

## WHAT TOOK US SO LONG? ... SOPHIA PYTS

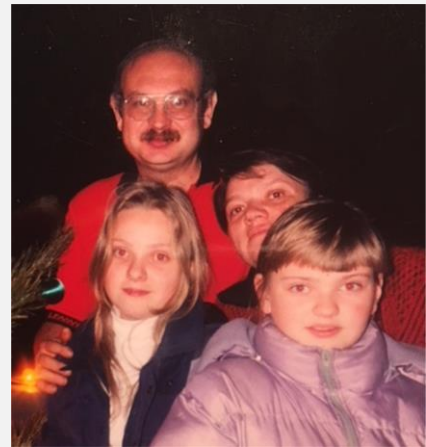
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For more than sixteen years our family has been coming to St. Stephen Ukrainian Church enjoying regular Sunday services as well as every Christmas and Easter festivities. But only last month I and my husband Petro formally registered as parishioners of our church. "What took you so long?" sounds like very reasonable question one might ask. To answer this, I will have to take you many years back into communist Soviet Union where I and my husband were born and raised.

I was not more than five years old sitting on the wooden floor covered by simple rag and playing with a doll my mom made for me out of old blanket. My father was listening to the "Voice of America" program on the radio. It was program about Ukrainian decedents jailed by Soviet regime because of their religious beliefs. Suddenly Dad picked me up from the floor set me on his laps and said "I want you to remember two things. It is very important. First: your mom is very sick and she can die any day. Second: our country Ukraine is occupied by Russian communist regime. They came, took our land, our possessions, and destroyed our church. But no matter what they will tell you in school remember God exists and their empire will collapse and they will be gone. Do you understand what I said?" He asked me. . "Yes," I answered and ran to my mom. She could not hold her tears back and neither could I. She kissed me again and again before I calmed. "You hurt her with this harsh talk," she said to Dad. "She is old enough to know the truth and life will hurt her more than once," was his response. My mom died 25 years later. It took three more years for Soviet empire to collapse and who knows how much longer it will take for Ukraine to become truly independent member of democratic world.

As I was getting older year after year I learned from my parents my true faith. They told me they were forced to baptize me in Russian Orthodox Church because Ukrainian Catholic Church was destroyed by communists and many of the priests were killed or send to Siberia. I wasn't allowed to talk about my faith to anyone. I lived double life. In school I was singing communist songs, memorizing poems about Lenin, studying the history of communist party. At home I was learning moral values and real history of my country. Every Christmas Eve, every Easter was celebrated in secrecy. Even though Orthodox Church was legal not everyone could attend it freely. All too common were people losing jobs, being expelled from school or post-secondary education and dismissed from military service. Registration as a parishioner just couldn't and didn't exist. My family could only attend church in remote village when we visited my grandparents. What joyful moments they were for all of us!

At very young age I learned that everything related to religion is very private and must be kept secret from anyone except close family. I recall the Easter of my senior year of high school. I was eighteen planning soon to leave my home town for a big city to pursue a dream of getting a university degree and becoming a journalist. Good Friday came and I had a tough decision to make. Never before had I gone to kneel upon Plashchanitcia but that year I felt like I must. Despite the risk of being caught by teacher or even worse KGB agent, being expelled from school



Our first Christmas in Canada

and never have a chance to get post-secondary education I couldn't resist temptation of standing in line with hundreds of others just to kneel by the symbolic God's Tomb. I felt if I miss this holy moment I will never be able to make my dreams come true. At two o'clock in the morning under the cover of darkness I went to church. Along with me came my best friend Oksana who was Jewish but since the Synagogue was ruined by communists she started to practice



Roy and Evageline Drynych, Mike and Verna Hryhoryshyn having a tea with our family after delivering furniture and much more

Christianity. How surprised I was when I saw many of my teachers and other town dignitaries standing in the same line pretending they didn't know or didn't see each other. It was a silent agreement of conspiracy which all these people were following for many years and every newcomer like me had to obey.

Ten years went by. I finished university, returned to my home town and got a job as a subeditor of local newspaper. At the very same time Petro whom I knew from our school years and was dating for a while proposed to me. We had standard wedding ceremony at the City Hall which had no mentioning of any religion. It didn't sit well with us. Three months later we were married in a secret church wedding in a remote village. Very early in the morning with church door locked with two of my aunts witnessing as Father Roman pronounced us husband and wife. Three years later our first daughter Iryna was born. We had to get creative to baptize her. The priest came to our house pretending to be plumber, performed the baptism with curtains closed and door locked.

Ukraine proclaimed Independence in 1991. Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was restored their rights. Our neighborhood decided to build new Catholic Church. We named it after Saints Peter and Paul. All of us donated our time, money and hands to make it happen. In this church our youngest daughter Daryna was baptized: for the first time we went to church openly and proudly.

