

UNIQUE COLLECTION OF BELARUSIAN COSTUMES PUBLICLY VIEWABLE FOR THE FIRST TIME

Catalogue of restored traditional Belarusian costumes late 19th - early 20th centuries ***Collection of Seattle Folk Group VOLYA***

Seattle resident Volya Dzemka and her musical group VOLYA own one of the largest private collections of authentic Belarusian women's costumes in the world outside of Belarus. This collection of sixteen complete sets from the late 19th century until the early 20th century, which has never been exhibited, can now be seen by the public in a 50-page full-color catalogue.

The 79 pieces of clothing and accessories, dating from the 1880s to the 1940s, have been categorized by region. Of the six historically ethnographic regions in Belarus five are represented in the catalogue: Western and Eastern Palesse, Paniamonne, Padniaprou'e and Central Belarus. The colorful, handmade costumes, which show the richness of Belarusian culture, were collected over more than a decade and reconstructed by hand using old photos by Dzemka, a Belarus-born singer/ethnographer/video producer who has lived in Seattle since 2004, and the members of her Folk Group VOLYA (meaning "freedom").

They inherited pieces of clothing from their family members and acquired other ones through international online auctions such as eBay and Etsy. Belarusian folk singers from Belarusian villages were also happy to donate costume pieces during the ethnographic expeditions the singers undertook to their homeland this past decade to record vanishing Belarusian folk songs – a project Dzemka immortalized in the award-winning documentary *The Songs of Old Europe – Ancient Belarusian Folk Songs*, the first ever English-language documentary about Belarusian folk songs.

Behind each costume and accessory is a unique story and some are explained in the catalogue. One example is a rare apron from the village of Biezdezh, where women were supposed to have twelve aprons – one for each month. All sets in the collection are holiday clothing and were only worn during major holidays, weddings or church services. The clothes were handmade using centuries-old technologies and are embroidered with symbols of Belarusian history and culture. During the restoration process, Dzemka and her group received help from master weavers and embroiderers in the city of Minsk and expert Belarusian belt makers, considered artists in their home country.

For VOLYA, the catalogue is part of their work to preserve the unique and endangered Belarusian culture. For the past twelve years, the group has also been performing traditional Belarusian songs, dating back to pre-Christian and medieval times, for audiences in the U.S. The collection and restoration of authentic Belarusian costumes happens through their Nonprofit Charitable Organization VOLYA Group and Center for Research, Collection, and Restoration of Material and Nonmaterial Belarusian Culture.

Project website: volya.weebly.com/costumes

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