

Smilovichi surprises with rich content

Urban settlement located 30km from Minsk is one of oldest in Belarus

By Lyudmila Minkevich

Several legends abound locally regarding how the town gained its name. According to one, brave and skilful hunters and fishers once lived there, called 'smelye lovtsy' (bold catchers) by their neighbours. Another legend tells us that the first to arrive was a bold young boy, nicknamed Smelki. Was it really necessary to be courageous to build your home there? Some say that the Tatars troubled the area while others recollect a terrible cemetery, which prevented people from settling on the banks of the River Volma. In the 15th century, Smilovichi became known as Bakshty, belonging to the Bakshtansky family, but was later owned by the noble clans of Keizgailo, Sapegi, Zavishi, Ogiński, Moniuszko and Vankovich. One of the Ogińskis — Marcjan — returned the settlement to its former title in the 17th century, also constructing a castle, surrounded by embankments and strongholds.

No traces of such magnificent architecture remain, although the castle inspired the construction of a palace estate in the 19th century; the remains are visible in the suburbs of the park in Smilovichi. Since the time of Polish and Belarusian composer Stanisław Moniuszko, who laid the first foundation stone of the new palace, rare black pines, silver maples and firs have been growing there...

The presence of a huge birch tree, which would now reach the roof of the former palace, shows that celebrations have been absent for many decades. However, there was a time when its terrace brought together famous noblemen to drink coffee. Napoleon Orda danced the polka and mazurka in its spacious halls, while artist Valenty Vankovich created a gallery of portraits. Composer Stanisław Moniuszko was inspired to write his prominent *Haunted Manor* there.

Pleasingly, the first steps have been taken to restore the estate; several years ago, an international volunteer camp began work, bringing together students from Belgium, France

and Portugal. They joined their peers from Smilovichi Agrarian College (to whom the palace now belongs). Last year, Smilovichi palace and park estate was awarded the status of a monument of national importance. We can hope that the palace won't be lost forever.

At present, 18 nationalities peacefully reside in Smilovichi, including Georgians, Tatars, Bashkirs, Arme-

brews. Residents attend an Orthodox church, a Roman Catholic chapel, an Evangelical church and a Muslim mosque — one of eight in Belarus. Many mixed families exist, living and loving in harmony.

Yuri Maslak arrived in Smilovichi from Ukraine 35 years ago to launch new equipment at a tan-yard. He stayed on, after marrying a local young girl called Galina. Now, Yuri's

You can immediately imagine how the French elite and members of the Parisian school gathered here some hundred years ago. Though unknown at the time, they became outstanding artists: Picasso, Chagall, Modigliani and their friend Chaïm Soutine. The latter was the tenth child of a poor Jewish family in the small Belarusian village of Smilovichi. From early childhood, he was

sistance from UNESCO in February 2008. Talented young artists are thus supported on their journey.

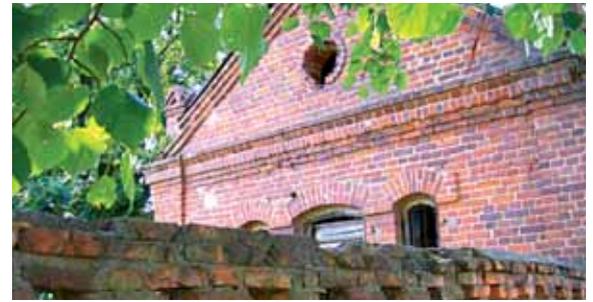
Ivan Yaroshevich can speak about Smilovichi endlessly. An historian by education and a local researcher in his soul, he occupies the post of school director and has written plenty of articles on local history. Now, he has a new goal — to 'reveal' the surnames of Smilovichi and neighbouring villages.

Like the sea, he constantly 'spews' ideas and initiatives. At the 140th anniversary of Smilovichi school, he promised to open a museum and has done. Anyone who visits can now see 300 year old grindstones, weaving looms, pots and letters from soldiers, sent from the frontline. Mr. Yaroshevich doesn't lock the museum, placing exhibits in the school's entrance hall — to everyone's delight.

Mr. Yaroshevich is also a poet. As a pupil, he heard from his teacher that his native village had been described by famous Belarusian writer Yakub Kolas in his trilogy *At the Crossroads*. He was so astonished that he began to write himself. Unfortunately, Mr. Yaroshevich's first collection, edited by poet Konstantin Turko, was never released; fire destroyed all his notebooks of verse. However, in 2005, his *Berry of Life* collection appeared, containing verses, poems and rhyming aphorisms.

