

The Ukrainian National Home Association

The need to establish a 'people's' or 'national' home (*narodnyi dim*) - a building with an auditorium, stage and office space, where Winnipeg's Ukrainian cultural-educational societies could store their books and property, hold meetings, lectures and rehearsals, offer Ukrainian heritage classes, stage concerts and plays, and host social events - had been a topic of discussion since the turn of the century. Such institutions had existed in old country towns and cities and in the summer of 1905 an unsuccessful attempt had been made to establish one in a hall erected by the German real estate agent Joseph Edinger at the corner of Selkirk Avenue and McGregor Street. Three years later an attempt to save the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society hall at 467 Manitoba Avenue and Powers Street by transforming it into a 'people's home' also failed. By the fall of 1912 new fire safety bylaws forbidding the staging of plays in wooden halls and the escalating costs of rented premises gave the issue added impetus.



Ukrainian National Home Association members 1914 (UCEC)



Dr A Sushko
(UCEC)

Accordingly, in October 1912, shortly after the demise of the Zaporizka Sich Association, which had renewed the call for a 'people's home,' the Ukrainian National Home Association was established at a meeting held in the Ss Vladimir and Olga parish hall. In March 1913 the new Association held its first general meeting, attended by more the 200 people. Taras Ferley was elected head of the Association (a position he would hold, with rare intervals, for the next 35 years) and members adopted a set of controversial bylaws. These stipulated that only



TD Ferley
(UCEC)

Ukrainians, "regardless of their religious or political views," could become members, and that the property of the Ukrainian National Home Association "shall never

pass under the jurisdiction of any party or sect." An even more pointed article declared that "only laymen may be elected to the Executive." Interpreted as a direct challenge by the Ukrainian Catholic clergy, who feared that exposure to secular and Protestant ideas in non-denominational organizations led by laymen would undermine the faith of their parishioners, the bylaws set the stage for conflict between the founders of the National Home and Catholic leaders. That summer, several lots were purchased for \$5,100 on Selkirk Avenue, between Parr and Arlington Streets, and hopes ran high that "an edifice twice as large as the Jewish [Talmud Torah] school on Flora and Charles" could be erected if all of the city's Ukrainians contributed to the

fund raising campaign. That this would not be the case became very clear after a boisterous general meeting on 31 January 1914. Led by Dr Alexander Sushko, editor of the Ukrainian Catholic weekly *Kanadyyski rusyn* (Canadian Ruthenian), Catholic activists provoked a heated debate in which Sushko condemned the presence of 'sectarians' (Protestants) within National Home ranks and called for a revision of the bylaws, particularly the article excluding members of the clergy from the executive. Although the meeting, which lasted until 5am, ultimately upheld the original bylaws, the Ukrainian Catholic press and clergy became active opponents of the National Home project, obliging the Association's leaders to lower their sights.



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Support for the National Home came from the teachers, students, cultural activists and small businessmen around the staunchly secular, national-populist weekly *Ukrainskyi holos* (Ukrainian Voice) established in 1910. In particular, the three largest drama circles in the city - the resolutely non-denominational Boyan Society, as well as the Maria Zankovetska Educational and Dramatic Society and the Ivan Kotliarevsky Drama Society, both embroiled in acrimonious disputes with the St Nicholas and the Ss Vladimir and Olga Ukrainian Greek Catholic parishes - affiliated with the Association and made generous donations from plays and concerts to the National Home between 1913 and 1916. Student groups, composed of young men who taught in rural

bilingual schools in the spring and summer and attended fall and winter classes at the university, also supported the National Home, as did the Ukrainian Teachers' Organization. In the fall of 1915 the National Home Association organized its first lecture series, held at Jastremsky's hall, and the following summer it held the first of many annual picnics at Lister Park on the Red River, 8 miles north of the city. In the summer of 1916, it also obtained permission from the Winnipeg School Board to hold Ukrainian Heritage School (*ridna shkola*) classes, taught by students of the recently abolished Ruthenian Training School, in Norquay, Strathcona and King Edward Schools, on weekday mornings, during July and August. Children enrolled in the summer classes learned to read, write and sing in Ukrainian, and in August they staged a concert at the Grand Opera House with pupils who attended heritage classes in the Brooklands and at Ss Vladimir and Olga parish.

