

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

Vasyl Petruk, 1886-1968 - A Forgotten Artist *by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator*

For decades, the month of November has been dedicated to the commemoration of those historic events which occurred in the years 1918-1921 in the struggle for Ukrainian independence and the honoring of the memory of those who were engaged in this important struggle. For it was in the month of November, 1918, after centuries of foreign rule and subjugation, that in Galicia (Halychyna), Western Ukraine, in the city of Lviv, the Ukrainian flag was raised on the Town Hall, and freedom and independence was proclaimed for the Ukrainian people.

History books describe in detail all of the aspirations, accomplishments, triumphs, deeds of valor, sacrifices, sufferings, setbacks, and the ultimate tragedy of those days. But, it is the artist who conveys these historic moments into visual form, and as the saying goes "One picture is worth a thousand words" and so it was in this case.



The artistic renderings of those epochal moments, both glorious and tragic, evoked great emotional impact, and undoubtedly inspired many people toward furthering the cause of freedom and independence.

The artistic legacy of Vasyl Petruk can be found in Europe and in the United States, both in museums and in private holdings. He painted many portraits, mostly of his comrades in arms, landscapes, illustrations for books, and historic scenes dealing with the war years and the post war conditions, 1918-1923. Our Museum is fortunate to have in its collection five of his war time drawings done on paper in ink and pen.

Vasyl Petruk was born in the village of Myshyn in the Carpathian Mountains district. From an early age he loved to

draw and his talent was recognized by a village teacher. Other good people, recognizing his artistic abilities, made efforts to place him in a special trade school in the city of Kolomyia where he had learned carving. For his art work he received awards and commendations. From Kolomyia he went to a higher trade school in Lviv. There the attitude of some of the teachers to a peasant boy, who came to school in his village Hutsul folk attire, was such that Vasyl left the school and returned home. Through the intervention of concerned people he went to the city of Chernivtsi and became a student at the art school of



Mykola Ivasiuk, 1865-1935?. Mykola Ivasiuk is best known for his historic painting Entrance of Bohdan Khmelnytsky to Kyiv.

When World War I broke out, Vasyl joined the Ukrainian contingent of the Austrian Army and achieved the rank of officer. Later, this contingent was reorganized into the Ukrainian Galician Army. During the final losing battles, part of the Galician Army retreated to Czechoslovakia where they were disarmed and interned in the cities of Liberts and Josefov. Vasyl, however managed to escape, went home but quickly returned to Czechoslovakia, where he married a Czech girl and made a living by teaching and painting.

The interned Galician soldiers in Josefov led quite an active cultural life. They organized schools, theatrical performances, choirs, art exhibits, and published a monthly magazine entitled *Ukrainskyi Skytalets* (the Homeless Ukrainian). It is to this magazine that Vasyl Petruk sent his drawings, some of which we actually have in our collection. In our Library we even have an incomplete run of this magazine.

When the Soviet Army invaded Czechoslovakia, Vasyl and his wife emigrated to Germany, to the town of Mankenfritz where he lived until his death. Vasyl kept abreast of all the activities of Ukrainians in Europe and America and carried on a wide correspondence with many people. Some of them commissioned art works from him. One such person was Myron Summach, owner of the first Ukrainian Book and Music Store which is still in business on 7th Street, now run by his grandson. Our Museum fortunately has one of Vasyl's drawings commissioned by Summach.

On the back of most of his drawings, Vasyl wrote notes. The drawing which Vasyl sent to Summach depicts a farewell scene of an UHA officer with his wife. It is signed Vasyl Petruk from Myshyn, 1919. On the back of the drawing Vasyl wrote that the title of this drawing is "When I die, be proud". He also scribbled a note to Mr. Summach: "I received your letter. . . thank you. I will do a drawing of invalids, but in the meantime use this drawing for your poster on invalids."

The second farewell scene in our col-



lection was used as an illustration in the magazine *Ukrainskyi Skytalets*. On the drawing depicting a family fleeing away from a burning village, Vasyl wrote

"Communist idea or despotism of the Soviet commissars under the guidance of Lenin. Running away from the Bolshevik robberies in the year 1921. Behind them the village is in flames."

A very striking drawing is entitled *The Resurrection of Ukraine* which Vasyl did in 1918. The Archangel Michael with his sword upturned is holding a shield upon which is the Trident and

the words Ukrainian National Republic. In front of him is a woman, a symbol of Ukraine with a crown of thorns on her head and with children at her side. On her right is a soldier in the uniform of a Sichovyi Strilets and on her left a Cossack, both with unsheathed swords, holding a broken chain in their hands. Further down on the right and left are two flag bearers, one is a Sichovyi Strilets and the other one is a Cossack. One flag has the words For the Freedom of Ukraine and the initials USS (Ukrainski Sichovi Striltsi). The other flag has the words from a Taras Shevchenko poem Fight and you will be victorious. In the background are ranks of marching soldiers. One flank is led by Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi, and the other flank is led by a Hutsul soldier. Vasyl later did a similar drawing which was used as an illustration in the aforementioned magazine. In the second drawing the initials on the flags are now UHA (Ukrainian Galician Army).

Vasyl Petruk also corresponded with the Ukrainian National Museum in Chicago. He sent them his diary and some paintings and drawings. Maria Klymchak, the curator of the museum, wrote an article about him based on his diary and letters of correspondence and thus brought to light a fascinating story about a little-known artist of great talent.

I wish to thank Maria Klymchak for sharing with me the biographical data about Vasyl Petruk.

Explore and Experience Our Past