



The Carpatho-Rusyns of Minnesota

By Karen Varian

Like many other Slavs, by the late 1800s many Rusyns found it difficult to make a living in their homeland and immigrated to the United States. They came from Carpatho Rus, the cross roads of Europe where the East Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians and Belarus) and West Slavs (Poles, Slovaks and Czechs) cultures meet. They came from small villages in the Carpathian Mountain areas of what today are Southern Poland, Northeastern Slovakia, and Western Ukraine. Their language and Orthodox and Greek Catholic religions differed from their neighbors, the Poles and Slovaks. For many years they had been subject to the will and policies of dominate governments which influenced their ethnic identity and religious affiliations. When they came to the United States they hoped to maintain their ethnic identity and religion, but found they faced many struggles here as well. The history of the Rusyns of Minnesota is a good example of the struggles they faced.

From 1880 to 1920 an estimated 250,000 Rusyns immigrated to the United States. For the most part they settled in Ohio, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York. Some moved on to settle in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming.

As far as we can tell, approximately 1200 Rusyns settled in Minnesota. There were three areas in Minnesota where Rusyns settled - Northeast Minneapolis, Browerville-Holdingford, and Chisholm-Hibbing. With its urban setting, Minneapolis provided work for the Rusyns through its developing railroad, Chisholm-Hibbing, on the Iron Range, provided mining jobs, and the Bowerville-Holdingfield area provided farmland.

The largest number of Rusyns in Minnesota settled in Minneapolis. The first wave of Rusyn immigrants came to Minneapolis between 1880 to 1900. They came from an area in the northeast of present-day Slovakia with the largest number from the villages of Becherov, Komlosa (today Chemlova), Regetovka, and Stebnik.

At the time of their immigration, the Rusyns who came to Minneapolis were of the Greek Catholic faith. Originally of the Orthodox faith but united with the Church of Rome in 1054. As Greek Catholics, they were under the Pope, practiced an eastern liturgy, used the Church Slavonic language in their liturgy, and their priests were permitted to marry. Similar to the Eastern Orthodox church.

With no church of their own in the United States the first Rusyn settlers in Minneapolis attended the Polish Roman Catholic Church of Holy Cross or the Slovak Roman Catholic Church of St Cyril and Methodius. The Latin language used in the Roman Catholic liturgy and their customs were foreign to the Rusyns. They felt isolated and wanted their own church.

By 1887 the Rusyn community numbered approximately 80 individuals. These individuals included George Homzik, George Ihnat, Peter Kuchesko, Paul Masley, Ivan Mlinar, Paul and Peter Podany, Michail Potochny, Theodore Sivanich, Basil Sad, Gregory Semanchak and Gregory Vrachol who founded St. Mary's Greek Catholic Church, 17th and 5th Street in the Rusyn community of Northeast Minneapolis. Construction of the church began in 1887. It was consecrated in the spring of 1889. The original church was destroyed by fire in 1904 and a new church built in 1905 which still stands today.

With the construction of a church, the parishioners of St. Mary's wanted a priest of their own. Since most of these Rusyns were from the Presov Diocese of the Greek Catholic Church, they requested that the Bishop of Presov send them a priest. In November of 1889, Fr. Alexis Toth, a Catholic priest of the Greek rite arrived.

As was the custom, shortly after arriving, Father Toth a Catholic priest of the Greek Catholic rite appeared before Bishop John Ireland, head of the Minneapolis Roman Catholic diocese to present his credentials. Bishop Ireland read his credentials and asked Father Toth if he was married. Father Toth replied stating that he was a widower.

After hearing this, Bishop Ireland refused Father Toth permission to work in his jurisdiction. The Bishop indicated that there was a Roman Catholic Polish church down the block that was good enough for the Rusyns. Despite this, Father Toth continued to serve at St. Mary's. He asked for help from his Bishop in Presov to settle the dispute, but no help came.

Feeling that the centuries-old traditions of his church, recognized by Rome as canonically legal, were being violated in the United States. Father Toth decided to leave the Catholic faith altogether and to convert to Orthodoxy. On March 25, 1891, the Reverend Toth and his community of 365 Rusyns living in Minneapolis were formally accepted into the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands.



St. Mary's Orthodox Cathedral (St. Mary's Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church), Minneapolis, MN.

St. Mary's Orthodox Greek Catholic Church, as it was called after conversion to Orthodoxy, initially had a strong Rusyn orientation. However, over time its connection to the Russian Orthodox Church became more apparent; it developed a more Russo-ophile orientation. Russian language courses were offered, Russian priests served the parish, and Russian hymnals became a part of the liturgy. Some felt it was better to accept Russian influences in exchange for having traditional liturgies and maintaining Eastern rite practices.

This has had a long-lasting affect on the Rusyn community. Today, some families with ties to St.

