Office of the Commissioner of Immigration
Winnipeg, Manitoba May 15, 1897

Sir,

As I have previously written you, there are quite a large number of these Galicians who are still remaining in this Shed (Immigration sheds) and have absolutely no money .... Most of these are what is known in their country as Bukownians, and are somewhat different from the regular Galicians; their chief difference, however, being in their religious persuasion. They do not affiliate, and, in fact, are detested by the Galicians; they are a lower class, more destitute (poor) and more awkward to handle.

Now, I cannot see what these people will do without a single dollar if they should be placed on land; it would be a case of assistance from the Government for some time, and the expense would run up very high.

I secured a contract of 1000 cords (stacks) of wood to be cut about fifteen miles from the City, at 45 cents per cord, and they to board themselves. I thought when I had secured this contract that I should be able to get them to go at once, and thus enable them to earn a little money at least during this month, and after that I would probably be able to engage them with farmers during haying and harvest, for, as you know, for the next month farmers will not require any help. They are raising a row over the matter however, with Genik, the Interpreter, and he seems entirely in a quandary (uncertain) as to what to do with them. They are an obstinate (stubborn) class, and complain that misrepresentations (lies) were made to induce (convince) them to come out here.

They were told that the Crown Princess of Austria was in Montreal, and that she would see that they got free lands with houses on them, cattle and so forth, and that all they required to do was to telegraph to her in Montreal in case their requests were not granted. These and other similar stories have been so impressed on their minds that they now seem very unsettled, and talk about going back to Austria. Well God knows we should be glad to get rid of them, but what effect would it have on future immigration from that country.

(Signed)

W.F. McCreary

Myron Kostaniuk reflects

Excerpt from an article published in The Ukrainian Canadian magazine in 1990.

The Ukrainian Canadian magazine

September 1990

“Because I was a peasant who had no trade, I was only able to do hard labour for which the pay was very low. If there were no jobs in Winnipeg, like others I got work on railroad extra gangs. We traveled on freight trains from one place to another. I remember working in Wynyard, Saskatchewan, where the boss treated us so roughly that we quit. Another time a few of us walked miles to get to Yorkton where, we were told, jobs were available on extra gangs. However when we arrived, tired and hungry, we were told that we had come too late, and that there were no jobs for us. Catching freight trains to places where we were told jobs were available became part of our life, but we were often chased off the trains.”

The Ukrainian Canadian, September 1990, Kobzar Publishing Limited.
Photograph taken in 1930 of Ukrainian women clearing land near Athabasca, Alberta.

Ukrainian women cutting logs, Athabasca, Alberta, ca. 1930. Library and Archives Canada/Canadian National Railway Company fonds/C-019134
Mary Prokop’s Story

I am the daughter of early pioneer immigrants—poor, landless and illiterate (unable to read and/or write) peasants from the village of Bovdury, Brody District, Lviv Province. My father Onufrey Michalchuk (immediately rechristened (renamed) "Fred" in the new world) arrived in Canada in 1899 or 1900 from Western Ukraine which was then under Austro-Hungarian rule. He found shelter with former village compatriots (people of the same nationality) at Mundare, Alberta. My mother Kateryna, with my eldest, then four and a half year old sister Rosie, came in the spring of 1902.

... At first, my parents settled on a homestead a few miles out of Mundare. With the help of friends, my father had built a log cabin with a lean-to shed or barn against it. It had a door, gunnysacks filled with hay for windows and some rough-hewn furniture. Mother was disappointed; she had expected better. With the few dollars that Dad had and what was left of Mother's earnings from Winnipeg, they bought a milk cow and some other necessities. Father then went off to work in the bush.

That first winter was the very hardest mother had ever experienced and, as she later told us children, at least in the old country, though food was scarce, they had always been warm. Here they were cold and isolated in the unfinished house for the entire severe winter.

After nine or ten years, during which my four brothers Peter, Paul, Nick and Mykhas, and my sister Annie were born, my parents for some reason traded the homestead for a farm at Slava, also a Ukrainian settlement, where I, the youngest of seven children, was born on August 7, 1914.

From the time I can remember, we had farm buildings built of logs and thatched with rye and wheat straw, two teams of horses, a few cows, pigs and fowl, and some farm machinery. Unfortunately, much of this had been bought on credit.

The house was small, consisting of a kitchen and family room, with clay floors. The interior and exterior log walls, as well as our outdoor peech (a homemade baking oven), were plastered with clay and whitewashed with lime. Our furnishings were primitive and, in summer, the children slept in the granary (grain storage) or the hayloft. Our house looked like it had come from the village in the homeland ....
“It must be thoroughly disheartening ….”

Excerpt from a letter to the editor published in the Winnipeg Telegram on August 10, 1899.

