

# LEMKOS AND THE UKRAINIAN NATIONAL ASSOCIATION

## ...SO WHAT IS THE CONNECTION?



Most of you have heard of the Ukrainian National Association, (the UNA). After all, it operates Soyuzivka; it publishes the Ukrainian language newspaper “*Svoboda*” and the English language “*The Ukrainian Weekly*”. However, what is it, and what does it have to do with the Lemkos?

The Ukrainian National Association remains, 113 years after its establishment in 1894, the largest Ukrainian organization in terms of membership, and is, certainly, the oldest. It is a fraternal organization— an organization that was established solely for helping our poor, exploited immigrant. The UNA’s goal was, firstly, to protect the life of the working class Ukrainian immigrant, provide enlightenment and cultivate the feeling of a Ukrainian national identity among our immigrants. The UNA, by 1900, had become the core of the organized immigrant community life in the USA, in close cooperation with the Church. In fact, with many clergymen in leadership, it began a driving force for the church expansion and preservation of the Eastern-rite traditions.

As most of us know, the early immigrants did not identify themselves as “Ukrainians” as Ukraine had not existed as an independent state. They identified themselves from the village where they were born or the region from which they came, for example: Boykos, Hutsuls, and Bukovinians.

But, how many of us realize that the very first brave pioneers that reached our American shores were Lemkos?

They preceded the Galicians, and Zakarpattian immigrants by at least 20 years. The UNA, as the oldest Ukrainian American organization, and “*Svoboda*” which has been chronicling the life of the community since the earliest days, therefore, shares its history with these first brave immigrants. They were the reason for UNA’s creation and the Lemkos, specifically, played a significant role in its establishment and growth.



The Lemkos began arriving en masse in the 1870s. The first Lemko immigrant, as per UNA archives, was one, Mychajlo Durkota from the village of Hanchowa, near Hrybowa in the early 1870s. The Lemkos were being recruited by unscrupulous American coal and steel barons who needed to replace striking American miners. Furthermore, agents from steamship lines were paid 'by the head' to fill the immigration ships with fare-paying passengers. These agents promised 'streets paved with gold' in America.

The oil barons were overjoyed that with this new Slavic worker, hardworking and unsuspecting, that would work for \$0.70 @ hour versus the \$3.50 @ hour that the American worker commanded. These new miners were honest, hardworking, strong, and amenable.

Of course, our poor Ivan had no idea why he was immediately hated and subject to terrible treatment in this new land. The local populace, Irish and Welsh miners, would subject these, “strikebreakers”, as they were called, to frequent showers of rocks, bricks and catcalls. Fights were frequent and did not always end well. The Protestants thought the Eastern-rite religion, with three-day religious celebrations, mystic and elaborate ceremonies were hedonistic. The Poles, on the other hand, tried to polanize them and force them into the Latin rite. The coercion was intense. Add to the problem married priests and the bigotry and intolerance against our immigrants was overwhelming. Since most of the boardinghouse owners were Poles, each Lemko boarder had to attend Latin mass and pay \$0.50 a week to the Latin Church. At the same time, the Magyars tried to absorb the Lemkos into their

culture. Last of all, the Russians insisted the immigrants were Russians—of course, a “lower strata Russian”.

The rich barons controlled everything in town ---stores, prices, taxes, and housing. Even traveling from one town to the next required permission. . It often placed immigrants further into debt at company-owned stores, as they sold products at exorbitant prices and then deducted payments from the worker’s salary, leaving the miners with almost nothing.

Yet, that did not stop our people coming. Thousands were leaving under the “slogan” “*Xoch ne leepshe, aby inshe...*” (*Maybe not better- but at least different*).

Life was hazardous. Even the youngest worked. Children worked in the mines from ages 8-14 as “breakers”, sitting in coal chutes picking out rocks, debris, and slate six days a week, ten hours a day, making only \$0.45 a day.

But, with such conditions, what would propel so many to leave the green lands of Lemkivshchyna for the black, dusty land of the American coalmines?

*“Once our ancestors were happy--lived happily, and now? ...not a sheep left for our Lemko, not even the ends of the bread, because the “Pany” (landowners) took the forests---stripped the fields, and the masses make every effort to go to Ameryka”.*  
(1894 Svoboda n.15)

They left for the promise of greater opportunity. With so little land left for our Lemko, he could no longer support himself, much less provide for his children. It was imperative he earn money for his family back home. The first Ukrainian settlements in the United States were in Shenandoah and Shamokin, Pennsylvania and both of these communities were settled first by Lemkos. Lemkos were the founders of many Ukrainian communities, first in Pennsylvania in the towns of Olyphant, Hazleton, McAdoo, and Allentown—and later, Yonkers, Pittsburgh, Passaic, Carteret; and others on the Eastern Seaboard. They built the first churches, the first community centers.

