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DATELINE NEW YORK: Christmas scenes from yesteryear

by Helen Smindak

This year's package of Christmas greeting cards from the Ukrainian National Association in Parsippany, N.J., arrived in the mail some weeks ago. Admiring the icons, wooden churches and vintage Christmas scenes lovingly recreated by Ukrainian artists, a tranquil Sviat Vechir tableau from an earlier time caught my eye. In saffron, terra cotta and rust hues, with sky blue and sunny yellow accents, a Ukrainian peasant family of four was pictured at prayer around a table centered with a glowing candle and set with traditional Christmas Eve fare. Through the window in the background peeked a neighbor's snow-covered cottage, white smoke curling from its chimney.

The contemporary, curvilinear shapes of the faces and figures, intermixed with geometric forms, were reminiscent of two glass paintings in my personal collection that are the work of artist Andriy Khomyk of Lviv. Sure enough, the back of the card read 'Christmas Supper,' glass and oil, 2000, by Andriy Khomyk, Stamford, Conn." The same artist, now in Connecticut? A couple of phone calls confirmed it was so. Mr. Khomyk, a book illustrator and a teacher in a children's art school in Lviv who specializes in the unique art of reverse painting on glass, is now plying his art in the Nutmeg State.

I met Mr. Khomyk in 1992 at the bustling, colorful Ukrainian Festival in Zdynia, Poland, where my husband and I chanced upon his display of glass paintings depicting themes in Ukrainian folk songs. We bought a framed portrait of a young Kozak bidding farewell to his beloved as he leaves for war – the setting for the well-loved song "Kozak vidyizzdzhaye, divchynonka plache" (The Kozak departs for battle, his sweetheart weeps).

In 1996, on a visit to Lviv, I had the pleasure of viewing Mr. Khomyk's dazzling art on display at the Sheptytsky Gallery in Lviv's Old Town and admiring other pieces at his studio. From this trip I brought home two paintings with wedding themes, a gift for my soon-to-be married daughter. Two years later, when an exhibition of Khomyk glasspaintings was held at the Mayana Gallery in Manhattan, I had an opportunity to acquire another Khomyk work for my own collection. I selected a harvest scene of two young women in peasant attire, sickles in hand, hard at work in a field of ripe wheat while a young man catches a few winks in the shade nearby.

Mr. Khomyk, who holds degrees in decorative and applied art, has been painting almost exclusively on glass since he discovered this wonderful medium during group expeditions to Carpathian villages in 1990. Because the centuries-old art form of painting in reverse on glass nearly perished during the Soviet era, he has a consuming ambition to restore this unique tradition.

His turnout has been prodigious. In addition to his very popular folkloric paintings, he has come up with complete series devoted to such themes as people and their professions, Ukrainian religious traditions, the Kozaks of the Zaporozhian Sich, Ukrainian demonolo-



"Christmas Supper" by Andriy Khomyk, as reproduced on a UNA Christmas card.

gy, Lemko traditions and sayings, and Ukrainian surnames that derive from occupations (Kravchuk – tailor, Tkachuk – weaver).

Painting in reverse, so that the viewer can see a flat picture through the glass, is not an easy task since the artist must paint an inverted or mirror-image of the scene. Mr. Khomyk is definitely up to it and, one can also say, into it. He likes to give attention to the exactness of settings and costumes and to the subtleties and bravura of color; colors match the spirit and the setting of every Khomyk work. Glossing over the finer points of facial features and hands, the artist interprets depth and feeling with lines and forms so that the viewer instantly grasps the mood and meaning of a scene. But whether the work is completely realist or closer to cubism, Khomyk paintings are united by one characteristic, that of humor.

Mr. Khomyk's glasspaintings have been shown in several solo exhibitions and in a large number of national and international group shows. His works can be found in private collections in Ukraine, Poland, Germany, France, Canada and the United States, and a number have been purchased by Ukraine's Ministry of Culture.

Mr. Khomyk came to the United States last year to explore opportunities and soon found a market and a delighted viewing public for his glasspaintings. Ukrainians in Warren, Mich., visited an exhibit of his work at Immaculate Conception Ukrainian Catholic School. New York area residents can find several vibrant Khomyk works – among them glasspaintings that portray the four seasons – at the Arka Ukrainian shop on First Avenue and Fourth Street in the East Village. The Ukrainian American Youth Association (SUM) is offering a set of eight Ukrainian Christmas cards by Andriy Khomyk on its web site (www.cym.org) with proceeds earmarked to benefit SUM children. Each whimsical, boldly colored scene is based on a Ukrainian carol, with a verse from that carol imprinted on the back cover.

The artist is preparing his own website (www.paintingonglass.com) although only the first page is ready for viewing so far. All set for the public, however, are some 70 Khomyk glasspaintings with religious and Christmas themes, which will go on view January 13 at the gallery of the Ukrainian Museum and Library of the Stamford Diocese, and will undoubtedly reinforce the widely-held belief that Mr. Khomyk's art will be a great asset to American culture. Lubow Wolynetz, librarian and museum curator, says she plans to keep the exhibit open for two or three months. For hours and directions, contact the museum at (203) 327-7899 or (203) 323-8866.

Little Ukraine is alive and well

The Kiev Restaurant, the Ukrainian coffee shop open round-the-clock for 24 years at the corner of Second Avenue and Seventh Street, unexpectedly closed its doors in late October. Reporting the news under the

heading "Like the USSR, a Longtime Ukrainian Diner is Defunct," The New York Times said that owner Michael Hrynenko apparently lost interest in Kiev as he turned his attention to his real estate holdings and, in turn, lost patrons.

