~ From Ukraine to Canada ~

The Ponomar Memoir

compiled & written by Rana Shaskin

From Ukraine to Canada - The Ponomar Memoir Rana Shaskin

~ From Ukraine to Canada ~
The Ponomar Memoir

by Rana Shaskin

Juhym and Ahaphia Ponomar were born as humble peasants in the midst of Ukraine's most turbulent decades, 1900-1945. This book of family memories recalls their survival through civil wars, famines and Nazi German occupation. In the photo above, we see them in Hamburg, Germany, on their way to Canada with daughters, Helen and Mary, in 1949. Their three oldest children reached Canada nine months earlier.

[Front cover] Sasha Ponomar is at the centre of rehearsal for a traditional Ukrainian dance performance, Cornburg, Germany, ca 1947.

From Ukraine to Canada

~

The Ponomar Memoir

compiled & written by Rana Shaskin

dedicated to
Helen Ponomar Shaskin
who makes all things possible

1st Printing
Vancouver, BC, Canada
rmshaskin@gmail.com

In Gratitude to Ahaphia & Juhym Ponomar

My fondest childhood memories take place at Grandma [Babashka] Ahaphia's in Magrath, Alberta, Canada. It was in the 1960s when men were racing to the moon and most everyone was replacing black & white TVs with colour models, but going to Grandma's took us to a time long ago and far away: with one TV rarely used, no cell phones, no gadgets, no plumbing, but so very special. There was a wind-up Victrola phonograph [record] player that my cousin Lora and I sometimes wound up, but most often, only family voices broke the silence in the house.

I loved Grandma's gigantic vegetable garden, the cast-iron water pump next to the barrel filled with rain water, and the weathered fence covered with delicate sweet pea flowers. Orange poppies were scattered along the dirt driveway.

I remember her house as being pale turquoise blue, but my mother says it was white. Everyone remembers differently. The small house wasn't insulated, but the kitchen was warmed by the wood-burning stove. This was the centre of the home where Grandma cooked and we ate. It was always filled with some combination of aunts, uncles and cousins. During one meal or another, the adults loved to share their remembrances of Ukraine and the long road to Canada. This is where I heard most of the family stories to follow and I'm ever thankful to Uncle Serghi [George], Uncle Nick, Aunt Sasha, Aunt Mary, and my mother, Helen, for sharing their memories.

I first heard their stories in the Ukrainian language, but the older I became they shared them most often in English, mingled with Ukrainian phrases. [I'm sad to say, my Ukrainian is now minimal.] I still recall their laughter, or tears, or both that filled Grandma's kitchen when I heard the stories of very far away in Ukraine and Germany.

Grandpa Juhym passed away on May 26, 1964, at the Magrath Hospital, across the street from their home of 12 years. I remember him as quiet and slowed by a stroke, but it's the vibrant Juhym and Ahaphia who are often at the centre of the memories to follow. They were the loving partners who overcame more than their share of obstacles and tyrants. Their efforts to feed and protect the family are the driving themes that thread all of the stories together.

I will always thank *Juhym Spyrydonovich and Ahaphia Nazarovna Ponomar, for fleeing Soviet Ukraine in 1944. Juhym said, "We left because life in Soviet Ukraine is no life."

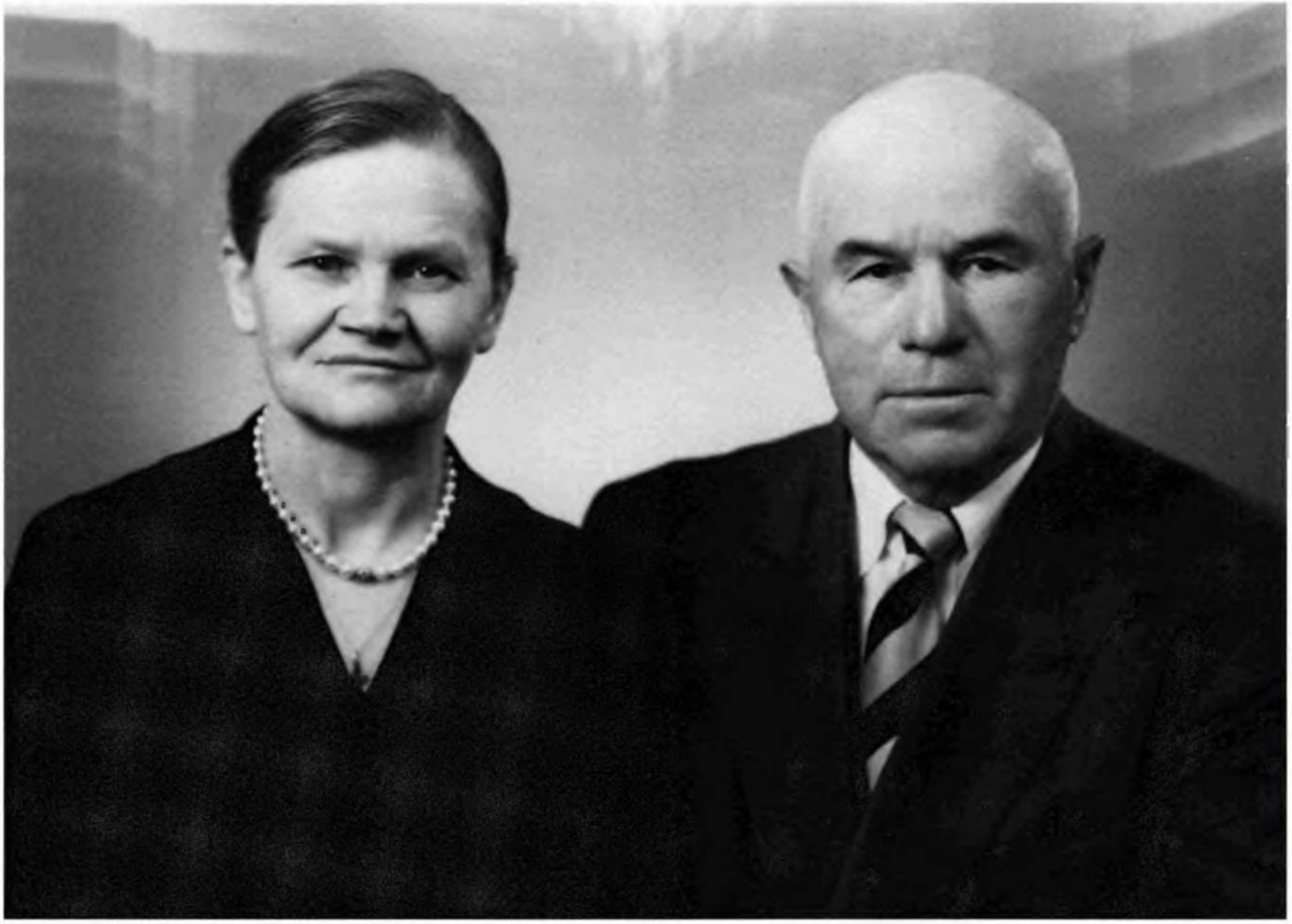
They were both born in the village of Novyy Buh, Ukraine, when it was ruled by Imperial Russia, and then they survived through World War I, violent civil revolutions, two famines, Stalin's Soviet terror, and Hitler's German occupation of 1941-44.

By 1944, the German Army was collapsing. The tough Soviet soldiers, bitter cold winters, and shrinking supplies forced the Germans to retreat out of Russia via Ukraine, and back to Germany.

This chaotic retreat of thousands of soldiers, trucks and tanks opened the door for about two million Soviet citizens to escape the nightmare of Stalin's rule. Juhym, Ahaphia and their children were among the crowd walking out of Ukraine.

The journey from Ukraine, through Germany, and to Canada took about six years, but it eventually led to a happy and peaceful scenario. Many tears were shed as I gathered the dramatic family stories, but they beg to be remembered. I include a few memories of our fore-fathers whom Juhym and Ahaphia also loved to remember.

* The Ukrainian naming for each person includes three names: a given name, a patronymic, and a family name [surname]. The patronymic uses the father's first name followed by a suffix meaning either "son of" or "daughter of". Males use "ovich" and females use "ovna." In standard usage, both the given name and the patronymic name were used together, but, for the most part, only the first names will be used in this family memoir.



Ahaphia & Juhym Ponomar, Magrath, Alberta, Canada, 1960.

~ *Juhym & Ahaphia's Turning Points* ~

They were born as peasants, at the turn of the 20th Century, just in time to witness the worst of times for Ukraine. This timeline highlights events that impacted their journey through life.

1600-1917: Imperial Russian czars rule over Ukraine.

2 Feb 1896: Juhym's birth.

16 April 1901: Ahaphia's birth.

1914-1918: World War I - Juhym is about 18 when he's drafted by Imperial Russia as a foot soldier for the Galacia frontline - 225,000 Russian casualties and 40,000 captured.

1917-1919: Czar Nicholas II abdicates and Imperial Russian families are exterminated by the anarchists. Civil War has revolutionaries and politicians fighting to become the reigning power. Ukraine is ruled by six governments within 1919. Bolsheviks [later named Soviets] prevail banning personal and religious freedoms.

1921: Ukraine declared part of the USSR. Josef Stalin rises to the top of the political heap as Soviet dictator. All Ukrainian lands and property are confiscated to create a slave state for Russia.

1922: Wedding planned for Ahaphia and Juhym, but famine sweeps through Ukraine. Wedding postponed when Ahaphia's father, Nazar Polyvyan, dies from starvation.

May 22, 1923: Wedding of Ahaphia and Juhym.

1924-1933: While raising their first five children, Ahaphia is a full-time labourer and Juhym is a book-keeper for the local Soviet communal farm.

1933-1934: Stalin instigates famine to punish Ukrainians for their lack of enthusiasm in letting go of their land and property. Juhym and family are on the brink of starvation when Juhym illegally moves them to Belarus in search of food. They return to Novyy Buh to find his father, Spyrydon, recently died in the famine. Juhym and family move in with his widowed mother, Lukija.

1937: Juhym is one of thousands on Stalin's elimination roster for being a Ukrainian nationalist and refusing to join the Soviet Communist Party. Juhym and family hide for about eight months in the village of Elenovka until Stalin is preoccupied with other political obsessions.

1941: Soviet drama is settling down in Novyy Buh. Juhym buys their first home.

22 June 1941: Nazi Germany invades Ukraine in its plan to conquer the Soviet empire and use Ukrainians as slaves. Juhym ignores Stalin's command for all Soviet citizens to immediately leave their homes and move north - ahead of the invading army.

1942: Their 15-year-old son, Koyla [Nick], is taken by the Germans to a labour camp of an undisclosed location. Shipped off in a cattle-car. Gone.

1944: Germans are losing the war and backing out of Russia via Ukraine. In the midst of the chaos, Juhym and family leave Ukraine. They're soon captured by Germans and shipped to the Nordhausen, German labour camp.

1945: Nordhausen bombed by Allies. Juhym and family survive. Nordhausen liberated by American soldiers, but soon to be governed by the Soviets. Juhym quickly gathers his family to move out of the Soviet zone.

1945-1950: Free at last, free at last from the Soviets. The family is housed, educated and thriving in the American refugee camp Cornburg, Germany.

Dec 1949: Juhym is 53 and Ahaphia 48 when they reach quiet Magrath, Alberta, Canada. Finally, they're no longer in the middle of the world's drama. No more need to fight, run, hide, or fear for their lives.

1952: The family buys a home and land in Magrath, Alberta.

Ponomar Family Sunday Dinner, Novyy Buh, 1938. I'm touched by how closely everyone sits next to each other and sad to see Ahaphia's head is torn from the corner. Juhym's family of six had recently returned from hiding in Elenovka, Ukraine. Missing from the photo are young Serghi Juhymovich Ponomar and Mykola [Nick] Juhymovich Ponomar who were busy playing with cousins. This photo miraculously survived a fire in Ukraine.

[Front, left to right] Hylyna Dmytrovna Shepel, Sasha Juhymovna Ponomar, Lydia Ivanovna Hres
[Middle, left to right] Dmytro Shepel, Tina Spyrydovna Shepel, Melanie Spyrydovna Ponomar, Grandma Lukija Ponomar, Motka Ponomar [Fedor's wife], baby Helen Juhymovna Ponomar
[Back, left to right] Oksana Spyrydovna Hres, Ivan Hres, Fedor Spyrydonovich Ponomar, family friend, Juhym and Ahaphia Ponomar

~ First Ponomar Memories ~

Dmytro Ponomar [ca *1855-1915] of Novyy Buh and his wife Salomia are faintly remembered. Like most young men of the time, he lived with his parents until it was time to marry. Marital unions were normally arranged by matchmakers, but it appears he was a bit of a rebel.

