

## EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

## Recently Received—An Item of History, but with Mystery!

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



(Photo 1) Topirets, Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford



(Photo 2) Topirets, Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

Museum and Library curators and librarians often experience a particular joy and satisfaction upon receiving or

acquiring a new item for their collection. This is especially true when the particular item comes unexpectedly and thus enriches or fills a gap in the holdings of the institution.

A few months ago, we received a distinctively striking gift from Halyna and Bohdan Balaban. This item, a wooden, hatchet-like walking cane is called a *topirets*. It was decorated with carved and inlaid designs of mother of pearl, multicolored seed beads, twisted metal wire, and brass plates, truly a genuine work of Ukrainian folk art. In the mid 1970s, the Balabans had purchased this item at a pre-auction viewing in a Bradbury Hills establishment. These types of establishments usually get their items from individual primary owners, or from their descendants, or from foreclosed estates when contents of the homes have to be disposed of. The salesperson had no idea what this item was, its provenance, origin, or even how this item came to them. The Balabans, however, immediately recognized the item as being a Ukrainian Hutsul *topirets*, not only because of its crafted style and carving, but mainly because of a special inscription which had been carved upon the shaft part of the cane.

A *topirets* was actually an integral part of the Hutsul lifestyle. A Hutsul would not leave his home, or be seen without his *topirets*. It had both practical uses and decorative aspects. In ancient days, the head of the *topirets*, shaped as an axe, was made of a heavier metal, sharpened, and used as a weapon when needed to defend oneself against man or beast. Past history and legends tell us about the Hutsul “Robin Hoods” who roamed about the Carpathian Mountains, avenging the wrongs and abuses inflicted upon poor people by those in power. During these skirmishes the *topirets* and flintlock guns were the essential weapons. It was because of these heroic exploits of the Hutsul “Robin Hoods” that the *topirets* was looked upon as a symbol of heroism, of

dedication to a beneficial objective, and of devotion to a higher ideal. The *topirets* was also extremely practical to use as a support or balance when walking through the forests, or when going up stony paths in the highlands, or when crossing streams, or clearing forest brush, etc. As part of the Hutsul folk dress it became an important decorative accessory, together with the above mentioned practical applications.

In time, when the high quality of artistic workmanship of the *topirets* was recognized, it became extremely popular, a collector’s item and in fashion among the city populace. It was used not only as a show-off walking cane, but also often served as part of a stylish home décor and exhibited with pride and joy. The *topirets* was also used as a favorite gift, which was given in appreciation to deserving notable individuals for their work, service, and contributions for the good of the society, organizations, schools etc.

Based upon the inscription carved on the shaft of the *topirets*, which we received from Halyna and Bohdan Balaban, we know that it was given as a gift in appreciation to a deserving teacher. On one side the inscription reads: “From Ukrainian Students” (*Vid ukrainskykh studentiv*), and on the other side the dates: 2/9-6/9, 1907 (See photo 2). Because of the unknown circumstances by which this item ended up in an auction house, we know nothing about the recipient or the donors. But, by using the scant information given to us on the inscription, we certainly have some interesting questions about the Hutsul carver who created this *topirets*, about the recipient, and donors of this item. Who was this teacher who received this magnificent gift from his grateful students? Did it take place in Lviv or in another city in western Halychyna? Did he emigrate to America? Did he live and die here? Did his descendants get rid of all his possessions deemed unworthy of preserving? Who was the



Hutsuls, a fragment from a painting by S. Obst

artist who carved this *topirets* with the exquisite detail? Who were the students? Perhaps we will never know.

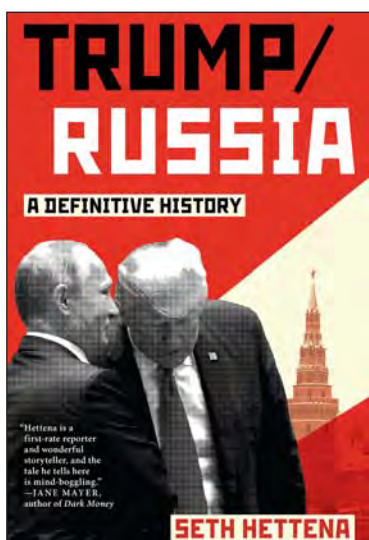
Q. *What can we learn from all this?* A. Be ever vigilant for Ukrainian items. If we have Ukrainian items in our possession, preserve them, and eventually donate them to a Ukrainian Museum for the benefit of present and future generations. □

We are most grateful to Bohdan Balaban who, from himself and in memory of his wife Halyna, donated this *topirets* to our Museum and Library. They were indeed fortunate to have found this item over 40 years ago, preserved it, and then gave it to our institution for posterity!

## Book Review by Museum Director

Msgr. John Terlecky

TRUMP / PUTIN: A DEFINITIVE HISTORY by Seth Hettena. Brooklyn, NY: Melville Publishing, 2018. \$27.99, (ISBN 978-1-61219-739-5).



This morning (September 16th) I found a very interesting online story from the New York Times. The headline was “How a Ukrainian hairdresser became a front for Paul Manafort”. This story appeared on the day after Mr. Manafort pleaded guilty to a number of charges regarding his lobbying tactics. He agreed to become another source of information to the Robert Mueller juridical investigation currently making headlines in the news.

A plethora of books have been published within the last twelve months, claiming a “friendly relationship” between President Donald Trump and the Russian Leader Vladimir Putin. Some of these exposés attempt to unravel a “conspiracy theory” between the two as regards the U.S. Presidential

Election of 2016.

Seth Hettena’s book is one of the above. The author’s credentials are interesting. He is an award-winning journalist, who was a reporter for the Associated Press, with a specialty on “political corruption”. One can listen to an interview with him, and the claims of this new book on a MSNBC cable report.

I came across this book by chance in a Barnes and Noble store near my rectory in Rockland County, New York. I started paging through it and there was one chapter entitled “Blood Money” that really caught my attention. The chapter deals with the lobbying efforts of Paul Manafort in Ukraine, and his association with oligarchs and friends of a name well-known to Ukrainians,

i.e., Viktor Yanukovich, and the dissemination of information to a Ukrainian audience through various social media airwaves.

So there I was sitting in the store skimming through the pages of this chapter. I didn’t even realize that a half-hour had already passed by!

I found this chapter to be very revealing about the electoral process in Ukraine for its presidential position in 2010. There is an adage that claims: “If you want to learn the truth in politics, just follow the money trail.” This chapter carries out this trail clearly by standard means of investigative reporting. I found the trail to be quite fascinating, because it reads in the stylistic intensity of a fictional spy thriller. I believe that any Ukrainian-American reading

this chapter would find this trail of money offers much documentation in the hands of an investigating reporter. It honestly makes for a good read.

I did not read the entire book and all the other claims that the author details with in his book. I believe this book is readily available for purchase, or can be found in many local libraries.

As for myself, I leave the entire contents of this and other such books to the judgment of the reader. I would agree with what another well-known journalist recently said about this subject: “It isn’t a question of discerning truth or deceit—rather, it is journalistic integrity which knows that history takes its time for truth to evolve.” □

For more information about The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford, please, visit [www.ukrainianmuseumlibrary.org](http://www.ukrainianmuseumlibrary.org), call 203-324-0499 or 203-323-8866. The Museum is open Wednesday through Friday from 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., or by appointment, and is located at: 161 Glenbrook Road, Stamford, CT 06902.