

EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

The Exhibition “Forever Free Ukraine” in Lithuania

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



On the steps of the church with the plaque for Prince Konstantyn Ostroskyi (Photo from personal archives of L. Wolynetz)

The exhibit “Forever Free Ukraine!” organized for the observance of the 30th anniversary of Ukrainian Independence opened in August of 2021 in Kyiv in the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War and was to have remain opened until May of 2022. The exhibit illustrated, ascertained and restored the long forgotten, suppressed and often even purposely destroyed by the Soviet regime. Historical facts of the brave and heroic feats of the Ukrainian national struggle for the freedom and independence of Ukraine at the turn of the 20th century were on display for this purpose. For this exhibit, the curators borrowed 250 historically unique artifacts from 20 museums, archives and libraries of Ukraine and from 5

Ukrainian Diaspora museums in America. In their comments visitors to the exhibit acknowledged that the gem of the exhibit are the 134 color plates on loan from our museum, depicting the uniforms of the Ukrainian army and fleet during the struggle for Ukrainian independence in the years 1917-1921. The opening of the exhibit was attended by hierarchs of the churches, diplomats, ministers, and scholars. Representatives of the Baltic states, especially Lithuanian diplomats expressed keen interest in having the exhibit travel to their museums.

Sadly, the unprovoked and irresponsible Putin's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 altered the museum's plans. The organizers had to immediately fold the exhibit, package it and transport

it to safety. This required ingenuity, quick thinking and exposed great danger to those who were transporting the items and those who were hiding them. The plans to loan the exhibit to Lithuania for some time were paused but not terminated. After the friendly and dedicated cooperation between Lithuanian state representatives and the director and staff of the Vitautas the Great War Museum in Kaunas, the exhibit arrived in Lithuania and opened in the war museum. The opening of the exhibit took place September 21, 2022. The first part of the opening ceremony took place in the square in front of the museum with the flag raising of the order of the Cross of Vytis. A speech by the Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania followed. A wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was placed then singing of the national hymns of Lithuania and Ukraine and a three volley dedicatory salute of an 18th century artillery gun followed. In the museum's auditorium brief and meaningful speeches were delivered. In her speech, the director of the museum said: “It is symbolic that the exhibition testifying to the struggle for the freedom and statehood of Ukraine arrived here, to this museum, where the memory of the struggle for Lithuanian freedom is preserved”. The Prime Minister of the Republic of Lithuania said: “However long this war lasts, I believe that the most important thing is not to get used to it, not to get tired of it, not to stop, and to constantly remind each other that Ukraine is fighting for all of us and for the future of the whole free democratic world. That our solidarity, our support and our real and much needed help must not wane for a single moment.” I personally spoke in the name of the three representatives from the Ukrainian museums in the Diaspora. After the speeches everyone was invited to view the exhibit guided by the curator.

For us, the representatives from the Ukrainian museums in the Diaspora, the organizers prepared special excursions to view the many historical and cultural monuments in the cities of Kaunas and Vilnius. The tour of the Vitautas the Great War Museum was fascinating. It presented historical artifacts of Lithuania from ancient times to the present. Here we saw items from the days when Lithuania and Ukraine had mutual historical and political relations when large areas of Ukraine were part of the great Lithuanian Duchy from the 13th to 16th centuries. We visited the 14th century Kaunas castle and went on to the Pazaislis monastery ensemble founded in the 17th century. It is an excellent example of baroque architecture which belonged to the Roman Catholic order of Camalduli monks. During the Russian tsarist days it was given to the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox monks during the Russian revolution stole all of the most pre-

cious monastery treasures. After World War II, the Soviet regime converted the monastery to an archive collection, psychiatric hospital and finally into an art gallery. In the 1990s the monastery was returned to the Catholic Church of the Independent Lithuanian Republic. The monastery is under the care of the Sisters of St Casimir. It is interesting that some of the sisters, although Lithuanian and Russian speaking have Ukrainian roots. Their parents were exiled to Kazakhstan

17th century the church was given to the Basilian Order. In 1821 the Muscovite government expelled the Basilians and converted the monastery complex into a prison. Adam Mickiewicz was incarcerated in this prison for his revolutionary anti-tsarist activities. In 1604 Ivan Kuntsevych entered the monastery who during his ordination took the name of Josaphat. He soon became known for his deeply spiritual sermons. In the Holy Trinity church there is a small chapel-



Pazaislis monastery
(Photo from personal archives of L. Wolynetz)

where they grew up but still remember their Ukrainian roots. In Vilnius one of the most distressing and somber excursions was the KGB museum. Here we saw what level of bestial and inhuman level of behavior the Soviet-Russian regime practiced and still does today. They continue to abuse and torment the Ukrainian people. But in Vilnius there also were bright moments and interesting discoveries. On the same street as our hotel on one of the buildings is a commemorative plaque on which we found the following: “Here lived Taras Shevchenko from 1829-1831.” We know that Shevchenko, as a serf was the property of Lord Engelhardt. The Lord loved to travel to Lithuania, Poland and especially St. Petersburg and always took Shevchenko with him as his servant. But the most interesting excursion we did was to the Holy Trinity Church and monastery in Vilnius. The church was built by the Grand Prince and magnate of the Lithuanian-Ruthenian kingdom - Konstantyn Ostroskyi (1460-1530). He built this church as thanks to God for the victory in the battle of Osha against the Moscovites. In the

like area where Josaphat (1580-1623) prayed and read. With great perseverance he worked towards Church Union. In 1623 during a visitation to Vitebsk, he was killed by those who opposed the idea of Church Union. In 1643 Josaphat Kuntsevych was beatified by the Vatican. Next year we will commemorate the 700th anniversary of this martyr's death. Throughout the centuries, the church had undergone many destructive episodes and currently needs total restoration. The restoration work which right now is underway is financed by the Department of cultural heritage of Lithuania and the Basilian Order of St. Josaphat.

With great interest and fascination we toured the selected cultural monuments of Lithuania. We were impressed by the care and devotion Lithuanians apply in the preservation of their own cultural heritage and the regard they have in their appraisal of the cultural heritage of other nations. This is once more an example of how important it is to cherish the cultural heritage of your nation and support institutions that dedicate their work to this. ❖



The castle in Kaunas
(Photo from personal archives of L. Wolynetz)

For more information about The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford, please, visit www.ukrainianmuseumlibrary.org, call 203-324-0499 or 203-323-8866. The Museum is open Wednesday through Friday from 1 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., or by appointment, and is located at: 161 Glenbrook Road, Stamford, CT 06902.