Holli in Today Podcast
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Ukrainian Traditions at the American Folklife Center

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

John Fenn: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I’m John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. My usual co-host Steve Winick is on vacation, so I’m here with Michelle Stefano, a folklorist specialist at the Center, and a member of the Folklife Today blog team.

Michelle Stefano: Hi, folks! In this episode we’re going to be looking at Ukrainian materials in our archive, but first we wanted to mention that it’s been a couple of months since we had a new episode, and that’s partly because it’s been a very busy time both within the American Folklife Center and out there in the world. So John, maybe we should fill our audience in briefly on events here at the Center.

John Fenn: Good idea. Back in our last episode, our former director Betsy Peterson announced her retirement! And now we’re in a position to announce that the director position has been filled. The new director is Nicole Saylor, whom our audiences already know as the former director of the American Folklife Center Archives. Nicki been a guest on this podcast several times, and we’re excited to have her as our new chief!

Michelle Stefano: Yes, and we should also mention that the new Archive Director is Michael Pahn, who comes to us after heading up the Archives at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

John Fenn: And, finally, we can tell everyone that the new director of the Veterans History Project is longtime VHP staff member Monica Mohindra. So we really feel like we’re in good hands.

Of course, while we’ve seen these changes here at the American Folklife Center, world events have been moving quickly too. And we really see this in the case of Ukraine. The latest Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred just days before our last episode, and we’ve been thinking since then of our Ukrainian friends and colleagues. Michelle, in response to the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia, you wrote a blog post on the topic of Ukrainian cultural heritage. Tell us a little about it.

Michelle Stefano: Sure! I knew that Ukrainian and Ukrainian American culture and traditions are represented in our archives, and that to feature Ukrainian culture would be an act of support – albeit a small one. But I was disturbed by the claims – or historical
revisionism – pushed by Russian actors, in Russian media, that Ukraine’s history and cultural heritage is essentially Russian – that is, Ukraine does not have its own distinct history and roots, and thus sovereignty, that it should be subsumed back into the so-called “mother country.” These aren’t new claims or justifications for the recent invasion and subsequent war, as we know Russia has occupied Eastern Ukraine for almost a decade now, as based on the same false rationale that Ukraine was always part of Russian civilization and, thus, territory. And these false narratives, mobilized by Putin in recent history, are grounded in early 20th century fascist thought. (And here, I’m drawing from the excellent 2018 book, The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America, by historian Timothy Snyder.)

And this is directly reflected in the title of the blog post I ended up writing, which quotes Ukrainian American artist Taissa Decyk, who in her late 1970s interview from our archives that I’ll get to in a moment, she explicitly states that, and I quote: “We have our own long history, and our literature, and our own culture; we don’t need to borrow anything from anybody.”

So, on the topic of exploring Ukraine’s own history and culture, there are a number of collections in the archives that first came to mind, particularly our digitized, online collections. One such collection is the Chicago Ethnic Arts Project Collection, which features – for example – orthodox churches, places of business, and decorative arts of the Ukrainian diaspora in Chicago in the late 1970s. And the collection includes recordings of church choirs, as well as interviews with community leaders who dedicated much time and effort to passing on particular traditions to younger generations.

**John Fenn:** We should also mention the Rhode Island Folklife Project Collection, which was made available on the Library website in 2018, and which also documents Ukrainian churches, community events, and practitioners of a number of traditions, such as Pysanky, or Easter eggs decorated through a wax-resist method. And there are some Folklife Today blogs by our retired colleague Stephanie Hall featuring some of those materials.

**Michelle Stefano:** That’s right, and it’s yet another immense collection in our archives, with 200 sound recordings and 17,000 photographs among other materials, so I admit that I’m still getting to know it as well as I think I know the Chicago collection! And that’s why I chose to start with it and learn more about what treasures it holds.

