

Returning to the Ancestral Village

By Ken Zinyk

I grew up on a mixed farm in north-eastern Alberta. My grandparents were born in Ukraine, but they chose Canada as their home in 1907. Our family had not maintained ties with anyone in the “Old Country,” so the only visual image I had of the motherland was the painting of a Ukrainian village, on the backdrop in the Orthodox Hall.

I enjoyed studying European history, but the texts never spoke about our people. When I searched for Ukraine in the atlas, it was just beyond the edge of the Germany page, and on the USSR map it was tiny, because the scale was several times greater. Even the biggest atlas at the university didn't show Nebyliv, our ancestral village. Nebyliv's claim to fame was that it was the village from which the first Ukrainian settlers came to Canada in 1891.

My grandparents were old, gruff and unapproachable, and I was just one of their flock of pesky grandchildren. Unfortunately both of my grandparents died while I was in my early teens. When I asked my father or uncles about their parents' village, they only recalled a few tidbits their parents had told them when they themselves were children.

My interest in our origins and our ancestral village did not diminish. I kept searching in books, atlases, and newspapers, but during the Cold War, Ukraine was rarely mentioned in the news.

In 1994, three years after Ukraine became independent, my cousin, Sonia, suggested we travel to Ukraine and visit a second cousin, Hannucia, with whom Sonia had re-established contact. Before the demise of the USSR, foreign visitors were only permitted to meet their relatives in their city hotel, but since independence, we were allowed to visit them in their village. We took a two week bus tour, but left the tour for three days to visit Hannucia in a village just twenty miles from Nebyliv.

I presumed that Ukraine would be like Western Europe was in 1970 (twenty-five years behind), but in many ways it was closer to the conditions that my grandparents left in 1907. Life in the village seemed to have changed little. The thatched roofs had been replaced with corrugated concrete, but the people still cut hay with scythes and grain with sickles. Everyone had one

cow, and planted an acre of potatoes. Potatoes or cottage cheese were part of every meal. There were no showers and only pit toilets.

None of our relatives spoke English, and my Ukrainian was limited to what I had learned before I started grade school. I could understand most of what was said, but speaking was very difficult and involved trying to explain words which I couldn't remember.

There were no gas stations in the countryside, so one day I accompanied Hannucia's husband on a search for gasoline. He met people, talked, offered favors, and without an exchange of money, arranged for the delivery of two large containers of clear fuel the next morning. Unfortunately, while we were out on our quest, another relative had picked up Sonia and taken her to Nebyliv. I had come so far, but had missed my chance to visit the ancestral village.

After I retired, I found that I had more time to indulge my fascination with the history of our family and the ancestral village. I wrote a history of our family, but the chapter on Nebyliv was based on a few family recollections and the first person accounts of other pioneers.

In 2008, I began to correspond with a different second cousin, Lesia, who had access to the internet at work. She wrote exclusively in Ukrainian so I had to use an online Ukrainian-English translator to decipher her email, and an online Cyrillic keyboard to reply. After many exchanges, we arranged a visit in June 2009. I made it clear to her that I wanted to spend some time in Nebyliv.

Our hosts showed my wife, Liz, and me sights that they felt would be of interest to tourists. They took us to a series of churches, old buildings, museums, a brand-new monastery, and the Dovbush Rocks (an old bandit hide-out). They were interesting, but I was searching for things with a deeper connection to me; everyday things that had not changed since their ancestors left.

Finally we approached Nebyliv. The village is located in the foothills, in the shadow of the Carpathian Mountains. Everything was green. People were hoeing potatoes and cutting hay. The fields extended up to the forested mountains, which began a half mile away and climbed to the sky.

We crossed a wide rock strewn river into a village of single storey houses. When we stopped at the store across from the church, I hurried out of the car and snapped a few photos. There was no assurance that we would return that way, or that the golden domes would be glistening so beautifully in the sunshine tomorrow.

A few minutes later, we drove down a narrow bumpy lane, and stopped in the shade of tall beech trees. A wooden picket fence surrounded the little farmstead on the edge of the village. In the centre stood a small yellow cottage, a stable, and a storage shed. Split firewood was neatly stacked around the walls of the stable and shed. In front of the house was a large meticulously cultivated garden, and an orchard of apple, plum, pear, and walnut trees. Behind the house, a hay field stretched to the river. The house and farmstead seemed to have changed little since my grandparents left 102 years ago.

An old woman opened the door of the house and slowly began walking towards us. As she approached, she ignored everyone else and fixed her eyes on me. Aunt Yulia greeted me like a long lost relative, with a hug and tears. "Welcome back to Nebyliv," she said. Two branches of our family tree had come together again after a century apart. I had finally returned to my roots.

She welcomed us into her house, and led us to table covered with a feast of beautifully arranged plates of food. The small dining room was filled with family. I rose to offer a few words of greeting and appreciation. I tried to express my deep emotion with my limited vocabulary. They toasted the guests from Canada, and I replied with a toast to the hosts, our family and our homeland.

As a memento of my visit, Yulia gave me a hand-embroidered Ukrainian table runner, but the souvenirs I collected myself, four walnuts and a bag of rocky clay soil, were much more precious to me for they had come from the fields my people had worked for generations.

Photos on next page

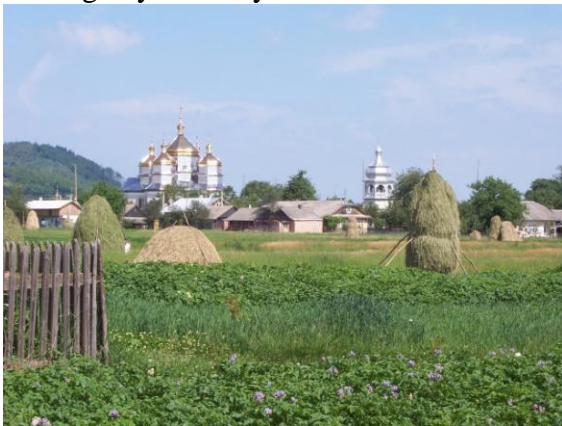
6 Photos and captions to illustrate:



Making hay with scythes and rakes



Cutting wheat with sickles



Church domes in Nebyliv



Nebyliv is in the Carpathian foothills



Family gathering in Nebyliv 2009



Yulia and Volodymyr still live on my great grandfather's land