The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

WINTER HOLIDAY TRADITIONS – CHRISTMAS, CAROLING AND MORE... by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

In the Pre-Christian days in Ukraine, rituals denoting the Winter Solstice were quite extensive, elaborate, and became an important part of our cultural tradition. Man felt that the time of the Winter Solstice was an auspicious moment to

bring about and ensure good fortune for the coming year through the enacting of specific rituals. Among these rituals were the following: the singing of winter well-wishing songs with specific dance-like movements and gestures, magical incantations, performance of theatrical skits depicting the death of winter and the rebirth of spring, the partaking of specific foods, the paying of homage to ancestral spirits; etc. With the coming of Christianity to Ukraine, many of these ancient rituals were adapted by the Christian church and united with Christmas holidays. Some of the more pagan elements of these rituals were Christianized or under-

went an overlaying of Christian symbolic elements, but some remained in their original form. For example, the carols which we sing consist of those announcing and rejoicing in the Birth of Christ, and the more ancient ones, the well-wishing songs (shchedrivky), which deal with the glorification of natural powers such as the sun, the moon, and the stars and their beneficial powers for man, especially for the tiller of land. They praise the master and mistress of the household for their hard work, through which the farmstead has prospered, for their generosity, and for their well-broughtup children; for this the carolers wish them even more good fortune at this opportune holiday time. This duality or unification of Pre-Christian rituals and beliefs with Christian Holidays has greatly enriched our cultural heritage, and has always played an important role as an expression of our religious and national identity.

One interesting aspect of Ukrainian Christmas ritual is the theatrical performance of the Nativity scene (Vertep) with the addition of secular themes and folk elements. It is usually performed by a group of selected young people knowledgeable in the subject matter, good actors,

household with their performance.

lage populace consisted of many personages. and traditions.

and singers. They wander from home after home large degree, they concentrated on the education not only to proclaim the Birth of Christ, but also of the younger generation. Magazines, books, to express well-wishes for all and to entertain each toys, and songs for children and juveniles appeared in abundance, all focusing their attention The folk Vertep performed by the vil- on the many aspects of Ukrainian culture, history,

There were, of course the traditional Holy Mother and Child, Joseph, the three kings, angels, shepherds, and a star of Bethlehem. But in addition to these, various local and ethnic characters were included like the gypsy, the innkeeper, a soldier, duction King Herod, and the ubiquitous goat whose enactment of dying and resurrection was an essen- TEMA. The toy tial ritual to ensure the cyclical dying of winter consists of paper and the birth of the new sun, and thus the revival cut-outs depictof spring. Each village might have not only one, ing a Nativity but several Vertep groups trying to outdo each other in the originality of their versified play script, creative costumes, artistic performance, harmonious singing, etc. Going along with a Vertep at cardboard and Christmas time took place in all parts of Ukraine, folded at the botand was adhered to and preserved mostly in the tom, so as to villages until modern times.

In the aftermath of World War I, in and thus be able Western Ukraine, the city, but not the village populace, partially abandoned some of the ancient traditions associated with specific holidays. This was caused by such things as the following; rapid various Ukrainian political, social, civic, women's, and youth societies, primarily in Western Ukraine, began to work towards educating

> ening the populace as to their national identity, historic past, cul-

and enlight-

Our Museum and Library has many of these publications. But in addition to this, we were fortunate recently to receive a paper toy for children which was created in Lviv in 1937 by a pro-

company called scene, a Vertep. The cut-outs can be attached to a prop them up to arrange them into a Vertep

scene, a Ukrainian style Christmas Creche or Shopka. The item urbanization; poverty brought on by economic was given to us by a family from California hardships; modernization which led to about whose parents had lived in the Far East where changes in the traditional way of life; political rethere had been an active Ukrainian emigre comstraints made by foreign occupiers; etc. In time, munity. They tried not to lose touch with Ukraine and had kept abreast with all the news by subscribing to many Ukrainian newspapers and periodicals published in Western Ukraine; they even purchased books and all sorts of memorabilia and ephemera, including the aforementioned paper toy for children.

> By studying the individual depictions of these cut-outs we can clearly see the educational intent of the creator - the artist who is identified only by his initials Yu. K. We see the beauty and variety of folk costumes. For example Our itage, and Lady is wearing an embroidered shirt and the Inthus to defant Jesus lies in a painted wooden cradle decovelop pride rated with traditional Ukrainian floral motifs. in their folk Other figures are shown in the garments of their art and an- particular region. The Hutsul is playing on the cient tradi- trembita as if announcing the birth of Christ, Huttions. To a sul style. There is the ever-present, in the Ukrain

ian milieu of those days, the wandering minstrel with his hurdy-gurdy and boy guide. We have the farmer, the village peddler, a factory worker all walking toward the Infant Jesus. Some are bearing gifts; others are walking in prayerful humility. A shepherd boy is carry-

> ing the Star. There is a depiction of a girl from Eastern Ukraine, the area which at that time was occupied by the Soviets where religion was outlawed as well as all display of tradition, and where expressions of national patriotism were severely punished. The depiction of the three eras of our glorious historic past are included in the following manner: Archangel Michael is shown as warrior knight of Kievan-Rus; a Cossack with his horse represents the second era, and a war-time invalid on crutches represents the World War I days of the Sichovi Striltsi fight for independence. This same publisher also printed sheets upon sheets of colorful ornamental designs which youngsters could use in decorating the carton in which the *Vertep*

figures could be placed or for any other dec-

The Vertep performances were so important to Ukrainian people that they soon

Vertep performance. Lviv, 1991

became tantamount to making a political statement, a means for maintaining their national identity. It is interesting to note that during the Soviet occupation of Ukraine, one of the signs of rebellion exhibited by the young generation of Ukrainians was to organize Vertep groups and then wander from house to house, down city streets, on buses, and sing carols and perform skits. Some of this was done in the 1970s, but was quickly put down by the authorities. Nevertheless, at the end of the 1980s and with Ukrainian independence in 1991 the Vertep was seen in all its glory. City street were filled with Vertep group performances, rejoicing in finally acquiring religious, national, and cultural freedom.



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