

## **SAMANISKY – URISTA FAMILY STORY**

Variations: SEMANITZKY-SEMANYTS'KYJ-SEMANICKI-SEMYONSKI-YURISTA

(English: Semanitzky =Son of Simeon or Simon, Urista =Son of George)

### **Baba Anastasia and Djidji Luka**

Luka Samanisky (Djidji), son of John Semanitzky and Theodosia/Devda Hliva, was born in Pantna/Pankna (Polish: Petna) a Rusin/Lemko village southeast of Gorlice, Poland and a few miles north of the Regetovka-Komlosa-Becherov-Stebnik cluster of villages in Slovakia (north of the city of Bardejov, Slovakia). Pantna was in the western part of the province of Galicia in the Austrian Empire. The family had lived in the village since at least 1786 when the name appeared on the Greek Catholic list in the Austrian census for the village. The Rusins in the village had probably been there since 1400-1600. The village of Pantna was established in 1547 and was subject to the Vlach Law which was typical of Rusin villages in the Carpathian Mountains. One theory is that the Rusins migrated from the southeast on the south side of the Carpathian Mountains into eastern Slovakia and then crossed over the mountains to the north slope during this period. Another theory is that the Rusin/Lemkos migrated from the northeast part of Galicia and other western provinces of Ukraine. These views are usually influenced by political considerations or national orientations toward Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, or Russia. DNA analysis of some families from the Lemko area seems to support the theory about migration from the southeast. There definitely seems to have been strong connections between the Rusins on both sides of the Beskid Range of the Carpathian Mountains.

Luka's mother, Theodosia Hliva, was born in Regetovka in Saris county of Slovakia (formerly Kingdom of Hungary). Luka's parents died when he was a boy and he and his brother, Yakov, were taken care by other families in the Greek Catholic parish of St. Paraskeva in Pantna. At some point, he must have visited Regetovka and he met Maria Urista, daughter of Gregory Urista and Mary Hudak. He fell in love with Maria, but the Urista family immigrated to Minneapolis. He went to work in the coal mines near Krakow in Poland until he earned enough money to buy a steamship ticket for North America from Bremen, Germany. He arrived in Minneapolis and found the Uristas. Unfortunately or fortunately, Maria was married to another man, George Tokar. Since she was no longer available, he married Maria's older sister, Anastasia (Baba). They lived at 2104 University Avenue NE. The house was demolished in the 1980s when Jax expanded its parking lot.

The name Samanisky was invented in Minneapolis as being easier to deal with than Semanitzky.

The Uristas were from Regetovka and Baba remembered traveling to fairs in Budapest when she was young. The family may have moved to Vienna, Austria for a period of time on their way to Minneapolis. The port of embarkation is unknown, possibly Trieste, Italy or Fiume (Rijeka), Croatia. Anastasia's siblings were Katherine (married Joseph Martonik), Mary (married George Tokar), Anna (married Paul Leba), John (married Theodosia Dupay), and William (married Mary Guzy).

### **Some Family Stories**

Luka said one reason he left the Old Country was to escape military duty in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was said that he was too short to be a Cossack and would have been assigned to clean the

stables. This may have been an imaginative recollection after they took on Russian identity with their fellow parishioners at St. Mary's since it is not clear that the Austro-Hungarian army had Cossacks. Maybe the original reference was to a Hussar, a mounted Hungarian soldier, and it was amended to Cossack to fit the adopted Russian narrative.

After they married in Minneapolis in 1890 (?) and had one child, the Samaniskys moved to Allegheny, PA which is on the north side of Pittsburgh. They were there in 1894 when Anna was born and back in Minneapolis in 1896 when Mary was born. They lived in Minneapolis the rest of their lives.

One of the ways that Luka made a living was as an itinerant woodcutter and firewood peddler. He would walk out the road that became Old Highway 8 or New Brighton Boulevard and chop wood where he could and then tie the bundle to himself and drag it back into town selling what he could along the way. He is remembered as short, but barrel-chested and very strong.

Luka was a financial secretary or Treasurer for St. Mary's in the 1920s. My father can remember him sitting at his desk at home keeping the records of donations to the church. The donation amounts were in cents as often as dollars.

Luka Samanisky was the starosta at the wedding of the parents of Irene Mikkelsen, Harry Yurista and their siblings.

Baba and Djidji only spoke a little English because they lived in an outpost of the Rusin (Russian) world in Northeast Minneapolis. They probably could understand some Polish, Ukrainian, and Hungarian. His grandparents usually called my Dad Vasily.

My father has vivid memories of the wakes for both of his grandparents. The open coffin was laid out in the front room of their house and the friends and relations would come to pay their respects before the funeral liturgy at St. Mary's. They were lifelong members of St. Mary's Orthodox Cathedral and are buried in the church cemetery.

