

## *Discovering Your Culture*

Ukrainian culture — what about it? To some people it might seem to be an insignificant piece of heritage of a small nation, of a small country located on the East of Europe that will soon be lost to time, not relevant for the rest of the world. The country, however, is the second largest in the European region — its soil feeds millions of people around the globe, its culture originates back from millions of years ago, and is as diverse as any; it is a motherland to many talented, famous people. One of many things that fascinates researchers about Ukraine is how we managed to preserve our culture and language despite being heavily oppressed for the past three hundred years of our history. And, frankly speaking, doing this — and now trying to *rediscover* some traditions of our ancestors — has not been easy on Ukrainians themselves. Many authentic parts of our culture were tried to be altered ever since the reign of the Russian tsar Peter I from 1682, to make them look as if they originated from Russia and were a slightly different variation of the Russian culture, and even more heavily harmed during the period of the Soviet Union — “The Soviet terror” — during the active development of theories by Soviet scholars, all working for the government, based on relation of each of now former republic’s histories to communism — where in regard to countries like Ukraine, Belarus and a number of other republics of this region it was crucial to outline how Russia was the ultimate predecessor to all of them and how the cultures of Ukraine, Belarus etc. were allegedly “heavily inspired” by it, in order to create a sense of dependency on Russia — one of the instruments of their influence — in order to maintain ideological control over people. And, unfortunately, it is still our task to battle these false allegations, and rediscovering some parts of our culture is yet complicated. Despite this, Ukrainians have managed to successfully preserve perhaps the most important attributes of our culture and carry them through the centuries despite the pressure of our oppressors in

attempts to assimilate us. Thanks to the fact that much of the memory of our traditions has survived in the countryside, we can once again conduct ethnographic expeditions to recover lost pieces of authenticity — as ethnography was banned for a long time — and debunk myths about our origins and history.

One thing Ukrainians always talk proudly about is our cuisine. The famous borscht soup, or holubtsi — cabbage rolls — and syrnyky. Deruny — almost like pancakes, yet having potatoes as the main ingredient. Our dishes carry our legacy, just like any *physical attribute* that brings a person back to a certain epoch. Through it we taste our traditions. We may not even think of it that way, but some dishes are so deeply incorporated into our culture that it almost seems like everyone in the world cooks them as well, just like we do. It can be guaranteed that each Ukrainian family — small or big — eats borscht at least once a week. And so did generations of Ukrainians, carrying the recipe through time — which, most incredibly, is so unique in different Ukrainian regions — for us to be able to connect with them through it. A small thread which connects generations of Ukrainian people through food. Food helps with shaping the nation's identity. Food is nutritious. Food from your nation helps you reconnect with your motherland even when you're away, or are living somewhere far. It brings back the best memories. Sometimes you wish you were able to taste it like the first time.

We are very diverse in languages. Most of us are bilingual – we speak Ukrainian and russian – because of the repressive politics of the Soviet russian government. They repressed or sent Ukrainians to distant corners of Siberia, either to die on their way here or in labor camps, and brought russian people to their homes instead. Also because of the general russification process, where the value of the Ukrainian language was tried to be lowered by propaganda of the russian language as a language of a “city” and Ukrainian being a language of “villages”. We have lots of regional dialects – closer to the West of Ukraine, in the Lviv

and surrounding regions, people possess a dialect called “a Galician dialect”. These territories were once part of Poland, before – the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But it doesn’t change the fact that Ukrainians always lived here. Our diversity doesn’t make us “too” different or incompatible. It makes us even more fascinating. I, personally, also speak Polish – for other reasons, however. After the invasion began me and my family fled to Poland as refugees, and I spent an entire year in this truly beautiful country, also being able to study their language. Polish and Ukrainian are surprisingly close – not identical, however. The closest language to ours is Belorussian – we can communicate with each other in our languages without a need for a translator. We’re different, but also so close.