Dmytro was not inspired by any of the local girls. He heard of the beautiful Salomia who lived in a nearby village. The confident Dmytro left Novyy Buh - either by foot or horseback - in search of Salomia. The next thing you know, Dmytro and Salomia are married and living in his home village. We only know of their son, Spyrydon Dmytrovich [ca 1869-1934] - Juhym's father. Salomia was a young mother when she died and Spyrydon may have been her only child. This is all we know about the beautiful Solamia. Dmytro probably remarried, but nothing more is known about him or additional children. In fact, this is sadly where the memory of Dmytro and Salomia ends.

~ ~ ~

Spyrydon married Lukija [ca 1870-May 3, 1948] and they had five children: Fedor [1890-1947], Tina [1892-1971], Juhym [1896-1964], Melanie [1904-1991] and Oksana [1908-1993]. After long days of tending crops, Spyrydon and his boys walked home to the comforting aromas of Lukija's freshly made borscht and bread. Or, perhaps varenyky [perogies] stuffed with potatoes, or sauerkraut, or pumpkin, or cottage cheese. Homemade butter or sour cream made these dumplings glisten deliciously. The meal might end with fruit compote. Plenty of calories were needed to work on the fields and run a home.

Although education for Ukrainians was banned by Imperial Russia, Spyrydon ensured his boys were taught by the local Greek Orthodox monks. The boys only attended school for three years, but even a short education with the monks was valued. They taught reading, math, astronomy, history, geography, and religion. Juhym loved the mental challenges and excelled in his studies. In fact, his fellow villagers often called on him to read or write letters, or notarize land agreements. He even wrote or read love letters for illiterate romancers. During the senseless times of revolution and Soviet rule, Jyhum continued as a respected voice of reason by his fellow Ukrainians.

~ Ukraine's Land & Peasants ~

Both Juhym and Ahaphia were born and raised in Novyy Buh [New River] - in the southern steppe, close to Odessa and the Black Sea. Several thousands of peasants were enjoying rural life in Novyy Buh. The nearby river made it an ideal farming location to raise crops and families.

The rich land was at the heart of every Ukrainian who farmed the steppe that stretches about 1000 miles across. The black 3-metre-deep top soil [chernozem] and mild weather of spring-summer nourished fields of wheat, barley, sugar beets, corn, sunflowers, and fruits of all kind. Family gardens were filled with vegetables, melons, sweet peas, honey-suckles and poppies.

Juhym and Ahaphia's families were among the landowning **peasants - the agrarian backbone producing harvests for all of Imperial Russia. The land and the hard-working peasants made Ukraine the bread basket of Europe. Peasants typically lived in a village and farmed parcels of land, 10-25 acres, just beyond each village. The peasant connection to their land was deep. They loved to work it, sing about it, thank God for it, and all too often they fought would-be conquerors for it.

Ukraine was ruled by the czars of Imperial Russia, circa 1600-1917. Empress Catherine [the Great] was the first to refer to Ukraine as "Little Russia", but Nick proudly taught, "For Ukrainians, Ukraine was always Ukraine, never 'Little Russia', and no man would be their master. Czar? Our people never saw a czar. Never wanted to. Novyy Buh was a long way from St. Petersburg. Ukrainians were never Russians."

Mandatory military service in the Imperial Army took Ukrainian men to distant fighting fields, but those who survived returned to their home with little reason or desire to venture beyond the village of their birth.

* Records of Ukrainian birth/marriage/death dates are rare. Unless otherwise noted, the family dates within this book are based upon the memories of Melanie Ponomar, Nick Ponomar or Helen Ponomar Shaskin.

** There were three classes of peasants: the relatively rich 10% [kurkuli], those of average means 40% [seredniaky], and the 50% poor [bidniaky]. [Subtelny, p. 263] The Ponomars were among the seredniaky. Ahaphia's Polyvyan family had more land than the Ponomar in-laws, and were among the wealthier kurkuli peasants.

~ Juhym's Parents ~
Lukija & Spyrydon Ponomar, Novyy Buh, Ukraine, ca 1910.

~ *Ahaphia Nazarovna Polyvyan* ~

In the age of matchmakers, Ahaphia and Juhym chose each other, and planned to marry in 1922, but this was a year of famine and her father, Nazar Polyvyan, was one of the casualties. The wedding was postponed until May 22, 1923.

Her family called her Hasha. Her crystal blue eyes, fair complexion and silky chestnut hair attracted much attention, but she was humble and loved to learn home-making skills. She grew up wanting to be the mother of many children.

Her parents, Nazar [ca 1869-1922] and Horpyna [ca 1870-1937], raised their seven children on their prosperous farm about 15 kilometres from Novyy Buh. [Nazar's wealth is remarkable, and puzzling, since he was an orphan.] With a large family, there was plenty of help to tend their land and home. The three eldest were sons: Mykyta [1896-1926], Marfa [1898-1945], and Ivan [1899-1935]. Then came Ahaphia [1901-1972], Anna [1906-1972], and Barbara [1908-1979]. The youngest was Andrew [1913-1985]. Ahaphia loved living in a large family, going to school and church, and having many relatives and friends to visit.

Ahaphia described Nazar as strict and hard-working, but a very loving father. She was proud of his talents for making leather boots and sheep skin coats for the entire family. He also ensured all of his children were educated despite the imperial ban of education for Ukrainians. Ahaphia finished four years of school and remembered her kind teachers who gave gifts of colourful ribbons or embroidered handkerchiefs at Easter.

Everything changed when Nicholas II abdicated in 1917, ending the Imperial Russian rule and sparking a brutal struggle for control of the Russian empire. Ahaphia recalled, "Our life was only good before the revolutions. After that, life was a nightmare. The whole country was in chaos with hooligan armies destroying everything in their path. They burned whole villages; killing and looting. One group comes to destroy everything, and then here comes another group to destroy anything that was left. It was madness."

This studio picture of Ahaphia and her friends is the one surviving Polyvyan momento. By the end of the revolutions nothing was left of their good life.

Ahaphia [front left] and friends [names unknown], ca 1915.

Historian Orest Subtelny writes, "By 1918, Ukraine was embroiled by Civil War. The fighting, executions and epidemics associated with the upheaval, took about 1.5 million lives...the people of Ukraine had to literally barricade their homes against the fighting forces.

"In the history of Europe no country experienced such complete anarchy, bitter civil strife, and total collapse of authority as did Ukraine at this time. In 1919, six different armies - those of the Ukrainians, the Bolsheviks, the Imperial Loyalists, the Entente, the Poles, and the anarchists - were fighting to control bounteous Ukraine.

"Backed by armed units, Bolshevik [Soviet] officials descended on villages like locusts and confiscated grain from peasants to feed the Russians. Most peasants and workers responded by stopping all production. As the shortfalls in food-stuffs increased, drought in southwestern Russia and Ukraine also diminished the crops. Remarkably, the Soviets acknowledged this famine and organized a relief effort to aid the hungry." [Subtelny, p. 381]

~ *Faith of Our Fathers* ~

Juhym and Ahaphia's story is incomplete without writing of their faith in God and the Greek Orthodox Church. Nothing makes me feel closer to my Ukrainian roots than being in a small Greek Orthodox Church - hearing the rich tones of the choir's chant 'Gospidi pomily' [God bless you] flowing from the loft above the pews and smelling the musky-sweet incense .

The Ukrainian devotion to their Christian faith reaches back to 988 AD, when Grand Prince Volodymyr of Kiev led his people's mass conversion to the Greek Orthodox Church.

Why the Greek Orthodox faith? Volodymyr had dispatched emissaries in search for the ideal religion to unite his growing empire. The Muslim's circumcision and abstinence from pork and wine disappointed him. "Drinking," he said, "is the joy of the Russes, and we cannot exist without this pleasure." The beliefs of the Jews and the Roman Catholics also failed to impress. It was the Orthodox Christianity of the Byzantine Empire that enraptured his royal scouts and they reported, "The Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth.

"For on earth, there is no such splendour or beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations." [Reid, p. 9]

Ukrainians came to embrace Christianity within the Greek Orthodox faith, and by Juhym's time, their faith in God and Christ was deep. Sunday was a holy day - the day of rest from daily labours, the day of worship. Everyone dressed in their Sunday best and attended services at the Orthodox churches dotting the landscape. Juhym and Ahaphia were devoted to God and the church. They may have first met at church. It was the sacred place where Ukrainians gathered to worship, marry, baptize babies, bid farewell to the deceased, find solace from sorrow, and hope for life beyond this world.

Each church building symbolized holy arks where all were saved from the flood of temptations. Iconic paintings of Christ, Virgin Mary, and the saints linked the people to heaven. The priest gently swung the golden censor filled with fragrant incense, and the choir sang bold praises to God and requests for heavenly blessings. There's nothing like a Greek Orthodox choir to lift your spirit above the cares of this world.

As a young boy, Juhym was trained by the monks to sing in the choir. He loved singing and his vocal gift was well known. He was a strong voice in the choir until he was drafted into the Imperial Army circa 1914. When he returned to Novyy Buh, his heart broke to see the churches being destroyed by anti-imperial anarchists.

By 1922, the Bolsheviks were the leaders of the empire - banning belief in God, church gatherings and religious choirs, but they could not stop Ukrainians from having faith in God or love for singing. Our people continued to sing about their land, sorrow, love and joy. Sometimes, a balalaika accompanied them, but the voice was the most prized instrument. Juhym organized and sang in choirs wherever life took him.

The Soviets also destroyed most church records of marriages, births, baptisms and deaths in their mad quest to erase the imperial past and the Ukrainian memory. The Soviets were determined to form a godless and classless society. The cost of this supposed utopia led to all Ukrainians becoming equally poor and oppressed.

~ *Little Melanie Ponomar* ~

Juhym's sister, Melanie, deserves special mention. Despite her obvious physical challenges caused from a childhood accident, she is best remembered for her grateful heart, her hand-sewing tailoring skills, and a remarkable memory.

As a child of about age three, she was dropped and suffered a broken back. To quote Serghi, "Children play and accidents happen." Although the bones healed and she was able to walk, the injury stunted her growth at about 4'7" and caused her to stoop forward when walking. She never married, but her cheerful disposition was known by many. As far as anyone remembers, she never complained about her hardships in Soviet Ukraine. Instead, she often said, "Look to God, and He will always look after you."

She lived all of her life in Novyy Buh, but was permitted to visit her Ponomar family in Canada twice in the 1970s. Thereafter, she eagerly exchanged letters with them until her death in 1991, at the age of 87. Thanks to her memory, we have the birth and death dates for her generation of family.

Melanie Spyrydovna Ponomar, Novyy Buh, ca 1958.

~ *Ponomar the Name* ~

Given the Ukrainian connection to the Greek Orthodox Church, it's no surprise to learn of the Greek roots of many traditional Ukrainian names: Dymytro, Spyrydon, Juhym, Sasha, Helen - they're all of Greek origin. The name Salomia [remember Dmytro's beautiful wife] is of Hebrew origin, but it's in the Greek Orthodox Bible.

The name Ponomar originates from the Greek "paramonario" meaning "warden of the church". The "ponomar" was responsible for ringing the tower bells, singing in the choir, and assisting the priest in the various sacraments and services. The "ponomar" position no longer exists in the Orthodox Church.

Juhym [right front] with his brother Fedor,
and perhaps a cousin behind them, ca 1910.
Juhym is about 14-years-old. The details are lost.

~ The Cossack Connection ~

Thus ends the pre-Soviet family stories, but the Zaporozhian Cossack connection to the Ukrainians of Novyy Buh begs to be remembered. Like most topics related to Ukraine, the history of Cossacks is very complicated. The Cossack brotherhood of independent freedom fighters began in the 1400s, when Catholic Poland ruled Ukraine with enslavement of the farmers and persecution of their Orthodox Church. Small groups of Ukrainian hunters, fishermen and serfs [slaves] banded together to flee from Polish oppression and secure individual freedom. They became infamous for their horsemanship and military savvy, and were often enlisted by Polish, Swedish and Russian royal dynasties for personal protection, border control, and battle reinforcements.

Zaporozhian refers to the Cossacks who lived beyond the rapids of the Dnieper River. To quote Nick, "They were a fierce group, but not wild hooligans. They were guided by a strict moral code - no violence or theft among themselves, no kidnapping of women, and no drinking when they were on duty. And, they made sure their children were educated."

In times of peace, they were committed to their plots of land, their families, and preparing for inevitable conflicts against Turkish [Ottoman] and Tatar invaders. Every few years, they battled huge raiding parties of Tatars from the Crimea who swept through the steppe to kidnap healthy and strong Ukrainians for the profitable slave trade.

~ ~ ~

In 1676, Zaporozhian Cossacks defeated the Turkish forces in a major battle and yet, the Sultan sent the following proclamation with the demand for the Cossacks to submit to Turkish rule.

The Turkish demand: "As the Sultan; son of Muhammad; brother of the Sun and Moon; grandson and viceroy of God; ruler of the kingdoms of Macedonia, Babylon, Jerusalem, Upper and Lower Egypt; emperor of emperors; sovereign of sovereigns; extraordinary knight, never defeated; steadfast guardian of the tomb of Jesus Christ; trustee chosen by God himself; the hope and comfort of Muslims; confounder and great defender of Christians–I command you to submit to me voluntarily and without any resistance."