Luka and Anastasia had nine children, 16 grandchildren and 47 great-grandchildren

1. John (married Katherine Jurchisin) became a mitred archpriest in the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church (now the Orthodox Church in America) and served parishes in Canada and the Eastern U.S. His last parish was in Terryville, Connecticut.
2. Anna (married Seman 'Sam' Grivna) and both were involved in St. Mary's Choir and parish organizations. Children were Walter Grivna (married Nina Roman), John Grivna (married Mary Sarich), Ellen (married Anthony Paluch, and Nancy (married Alexander Pavlushik).
3. Mary I (died in infancy)
4. Mary II (married Charles Dion)
5. Katherine (married James McCabe)
6. Helen (unmarried)
7. William (married Frances Zelmanowski) Seabee and incarcerated for 'rum-running' from Canada
8. Olga (married Merle Sutton)
9. Gregory (married Marie Phillips)

### **Greg and Marie's Story**

Family civilizer, Russian School memories, University of Minnesota Master's degree, Social Worker, Musician-Cellist, Church Choir, Balalaika Orchestra, Soviet visitors could not understand his Russian because it was Rusin. Met Marie at U of M where she was a librarian. Puppeteers. Memorialized in the name of the library at St. Mary's Cathedral.

### **My Dad's (William Dion) family**

Mary Samanisky married Charles Dion. They met at the Phoenix Laundry on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue South when they both worked there. The laundry was owned by Charles' father. They lived at 2117 University Avenue NE next to Sokol's Bar. During the Depression they had to move in with Grandma and Grandpa Samanisky across the street. Charles worked in high beam construction and later at Gluek's Brewery. The children were all baptized at St. Mary's and raised in the Russian Orthodox faith. My Dad remembers standing or kneeling during the divine liturgy, the yolkas at Christmas time, and Father Nedzelnitsky responding to him at confession by saying: "You say you have not done anything wrong since your last confession. Pretty good...if true." He also remembers rivalries with Polish boys and being chased home where his older brother was waiting with a basin of water which they threw on the pursuers through the screen door. The Polish kids taught them a Polish song that ended with a line that was something like "and run home and ask your Mommy for a bottle of beer (pivo)." In my father's generation, they understood their background to be Russian, but from some place in Austria-Hungary that was later in Czechoslovakia. In the mid-1930s, a Swedish in-law introduced my grandparents to a Lutheran pastor from South Minneapolis and they eventually joined that church. Some of the Orthodox relatives stopped speaking to my grandmother for a time. When I was young, my grandmother would still say prayers to us in 'Russian' or Church Slavonic. My father was a fighter pilot in WW II and went to St. Olaf College, where he met my mother, Anne Harang, and he became a Lutheran pastor.

Mary and Charles' children were:

Adelaide (unmarried)

Charles (married Audrey Ness)

Katherine (Kay) (married Carl Olson)

William ( married Anne Harang)

Dorothy (married Arnold Shartin)

### **Re-Discovery of Our Rusin Roots**

I grew up in the 1950s and 60s and inherited the sense that our family origins were Russian. Because of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, Russian ethnic identity could be ambivalent or awkward. There was on the one hand the Soviet Union of the Gulag, the Iron Curtain, Stalin, and the threat of atomic war. On the other hand, there was admiration for the role and immense sacrifice of the Soviet Union toward the defeat of the Nazis and the prestige of traditional Russian culture and religion. As late as the early 70s, I remember being a part of a discussion of ethnic background and having another participant physically move away from me and say something like "Russian...Russian, I don't like the thought of being close to a Russian." I replied that they might want to distinguish between Russian and Soviet and consider that some of the most pro-American, anti-Soviet people were people with roots in Eastern Europe who some

sense of what had been repressed. My Dad raised us with an appreciation for our background in spite of the political situation. I think among my generation, I was the most interested in trying to understand where our family had come from.

### Clues to the Mystery

- \*Fifty Year Commemorative Album for St. Mary's Cathedral (1939). Priests from Presov.
- \*Russian from Austria-Hungary or Czechoslovakia?
- \*What is ROGC? Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church.
- \*Rabbi Marcus Breger in Tucson, AZ told my Dad that his family was probably Ruthenian.
- \*Detour 1: Djidji was a Georgian because he resembled Joseph Stalin.
- \*Detour 2: Baba was a Viennese.
- \*Carpatho-Russian Oblast of the Ukrainian SSR - article in the Encyclopedia Britannica (1960s edition).
- \*Letter from my Grandmother – Pantna and Regitive (Regetovka)
- \*The film Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors and the Hutsuls
- \*The film The Deerhunter in which the main characters were 'Russian-Americans' , but actually Carpatho-Rusins from a Pennsylvania mining town.
- \* Detour 3: Were we Ukrainian?
- \*Lemko? Rusinyak and Rusiny?
- \*Orest Subtelny, History of the Ukraine – Lemkos are westernmost Ukrainians.
- \*Comment at Festival of Nations: "You are an integral part of the Ukrainian Nation and don't you ever forget it!!" (It is nice to be wanted...sort of).
- \*Father Basil Shereghy's book on the Byzantine Catholics.
- \*Visit to Pittsburgh and the St. Cyril and St. Methodius Seminary. Eastern Rite Church Tour.
- \*Father Pekar's books on the Eparchies of Presov and Mukacevo/Uzhorod
- \*Rusin Association
- \*Robert Magocsi's books, especially Our People
- \*Keith Dyrud, Quest for the Rusyn Soul
- \* The film Memoirs or Memories of a River Hungarian film by Judit Elek depicts a true story of Rusins and Jews falsely accused and acquitted of ritual murder in Transcarpathia in the late 1800s.

