I’m a Descendent of “Sifton’s Pets”:
the Frykas Family Immigration History

Samantha Price
University of Winnipeg

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the Frykas family history, mainly the immigration of Yurko (George) and Paraska (Pearl) Frykas and their children to Canada in 1898. They came to this country, from Galicia, during the mass immigration of Ukrainians between 1892 and 1914 (Lehr 1991:31). Times were hard, but the family managed to get a piece of land for a homestead near Mink Creek, Manitoba. Since then, four more generations of Frykas’ have come to pass, with mine being the third. Although no one has lived there for over a decade, the homestead of Yurko and Paraska Frykas is still in the family, with the original house still standing. Pictures of family still hang on the walls and furniture is arranged much like it would have been set up when someone last lived there.

My original thesis was to examine the difficulties for Ukrainian immigrants coming to Canada, but while conducting my research I have discovered how little information can actually be discovered for Ukrainian settlers in the Dauphin/Ethelbert area. As well, there are several instances in which information that has been passed down orally through the Frykas family has significant gaps that have been able to be filled by the written documents from the same time and vice versa. Based on these insights, my thesis statement is the examination of the difficulties for Ukrainian immigrants coming to Canada between 1892 and 1914 with a side study looking into the inconsistencies between written documents and oral histories.

RESEARCH TOPIC

Ethnohistory is a discipline which looks into history through the eyes of the person who directly experienced that time. This can be accomplished by combining both oral and written documents. Four main sources may be used for this: indigenous documents, transcribed oral traditions, firsthand accounts and descriptions by outsiders and colonial administrative documents (Costin 2002:262). These sources can be acquired by looking into archival documents, interviewing those who lived during that time or recording the stories they passed down to the descendents.

The main primary sources for my project are documents recording my ancestors’ beginnings in Canada. These include the ship manifest documenting when the Yurko and Paraska Frykas arrived at Ellis Island in New York in 1898. The letters and other forms between Yurko Frykas, the Dominion Lands agent and the Dominion Lands Office that were created during the process of obtaining the homestead were a rich resource for this project. In addition, death and marriage records from Vital Statistics, the family record from the 1901 census, interment records from Riverside Cemetery in Dauphin, Manitoba and photographs of headstones at Mink Creek Holy Trinity Cemetery (Manitoba) provide more information on the family. As well, an interview was conducted with Sharon Price (née Frykas), the great-granddaughter of Yurko and Paraska Frykas in order to obtain
additional information into the lives of the settlers.

Looking into literature regarding the immigration of Ukrainians to Canada between 1892 and 1914, there were several key points that arose. People were not happy living in the old country of Galicia, because they had very little land and could not sustain their families with their little farms (Lehr 1991:31). Also, they hoped to improve their children’s lives by moving their families to Canada (Lehr 1991:33). Dr. Josef Oleskow had toured Canada in 1895 and was encouraging Ukrainians to immigrate to Canada because there was ‘free land’ available to them there (Kaye 1964:12). The minister of the department of the interior at that time was Clifford Sifton and he was very enthusiastic and approved of bringing the Ukrainians coming to Canada, but others were not so convinced and referred to the immigrants as ‘Sifton’s Pets’ (Swyripa 1991:12). The Nor’Wester/Winnipeg Telegram “saw the

CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND INTERPRETIVE CONTEXT

Between 1892 and 1914, about 170,000 Ukrainians immigrated to Canada (Lehr 1985:208). The principle source for these immigrants was Galicia, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Swyripa 1991:13; Lehr 1985:208). The major influence for the immigration to Canada was a Dr. Josef Oleskow. He was very interested in getting immigrants from Galicia to Canada. He contacted the Canadian government in April 1895, wanting to find out any information regarding land available for settlers in Canada (Kaye 1964:3). After receiving information from the Canadian government and making a visit to Canada in the summer of 1895, he wrote several immigration pamphlets on Canada (Kaye 1964). He encouraged the Ukrainians to immigrate to Canada after the failed attempt in South America (Lehr and Picknicki Morski 1999; Petryshyn 1991). The Ukrainians also wanted the opportunity to make life better for their children (Lehr 1991). At this point, they were living on farms that were much too small to sustain their families. The reason for this was that one usually obtained land by inheriting it from their father, and a farm can only be divided so many times between sons before one is left with very little.