The Zaporozhian reply clearly illustrates the confidence that carried our Ukrainian families through many waves of hardship: "You Turkish devil and damned devil's brother, secretary to Lucifer himself. What the devil kind of knight are you, that can't slay a hedgehog with his naked arse? You will not make subjects of Christian sons; we've no fear of your army, by land and by sea we will battle with thee. You Babylonian scullion, Macedonian wheelwright, brewer of Jerusalem, swineherd of Greater and Lesser Egypt, Armenian pig, and fool of all the world and underworld, an idiot before God, grandson of the Serpent. So, the Zaporozhians declare you lowlife. You won't even be herding Christian pigs. Now we'll conclude, for we don't know the date and don't own a calendar; the moon's in the sky, the year in the book, the day's the same over here as it is over there; for this, kiss our arse!" Signed, Ivan Sirko with the whole Zaporozhian Host.

~ ~ ~

In 1709, Cossacks were recruited to fortify both the Swedish and Russian armies facing each other in the Battle of Poltava. Charles XII of Sweden recruited 3-7 thousand Zaporozhians to fight against Peter the Great's Russian troops which included about 2000 Cossacks. Sweden was the leading European empire and entered the battle fearlessly, but their army of some 30,000 was no match against the 60,000 Russians who also out-numbered them with cannons and calvary by double.

The battle began at dawn and by noon the landscape was a bloody mess with the Russians prevailing as the new European powerhouse. Thousands of prisoners were taken as slave labourers to build the new city of St. Petersburg, but the surviving Zaporozhian Cossacks would not be conquered. With passion for freedom coursing through their veins, they headed to the southern Ukrainian steppe with trailing clouds of dust and glory, and established many farm-based settlements - Novyy Buh being one of them.

Cossacks continued to serve as special protectors of such Russian notables as Catherine the Great and the czars to follow until the abdication and death of Nicholas II.

~ *Family Life in Stalin's Ukraine* ~

By 1921, Ukraine was reeling from the aftermath of revolution, civil war, and a completely new social order to face - rural Ukraine would never recover. This is the year Ukraine was officially declared part of the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics]. In 1922, Josef Stalin rose to the top of the political heap as the Soviet dictator and quickly became Ukraine's worst nightmare until his death in 1953.

Perhaps it's the Cossack inner strength that carried Ahaphia and Juhym through the Stalin years. They would have eight children during this time: Serghi [21 April 1924] and two girls who died as babies - Alexandra [about 1 year] and Helen [about 9 months]. Then came Mykola [Nick] [28 Aug 1927], Alexandra [Sasha] [27 Sep 1931], Helen [7 Feb 1937), Mary [3 Aug 1939], and Paul [1941-1944].

Sasha writes, "Our parents were very good people. All they did was work hard for their children. Family was the most important thing for both of them.

"Father often said 'life in Soviet Ukraine was no life.' Everyone worked on the state-owned communal farms, but nobody was paid. Everyone worked for the 'Great Mother Russia'. We had a cow, but there was hardly any milk left for us. A certain quota of milk had to be delivered to the State each day. I often had to deliver a bucket of milk and stand in the long line.

"We had chickens and even eggs had to be taken to the State every day - not much was left for our family. We were lucky our parents were such hard workers. Mother preserved many fruits and vegetables for the winter.

"It was traditional for the eldest son and his family to live with his parents, so we lived with Grandma and Grandpa Ponomar. Aunt Melanie also lived with us. We all lived under one roof for many years."

Helen recalls, "Our house was small, but cozy with a brick oven and a warm alcove reserved for old people and children. Mother was a whiz at running our home even though her day job was working on the Soviet fields from early morning. She woke at 4 or 5 am to prepare our food or work in her garden. She left for work by 7 am and walked several miles to the fields. Sometimes, they had a ride in wagons, but most of the time, they walked. Mother never seemed to rest or complain about having too much to do. Dad was a book-keeper for the farm, so he worked in an office.

"While my parents worked, Serghi, as the eldest, was in charge of taking care of us even though he was a child himself. He also had to take care of the cow and chickens. Serghi told us he was so busy caring for kids and animals, he didn't have much time to play with friends. I must say he was a good brother who was very protective of his many younger siblings."

~ ~ ~

Sasha remembers, "When I started grade one, I was given my first new dress and a new pair of shoes. The dress was green and I could hardly wait until the morning to put it on. I felt like a princess. Then, the first day of school, I spilled ink all over my new dress. I cried all the way home.

"We went to school, but after the harvest, even small children were taken to the fields and told to pick up every available grain for Mother Russia. We worked all day gleaning the wheat in the hot, hot sun. I was about 10-years-old and I was terribly thirsty. I thought I saw a lake in the distance. I was so thirsty, but there was no water for us.

"I should mention, not all children worked in the fields: just those whose parents didn't join the communist party. Children whose parents were communists went on summer holidays. We never had holidays.

"One day the teacher told me that I was such a good student, I would also be going with the others to a fun camp near a lake. My little heart was bursting with happiness. I ran all the way home to tell my family. My grandmother was the only one home. When I told her my good news, I was surprised that she just looked sadly at me without saying a word.

"I told all of my friends about my good fortune, but the next day the teacher said, 'Sasha, you can't go camping with us. There isn't room for you.' I don't have the words to describe my disappointment. I ran home crying all the way."

~ ~ ~

Only one family picture survived from the Stalin years [see page 5].

~ *Ukraine's Terror Famine, 1933-34* ~

My blood boils when I'm reminded of this Stalin-instigated famine. There was no lack of food in Ukraine. Crops were flourishing with plenty to feed Ukraine and Russia, and yet 3-7 million Ukrainians perished in the famine of 1933-34. Typical of Soviet statistics, the number of casualties cannot be verified. This catastrophe is remembered as the Holodomor or Ukraine's Terror Famine.

Stalin orchestrated this to punish the Ukrainian peasants who resisted his command to nationalize all private land and property. Communal [collective] farms owned by the State and worked by the former land-owning peasants was the new communist system. For Ukrainians, this slave-state plan was madness. They refused to follow Stalin's demands and his obsession became punishing the independent Ukrainian spirit.

Communist officials were sent to the widespread peasantry riots demanding the return of their property and livestock. The peasants also protested by slaughtering their own livestock rather than giving it to the communists. Between 1928 and 1932, Ukraine lost half of its livestock to this act of revolt. [Subtelny, p.411]

In 1932, the Soviet "grain procurement policy" demanded impossibly high quotas from the former Ukrainian farms. The harvests were used to feed the Red Army and Russian civilians. Ukrainians were issued small rations and before long, they were starving to death.

Spyrydon, Juhym's father, was about 55 when he perished in the spring of 1934. He died while plowing on a communal field. Feeble from starvation, he was barely able to walk, but the Soviets insisted he fulfill his daily work obligation. He had the strength to set the plow into the field, but he fell to the ground and died with his heart next to the black soil he once owned.

Even the smallest theft of food from the collective farms carried the death penalty. The introduction of the passport system in the same year, prevented starving peasants from escaping to the cities, and the Russian-Ukrainian border was sealed off lest the famine victims flee to the Russian Republic - corpses lined Ukrainian roads. [Yekelchyk, p. 107-112]

Feeding the family became Juhym's obsession. He cleverly produced passports for his family and they boarded a train headed for White Russia [Belarus]. It was winter and Ahaphia bundled the children for the cold. Time to leave.

They had to be very careful not to speak on the train - if identified as Ukrainians, their trip would dramatically end. They finally reached a village in Belarus where they cautiously lived for about two years. Food was available, but life was difficult. It was against the law to help Ukrainians, so finding a home and a job were challenges. For a short time, Juhym worked as a book-keeper until he was fired when they learned he was Ukrainian. His next job was cutting firewood.

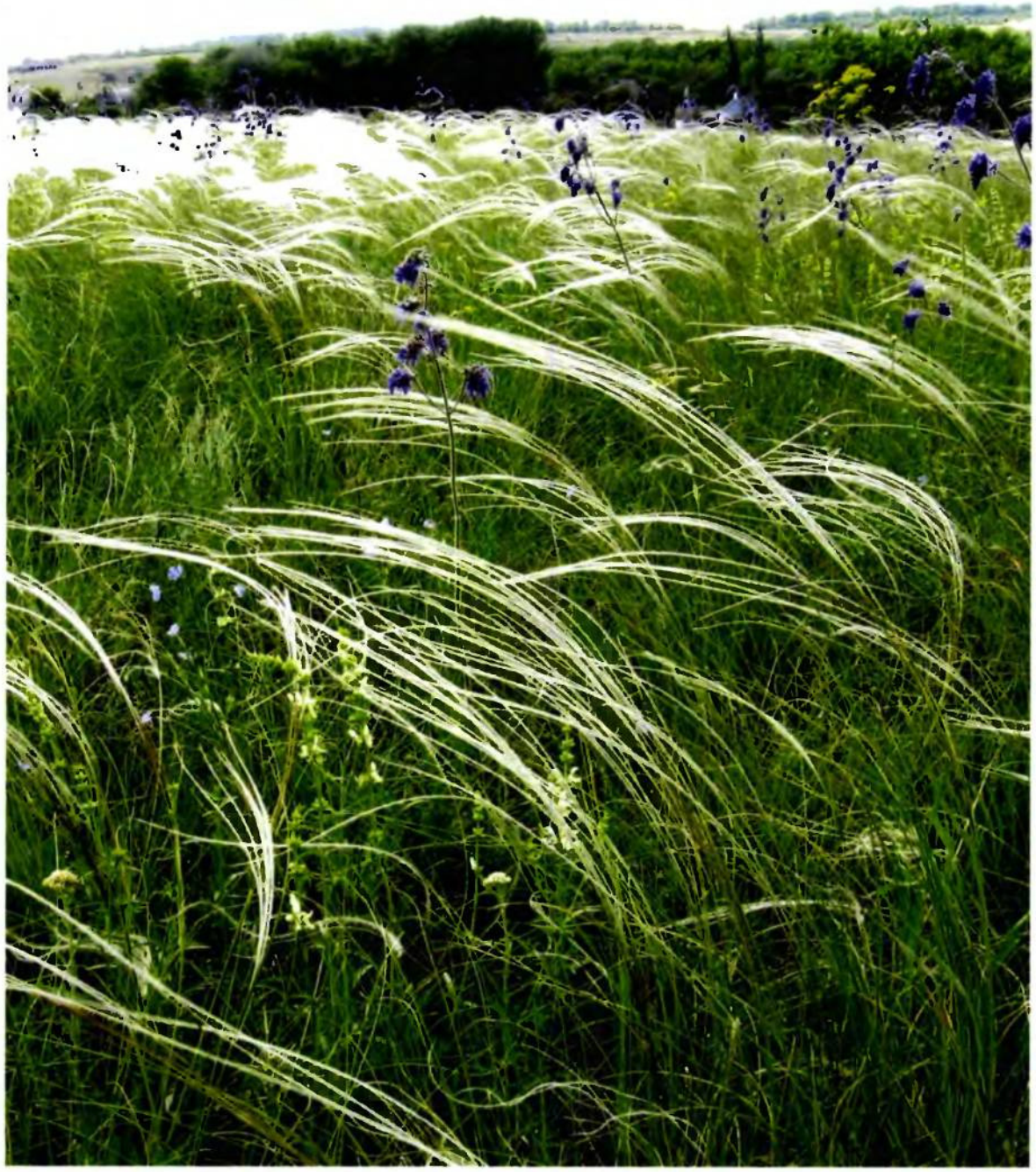
Sasha writes, "A kind widow, with three small children, shared her home with our family. She was very poor, but she shared whatever she had. It was crowded with three adults and six children living in a small house. In spring, we planted a garden in the widow's small yard. It was good to have vegetables to eat, but then the authorities discovered us and we were sent back to Ukraine. We returned home to learn Grandfather Spyrydon died in the famine."

Nick said, "When we reached Ukraine, it was spring, and the acacia trees around the house were blossoming - they bloom white and are edible. My brother Serghi and a few other kids were climbing the trees and eating the 'kashka', the bloom.

"My friend Petia was sitting on a bench. Petia and I were both about 6-years-old. He was sitting on the bench because he was too weak to climb the trees. He was in the last stage of starvation. He faintly whispered to Serghi, asking for some kashka, too. Petia ate a few, but died about 20 minutes later. We were too weak to carry his lifeless, little body. The State came and picked up his body, threw it on a wagon, and took him away. His father had died during the winter and his mother was on the brink of death. Incredibly, she survived."

By 1935, one Stalin cohort proclaimed, "A ruthless struggle is going on between the peasantry and our regime. It's a struggle to the death...It took a famine to show them who is the master here. It cost millions of lives, but the collective farm is here to stay. We have won the war!" [Subtelny, p. 415]

Our Ponomar family rarely spoke about this time.



