



## VERA NAKONECHNY: my art is my passion

I was born in Germany after the war, in a displaced persons camp, to Ukrainian parents who had been taken from Ukraine to forced labor in Germany. Later on, my parents moved to Brazil, where I grew up. Since my early childhood, I enjoyed working with my hands. Embroidery and art crafts were mandatory subjects in grade school, and I developed a real passion for embroidery. Seeing my interest, my mother talked to me about Ukrainian embroidery patterns and different stitches, particularly recalling a technique where you embroider from the reverse side of the fabric. I was very intrigued and determined to learn this art one day.

When I came to United States

in 1962 and settled in Philadelphia, I continued to embroider and to research the technique my mother had spoken of. I soon found out that the technique was called “nyzynka” and it was from the Hutsul region of Ukraine, in the Carpathian Mountains, the region where she had grown up. I joined the Ukrainian Women’s League of America, Philadelphia branch, which offered a comprehensive course in Ukrainian embroidery. I also found someone to teach me nyzynka—Mrs. Eudokia Sorochaniuk.

Mrs. Sorochaniuk is from the Hutsul region also, and she is a master craftsperson where Hutsul native embroidery, weav-

ing, and folk costume are concerned. She is an authority on nyzynka and is the author of the book *Nyzynka: The Embroidery of the Hutsuls*. She showed me many different folk artifacts from that region—more than I had ever seen: leatherwork, beadwork, and cutwork as well as embroidery and weaving. I fell in love with her mastery and skill, and with the intricate patterns and motifs, colors and styles. I wanted to learn everything that there was to know about it. I wanted to go to Ukraine to visit the region where all this folk art originated.

In 1992, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, when Ukraine became independent, I took my



mother to visit her homeland, her native village, and relatives, after 50 years of separation. During that trip I also took the opportunity to visit the Hutsul region. It was a very exciting and emotional visit. In one of the villages the Hutsuls were having an annual festival, and besides sampling the traditional foods, I had the opportunity to see people wearing different styles of embroidered patterns, with breath-taking color combinations and compositions of old and genuine Hutsul folk costumes.

But speaking with some of the younger Hutsul women, I found out that they didn't know how to embroider with the *nyzynka* technique. During the Soviet occupation the authorities would severely punish you if you were embroidering or weaving traditional ethnic or regional patterns. Their objective was to destroy any Ukrainian art and to create the so-called Soviet art for everyone instead. So much knowledge was lost. That really puzzled me, and upon returning to the States I contacted Mrs. Sorochaniuk for help. She put together a package of embroidered samples of "*nyzynka*" patterns, instruction manuals, and her book and sent all this material to the local Hutsul embroidery guild group back in the Ukraine, and also to teaching institutions in the Hutsul region. Thanks to her actions, there is now a strong rebirth of *nyzynka* embroidery technique among Hutsul people.

I have now made 12 trips to Ukraine, and I have discovered that the embroidery patterns and woven components of the traditional folk costumes from other parts of Ukraine are just as beautiful—colorful, with complicated

motifs—as those from among the Hutsuls, where my mother came from. I was especially intrigued by the "*plachta*" from the Poltava region. The *plachta* is a two-panel skirt, joined together with a specific unification stitch. This pattern and style has not been taught for a long time and was almost forgotten. It was difficult to find someone who knew the techniques. Through personal contacts, I gained access to the Lviv Folk Art Academy in order to learn to weave this skirt.

To my surprise, I found out that the looms and other equipment in the Lviv Museum were very old and outdated. This was in 1993, only two years after Ukraine had become independent. The budget of the old Soviet Ukraine had intentionally neglected the Museum: no funds had been appropriated for new equipment or other basic Museum expenses. The electricity was still rationed, so all the work in the Academy shops had to be done during daylight. When I was there, one day, just as we finished threading the loom, it got dark—all the lights in the building were turned off. But we needed more time to finish the job. So I took a mini-flashlight that I carried in my pocketbook, and that is how we finished the project!


Now Ukraine is in the fifteenth year of independence, and things have improved: the equipment has been replaced or updated, and the museum's electricity and heating have been restored.

I have continued to pursue my studies of Ukrainian folk arts. For the past two years I have been traveling to Ukraine looking for someone who knows a special woven belt technique. It seems that

no one can understand how to make it. I even went to the College of Textiles here in Philadelphia for help, and they also have no idea how this is done. Recently I was told that in two remote villages in the neighboring Ternopil and Bukovyna regions there are some old weavers who still know and use the technique. My plans now are to go to Ukraine, to take with me a small portable loom and the necessary threads, and then to stay in those villages until I master the technique.

For the past 12 years I have been traveling to Ukraine to conduct research on embroidery, weaving, and beadwork in order to further my knowledge of these folk arts and to better understand my ancestors' rich culture. I have been amazed to see the hidden treasures stored in the vaults of every museum I have visited. At the same time, I have been horrified to see the archaic methods used in the battle with the moths! Many irreplaceable artifacts were destroyed by infestations. In my visits, I have shared what I have learned over the years, and I have forged relationships with others equally committed to the preservation of these traditions.

My art is my passion, and I feel a strong need to learn as much as I can about the millennium-old folk culture of my ancestors so I can pass it on to a younger generation. I am so grateful for all that I have gotten: the knowledge, the relationships with artists. We have become one big family, on two sides of the world, puzzling over this art form that was supposed to be lost.



*Vera Nakonechny at a loom. Courtesy of artist. Photos of details of her work: Will Brown.*