Which doesn't mean the end of Little Ukraine. Far from it. The Ukrainian population may be smaller than it was 30 years ago, but the churches, book stores, meat markets, restaurants and other businesses continue to function as usual, and Ukrainian cultural and social activities go on apace. With the recent announcement that a new Ukrainian Museum facility will open on East Sixth Street in the spring of 2002, there'll be no end to Ukrainian events and activities in the East Village.

Consider what took place recently in the span of just two weekends, in addition to regular rehearsals of the Dumka Chorus and the Promin and Prolosok singing groups, classes at the Ukrainian Music Institute and the two Ukrainian Saturday schools, sessions of the Plast Ukrainian Scouting Organization and the museum's Christmas craft workshops and bread-baking demonstrations.

Chicago-born writer Irene Zabytko, author of the recently published novel "The Sky Unwashed," a poignant story of villagers who defied the forced evacuation of their town after the Chernobyl disaster, gave a reading from her work at The Ukrainian Museum. Ms. Zabytko, whose novel received complimentary reviews from The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune and the Denver Post, described her experiences in Kyiv and Drohobych as an instructor in the program English as a Second Language, which prompted her to write the novel. Later, she signed copies of "The Sky Unwashed," the novel nominated for the American Library Association's notable books of the year group and selected for Barnes & Noble's "Discover Great New Authors" series. A graduate of Vermont College with a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing, Ms. Zabytko believes that Ukrainians in this country need to "tell our stories" to other Americans and the world. "If we don't, someone outside of our collective experience will write about us, and they will usually get it wrong."

The season's first Bandura Downtown session, which drew an overflow crowd to the Mayana Gallery, featured bandura maestro Julian Kytasty with music of the kobzari, the blind singers who created and perpetuated a unique oral epic tradition in Ukraine. The art of the kobzari centered on the дума (epic song), whose subject matter ranged from historical songs (about Tatar slave raids in the 16th century and captivity in Turkey) to the timeless and universal (the widow and her three ungrateful sons). Also included in their repertoire were moralistic and quasi-religious songs (kanty and psalmy), strophic historical ballads, and humorous songs and dance tunes. Presenting examples of all these types, along with commentary, Mr. Kytasty worked with two instruments he has not played before in New York, both designed specifically to accompany the music of the kobzar tradition: a reproduction kobzar bandura with 21 strings and wooden tuning pins, recently made for him in Kyiv by Mykola Budnyk, and a unique instrument made in the mid-20th century by Josyf Snizhnyj, a member of the original 1918 Kyiv Bandura Capella. Mr. Kytasty's student, Ilya Temkin, spelled him with traditional kobzar instrumental tunes.

An enthusiastic audience filled the Selfreliance Association clubrooms on Second Avenue to view the work of five Ukrainian women artists, showcased in a one-day exhibit by Branch 83 of the Ukrainian National Women's League of America. Included in the show were icons by Halyna Tytla of Westchester, N.Y., Myroslava Stojko of Highland Park, N.J., and Lida Piaseckyj of Hunter, N.Y., traditional and realist watercolors by Adriana Tytla-Henkels of Philadelphia, and modern abstract works by Daria Naumko, recently from Ukraine. Branch President Barbara Bachynsky, exhibit co-organizer with Cultural/Educational Convenor Olympia Rohowsky, opened the exhibit. The artists were introduced by Iryna Chaban, editor of the UNWLA publication Our Life.

Yuri Vynnychuk of Lviv is a versatile writer and accomplished storyteller who is regarded as the contemporary Ukrainian master of black humor and the grotesque, much in the tradition of his countryman Nikolai Hohol (Gogol). He was the featured guest at a literary evening presented at the Shevchenko Scientific Society. Born in Ivano-Frankivsk in 1952, Mr. Vynnychuk was involved in the samvydav underground during the 1970s and had to hide from the KGB, adventures he later

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Bandurist Julian Kytasty

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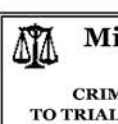
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Christmas scenes...

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used as source material for his book "Maidens of the Night." He is the author of many Ukrainian prose works, among them the lyrical and philosophical stories in "The Windows of Time Frozen," an exquisitely crafted piece translated from Ukrainian by Prof. Michael M. Naydan (with one translation by Askold Melnyczuk). Vitaly Chernetsky, assistant professor of Slavic languages and literature at Columbia University's department of Slavic languages, introduced the author.

Fordham University freshman Romanka Zajac, who sings in the Prolosok girls' choir that is part of the activities of the New York branch of the Ukrainian American Youth Association (SUM), was crowned queen of the branch for 2000-2001. Ms. Zajac, 18, a graduate of SUM's 12-year Ukrainian Saturday School, serves as a SUM counselor during the year in New York and at summer camp in Ellenville, N.Y. The crowning ceremony took place during the annual fall dance of the New York branch, held at the Ukrainian National Home. Music for dancing was provided by the popular new band Svitank, whose members are Yuri Furda, Volodya Krul, Stephan Kobyleckyj, Peter Resznyi, Mark Winiarskyj and Valeriy Zhmud. The group has been playing together since May 1999 and released its debut album "Svitank" earlier this year.

As icing on the cake, the New York State Council on the Arts awarded a three-year \$60,000 grant to the Ukrainian Chorus Dumka of America Inc., the umbrella organization that includes the Dumka Chorus, the Promin Young Adult Ensemble, Syzokryli Ukrainian Dancers, Stage Art Ensemble and the Mriya Ukrainian Dancers of Hempstead, N.Y. The ensembles are directed, respectively, by Vasyl Hrechynsky, Bohdanna Wolansky, Roma Pryma Bohachevsky, Lydia Krushelnysky and Peter Fil, who is assisted by Orlando Pagan. Vasyl Sosiak, president of Ukrainian Chorus Dumka, incorporated in 1976, says the five groups will share the grant equally.

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