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GEORGE WASHINGTON TRADITIONS IN UKRAINE

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GEORGE WASHINGTON TRADITIONS IN UKRAINE

In my book, *Shevchenko Meets America*, Marquette University, Slavic Institute, 1964, which contained a preface by my distinguished colleague, Alfred Sokolnicki, I discussed on pp. 26-27 (footnote 17) the Washington traditions in Ukraine.

Evidence for the existence of a cult of George Washington in Ukraine is to be found in the *Diary* of Mrs. P. Rozciszewska of the Kievan province:

May 21, 1827 — I also visited the Trzeciak family in Yaropovci. What a beautiful garden they have! Trees, flowers, and a beautiful setting. Mrs. Trzeciak showed me Washington's beloved tree — the *Bignonia Catalpa*. The hapless Muravjov always used to doff his hat before the tree, saying that one must pay homage to the tree of the great man... Alas, a few steps away grow tall cypresses and frowning pines, and they remind one of this splendid young man and his unhappy fate. Together with Mrs. Trzeciak, we wept there, moved by the remembrance of him and by our grief...

Who was the Muravjov mentioned in the *Diary*? Serge Muravjov-Apostol (1796-1826) was a descendant on his mother's side of the Ukrainian *Hetman*, Danylo Apostol. Educated in Paris and St. Petersburg, he played a leading role in the conspiracies of the "Union of Liberation" and the "Southern Society." As a colonel of the Chernyiv Regiment, he headed its mutiny and, after the failure of the Decembrist Revolt, was sentenced to death together with Ryleev, P. Pestel and Michael Bestuzhev-Riumin (1803-1826), who was a second lieutenant in the Poltava Regiment and liaison to Polish revolutionary societies.

About the tree mentioned in the *Diary*, I wrote:

Bignonia Catalpa, the supposed beloved tree of Washington, was brought to Europe from North America and was widely cultivated in Poland and Ukraine. It is a decorative tree with bell-shaped flowers.

But neither the noted historian of Marquette University, Rev. Raphael Hamilton, S.J., nor I could locate in the U.S. any material

to justify the East European traditions connected with this tree. I added:

We could not find any material to support this East European tradition that this tree was in fact a beloved favorite of Washington. We assume that it was brought from America to Poland and Ukraine and that here developed the legend by association: American Tree -- Washington's Tree. Perhaps the following explanation can give some direction. For it we are indebted to our distinguished colleague, Rev. Raphael Hamilton, S. J., professor of history, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

In 1932 the Bicentennial Commission, appointed to celebrate the birth of George Washington, had extensive research done which was published as: "Honor to George Washington and Readings About George Washington." There on pages 97-98 Father Hamilton found that the only tree which the Commission is sure was planted by Washington and which still flourishes on the grounds of his home, Mt. Vernon, is a magnolia tree which the dictionary establishes to be very much the same as the Bignonia tree. Both have large decorative leaves and white, pink or red blossoms."

Teaching now in Washington, I availed myself of the opportunity to investigate the question on the very spot, Mt. Vernon: Had the Bignonia Catalpa Tree any link with George Washington or his home, Mt. Vernon, or is all merely an East European, Polish-Ukrainian legend? The Very Rev. Constantine Berdar, Rector of the Ukrainian Catholic Seminary in Washington, D. C., was my good guide and helper, and twice we inspected the Mr. Vernon Gardens. In a shop on the grounds I bought a series of publications, among them: *The Mount Vernon Gardens, a brief description of their origin and restoration, complete plant lists, plans and other illustration*. This is a publication of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, Mount Vernon, Virginia, 1960.

Among "Trees and Shrubs, A list of the trees and shrubs collected and planted by General Washington, which are represented in the general plantings," page 23, is: *Catalpa Tree — Catalpa Bignonoides*.

Therefore, summing up: 1. There can now be no doubt that the East European Washingtonian traditions are no legend but are based on the fact that this tree was a favorite of Washington and was in fact planted by him in his Mt. Vernon Gardens. This proves that Washington at least "liked this tree." 2. According to the aforementioned booklet Washington was in contact with French and German gardeners who could have brought it seeds to Europe. Cultivated on the estates of the nobility in Eastern Europe, this tree eventually reached Ukraine.

In the background of the Washingtonian symbolism of this tree was surely the great popularity of the American War of Independence and of George Washington, the man, among the Polish and Ukrainian gentry families on the right bank of the Dnieper in Ukraine at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As a quarter of a century later the Ukrainian Decabrists (Decembrists) organized their rebellion against the Czar in Kiev Province, Washington and the political regime in office in the USA were looked upon as ideals. Washington was the hero, and the pattern of the American regime in some parts and ideas were integrated into the project of state reforms which were discussed in the conspiratorial circles of the Southern Decembrists. The *Diary* of Mrs. P. Rosciszewska confirms this.

But there is a continuity of Washington and American traditions in Ukraine. The Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood, a conspiratorial organization which emerged in Kiev twenty years later, propagated the ideas of a federation of all Slavic nationalities according to the pattern of the USA. In this way the name of George Washington again became a banner.

The national bard of Ukraine, Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), was associated with this group. He formulated modern Ukrainian nationalism by expressing the longing for the coming of "Washington's just and new law," also for the Ukrainian nation.

The American Ukrainians erected in the capital of the United States, Washington, D.C., a monument of Shevchenko on 22nd and P Streets, N. W. It was unveiled by former President Dwight D. Eisenhower on June 27, 1964.

And thus the circle of Washington traditions closes: the gardens of Mt. Vernon to the Washington traditions in Ukraine and back to Mt. Vernon by way of this monument.

The Catholic University of America ROMAN SMAL-STOCKI

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