~ *My Testament* ~

By Taras Shevchenko, 1845
Translated by John Weir, 1961

When I am dead, bury me
In my beloved Ukraine,
My tomb upon a grave mound high
Amid the spreading plain,
So that the fields, the boundless steppes,
The Dnieper's plunging shore
My eyes could see, my ears could hear
The mighty river roar.

When from Ukraine the Dnieper bears
Into the deep blue sea
The blood of foes...then will I leave
These hills and fertile fields --
I'll leave them all and fly away
To the abode of God,
And then I'll pray...But till that day
I nothing know of God.

Oh bury me, then rise ye up
And break your heavy chains
And water with the tyrants' blood
The freedom you have gained.
And in the great new family,
The family of the free,
With softly spoken, kindly word
Remember also me.

~ ~ ~

In Memory of

Nazar Polyvyan [ca 1869-1922]
Spyrydon Ponomar [ca 1869-1934]
Lukija Ponomar [ca 1870-1948]

~ Perished in Famines ~

Steppes of Ukraine,
photographer unknown.

~ A Time for Hiding ~

Whoever survived the famine witnessed Stalin's Purge [execution, imprisonment or exile] of those who didn't support his Soviet vision. Between 1936-1939, about 150,000 Ukrainians were purged on charges of Ukrainian nationalism. The NKGB [People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs], Stalin's secret police, stormed homes during the dark of early day and pulled men [sometimes women] into the night. [Subtelny, p.403]

Juhym was respected in Novyy Buh among his fellow Ukrainians as a voice of reason and good judgement. As a natural leader among the former peasants, the local communists were counting on him to give the villagers his example and officially join the communist party. For Juhym, this was impossible. He had a long standing commitment to freedom and disdain for the Soviets. He couldn't join them. He planned to keep a low profile, but the Soviets had their eyes on him.

Juhym's life was rarely easy in Soviet Ukraine. In 1936, someone warned him, "you didn't hear this from me, but if I were you, I would disappear for a while. Take your family and go."

Where are you going to go? It's winter and Ahaphia was about six months pregnant with their fourth child. Only two years earlier, they had fled to Belarus to survive the famine. Once again, he had to find a hiding place beyond Novyy Buh, bundle his family for the cold, and flee to escape Stalin's madness. He left with Ahaphia [35], Serghi [12], Nick [9] and Sasha [5]. In the snow and probably on foot, they moved to the village of Elenovka, not far from Novyy Buh, but far enough to hide from the NKGB.

~ ~ ~

Helen writes, "I was born in Elenovka on February 7, 1937. Snow storms and bitter cold were common. I don't know how Dad found shelter and food for our family. They probably depended on the kindness of relatives or friends. Somehow we survived. We lived in Elenovka for about one year before returning home. I'm the only one in the family who wasn't born in Novyy Buh. I must have been a strong baby to survive the winter."

~ Then Came the Nazis ~

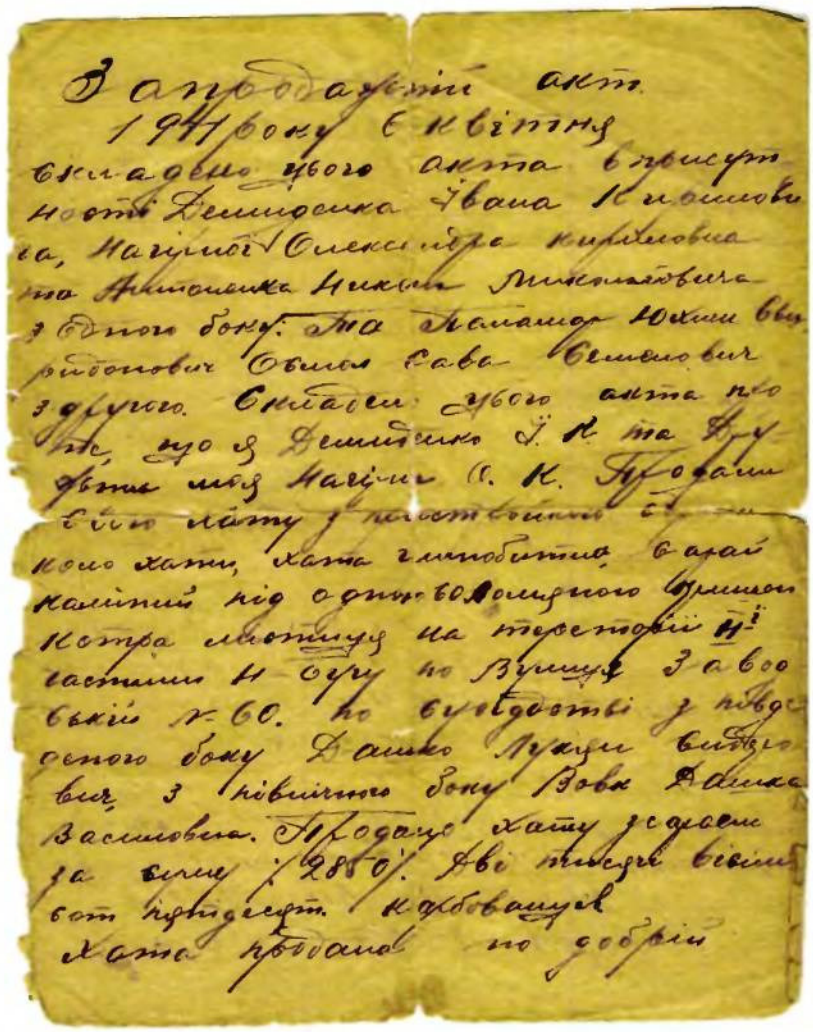
By June 22, 1941, new worries came the size of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Army which invaded Ukraine with three million troops, tanks, air bombers and horses - the largest invasion in history. They attacked at lightning speed and suddenly Ukraine is in the middle of history's biggest and deadliest conflict: World War II, 1939-1945.

Ignited by Hitler, the conflict eventually had two opposing military alliances: the Allies [headed by Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States] and the Axis [Germany, Japan and Italy]. Germany took the Axis lead with Hitler's heavy-handed quest to rule the world.

Stalin had no concern for Soviet civilians caught in the invasion, but he was furious about the surprise attack by his supposed German ally. The two had signed a pact of non-aggression in 1939.

Responding to the massive betrayal, Stalin ordered the retreat of all Soviet citizens - and destroy everything, leave nothing for Germany's benefit. Burn the fields and villages, destroy all bridges and factories. He infamously declared, "Those not with us, are against us." Those who would not retreat ahead of the German army were declared traitors. Many fearfully obeyed, but Juhym and millions of other civilians, decided to stay put until the chaos settled - besides, where would they go?

Sasha recalls this time with remarkable calmness: "In 1941, just before the Germans came, Dad was able to move our family to a small acreage on the edge Novyy Buh - the area was called Nyz - close to gentle hills, like the coulees in Alberta, close to a river. Although Ukraine was occupied by Germany, I remember things settled down. Mother was thrilled to have our own little house and garden - all kinds of fruit trees. Growing vegetables and flowers always brought her joy. We were also very blessed to have a well with spring water which was a luxury. Every day Mother said, 'How lucky I am to have this well. Bless the Lord for such kindness.' We had a cow which was unusual since the communists had confiscated most farm animals. Maybe we didn't have a cow. I hope we did, but I don't remember."



In 1941, Juhym was able to buy a home and land on the edge of Novyy Buh. This is his hand-written agreement of land purchase.

~ Nick Taken by Nazis 1942 ~

The trauma of war hit hard in 1942 when 15-year-old Nick was taken by the Nazis to work in a German labour camp. Nobody knew where they were taking him or if they would ever see him again. Ahaphia couldn't stop crying and nearly died of sorrow that day. Nick rarely spoke about this time. Many decades later, his daughter, Tina Ponomar Bonetti, recorded his memories.

Nick said, "I read the posted public notice with disbelief. All young people born in 1926 and 1927 throughout Ukraine were to be taken to Germany to work in factories for the German War Machine. Those who did not comply would be severely punished. I was born August 1927.

"I ran home and breathlessly explained the notice to Mother. She packed whatever she could to make the journey easier: bread, sausage, water, bedding and clothing. I saw Mother wipe her eyes with the back of her hand as she packed my supplies, hoping I wouldn't see her tears and worry.

"My family walked with me to the pick-up location: a large garage filled with tractors and machinery next to the railroad station. We were among thousands of other young people walking with their families. German military police stood guard, directing us into cattle-cars. Many people were crying; some stood stone-faced with disbelief.

"Mothers and fathers were falling on their knees begging the soldiers to release their children. Soldiers on horses tried to drive the crowd away from the train, but the parents were frantically trying to hug their children. A mother was stomped by a horse. She fell down and the horse lost its balance and fell on top of the women. The war seemed to turn people into animals. We knew the Soviets were bad, but Germans turned out to be no better. We suffered under both.

"I was crammed into a cattle-car with many other young people from my village, both boys and girls. The soldiers locked the doors and the trains pulled away from the station, away from my family and my home, away from my childhood. It was dark and cramped and we were scared.

"There weren't any bathroom facilities in the cattle-cars. We decided to make our own. We gathered whatever sharp objects we had and gouged a hole in the floor for a toilet. The girls gathered whatever blankets and linen we had and made a partition for our make-shift bathroom. Working together boosted our spirits and gave us a sense of control.

"The train journey took five or six days. We were thankful for the food, water and bedding our parents had packed for us. We didn't know we were going to Poland. When we arrived, the cattle-cars were opened and we were let out. The sun on my face and the ground under my feet felt good. For a moment I felt freedom. We were put in a large camp, like a holding tank, before being distributed to various German locations. We were there for a week.

"Then we were sent to Krakow, Poland, for training in the manufacturing of war equipment, such as tanks. We were housed in barracks, fed well and given new clothing. We no longer were guarded by the military. Our training went from 9 am to 5 pm, with an hour for lunch. At the end of the training we wrote exams. Those who passed went on to Germany. Those who failed, stayed behind. Although it was not my choice to be in these circumstances, I enjoyed the classes. I worked hard to pass the exams. I was part of the group moving on to Germany.

~ *Nick in Duisburg, Germany* ~

"[On the train again] two days into our journey, while passing through Berlin, we ran into an Allied bombing raid. The railroad in front of us was destroyed before our eyes. The reality of the war became apparent and I was filled with cold fear and a strange sense of excitement. We were delayed for two days because of the bombing, and then continued to Duisburg, our final destination. We would be working in the nearby factory called DEMAG that specialized in the production of heavy equipment such as the Nazi Panzers [tanks]. The factory was buzzing 24/7 to meet the high demands for the army, but production was often delayed by frequent Allied air strikes - bombings. The labourers included many other Slavic young people, about 3000, mostly Ukrainians, taken from their villages.

"I was struck by the utter destruction of the city. The Allies had already been *bombing Germany. Everything was in ruins, grey and drab. We were taken to a nearby labour camp - a collection of large, grim barracks surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by military police. This would be my home until 1944.

"In Krakow we were treated as a valuable commodity, but in Duisburg we were viewed as sub-humans and called 'osterbeiters' - 'east workers'. We arrived at the camp at about 8 pm, assigned bunks and sent to bed. They woke us at 5 am and shouted the appropriate conduct and expectations - everyone would work 14-hour shifts and anyone attempting to escape would be shot on sight.

"I grew up fast in Duisburg. I no longer felt like a child, and I learned that to survive, I would have to bid my time, keep my wits about me, and rely on myself.

"Breakfast was bitter ersatz coffee made from burned barley, and then we marched four kilometres to the machine shop where we spent our days or nights working. I was assigned to work on the metal lathe and drill - cutting and grinding hard materials like steel. The fine shavings of metal filled the air like silver sawdust.

"I worked from 6 am to 12 pm, and then 1 pm to 7 pm. Lunch was a serving of boiled vegetables: carrots, turnips or spinach, and nothing else. After completing the afternoon shift, we were marched back to our barracks at 7 pm for supper: 300 grams of sauerkraut, one piece of heavy, dark bread, and ersatz coffee. We fell into bed immediately after supper, exhausted from the work and lack of food.

"There were power blackouts every time the air raids came. We were given shovels and sent to the rubble, digging out Germans, both dead and alive. When the power was restored we were marched back to the factory. The bombings became more frequent and intense - the destruction was unbelievable. We could see the war was ending. I knew my only chance for survival was to escape during the confusion that came with the air raids."

* Between 1942 and 1945, the Allies dropped tons of explosives with multiple raids throughout Germany: Duisburg, Nordhausen, Cologne, Munich, Hamburg, Berlin, etc. The number of air raid casualties - including German civilians, labour camp workers, and other prisoners of war - is still debated. Millions were left homeless.

With 299 Allied bombings on Duisburg, it's cited as the most heavily bombed city during World War II. As the location of major chemical, steel and iron industries, and home of DEMAG, Duisburg was a prime target. The infamous Operation Hurricane - on October 14, 1944 - was the final air raid on Duisburg. Bombers returned to Duisburg every 2 hours for 24 hours.