Clifford Sifton was the Minister of the Department of the Interior at this time and was very much in favour of having the Ukrainians come to populate the country and to set up farms. He believed their background in agriculture would provide a great way for Canada to begin agricultural settlements within the vast, unsettled areas of the new nation. A large number of other people were not as excited for this new opportunity as Sifton was. The Brazilian government was targeting people from Galicia promising an allotment of land between twenty-five and thirty hectares in deforested areas. Over 20,000 Ukrainians had arrived in Brazil by 1896. Once there, they had to deal with the harsh conditions of farming in the rainforest. Most of the land was forested and covered in trees that were hard to fell, making clearing the land difficult. The tropical soils did not support the crops brought from the homeland, leaving them to substitute wheat, rye and potatoes for beans and rice. What they could grow could not sustain them and they would have starved if it had not been for nuts found growing natively and ‘palm cabbages’ from palms. On top of the issues with agriculture, the settlers were also very susceptible to many diseases including malaria and yellow fever (Lehr and Picknicki Morski 1999).
Ukrainian immigrants as immoral, dishonest, irreligious and superstitious, incooperative and lawless and stupide” (Lehr and Moodie 1980:93). In addition, they were also “described as ‘riff-raff’ and ‘moral lepers’ whose ‘bandit habits’ had caused the Austrian government to deport them (Lehr and Moodie 1980:93)². As a whole, the Telegram as well as the Winnipeg Tribune reflected a very negative stance on Ukrainian’s immigrating to Canada. The Manitoba Free Press had an opposite, less extreme position on the matter (Lehr and Moodie 1980:91).

Sifton still encouraged the immigration to continue though, with his famous quote being, “I think a stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born on the soil, whose forefathers have been farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and half a dozen children is good quality” (Sifton 1922:16 as cited in Lehr and Moodie 1980:89; Lehr 1991:38). Sifton’s continued support for the immigrants left them to be named ‘Sifton’s Pets’. Residents already present in Canada were opposed to Ukrainians coming to the land because they believed them, simple and dirty, following the lead that the papers had created. In addition they did not agree with the fact that they saw the women out in the fields, working just as hard as the men (Swyripa 1991:12).

The government was highly sensitive to the charges that the Ukrainian’s were “pauper immigrants” and were believed to likely become a burden to the government’s treasury. Because of this, the government agents helping the immigrants get to their homesteads strategized in where they placed the immigrants. They chose areas for the Ukrainians to settle based on their merits for short term survival rather than long term survival (Lehr 1987:6).

When immigrants started coming to the country, Star, Alberta was a popular place to settle. The government wished to create a better dispersal of Ukrainians so as the better divide the land and assimilate them to Canadian society. Therefore, agents began to encourage settlers to other areas of the Prairies, one of those areas being Dauphin, Manitoba, where my family chose to settle (Lehr 1977).

When the immigrants came to populate the land, they paid a ten dollar entry registration fee to get 160 acres of land (one quarter section) under the Dominion Lands Act. They had to live on the land for six months of the year for three years. During this time, they had to build a house and clear the land in preparation for a crop. Once they had completed these requirements and had become a Canadian citizen, they could apply for patent. When they had been granted patent to the land, they were the true owners of the land (Martin 1938:395,405). They chose to settle in areas of the parkland rather than the prairies because it was rich with raw materials to make their homes which were not available on the prairies (Darlington 1991: 54).

The immigrants did not come to Canada with much money. They scrounged up whatever they could in the mother land before they made the passage, Yurko and Paraska came with $80 to their name (Trojan Prince 1898). The cost for passage was five dollars, but that alone would not get them to the new country. They had to go through a physical examination and have what was deemed enough money to make it in the new country as well (Price 2010).

