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The Story That Wasn't but Now Is

How a Journalist Can Lose and Recover a Story

Abstract. Often journalists receive story assignments that never come to fruition. This narrative recounts the efforts made to tell a story about how New Jersey school districts were addressing the Ukrainian war in classrooms around the state, and why they need to tell that story was so important. That story was never published for the intended audience but is now rewritten for an academic e-publication.

In journalism, we call the opening sentence, or paragraphs, of a news story the lede– pronounced leed. The lede I had prepared for an assigned story about how current events in Ukraine were being addressed in New Jersey public schools read like this:

With strong voices and pragmatic words, students and professors from Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University told their colleagues at Seton Hall University that they would persevere as the unprovoked war with Russia raged on.

"Cities can be under siege for years and still function," one student said. "Putin thought Ukrainian soldiers would not fight back. Putin believed the war would not last long. Our nation has struggled for centuries not to have Russia take our independence away" said another.

A third student summed up his college experience this way: "I have never seen our nation being more united. And it shows here. We organized ourselves as fast as possible. That's what we had to do. Businesses keep on working . . . baristas are still making lattes, and students continue to study. I can't sit and do nothing. I don't want to lose my future because Putin believes that Ukraine shouldn't exist."

These were some of the insights shared by Ukrainians during an April 5, 2022 Google Meet between students and professors from Seton Hall University in New Jersey, and students and professors at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University in Ukraine. The exchange lasted more than two hours. I was there as a New Jersey school board member asked to write a story about how some New Jersey teachers–graduates of the secondary education program at Seton Hall– were discussing these current events in their social studies classes. But in addition to telling the story of that call, the other impetus for writing the larger piece came from three news stories about what was happening within New Jersey as the war unfolded.

The first news story, my own, looked at one community's response to the war. The photo for the story showed the opening of the annual St. Patrick's Day parade where members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians Monsignor Crean Division No. 1 carried both the Irish and Ukrainian flags. That gesture seemed to embody the response from the Hamilton community. (Ferrara, 2022) A second story profiled Vasyl Hrechynsky, a New Jersey public school music teacher during the day, but additionally, the director of the Ukrainian Chorus Dumka of New York. The chorus was asked to perform for the opening of NBC television's long-running show, *Saturday Night Live.* (SNL, 2022) According to the story, "the song the group performed on *Saturday Night Live* was a prayer for Ukraine that dates back to 1885. It has become the country's spiritual anthem." (West, 2022) The third story recounted the harrowing tale of a young Ukrainian girl whose mother was visiting in the United States when the war began. The mother, with the help of friends and family in Ukraine, managed to get her daughter to safety, eventually bringing her to New Jersey. Highlighted in this

story was how this young lady had enrolled in a New Jersey school where students were "communicating with her using Google translator on their smartphones." (Radel, 2022)

My school board colleagues needed to know these current stories and how those stories nested with the history of Ukrainians in New Jersey.

There are 5,000 elected school board members in New Jersey. Once elected, we become automatic members of the New Jersey School Board Association (NJSBA), an organization established in 1914. (Bamford, 2014, J. Bamford, personal communication, February 3, 2022) NJSBA publishes a magazine titled *School Leader*. The story would have been published there. While we run for election to our seats, we serve as volunteers. By law, we are tasked with hiring and evaluating the district's superintendent–the equivalent of a college president. We must set a budget each year. And, we establish policies for the students, teachers, and staff in hopes that our schools become safe and productive learning spaces. And while those are the only tasks by law, there are many other things school board members are called to do, including making sure that what is taught in our districts aligns with the State of New Jersey learning standards and the values of our community. Think of learning standards as a syllabus, only instead of applying to one class, the standards apply to student learning from Kindergarten to 12th grade. (NJSBA, 2021)

New Jersey's Student Learning Standards for Social Studies includes one reference to Ukrainians. Found on page 81 of the 93-page document, the standard reads:

> Analyze the motivations, causes, and consequences of the genocides of Armenians, Ukrainians, and Jews in the Holocaust and assess the responses by individuals, groups,
> and governments and analyze large-scale atrocities including 20th-century massacres in China.
> Assess government responses to incidents of ethnic cleansing and genocide.
> (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020)

This lone standard does a disservice to the rich history of Ukrainian immigration to America; and, it most especially ignores the historical impact of Ukrainian immigrants who settled in New Jersey. So the goal of writing the piece was not just to examine how current events of the war were being discussed in New Jersey classrooms. What I wanted my colleagues to understand was how the war impacted Ukrainian Americans living in New Jersey, and why our districts needed to set the current war into a historical context.

Ukrainian immigrants have called New Jersey home since the late 1800s according to a 1994 article published in a special issue journal for The Center for Migration Studies. (Pawliczko, 1994).