The Soviet Union collapsed and we had new hope for our family and our country. Soon enough we understood that the soviet evil deeply damaged not only our people, culture and economy, but also entire nations which lost orientation. For more than 70 years Moscow was in power. They punished those who rebelled and rewarded those who obeyed. Suddenly the powerful center was gone and people were disorientated. Corruption, protectionism continued to rule. Slowly but surely Russian mafia which in big part was formed from communist clerks, former police and Special Forces agents returned to Ukraine. They laid their hands on all fields of economy. I was the first one to lose a job. Petro managed to keep his job in a geological firm but didn't get paid for entire year. We were down to one can of condensed milk and few cans of ham when we decided to immigrate to Canada.



Sister Janet with our daughters Iryna and Daryna in our first apartment

Precisely at five o'clock in the afternoon on October 5, 2002 I, Petro and our two daughters stood on Canadian soil. No one came to welcome us at the Calgary airport because we didn't know a single soul in this city or country. The four of us stood there watching other people running to each other kissing and hugging. I looked at my youngest daughter who suddenly started kissing her teddy bear, the only toy she was allowed to take with her to Canada. My heart shrunk. "What have I done," I thought. "I pulled my kids out of their country away from their friends, family and all things familiar and brought them to unknown land where no one waits for them, needs them or cares about them. Our oldest daughter who was the only English speaking person in our family

explained our situation to the taxi driver and he took us to an affordable motel. "Now what?" were the first words my husband said when we woke the next morning I opened a thick phone book which was sitting on the night stand. "O", "P", "R", "S", "T", "U", I was reading letters out loud. "Saint Stephen Ukrainian Catholic Church" I said. Took a pen, wrote down church's address. "This is where we going".

Sunday service was almost over when we got to church but we knelt down to pray. As soon as choir finished the closing hymn a young lady came up to us. It was Lisa Letwin. She introduced us to Sister Janet who truly did wonders for us. Many parishioners welcomed us to Canada. Sister Janet took the address of our motel and three days later she loaded our suitcases in her car and we moved into our apartment. It didn't take us long to unpack. All we had was few books in Ukrainian, some clothes, four plates, four cups, four spoons and forks, two pots and frying pan. We were glad to see carpeted floor. In the evening I made a bed for the kids spreading sheets on the floor and placing two pillows and blanket on top of it. For me and Petro sweaters served as a pillows and jackets as a comforter. The girls fell asleep almost immediately being tired from a long walk we took in the afternoon exploring the neighborhood. After tossing and turning, Petro eventually fell asleep. I couldn't put my mind to rest. Thoughts and worries about unknown life ahead of us kept me awake almost all night but towards morning I dreamed about a little bird flying into our window. Back in my youth grandma told me that if in my dream a bird visits I can expect good news or visitor. Soon enough a knock on the door woke me up. A bunch of people from St. Stephen's church came in: Mike and Verna Hryhoryshyn, Roy and Evangeline Drynych, Sisters Janet and Laura. Later these people became our friends, back then they all were strangers. Men carried bed frames, couches, mattresses, chairs; ladies brought linens, towels, kitchenware and toys for kids. All day long people were coming bringing things sometimes not even saying their names.

By the end of the day we had almost everything we needed. At dinner time I opened our fridge. It was full of groceries. Once more the doorbell rang and Jenny Swydneyky who became one of our closest friends, brought freshly made barley soup. It was the best soup we ever had. For a long time people from church looked after our family. Every weekend someone took us for a road trip to the mountains or other entertainment. For everything we needed, whether a helping hand or good advice, we turned to the church. Never will we forget Father Randy



Sophia and her husband Petro

who welcomed us to the church and made all arrangements necessary to enroll our kids in a catholic school. Our first week in Canada he gave us Co-op gift certificates which we used to buy food for our family for two months.

When we needed transportation to bring our first piece of furniture that we bought in thrift store, Larry Mandryk was there for us with his truck and helping hands. With help of Vincent Lytwin we bought our first car which served us more than ten years. When I look through my closet I still have clothes donated to me by Lynne and Paule Kyba. In the summer time we enjoy blossoms of some perennials which Ed Demchuck gave us the very first year we bought our house. Velma Cybulska also gave us many plants from her garden. We keep all those people in our prayers.

Over the years being immigrants, we faced many challenges but our church helped us to stay strong, keep our faith, work hard and be grateful to the country which gave us shelter when we needed it. ***We would like to say***

***thank you to all of St. Stephen's church community for accepting us, for supporting and helping us.***

This year our oldest daughter Iryna is planning to get married. I know when she will walk down the aisle I will cry. But these tears will be the tears of joy because unlike me she doesn't have to hide her faith, to fear persecution for her beliefs. ***Finally we were able to shed our feeling of being punished for our faith and we felt ready to be registered as parishioners of St. Stephen's. We want our daughter to be proud of her faith and pass this onto her children.***

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I want to share your "***views***" as they are important to our parish family.

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