~ Fleeing Ukraine ~

By late 1943, the German Army in Russia is collapsing. They weren't prepared for the bitterly cold winter, a shrinking number of soldiers, dwindling supplies, and fierce fighting - apparently, nobody is tougher than a Russian fighting for their life. Thousands of German troops were gathered as Russian POWs and dying of hunger in open fields. My father remembers seeing the POWs standing like cattle in the fields. I mention this to honour and remember the millions who perish anonymously in every war.

With the Russian Army at their heel, the Germans are retreating back to Germany via Ukraine. As the Germans are exiting, comes the opportunity for civilians - like Juhym and family - to join the exodus and escape the wrath of Stalin.

Stalin had proclaimed punishment for all Soviet citizens who had not followed his 1941 command to retreat into Russia when the Germans first invaded. With the Germans retreating, millions packed their families and walked out of Ukraine rather than face Stalin's wrath and discipline.

"My parents loved their Ukraine," writes Helen, "but the prospect of continued Stalin dictatorship moved them to take our family and flee with the German Army. Not everyone retreated with the Germans, but my parents had enough of Stalin.

"Leaving our home seems like a dream I can't forget. We left on March 8, 1944. I know the date because Serghi and Anna were married the day we left. Our family included Dad [48], Mother [45], Serghi [21] and his new bride Anna Hayduk [18], Sasha [12], me [7], Mary [5] and Paul [3].

"If you can imagine, it's the middle of winter, you're leaving your home and you know you're not coming back. We didn't know where we were going, but the hope for a better life for their children gave my parents the courage to move into the unknown.

"It was treason not to have retreated with the Russian Army in 1941, and it was also treason retreating with the German Army. Dad and Serghi would have been shot or sent to the frontline as soldiers if the Russians caught them. We had to leave in secret. We couldn't tell any of our extended family or friends. There were no formal good-byes.

"The night before we left, Dad and Serghi had to 'borrow' a few horses for our travels. Mother didn't like this plan. She worried they would be caught and killed. She begged them not to go.

"Father said, 'The Russians stole our horses, the Germans stole from the Russians, and I'm just taking what the Russians stole from us.' And off they went into the night. Mom was sick with worry not knowing if she would see them again. She was so relieved when they safely returned with a few horses, but there was another predicament to settle before we left. Serghi had a beautiful girlfriend, Anna, whom he wanted to marry.

"He knew if she didn't go with them, he would never see her again. Serghi went to Anna's parents [Pantolon and Vera Hayduk] to ask for their permission to marry her. There wasn't much time to think or talk about this. I'm sure more than a few tears flowed in the Hayduk home. I hope they gave her their blessing that she would have a good life wherever God would take her.

"I remember Mother crying in the orchard. She put her arms around a tree and cried, 'How can I bear this? My son is gone and now we're leaving our home to live among strangers.' She also worried Koyla [Nick] - wherever he was- might return to Novyy Buh only to find us gone. She suggested Dad go ahead and send for us when he was safe. Maybe Koyla would be back by then. Dad didn't like this plan. He was afraid we would never find each other again. All of us had to leave together.

"I was so young, for me, it was an exciting adventure. Us young kids got to ride in the wagon piled high with feather stuffed quilts. The adults walked. I enjoyed sitting at a bonfire each night and eating outside even though we didn't have much food. I'm sure it was hard for Mother and Anna to cook over a bonfire. I think we had potatoes and cabbage. I seem to remember we brought a cow, but I don't think she lasted long.

"March is still cold winter in Ukraine. I don't know how we survived sleeping out in the open air. We had lots of blankets, but how warm could they be?"

Sasha adds, "Before long, the exciting trip was not so exciting. There was lots of rain and lots of black mud. It wasn't long before the Germans took our horses - the German Army was short of everything at this point. Somehow the wagons got through the muddy mess. We couldn't stop very often.

"We had to move past the battle's frontline as fast as possible. As we moved along, we met other families also fleeing Ukraine. We stopped together at night and it was like a gypsy camp. I always remember the women cooking on the big open bonfires.

"We traveled through a few countries before we reached Germany. Most of the time, we had no idea what country we were in or what language the people spoke. Somehow Dad and Serghi communicated to find water or wood for the fire. It was a struggle to keep us alive. We were hungry most of the time.

"We reached Romania when it was Easter. We asked a farmer if we could stop in his yard for the night. Their farm yard was big and very tidy with several houses and buildings. His married children and their children lived in some of the houses.

"I could see them baking paska and colouring eggs just as we did at home. Every Easter Sunday we took our paska and coloured eggs to the church to be blessed before we ate them. Looking at the farmer's paska, I really wanted a piece, but they didn't offer us any. I wished they would at least give a little piece to Paul, but they didn't. Paul was so little.

"Then, back on the road, we reached Hungary. Dad felt we were far enough from the frontline we could rest for a while. Along with other refugees we camped long enough to build ovens for baking bread, but then the German soldiers gathered us up and loaded us into train cattle-cars. The train smelled horribly. We were crowded like sardines. The Germans called us 'slovak slaves'. I suppose we were slaves.

"Everyone on the train was scared. We had no idea where we were going or what will be done to us once we got there. Mother hoped we were going to Germany and through some miracle, find Nick. It had been almost three years since the Germans took our Nick, but she never gave up hope of seeing him again."

Ahaphia, Germany, ca 1945 -
war worn, but with layers of beauty and strength.

~ *Nordhausen Nazi Labour Camp* ~

By April-May 1944, Juhym and family, were among the trainload to reach the Mittelbau-Dora labour camps, close to Nordhausen in central Germany. For the final 18 months of the war, Mittelbau-Dora was a hot bed of activity with 60,000 prisoners [mostly Soviet, Polish and French] assembling the Mittelwerk V-2 rockets.

These were the darkest days for our brave Ponomar family. Sasha writes, "We had no idea where the Germans were taking us. We reached Nordhausen knowing nothing about what would happen to us. When we first got there, they separated the men and the women, and showered us with a disinfectant. It really burned our eyes. The children screamed with agony. Our family was settled in a big abandoned school. It had been a military school before the war. We were on the second floor in a big room with three other families. We had no choice but to get along with everyone. We lived with people of different nationalities and languages: Poles, Russians, Yugoslavs - you name it. For a bit of privacy, blankets were strung up to make it seem like we had separate rooms. We slept on bunk beds made of wood. No mattresses. We lived there for about one year.

"All the men and women were assigned jobs. I think Dad and Serghi had to dig ditches. Mother and other women swept the streets with big, heavy brooms. Poor Anna had the hardest job. She had to help lift missiles and put them on trailers. It was early spring and very cold. She worked 12-hour days and she was expecting her first baby.

"I worked in the kitchen making soup, if you could call it soup. It was water with a few potatoes and pieces of cabbage. This was our only nourishment. Things were a bit better in the summer. The children would run to the roadways lined with fruit trees and gather it to take 'home' to share.

"We weren't allowed to walk freely into Nordhausen, but one good man at the gate often let my girlfriends and me go into the city centre. We liked to go to the bakery. Refugees were not allowed into any store, so we stood at the door and just enjoyed the smell of the heavenly bread and pastries. God, we were hungry."

With Sasha working in the kitchen, 7-year-old Helen was left to care for Mary and Paul. Helen writes, "I had no idea how to care for my little sister and brother. I remember, it was very cold and we were standing outside waiting for Mother to come home. I think this is when Paul became sick with a cold. Nurses came around to check for possible sickness and to prevent anything like typhoid sweeping through the camp. She examined Paul and demanded that he be sent to the hospital. Mother begged her not to take Paul, but the nurse took him away.

"We visited Paul every day, but they didn't let us see him. Three days later, Paul was sent back to us. Mom and Dad were so happy to see him, but when they looked into his blank eyes, they could see something was terribly wrong. He never cried again. Three days later, he died. Mom could not be comforted. All of us were crying. Someone told us Paul had been sleeping on an upper bunk bed and during the night fell onto the cement floor where he layed until morning.

"It's hard to remember what Paul looked like. We never had a picture of him. He had dark curly hair and a round little face. My parents grieved for him for the rest of their lives.

"Despite the sorrows, Mother said, 'Not all Germans are bad'. When she was sweeping the streets, one German woman often came out of her home to give Mother bread. Mother must have been hungry, but she always brought it home for us kids. One day the woman asked Mother if she had 'kinder', children. Mother showed her how many with her fingers. The next time Mother saw her, she gave Mother clothes for the children."

~ ~ ~

Helen, Germany, ca 1946.

~ *Baby Nick* ~

"A rare burst of joy came on November 9, 1944, when Anna gave birth to Mykola [Nick Jr.]," Helen continues. "After so many hardships, baby Nick's arrival gave our family great happiness. There's nothing like a baby to bring hope into a home. I had never seen my parents so happy. Nick was named after my brother whom we hadn't seen for two years. Little Nick was resilient, but this was a harsh time to come into the world. It was very cold and our housing was not heated. Sometimes, Mother wrapped Nick's wet clothes around her torso to help them dry more quickly with her body heat. Mother also had to find extra porridge for baby Nick. Anna was not well, and not always able to breast feed him."

[Right] Serghi with baby Nick,
soon after the Americans liberated Nordhausen, 1945.

~ The Letter & Nick's Escape ~

Nick's escape from Duisburg reads like a movie. By 1944, there are whispers among the refugees - Nazi Germany is falling apart, but there are no guarantees. The Germans are still their captors and everyone is hungry.

With the number of foreign workers dramatically shrinking due to bombings, illnesses and malnutrition, the Germans are redistributing the refugee workers among various camps - high production quotas for tanks and missiles continue. The movement of the enslaved workers brought the opportunity to ask new arrivals about missing family members.

There was no word from Koyla [Nick] since he was taken - by now he's almost 18. I can imagine Juhym talking in hushed tones to a fellow Ukrainian new to Nordhausen.

"Have you seen my boy Mykola Ponomar? We're from Novyy Buh, close to Nikolai."

"No, I haven't seen him, but I know of another boy from Novyy Buh. Ivan, uhh...Seryvchuk? He's in Duisburg."

"Ivan Seryvchuk!! Gospidi pomily! Ivan was our neighbour. They took Kolya and Ivan on the same day. They were on the same train."

"Send a letter to Ivan. Maybe he'll know something."

Serghi quickly wrote the letter and remarkably it reached Duisburg. Despite the bombings and Germany's collapse, the mail system between labour camps is functioning with infamous German efficiency.

Only decades later, Nick shared details about his escape: "Production is going day and night. One night at supper, Ivan's name was called for mail, but he was working the night shift. Since we lived in the same barrack, I said I would give Ivan the letter. In a moment, I recognized Serghi's handwriting. I ripped it open and learned my family was in Nordhausen.

"This was one of the happiest moments of my life. I thought they were still in Ukraine. It was very important for me to know they were not in Ukraine. Things were not going well for the Germans. My plan had been to escape and return to Ukraine. Now, with this letter, I knew I had to reach Nordhausen and find my family.

"If I didn't receive this letter, I would have returned to Ukraine after the war. If that had happened, only God knows if I would ever see my family again. Ukraine was still under Stalin's dictatorship and he saw no reason to have families reunite or communicate. In fact, who knows if I would have survived if I had returned to Novyy Buh. I would have been considered a traitor and shot or sent to Siberia. This happened to many Ukrainian refugees who returned home after the war.

"The Americans were gaining a lot of ground and pressing from the west. The Germans decided to move the Duisburg operation east and we, the forced labourers, were required to move with it. We were organized into columns [several men deep] and sent marching to a new location.

"Suddenly, the sirens are blaring and we knew we would soon be in the middle of another air raid. There's mass confusion - Germans firing, bombs falling around us, everyone is running, and I knew the moment had come. This was my opportunity!

"I cut out of the column with two friends, running blindly, just running. We ran and ran and ran, not knowing where we're going, knowing only we had to run. My lungs burned with the effort. As we distanced ourselves from the chaos, I realized I was finally free. We ran through the night. It's amazing how the survival instinct kicks in. I was running on adrenalin.

"The country-side was fairly wooded. By early morning we came upon a farm. We were hungry and cold. The farm looked deserted, so we ran into the barn to warm up and rest.

"To our surprise, we found a young girl of 18 or so, feeding chickens and ducks. She was as startled to see us as we were to see her. We asked if she was German and to our relief, she replied, 'No, I'm Ukrainian.' She was also brought to work in Germany two years before. The farmers were in town for the day and she was left alone.

"We were overjoyed to meet a fellow Ukrainian and couldn't believe our good fortune. She brought us food and hot tea, and gave us directions to the nearest railway station. After eating and resting, we thanked her for all her help and departed. It was about 3 pm.

"It wasn't long before we entered a clearing and were stopped by German Field Police. Their job was to ensure that deserters from the German Army were captured. We knew our only chance was to keep our cool and convince them that we were 'volk Duetsch', Germans who were born in Ukraine.

