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Protective Powers in Ukrainian Tradition

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In various world cultures we find a deep and steadfast belief in the power of symbolically protective elements to which people have adhered to for centuries. In Ukrainian traditions one such significant protective element is the ritual cloth with embroidered or woven specific symbolic elements.

Traditional Ukrainian usage of ritual cloths dates far back into antiquity, into the pre-Christian era when they were considered to be an essential component within all aspects of a person's livelihood. According to belief, the *rushnyk* sanctifies and safeguards its surroundings and has the power to protect human beings during significant events in their lives. No wonder then that an old Ukrainian proverb says "A house without a ritual cloth is not a home." Upon reading recollections of the Holodomor survivors we learned that some of them returned to their devastated homes in an attempt to rebuild their lives. But their homes were empty, the walls were bare and they had nothing to decorate them with because all items were sold for a piece of bread. In order to renew life in these abandoned sad homes they painted ritual cloths with potter's clay on the walls and in this temporary and simple way they renewed an ancient tradition without which they could have not imagined their existence.

There were different ritual cloths designated for a various uses. The *kilkovi* (peg) ritual cloths were hung by the entrance doorway on a special hook or peg. It was believed this would protect the home from any evil entering or the evil intentions of a malevolent visitor. But the finest, most elaborate ritual cloths were prepared for the holy icons to which the populace prayed and whispered their pleas and requests. Specific cloths were used in rituals such as births, weddings, deaths. Honored guests were always greeted with bread and salt on a ritual cloth.

A deeply meaningful moment was the time of farewells of a mother with her children when for them came time, for whatever reason, to leave their family home. For their road, the mother would give them a very specific ritual cloth she

prepared for such occasion. This cloth was to be not only a protective element for their journey but also a constant reminder and witness of their origin, their heritage, traditions according to which they lived within the family hearth. The cloth is a reminder of their cultural upbringing, lessons of dignity and exists to help them adhere to the cultural traditions, to live by them in whatever circumstances they may find themselves. What's more, the ritual cloth was not only to guide the person in their travels but also to forever make it possible to rediscover the road back home, matured but unaltered in their national and cultural attitudes.

The poet Evhen Malaniuk wrote upon the topic of culture and traditions and gives us a vivid account of them in his Essays on History and Culture published in 1954 in New York. In 1922, following the unsuccessful struggle for independence, some regiments of the Ukrainian army, in which Malaniuk served, were interned in POW camps in Poland. In this same camp there also were interned soldiers of the former tsarist army. Malaniuk describes these Russian soldiers as "unkempt, all the time relaxing on the dirty mattresses and reminiscing the good old days in Petersburg, the luxurious restaurants they ate in and the decadent play of their unencumbered youth. They even ate their meals half sitting, half lying down on these dirty cots. With this group there also was an older soldier, withered and worn but neatly dressed, with his teenage son who was kept apart from the other prisoners. When mealtime came, this soldier took out from his coat pocket an embroidered ritual cloth, he placed it on a derelict stool as his son placed the metal army dish with their food rations in it. They would make the sign of the cross, draw out their spoons and then slowly begin to eat. This father and son, whose national identity was clearly evident just by observing how they ate, created a stark contrast with the Petersburg soldiers, unshaven, disheveled, grimy... and when I recollect – the miserable, squalid and hopeless days in this internment camp

and remember these "malorosy"*, father and son, I tell myself : this was culture. This was what had been created on our land throughout centuries and millennia, it permeated into their blood, their veins and no one neither Scythians, Polovtsians, Huns, Tatars and even Moscovites – had the power to destroy it." Malaniuk continues to ponder this and almost predicting today's events in Ukraine says: "We are eyewitnesses and partly participants of terrifying events, when our national being is by all sort of means and methods being destroyed, crippled, attempts are made to change its nature, tear out its spiritual essence and fill it with something else... The enemy wants to extract from man what Shevchenko called "God's image". And we see an enormous inner resistance to this by our national being, our deeply woven resolve, which irrespective of the specific circumstances, we figuratively draw out this ritual cloth, make the sign of the cross before we eat even prisoner's broth."

Present events in Ukraine, once more underscore the many attempts to destroy our national existence. Nevertheless, we see "enormous inner resistance to this by our national being" and we are united in this struggle for our existence until we reach victory. These tragic circumstances are not stopping us, are not diminishing the courageous struggle, are not letting us discard our ancient cultural traditions but just the opposite, they are strengthening us. Our strength is woven within us, our steadfastness, decisiveness, persistence. The cultural traditions of our nation are the sentinels of our existence. ❖

* "malorosy" was a term used for Ukrainians during the tsarist days. Many of them had to do compulsory service in the Russian tsarist army. Depending upon where their units were stationed at the time of the Russian revolution, some of them joined the Ukrainian National Army, while others remained with the remnants of the tsarist army and fought against the bolsheviks.



Samples of various ritual cloths. (Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford)