

The Centenary of the Miracle of St Nicholas in Pennsylvania:
The Saving of Over 250 Carpatho-Russian Miners on 19 December 1907



On 20 December 1907 *The New York Times* front page reported details of a mining disaster in Pennsylvania. Although hundreds of coal miners had lost their lives, the newspaper carried the unusual headline of *The Pittsburgh Press*: ‘St Nicholas Feast Saves the Russians’. And other headline captions at the time included: *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*: Majority of Victims Americans - Foreign Workers Lay Off to Go to Church and Escape Death; *Pittsburgh Dispatch*: Many of the victims are English-speaking men. Foreigners escape owing to religious holiday. What was the story behind these headlines?

On 19 December 1907, at least 239 coal miners were killed in an explosion at the Darr Mine in Van Meter, in the south-western corner of Pennsylvania. This remains the fourth worst coal mining disaster in U.S. history and everyone inside the mine was killed. However, it could have been much worse - the number of victims could have been double. The death toll was not some 500, because 19 December is St Nicholas’ Day and some 250 faithful Carpatho-Russian immigrant coal miners had taken an unpaid day off work to celebrate his memory. For even the greedy coal mine owners, who otherwise had virtually complete control over the miners with their threats of dismissal, knew that they could not force Carpatho-Russians to work on 19 December, St Nicholas Day. For St Nicholas is the patron saint of shepherds, one reason why he has been the Carpatho-Russian patron saint for centuries, and thanks to his intercession, men and boys, some perhaps as young as ten, survived to become fathers of hundreds and grandfathers of thousands. Had it not been for this miracle, more than a thousand would have been widowed and orphaned, which in 1907 would have meant financial destitution, for there would have been no assistance from companies or government agencies in those days.

Newspaper reports of the 11.30 am explosion that took place in the middle of the church service record that there was a terrible noise and the ground shook, as if there were an earthquake. Immediately everyone realized that there had been an explosion in the mine and they rushed to help find survivors. Although it was against the few regulations that did exist at the time, the mining company had allegedly interconnected more than one mine, which devastated a large area of the mine on both sides of the river. In the end, many

bodies could not be identified and were placed in a mass grave, and although probably higher, the official death toll was 239.

Life was very harsh for the Carpatho-Russian miners. They were worked like animals in the bowels of the earth, exploited by 'the English' - anglophone American businessmen and coal barons, and often worked seven days a week. At that time the Carpatho-Russians were supported in their labour struggles by a priest, Fr (now St) Alexis Toth (1854-1909). Fr Alexis not only supported every labour struggle and won the respect of the people, but supported the immigrants in other ways too. For, having been forced into outward Uniatism in their homeland by the threat of starvation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from the 1880s on the Carpatho-Russians had been forced into emigrating by the cruel Hungarian Roman Catholic authorities in their homeland. In America they struggled to retain their identity and traditions. However, as a result of the religious freedom they found in North America, many of their priests and tens of thousands of people had since 1892 been returning to Orthodoxy to become part of the then united Orthodox Church in North America. And it had been St Alexis who had led the way. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Uniats were as a rule anti-labour and supported their Irish masters. The Carpatho-Russian miners remained close to the Church and many later revered the memory of the Russian Tsar-Martyr, Nicholas II, under whom all Orthodox in North America had been united.

In response to the return to Orthodoxy of the exploited and misled Carpatho-Russians, in 1907 the Pope of Rome was so worried that he appointed a Bishop Soter Ortinsky as 'Greek Catholic' bishop for America. It is notable that Rome had never made any similar effort to provide for a specific nationality that had emigrated to America. However, Ortinsky was not even Carpatho-Russian, but a Polish Galician, and he had virtually no authority. In reality, relatively few Uniat churches and priests remained under the authority of their local Roman Catholic bishop, who typically had limited knowledge of the Orthodox rite, let alone Orthodox teaching, and refused to recognize married priests. The 1907 miracle in Pennsylvania, which took place according to the Orthodox calendar date of St Nicholas Day, only served to hearten the exploited Carpatho-Russian immigrants who had returned to Orthodoxy, confirming them in their choice of Faith and encouraging others to do likewise in later years.

19 December 2007 is the centenary of the Miracle of St Nicholas at the Darr Mine and at 7 pm an Akathist to St Nicholas will be celebrated at the St Nicholas Orthodox Church at Jacobs Creek close by. A new troparion and kontakion have been composed for the occasion and new content, describing the miracle of the saving of the coal miners, will be added to the service.