

UNIQUE COLLECTION OF HISTORIC BELARUSIAN COSTUMES NOW PUBLISHED

Folk Costumes of Belarus – album of traditional Belarusian costumes late 19th - mid-20th century curated and restored by Seattle Folk Group VOLYA

Seattle resident Volya Dzemka and her musical group VOLYA (meaning freedom) own one of the largest private collections of authentic Belarusian folk costumes in the world, outside of Belarus. This collection of 35 complete sets (32 women's, 3 men's) from the late 19th century to mid-20th century, which has never been exhibited, has now been published in an eye-catching full-color album of 140 pages.

All the photos in the album were made by Dzemka, a Belarus-born fashion photographer and filmmaker who has lived in Seattle since 2002 and works freelance for the Gates Foundation. She and her co-members collected the colorful, handmade costumes that show the richness of Belarusian culture over more than a decade and reconstructed them manually. The 234 pieces of clothing and accessories have been categorized by region. All the six historically ethnographic regions in Belarus are represented in the collection: Western Palesse, Eastern Palesse, Paniamonne, Paazer'e, Padniaprou'e, and Central Belarus.

The historical and cultural importance of the collection is emphasized by the current war Russia has started in Ukraine. Although Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko is an ally of Russia, he is considered an illegitimate president who is not recognized by the U.S. and the E.U. Belarus won its hard-fought independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 after a tragic history in which its population received the same message from Russian leaders as the Ukrainian people: Belarus was not a real country, Belarusians were not a separate people, and they did not have their own culture.

"I want to show the people of Belarus – and the rest of the world – the true value of their country," Dzemka says. She and other VOLYA members inherited pieces of clothing from their family members and acquired other ones through international online auctions on eBay and Etsy. Folk singers from Belarusian villages were also happy to donate costume pieces during the ethnographic expeditions Dzemka undertook to her homeland to record vanishing Belarusian folk songs – a project she immortalized in the award-winning documentary *The Songs of Old Europe – Ancient Belarusian Folk Songs*, the first English-language documentary ever made about this topic.

Behind each costume and accessory is a unique story and several of these stories are told in the catalog. All sets in the collection are intended for special occasions, only to be worn during 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 invaluable help from Belarusian master weavers, embroiderers, experts in paper modeling, and belt makers, considered artists in their country.

For VOLYA, the album is part of their mission to preserve the unique and endangered Belarusian culture. Since 2009, the group has also been performing traditional songs, dating back to pre-Christian and medieval times, for audiences in the U.S. The collection and restoration of 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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