There were several different sources of information that the Ukrainians had on opportunities in the new country. Dr. Josef Oleskow was not the only source for them, although he seemed to be the most informative and objective in his writings. They also received information from family

² As cited from Nor’Wester, May 17, 1898; Winnipeg Telegram March 7, 1899; and February 20, 1900.
and friends who had already made the journey to Canada. The views they received from those who were writing from Canada seemed to concentrate more on the merits of Canada and some even went as far to say that government regulation and interference were non-existent (Lehr 1983:9). A third source were the steamship agents in Europe, who were more concerned with securing ticket commissions and therefore the volume of traffic going through the ports than enlightening the immigrants on their prospects (Lehr 1983: 8). The largest area of confusion was the explanation of the homesteads. In Oleskow’s literature the term was translated and explained, so those who had read his pamphlets had no doubt as to what it meant. For others, homestead was translated to Ukrainian as ‘farm’, and therefore those who only had information from those sources believed that they were receiving a fully developed farm with cleared land and the basic buildings (Lehr 1983:12).

My ancestors, Yurko and Paraska Frykas arrived at Ellice Island in New York on November 6, 1898 (Trojan Prince 1898) with their children Julia, Petro and Elias (Alex). A third son, Michael was to join them in the new country at a later date. Shortly afterwards they arrived in Dauphin, Manitoba and applied to receive a quarter section of land, N.E. 28-22W-20 through the Dominion Lands Act. They received entry for this land on May 15, 1899, but did not live on the land until March of 1904 (Frykas June 1904).

Shortly after arriving in Dauphin, Yurko became ill and was not able to go out to the land to make the necessary motions to claim his place there. As a result, extensive correspondence was sent between the Department of the Interior and the Lands agent within Dauphin regarding the homestead, in which notice of cancellation of the land claim was sent several times.

Yurko was so ill at one point, that he spent some time in the Winnipeg General Hospital (Dauphin Doctor June 1900) and the family was not sure if he would survive. The only reason they kept their land was because Yurko insisted that his son, Michael would soon be joining the family from Galicia and would be able to take over the homestead. At another point in 1904, the land was almost lost to another settler, a John Witnicki (Huchman Feb. 1904), and the only reason they kept it was because by that time, they were already living on the land. From that point, there are Homestead Inspector’s reports that were completed to show progress in the settlement on the homestead. Yurko applied for patent of his land in 1907, he received confirmation of patent and naturalization on November 6, 1907 (Acting Deputy Commissioner, Oct. 1907).

While the family was in Dauphin, Petro died in June of 1902; the cause of death is not known. Petro was buried in Riverside Cemetery in Dauphin Manitoba (Riverside records). Julia married a John Bihun in March of 1902 and died reportedly during childbirth in 1904. She is buried in Mink Creek Holy Trinity Cemetery as Julia Frykas. Paraska died in 1926, Yurko in 1932 and they are laid to rest next to Julia in Mink Creek Holy Trinity Cemetery (Family Contribution, The Ties that Bind).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As discussed in the historical context, while Sifton was quite enthusiastic to bring the Ukrainians to Canada, many others were not. “They labelled them as ‘Sifton’s Pets’ – dirty, ignorant and garlic smelling – and demanded their assimilation to British-Canadian ideals and standards of conduct,” (Swyripa 1991:12). These people had come to Canada to make a better life for their children (Lehr 1991:33), not to be
treated like they were not welcome. Not only did these people come to Canada with little money (Trojan Prince 1898), they spoke a completely different language than what was present in the new country. As they went through the process of immigrating, and even once settled in Canada, the language barrier proved to be an issue, as can be seen the number of ways the names of Ukrainians have been mistaken on both ship manifests and the census. Once here, they had to fight to keep their land, working hard to clear enough land and get a house built before the deadline set by the Dominion Lands Office was up and they gave the land to another settler (Martin 1938). The government did not want them to fail though. They listened to their requests and worked with the immigrants to get them the land that was the most suitable (Lehr 1987). On numerous occasions, while Yurko was sick and the family was staying in Dauphin and even once the family was already living on the farm, Yurko had to negotiate with the Lands Office to keep his land, even humbling himself to tell them that he was poor and needed the land to make a living for his family. Knowing the values instilled on our family today and how proud we are, this was a huge deal for Yurko to have to plead with the Dominion Lands Office to keep the land, especially to tell them that he was poor.

