

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

“AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?” *Genesis 4:9*

by *Lubow Wolynetz, Curator*

For almost 100 years, Ukrainians in the free world have celebrated January 22nd as Ukrainian Independence Day. This date commemorates the proclamation in 1918, issued by the Central Rada government in Kyiv with Mykhailo Hrushevsky as President, that the Ukrainian National Republic was free and independent. Although this independence did not last long, Ukrainians afterwards continued to struggle and work towards this difficult and elusive independence and freedom, which was finally obtained in 1991. At this time, this freedom and independence is being challenged once more, and the Ukrainian nation has been thrown into a testing ground to see if it is strong and determined enough to remain a free, independent, democratic, and unified nation; or would it again succumb and be-

to rest. But there is a third group of heroes about whom we speak less, but who deserve just as much as the others, our attention, our care, our gratitude. These are the soldiers who fought, risked their lives, were severely wounded and came back often limbless, sightless, and emotionally scarred. They also deserve to be honored and to be given the best care possible. Is the Ukrainian government able to provide this? How much is the Ukrainian community willing to help? Who will take the responsibility, or be in charge to take care of this urgent need? How were such situations handled in the past?

In our Museum and Library we have a number of interesting publications, documents, and artifacts which shed some light on this matter.

Ukrainians in the United States and Canada who most generously responded to aid their brethren in need. A very active vice president of the Society from 1923-1924 and president in 1926 was Maria Biletska, 1864-

1938. She was a civic leader, educator, principal of the first girl’s Institute of Higher Learning in Lviv, and head of the Ukrainian Women’s Club (Kliub Rusynok). She was instrumental in organizing a women’s group of volunteers who conducted concerts and fund-raising events which brought the much needed funds for the Society.

The Society’s work was conducted in a rented building in Lviv. Here they kept precise lists of registered invalids and their needs, and housed those who were in need of temporary housing. The aim of the Society was to acquire its own building. For this the members began an intensive campaign in the 1920s. The first donation of \$400. for this cause came from the Ukrainian Women’s Society in New York. This Society later became the 1st Branch of Ukrainian National Women’s League of America. Finally, in 1932 with the collected donations the Society purchased a large building in Lviv.

From 1935 the Invalid Aid Society began publishing its annual Almanachs, a 152 page publication dealing with the activities of the Society as well as pertinent historical essays, dealing mainly with a war and military theme. It also published annual financial reports listing by name, city and country of all contributions to the Society. Each and every donation was acknowledged and its disbursement accounted for. To make it possible for the disabled veterans to have some form of employment, the Society organized food-store co-operatives where they could work, and encouraged citizens to buy goods from these stores. It also organized a hat making factory where the invalids worked at hat production. These efforts not only benefited the Society financially, but more importantly it gave the invalids the possibility of making a living. It gave them a measure of self-dignity. They no longer felt useless and abandoned.

Our Museum and Library has four of these Almanachs 1935-1939, as well as an informative booklet entitled Ukrainian Invalid (Ukrainsky Invalid) published in 1923 in Lviv. We also have an interesting artifact – a table

and two boxes made out of ebony stained wood. The top and sides of the table and boxes are covered with a special paste (papier mâché) and inlaid with straw and colored beads creating an intricate design. They were sent by the Ukrainian Invalid Aid Society to the Ukrainian Pavilion at the Century of Progress World’s Fair which was held in the Windy City in 1933. These items made by the disabled veterans in Lviv were to be exhibited and hopefully to be sold for \$1,000. When a buyer was not found, the Ukrainian National Women’s League organized a raffle. The collected money from the raffle was sent to the Society in Lviv to provide medical care and artificial limbs for the disabled veterans. A few



come subservient to the more powerful, conniving, treacherous, merciless, power hungry usurpers from the north.

For over a year now, beginning with the protests on the Maidan, Ukrainians are defending their right to lead a democratic and dignified way of life. These protests have developed into an ongoing defensive war and military action. A multitude of contrasting emotions are evoked among people who participate in, or are affected by, this armed conflict. Depending on military successes or losses, there can be rejoicing and jubilation, as well as sorrow, tribulation, and despair. We find many self-sacrificing, as well as some self-promoting, actions in such times. We have witnessed heroic deeds of young and dedicated, though ill-equipped, soldiers and buried too many of those killed in action. We pay homage to and glorify the heroic deeds of those who died. Taras Kompanichenko, a contemporary kobza bard, calls these modern day heroes “the knights who hold up the Ukrainian sky”; and when they fall, others come to take their place and “don’t let the sky fall and shatter into splinters.” We honor, greet, and welcome those who served their tour of duty and come home



After World War I, soldiers who were fighting for Ukrainian independence in the ranks of the Ukrainian Sharpshooters (Sichovi Striltsi) and the Ukrainian Galician Army, and who were also interned in prisoner of war camps for a few years after the war, returned home to western Ukraine (Halychyna). In the years 1920-22, there were over 5,000 thousand registered war invalids. Since western Ukraine was not independent but under foreign domination, it was up to the Ukrainian community to take care of their war wounded invalids. From 1918 in Lviv, there existed a Citizen’s Council headed by Dr. Stepan Fedak, 1867-1937 (lawyer, civic leader, philanthropist). The purpose of this committee was to aid and care for the wounded soldiers, prisoners of war, and political prisoners. When the Citizen’s Council was liquidated by the Polish government, its members reorganized and formed the Ukrainian Invalid Aid Society with headquarters in Lviv and with branches in other cities and towns. It encouraged citizens to become members. Donations, membership dues, and money raised from fund-raising appeals financed the activities of this Society. Needless to say, the Society appealed for financial support to



years later, to ensure the preservation of the table and boxes, the UNWLA donated these items to our Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford, which at that time was the first and only cultural institution for Ukrainian-Americans in the United States. On September 5, 1937 the items were delivered personally to our Museum by the then president of the UNWLA, Anastasia Wagner. Ever since, these items have been in our Museum on permanent display.

Organizers and administrators of the Ukrainian Invalid Aid Society were all professional people, lawyers, physicians, architects, educators, politicians, journalists, civic leaders. They knew who they were, what they were, did their work selflessly and not for self-promotion, self-enrichment, or to receive notability, petty significance, or temporary, empty, fleeting acclaim. They did this work as responsible members of a downtrodden nation for the good of their people. They took this burden upon their shoulders willingly and without complaint. They truly proved to be “Their brother’s keepers”! Can we then follow their good example, and help our present-day disabled Ukrainian veterans?

Explore and Experience Our Past