoly's home and asking questions and visiting, searching of pictures, photos, new questions and so on.

Thus our American ancestors were united with their long-lost Ukrainian relatives after 100 years of total isolation. It was a moment of reflection that faith and making efforts to reunite ones family history can be an incredible faith-developing experience. Three months later, my entire family traveled nearly 7,000 miles to meet these relatives who had no idea that they had any American ancestors living. And they all lived in the same rural farming village in Eastern Ukraine. They had made arrangements for a car to transport us to their village from the train station when they had no automobiles of their own. Upon arrival to the village, some of the relatives were playing violins on the unpaved street and greeted us warmly. Once inside their property, they had assembled a series of table no less than 30 feet long with a feast for a king as they had been cooking for three days. At no point was the food consumed in appearance because they kept refilling all of the plates as we ate which is a Ukrainian tradition. We sang and spoke to each other our two interpreters and my son who had recently returned home from a mission in Moscow. You can view the celebratory meeting with dancing, song and conversation and more at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISoP-kncSQM&feature=player_embedde.

But the story doesn't end there. The next year, we sponsored a niece from this village to come to the USA to study at a local community college. Eventually, she married a staff member at the college and lives here in the Denver suburbs. Never again, will our families be separated again! Next summer, my wife and I are planning to visit our roots again in eastern Ukraine to record our roots with 360 degree virtual panorama photos to post them so future generations can view their roots with the magic of such technology. For maps, more family history stories videos, and more information, go to the <http://kuzmichgenealogy.blogspot.com>.