Other attributes of our culture are our dances, clothes and songs. Our traditional wear features an embroidered shirt called “vyshyvanka” – with patterns unique to each region, and to each district inside of them. It’s considered sacred. Nowadays we wear them on special occasions and celebrations. Me and my family obviously brought some of them with us to Canada as an important part of our identity. And I love them – I hope to learn how to sew in order to make my own someday and teach my kids, too. And our dances! There are so many, but the most prominent between all of them is Hopak. Known worldwide, unfortunately often mistaken for a Russian dance. It has lots of very complicated moves performed by the dancers, which require lots of preparation and focus. And, obviously, there are so much more than what I can recall – I can remark on the Arkana dance, however. More familiar to the people of the West of Ukraine, its sounds fascinate and enamour. I love listening to it, even though I am from Central Ukraine. Some time ago only men were allowed to perform it, but nowadays it’s performed both by men and women. Our songs, though! They are beautiful. Remember me telling above that food helps reconnect with your roots? Songs do so too. Oh, how wonderful they are. Some make me tear up and give me goosebumps. The folk motives and what they are about – it makes you feel as a part of something bigger. Of something

significant. A part of you starts to resonate with them on a level much inner and deeper. It is a miracle, or can be considered as something spiritual – it's unexplainable, yet it exists. And the songs are touching, too – written and passed down like everything we now have. They describe different historical periods, up from times when Ukraine – then Kyivan Rus – was not a Christian, but a Pagan country, to our days. And like most of non-material culture, they usually don't have authors and were sang by people who shared their knowledge this way. Our ancestors also sang songs for different seasons – for planting, for harvesting, for good yield that year, for good weather. For celebrations – Christmas, while performing our traditions; for Easter and more.

Ukraine is incredibly diverse. And, obviously, we don't have only Ukrainians living here. Apart from russian, Polish, Jewish, Georgian people and people of other distinct, Crimean Tatars and Karaites live in Ukraine. A wonderful, delightful Turkic nation whose homeland is the Autonomous Republic of Crimea – the Crimean Peninsula. With fascinating traditions, language and history. The last one has unfortunately been soaked in blood – Crimean Tatars were always discriminated against by first russian empire, then USSR, and now russia. Its people have been deported and deprived of their homes several times. The most bloodsome is the deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944 – the Soviet government had “presumed” that Crimean Tatars were helping German soldiers during the occupation, and used it as an excuse to raid their homes, give them short time to take their most important belongings, load them into train carriages and set them on a journey with no way back... Those Crimean Tatars who survived the train ride were deported to the Uzbek, Kazakh, russian SSR, with no ability to ever return – they were banned from their homeland. In the meanwhile, the Soviet government populated the peninsula with russians who had no idea how to take care of the crops under the different climate. If at the beginning of the 18'th century the percentage of Crimean Tatars who lived in Crimea was 95.1%, by 2001 it

dropped to 12.1%... And ever since russia illegally annexed the peninsula in 2014, Crimean Tatars are again experiencing injustice and persecution. Many of them moved from Crimea to Ukraine – as well as Karaites – with their biggest diaspora located in the city of Kharkiv. Crimean Tatars are a very friendly, warm nation, and we also hope that they will soon be able to return home, where their homeland is – and will be able to live there serenely.

I love my culture. I, in fact, praise my culture. It's so dear and important to me – knowing that people and countries tried to alter and erase it, I cherish the way it was preserved and passed down for future generations, part of which I am. I'm thankful for being able to learn and sing folk songs and poetry at school; for being familiar with our poets and historical figures; for knowing and deliberately speaking Ukrainian – not russian, that was imposed in my country forcefully. I would like to know more – to be an expert, so I could teach my future children and people around me. I know that there are lots of misconceptions about both my country and our origins – so I take every chance to be able to express where I belong. It's a paradox – I don't like excessive amounts of attention towards myself, but I love when people pay attention and I can tell them more about our history. I carry our legacy with me, our origins and story in my heart. I know who I am and where I belong the most, and perhaps that's the first and most important fundamental of one's identity. Indeed, I am a person, and I have individuality in my character, traits, behaviour, opinions and looks – but being Ukrainian is a part of my identity. Just like the above mentioned things, but combined, and my heritage.

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