The Ukrainian Reading Association 'Prosvita' (Tovarystvo Chytalni Prosvity) traced its origins to 1903 when a group of parishioners at St Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic church organized a reading club that met in private homes. The Association was formally established in January 1905 on the initiative of Mykola Hladky, Peter Ruta, Andrew Bilenky and several other parishioners. At the time, the Association only admitted parishioners of St Nicholas, and Father Matei Hura OSBM, the pastor, became its first chairman. For a while members met in the 'small' church that had been converted into a parish hall in 1905 after the construction of the new, 'large' St Nicholas church, and then in the first short-lived 'people's home' (narodnyi dim) at the corner of Selkirk Avenue and McGregor Street. During these early years a drama circle was organized and several plays were staged in the basement of the new church and in the ‘people's home.’ By 1907 both of these facilities were no longer available and the Association began moving from one locale to another. From 1907 until 1910, as its headquarters moved from a private residence at 621 Stella Avenue, to rented premises at 214 Dufferin Avenue, to Jastremsky's hall at 85 McGregor Street, and finally into the basement of St Nicholas church, the association was relatively dormant, although it continued to order books from Lviv and stage the occasional concert. Father Atanazii Fylypiv, pastor of St Nicholas from 1907 until 1933, urged the Association to become more active and provided space in the basement of his church and later in St Nicholas School (1910-13), but his efforts to control and supervise all of its activities caused much internal discord. Youthful members of the Reading Association's talented and very active drama circle (subsequently known as the Maria Zankovetska Educational and Dramatic Society) were alienated to such an extent that they abandoned the Association and the parish in 1912, taking with them the Association's library and about $100 awarded to the drama circle after a bitter legal battle.

In 1913 the Association resumed its migratory ways, moving, once again, to the private home at 621 Stella for just over two years, relocating to Jastremsky's hall for a second time during the winter of 1916-17, and finally renting a building at 671 Dufferin Avenue and McKenzie Street in October 1917. Despite these peregrinations, a new drama circle was established and started staging plays in January 1914, with some of the proceeds earmarked for flood and famine victims in eastern Galicia. In 1916, a choir was formed under the direction of Peter Ruta, and the following year, a wind orchestra made up of woodwinds and brass was established at the urging of Nicholas Dziombryk, the parish cantor. A used organ and 28 wind instruments were purchased, the costs being divided among the association, the parish and individual musicians. A women's circle (zhinochyi amatorskyi hurtok), only the second
secular Ukrainian women's organization in the city, was established in November 1917 to embroider and sew stage costumes, popularize Ukrainian dances, organize receptions and social functions, and promote education among women, children and youth. The library was slowly rebuilt, until it offered a selection of 360 books and 9 newspapers. During the first half of 1918, the Association staged 2 plays, held 2 social dances, organized 2 excursions, sponsored 6 literary evenings, and the orchestra performed at various parish and community functions no fewer than 22 times; 53 new members joined, bringing the total dues-paying membership to 289.

A major turning point in the Association's history occurred late in January 1919 when recently demobilized, unemployed Great War veterans vented their fury on the city's 'alien' population with two days of unprovoked rioting. On 26 January, a mob of war veterans that had roamed the streets of Point Douglas and the North End looting stores and restaurants that belonged to 'foreigners,' sacked the premises of the Ukrainian Reading Association 'Prosvita.' Within ten minutes all of the windows in the building were broken; the organ, furniture, and bookshelves were flung into the street; clarinets, trumpets and other musical instruments were smashed; and the drama circle's wardrobe was destroyed. Damage totalled $1,500 but the Association recovered nothing and in June, the owner evicted the Association from the building. Unable to replace the damaged instruments, the Association cut its ties with the orchestra (which managed to survive as a private venture).