Similar to the Chicago collection, the Rhode Island Folklife Project Collection is also based on an AFC ethnographic field survey project that was called the AFC’s Rhode Island Folklife Project, and took place on the heels of the Chicago Ethnic Arts Project over several months in 1979. (Just to be clear: the Chicago Ethnic Arts Project was the first in a long series of AFC field survey projects, undertaken predominantly in 1977.) The Rhode Island Folklife Project was led by seven AFC folklorists and documentarians in cooperation with the Rhode Island Heritage Commission, the Rhode Island Council
on the Arts, and the Rhode Island Historical Society, to, as one main aim, identify the needs of statewide artists and communities in keeping their cultural traditions alive.

The collection documented traditions and places in a wide range of cultural communities and social groups, including Ukrainian American communities, such as St. Michaels Orthodox church in Woonsocket, which was extensively photographed and religious services were also recorded. And as you noted, it also comprises documentation of Pysanky making, including photographs of and an interview with traditional dancer and pysanky maker Natalie Michaluk, who was a 22 year-old kindergarten teacher at the time and very active in St. Michael’s and its Ukrainian language school. And in her interview, she discusses that it was through growing up in the church that her passion for Ukrainian dance and pysanky traditions grew. She also gets into pysanky making, sharing that she first learned how to make them at 5 years old from her grandmother, who emigrated from Ukraine. She also talks about how the decorative eggs represent the birth of Christ, and traditionally are given to friends at Easter time as signs of friendship and love.

And then we come to the interview with Taissa Decyk that I mentioned earlier, who fled Europe after World War II. She and her family eventually settled in Providence, where she was interviewed for the Rhode Island project about her life story and longstanding dedication to Ukrainian embroidery traditions and keeping them alive. And it was her fascinating and inspiring story that I felt needed to be elevated through our Folklife Today blog.

John Fenn: We should add that Mrs. Decyk was interviewed by the late folklorist Geraldine – or Gerri – Niva Johnson, and we have an obituary for Gerri on the blog as well.

Michelle Stefano: That’s right. Gerri interviewed Decyk in her Providence home for over two hours on September 11, 1979. And as I wrote in the blog, much of that interview took place in her bedroom, with her bed full of what looks like dozens of intricately embroidered pillows and clothing that she made, as Gerri’s photos from the time show. And it’s sweet, Decyk would ask to pause the interview in order to bring in from other rooms more embroidered items, such as dresses and the like, to show Gerri. So, Decyk’s passion and pride is certainly palpable.

John Fenn: What I found most striking were the parallels between Mrs. Decyk’s story of becoming a refugee as a result of WWII, and the current experiences of so many Ukrainians in having to flee, resettling in various European countries, as well as in the U.S.

Michelle Stefano: Yes, sadly, her story does resonate with what so many Ukrainians have faced over the past months, and are still facing today. And she goes into great detail about her life in the interview, beginning with being born in late 1920s Poland to Ukrainian parents who were then studying in Warsaw. And it was in 1940, as a family, that they returned to her parent’s home region of mountainous northwestern Ukraine,
which as a side note, when she was in the U.S. years later, she lived in Western Massachusetts and she made particular mention of how the landscape would often remind her of her family’s home region in Ukraine.

Nonetheless, after they moved from Poland back to Ukraine in 1940, then came the German occupation, when her family was taken to forced labor camps in Germany. It is in those camps where she worked for years alongside prisoners of war in making munitions. She notes that “labor camp was not as bad as a concentration camp, but it was very close to it.’ Obviously, she was forced to work, and had no control over the conditions, and they had to survive on “skimpy rations,” as she says.

**John Fenn:** And she notes that in the forced labor camps, her mastery of a range of Ukrainian embroidery traditions really took root.

Yes, in the interview recording you hear her showing Gerri a tablecloth she embroidered, which she says she made while pregnant with her first child in a German camp. She talks about how, in the camps, her love for embroidery and “collecting” its many different designs took hold. She talks about how other Ukrainian women would sometimes share their designs for her to copy, as many brought traditional embroidered items with them as they are cherished. Though, she also mentions that not everyone was so free in letting her copy the different designs, as if they are sometimes kept private like secrets.