First, the men came alone. 70% of the early immigrant’s were men. Later the women joined them, working in factories and as housekeepers. In an article in Svoboda in 1894, the arrival of “our own women”, was lauded and greeted with great enthusiasm. Many were mail-order brides, characterized as “*hardworking, handsome, and above all, virtuous, and pious.*”

The immigrants from Lemkivshyna and Haychyna were frugal. Somehow, they not only managed to survive economically, but put aside money to build churches, community centers and sent significant monies back home. According to the editor of “Svoboda”, Luke Myshuha in the 1936 UNA Jubilee book, these amazing immigrants had been sending an average of \$5,000,000 back to the old country annually since 1894!

Deaths were frequent and at a young age. The three major causes of death were mining accident, tuberculosis, and pneumonia. The cold, damp conditions in the mine led to many illnesses and premature deaths.

Svoboda obituaries were filled with such examples, which characterized the perils of an immigrant’s life.

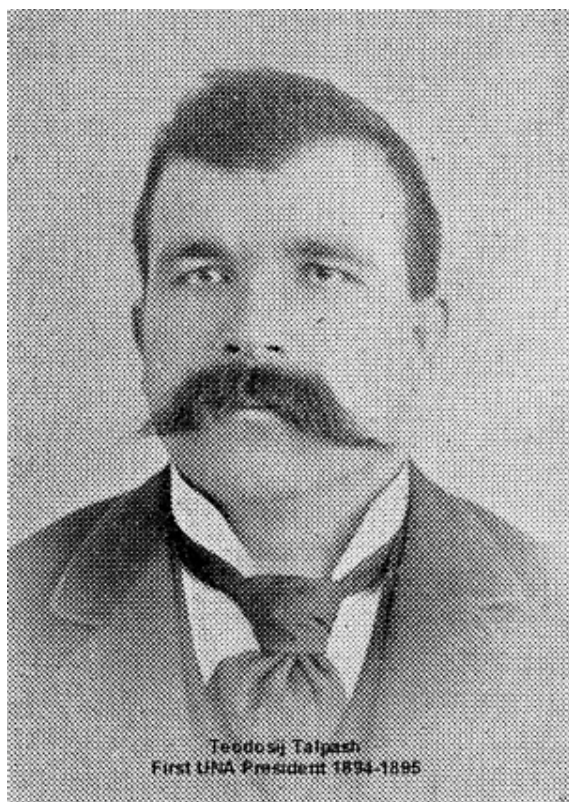
*Mychajlo Turko, age 35, died October 1, 1893, buried 18 days in coal mine, leaves behind grief-stricken wife with hungry children, youngest 3 months.*

*Stefan Huska, age 25, of Nowy Sanch died August 27, 1894, children 3. Wife precedes him in death of childbirth last year.*

Only four percent of Ukraine's early immigrants were skilled artisans, merchants, or professionals and few who came to the United States during this early period could read or write Ukrainian, let alone English. However, there was a group of clergymen from Halychyna and several prominent Lemkos and Galicians that were literate and were the beacons behind the idea of a national organization—an organization they would help our suffering brother immigrants. The organization would, at the very least, provide the funds necessary for the members to bury their own (the miners were uninsurable by traditional companies) and set aside some help for the grieving families.

As was written in November 1, 1893 in Svoboda: *"Ukrainians scattered across this land need a national organization, namely such a brotherhood, such a national union that would embrace each and every Ukrainian no matter where he lives. ...in unity, there is strength, and it is not easily defeated. ..."*

Therefore, 20 years after the arrival of the first settler, in Shamokin, PA, on February 22, 1894, the word became deed and the Ukrainian National Association (Ruthenian, as it was then known) was born.



Theodosij Talpash of Shamokin was elected supreme president of the new organization. He was a Lemko from Labowa, an intelligent accomplished businessman that arrived in America in 1884. He was one of six sons of a middle class farmer and knew that their was to enough inheritance to divide the land among the six brothers. He was educated and looked to America for prosperity. At first, he

worked in the coalmines, but his natural intelligent, strength and size, got him a job, as a bartender-bouncer in the Vanderbilt Hotel. After the death of Mr. Vanderbilt on the Titanic, he ran the hotel for the widow until he bought his own hotel and boarding house. He was one of the most successful Lemkos.