"My German was good enough to explain this to them. I said we were on our way to Nordhausen to join our parents. I struggled to keep calm. My heart was pounding through my chest. I was flooded with relief when they seemed to accept my story, but they took us to a [Nazi] camp full of Italians.

"There had recently been an air raid. The Italians were digging people and vehicles out from the rubble and disposing of the dead. Right away, the Germans put us to work. I remember the stench and the flies. To this day, I can't stand flies. After two days, I told my companions we had to get out of this place. We planned to escape at our first opportunity."

It's worth interjecting a story Nick shared with my brother Chris, decades later, about the road to Nordhausen. Chris writes, "Nick and his friends, Ivan and Hrysha, are near starvation, hardly able to walk. They're hiding in a roadside ditch, when they see a group of women guarded by German soldiers. The women are walking from farm fields to a Nazi camp where they ate and slept. The girls are speaking Ukrainian. Somehow, Nick catches the girls' attention without being noticed by the soldiers.

"By this time, the soldiers guarding the camps are the dregs of the German Army - either very young or very old. A few girls distract the soldiers while the others pull the boys out of the ditch and slip them into their camp. Miraculously, the girls nurse the boys back to health and help them sneak out of the camp. Nick bid them farewell with the promise that the girls will soon also be free.

"It isn't long before the boys are caught by German soldiers. Nick thinks this was his end, but the Germans have a job for them - clean up the dead bodies. They're given shovels and commanded to pull bodies from the rubble. There's no choice but to obey. You don't argue with guns pointed in your direction. When the boys completed the job, they thought the Germans would kill them for sure.

"They work until late at night. Nick especially remembered the children among the dead. Nick and Ivan are given a big piece of canvas to cover the pile of dead bodies. While the soldiers were having a cigarette, the boys slip under the canvas and fall asleep next to the corpses. They're so tired, they don't care. Early the next day Nick and the boys again slip away without being noticed."

Nick's continues, "About 4 am, we slipped past the guard who's sleeping at his post, and crept about three city blocks to the highway. We hid on the side of the road and just watched. Trucks were hauling coal a short distance ahead, slowly moving up a hill. We were hungry, but mustered enough energy to run to the trucks, knowing that we could hitch a ride if we caught them before they reached the top of the hill.

"Two of us made it, but our friend Hrysha, couldn't run fast enough to jump onto the back of the truck. We leaned over, arms outstretched, calling his name and urging him on, but he couldn't quite reach us. Then the truck reached the crest, began its descent, and we lost sight of Hrysha forever.

"We rode on the truck all the way to the train station. By this time, we were thoroughly wet, dirty and hungry, but elated to reach the train station. This is where we saw hundreds of Germans trying to head east, away from the bombings. The station was in complete chaos, everyone trying to catch a train, and nobody questioned us.

"We boarded the train headed for Nordhausen, which is nestled on the edge of the Harz Mountains, central Germany, a beautiful setting. The locals made alcohol, supplies and uniforms for the army. When the conductor called out 'Nordhausen' we got off the train expecting bombed ruins, but we were amazed at how beautiful it was. The bombings and ruin came later."

Sasha remembers, "One day there was a knock on the door and in walked Nick and Ivan. Mother screamed 'Koyla, Koyla' and then I saw my brother whom I missed so badly. I hardly knew what to do I was so happy. We could hardly believe he was alive and well. It's as though he came back from the dead. Mother wouldn't take her eyes of him. Finally, we were all together. It was a miracle."

The most remarkable part of Nick's story is that, as far as anyone can tell, he never cursed the Germans for ruining his lungs and turning the world upside down. Nick was an extraordinary man who passionately loved his family, his freedom, his books and chess, the land of his birth, and Southern Alberta. And, he personified the saying "living a good life is the best revenge."

~ *Nordhausen Bombings* ~

Nick made it to Nordhausen just in time for the air raids that turned it into smoldering ruins. The Flying Fortresses mission of August 24, 1944, brought almost 600 bombers over Nordhausen.

Helen writes, "It was summer and our family was at five locations. Mother was working in the fields and she looked up to see hundreds of bombers coming our way. Dad and Serghi were working at other Nordhausen locations, Sasha was peeling potatoes in the camp kitchen, and I was at home with Mary. I think Anna was still working in the factory. We were in air raid bunkers scattered throughout Nordhausen. After the bombs stopped, I just remember the joy when we discovered we all survived. It was a miracle we never forgot.

"Mother was in jail during one air raid. That day she was very sick and couldn't get out of bed to go to work. German guards came and took her to jail. There was some luck in this. With the bombing, one of the jail walls was knocked down making it easy for the prisoners, including Mother, to escape. Mother was always very honest and law-abiding, but she enjoyed telling this story and claiming to be a jail bird."

The worst Nordhausen bombings came April 4 and 5, 1945. Sasha writes, "There were hundreds of airplanes dropping bombs. When the warning sirens were heard, everyone was running for the underground bunkers. There was a bunker near us, so we ran toward it, but the German soldiers tried to chase us away screaming 'foreigners, raus, raus, out, out,' but we forced ourselves into the bunkers and then sat quietly for about 20 very long minutes. Then, the bombs started whistling down."

Helen adds, "I remember sitting in the bunker and baby Nick was crying and crying as hungry babies naturally cry. Anna was not feeling well and unable to feed him. The crying baby seemed extra loud in the bomb shelter. My fearless mother suddenly left the shelter, ran back to our apartment to get a little cream of wheat or whatever we had to comfort baby Nick, and returned with the bombs still dropping. I don't know how she survived. I don't know how any of us survived.

Nick employed by the U.S. Army, Germany, ca 1947.

"As a little girl coming out of the shelter, my mind could not comprehend the horrific sight. I saw hundreds of dead people on the streets, most buildings were flattened. It was too horrible to face. Before my brother Paul died, I had never seen a dead person and now I saw hundreds, maybe thousands. The sight was too much for me to endure. People tried to rummage through the remains to find survivors. Some stood around in silence, shocked into numbness. These are the memories I can never forget."

Sasha writes, "When we finally came out of the bomb shelter, Nordhausen was gone. All was on fire, the air hot, and no place to run. The city was just flat. Miraculously, we survived and our 'home' stood intact, but then the sirens sounded again.

"More planes were headed for us. This time we ran into the basement. Within minutes, the basement was full of people, mostly women and children. The men were away working in the fields or in the factories. We heard one bomb explode in our yard.

"Everything shook like it was end of the world. It was getting dark and we all were crying. Then, everything became quiet again. We came out of the basement. Amazingly, our building was still standing. Only the windows on the second floor were gone.

"Soon, all of our family was together in our home and we thanked God that our family survived. Then we picked through the remains in search of food not knowing if more bombs were coming."

An estimated 80,000 perished in the final Nordhausen bombings. I can imagine Juhym and Ahaphia looking to their hungry children and wondering if they had made a terrible mistake in leaving Ukraine. For all they knew, more air raids were to come.

Helen [age 8], Sasha [13], & baby Mykola [Nick Jr.], after the American ground troops arrived, Nordhausen, 1945.

Helen [far left], Nick, Mary, Cornburg, Germany, ca 1948.

~ *The Americans Are Coming* ~

The family rarely spoke about the dark days after the bombings. Instead, they shared the joy that came when the Americans ground troops appeared on April 11, 1945. Sasha writes, "For the first time in my life, I heard cries of happiness in the streets. Americans are coming! Americans are coming! We are free! We are free!"

Hundreds of American soldiers flowed into Nordhausen like sparkling spring water rushing into a desert. At long last there was reason to hope for life beyond Stalin and Hitler's regimes.

Sasha continues, "We all ran to the street with great excitement. I had never seen an American before. I thought they might look somehow different from anyone else. I saw them coming in army trucks, and tanks, and jeeps. So many of them! I had never seen anything so exciting. I was surprised to see the soldiers were so young. They all looked alike to me, but they were very handsome, so nice and clean. They looked so happy, nothing like the German soldiers.

"I loved to see those Americans. When I saw them, I knew we were finally free. I can't describe the happiness I felt. We were free. Free from fear. Free from Stalin and Hitler. Everything changed when the Americans came. I will always thank Americans."

After the euphoria of liberation settled, Juhym learned that Germany would be divided into four zones to be administered by one of the following Allies: America, France, Soviet Union and Britain. Citizens of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were to be handed over to their respective countries, regardless of the individual's consent. The Soviet zone included Nordhausen. Juhym quickly realized the family needed to leave as soon as possible. He was determined to lead his family to the safety of the American zone.

In the ruble, the family found a tattered cart to carry Anna and Mary who were weak and recovering from typhus. There wasn't much to pack. Ahaphia's heart almost broke over leaving little Paul's gravesite behind, but they had to leave.

~ *Days of Heaven in Cornburg* ~

Our little band of Ponomars left by foot and many days later reached the city of Kassel - a nearby refugee camp known as "the Burned Camp", aptly describing the poor condition of this temporary town of tents. They were there for only a few weeks before the Americans moved the refugees to deserted barracks close to Furstenwald.

Sasha writes, "It was good in Furstenwald. We were well fed and schools were organized for the children. The classes were taught in Russian because most of the refugees were Russian. We were there for eight months before the Americans moved us to Cornburg, a big camp for 3000 Ukrainians. It was one of the refugee camps the Americans set up like small towns giving shelter, food and schools.

"We loved Cornburg and called it 'Little Ukraine'. It was a very nice place, very clean. It was a peaceful little town, away from the world. It became our home and I loved it as if it was my own country."

Helen happily recalls, "We were given a big apartment: two bedrooms, a living room, dining room, a kitchen and even a bathroom with running water. We never had it so good. Back in Ukraine, our house had only two big rooms: all of us slept in one room and the kitchen is where we spent most of the time. In Ukraine, our stove was made of clay and we didn't have coal or wood, so we burned straw. The straw didn't give much heat. In Cornburg we also had a garden in the back yard. Mother and Anna loved working in the garden and grew all kinds of vegetables. We even raised a pig and some chickens.

"Ukrainian schools were organized for all the children. This is where I started the first grade. My teacher's name was Maria. From the very beginning I studied hard. We didn't have many books at that time, but I was so happy to learn how to read. For the rest of my life, reading has been one of my favourite things to do.

"In school we had many friends, and Sasha and I belonged to the Ukrainian dance groups. We loved to dance. We even performed for the American soldiers. Dad organized a choir, and both Dad and Serghi acted in stage plays."

[Top] Helen sits in the front left, grade 1, Cornburg, Germany.
[Bottom] Helen in the children's dance troupe, middle row, 4th from left.

Serghi & Nick as drivers employed by the U.S. Army, Germany, ca 1947.

"Many young people were trained and given jobs by the American Army," writes Sasha. "They offered courses in plumbing or mechanics or engineering. The girls were trained as secretaries or nursing aids. I trained to be a secretary. When I was 16, I was one of seven girls in Cornburg chosen for secretarial school in Arolsen, Germany. It was the nicest school you could imagine. They had many rules, but I still loved going to this special school. All day long we typed and in the evenings we practiced typing. At first, it was very hard because everything was in English. We had to learn English and typing at the same time. I'll never forget the graduation day and the fun dance that night.

"Both Serghi and Nick took mechanic courses and driving lessons. In Ukraine, we could never dream of such things as driving or anything beyond working on the Soviet fields."

Now for another story Nick shared decades later with my brother Chris. Nick said, "After the war, the Americans brought everything they needed to clean up Germany: food, tents, trucks, dentists, doctors, translators. You name it. Everything in endless supply.

"The one thing they were short of was labourers. They needed lots of workers to clean up Germany. Americans didn't use refugees like slaves. They respected us. They insisted on hiring us as employees and paying wages. They didn't hire Germans.

"So, the refugees found ourselves in great demand. Serghi and I were trained as mechanics and quickly hired. They gave us new American uniforms, food and for the first time in our lives, paychecks!

"One of our first jobs was to drive trucks out to the middle of a field and unload them. The trucks were filled with army food that expired. We were ordered to stock pile the rations, splash them with fuel, and set them on fire. We couldn't believe that such an order could be made and didn't follow the order, at first.

"The Black American sergeant yelled, 'Don't worry about it. There's plenty more where that came from. Go ahead, set it on fire. Burn it! Just burn it!' So, we did. Some of the young guys held their hands across their opened mouths, others fell to their knees and crossed themselves.

"Tears were streaming down my face and I said to the guy next to me. 'I'm gonna to move to America and become a millionaire.'"

Sasha takes centre stage in traditional Ukrainian dance, Cornburg, ca 1947.

I'm impressed with the Americans who encouraged the refugees to celebrate their cultural heritage with song, dance and theatre. A remarkable amount of time was given to produce traditional Ukrainian costumes and stage sets, along with rehearsals for popular performances for the public. This was a brilliant effort that helped heal the fractured Ukrainian souls recovering from war and building new lives far from their homes.

Scene from Cornburg stage play.

Beautiful Sasha, age 16, in typing school, Arolsen, Germany, 1948.

Juhym in Cornburg's Ukrainian Choir, ca 1948.