"I want to delight people with my verses," admits Mr. Yaroshevich. "I've dedicated a poem to my wife and a verse to each of my daughters. It's wonderful to make people happy."

Mr. Yaroshevich also collects ancient coins, historical documents and books, and is keen on beekeeping and carpentry. It sometimes seems that he's good at everything. It's always pleasant to meet him and see Smilovichi, which holds so many memories, events and mysteries in its palm. The town is like a vinaigrette — original and delicate.



Historical traces of Smilovichi



Chaïm Soutine Museum in Smilovichi opened with assistance from UNESCO

nians, Moldovans, Poles and Lithuanians. Tatarskaya Sloboda once occupied the major part of Smilovichi, while the Tatars began to settle in the outskirts in the 15th-16th century. For a long time, Smilovichi was a typical Jewish settlement, with Jewish families accounting for 70 percent of residents in the 19th century. However, 2,000 Jews, a significant portion, were shot during WW2, in Solomyanka gully. A monument to the tragedy stands there today, surrounded by quietly rustling lime trees, planted by villagers to honour the dead.

Smilovichi is a wonderful place, with Christian cemeteries neighbouring those of Muslims and He-

children have grown; he even has a grandson — Denis. He doesn't miss his homeland too greatly, as there are so many Ukrainians in Smilovichi.

"We often get together to chat and sing in our native language," notes Mr. Maslak. "My wife has learnt to cook Ukrainian dishes and, sometimes, she can even prepare Tatar dishes for us; our neighbours have taught her."

A mysterious coffee aroma fills the air, alongside a beautiful French melody. I enter in, guided by Svetlana Khasenevich, a training specialist from Smilovichi's House of Children's Creative Activity. The atmosphere is so Parisian — like a café, featuring pictures and easels...

keen on drawing — unallowable for Hebrews. Despite all obstacles, he gradually achieved his desire, studying at Kruger's School of Drawing. He then spent three years in Vilnius and finally arrived in Paris. His years of suffering, wandering, hunger and disease shaped his work, forming expressive, insane and hurricane-like pictures. These now sell for millions of Dollars at auction and are known worldwide. The lucky owners of his masterpieces include Isabella Rossellini, the Chaplin family, publisher Galimard, the descendants of Chagall and Francis Ford Coppola.

The House of Children's Creative Activity now houses the Chaïm Soutine Museum, opened with as-

National diversity helps find common language

By Viktor Korbut

Some good news has come from Vilnius. Firstly, a memorial plaque has been unveiled on the facade of the former Belarusian gymnasium

The plaque honours Roman Catholic priest Adam Stankevich, who was an enlightener and supporter of the national school. Secondly, the Centre for Belarusian Language, Literature and Ethnoculture at the Lithuanian capital's Pedagogical University has recently celebrated its 20th anniversary. The

Centre was opened during the hardest days for Lithuania and Belarus — in 1991 — launching the revival of Belarusian cultural life in Vilnius.

In the 1990s, two Lithuanian schools were set up in the Grodno Region: one state run in Rymdyuny and one private in Pelyasa. 120 children attend — a modest figure; however, all the youngsters desire to study in Lithuanian and the state has ensured this right for them.

It's no wonder that Belarus enjoys such ethnic, religious and racial harmony, as solutions are found before problems arise. Igor

Popov, the Head of the Grodno Regional Executive Committee's Department for Religions and Nationalities, can easily list dozens of events organised jointly with the Union of Poles in Belarus and the Lithuanian community. Every year, district and regional contests of poetry and writing are held, featuring Polish language experts. Meanwhile, libraries have special national literature funds. Festivals such as *Avgustovsky Canal in Culture of Three Nations*, *Polonaise* (in Slonim) and the European Basketball Championship for Lithuanian



Lithuanian and Belarusian language commonly heard in Gervyaty

communities are also organised.

Our neighbouring countries are attentively following our handling of national diversity, learning from our experience. In Vilnius, there is the Belarusian language school (named after Frantsisk Skorina and attended by 120 children). In June, the Voronovo District is to host a sitting of a joint Belarusian-Lithuanian com-

mission overseeing school issues, which last met a year ago in Vilnius.

In Poland, three thousand boys and girls are learning Belarusian written and spoken language through additional classes: at schools, gymnasiums and lyciums. Meanwhile, 520 children study through the medium of Polish at two schools: in Grodno and Volkovysk.