> Large-scale immigration of Ukrainians to the United States did not begin until the 1880s; however by the outbreak of World War I, nearly 500,000 Ukrainians had reached America's shores. The second Ukrainian immigration wave (1920-1939) was much smaller than the earlier wave–only some 15,00 to 20,000. The third or post-World War II wave reached close to 90,000, the majority of whom were persons displaced by the war.
> [O]ver 90 percent of Ukrainians arriving in the United States had chosen urban destinations. (Pawliczko, 1994)

Between 1899 to 1914, nearly 30,000 Ukrainians chose to live in New Jersey, the third-highest population in the U.S. behind Pennsylvania (113,204) where Ukrainians were recruited to work in the coal mines; and New York (59,883) where most settled in New York City. (Pawliczko, 1994) In 2022, "there are 65,855 New Jersey residents of Ukrainian heritage, including 21,236 foreign-born people, according to U.S. Census data, which makes up 0.74 percent of New Jersey's total population." (O'Connell-Domenech, Vella, 2022) And while they live in New Jersey, they did not leave their heritage behind in Ukraine.

Pawliczko wrote that "Ukrainians always considered the maintenance of their ethnic identity to be of extreme importance." This led, she said, to Ukrainians choosing to settle together and then "establishing churches, schools, and other organizations." (Pawliczko, 1994) And that is clearly evident in the state of New Jersey where the Ukrainian communities have worked to establish a quiet, but solid presence–a presence which could easily help support New Jersey public school social studies teachers.

For example, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA (UOCOFUSA) is located in Somerset, New Jersey, about five miles (8 km) from Rutgers University, New Jersey's flagship state school; it is about 30 miles (48 km) from Seton Hall University. According to the UOCOFUSA website, the headquarters was organized in 1918 "when several already existing parishes and clergy of other Orthodox and Catholic dioceses decided that the Ukrainian population of the USA had reached the level that this distinctive ethnic identity should have its own jurisdiction."

The expansive site supports several missions on its grounds, including the main administrative headquarters called the Metropolia Center. Also on the grounds are St. Andrew cemetery and St. Andrew Memorial church. The spire on the church is "is dedicated to all who perished in the Stalinist famine of 1932-33." (Mackin, 2019) The St. Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Theological Seminary is also located there, as is The Ukrainian History and Education Center, also known as UHEC. This center hosts special exhibits and workshops and is prized for its genealogy outreach programs, including an annual conference. The Nashi Predky Ukrainian genealogy group, which has a closed presence on Facebook, works out of UHEC and boasts a roster of 3,000 people who "share their knowledge and experiences, and in-house resources, such as the genealogy archival collections." (Mackin, 2019)

Forty-one miles (66 km) southwest of the UOCOFUSA site, one can find the Ukrainian Community of New Jersey or UCNJ which is located in Hamilton, New Jersey, outside of Trenton, the state capital. UCNJ is affiliated with The Ukrainian National Home and Cultural Center which was established in 1968 with the purchase of a historic house, once known as the Bow Hill mansion. Bow Hill originally belonged to William Trent, the founder of Trenton, New Jersey. (Ferrara, 2022). The Ukrainian National Home and Cultural Center is located across the Delaware River, about 33 miles (53 km) from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a city that boasts the second-largest Ukrainian community in the United States. (Zucker, 2022) The Home and Cultural Center hosts events and meetings. The UCNJ Facebook page keeps members apprised of happenings in and around the New Jersey/Philadelphia area. Since the start of the war, all of these Ukrainian institutions have been instrumental in fundraising for needs in Ukraine. They all have stories to tell and personally, I think many of those stories should be told in classrooms making studies richer.

But unfortunately, none of my 5,000 colleagues will be privy to the vast Ukrainian history in and around New Jersey, which can be told by many. School board members won't hear stories from New Jersey social studies teachers and their students. They will not read about the April 5th call representing the most important piece of the planned story. Schools no longer need to wait for news programs, videos, movies, or letters from abroad for information. Google Meet, or Zoom, can bring current events into the classroom in real-time with real people. Those 5,000 school board members, many of who voted in their districts to provide every child with a laptop, could have seen the value and wisdom of their collective decision-making. They might have learned what American students–maybe students of Ukrainian descent–thought about the war. The story didn't evaporate due to the lack of effort on my part, or even on the part of a New Jersey social studies teacher who emailed his colleagues asking if they would speak with me. The email message back from this teacher? "Most told me there was no district-level interest in commenting."

My editor and I were at a loss to explain why participation in the story, which would have highlighted important work and discussions, would be dismissed. My hypothesis? Since the pandemic, New Jersey school districts, like many others around the United States, have come under fire for a series of contentious decisions. These decisions, including the mandating of mask-wearing in schools, did not come from the districts themselves, but from state and federal government officials. But parents don't have access to those officials; they have access to school district superintendents and Board of Education members, so that is where they exert pressure. And currently, in New Jersey, parents are distraught over new curriculum standards for Health and Physical Education. Those standards include what is called the Family Life Curriculum, a euphemism for sex education. The standards include teaching students about "gender and gender role stereotypes." (Carrera, 2020)

And so, the story that was to hopefully become an edifying moment for members of the New Jersey School Board Association–for people charged with helping to make teaching and learning relevant – has instead become an obituary for a lost news story. So the story that wasn't, now is the story for academia.

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