Washington’s first “pysanka weekend” attracts specialists, collectors

by Olenka and Jurij Dobczansky

WASHINGTON — Sixty pysanka spe- cialists, lobbyists and collectors from across North America gathered at the Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine on March 8 for the first Pysanka Symposium in the United States. Five presenters shared their stories of creating, docu- menting, collecting and preserving the pysanka and its legacy. A very receptive audience joined in a lively exchange of ideas on the ancient art and living tradi- tion of pysanka writing.

The symposium began with welcoming remarks by Jurij Dobczansky, who conceived and spearheaded the endeavor in order to organize this sym- posium was to provide a forum for pysanka specialists, writers and connois- seurs. We wanted to share our collective knowledge and experience and document it in an accessible way. Pysanka writers today creatively reconstruct traditional patterns in an individual work of art lead- ing some to declare it is no longer a “folk art.” The explosion of information about the pysanka challenges us to ensure that the essence of traditional pysanka writing doesn’t become “obscured,” he said.

Dr. Andrew Sorokowski, known to readers of The Ukrainian Weekly through his column “CrossCurrents,” introduced the symposium coordinators and served as moderator of the symposium. In introducing Helen Badulak of Reading, Pa., Dr. Sorokowski noted that she represented the creation phase of pysanka. Ms. Badulak spoke about the life of a pysanka artist and displayed a selection of her exquisite work. The winner of over 200 books, audio-visuals and arti- cles in Ukrainian, English, German, French, Portuguese, Italian, Polish and Japanese. Ms. Brander also displayed books, clippings and photographs of her work in teaching and popularizing the pysanka on Canada’s Pacific Coast.

Dr. Andrj Hornjatkeyev’s illustrated talk centered on the collection and preservation aspects of pysanky. A lin- guist by profession, Dr. Hornjatkeyev’s interest in pysanka comes from his father, Damian’s, collection, which he preserved and whose recording in electronic format by the Ukrainian Folklore Chairs at the University of Alberta he facilitated. He described how his father collected pysanky and embroidery in western Ukraine and safeguarded them during the second world war. He managed to bring the collections with him when he immi- grated to the United States, despite cus- toms officials damaging some in an effort to determine whether they were real eggs. Dr. Hornjatkeyev demonstrated how his father’s pysanka collection can now be viewed online from any angle rotating them 360 degrees (http://www.arts.ual- berta.ca/wp/pages/media/dpysanky/ima- ges/dhl/dhl.htm). In addition, Dr. Hornjatkeyev announced that he had brought both collections from Edmonton, in order to give them a permanent home at The Ukrainian Museum in New York immediately after the symposium.

The last speaker was Lubow Wolynetz, the representative of the Ukrainian Museum who facilitated Dr. Hornjatkeyev’s donation. A librarian by profession, she is presently a professor and museum curator of the Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford, Conn., as well as the folk art curator of The Ukrainian Museum in New York.

Mr. Dobczansky voiced that evening was the need for additional features

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A view of some of the pysanka in the collection of Lubo Charodomolsky (by Olena Kuzmynsky and Maria Hawrych).

At the Pysanka Symposium (from left) are: Andrew Sorokowski, Lubow Wolynetz, Andrj Hornjatkeyev, Joan Brander, Orysa Paszczak Tracz, Jurij Dobczansky and Helen Badulak.

The display case titled “Passing on the Pysanka Legacy” chronicled 25 years of pysanka workshops conducted by Mr. Dobczansky at the Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine in the form of photo- graphs, flyers, press clippings and related publications.

“Paths to the Pysanka” presented pysanka from eight pysanka-writers and collectors. Lubo Charomodolsky, Jurij Dobczansky, Olha Kurylas, Lesia Mandzia, Ihor Mansny, Nadia O’Shea, Ihor Slabicky and Sofika Zielyk shared their experiences and the accompanying bookend underscored the fact that every- one who has written, collected or inherit- ed pysanka has a unique story to tell. Some are hooked the minute they see a pysanka emerging from beneath the blackened waseware. Some are intrigued by the challenge of creating the “perfect pysanka.” Some cherish pysanka gifts as gifts that bring memories of friends or loved ones. For others, pysanka evoke a cher- ished family tradition spanning several generations.

The third exhibit, “Tools for the Pysanka,” focused on the absolute sim- plicity of tools and techniques required for pysanka-writing. It highlighted the development of the electric kistka by Wsylar Ohtar of Detroit. This “New World” innovation has significantly changed the way pysanka are written today. The electric kistka is now widely used even in the “Old World.”

“Pysanka – it is written!” A bibliography documented guided tours at the symposium to over 200 books, audio-visuals and arti- cles in Ukrainian, English, German, French, Portuguese, Italian, Polish and Japanese. Ms. Brander also displayed books, clippings and photographs of her work in teaching and popularizing the pysanka on Canada’s Pacific Coast.

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At the conclusion of the symposium the main participants and members of the organizing committee enjoyed a dinner next door at St. Josaphat Ukrainian Catholic Seminary, hosted by the semi- nary’s rector, The Rev. Robert Hitchens. Mr. Dobczansky again thanked the speakers and members of the organizing committee, including: Zenovia Choma and Norm Thompson, who produced the handsome program booklet; Christine Paclawsky, who assisted with announce- ments and media publicity; Oksana Sorokowski, who managed the book sale table; and all the community organiza- tions that financially supported the sym- posium. Conversations continued late into the evening. Among the many ideas voiced that evening was the need for another such event to explore those aspects not fully discussed at the sym- posium.

Sunday events

The symposium was followed on Sunday by two hands-on pysanka-deco- rating workshops, held in conjunction with the annual Easter Bazaar at the Holy Family Parish.

Thirteen pysanka-writers attended the Pysanka Master Class with Ms. Badulak, and the 25th annual Pysanka Workshop for pysanka-writers of all ages and levels with Mr. Dobczansky attracted a total of 63 participants.

Overall, participants of the symposium, the workshop and the master class were very positive about their experience. The Ukrainian Service of the Voice of America recorded several interviews with participants and presenters, which were included in a special broadcast to Ukraine on March 19. (The full Ukrainian-lan- guage text and a video clip may be viewed at https://author.voanews.com/ ukrainian/2008-03-19-voacfm.)

Mr. Dobczansky observed at the out- set: “Often it is asked why we invest so much time and effort into decorating a fragile pysanka. In fact, more than 800 individuals who have participated in our workshops you would probably hear 800 reasons. But above all, you would readily sense an excitement and joy in learning this craft and its traditions. Yes, it appears the eggshell is indeed fragile, but the legacy of the pysanka is quite strong.”