Michael Yevchak, another Lemko was elected supreme vice-president and Lemko Ivan Glova born in Nowyj Sanch, was elected supreme treasurer. Other Lemkos were prominent in those first few decades. Half of the ten-member General Assembly Advisors were Lemkos: Michael Halkovych, (perhaps a relative of your president Zenon Halkowych?) Onufriy Murdza, Michael Adzyna; Oleksiy Shlianta; Yurko Khyliak. One of the three auditors was Lemko Gabriel Gulovych.

The first four brotherhoods to join the UNA were the Brotherhood of St. Nicholas, founded on January 18, 1885, in Shenandoah; the Brotherhood of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, founded in 1887, in Shamokin; the Brotherhood of St. John the Baptist, founded on October 14, 1886, in Olyphant; and the Brotherhood of St. Nicholas, founded in Pittsburgh in 1888. The first three were established by Lemkos. As brotherhoods joined, they became UNA branches simultaneously.

The UNA became a crusader. It organized reading room in every city where a branch existed Ukrainians lived; in the first year, 1894, 2000 books were distributed. It set upon teaching adults to read and write as well as establishing the first Ukrainian schools for its youth.

The UNA and Svoboda were enlighteners. They promoted education among the people, encouraged their political involvement in American life, and raised their national consciousness. It was Svoboda, according to immigration historian Dr. Myron B. Kuropas that forged the Ukrainian national identity in America.

The UNA promoted Ukrainian national aspirations and fought for Ukraine's independence, revealed the truth about the Great Famine, spoke out for displaced persons following World War II and defended the independence newly regained during this decade. It spearheaded the campaigns for a Taras Shevchenko monument in Washington and the establishment of Ukrainian studies at Harvard University, and it was an advocate for repressed and persecuted Ukrainian activists for human, national, and religious rights.

As a token to our Lemko origins, it still provides annual assistance for Lemkos in Poland and offers a small scholarship for a student of Lemko descent.

The first two decades featured many accomplished Lemkos in the leadership of UNA: Teodosij Talpash (President 1894-85; Vice President 1896-97); Ivan Glova (President 1896-98; Treasurer 1894-96); Yuriy Khyliak (Treasurer 1895-98; President 1898-1900); Dmytro Kapitula (President 1908-1917); Oleksij Kuryla (Vice President 1896-97); Oleksij Sharshon (National Secretary 1900-1902 ; Treasurer 1900-1917;) Rev Ivan Ardan (Treasurer 1897-98; Editor-in-chief Svoboda 1900-07) ; Denys Prych (Treasurer 1900-04). Lemkos took prominent branch positions within UNA and were foremost in leading the organized life of the early immigrants.

Today, at 113 years of age, The Ukrainian National Association has assets of \$68 million and a membership of 40,000. It has grown far, far beyond what it was at the time of its founding. However, one thing has remained constant: its devotion to its founding principles. Throughout its history, the UNA has always extended a helping hand to its members, the Ukrainian community in the United States and Canada, Ukrainians wherever they have settled, and to Ukraine.





***Photo: Protest against Russian domination 1934 - Detroit***

With the declaration of Ukraine's independence, the UNA focused on helping the people of that formerly Soviet-dominated land. It has supported many a project, from textbooks for the children of Ukraine to handbooks for businesspersons, and it has initiated its own educational projects, the Teaching English in Ukraine Program and the Summer Institute for teachers of the English language. It sponsors an adoption weekend seminar for American poarents who have adopted children from Ukraine at

Soyuzivka and supported the election observers for the elections in Ukraine.

It has partnered with other community organizations to sponsor many an event or program For example, UNA supports a SITCH soccer team, that has mutual members.

Our summer camp, that concentrate on heritage preservation, cultural and sports programs provide our youth opportunities to meet with each other and cultivate an understanding and pride in their heritage.

In short, the UNA has always been there for all Ukrainians. Will it continue to be there in the next 100 years?

The future depends upon both the new generations of Ukrainians who have grown up in North America and the new wave of immigrants recently arrived on these shores from Ukraine. Will they see the value of the Ukrainian National Association, become its members, and take upon themselves the organization's leadership?

I call on all of you to become involved and become a member. As a not for profit--- the income we receive for premium income on our life insurance policies, annuities or endowments, goes to support many community projects.

We are there to serve you and our entire Ukrainian community.

*UNA: Partners with the Community...Partners forLife....*

## **Roma Lisovich**

***Treasurer, Ukrainian National Association, Inc.***

Sources: various issues of "Svoboda", UNA Jubilee Books, 1904, 1920, 1936; *Ukrainian-American Citadel: The First 100 Years of the Ukrainian National Association*, by Dr. Myron B. Kuropas, published in 1996 by East European Monographs of Boulder, Colo