The Winnipeg Telegram
August 10, 1899

It must be thoroughly disheartening [discouraging] to any respectable English speaking settler to find himself surrounded by a colony of Russian serfs [Ukrainians], and to know that if he remains on his homestead [a farm lot, usually 160 acres], he is likely to have no other neighbours for himself and his family all his natural life. He has braved all the difficulties of a pioneer in the hope of building up a comfortable home for himself and his children. He has selected for his home the Canadian Northwest because the British Flag flies over it, and because, as a Canadian, an Englishman, an Irishman or a Scotsman, he wants to remain a Britisher among British people.

The unfortunate settler finds himself hemmed in [surrounded] by a horde of people little better than savages—alien in race, language and religion, whose customs are repellent and whose morals he abhors [detests] … all hopes of further British settlement in the neighbourhood vanishes; he becomes an alien in his own country. There is nothing left for him but a galling [extremely frustrating] lifelong exile on British soil equivalent to deportation to a Siberian settlement.

The Winnipeg Telegram, August 10, 1899
Immigration Problems

Political cartoon, published in 1900, depicts the reaction of many Canadians to the large wave of immigration that occurred at the turn of the 20th century.

“Immigration”

Sifton: Here’s a fine lot of immigrants that I got for practically nothing.

Miss Canada: My God! How much will it cost me to send them back?

Interview with Mary Romaniuk

"There were more than 1200 miners in this locality (settlement), most of them of Slavic origin. Of these, many were Ukrainian. The miners were paid from $1.80 to $2.00 per company shift of work. They only worked three days a week during the summertime. They worked more days, often full weeks, from November to June.

The miners bought their necessities on credit when they worked fewer days a week and consequently went into debt. Life at the mine consisted of the vicious circle of debts incurred and working to pay off these debts. When we got married, my husband earned thirteen dollars and forty cents for a two-week company shift of work."
Ukrainian church in Borschiw, Alberta

Photograph of Bishop Budka, the first Greek Catholic bishop in Canada (1912), and parishioners in front a Ukrainian church in Borschiw, Alberta in 1916.

Library and Archives Canada, MIKAN no. 3200332
Interview with Anna Bokla

"As more Ukrainian farmers settled in our district, they began to get together on Saturdays and Sundays. They were on the friendliest of terms with one another, regardless of whether they had originated in Bukovyna or Galicia. Later the people from Galicia were in the majority. Our neighbours, who lived five miles away from our place, used to visit us, usually on Sundays. My parents were so enthusiastic in their welcome that they would go out and meet them halfway along the road. We children also went out to meet them. People craved companionship and rejoiced in meeting with one another. As I have already said, the nearest neighbour was five miles away.

There were no organized cultural or educational activities in our district in those days. There was only a small Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Sheho, which was twenty-five miles from our district, had more Ukrainian people. A National Home had already been built in that district and the children were taught the Ukrainian language. But it was too far for us to go to Sheho. Our parents wouldn't let us go that far and we had to grow up without the benefit of organizational activities."
Harvest Time

Photograph taken in 1918 of Ukrainian Canadians harvesting

Ukrainian family harvesting, 1918, Library and Archives Canada/George E. Dragan fonds/PA-088504

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Vilni zemli, free land, attracted these people, and though the land they obtained was often chosen for its hills and wooded areas similar to their homelands, it was sometimes poor and unproductive. The initial poverty of these immigrants frequently necessitated years of work in non-agricultural activities: mining, railway building, lumbering. Their lack of skills, their language problems, and, above all, their economic need meant that they often became the most exploited of the ‘bunkhouse men’, working long hours for low wages, living far from their wives and families in cold, sometimes insect-infested shacks. Other men, sometimes alone, sometimes with their families, found insecure jobs in the burgeoning urban areas, especially in the West. There, in such places as north Winnipeg, on the other side of the tracks, families lived in tenements and slums, cheek by jowl, with a mixture of new immigrants and traditional poor. They struggled to earn and save the capital necessary to pay for the equipment and domestic supplies required to begin farming. Conditions in these slums were hardly better than those in the bunkhouse: overcrowding, filth, unemployment, cheap alcohol, and prostitution were common. These conditions were only partly offset by the efforts of the city missions, and by the chance for their children to attend school.

Life in the rural settlements was more satisfactory, though just as arduous. There, the newcomers could rely on one another for aid in times of crisis. The loneliness of life in the new land was reduced by the presence of others who spoke the same language. Though the activities of the priests of the Russian Orthodox church could sometimes be a source of rancour and division, religion, or at least the church, nevertheless played an important role in easing the immigrant into his new surroundings. In many communities on the prairies, the onion-domed church stood out against the prairie sky as the spiritual counterpart to the hard-edged, geometrical grain elevator, the symbol of prairie man’s earthly ambitions.
The first task was to construct a temporary shelter, referred to as a burdy, kurnyk, or zemlianka—a simple dug-out. A pit was sunk a few feet below ground level and covered with an inverted “V” pole-roof overlaid with sod …. The shack was meant to offer some protection from the elements. It was not always successful …. Frequently, more than one family lived in these dwellings.