As she shows samples to Gerri in the interview, she discusses how they correspond to particular regions across Ukraine. And long ago, some families had their own designated patterns. Traditionally, embroidered blouses, dresses, and towels were part of a woman’s dowry, with some worn for everyday use and others for special occasions, such as weddings and for burial. Decyk states that: “The towels have special meaning. They are not used to wipe your hands; they are ritual towels. They are used over icons and in wedding rituals, and many other things.” As she talks about the designs at certain points in the interview, you can also hear her flipping through what sounds like binders of designs and samplers. On that, Gerri wrote in her field notes that Decyk “has file cabinets filled with patterns and designs.”

**John Fenn:** In addition to the fact that embroidery designs are regional, I understand they also correspond to particular, regional dances.

**Michelle Stefano:** That’s right. Decyk grew up learning traditional dances and, in grammar school, embroidery, as they are, indeed, closely linked. She states: “This is what leads you into the embroidery, because by knowing which dance you do from which part of Ukraine, you need a particular costume, and we didn’t have readymade costumes.”

**John Fenn:** So what happened after the war?

**Michelle Stefano:** After WWII, her difficult journey continued. She and her family members lived in a displaced persons camp, mainly due to not wanting to return to
Ukraine, as it was then under Soviet, or communist, rule, so they eventually were able to make their way to Newark, New Jersey in 1952, thanks to the Displaced Person Act of 1948. At the time of her interview in 1979, Ukraine was – as we know – part of the Soviet Union, and she discusses the lack of freedoms that Ukrainians endured as a result, including crackdowns on speaking Ukrainian. Importantly, this was a main motivation of hers in continuing to keep alive particular traditions, such as Ukrainian dances and of course embroidery traditions because, in her words, “the others who are in Ukraine cannot.”

And back to the important relationship between the embroidery traditions and dance, she does stress how the dance traditions serve to sustain embroidery traditions since they’re so closely linked.

**John Fenn:** Let’s listen to Decyk explain this relationship herself. Here’s a clip of her discussing a particular dance she terms an “embroidery dance” and its importance:

**Taissa Decyk:** One of the ways of keeping the Ukrainian embroidery alive in the Ukrainian community is to hold a dance. This is called [Ukrainian words] the embroidery dance. Ladies come in modern dresses with embroidery or blouses, or folk costumes, and men come with embroidered shirts or embroidered ties. Then sometimes there are prizes, or not, but that’s usually in a bigger community an annual affair.

**Geraldine Johnson:** And do you have one here?

**Taissa Decyk:** Not in Rhode Island, I’m sorry to say. But you'll find it in Newark, New Jersey. The Ukrainian National Home is in Newark, but almost in Irvington. It’s a big Ukrainian community. Philadelphia has seven…only seven churches! New York holds one. Hartford, Connecticut holds it. New Haven. Wherever there is more Ukrainians in one city, they do have embroidery dances.

**John Fenn:** That was Taissa Decyk discussing the strong relationship between Ukrainian dance and embroidery traditions. So, Michelle, it sounds like Decyk was very concerned with keeping Ukrainian traditions alive as a member of the diaspora.

**Michelle Stefano:** Yeah, it is clear how dedicated and passionate she is. And even in her field notes, Gerri states that she was surprised at how little time Decyk had actually lived in Ukraine and yet – and I quote – “her feelings about Ukraine and Ukrainian culture are quite strong” and that she –and I quote again-- “had encountered the most dedicated and interested craftsmen I had yet found in my fieldwork to date.”

**John Fenn:** It’s such a rich interview, and I’m happy you chose to feature it on the blog. And I hope listeners will take the time to listen to it. It’s divided into four separate sound files on the online Rhode Island Folklife Project Collection on the Library’s website—but you can find it through Michelle’s post at Folklife Today. Now Michelle, stay with us for a few minutes because I know you have another collection to tell us about. But first I want to mention that Taissa Decyk’s story resonated with a family story I heard in an interview our own Steve Winick did recently with the Ukrainian American musician
Julian Kytasty. Since Steve isn’t here with us this time, and since that interview was part of the Homegrown series, I thought we’d bring in Theadocia Austen, who produces the concert series, to talk about it. Hi, Thea!

