

Still fibres in weaving looms

Anna Shevtsova, 83, is sharing hand-woven 4m long red-and-white embroidered rushnik napkins with the public. Some are as old as their owner.



Kolya Kulikov masters basics of ancient profession at Neglyubka Weaving Centre

By Dmitry Umpirovich

Anya's mother used to weave on a wooden spinning wheel. Now, the wonderful items she created in the last century are drawing hundreds of visitors, who are happy to pay money to view them. In our 21st century world, her rushniks are a cultural treasure. On show at the UN headquarters and at the American Metropolitan, in New York, Montreal, Tokyo, Paris and Brussels, her skilfully embroidered napkins are admired worldwide.

Of course, almost every home in the village of Neglyubka (in the Gomel Region's Vetka District) owns such treasures.

'Reading' patterns

In the late 19th century, 3,500 villagers lived in Neglyubka; today, there are only around 800. It could be worse; another 59 villages in the district disappeared altogether after the Chernobyl disaster.

In the past, Neglyubka was famous for its harmonica makers; their last representative died not long ago. Its weavers remain, although their wheels tend to be stored in attics these days. They're old, with stiff fingers and weak eyesight, so have long since given up their craft.

Every wedding features a ceremonial rushnik. In the past, newborn babies were laid upon

their own embroidered cloth and would eventually have this buried with them. The rushnik is a talisman which



still decorates icons and family portraits in many houses.

"Neglyubka has its own peculiar feature: three — rather than

one — rushniks decorate the icon corner, which is viewed as the most beautiful part of the house," explains Larisa Romanova, a leading research officer at the Vetka Folk Art Museum. It boasts the largest regional collection.

Each Neglyubka rushnik is unique. Anya shows us the 'zhaluddzya' and 'kulachcha' patterns, adding that she has never thought about their actual meaning. Ethnographers believe their motifs are sacred, explains Ms. Romanova, "The Neglyubka tradition is among the richest, with over 120 patterns. Meanwhile, 'Cruchcha' is one of the most popular, being 5000 years old. Our books on Dnieper Area Ornamentation can help you distinguish between these patterns. It was through rushniks that people demonstrated their understanding of life and time; those woven in the 1920-

30s differ from late 20th century rushniks."

"I also have many shirts which I can show you," says granny Anya, taking wonderfully woven clothes from her wardrobe. Local senior citizens tell us that, many years ago, the head of the village forbade the wearing of such shirts at work, as such traditions were seen as unnecessary distractions: vestiges of the past. Interest in weaving then fell away.

Age of renaissance

In fact, some wheels continue spinning! Kostya Kulikov, 8, has been having lessons at Neglyubka's Weaving Centre (established at the local House of Culture). The textiles club is teaching 16 children, headed by Lyudmila Kovaleva. She notes that more boys are taking part than girls at the moment, being 'keen to make gifts for their mothers for March 8th'.

I watch some of the girls skilfully inserting shuttles of red and white threads, then pushing the 'steps' to activate the loom. They spend an hour studying Neglyubka patterns. Acting Director Irina Kulaga tells us, "The Education Ministry has prepared a programme for us to follow in our handicraft lessons. Of course, we can adjust the number of hours devoted to weaving but we see no reason to do so: we're dedicating three hours of club time and an

ditional extra hour. We also teach sewing and cooking and are seeing good results. This year, a rushnik woven by a couple of our tenth grade pupils was awarded second prize at the *Kolyady Star* Republican Contest. We also teach the history of traditional crafts and children undertaken their own research."

Everything could have developed differently if a branch of the Gomel Artware Factory had continued operating in Neglyubka — as in the early 1990s. It became a vocational training centre, with past employees remaining, but the sewing facility closed, as it no longer made a true profit. It's undecided whether it will relaunch, explains the Deputy Chairman of the Vetka District Executive Committee, Sergey Konchits. He tells us, "The factory may reopen if rushniks come back into fashion, enjoying demand. In the meantime, it's not reasonable for us to simply build up a stock of unsold products. Wise promotion may help increase demand, so we're exploring this at present."

The Director of the Gomel Regional Folk Art Centre, Nikolay Shemshenya, notes, "Neglyubka weavers create exclusive napkins which are hand made; they are in a different realm to factory made items."

Interestingly, Vetka children have helped spread the presence of the local rushniks across Western Europe, having brought them as gifts for many years after the Chernobyl disaster, during their recuperation in Italy, Germany and Holland.

Those from the Gomel Region understand that it's vital to show Neglyubka's unique pieces across Belarus and abroad, to help revive this wonderful craft and launch industrial production. The First Deputy Head of the Gomel Regional Executive Committee's Culture Department, Olga Antonenko, believes that the first step has already been taken, with Neglyubka last year hosting a regional festival of Belarusian rushniks for the first time.



Anna Shevtsova demonstrates her hand-woven rushniks

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Belarus' State List of Intangible Cultural Heritage also includes red-and-white rushniks from Semezhevo. The Deputy Chair of the Minsk Region's Kopyl District Executive Committee, Alla Raevskaya, notes that the area is preserving and promoting the tradition. "A Weaving Centre and a School of Weavers operate in the village of Semezhevo," she tells us. "However, we aren't fixated on this craft alone; we're promoting Semezhevo and the district as a whole. We're popularising the 'Kolyady Tsars' custom (on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage), while developing culinary traditions. Last year, a folk-ethnographic tour was organised and a special 'green route' launched for tourists — with information boards and campsites. There are plenty of similar ideas."