

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

UKRAINIAN FOLK COSTUME PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE 1880s

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In the numerous scholarly and popular works dealing with Ukrainian folk art, and especially with folk costume, a

Village of Yasine, Kosiv district



particular set of vintage photographs is repeatedly used. Of these, each individual image depicts a group or a pair of peasants dressed in the native costume of a particular region of western Ukraine. These groups of people in their authentic folk costumes are usually set against the background of a village home or a natural landscape; but they have the look of being posed for a special occasion or for a particular purpose. Although each image is identified as to the regional costume it is depicting, nowhere does it indicate when and where these photographs were taken.

The origin of these photographs always intrigued me; and after some research I found my answer in a book written by Oleksander Barvinsky (1847-1927) *Memories from My Life (Spomyny z moho zhyttia)* published in Lviv in 1912. Oleksander Barvinsky was a noted educator, historian, civic and political leader in Halychyna. He held important political positions in the Austro-Hungarian government, as an ambassador to the Austrian Parliament. He was also a member of the Austrian House of Lords. As a member of the Galician School Council he defended and supported Ukrainian interests in education and schooling.

In his book, Barvinsky writes about a special event that took place in Halychyna, specifically in the city of Ternopil in 1887. The Austrian government announced that Crown Prince Rudolf would visit Halychyna to become better acquainted with his subjects and his lands. The Crown Prince was to visit Krakow, Lviv, and Ternopil. Barvinsky at that time was a high school professor in Ternopil. Active civic leaders of Ternopil quickly organized a committee, in order to prepare a dignified reception for the Crown Prince; but at the same time to show him the life style, traditions, and cultural aspects and accomplishments of the Ukrainian population of that area. Although the majority of the members of the committee were from the Polish aristocracy, it was the Ukrainian members who presented the plans and prepared the program. The head of the committee was Volodyslav Fedorovych (1845-1917), a rich landowner and a great supporter of various cultural projects. The Patron of the committee was Count Volodymyr Didushytskyi. Oleksander Barvinsky was elected as secretary and had the responsibility of organizing the exhibitions and general program. The plan was to have an ethnographic exhibit in the Pavilion, in the city's park where various archeological finds and ethnographic material, including many folk artifacts, would be on display. In order to

acquaint the prince with the life style of the people the committee decided to build typical peasant homesteads depicting four different regions (Podillia, Hutsul, Dniester, and the Buh regions). In addition to this, groups of peasants in their folk dress from 45 villages came and exhibited their regional diversities. To show some of the folk traditions, the committee also organized a presentation

of harvest rituals which were performed by folks from the villages of Berezovytsia Velyka and Ostriv, to the accompaniment of a folk orchestra. A Cantata in honor of the Crown Prince was written by Professor N. Vakhnianyn and performed by a choir of over 100 singers assembled from various village church choirs. The organization of the choir and choir practice was conducted by Reverends Iosyf Vitoshynsky (1838-1901) and Amvrosi Krushelnytsky (father of the world renown opera singer Solomiya Krushelnytska). The visit of the Crown Prince to Ternopil was a

huge success. A local photographer by the name of Sylkevych photographed all the groups of peasants in their native costumes, colored them, and prepared two albums. One album placed in a wooden box was carved by Vasyl Shkribliak and was given to the Prince. A second album was donated to the Prosvita (Enlightenment) Society in Lviv. The photographs by Sylkevych are actually the ones repeatedly used in various ethnographic publica-

tions.

Once I learned of the origin of the photographs, I wanted to find the original copies. Every time I visited Ukraine, I kept inquiring about these photographs. When the Bolsheviks had occupied western Ukraine in 1939, they closed down all cultural institutions including the Prosvita Society; and its libraries and archives were often destroyed. But there were some good people, who at the risk of their own lives, managed to save some books and valuable materials from the various cultural institutions; and then hid them until such time as it became safe to store them in appropriate places. And so it was with these photographs. I visited the Ethnographic Museum in

Lviv in the 1990s; then, upon inquiring about the photographs, lo and behold, the librarian showed me about twenty of them which had been housed in their library. Apparently, they were part of the original album



that the Prosvita Society had received in 1887.

These photographs depicting various regional folk costumes as worn at the end of the 19th century present invaluable ethnographic material for us today. We can not only admire but also be in awe of the magnificent accomplishment of the Ternopil Committee of the 1880s, namely the foresightedness of its actions in preserving this memorable event, which resulted in the photographs so readily and repeatedly made use of.

This is just another example of how important it is to document events by written words, and especially with illustrative materials, and most importantly to preserve them for posterity.



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