Once the temporary shelters were constructed, the more destitute [poor] men left the homestead to seek work. The women and children were left to fend for themselves. The wife began clearing the land for a garden, and frequently, with the accumulation of logs, undertook the construction of a permanent house.

The construction of the house was a major undertaking, involving months of hard labour. Cooperation from all available family members was essential and, when possible, neighbours helped with the work. Men normally cut and put up the logs to form the walls and frame for the roof, whereas women did most of the work involving clay—plastering the walls, glossing the floors …. For the immigrants, it was indeed a joyful occasion when the house had been constructed.

… Clearing land for the garden was another major undertaking, which normally coincided with the building of the house. Trees were cut, stumps rooted, stones removed, and the land ploughed. At times the wife and husband harnessed themselves to the plough ….

Methods of eking a living from the soil were primitive. Wheat grinders were a luxurious commodity. The hand-made and hand-operated machine for pressing oil was a “farm implement widely sought by housewives …. Rope was made by stripping fibre from hemp plants and spinning it on a spinning wheel. Socks were made from rabbit skins. For tobacco, pipe smokers used the bark scraped from the red willow …. Obtaining supplies meant trekking to the nearest village, which in most cases was located 40 to 60 miles away. Under such conditions, shopping became a carefully planned procedure ….
In the process of settling the Prairies and organizing communities in the wilderness, the Ukrainians found the religious circumstances in Canada most perplexing, and many despaired. The churches familiar to them sent no permanent priests to the new country for many years. The impoverished [very poor] settlers at first built no church building of their own; such a responsibility had been in the hands of the state in the old country. They often gathered in private home and chanted mass with prayers as best they could. For the christening of children and for burial services, marriages, and confession, some felt compelled to go to the Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy in the vicinity. Most disliked the practice, yet appeals for priests to authorities in the old country went practically unheeded. To fill the spiritual vacuum, the Canadian Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations undertook home missionary work. The Russian Orthodox Church, too, sent itinerant [travelling] priests. The resulting contest for souls greatly confused the peasant-farmers and the growing number of city workers.

Ukrainian settlers in the municipality of Franklin in Manitoba entered municipal politics in 1902 because their requests for roads, bridges, and schools were being ignored. When the provincial government also failed to support their request for a school, Theodosy Wachna convinced the settlers to break away from Franklin and create the municipality of Stuartburn. Except for the reeve [mayor/president], all members of the new municipality’s council were Ukrainian, with Wachna the first Ukrainian municipal secretary-treasurer in Canada. Within a year three schools and a post office were built. In 1908, with the election of Ivan Storosczuk as reeve, the Stuartburn council became the first all-Ukrainian municipal council in Canada.

The situation in the Interlake region of Manitoba was similar. In Gimli the council was dominated by Icelandic settlers who had been concentrated near Lake Winnipeg since the 1870’s. They were not anxious to spend municipal funds for improvements in the interior settled by Ukrainians. In 1913 the Ukrainians, aided by a few German and Icelandic settlers, finally broke away and gained considerable influence in the new municipality of Kreuzberg.

… It was more difficult for Ukrainians to win election to city councils. Property qualifications enabled commercial elites to control such councils, particularly in Winnipeg, which had the largest urban concentration of Ukrainians. In 1906 fewer than 8000 of the city’s 100 000 residents were registered voters, and election to any municipal office required backing from powerful business interests.

Even under the best of conditions, farming is a demanding undertaking. It is immeasurably more daunting [intimidating] when one begins literally from scratch, on uncultivated land, amidst vast and desolate prairies … in the early decades of the century, 20 per cent of the homesteaders in Manitoba, 45 per cent in Alberta, and 57 per cent in Saskatchewan failed. What, then, were the chances of a penniless, illiterate, confused Galician or Bukovynian peasant, whose only assets were his and his wife’s bare hands and who was dumped amidst the bush, often on poor-quality land, with a brood of shivering children and with the fearsome Canadian winter fast approaching.

Yet for the most part, these severely disadvantaged newcomers not only survived but in the process managed to transform millions of acres of prairie and bush into bountiful wheat fields ….

… Hard work and endurance. These words are used most often in explaining Ukrainian achievements in agriculture. If the work load of the average farmer was huge, that of the Ukrainian homesteader was more so, especially in the early years. Not only did he have to transform, literally with his bare hands, 160 acres of bush land into a productive farm but, because he lacked sufficient capital, it was necessary to leave home for months every year in order to earn desperately needed money. On the homestead, endless, back-breaking tasks, made all the more difficult because they were performed under primitive conditions, awaited him: he had to break the land, pull out the roots, stumps, and rock, plough and seed, and take in the harvest. Given the short Canadian farming season, all this had to be done hurriedly and punctually or else the harvest was lost. In addition, there were granaries to be built, wells to be dug, bins, roofs, and fences to be repaired. Upon returning from the field, the farmer fed the livestock and looked after other chores in the barn. Normally, the working day began at five in the morning and lasted until ten at night.