

Chance discovery leads couple to visit relatives in native land, re-establishing ties and leading them to a business "All Things Ukrainian,"

By Lisa O'Donnell, Journal Reporter, Winston-Salem Journal
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CLEMMONS - Last month, two contestants on the TV show So You Think You Can Dance? performed what was billed as a traditional Russian dance in folk costumes. Except it wasn't really a Russian dance. It was a traditional Ukrainian dance called a hopak, and they were wearing distinctive Ukrainian folk costumes.

Word of the blunder made its way to Susan Washinsky of Clemmons, who hopped on her computer and alerted members of the Ukrainian Association of North Carolina to the mistake. She requested that they write to the executive producer of the show expressing their disappointment. As the association's action-item coordinator, Washinsky monitors how Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, is portrayed in the media.

"THE UKRAINE"

One of the most common mistakes is calling the country "The Ukraine." When the country split from the Soviet Union in 1991, it dropped the article before its name. When a writer or broadcaster adds the article, they can expect a letter from Washinsky. "Ukrainians don't even have the article 'the' in their language," she said.

It's a particularly sensitive issue with Ukrainians, who are trying to reclaim their identity after 70 years of Soviet rule, said her husband, John Washinsky.

"For so long, Ukrainians were denied so many things," he said. "They were not allowed to practice their traditions and their art forms."

The Washinskys are dedicated to preserving Ukrainian culture. John Washinsky grew up in western Pennsylvania hearing stories about Ukraine from his maternal grandfather, who immigrated to the United States around 1910.

One day in the early 1990s, while searching through his grandfather's attic, he and Susan came across a bundle of letters from Ukrainian relatives he had never met. The last letter was dated 1968.

The Washinskys aren't entirely sure why the correspondences stopped, but they said they believe that local Communist leaders had a role in disrupting communication between the families. A letter from or to the United States was sure to raise a red flag.

The letters piqued the Washinskys' curiosity and, with the help of a Ukrainian friend from Greensboro, they wrote a letter and mailed it to the return address on the envelope.

Within a few months, they heard back from a cousin. Subsequent letters and e-mails with the cousin and other relatives followed. And in 1997, the Washinskys, with their son, Michael, flew to Ukraine to meet their relatives, who live in a village near Poland. "It's hard to put into words, to think that we are now connecting after 80 years," Susan Washinsky said.

The Washinskys fell in love with Ukrainian culture. Upon returning from Ukraine, the Washinskys started All Things Ukrainian, a Web-based business that sells handmade Ukrainian arts and such crafts as decorated eggs, stained glass, black lacquered boxes and paintings of religious icons.

The idea for the business was hatched while sitting around the table with their Ukrainian relatives.

The relatives buy local art and ship it to the Washinskys.

A few times each year, a box of goods arrives at their house. "There's a certain smell to the embroidery and the varnish. When a box arrives, you feel like Ukraine is here today," John Washinsky said.

Oleh Wolowyna, the president of the Ukrainian Association of North Carolina, said that as far as he knows, the Washinskys' business is the only one in the Southeast that specializes in Ukrainian crafts. "It's a really important way for people to get acquainted with Ukrainian culture," he said.

Susan Washinsky runs the business. She is a language lover and learned to speak Ukrainian. They travel to international festivals around the Southeast and set up booths to promote their business and Ukrainian culture. They are also active in the Ukrainian Association of North Carolina, which has 120 families, most of whom live in the Triangle.

One of the association's main goals for this year is to promote awareness about the 75th anniversary of a famine that killed between 3 million and 6 million Ukrainians. Ukrainians refer to it as the Holodomor, which means extermination by hunger.

According to information from the Ukrainian Studies Fund at Harvard University, the famine was engineered by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to crush Ukrainian resistance to forced collectivization. Little was known about the famine because news of it was suppressed by the Soviets.

The Ukrainian government is pressing other countries to label the famine a genocide as a way to raise awareness about other engineered famines in the world. As part of this effort, Susan Washinsky will be putting together some material that will be on display at the Clemmons Public Library in December.

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