Mary's still consider themselves Russian. Others have taken on a Slovak identity influenced by their contact with relatives in the homeland, who, for various reasons, identify themselves as Slovak.

There are also those who proudly identify themselves as Rusyns. St. Mary's has not totally erased its Rusyn origins. Their web site at <http://www.stmarysoca.org> acknowledges the fact that it was found by Rusyn immigrants.

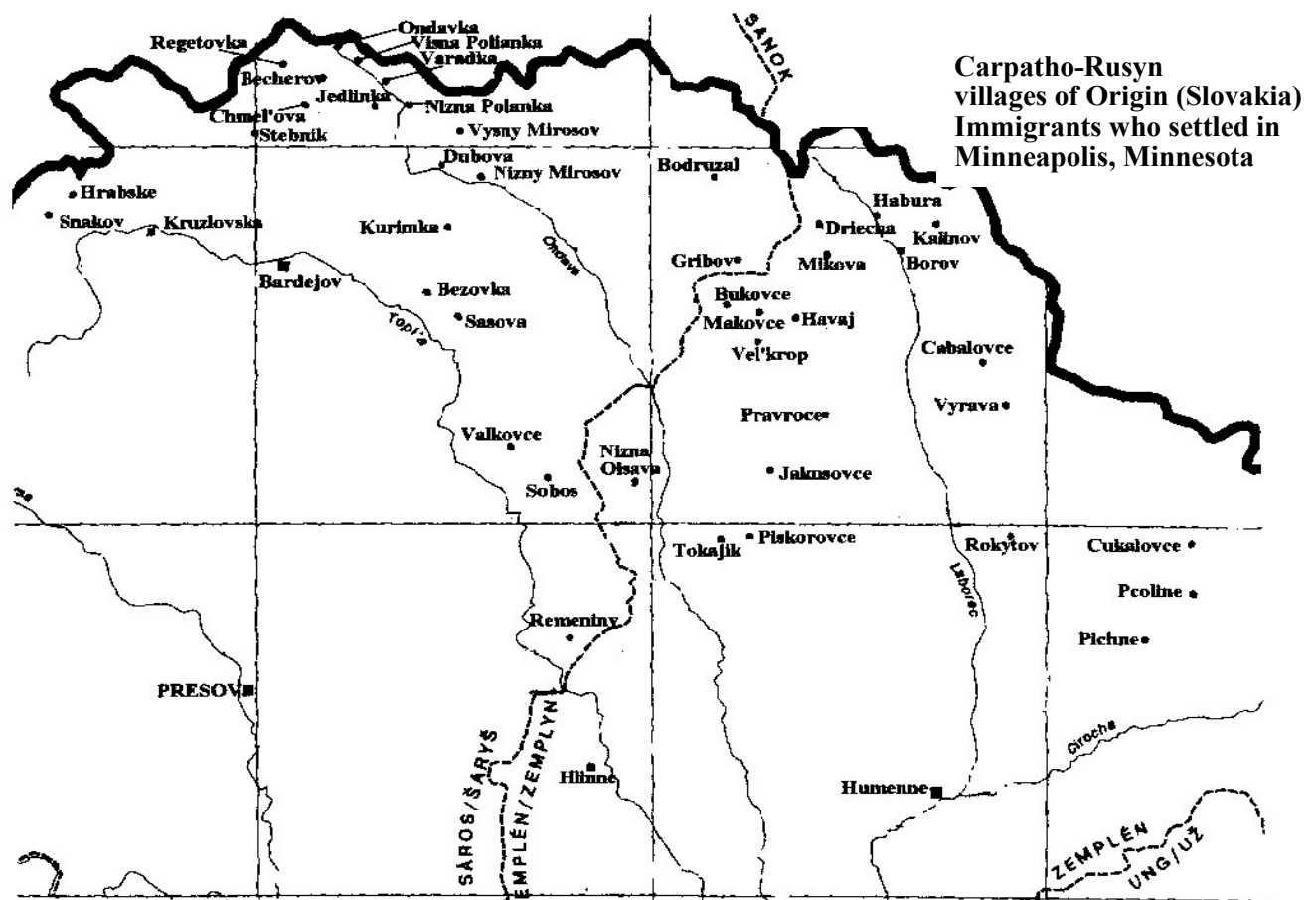
The second wave of Rusyns settling in Minneapolis came from 1900 to 1920. As did the first group of Rusyns, many first settled in the eastern states, many in Pennsylvania others in New York or New Jersey.

Unlike the first Rusyn settlers, these Rusyns did not originate from a single village area, but represented a cross-section of many villages in Carpathian Rus. This included the villages of Habura, Piskorovce, Kalinov, and Pcoline in Zemplin County and Regetovka, Krurov, and Komlosa (today Chemlova) in Saros County of present day Slovakia and the villages of Ljuta and Horlovo which today are in Ukraine.



