

Freeland knew her grandfather was editor of Nazi newspaper

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Canada's Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland speaks during Question Period in the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, March 6, 2017.
CHRIS WATTIE

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Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland knew for more than two decades that her maternal Ukrainian grandfather was the chief editor of a Nazi newspaper in occupied Poland that vilified Jews during the Second World War.

Ms. Freeland's family history has become a target for Russian forces seeking to discredit one of Canada's highly placed defenders of Ukraine.

Ms. Freeland, who has paid tribute to her maternal grandparents in articles and books, helped edit a scholarly article in the Journal of Ukrainian Studies in 1996 that revealed her grandfather, Michael Chomiak, was a Nazi propagandist for Krakivski Visti (Krakow News).

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Krakivski Visti was set up in 1940 by the German army and supervised by German intelligence officer Emil Gassert. Its printing presses and offices were confiscated by the Germans from a Jewish publisher, who was later murdered at the Belzec concentration camp.

The article titled "Kravivski Visti and the Jews, 1943: A contribution of Ukrainian Jewish Relations during the Second World War" was written by Ms. Freeland's uncle, John-Paul Himka, now professor emeritus at the University of Alberta.

In the foreword to the article, Prof. Himka credits Ms. Freeland for "pointing out problems and clarifications." Ms. Freeland has never acknowledged that her grandfather was a Nazi collaborator and suggested on Monday that the allegation was part of a Russian disinformation campaign.

In 1996, Prof. Himka wrote about Mr. Chomiak's work for Kravivski Visti, a Ukrainian-language newspaper based in Krakow that often published anti-Jewish diatribes including "certain passages in some of the articles that expressed approval of what the Nazis were doing to the Jews."

But he also said in the article, edited by Ms. Freeland, that Mr. Chomiak had told his family that he was playing a double game as the editor of the newspaper.

"A daughter of the chief editor, who interviewed her father about his wartime experiences, has informed me that Mykhailo Khomiak [Michael Chomiak] and the editorial board as a whole worked to some extent with the anti-Nazi resistance; in particular, they issued false papers for members of the underground," he wrote.

Prof. Himka said that he was never able to verify this information, which he described as "fragmentary and one-sided."

In an interview on Tuesday, Prof. Himka said he never knew that Mr. Chomiak had worked for the Nazis until after his father-in-law passed away and he discovered copies of Krakivski Visti in his personal papers.

Although he acknowledged that Mr. Chomiak was a Nazi collaborator, he maintained that the Germans made the editorial decisions to run anti-Semitic articles and other Nazi propaganda.

"Yeah he was the editor of a legal newspaper in Nazi-occupied Poland. He never signed anything in the paper. He never made policy or that kind of thing. It wouldn't be his call," Prof. Himka told The Globe and Mail. "[The newspaper] also performed a function for Ukrainian culture and kept Ukrainian intelligentsia alive during the war by paying them for articles, not just anti-Semitic articles but articles about Ukrainian culture. It was a bit of a mixed bag."

Ms. Freeland's office offered a short statement when asked for comment on Prof. Himka's writings about Krakivski Visti and her grandfather.

"Dating back many years, the Minister has supported her uncle's efforts to study and publish on this difficult chapter in her late grandfather's past," press secretary Alexander Lawrence said in an e-mail Tuesday evening.

On Monday, Ms. Freeland accused Russia of spreading disinformation when she was asked by reporters about a number of stories that have appeared in pro-Putin websites about Mr. Chomiak's Nazi past.

"I don't think it's a secret. American officials have publicly said, and even [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel has publicly said, that there were efforts on the Russian side to destabilize Western democracies, and I think it shouldn't come as a surprise if these same efforts were used against Canada," Ms. Freeland replied.

She did not directly respond to questions about whether the stories about Mr. Chomiak were true. When The Globe asked her office on Monday to refute the allegation, Mr. Lawrence responded: "People should be questioning where this information comes from, and the motivations behind it."

Conservative foreign affairs critic Peter Kent said it was obvious the Russians dug up details on Mr. Chomiak's past to smear Ms. Freeland.

"It is unacceptable. It seems they are trying smear a minister with historical detail that has probably been misrepresented," he said. "It is unfair and it is typical of what we have seen in other countries and it has nothing to do with her ability to represent Canada."

Ms. Freeland is a fierce critic of Russia's annexation of Crimea and was banned from travelling to Russia in 2014, along with 12 other Canadians who had advocated for Western sanctions against the Putin regime.

Stories published in pro-Russian websites have said Ms. Freeland's strong stand against Russian aggression in Ukraine is linked to her grandfather's past.

Ms. Freeland has written that her maternal grandparents fled Ukraine in 1939, describing them as "political exiles with a responsibility to keep alive the idea of an independent Ukraine."

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