Sasha writes,"Here we see my father [back row, 2nd from the left]. Dad and Serghi had beautiful voices. They both sang in the choir and even acted in stage plays. Quite often we would have concerts and dance performances for the public, including the American soldiers. Our shows were very popular. My good friend Tamara is in the front row, third from the left. Those were very happy days for our family."

~ *Displaced Persons* ~

The estimated number of homeless in post-war Germany varies dramatically - between 11 and 20 million - possibly the largest number of refugees in modern history. To quote my father, Stephen, "The Allies have millions of homeless under their care and they're asking themselves, 'What are we going to call these people? Stateless? No. These people have home countries. They just don't want to go back. Poles don't want to go home. Ukrainians don't want to go home. Russians don't want to go home. Millions of them and they don't want to go home. What are we going to do with these people?'

"The Allies decided to call us Displaced Persons, DPs. If you're a DP, you're okay. If you aren't a DP, you're a collaborator and back you go to the Soviet Union. Suddenly, everyone says they're born in Poland. If you're born in Poland, you're not sent back to the Soviet Union."

By 1948, Cornburg was beginning to dismantle. It was time to send the refugees to various countries where they could build new lives for themselves.

Sasha writes, "Father asked to be sent to Canada. He knew if we went to the U.S., my brothers would be drafted into their army. It was a miracle our family survived this war. Dad didn't want to lose his boys to another war. We were told Canada was a great country. It had a democracy and many jobs. Many Canadian farmers were sponsoring people to work on their farms. Eastern Canada also needed people to work in the factories and coal mines. We decided Canada was the place for us."

Sasha, Nick, Serghi, Anna and Little Nick were the first of the family to immigrate to Canada. Juhym and Ahaphia were considered too old for the Canadian work program, and Helen and Mary were too young. Even a short separation seemed too long, but the family agreed to take the opportunity, such as it was. The hope was to find sponsorship for the rest of the family in a year or two. Perhaps Juhym was counting on a few extra miracles to come. Surely, God could pull a few more strings to have the family reunite in the near future.

In early 1949, the first batch of Ponomars sailed to Halifax, Canada, and then journeyed by train some 3000 miles to Magrath, Alberta, to work on the Wallace Dudley prairie farm.

[Left to right] Sasha, Serghi, Little Nick & Anna - newly arrived at the Dudley farm, Magrath, Alberta, 1949.

~ *Finding Canada* ~

Between 1947 and 1953, the following countries opened their doors for refugee immigrants able to work in exchange for travel, food and lodging costs. They would work on farms, factories or post-war projects, usually for 2-year contracts. This massive immigration effort was administered by UNRRA [United Nations Refugee Relief Association]. In most cases, the refugees were asked which country they preferred for resettlement, but many countries restricted immigration numbers.

Argentina	33,000
Australia	182,159
Belgium	22,000
Brazil	29,000
Canada	157,687
France	38,000
Iraq	10 unmarried medical physicians
Israel	50,000 in 1948; 650,000 by 1950
Morocco	1,500
Norway	492 Jewish refugees moved to Israel by 1950
U.K.	86,000 civilians, 115,000 Polish Army veterans, and 12,000 Ukrainian veterans
U.S.A.	600,000 (included 55,000 Germans)
Venezuela	17,000

Sasha continues, "Serghi, Nick, Anna, Little Nick, and I were accepted into Canada because we were healthy and strong young people. Wallace Dudley sponsored us in exchange for working on his sugar beet fields. We had no idea what 'working on the beets' meant or where Alberta was, but we were happy to go to Canada.

"It was very hard for us to leave our family behind in Germany, but this had to be done. We had to find a new country for our home. It was also hard to part from my school friends. I knew I would never see them again. We said our good-byes to family and friends not knowing when we would see each other again.

"In March of 1949, at the Hamburg port, we boarded a huge English ship, the [Cunard White Star] S.S. Sumaria. It was a beautiful ship with over 2000 people on board. We were fed well, and they had dances and movies. Most people were sea-sick and couldn't eat.

"The ocean is endless. I thought I would never see land again. The size of the ocean waves was unbelievable. Our big ship was tossed like a little matchbox in the storms, and the storms howled. Sometimes the sea would quiet down and we would go to the movies. In the dark movie theatre things seemed a little better. I couldn't go to the dining room for most of the trip. The smell of the food made me more sea-sick.

"After ten long days, we finally landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on Sunday, March 27, 1949. The next day we boarded a train for Alberta. We had no idea Canada was so big. After three long days we finally got to Lethbridge. Mary Dudley [Wallace's wife] met us at the depot and drove us to Magrath, a little town about 25 miles south of Lethbridge. We knew English very little and Mary didn't know Ukrainian, so it was a very quiet trip to our new home. We were surprised to see the land was so flat and without many trees.

"Driving through Magrath, I wondered which house we would live in. I saw a nice little brick house and thought, "Wouldn't it be nice if that was our house', but we drove right through the town. When we reached the Dudley farm [another 5 miles] we were taken to a sad little shack. This was our new home. We went inside and couldn't believe our eyes. The place was a mess. It was actually a tackle shack for their horse gear. It was filled with oats and hay, tires, horse harnesses, all kinds of things. It had two rooms with a little kitchen. Still, we were happy to be in this big, beautiful and free country. It felt like we were a million miles from the Soviets.

"The first thing we did was clean the place. Nick and Serghi took out all of the junk, and Anna and I swept the floors. Then it was time for bed. We didn't have beds, but we had blankets we brought from Germany. The Americans gave us blankets, along with new clothing for the trip.

"One hard part was buying food. There was a small grocery store in Magrath, but we didn't have money to begin with. We found out we could buy the groceries with credit and pay for them when we earned some money.

"We started working on the beets in May and quickly learned how difficult it is to hoe beets. The rows of beets are very long on the flat prairies.

"We would take the hoe and chop a space between the beets. There had to be only one beet standing every few inches apart. This is a backbreaking work. You have to bend down all the time, from sunrise to sundown.

"Out in the fields it was hot. I mean very hot and each row was about one mile long. We're thirsty, but the water we have with us is always warm. Your lips are parched; and you are so tired, you can hardly stand on your feet.

"Nick especially hated working on the beets. One day he dropped to the ground, flat on his back, and said, 'That's it. I can't do this. I just can't do this. I would rather die than hoe another row.' It wasn't long before he was able to find training to become a plumber and quit working on the beets.

"My brothers and I were able to sponsor the immigration for the rest of our family to join us in Magrath. As soon as we could we applied for visas for them, but it took nine months before they were approved to come. We missed them very much. These were the days before long distance phone calls and email. Correspondence was restricted to the slow postal service. It took months to exchange letters.

"We were told our family would come soon, but we didn't know exactly what day it would be. We went to the train station in Lethbridge whenever we could find a ride, not knowing if they would be on the train or not. Many times we waited at the train station for a long time. We would wait, and wait, and wait, and when they didn't come, we would go home.

"Finally, one day in December [1949], a Polish fellow we met on the ship, came to to tell us he heard some people were coming from Europe that day. He drove Nick and me to Lethbridge and we waited at the train station. Finally, this was the time our parents and the girls reached us. We were so happy to see them. At long last, our family was together again. This was one of the happiest days of my life."

[Left to right] Juhym, Helen, Mary & Ahaphia: Hamburg, Germany, 1949, shortly before sailing to Canada.

~ *Surviving the Atlantic* ~

Juhym, Ahaphia, Helen and Mary set sail for Canada in November 1949. They also left from Hamburg and sailed on the SS Samaria. Their belongings included one tin tub, a few felt blankets given by the Americans, a few Ukrainian embroidered table clothes, a picture of Taras Shevchenko, and Ahaphia's small pouch filled with soil from their garden in Ukraine.

"It was such an adventure for us girls to be on such a big ship with so many people," writes Helen. "The men and boys were separated from the women and girls. Mother, Mary and I slept in a place just for women and met with Dad for the days.

"As a 13-year-old, I had a good time on our voyage. Mary and I explored the ship, and there was a beautiful dining room with round tables covered with white table clothes. The meals were out of this world, but hardly any people came to eat.

"Most people were sea-sick. Mary, Dad and I didn't get sick, but our poor Mother was sick from the moment she stepped on the ship until we docked in Halifax. She could only eat crackers. Dad would find a nice spot for Mom to sit on the deck, and then the wind would shift and he would move her to another sunny spot. Mother would say, 'Please leave me be. I can't take another step.'

"Sometimes, there were really bad storms. The waves flung the ship up and down, up and down. I wondered how the captain could keep the ship on the right track.

"After ten days, we finally docked in Halifax. Mother was sea-sick even when we were finally on land. Dad said, 'Why are you walking like a drunken sailor? We're on solid ground now.'

"From Halifax we boarded a train for Alberta. We met all kinds of people on the train and were given all kinds of food we had never seen before. One of the things was a can of spam. One man in our compartment tried and tried to open the can, but he just couldn't figure out how to do it, so he threw it out the window. That was funny.

"My Dad couldn't eat the bread they gave us. It was white store-bought bread, nothing like Mother's wonderful homemade bread. It tasted very strange for us.

"After three days we finally reached Lethbridge. There was lots of snow on the flat prairie and it was very cold. Mother looked disappointed, but Dad cheerfully said, 'It looks just like home.' I guess it does look a lot like the flat steppes of Ukraine.

"Nick and Sasha had been waiting for us at the train station for two or three hours. Dad was the first to see Sasha in the station. When we stepped off the train, we ran toward them and started to hug and kiss each other, and we were all crying from happiness. After a whole year of waiting to be reunited, we were finally together, safe and sound.

"They drove us to the Magrath farm and the little place that would be our home for the cold winter. It was tiny. We couldn't believe our eyes. All nine of us would have to live in it. I don't remember exactly where all of us slept, but some of us slept on the floor. I don't remember any mattresses.

"I'm sure it was cold on the floor. December in Alberta can be bitter cold. Sometimes, it would be minus 20 degrees or colder. We had to wear our coats and gloves during the day and night. But we made the best of it. We were just thankful that we were together."

~ *Helen & Mary's First Day at School* ~

Helen writes, "We reached Magrath on December 4, 1949, and by the next week, Mother sent Mary and me to the public school. Mother asked Nick to walk with us and introduce us at the school. It was a five mile walk so we had to leave quite early. Nick spoke English fairly well since he had worked for the U.S. Army back in Germany.

"Mary and I only spoke a few English words. I was almost 13 and Mary, 10-years-old. You can imagine my surprise when we reached the school and Nick decided to just drop us off. He pointed to the school and told me to take care of Mary. I was so mad, but what was I to do? It was scary to take Mary into the building without Nick, but I was eager to go to school. I took Mary by the hand and in we went.

"I went to the first grown-up I saw and pointed to myself saying, 'Halyna' then pointed to Mary saying 'Maria'. He looked at us and said, 'Helen and Mary.' Mary was crying as he took us to the classrooms. I didn't cry, but I was really upset. The classrooms were large and filled with kids. They looked at us as if we were some kind of aliens. I have to admit we did look different. The other girls had nicely cut hair in the popular 'bob' hair-style while I had thick, long, black braids. Our dark dresses didn't look anything like the cute dresses worn by the sweet little Magrath girls.

"I was old enough to be in grade six, but they put me in grade five. My teacher was Mr. Walter Brown and he was very kind. He began teaching me English right away. He pointed to the desk and said, 'This is a desk.' Then, he did the same with the blackboard, the pencil and other things in the classroom. Every day I learned new words. In three or four months, I spoke English quite well. By the next school year, I spoke English so well, they advanced me to grade seven. I had to study extra hard to catch up for subjects like literature, Canadian history and grammar, but I loved learning."

[Top photo, front] Little Nick, [middle row, left to right], Anna, Helen, Mary, [back, left to right] Nick, Sasha, baby Paul [Serghi & Anna's son], Ahaphia & Juhym - Magrath home, 1952.
[Top right] Ponomar home in spring.
[Right] Beloved Rosie, Magrath, 1953.

In 1951, 14-year-old Helen entered Magrath's Annual Gagan Oratorical Speech Contest and won 1st place for her division.

~ *Why We Came to Canada* ~

by Helen Ponomar

"I suppose there are many reasons why I came to Canada, but I will mention just a few that may be of interest to others. My family and I came to Canada to escape Russian dictatorship, slave labour, endless hunger and misery. I was only seven when our family left Soviet Ukraine. I wasn't old enough to understand it then, but my parents had lived for 25 years under Russian dictatorship and went through many horrible experiences.

"For instance, in the years of 1922 and 1933, millions of Ukrainians died of famine and hunger. All wheat and food were taken away by Russians and transported to other countries while Ukrainians died helplessly. There were towns where no living creature [cows, chickens, dogs or cats] could be found. There were some cases when people ate each other.

"There are other ways that people rapidly died. In 1942, in the city of Viennetta, Ukraine, 10,000 people were found in a grave. Some of them were tortured and others shot in the back. Many people died from disease which came from poor nourishment and uncleanliness, and thousands died in jails and labour camps.