Other issues I have noticed in completing my research are the inconsistencies between the written documents and oral histories that have been passed down through the family. The first case being that up until the manifest for the family arriving in New York was found, my family was not aware of the existence of a Petro Frykas (Price 2010a). A picture that is tucked into a frame that contains the photo of Yurko Frykas is the only photographic evidence that exists. In the picture, Petro looks like a little ghost, our “little lost boy”. This picture is on the wall in Yurko and Paraska’s home to this date and yet, nobody ever asked who this little boy was in the picture. According to Vital Statistics, a Petro Frykas did exist, he died in Dauphin Manitoba on June 23, 1903 (1903-002582). His interment record at Riverside Cemetery in Dauphin lists him in Section 33-Potters, Block 1. Looking at the map of the cemetery, he is in a corner of the cemetery off to the side and if one were to go to the cemetery, a headstone is not present. Based on the location of his grave, the fact that he shares it with another person (Riverside Record) and that his section is titled: Section 33-Potters; Petro Frykas was laid to rest in a Potter’s Field, which is considered a burial place for pauper’s and strangers (Knowles 2006). Knowing society’s view on Ukrainians at that time and the fact that the family was so poor, it would make sense that Petro would have had to be buried in a potter’s field. The family may not have belonged to a church yet to have a cemetery readily available to them for Petro to be buried in and they had not moved to their homestead yet so they did not have the option to have him buried at the farm.

The second case is that of Julia (Frykas) Bihun. The family knows that she was married to a John Bihun, and yet she was laid to rest as a Frykas because of a disagreement between her husband and her father or the uncooperative behaviour of her husband in the case of placing a headstone at her grave (Price 2010a). The cause of Julia’s

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3 This term has biblical allusion to Matthew 27:7. The field is said to have been bought with the thirty pieces of silver which had been paid to Judas for the betrayal of Jesus. Priests had paid Judas for his betrayal, and before he committed suicide, the repentant Judas had returned the silver to the priests. The fact that Judas commits suicide has made Potter’s field a place where persons who have committed suicide may be buried as well. Merriam Webster (2010) states that it may also be a burial place for criminals.
death was believed to be typhoid fever for a long time, until a family member, my grandfather’s sister (Yurko and Paraska’s granddaughter) had mentioned to others that Julia had actually died in childbirth. Until that point, some of the family was not aware that Julia had actually been married (Price 2010a). Even looking in the history book of the Ethelbert area, it did not state that Julia had been married. If one were to search for the death record of a Julia Frykas or Bihun, not one entry shows up, yet her headstone shows her existence quite clearly and the descendents of her siblings know that she existed. A marriage record exists in Vital Statistics, saying that a John Bihun married a Helen Frykas in March of 1902, (1902-002257) around the time that Julia and John would have been married. In this case, it is believed to be that the bride’s name was recorded incorrectly as the Frykas family did not have a Helen Frykas in 1902 and there was only one John Bihun in the area (Price 2010b). As seen already, huge mistakes were made in recording Ukrainian’s names all the time, one of the many results of the language barriers and the illiteracy of some of the immigrants. In Julia’s case, it must have just been that whoever wrote up the document could not understand her when she stated her name.

A third case is the illness of Yurko Frykas. It was not until the documentation regarding the family’s application for land and their struggle to maintain possession of it was found that the generations today were aware Yurko was sick while the family was living in Dauphin.

