

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

THE ROLE OF DEDICATED UKRAINIAN WOMEN IN WORLD WAR I

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This year marks the 100th anniversary of a victorious World War I battle which took place in May of 1915 at Mount Makivka in the Carpathian



mountains. A small contingent known as the Legion of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (Lehion Sichovykh Striltsiv), who were part of the Austrian Army, encountered on the decisive days of the battle an entire brigade of Russian tsarist troops. Through fierce and intense fighting, including many individual heroic deeds, Sichovi Striltsi achieved triumphant victory, took over Mount Makivka, and forced the Russian tsarist troops to retreat. The Austrian War Command acknowledged these accomplishments of the Sichovi Striltsi, and praised and rewarded them for their heroic efforts.

At this Battle of Makivka there were among the Sichovi Striltsi contingent three brave women soldiers—Olena Stepaniv (1892-1963) and Sofia Halechko (1891-1918), and Iryna Kuz. They were actually the first women of a 20th century army to serve as soldiers on an equal basis with men. For their extraordinary and heroic deeds in the Battle of Makivka, they were decorated with medals for bravery and raised to the rank of ensign. Their accomplishments were heralded and written about in most European newspapers, especially in the Austrian, German, Scandinavian, and Ukrainian press. Their photographs were taken and printed as postcards, as was done with photographs of many other Sichovi Striltsi army leaders. These postcards soon became very popular, practical, and informative correspondence tools. Today these postcards are important collectors' items, of which our

Museum and Library has quite a number.

How did these women become soldiers in 1914? What circumstances led to this phenomenon? The answer is as follows: European political instability in the early 1910s alerted the populace in western Ukraine of the necessity of being prepared for an eventual and imminent coming of war. Ukrainian youth and students (both men and women) in Halychyna, from the beginning of the 20th century, were actively involved in various sports and para military organizations, namely, *Sokil*, *Plast*, and later *Sichovi Striltsi*. In addition to physical and military drilling, a development of hardiness, first aid and ambulatory training, there was a profound awakening in each member, his/her national consciousness and awareness. Patriotism was foremost on the agenda. Ukrainian civic leaders, students, and the youth of those days believed that with the Austrian-Russian conflict at hand, Ukrainians should organize a military unit which, when circumstances required, would be able to fight for an independent Ukraine.

Ukrainian women's organizations in Halychyna and their activities already from the end of the 19th century played an important part in the national movement of Ukraine. Seeing the need for war preparedness, the Women's Committee in Lviv called a general meeting on December 14, 1912 in Lviv. Here the political situation was presented and the responsibility of the Ukrainian woman during the eventual war was discussed. In their resolutions they stressed their determination to be useful and equally appreciated for their work in the war effort. The meeting was organized and conducted by Konstantyna Malytska (1872-1947) a pedagogue, author, and civic activist. Along with her were other eminent civic and educational leaders, notably Olena Zalizniak (1886-1969), Maria Biletska (1864-1937), Olha Basarab (1899-1924), young Olena Stepaniv, and many others. They also made emotional appeals to the Ukrainian populace to contribute to the "National Combat Fund", so that when the need would arise, funds would

be available for the military cause. This Fund really came in handy, because it was used to finance the needs of the first echelons of the newly-formed military unit of the Sichovi Striltsi.

When the war broke out, many young men and thirty three young women enlisted in the Sichovi Striltsi military formation and fought side by side against the Russian tsarist invaders. Among the women soldiers were the afore mentioned Olena Stepaniv, Sofia Halechko, and Iryna Kuz, along with Handzia Dmyterko, Pavlyna Mykhailyshyn, Olia Pidvysotska, Vasylika Oshchypko, and others. A good number of other young women served as nurses in field hospitals, and Red Cross outpost, and did office and community work.

Of all the women soldiers, Olena Stepaniv became the most prominent, distinguished, and famous not only for Ukrainians, but especially in Finland and the Scandinavian countries. In another battle in 1916, Olena was captured by the tsarist Russian army and exiled to Tashkent with other Ukrainian prisoners of war. The news of her capture spread to many European newspapers. With the fall of the tsarist government in 1917, she and other prisoners of war were released and through the efforts of the International Red Cross were able to return home, traveling by train through Petrograd, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and finally Vienna and then to Lviv. When Olena was travelling through Finland and Sweden, newspapers in those countries printed numerous articles about her, including interviews and photographs of her. All were intrigued by this unique young woman warrior. She became a

celebrity and an example to be followed for the Finnish and Scandinavian women, who at that time were actively engaged in their own struggle for women's rights. Fascinating stories can be told about each and every one of these Ukrainian women soldiers who joined the Si-

chovi Striltsi army ranks and fought in many battles during World War I.

In the collection of our Museum and Library we have a significant number of postcards depicting the Sichovi Striltsi. They are a treasure in themselves, but more than that they are fascinating historical documents, because of who wrote them and to whom they were sent. To mention a few—three postcards were written in 1915 and were sent from Vienna to Father Joseph Chaplinsky (1868-1941) who was the first pastor of St. George Church in New York City. At the time these postcards were sent, he was pastor in Perth Amboy, NJ. Another postcard was mailed from an army field post in 1916 and sent to Ivan Bobersky in Vienna. It was written and signed by Lev Lepkyi (1888-1971) and Roman Kupchynsky (1894-1976). Both Lepkyi and Kupchynsky were soldiers, journalists, writers, and were especially known for their Sichovi Striltsi songs.

The above is another excellent example of how seemingly ordinary materials may actually provide a valuable and interesting insight into certain aspects of the rich history of Ukraine.



Хор. Олена Степанів
Фото 1917 р.



Олена Степанівна зі старшинами шведської армії, та сестричками шведського Червоного Хреста, перед санітарним поїздом на граничній стації Торнео.

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