### Books about the Lemko Rusins

Paul Best and Jaroslaw Moklak The Lemkos: Articles and Essays  
Bogdan Horbal Lemko Studies  
Katherine Howansky Reilly Scattered. The experience of her parents' families during the deportation from Lemkovyna in 1947. Their village was a few miles east of Pantna.  
Susan Mihalasky Lemkos View Poland and Poles  
Ioann Polianskii, Lemkovyna  
Wolodymyr Iwanusiw, Church in Ruins  
Jerzy Zak and Andrzej Piecuch, Lemkowskie Cerkwie/Lemko Churches  
Nicholas Karas, Hunky: The Immigrant Experience.  
Wansa, Mark, The Linden and the Oak  
For more see <http://lemkoassociation.org/>

### **Anyone Left in the Old Country?**

Some contact with Urista relatives in Regetovka. No contact with anyone in Pantna or Poland who may have survived the war and the Operation Vistula deportation. By Google search, I found a Semanicki in Pila in northwestern Poland. The family might be related since that is an area where Lemkos were resettled in the late 1940s and it seems to be an uncommon surname.

### **Rusin History and Current Events in Ukraine**

One of the reasons the Rusin people survived is that they settled in what were initially unpopulated highlands that nobody else wanted. Their homeland in the Carpathian Mountains was usually a remote corner of some larger country or empire. The area came under the control of Poland and Hungary and after 1700, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Under pressure from Roman Catholic rulers, they tried to avoid conversion to Roman Catholicism and Polish or Hungarian culture, by negotiating a union with Rome which allowed them to maintain the teachings and rituals of the Orthodox Church while recognizing the Pope as the supreme head of the church. This Uniate agreement was called Greek or Byzantine Catholicism and it seems like the Rusins became Catholic in order to protect Eastern Orthodoxy under difficult circumstances. Greek Catholicism and Ukrainian identity were encouraged by the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a counter to Russian influence. The Rusins in turn attracted the attention of the Russian Empire before World War I as part of the strategy to counter the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Russian agents encouraged the Rusins to think of themselves as Russians. This policy actually was one of the reasons that the Rusins (including our great-grandparents) that started St. Mary's Church in Minneapolis and in other places in America adopted the Russian Orthodox faith and Russian ethnicity. The Tsar or the Tsarist government actually made donations toward the construction of the church and several of the icons in the sanctuary. After World War I, the homeland was divided between Poland and Czechoslovakia. After World War II, the eastern part of the Rusin lands was occupied by the Soviet army and transferred to the Ukrainian S.S.R. The Greek Catholic Church was persecuted and forcibly reunited with the Russian Orthodox Church and the Rusin identity was merged with the Ukrainian identity in the official policy of the Soviet -backed regimes. After the Communist period ended, the Greek Catholic Church emerged from the catacombs and the Rusin and, in Poland, Lemko identity also re-surfaced. In Poland, deported Lemkos have been allowed to return to their home villages on a limited basis. In Slovakia, Rusins are allowed to express their culture fairly freely, but there is a tendency to assimilate to Slovak identity for practical reasons. In the Ukraine, the government has discouraged Rusin identity and official policy is that they are Ukrainian hillbillies. Meanwhile, the Russian government has been supporting the Orthodox Church in the Rusin areas (Transcarpathia or Zakarpatska Rus or Podkarpatska Rus) against the revived Greek Catholic Church as part of its policy to weaken the Ukrainian government and ethnic identity. This was all before the recent government collapse and Russian annexation of the Crimea. It is hard to say what might happen next to the Rusins in the Ukraine. I don't know if the West (the European Union and the U.S.) functions as a contemporary version of the historical rivalry between Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but let us hope that Putin doesn't try and 'liberate' them.

It is no wonder that many Rusins lost touch with their background. It is a heavy burden to be from a lesser known, stateless ethnic group with a complicated history. Nzdrovije! Ja rusin byl Jesm I budu! (Cheers! I was, am, and will be a Rusin forever!).