Finally, in August 1916, after years of sluggish fund raising, the Ukrainian National Home Association abandoned its dreams of building a grand edifice on Selkirk Avenue, and settled for purchasing a much more modest two-storey structure at 582-90 Burrows Avenue and McGregor Street, opposite the Strathcona public school. The new brick building, which cost just under \$20,000, occupied 3 lots, had 25 small rooms on the top floor, and one hall, plus accommodation for five organizations or small enterprises, on the ground floor. While the building satisfied the storage and meeting place needs of more than a dozen community organizations, and afforded ample space for lectures, meetings, heritage classes and rehearsals, the community's desperate need for a theatre remained unfulfilled. Nevertheless, grand opening ceremonies, attended by more than 2,000 people who gathered around the building, many wearing traditional folk costumes or blue and yellow sashes, were held on 24 September 1916. The building was festooned, inside and outside, with Ukrainian and British flags, while portraits of Ukrainian Cossack hetmans (Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Ivan Mazeppa), Ukrainian poets (Taras Shevchenko,

Markiian Shashkevych), and the founders of Ukrainian Radicalism (Mykhailo Drahomanov, Mykhailo Pavluk, Ivan Franko) adorned the walls of the hall. Taras Ferley, Jaroslaw Arsenych, Wasyl Swystun and others representing several local organizations, delivered speeches; someone recited a poem written for the occasion by Semen Kowbel; and Ukrainian, Canadian and British anthems were sung at the conclusion of the ceremony. A banquet attended by members of the three drama circles and reading associations in the Brooklands and Transcona concluded the festivities.



The Ukrainian National Home Association building (UCEC)

The National Home's strength also proved to be its weakness. The three drama circles, which provided the Association with funds and most of its members, remained almost completely focused on their own agendas until 1922, when they finally amalgamated into one Ukrainian National Home Choral and Dramatic Society. In the meantime, the burden of planning and carrying out programs and activities unrelated to the theatre, fell on the shoulders of the Association's executive. As a result, the fall and winter lecture series, and Ukrainian heritage

classes, offered daily during the summer vacations when up to 90 children attended, and two or three evenings a week during the school year when 50 to 60 attended, became the mainstays of cultural-educational activity at the National Home. Other activity was sporadic. In 1916-17, English-language classes, taught by university graduates Orest Zerebko and George Richardson, were offered; a **Ukrainian Women's Educational Society** (*Ukrainske prosvitne zhinoche tovarystvo*), which worked with children, offered embroidery classes, and organized social events, including dances, masquerades and picnics, was established in December 1916, but seems to have faltered after a few years; a library open to the general public two evenings and one afternoon each week was launched by the Boyan Society in 1918 but also expired after a year or two; and a second women's organization, the Women's Assembly (*Zhinocha hromada*), was established in 1922, only to falter and be replaced by the **Lesia Ukrainka Women's Association** in 1926.

The Association's finances remained precarious well into the 1920s. Although the National Home claimed over 300 individual dues-paying members and almost 20 affiliated cultural organizations by 1919, two years later it was still saddled with a debt of more than \$17,500 and interest payments of \$1440 annually just to service the debt. As few local Ukrainians were prepared to make donations, ambitious plans to raise \$50,000 for cultural and educational work all across Canada had been dropped soon after the building on Burrows was purchased. A more successful initiative was the establishment, in November 1921, of the **Ukrainian Relief Association** (*Vzaimna Pomich*), a fraternal sickness and death benefit society affiliated with the National

Home and open to all Ukrainians, 16 to 45 years of age, irrespective of religious and political views. The Relief Association obtained a Dominion charter in February 1925 and by 1928 it had 843 members (including 540 in Winnipeg) in 22 branches all across Canada.



Ukrainian National Home Heritage School pupils with teacher Mykhailo Kumka 1928 (UCEC)

After the three drama circles amalgamated in 1922, cultural activity became more diversified. The newly amalgamated Choral and Dramatic Society, with a wardrobe and sets valued at over \$5,000, staged 10 plays and 2 concerts in 1922. The Association's 2,000 volume library was reactivated and accessed by more than 100 members on a regular basis. The 1922-3 lecture series featured 20 local speakers and was well attended. A Ukrainian National Home orchestra, conducted by Petro Yundak, formerly musical director with the Maria Zankovetska Educational and Dramatic Society, made its debut in February 1923. And the April 1923 Shevchenko commemorative concert, which featured the Ukrainian National Home Chorus conducted by Maksim Pasichniak, as well as vocal soloists, poetry recitations, and speakers, was attended by Premier Bracken and Dr MR Blake, the MP for North Winnipeg. The Chorus was especially successful, and earned a reputation as one of the best choirs in the city in 1928-9 when, under the direction of Professor Eugene Turula, it staged 4 successful concerts in major downtown venues. In spite of these achievements, the absence of an auditorium and stage in the National Home meant that performances by National Home choral, dramatic and orchestral groups were always held in rented facilities - primarily at the Queen's Theatre, the Ukrainian Labour Temple (1919-21), and the Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita,' but also in the Palace, Playhouse and Metropolitan theatres, where many of the choral concerts were staged. This wasted valuable financial resources and ultimately inhibited the Association's growth and expansion.



Ukrainian National Home Association choir with Prof Yevhen Turula 1926-7 (UCEC)

-- Orest T. Martynowych

Books

Semen Kovbel and Dmytro Doroshenko, *Propamiatna knyha Ukrainskoho narodnoho domu u Vynypegu* (Winnipeg: Ukrainskyi narodnyi dim u Vynypegu, 1949).

Orest T. Martynowych, *Ukrainians in Canada: The Formative Years, 1891-1924* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, University of Alberta, 1991).