

## The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

### THE GIFT OF SONG by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

According to an ancient Ukrainian legend, God distributed talents to each nation by which that nation would be characterized, known, recognizable, and differentiated from one another. As God came to the end of His gift giving, He realized that He had forgotten about one nation – the Ukraine! So, to compensate for this omission, God told the Ukrainians I will give you a special gift – the Gift of Song. You will be known throughout the world for your wealth of beautiful songs. Your songs will bring solace in times of grief, joy in times of triumph. They will glorify creation and life. Into your songs you will express your hopes and wishes. Your songs will ennoble and enrich the human spirit. They will inspire, unite, and give you strength in times of adversity and will serve as a teaching tool, a guide. Your past and your heritage will be preserved in your songs. As long as you nurture the Gift of Song you will be indestructible.

The Ukrainians took to heart this special gift. Their creative output of songs is immense. In the opinion of critics these



St. Vladimir's Church choir, Stamford CT 1942-43. Father Stefan Hrymick, Choirmaster - Jas. Swinski  
1st row sitting from left - 1st - Josephine Malinick, 2nd - Anne Nagurney, 2nd row - 1st - Mary Lohausky, 2nd - Lilian Kroblesy, 3rd - Olga Kroblesy, 4th - Eleanor Wolchak, top row - 2nd from left - Peter Koczanski

titute lot who came to these shores to find a better life and to help their brethren in the old country. However, what they did bring with them were memories of their village with its traditional lifestyle of hard work, but filled with music and singing, especially during the holidays and during the important events of life like weddings. They remembered their church where they had prayed and sang. As one of the early Ukrainian choir

only a choir but often an orchestra, a theatrical group to stage musical performances, a reading room, a dancing school, and an evening school. Church choirs sang not only during Divine Liturgies, but also performed at various functions of the Ukrainian community. In their desire to acquaint the American public with Ukrainian songs, they also organized public concerts for general audiences. The early Ukrainian choir conductors in America were semi-professional, but musically talented individuals. Most of them were trained as cantors but they kept perfecting their skills on the job as well as through additional training. As the years went by, professional choir conductors gradually took over and choir singing reached its heights when Oleksander Koshets, 1875-1944, a world renowned conductor and composer, came to the United States and worked with Ukrainian choirs in the New York-New Jersey area before moving to Canada.

Much information about the early choirs and their concerts was printed in the Ukrainian newspaper *Svoboda*. In the June 6th, 1894 issue we read about Fa-

ther T. Obushkevych, 1841-1924, and about his work in organizing choirs and orchestras in order to "show the people the melodic beauty and passionate strength of Ukrainian song". Later, similar sentiments were expressed by the choirmaster of many years (1919-1962) of the St. George Ukrainian Catholic Church in New York, Theodore Onufryk, 1891-1987: "We resolved to go with Ukrainian song unto the American stage, among Americans in order to acquaint them with our culture and art and to spread the good name and glory of our church, rite, liturgical music, and our Ukrainian people on the whole". He conducted over 300 concerts during the time that he had served as choirmaster.

In our Library we have a small collection of photographs of church choirs from various Ukrainian parishes, as well as photographs of choirs on stage in concert spanning the years from the 1900s to the late 1930s. Unfortunately, although there are quite a few names of the numerous choirmasters, we have very little information about them. So much was lost through negligence and indifference. Those early choirmasters laid the foundation of Ukrainian choral music in America for us, and we cannot even pay homage to them and their work, because there was no preservation of archival material about them with but a few exceptions. I hope that perhaps there are still some individuals who have photographs or material about choirs and choirmasters of these early years. Please do not discard them. Rather, please send them to our Archives as soon as possible. Every piece of information, every pertinent item is important archival material for the reconstruction of the life and activities of dedicated people who worked toward one goal, the preservation and popularization of the special gift which we have received – the Gift of Song!



St. Constantine Choir Minneapolis, MN - 1916  
Fathers M. Danylovych & Lev Chapelsky

songs are captivating and of immeasurable beauty both in content and in melody. Singing became and still is a favorite pastime among Ukrainians whether it be solo, group, or choir. No wonder then that there is an old saying: "When you have three Ukrainians, you have a choir". Thus, for centuries songs played an important role in the lives of Ukrainians wherever they were or wherever they traveled.

The first Ukrainian immigrants who came to America brought with them very few material items. They were a des-

directors in America, Teodosii Kaskiv, 1878-1973 said in his memoirs: "We knew that in the worst times of destitution and misery we had one faithful and powerful friend – our song. With her we departed from our country and began to plant it in the new world as soon as we got here".

Once the new immigrants had oriented themselves in a new country and created their own communities, the first thing they did - which they considered to be of utmost importance - was to establish their own church. Upon the establishment of their own church came the necessity of having a choir. In time church members organized not



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