

A Custodian of the Harmonica Museum

Minsk is home to the Belarusian State University of Culture-based museum of harmonicas that has existed for a year already

It was established on the basis of a collection from Mikhail Slizky, a professor at the Folk Instrumental Creativity Chair. Sixty harmonicas, bayans, and accordions of various models and designs are placed in accurately organised rows in one room. Each instrument works and can be readily played. Therefore, the museum is simultaneously used as a creative laboratory to study the harmonica.

"It all started in my early childhood," said Mikhail Slizky. "My father was a violinist and also played the harmonica. Our neighbours across the road — old man Yefrem, his daughter Raya and son Zhenya — also could play the harmonica. Naturally, I wanted to play it, too. I would climb the oven, make a paper harmonica, stretch it and sing."

The house of a harmonica player has always differed that of other villagers. Creativity would be revealed not only in playing music, but in other talents, too. A good musician would be highly esteemed in a village. Girls could judge their future husband harmonists based on the way they handled their harmonicas. If he treated his instrument with care and attention, he would coddle and pamper his future wife. If he put his harmonica away after playing, he would treat his wife in the same careless manner.

"I started collecting instruments much later," recalled Mikhail. "Eleven years ago, I asked Master Mikhail Gaidukevich from Molodechno to make a harmonica for me. The instrument he made turned out so excellent that I felt like getting another one. So, the process unfolded. Often, my collection is replenished due to some miraculous coincidence. Let's take, for instance, this German bandoneon. Last year an acquaintance of mine, while at a fair, noticed a harmonica of an unusual shape. He asked the seller to hold it back for a while and called me immediately. We met with him. It turned out that the bandoneon

reached its owner by mere accident. He purchased a car in Germany and after returning to Minsk, found this fancy instrument in the trunk."

Previously, Mikhail Slizky kept his collection at home. His two-room flat abounded in harmonicas. They could be found everywhere — under sofas, in the entresols, behind armchairs, and in the closets. A few



Harmonicas of collector **Mikhail Slizky** have resounded in many world countries

dozen of them were stored in the bedroom. Soon, the flat appeared too small for the numerous instruments. Mikhail Slizky was offered a room at his university and eagerly accepted the proposition. Since that moment his private collection was transformed into a museum.

"Each harmonica is unique in a certain aspect, each has its own character," explained Mikhail, showing his treasures. "Indeed, there are many rarities. For example, the Petrograd three-row harmonica was made back in pre-revolution times. Next to it, Tula, Shuisk, Molodechno, Saratov harmonicas rest, alongside a Yelets piano harmonica, peculiar because of its exquisite shape. The majority of harmonicas were ordered.

Apart from the German bandoneon, there are other "foreigners"."

Mikhail Slizky proudly demonstrates an Austrian Steier harmonica and an Italian trophy instrument.

Some famous guests have already seen the museum. In January 2003, the Russian Minister of Culture danced the famous Tsyganochka (Gypsy Woman) accompanied by the museum keeper who was playing the Tula harmonica.

"Belarusian masters, by the way, are highly assessed by musicians," stated Mikhail. "When our Khoroshki band toured to India, many instruments were damaged by heat and high humidity. Meanwhile, the harmonicas made by Belarusian master Mikhail Gaidukevich passed the climate examination. Therefore, Belarusian harmonicas can be heard in many world countries."

Nowadays, trophy instruments are rare. Street musicians, who go to Germany, Austria, and France to earn money, take their harmonicas back to their "historical motherlands". Unique harmonicas made by Belarusian masters also vanish abroad. It takes a master half a year to create one instrument. Hence, a good harmonica costs at least \$500 in Belarus. In the West, the price of a harmonica is several times higher.

Russian harmonica collector Alfred Mirek presented his collection to the city of Moscow. In this way, the golden-domed Russian capital received a museum of harmonicas. Mikhail dreams of going to Moscow in order to see this miracle. He intends to do it next year when his vacation starts.

"I hope to get acquainted with Alfred Martinovich," Ivanovich urged. "I think I can learn a lot of new information and, the main thing, gain experience in creating this kind of museum. Collecting harmonicas is a very delicate occupation that requires a subtle approach, just like a harmonica itself."

By **Dmitry Korsak**