

## The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

### ONE MAN WITH A MISSION

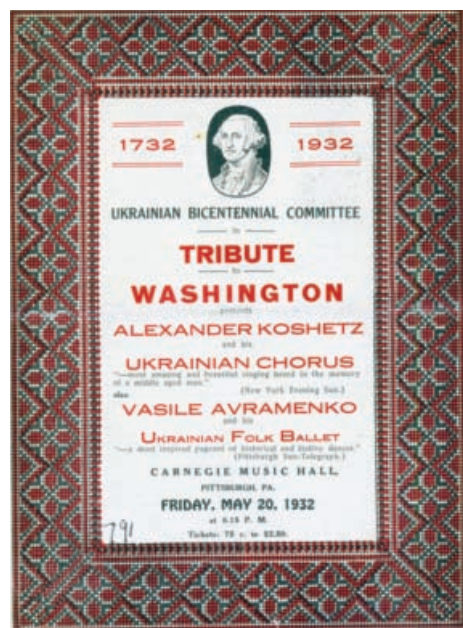
by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

Periodically our friends from California send various items of interest to our Ukrainian Museum and Library for safekeeping and preservation. Just recently we received from them a number of postcards depicting the prominent Ukrainian folk dance and ballet master, choreographer, and impresario - Vasyl Avramenko, 1895-1981. During his remarkably active life, Vasyl Avramenko did so much to promote interest, appreciation, and esteem of Ukrainian culture among his own people and even worldwide. He concentrated on one branch of Ukrainian culture – the national dance, to which he devoted his entire life. He maintained that Ukrainian folk dance was an independent and important branch of Ukrainian folk art which needed to be studied, developed, brought into prominence, and then to acquaint the world with it.

Vasyl Avramenko was born in the heart of Ukraine – the Kyiv district. Orphaned at an early age he had to fend for himself, earn his keep, and depend on the kindness of his elder siblings. He was a bright, inquisitive, lively, clever, and a keen observer of his surroundings. He had a natural ability for mimicry and personification and a good sense of humor. His elder brother summoned him to come all the way to the Far East (Easternmost region of Soviet Asia, and before that, Tsarist Russian Asia, where

there was a large Ukrainian settlement called *Zelenyi Klyn*). It is here in the city of Vladivostok that Vasyl saw a performance of the musical play *Natalka Poltavka*. He became enraptured by the drama, music, songs, and especially the dances. It is precisely this experience that made him decide what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. World War I broke out, and Vasyl was recruited to the tsarist army to fight at the eastern front. When the War ended there, he returned to Ukraine, to Kyiv and then joined the Ukrainian national forces working towards an independent Ukraine. Perceptive people, who were aware of the dramatic talents that Vasyl possessed, urged him to study at the Kyiv Drama School. This School worked closely with the first resident theater of Mykola Sadovsky, 1856-1933. Here he was taught drama and dance by the best teachers in the field. With this sound training, in addition to his innate talent and genuine pas-

sion for this art, he was now ready to venture on his own. Thus began the mission of his life – “bring about the rebirth of Ukrainian folk dance”.



After collapse of the short-lived Ukrainian independence of the 1920s, many of the demobilized soldiers of the Ukrainian National Republic were interned in the city of Kalisz. Among them were actors of the Sadovsky theater and yes - Vasyl Avramenko. But he did not waste time in this camp. Still full of fervor and energy Avramenko immediately began the organization of a dance school in the interment camp. Over a thousand individuals registered. The dancing school was a huge success. From among the dancers, Avramenko chose the more talented ones, and prepared them to be his assistants, and later

dance instructors on their own. It is also at this time that he adapted his unique style of dress – an embroidered shirt, a long light overcoat (svyta) and boots. This style of clothing he wore all his life, wherever he went. From Kalisz he emigrated to Czechoslovakia, then to Germany. To areas he traveled, he organized dancing schools, trained instructors, and conducted numerous performances.

In 1925 he emigrated to Canada where he established numerous dance schools, especially in the western provinces. These schools were attended by thousands of children, young men and women, and featured hundreds of performances. In 1930 Avramenko moved to the United States where he established 71 dance schools. There were many group performances, but some which were conducted on a grand scale should be mentioned. One such performance occurred in 1931 and took place at the New York Metropolitan Opera House. A choir of 100 voices and 500 dancers performed. Henry Beckett, a reviewer of the *Evening Post*, wrote: “Today we write with eagerness. We want to tell everybody about the unquestionable gorgeous and fascinating Ukrainian program under Vasyl Avramenko...we are still excited over the kaleidoscopic ardors of

the dance, the richness of the chorus, the congeniality of the audience and the fairly inspiring naturalness of what really amounted to a brilliant Ukrainian folk festival.” Another spectacular performance as a tribute to George



Гілка Президента Іл. Держави Добір. Рухомі після руку Аврамєнкови і танку йому як його дітворами танцюристам з Балтімор, Мд. як їх зустріч з товаришами коло Білого Дому, 20. Квітня 1935.



Washington took place in Pittsburgh, PA in 1932. A chorus conducted by the renown Oleksander Koshets, 1875-1944, sang and Vasyl Avramenko’s Ukrainian Folk Ballet dancers performed. In 1933 Avramenko’s dancers performed at the Ukrainian Pavilion during the Century of Progress World’s Fair in Chicago. In 1935 Avramenko and a children’s dance group from Baltimore, MD were received by the First Lady of the USA – Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. The children performed spring dances (hahilky) on the White House Lawn Easter Party in honor of the First Lady.

This is just one aspect of Vasyl Avramenko’s lifetime work. The style of his teaching, his revival of forgotten ritual dances, his choreography of regional and ritual Ukrainian folk dances, and creative and ingenious theatrical stage performances was uniquely his own. One man with a mission, enthusiasm, and dedication could do wonders, and Vasyl Avramenko did exactly that. What is even more important is the fact that in the first, second, and third generation of thousands of young Ukrainian men and women in Canada and the United States, he instilled awareness and pride in their heritage and acquainted non-Ukrainians with our rich culture.

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