

# 100 Years and Counting

A tribute to the Slemko family on their Canadian centenary

by Marie Lesoway



The following is an excerpt of a speech delivered by Marie Lesoway at the Slemko family reunion of 2002, which marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the family's life in Canada.

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*Marie Lesoway conducted personal interviews, archival research and literature reviews to prepare comprehensive reports on the Slemko house, barn and granary that were relocated to the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village.*

*During the course of her work, she forged close bonds with the Slemko family. She was invited to speak at their family reunion, where she was presented with a certificate adopting her as an honorary member of the Slemko clan.*



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6927 – 101A Avenue NW  
Edmonton, Alberta T6A 0M3  
780.469.7396  
marie@storyphile.ca  
www.storyphile.ca

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## Speech Excerpt

I first met the Slemko clan back in 1984, when I was a consultant for the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village. The village had acquired a house, barn and granary that had belonged to Yakiv and Annytsa (nee Tkachuk) Slemko of Edward, Alberta—east of Smoky Lake.

My job was to research the stuff and stories associated with those buildings. Of course, since this was a government job, “stuff and stories” had a fancier name.

The “stuff” was called material culture.

This was the furniture, tools, pots and pans, dishes, books, clothes, trinkets, farm machinery and everything else that was housed in those buildings in 1919. With the help of period catalogues and concept drawings, we created spec sheets for 100s of artifacts—for everything from the handmade cradle and woven-willow fish traps to the pins and needles in the drawers of the sewing machine.

The “stories” part of my work was called narrative history.

This documented how the Slemko family lived, how they farmed, how they raised their kids, how the chores got done and how the bread got baked. It told the story of how the Slemkos coped with the challenges of living on a homestead with no electricity, no running water, no phone, and in the earliest years, no railroad, no roads, no schools, no churches, no community centres and not much of anything but bush.

***Yakiv (Jacob) was the eldest son of Semion and Elysaveta Slemko. He was 22 when his family immigrated from the western Ukrainian village of Lashkivka, in the province of Bukovyna, in 1902.***

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It goes without saying that, in doing my research, I had a lot of help from a lot of Slemkos—especially from Yakiv and Annytsa’s children. Many of them have now passed on, but they’ll always have a very special place in my heart.

It was Ilena’s stories that helped make the Slemko buildings come alive. Something Ilena and I shared in common was a deep dislike of the boiled cornmeal dish called *kulesha*. The Slemkos sometimes ate this instead of bread, while in my family it was served as porridge. But I knew just what Ilena meant when she said, “Eating that *kulesha* was death.”

John’s Margaret was the one who introduced me to Bukovynian-style *zeleni holubtsi*—the ones made from beet leaves wrapped around bits of dough and smothered in farm cream. I’ve never tasted better than the *holubtsi* I ate in John and Margaret’s kitchen.

Bill and Elesoveta were among the warmest-hearted and most hospitable people I’ve ever known. Bill had a keen sense of humour and there was always a twinkle in his eye. Some of his one-liners still crack me up. Like “*Tut durnykh nema. Durni pishly lis maliuvaty.*” Which, loosely translated, means, “There are no fools here. They’ve all gone to paint the bush.”

The Slemkos I interviewed were lovely people and they treated me like one of the family. In fact, one of the best compliments I ever had—in all my years as a researcher—was one day at Edwand, when John happened to phone while I was interviewing Bill. Now, Bill and John were both on in years and they were getting a wee bit hard of hearing. They were both hollering into the telephone, so I could hear both sides of the conversation. Bill says to John—in Ukrainian—“I can’t talk now. Marika [that’s me] is here.” John asks, “Which Marika?” And Bill says, “*Our* Marika.” Which just goes to show what warm, friendly folk the Slemkos are.

In the course of my research, I got to hear many of the Slemko family stories. I was always struck by the great courage, strength and spirit of cooperation that characterized the Slemko clan. Semion and his sons worked together and helped each other out. They pooled their resources to buy things like registered livestock, and in about 1917, the very first gasoline-powered tractor the Edwand area had seen.

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I was also impressed that, in spite of the hardships they endured as homesteaders, the Slemkos managed to maintain their sense of humour and love of life. They never forgot how to party and have a good time—and the proof is right here in this room.

The Slemkos held fast to a deep faith that things would turn out, even in the middle of the wilderness. With God's help and bit of hard work, they would make it so.

Yakiv and Annytsa's buildings at the Ukrainian Village are a testament to this faith and to the Slemkos' deep, deep sense of family. This has held fast for 100 years, and I have no doubt it will be strong and true 100 years from now.

In thinking about family, and what I might say to you all tonight, I was reminded of a Ukrainian folk song that was my mother's favourite.

*De zhoda v rodyni...*

Where there is goodwill in a family,  
Where there is peace—and quiet,  
Those people are fortunate.  
Their way is joyful.  
They are blessed, and good things come to them.

I wish you peace in your families. May you live long and prosper. And may the Slemko family's next hundred years in Canada be joyful and blessed.