While there may have been several different reasons for why the records for Petro and Julia are fragmented and we did not know why Yurko was sick, I can definitely think of a few. To this day, the family does not like to talk about the skeletons in our closet. They put it another way, they do not like to “dig up dirt”. I can only imagine the tough life the family was living when in Dauphin, and then to lose a son so young and a daughter so soon afterwards would have been unbearable. I can see how it would have been easy to just not talk about Petro and bring up any of the pain or bad memories surrounding his death. As for Julia, well it is better to think about the good times in a person’s life when you remember them than to dwell on the bad. As far as Yurko’s sickness, the family may have just been so grateful and happy to have their land and wanted to concentrate on the future and what was to come rather than what had happened.

CONCLUSION

Researching one’s family history can provide great insight into the lives of one’s ancestors and the difficulties they endured. Through researching the Frykas family history I was able to get a glimpse into my ancestor’s lives. The records from the Dominion Lands Office proved to be a valuable resource, showing just how difficult it was for Yurko to hold onto his land while he was sick and even once he had moved on to the farm. I had always known it had been difficult for them to come to Canada, but I had never known just how hard it had been for them to be accepted. It is funny to look at how my brother and I joke about our ancestry now that I have done this research. With my ancestry being one half Ukrainian and the other half a mixture of the British Isles, we would joke that we are one half Ukrainian, one half mutt. This was not to say we thought the British side inferior, it was the fact it was a mixture. At one point in history though, the Ukrainian side would have been considered the “mutt” side and the British side far superior.

As previously mentioned in the introduction, while I was researching this topic, I found that both the written
documentation found and the family history that has been passed down had gaps, but when the two were combined, they revealed an almost complete picture. The cause of death for Petro Frykas and why the generations of the family that came after him were not aware of him until the discovery of his name on the manifest is not known. It is very likely that we will never know why the family never mentioned him. Information regarding his death may be able to be obtained yet through further research into the actually physical death certificate, available from Vital Statistics for a fee. What I would really like to know is what happened to him, so maybe we can begin to understand why he was never mentioned before.

Another mystery lies in the illness that stopped Yurko from clearing his land on the schedule the Lands Office required. All that is known at this point in time is that he was ill and had to go to Winnipeg General Hospital at some point in time. Additional research may be conducted into looking for old patient records from the hospital, if they even exist, to see if a record for Yurko Frykas is present.

Although some of these mysteries may never be solved, this has been an amazing experience looking into a chapter of my family’s history. Because I am four generations separated from Yurko and Paraska I never had the chance to meet them or their son Elias, my great-grandfather. My grandfather, John, (Elias’ son) was already seventy-four by the time I was born and he passed away when I was sixteen years old. My mother is John’s youngest child and while she can give me much information on these family members, as we can see it is quite incomplete. Because of this, I feel that there are many stories I have missed out on hearing and experiencing. I truly understand Angela Sidney when she described her stories as her wealth (Sidney as cited in Cruikshank 1996). This is not to say that I feel poor, on the contrary, this project has allowed me to see just what amazing traits and rich cultural heritage I have in fact inherited.

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Huchman, F. K. April 23, 1900. Letter to the Commissioner of Dominion Lands. File No. 18550


Huchman, F. K. April 23, 1900. Letter to the Commissioner of Dominion Lands. File No. 18550


4 The death record for Petro Frykas was obtained. His cause of death was listed as natural causes, which while may seem strange for an eleven year old boy to die of natural causes during this day and age; it may very well have been possible then with the state of the healthcare at that time. Another possibility may be simply the discrimination against Ukrainians apparent again. As it is, Petro’s birthplace is listed as Russia, not Galacia or even Austria, which would be expected. This is another stance in which the English simply looked at them and assumed who they were or where they were from. The doctor may have simply not wanted to complete the autopsy and list Petro’s death simply as natural causes to get on to the next case or to other patients.
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