

EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

Claiming Our Ukrainian Identity

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

Recent political events in Eastern Europe have brought about many news reports on the plight of Ukraine and Ukrainian people resulting from Russian aggression, such as the Crimean annexation, hybrid war in the eastern regions of Ukraine and other stealthily applied abuses. These events, sad and tragic as they are, brought much attention to Ukraine and to the Ukrainian people resulting in objective, historically factual information from the Ukrainian perspective and not based on Russian propaganda. It underscored Ukrainian distinctiveness as a separate nation with its own language, culture and history. Presently Ukrainians do not have to constantly identify themselves by explaining who they are, by finally breaking the insulting remark ingrained into the mentality of the general public by Russian propaganda, when you say "I'm

Ukrainian" you immediately are told "Oh, you mean you're Russian".

But, in the eyes of the world, for many decades Ukraine as a county and as a Nation was subdued to the point of being forgotten. This was due to Ukraine having been occupied for centuries by foreign powers, in whose interest it was to not allow Ukraine to emerge as a separate entity. Whenever political upheavals such as World War I and revolutions made it possible for subdued nations to briefly resurface they had to re-introduce themselves to the world in order to be acknowledged, accepted and become part of the family of independent nations.

One of a very memorable re-introductions of Ukraine to the world took place in the years 1919-1922. In 1919, the government of the short-lived sovereignty of Ukraine (1918-1922) under the presidency of Symon



Concert in Mexico, photo.
The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford.

"Carnegie Hall was the scene last night of one of the most enthusiastic receptions ever accorded there – clapping, shouting enthusiastic approval – platform strewn with bouquets of flowers – perfection seldom obtained." N.Y. Globe, Oct. 6, 1922.

The important aspect of the Carnegie Hall performance was the fact that for the first time in America the Ukrainian carol "Shchedryk", which later became known as The Carol of the Bells, was performed. It made a great impression not only on the audience but specifically on the composers and musicians in the audience. In time with its English lyrics, it has become one of the favorite Christmas and New Year's songs in America.

Every performance of the choir brought numerous and praiseworthy reviews. Thanks to the achievements of the Ukrainian National Choir, Ukraine was recognized, and Ukrainian culture was admired.

But, after the war and revolutions ended major political powers sat down to hammer out peace agreements. In these peace treaties and agreements Ukraine did not receive fair treatment. It was not recognized as an independent nation and the land, and its people were split between and subjugated by foreign powers. Once again, Ukrainian identity was suppressed and the triumphant achievements of the Ukrainian National Choir were almost forgotten.

Last week our Library and Museum had a visitor with a request to peruse our archives dealing with the choir director Oleksander Koshets and his work in America. The visitor, Tina Peresunko, a Fulbright scholar, had already done an in depth research on Koshets and the Ukrainian National Choir and is the author of a book published in 2019 entitled Cultural Diplomacy of Symon Petliura: the Mission of the Capella of Oleksander Koshyts. The book recounts, in detail, on basis of original archival material, the complete tour of the choir from Ukraine to the Americas and reads as a fascinating travelogue of dedicated people fulfilling an important mission. In Europe alone, from 1919-1922, the choir gave 208 concerts, according to the statistical calculations of by the author. Then came 138 concerts given in the Americas, and so on. Just the sheer logistics of transporting, housing and feeding a choir of 80 people made it a tremendous undertaking. They faced constant financial difficulties, but did not give up. Notwithstanding the problems and obstacles they had to overcome, the choir continued to perform concerts of the highest quality. They accomplished their mission. The world forgot about this Ukrainian gift to the world of music. Sadly to say even Ukrainians know little about the heroic accomplishments of the Ukrainian National Choir. ❖

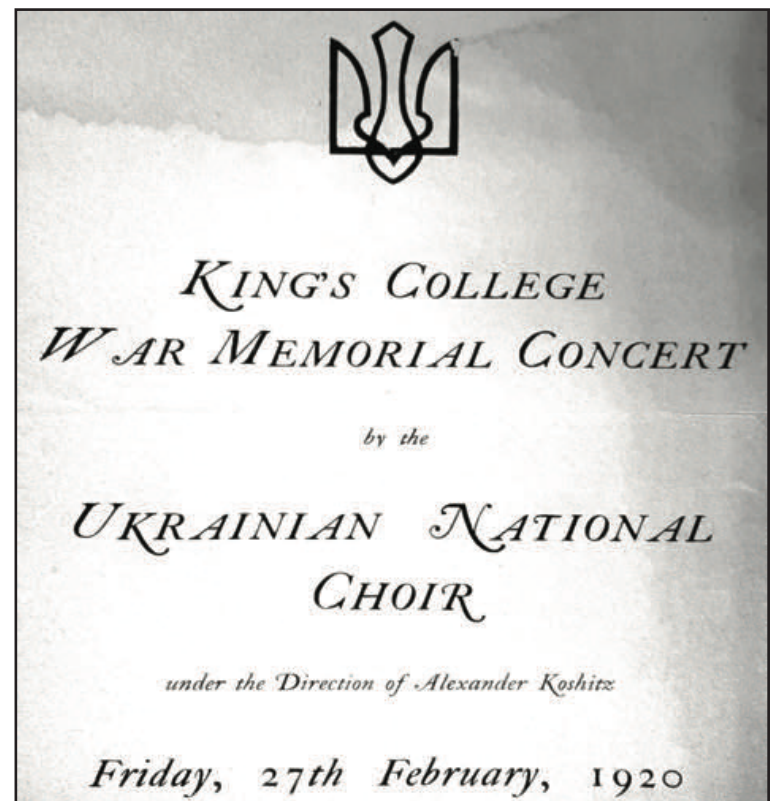
Petliura, organized the Ukrainian National Choir under the directorship of choir master Oleksander Koshets. The choir was to conduct concert tours throughout Europe and the Americas promoting Ukrainian name, Ukrainian culture, particularly the art of the Ukrainian song. Petliura believed that through "cultural diplomacy" Ukraine might achieve international recognition and its national identity would be respected. Their concert tour was one of the most triumphant choral achievements of the century. Every critic from every country and city raved about their performances and the beauty of the Ukrainian songs in their repertoire. To quote just a few reviews:

"It is wonderful, that chorus. A human organ, it has been called, but it would seem as if a human orchestra would be a better name."

"It was left to Dr. Koshetz to prove that wonders can be drawn from such throats and hearts."

"It was enjoyable from every point of view. The precision, the purity of tone, the modulations, as well as the personality of the singers made a very strong appeal..."

"The technical proficiency on the part of the Chorus and its absolute mastery of the music is amazing."



Concert program.
The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford.