

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

The Cultural Heritage of the Sich Riflemen (Sichovi Striltsi)

by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

The valor, heroic deeds, and accomplishments of the Sich Riflemen during World War I and in their struggle for Ukrainian Independence in the years 1918-1921 are well known. This is primarily due to an accurate and detailed documentation made by the Press Corps (*Presova Kvartrya*) of the Army, a sub-division of the



Corps known as the Artistic Sheaf (*Artystychna Horstka*), and other military fraternities devoted to the preservation of the cultural aspects of their work and activities. Most of the founders and members of these alliances were highly educated persons of various professions. There were lawyers, writers, poets, artists, teachers, journalists, civic leaders, etc.

Regardless of the difficult and demanding situation which individual squads or military detachments with their officers were in - be it in military training camps, battlefields, or internment camps as prisoners of war - they managed not only to execute their duties, but also to organize their lives and activities in such a way as to give them spiritual and cultural content. Their enthusiasm, devotion, encouraging creative

atmosphere, and a strong belief in the necessity of their work produced a wealth of cultural material. Talented individuals had a forum whereby they could realize their potential and actually did so, which in other circumstances might have lain dormant. The Press Corps was the central point, the nucleus of all activities. Thanks to the work of its members we have the following: a detailed history of events, various publications, journals (humorous, satirical, and serious), memoirs, correspondence, thousands of photographs, paintings, post cards, poems, novels, songs, musical compositions, etc. The abundance and usefulness of these materials is immeasurable.

In addition to the Press Corps and the Artistic Sheaf, there were other types of organizational brotherhoods, very much in the style of a fraternity, one of which was the Knights of the Mighty Brigade (*Lyt-sari Zaliznoi Ostrohy*). It was founded in 1916 by Lev Lepkyi, 1888-1971, a journalist, writer, and song writer. Some of the songs which he had writ-

ten for the Sich Riflemen eventually became very popular and are often sung even nowadays, e.g., *Oi Vydno Selo* (The Village is Near), and *Zhuravli* (The Cranes). The organizational structure of this mighty Brigade was very similar to the structure of the Knights of the Crusades. The aim of this Brotherhood was to foster knightly values and social culture. Almost all



the officers at the military training camp belonged to this Order. The colors of the Order were black and red, and they had various insignias: a sword, a mace, a shield, and a staff. Special ceremonies and rituals were instituted and practiced mostly for fun and amusement. The chief officer of the Brigade was titled The Grand *Komtur*. The word *komtur* is from the German and was used to designate a high ranking knight in the Crusade Army. The *Komtur* of this brigade was Ivan Tsiapka-Skoropad, a semi-legendary individual, who studied law in Vienna, joined the Sich Riflemen, and was known for telling fantastic stories about his escapades and adventures. Another member of the Brigade was Roman Kupchynsky, 1894-1976, a writer and journalist who wrote a poem entitled *Skoropad*. Still another notable member of the Brigade was Dr. Volodymyr Starosolskyi, 1878-1942. He was a lawyer and a civic and political leader. He gained prominence defending the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) members at their trial in the 1930s in Lviv. He was subsequently arrested by the Soviet authorities in

1939 along with his wife, son Ihor, and daughter Uliana, and then sentenced to hard labor in Siberia where he later died. Also a member

was Hryhorii Trukh, 1894-1959; he later joined the Basilian Order, was ordained a priest, and served in Canada where he died.



Our Museum and Library has an interesting photograph of the Brigade. It depicts some of the members with their insignias and The Grand *Komtur*. In our Library we have several copies (different editions) of the poem *Skoropad* by Kupchynsky. The lore of the Brigade was so popular that several artists immortalized the members in their paintings. One such artist was Edvard Kozak, 1902-1992. His painting of the Brigade is in our collection and is currently on exhibit in our Museum along with other of his works.

Furthermore, our Library has quite a few rare publications of the Sich Riflemen written and published through the efforts of the Press Corps, one of which is the humorist journal *Samookhotnyk* (Volunteer), 1915-1918. This we shall discuss in a future article.

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