"People [living in the Soviet Union] were not allowed to own their property. It was taken away by [Russian] communists for whom they had to work without pay. Children were taught that there is no God and that religion is just foolishness. Churches were destroyed and some turned into theatres, offices, or even barns.

"There was no freedom of speech whatsoever. All they had to talk about, sing about, and even think about was Stalin and Mother Russia. People in communist countries have no notion of what democracy is. They are slaves as long as communism remains.

"I came to Canada to find a free democratic life where I can live freely, go to school and worship God as I please. I wanted freedom of speech, and equality with my friends and neighbors. And now that that I found this wonderful country, I'm thankful for the other thousands of people like me who came to Canada."

The win was remarkable - Helen had only been in Canada for one year. The teachers were so impressed, she was asked to present it to several large congregations for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Magrath and area.

Helen writes, "Even though I was nervous, when the time came to speak, I stood up, looked at the audience and spoke with confidence, as though it was nothing new to me. My family was so very proud of me. I won $5 and used it to buy a pair of beautiful new shoes."

Helen's story of triumph underscores the inner fearlessness she gained from Juhym and Ahaphia. She thrived in school - excelling in literature, history and art. In 1956, she became the first and only high school graduate from among her generation of immigrants in Southern Alberta.

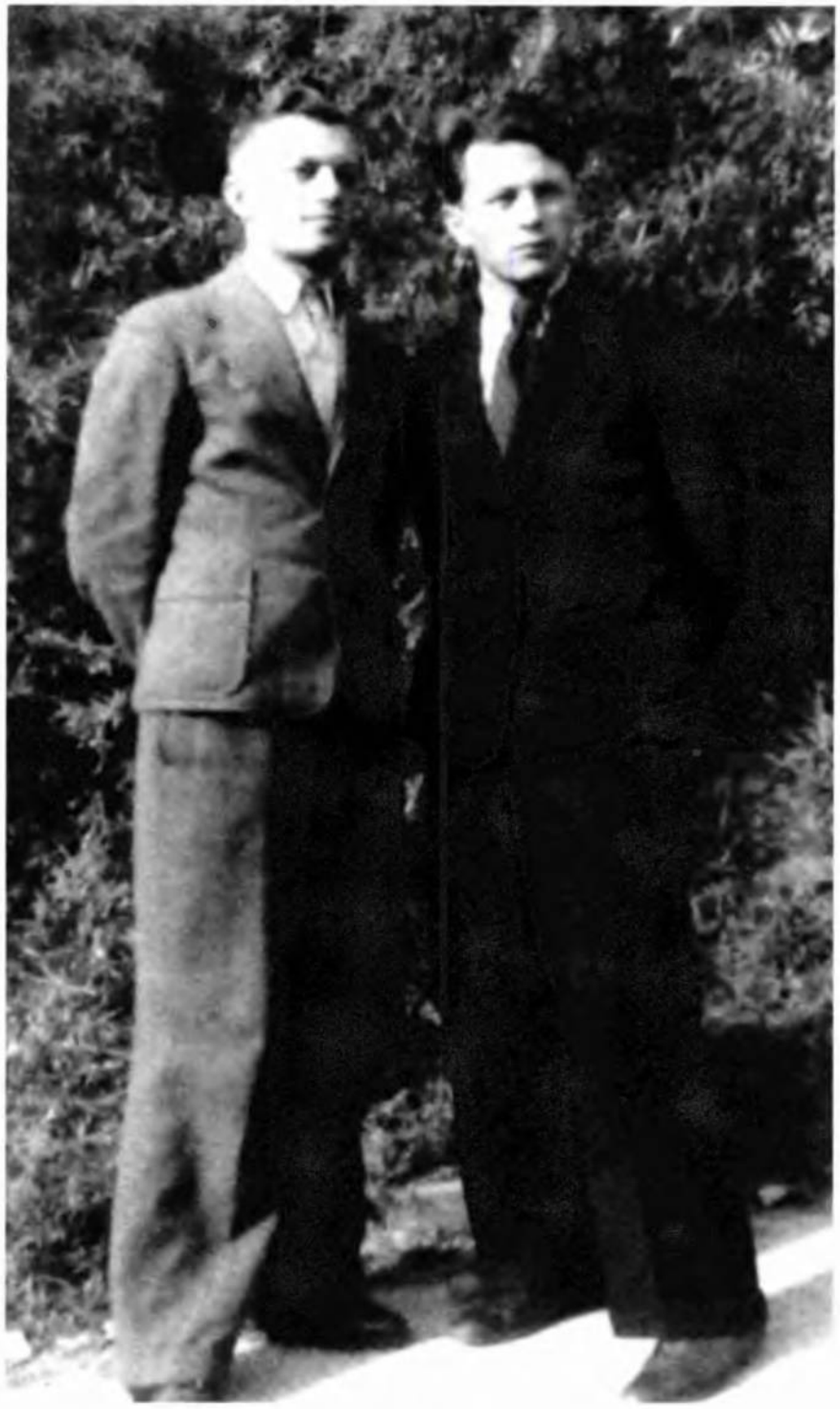
~ ~ ~

It could take volumes to share the Ponomar successes in learning a new language, finding work beyond the beet fields, adjusting to a foreign culture, and rising above the 'Displaced Person' [DP] label. It wasn't long before DP became known as 'Dirty People' and prejudice had to be faced, but the Ponomar family had overcome far worse obstacles. Nothing overshadowed the joy of being together in Canada.

Juhym and the family worked hard on the sugar beet farms [Nick worked as a plumber], and within two years, they bought a 5-room house on 1.5 acres in Magrath. Ahaphia and Anna planted rows and rows of vegetables, and tended to Rosie the cow and a few chickens. It took them little time to make it look and feel like a perfect piece of Ukraine. Add a string of grandchildren and you have heaven on earth.

Juhym suffered a stroke shortly after they bought the family home, but lived several years to follow. After a life of hiding, fleeing and protecting his family from tyrants, the stroke was the first event to slow him down. He well-deserved a rest. I have one vivid memory of him - I'm about 5-years-old and I'm watching him enjoy a bowl of borscht in their warm kitchen while Grandma's making varenyky for the crowd of family to come. Recalling that memory, I suspect Ahaphia and Juhym felt deep comfort from bringing their family to peaceful Canada, land of a million brilliant possibilities.

Mary [10] & Helen [13], Magrath, 1950 - their first spring in Canada.



~ *Epilogue* ~

Juhym passed away - from a stroke - in 1964 in Magrath, but he lived to happily see all of his children marry and know most of his 16 beautiful grandchildren. Ahaphia lived in their Magrath home until health issues convinced her to move-in with my parents [Helen and Stephen Shaskin], in Lethbridge, in 1971.

Until this time, Grandma's house was a central gathering place for the Ponomar clan. With her sons Serghi and Nick living about 100 paces south of her, and the rest of us visiting for weekends and holidays, there were always more than a few grandchildren to feed and enjoy - and her garden was her comfort until it was time to move. Leaving Magrath and her home seemed to take a toll on her body and soul. She missed Juhym more than ever, and passed away February 23, 1972.

Each one of their five children became respected citizens of Canada. By 1965, Serghi and Nick established MP Crushing Ltd., to supply sand and gravel for construction projects throughout Southern Alberta. Their partner was Heinz Claussen, a Mennonite German fellow they met in Alberta. The business was very successful, employing many and it continues even after the passing of Serghi in 1991 and Nick in 2005.

Serghi and Nick were next door neighbours in Magrath for 30 years, and then in Lethbridge for the rest of their lives. They also vacationed every winter in Hawaii for 20-something consecutive years.

Stalin and Hitler gave my aunts and uncles plenty of reasons to complain about their early lives, but they didn't. As you will see in the photographs to follow, their examples taught us well, "The best revenge is to live a good life."

May we ever remember Ahaphia and Juhym who sacrificed everything for the well-being of their family. Their lives continue to inspire me to rise above life's fiery darts and hurdles. I think of them most every day.

Serghi & Nick, Germany, ca 1946.

~ Weddings & Family to Follow ~

1952 - 1970

[Right] Ahaphia & Juhym, Magrath, ca 1960.
[Above, left to right] Sasha, Helen & Mary, Lethbridge, ca 1955.

Alexandra [Sasha] Ponomar & Don Mirkovich, Lethbridge, 1952.
Children to follow: Gorden b. 1953, Perry b. 1957

Mykola [Nick] Ponomar & Stephanie Nisnikowski, Lethbridge, 1954.
Children to follow: Richard Andrew b. 1955, Tina Joy b. 1960

Helen's High School Graduation, Magrath, 1956.

Of this happy day, Helen [front, 2nd from right] writes,
"Stephen took me to the graduation and bought me my first corsage - red roses!
I was so thrilled! He was so charming, so loving. I think he was crazy about me!"

Mary Ponomar & Alexander Sereda, Lethbridge, 1956.
Children to follow: Leona Anastatia b. 1958, Peter b. 1959,
Zoia Antonia b. 1961, Irene b. 1962

Helen Ponomar & Stephen Shaskin, Lethbridge, 1956.
Children to follow: Rana Melanie b. 1957, Christopher Stephen b. 1958, Diane Lynn b. 1961, Gina Marie b. 1968

Anna with Lora in Magrath, 1958.

[Top right, left to right] Serghi's sons: Paul & Gene, & [Nick's son] Rick, Magrath, ca 1957.

[Right] Rana's cousins: Mark Shaskin, Rana [in the middle] & Perry Mirkovich, Lethbridge, 1957.

[Far right] Helen with Rana & Chris, Banff, Alberta, 1961.

The 1960s were filled with family gatherings. I thought we were "the Kennedy family" of Southern Alberta.

One of many Sundays at the Shaskin home with Mirkovich cousins, Coaldale, Alberta, 1967.

Easter with Ahaphia's grandchildren, 1970.

[Back, left to right]
Leona, Perry, Gorden, Rick, Ahaphia, Aunt Melanie, Gene, Rana & Lora

[Front, left to right]
Zoia, Diane, Tina, Peter, Irene & Chris

[Not in photo]
Nick Jr. & Gina

Ahaphia & the girls in Anna's garden, Magrath, 1967.

[Back, left to right]
Tamara Kisil, Ahaphia & Anna

[Front, left to right]
Sasha & Stephanie

Anna & Serghi enjoyed Hawaii every winter for 20+ years.

Anna & Serghi's children:
Nick Jr. 1944-2010
Paul b. 1950
Eugene [Gene] b. 1953
Lora 1958-2005

Picnic at the Sereda Farm, 1968.

[Back, left to right]
Nick, Alex, Stephanie, Don, Sasha, Anna & Serghi

[Middle, left to right]
Maria [friend], Ahaphia, Gene, Rick, Gorden, Perry, [behind the boys] Lora & Helen

[Front, left to right]
Irene, Rana, Diane, Leona, Tina, Chris, Zoia & Peter

~ ~ ~

"And in the
great new family,
the family of the free,
with softly spoken,
kindly word,
remember also me."

from
My Testament
by Taras Shevchenko

~ ~ ~

Ahaphia at Sasha's, Lethbridge, 1968.

~ *Bibliography* ~

Reid, Anna. Borderland: A Journey Through the History of Ukraine. Basic Books. Toronto, 2000.

Rutherfurd, Edward. Russka: Novel of Russia. Crown Publishing. New York, 1991.

Subtelny, Orest. Ukraine: A History. University of Toronto Press. Toronto. 1988.

Yekelchyk, Serhy. Ukraine: Birth of a Nation. Oxford University Press. New York, 2007.

~ *Recommended Reading* ~

Shaskin, Rana. From Ukraine to Canada: The Shaskin Memoir, My Publisher.com. New York, 2014.

Shevchenko, Taras. Poetical works. Translated by C. H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell. Ukrainian Canadian Committee by the University of Toronto Press. Toronto, 1964.

Sholokhov, Mikhail. And Quiet Flows the Don. Vintage Books. New York, 1989, c1934.

~ *Recommended Movies* ~

All Quiet on the Western Front [2007, c. 1930]
Director: Lewis Milestone

Dr. Zhivago [1965] Director: David Lean

Everything is Illumininated [2006] Director: Liev Schreiber

Fiddler on the Roof [1973] Director: Norman Jewison

Nicholas and Alexandra [1971] Director: Franklin J. Schaffner

Quiet Flows the Don [1980, c.1957] Director: Sergei Gerasimov

[Photo] Acacia blossoms on the steppes of Ukraine.

PONOMAR FAMILY INDEX

~ About the Author ~

Rana Shaskin

Not so long ago, Rana was having lunch in Paris, France, when she felt compelled to compile the family stories she loved to hear since her childhood in Southern Alberta.

Today she lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada, where she enjoys being an aunt, family historian, writer, and librarian at the Richmond Public Library.

[Back cover, left to right] Ponomar sisters: Mary, Helen & Sasha in Lethbridge, ca 1955.