Michelle Stefano: Hi Thea!

Theadocia Austen: Hello, everyone!

Michelle Stefano: As you know, Thea, I recently wrote about an interview with a former Ukrainian refugee from World War II. And as John pointed out, there are unmistakable similarities between her story and what we heard about from Julian Kytasty. So first of all, Thea, Who is Julian Kytasty?

Thea Austen: Julian Kytasty is a Ukrainian American singer and musician who is particularly known for playing the bandura, a stringed instrument considered one of Ukraine’s national instruments. Julian has been on our radar for a concert or lecture for a few years because he’s also a trained musicologist who knows all about Ukrainian music history as well as being a great performer. And this year was an opportune time to have Julian in the concert series, for a number of reasons. Of course, we were eager to highlight Ukrainian music in light of current events.

John Fenn: As with the last couple of years, we are doing this year’s Homegrown concerts as video premieres to prevent bringing audiences together indoors, so the whole concert is available in a recent bog post, along with Steve’s interview with Julian.

Thea Austen: Right! So to give you a sense of his music, why don’t we hear Julian Kytasty perform “Lament for a Fallen Warrior.”

[Playing and singing in Ukrainian by Julian Kytasty]

Michelle Stefano: Again, that was Julian Kytasty. So explain a bit about the parallels to Taissa Decyk’s story.

Thea Austen: Sure. Julian’s grandfather and great uncle were well known musicians at the time of the Nazi invasion of Ukraine. And his father was a teenager, and he was their student. They all played the Bandura. They formed a group during the occupation, and ended up being able to emigrate together to the US after the war. We can let Julian tell this fascinating story, which as you say was part of an interview Steve Winick did with him for the Homegrown series. So here’s a fuller version of the story:

Julian Kytasty: Like you mentioned Steve, I’m a third generation player. My father and grandfather came to the United States as professional players. And my grandfather and his brother were part of a -- of a small group of professional players who -- who ended up coming together and starting to perform in outlaying villages around Kiev in the first winter of the German occupation after the -- after the Nazi invasion in 1941. They were playing the villages for food, you know? And did that for a while, and then -- and then at some point -- and then in the summer of 1942, the whole group was basically put on a -- put in a cattle car and sent to Germany to -- initially to work in -- as essentially slave
labor in the factories, which of course happened to millions of Ukrainians at that time. Especially young people. And you know, the group had made my father official student, which meant that he didn't get rounded up on his own, you know, in the -- but [inaudible] it very possibly saved his life, you know? But what it also meant was that when the group got put on the cattle car, he went with them.

**Stephen Winick:** Right.

**Julian Kytasty:** So, you know, so that was my father's experience, you know, living through World War II in those circumstances, and as a 14-year old kid. But you know, but they -- they were lucky, you know? They ended up being able to make their way to Bavaria at the end of the war, and into the U.S. occupation zone and then four years of, you know, refugee camps. Displaced persons camps, after the war, which they used to practice, you know? And the whole group came as a group to the United States.

**Stephen Winick:** Yes, how did they manage that? That sounds like it would be very complicated to figure out.

**Julian Kytasty:** It was, but -- and it was 1949 when they were looking for a chance to go someplace out of Germany. By 1949, when the people from those camps were being admitted to the United States, Canada, Australia, other countries, and they managed to -- they managed to work it out where they all -- they all went more or less at the same time, and they all went to the Detroit area. You know?

**Stephen Winick:** And so, they had been sort of in -- in exile from Ukraine already for almost a decade by the time--?

**Julian Kytasty:** Yes, eight years. Yes.

**Stephen Winick:** Yes, yes. That's amazing. So -- so arriving here, they were sort of lucky to have a built in group to play with, but how did they find the Detroit area in terms of the Ukrainian population there. What was--?

