

Connections between times are apparent

About history and geography, touching provincial charm and spirit of the past

By Lidia Taifunova

“We have very beautiful scenery and a quiet town. Although we can’t match the scale of the late 19th-early 20th century (when we boasted over 50 industrial enterprises: brick manufacturing, breweries, craft workshops and small stores) we are developing successfully,” notes Alexander Kachan, the Chairman of the Disna City Executive Committee.

“Our level of unemployment is the lowest in the district. The next tasks include rebuilding infrastructure. Roads, as well as roofs and facades of old buildings, should be brought to order. We also need to solve the issue of purifying facilities and the river bank should be developed.”

Walking along cobble and stone paved streets, I can’t but admire how this small town has preserved the spirit of the past.

“Famous Russian traveller Semenov-Tyan-Shansky once called Disna the best town in the Vilnya Province. If you have any doubts, just ask our old-timers, like Fadey Shimunovich — the father of Yelena Balash, the Director of the Crafts House. He’s been studying local history for some time, like many others, and will happily tell you about the past. Several cultures are intertwined here: Jewish, Polish, Belarusian and Latvian,” explains Mr. Kachan. They say that Disna was also partially designed by German architect Hedemann.

He’s certainly right. One beautifully illustrated booklet notes that Disna is benefiting from its location and history. Once, kings and dukes walked its streets — not just merchants and craftsmen. Patriarch Tikhon served in Disna for seven years; the snow-white walls of the Holy Resurrection

Church still keep his memory.

The former district branch of the Guardianship of Sobriety is located in the town’s historical centre. Before the revolution, a buffet operated on the first floor and a club on the second. In 1911, a drama company performed there, directed by Ignaty Buinitsky: Belarus’ first professional theatre. The building housed a cinema and local crafts house in Soviet times and is now undergoing major repairs. Those involved hope that its aura of creativity will continue; they all plan to return once the renovations are complete.

Disna masters have easily settled into their new studios and the seven hobby clubs (three for adults and four for children) enjoy great popularity. You can learn the art of straw weaving, soft toy making, embroidery and tapestry, knitting and patchwork.

“Our major task is to pre-

style of embroidery: blue, red and black gamma. It’s similar to that found in the Baltics. We’ve recreated it and are going to embroider items in the same style for the *Slavonic Bazaar*.”

Ms. Balash lays true handmade treasures on the table: napkins, table cloths, beaded items and patchwork bed covers. “As you see, we use everything. We take fabric pieces and yarn waste from our local branch of Vitebchanka Production Association, which exports some of its goods. We promote forgotten crafts at exhibitions and love taking part in competitions. The next one is a quilting event, organised in Polotsk: *Connecting Tie of Centuries*. It’s wonderful to see patch-working in fashion again, as you can really let your imagination soar.

“What are these cheerful dolls standing near the tea-cosies? They don’t look like samovar dolls,” I enquire. “They’re



Town named after the River Disna



Old buildings remind us of Disna’s past

fore. It’s no surprise that foreign tourists rarely return home without these souvenirs.”

Time flies in the company of these skilled women and their cheerful handicrafts. Everywhere I go, I see evidence of their love for their wonderful town, whose history began 445 years ago. Its fortress protected the water route to Polotsk, which stands on an island, where two rivers meet.

I’m told: “The Island is named Zamkovy (castle); it still has an embankment and ruins. A small lake nearby continues to attract those searching for legendary Napoleonic treasure. Do you know why a floating boat is depicted on Disna’s coat of arms?”

I’ve already heard about the sails and ropes once manufactured here, which were popular all over Europe. It can be no accident that this small town was the birth place of Stefan Grinevsky — father of the famous writer Alexander Grin, who wrote *Scarlet Sails*, a romantic sea tale. According to legend, a 15th century miraculous Icon of the Mother of God — the Hodegetria — sailed to Disna along the Zapadnaya



The Holly Resurrection Church

Dvina River by boat.

Local residents well remember the time when their picturesque town was a ‘cinematographic Mecca’; its scenery is suitable for historical epics and fairy-tales. Outstanding actors such as Vyacheslav Tikhonov, Irina Alferova and Lyudmila Chursina have shot here. “I also appeared in a film,” smiles Ms. Balash. “I was paid five Roubles per day to take part in a crowd scene, alongside many others.”

“Film directors and cameramen were keen on our ancient square. It’s now been renovated,

with a new road surface, which has, unfortunately, affected its touching provincial charm,” notes Olga Shestak, who teaches embroidery and knitting. “However, you can see its previous appearance in several films, set in Great Patriotic War times.”

I admire the square and then walk on towards the hundred year old bridge — the calling card of Belarus’ smallest town. There’s an old-fashioned ferry boat and the most beautiful sunset, which mysteriously reflects on the smooth surface of the Zapadnaya Dvina River.



Guides show the way to interesting sites of Disna

serve our traditions and pass them on to the younger generation,” explains Ms. Balash. “Each summer, we join other schoolchildren in exploring neighbouring villages, studying folk art. We recently found two rushniks in Disna’s unique

our most popular souvenirs — made locally,” explain employees of the Crafts House, smiling in pleasure. “The doll is called Disnyanka-siskovushka. Are you laughing? It’s a folk name. The ‘voluptuous advantage’ of our Disnyanka is always to the

Alternatives suggested for those with disputes

By Andrey Kolnitsky

First permanent arbitration court set up in Gomel Region, allowing organisations and citizens to settle disputes

The Gomel Regional Union of Employers, uniting the 43 largest enterprises, which employ

73,000 people, has founded the Alternative Arbitration Court. In all likelihood, members of the union will be the first to use the new mechanism.

Judges are to be selected depending on the specific nature of a dispute — from nine experienced lawyers and specialists, including

The MT’s reference:

Arbitration courts aren’t part of the judicial system yet their decisions are legally binding. The first such court in the country — Novopolotsk’s arbitration chamber — was set up in March. One of its founders is Polotsk State University. Arbitration courts also function in Grodno and Lida and more are to appear in each region.

those employed by member enterprises. Both sides should agree their trust in the chosen judges and agree

to abide by their decision.

Lyudmila Bukhmanova, the Deputy Chair of the Gomel Regional Union of

Employers, is confident that this alternative should relieve the existing burden. “It often happens that ar-

bitration of economic disputes is easier, quicker and cheaper, as costs are lower for complainants and defendants. Of course, the court aims to reach amicable agreements.”

Arbitration courts are to be founded in the Gomel, Mozyr and Zhlobin districts.