At this point, led by Peter Ruta, Sava Andrusiak, and the playwright Dmytro Hunkevych, the executive decided that the Association had to have a building of its own. In November 1919, a small house was purchased at 653 Flora Avenue for $2,000. Simultaneously, the Association launched Ukrainian literacy classes for illiterate adults, and Ukrainian heritage classes (ridna shkola) for about 30 to 50 children who learned to read and write in Ukrainian, and in subsequent years also studied Ukrainian geography, history and grammar. By 1920, the Association also had children's and youth circles to complement the women's circle. Determined to provide its members and the younger generation with an attractive and functional venue for the Association's activities, the executive purchased a lot at the north western corner of Flora Avenue and McKenzie Street in March 1921. Three months later, on 25 June 1921, construction commenced on a 40 foot wide, 100 foot long, and 14 foot high, brick building, with an auditorium, a stage, two rooms on the ground floor near the entrance, an upstairs gallery that doubled as a library and classroom, and a backstage area. Built almost entirely by volunteer labour, with the cost of building materials covered by personal loans negotiated by eight members, the new Ukrainian Reading Association 'Prosvita' hall at 667 Flora Avenue was completed on 10 September 1921. Valued at just under $20,000 it was formally opened to the public on 9 October with festive ceremonies that included a concert prepared by the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate and the students of St Nicholas School, which was located on the opposite side of the same street corner. Four days later, the Sisters and their students staged a
second concert in the hall, this time in honour of Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, who was on the Canadian leg of his post war tour of Ukrainian Catholic communities in North and South America.

By the mid-1920s, the Association was one of the most important Ukrainian cultural-educational institutions in the city. It sponsored a Ukrainian Heritage School, attended by 50 pupils annually and taught by university student Constantine Andrusyshen, a fine public speaker and frequent lecturer at concerts commemorating Ukrainian literary figures, who would become Canada's first professor of Slavic languages and literatures. Although its drama circle, directed by Paul Tesliuk, had become less active, producing only two to four plays annually, the Association had an active mixed choir, which grew out of a quartet organized by Andrusyshen in 1923. In 1925-6 the choir was conducted by Professor Eugene Turula, and when he left Andrusyshen assumed responsibility. During the 1920s, the Association staged numerous concerts, including musical recitals featuring instrumental groups and soloists like the talented young violinist Taras Hubicki. In May 1926, the Association sponsored the city's first Ukrainian folk dancing course, taught by Mykhailo Darkovych a year before his mentor Vasile Avramenko first taught in Winnipeg. Efforts to introduce programs calculated to appeal to Canadian-born and -educated youth met with resistance, however. When the Association's 24 year-old chairman, Wolodymyr Koman, who had been raised and educated in Canada, organized a baseball team for boys in 1923, he was accused of trampling on Ukrainian national traditions by introducing 'Canadian-style' athletic activities. Traditionalists demanded the Association's athletic program be patterned on the activities of the old country 'Sich,' which had stressed gymnastics, rhythmic exercises, tumbling and drill. After calling his detractors retrograde "Galicians," Koman resigned, although time would prove that he had been right. In 1926, he became one of the founders of the Canadian Ukrainian Athletic Club (CUAC), a North End institution that was headquartered in the Ukrainian Reading Association 'Prosvita' hall from 1927 to 1937, and produced some of the city's finest men's and women's baseball and softball teams for almost 50 years. Koman met with greater success in 1927, when he proposed a sickness and death benefit society for Association members that offered $5 weekly sickness benefits and a $250 death benefit. Eighty-five joined immediately, and the society survived for more than 30 years.
The Association's relations with the St Nicholas parish and the Ukrainian Catholic church also changed during the 1920s. When the Association applied for and received a provincial charter in 1921, all formal ties with St Nicholas parish were cancelled, although the Association was still identified as a Ukrainian Catholic organization. While Bishop Budka and several priests, including Father Fylypiv, blessed the cornerstone beneath the hall built in 1921, and attended many events in the new edifice, relations with the clergy were often strained. In particular, they deteriorated in 1925-6 when the Association engaged Professor Turula, a defrocked Ukrainian Catholic priest, to serve as its choir director, and when some members of the Association expressed their opposition to the imposition of compulsory clerical celibacy on candidates entering the Ukrainian Catholic priesthood in the old country. However, in spite of such tensions, it was still possible to iron out misunderstandings. When Bishop Basil Ladyka succeeded Bishop Budka in 1929, the Ukrainian Reading Association 'Prosvita' organized social functions to raise money for the construction of an elegant new episcopal residence on Scotia Street. On the eve of the Depression, most members of the Association still belonged to St Nicholas parish and attended services in the church.
Books and articles