**Julian Kytasty:** No, there's a -- there's a large Ukrainian population, and -- all ready, you know, going back to the earlier immigrations from the turn of the century, and from between wars. But also, a large immigration came to Detroit from the displaced persons camps, because -- because there were jobs. You know, there were all these factory jobs.

**Stephen Winick:** Yes.

**Julian Kytasty:** And early on, that's -- that's what they did. You know, they all would get a -- would get a factory job, and then when there was a chance to go on tour with the group, they'd all quit and then come back -- come back in a month or two or get a different factory job. It was a little bit easier to do that back in those days.

**John Fenn:** So again, that was a clip from the interview with Julian Kytasty. And that's amazing, by the way. I'm just imagining musicians today doing that. What if I quit right
now in the middle of this podcast to go on tour? Finally some real-life drama on Folklife Today!

**Thea Austen:** Yes, that would certainly be something! I'll just mention that the full interview video with Julian is about an hour and a quarter, and you can watch it right in the same blog with the concert at blogs.loc.gov/folklife

**John Fenn:** That's great. And Michelle, I understand you came across another collection in your explorations of Ukrainian materials in our archives?

**Michelle Stefano:** Yes, the Ryl's'kyi Institute Ukrainian cylinder collection documents musicians – and roughly 400 individual songs – from a wide range of places in Ukraine from 1908 through the 1930s. Locations include the Kharkiv region in what was then Soviet Ukraine, and the Carpathian region of Eastern Galicia in Interwar Poland. Documented by folklorists and musicologists over those 3 decades, the collection is primarily comprised of field recordings on wax cylinders held by the Ryl's'kyi Institute of Art, Folklore Studies and Ethnology. And beginning in early 1992, the AFC and the Ryl's'kyi Institute collaborated on project in which the cylinders were duplicated so that they could also be preserved in the AFC archives. As part of this collaboration, Joe Hickerson, the then Head of the AFC archives, traveled to Kyiv in 1994 to visit the Institute, along with many other stops, such as the Vernadsky Library, where he explored a collection of 1,200 wax cylinders of Jewish folk music and stories that was generated by folklorist Moshe Beregovski in the late 1920s.

In the summer 1994 issue of the *Folklife Center News*, the precursor to the *Folklife Today* blog, Hickerson provides snapshots of his trip, including his meeting with young musicians learning to make and play *bandura* and *lyra* in Irpin, the city recently devastated by Russian forces.

**John:** That's a wonderful old collection, and to listen to it you can come visit us at the Library of Congress. And as you can tell, we have a lot of collections with Ukrainian content. We have recordings of a bandura ensemble playing for Jimmy Carter's inauguration in 1977. We have interviews with Myron Surmach, who was important in the Ukrainian communities in New York and New Jersey; we have recordings of Ukrainian music in Canada, where there's a large and active Ukrainian community, and we have many recordings of Ukrainian Jewish songs as well. We also have oral histories, videos, and artifacts relating to the Luboml exhibition project, which is about a Jewish Shtetl or market town, which was considered to be in Poland in its heyday but is in fact within Ukraine’s current borders. And finally, haven’t we featured Ukrainian music in the Homegrown series before, Thea?

**Thea Austen:** Yes we have had several Ukrainian groups over the years..

**John:** Great. Let’s hear one more selection of Ukrainian music. But first, thanks to Theadocia Austen for being a great guest and Michelle Stefano for co-hosting!

**Michelle Stefano:** Thanks!
Thea Austen: Yes, thanks for having me!

John: And let’s also thank our engineer Jon Gold, and Steve Winick, who helped script this episode before going off on vacation, and all the colleagues throughout the Library of Congress who make this podcast happen. And of course to all you listeners too. So Thea, what music should we play to end the show?

Thea Austen: Let’s hear the group Gerdan. They played at the Library at the time of the last Russian invasion of Ukraine, in 2014. Let’s hear them play some lively Ukrainian tunes on Ocarina, violin, and accordion [Clip begins at 01:05:51 of Gerdan concert.]

Thanks again for listening!

[Ukrainian instrumental music by Gerdan]