

We led while others followed, and we made a difference

By Yaro Bihun

TWG President (1988-1990)

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Taking over the helm of The Washington Group from what I respectfully refer to as our “founding mothers” — Natalie Sluzar and Daria Stec — was something I undertook with a good measure of apprehension. Under their leadership, in the first four years of its existence, TWG became the largest Ukrainian-American professionals’ organization, with a nationwide membership of 300, and by far the most active, positive organization in recent memory. Natalie, Daria and others convinced me with promises of help.

And so they did. But history helped as well.

Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika policy in the Soviet Union was going into high gear and it was becoming obvious that there was no turning back. At our 1988 annual meeting we made the decision to get actively involved in the democratic processes that were beginning to evolve in Ukraine. Unlike most diaspora organizations at that time, we did not wait for that tsunami (as I characterized it in subsequent annual reports) to hit our shores, but went out and rode on its crest.

Through our various programs and activities, which averaged about two per month during those years, we kept our membership and the community at large well informed and involved. We hosted and provided a forum for numerous visiting Ukrainian scholars, writers, artists and political activists; turned the focus of our leadership conferences on developments in Ukraine and our role in its future (Changes in Ukraine: Assessment and Response in 1989 and Ukraine: Building the Future Together in 1990), which brought together top U.S. and other Western experts as well as the leading proponents of those changes from within Ukraine; and conducted two TWG trips to Ukraine.

TWG's first direct contact with glasnost came in January 1989, at an evening with poet Vitaliy Korotych, then the editor of the leading Russian magazine *Ogonyok* and a frequently quoted expert on glasnost in the U.S. media. Among those that followed were: literary critic Ivan Dziuba, who later became Ukraine's second minister of culture; historian Mykola Zhulynsky, later to be deputy prime minister; director Les Taniuk, poet Pavlo Movchan and writer Volodymyr Yavorivsky, who later became influential members of Ukraine's Parliament; the leader of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, Mykola Rudenko; Rukh leader Mykola Horbal; Viacheslav Briukhovetsky, who would found and head the Kyiv Mohyla Academy University — and many others.

Also discussing developments in Ukraine at various TWG forums were U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer, co-chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission; Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Paula J. Dobriansky; U.S. Ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock, and Ukrainian Orthodox Patriarch Mstyslav.

The focus of these meetings was not limited to political and human rights developments; there were forums and conference sessions covering religious, academic, economic, environmental and cultural issues as well. We continued our involvement in the presentation of the Antonovych Foundation awards for literature and Ukrainian studies. It was at this time that our then special projects director and now Cultural Fund director, Laryssa Courtney, began introducing a cultural element to TWG activities, which four years later she would formalize in the TWG Cultural Fund, by organizing concerts by such leading Ukrainian performers as violinist Oleh Krysa and pianist Alexander Slobodyanik.

Time and energy was also found for pool parties, TWG summer camps, Christmas parties, and the like.

Organizing all of these events took a lot of time and effort on the part of many members of our organization, first of all the members of the board: Vice President Lydia Chopivsky, who would go on to become the next TWG president; secretaries Orest Deychakiwsky and Marianne Woloschuk; treasurers Helen Chaikovsky and Olha Holoyda; Events Director Orysia Pylyshenko; Special Projects Director Laryssa Courtney; Public Relations Director Marta Zielyk; membership directors Andrew Rylyk and Adrian

Kerod, who raised the membership total from 300 to near 400; Fellowship Committee Chairman Andrew Mostovych; TWG News editors Maria Rudensky and Irene Jarosewich, and their Mac- PageMaker guru George Masiuk; Zirka Hayuk, who organized our two trips to Ukraine; and many, many others.

Through our conferences, forums, receptions, discussions and trips, TWG was recognized, both here and in Ukraine, as an organization that was actively and genuinely concerned and involved in building Ukraine's future. Being out front in this effort was exhilarating, of course, but it was also uncomfortable at times. The initial meeting with Vitaliy Korotych, for example, had its doubters and detractors, as did some of the other meetings that followed. But we persevered, and, in so doing, served the interests of our membership, our community, the United States and Ukraine.

As an organization, TWG led while others followed, and we made a difference. The 1989 leadership conference was important in many respects, but at least as a footnote to history I would recall that cold October 1990 evening in Kyiv, when a number of our TWG Ukraine trip group joined thousands of Ukrainians in front of St. Sophia Cathedral to greet Ukrainian Orthodox Patriarch Mstyslav on his historic return to Ukraine. Speaking to the crowd that evening, Volodymyr Yavorivsky noted that he had met the Patriarch for the first time a year earlier — in Washington.

They had met at the 1989 TWG Leadership Conference.