

**Ellen Bacon,**  
**Seton Hall University**  
**ORCID ID 0000-0003-3591-6919**

### **Interview with Mr. Michael Komichak, the parishioner of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Holy Ascension of Maplewood town, New Jersey, USA**

The following paper is a summarization of a 2018 interview with Michael Commacezh conducted by Kalliopi Logothetis and Laura Abel demonstrating the central role and influence of the Ukrainian Church on the maintenance of culture for immigrants and their descendants from Ukraine now living in the United States.

In the early spring of 2018 students from Seton Hall University met with parishioners of the Holy Ascension Church in Maplewood, New Jersey. One of the parishioners they interviewed is named Michael Commacezh. Michael's ancestors left Ukraine in the first wave of the diaspora which began in the late 19th century and ended before World War I. Like many Ukrainian descendants, Michael can link his family's history to Ukraine's tumultuous past, commenting that his maternal great-grandparents' nationality was identified as Austria-Hungarian on their immigration papers. He concludes that they were likely seeking economic opportunity or they were politically motivated to evade Kaiser Wilhelm. Michael's paternal grandparents came to the United States in 1912, citing turmoil between Ukraine and Poland leading up to the first World War for his grandfather's motivation to start a new life abroad. Similar to many Ukrainians in the first wave of the diaspora Michael's ancestors settled in the Northeast; his family laid roots in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area. Michael is quick to identify the influence of a Ukrainian Church on the immigrant community at that time due to the strong pull of a unifying language on people that are otherwise isolated. He describes it as a center from which cultural and religious community springs forth. This is the community that brought his paternal grandparents together when they met in the United States.

Michael goes on to describe his maternal grandparents and how the Ukrainian church is central to their story. Michael's maternal grandmother was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania and moved with her family to Pittsburgh in the early 20th century via horse-drawn wagon. She came from a family of farmers who immigrated from Ukraine, and she herself went on to marry an immigrant from Ukraine. Michael shares the story of how his maternal grandparents met in the church choir, beginning his family story with the Ukrainian Church at its center. Also Central to many stories of Ukrainian immigrant families is the turmoil of Ukraine's past. Michael's family is no exception as his grandfather moved back to Ukraine to support its independence efforts and did not return to the United States, resulting in his grandmother raising his mother alone through the Great Depression.

Keeping with tradition, Michael's parents also met in the choir of the Ukrainian Church they attended in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area. Michael's family is an example of the steadfast community that the Ukrainian church provided. Despite both being native-born and fully immersed in the United States, Michael's parents were determined to raise their family with the Ukrainian church at its core. Michael's family members were leaders in the Ukrainian-American community, establishing a bilingual radio broadcast called "Ukrainian Radio Program" that still aired at the time of the interview in 2018 and serving as cultural experts for NBC.

Michael describes his childhood church in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania (a suburb of Pittsburgh) as a "vibrant community" that demonstrated the American melting pot, especially of those of Eastern European descent. This community is one in which the priest was the center.

Tragically, this community is not as vibrant as it had once been due to the decline of industry in the area.

Michael's story continues with his move from Pittsburgh to New Jersey. Michael attended Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. He began as a piano major and cited both of his parents' musical talents that they had practiced in the Ukrainian Church Choir when they met as his source for his musical genes. Not wanting to end up being a music teacher, Michael transfer to the Massachusetts institute for technology where he earned degrees in both Mathematics and in Electrical Engineering. Michael spent the next twenty years as a computer software consultant, traveling all over the country to fulfill his position. Exercising his love of travel, he attended a sailing trip to Turkey that was organized by his future wife, Dari, for first generation or second generation Ukrainian immigrants. Never far from the influence of the Ukrainian Church, Dari and Michael actually attended the same church growing up and their parents were friends. Dari lived in New Jersey, so Michael moved to be with her.

Michael goes on to discuss his privilege of the Ukrainian-American. Michael is able to cite various Struggles that Ukrainian people had to go through, including: war, famine, and genocide. Michael references struggles under Poland, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. However, after Ukraine achieved its independence, Michael was able to make connections with Ukrainian people on his trips there, citing his cultural affinity and connection he was able to maintain through the Ukrainian Church and community in the United States.

### References

*Commacezh, Michael.* (2018, May). Interview with Michael Commacezh [Interview]. Ellen Bacon, Seton Hall University.

Interview 5 (41:43). May 8, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvIJnVTt5Pg>