Byzantine Church of St. John (St. John the Baptist Byzantine Catholic Church/St. John the Baptist Greek Catholic Church) - Minneapolis, MN.

These Rusyns also came with their Greek Catholic faith, and along with other members of the Rusyn community in Minneapolis who wanted to maintain their Greek Catholic faith found St. John The Baptist Greek Catholic Church.



By 1906 the group bought property at 22nd and 3rd Street Northeast (a half mile from St Mary's) and moved an old church building onto the property.

With the approval of Bishop John Ireland, who by now wanted to stop the Rusyns from continuing to turn to Eastern Orthodoxy, St John the Baptist Greek Catholic Church was incorporated in 1908. Ironically, the first priest to serve St. John's was Father Eugene Volkay was married. In 1929, the Pope banded priests in the United States from marrying. This band remained until 2014.

Where the Rusyn parish of St. Mary's had to contend with the Russian influence on their traditional religious practice, the Rusyn parish of St. John's Greek Catholic Church had to contend with foreign religion impinging upon its traditional language and culture. This influence was the American Roman Catholic Church and its policy of Latinization and Americanization.

The parishioners of St. John's were able to preserve the orthodoxy of their faith and liturgy and ethnicity of their traditions with little "Romanizing" being apparent until the building of a new church was completed in 1927 and still is use today.

The new church was decorated in a purely Western and Roman interior. There were no Icons or Royal Doors as was traditional in a Greek Catholic Church. Even the Altar was clearly Roman. The exterior of the new church was and, except for the three barred cross, was clearly Western.

The interior of St. John's Byzantine Catholic Church, as it is known today, has been remodeled several times over the years. Today the interior is decorated in the eastern tradition with beautiful Icons and Royal Doors and maintains most of its Eastern Rite traditions.

Ninety three names were listed as the original founders of St. John's. Some of the family names include, Antoniak, Ihnatowicz, Bilyj, Zbehli, Babej, Bracik, Bizcko, Bitner, Ciucwara, Czaczko, Czerbanycz Chorwat, Cymbal, Danio, Dargaj, Filo, Filak, Gambol, Goga, Haluska, Horhota, Hudak, Ihnat, Jaroszczak, Kalyn, Kania, Kocisko, Kicinka, Klymak, Korbik, Kostelcj, Kuruc, Lacyk, Lysyj, Macica, Madiar, Macko, Ordas, Pagacz, Piricz, Pindo, Pelak, Poliwka, Prokop, Rusnaczko, Snapkko, Suszko, Slepak, Szeremeta, Snajder, Szevec, Siwanycz, and Zupko (spellings of many of these names have been "Americanized" throughout the years).

Some of the descendants of the original founders of St. John's and St. Mary's still live in the Minneapolis area and attend those churches. Others have lost contact with their Church and their Rusyn heritage. Others are unsure of their heritage or now identify themselves as Slovak or Ukrainian.

With the loss of religious unity among the Rusyns and the Rusyn Churches becoming denationalized over the years, it has been left up to the families to maintain and pass on their ethnic heritage. Most families when coming to America wanted to be American and their ethnicity was not stressed. This took a toll on the Rusyn Community in Minnesota. In the 1980s, Larry Goga, who, from his own experiences of not knowing much about his Rusyn heritage, formed a group calling itself the Rusin Cultural Awareness Group. This group later became our "Rusin Association," also known as the Rusin Association of Minnesota, and was the first Rusin/Rusyn cultural organization in the United States to be independent of the Church.

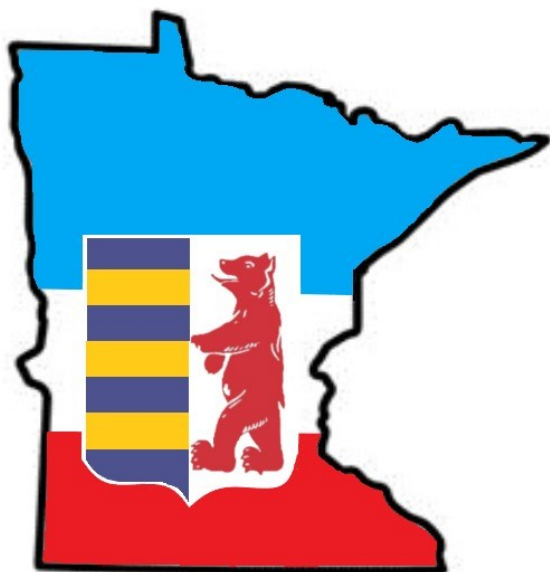
In 1994, at the National level, the Carpatho-Rusyn Society was formed. Today the Carpatho-Rusyn Society has over 1800 members, 14 chapters throughout the United States and a Cultural Center in Munhall, Pennsylvania.

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