

The Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita'

The expansion of cultural-educational activity under the aegis of secular societies, in particular the emergence of the staunchly non-denominational and anti-clerical Ukrainian National Home Association, goaded the Ukrainian Catholic clergy and devout laymen into action during the war years. On 28 August 1916, a few months after providing the impetus for the formation of the Bandurist Choral and Dramatic Society at Ss Vladimir and Olga Ukrainian Catholic parish,



**Fr Mykola Olenchuk
(UCEC)**

Father Mykola Olenchuk and his parishioners resolved to establish the Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita,' an institution that would provide a theatre and accommodation for a variety of Ukrainian Catholic organizations. Four lots were purchased on the north western corner of Pritchard Avenue and Arlington Street in December 1916, a series of concerts and plays were staged by parish children and the Bandurist Society to promote the project, and a Dominion charter was obtained for the Institute. The project stalled, however, as construction was repeatedly postponed because of internal disputes, wartime impediments to fund raising, the influenza epidemic, anti-alien riots led by returning soldiers, and the Winnipeg General Strike. Not until September 1920, when Father Olenchuk returned to Winnipeg, did the project begin to gather steam once again. Money was raised through the sale of bonds, an architect drew up the building plans, and in July 1921 contractors were hired to begin construction. In September several thousand witnessed the placement and blessing of the cornerstone at a ceremony attended by Ukrainian Catholic Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky of Lviv. When the 76 foot wide and 106 foot long building at 777 Pritchard Avenue was finally opened to the public on 22 January 1922, only the ground floor and the large sunken

auditorium with its very spacious stage had been finished. The building would not be completed for more than 40 years.



Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita' from Selkirk Avenue and Arlington Street (UCEC)

Ironically, the Bandurist Choral and Dramatic Society, which lacked an able choir conductor and stage director, expired shortly after the Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita,' hall opened. For about two years most of the concerts and plays staged in the Institute 'Prosvita' auditorium were produced by choirs and drama circles affiliated with the Ukrainian National Home Association,

the Ukrainian Student Circle and most other local cultural-educational organizations. Indeed, the Ukrainian Labour Temple's policy of prohibiting anti-Soviet plays and banning drama circles that produced such plays from its stage, made the Institute 'Prosvita,' with its large new auditorium and stage, the preferred venue for virtually all of the city's non-communist Ukrainian choral, orchestral and dramatic productions. It also became the site of countless political meetings, including every variety of gathering from municipal election rallies to protests against the violation of Ukrainian minority rights in East European successor states. The only new organization established at the Institute 'Prosvita' during these years was the **Princess Olga Ukrainian Women's Association** founded in September 1923 on Father Olenchuk's initiative. Members of the Association visited the sick in hospitals, staged plays, organized picnics and dances, and worked with children. The Association grew from 29 to 130 members during its first two years.



Dominion Day float 1924 (UCEC)

The Canadian Ukrainian Institute "Prosvita" began to realize its potential as a cultural-educational institution in 1924 after the arrival of Professor Eugene Turula, an ordained Ukrainian Catholic priest and a trained and accomplished musician, arranger and choral conductor, most recently employed as an instructor at one of the musical conservatories in Berlin. Early in 1924, Turula organized the 'Canada Chorus' (*Khor 'Kanada'*), composed of the best Ukrainian male and female singers in the city, many of them Institute

"Prosvita" members, and held rehearsals in the Institute's new hall. The choir made its debut in March 1924 at a recital in the Board of Trade Building, where Alexander Koshetz and the Ukrainian National Chorus had awed Winnipeg music lovers a few months earlier. Turula's choir was an instant success with mainstream critics and was soon performing at various events



**Prof Yevhen Turula
(UCEC)**

throughout the city, including the June 1924 celebrations marking Winnipeg's fiftieth anniversary. The choir and the Institute also won a prize for one of the best floats in the anniversary parade. Success was short lived, however, as Turula was defrocked in 1925 (for marrying after ordination in a Lutheran ceremony) and became *persona non grata* in Ukrainian Catholic circles. The remnants of the choir were reorganized as the Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita' Chorus, which performed in the hall on Sunday evenings and participated in plays and operettas staged by the Institute's drama circle, which was established in 1926. That year the chorus also performed 8 times at the annual Winnipeg Industrial Exhibition, and at a reception for American visitors sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce in the Agricultural College auditorium. Major performances at celebrations marking Canada's Diamond Jubilee in Assiniboine Park, and at a reception for an international gathering of agricultural scientists followed in 1927. In April 1928, the Institute 'Prosvita' and its chorus hosted a recital of popular opera arias and Ukrainian folk songs featuring the internationally celebrated Ukrainian soprano Salomea Krushelnyska, who had

been the first successful interpreter of Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* some twenty-five years earlier. This was followed by participation in the New Canadian Folksong and Handicraft Festival and at a Kiwanis Club festival in River Park. In addition to choral concerts and plays, by the late 1920s the Institute 'Prosvita' also organized popular vaudeville nights, which reflected the growing influence of North American popular culture, as did its screenings of Hollywood movies on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings.



Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita' drama circle 1926 (UCEC)

-- Orest T. Martynowych

Books and articles

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

Vinnipezhets, "Muzyka i spiv mizh Ukraintsiamy v Kanadi," *Kaliendar Kanadiiskoho farmera* (Winnipeg, 1929).

"Khor Instytutu Prosvity u Vinnipeg," *Kaliendar Kanadiiskoho farmera* (Winnipeg, 1932).