

We gather here this morning to remember and celebrate the life of Yaroslav Bihun. There is much to remember and much to celebrate, for his was a life of service and self-sacrifice.

Yaro served in the US army and was a career civil servant at USIA. He served as press attaché at the US Embassy in Kyiv, and correspondent for the Voice of America and BBC. Yaro also wrote for Svoboda and The Ukrainian Weekly. From 1988 to 1990, he was President of The Washington Group, an Association of Ukrainian American Professionals.

As President, Yaro was very humble. In his first Annual Report, he called the organization, which then had 300 members, "the most active, positive organization in recent memory." He credited this success to those who came before him, Natalie Sluzar and Daria Stec. Later, under Yaro's leadership, TWG membership rose to 400.

Yaro also credited history for helping him and TWG. Taking advantage of Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost, he wrote that we became "...actively involved in the democratic processes beginning to evolve in Ukraine. Unlike most diaspora organizations at the time, we did not wait for the tsunami to hit our shores but went out and rode on its crest." Such a vivid and beautiful metaphor!

During Yaro's tenure, TWG organized high-profile Leadership Conferences. They provided a forum for expression by Ukrainian political activists, writers, scholars, and artists, among them such luminaries as Ivan Dziuba, Mykola Zhulynsky, Les Taniuk, Pavlo Movchan, Volodymyr Yavorivsky, Mykola Rudenko, and Mykola Horbal. Speakers at the Leadership Conferences included Representative Steny Hoyer, Co-Chair of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, Deputy Asst. Secretary of State for Human Rights Paula Dobriansky, and Ukrainian Orthodox Patriarch Mstyslav.

Under Yaro's leadership, TWG began hosting cultural events. It presented such outstanding Ukrainian musicians as pianist Alexander Slobodyanik and violinist Oleh Krysa. TWG also organized two inspiring and exhilarating trips to Ukraine. The Washington Group had become well known in Ukraine and we were greeted warmly everywhere. Those were heady days when Ukraine was on the cusp of its independence, something we had all dreamed about.

Over the years, Yaro wore many TWG hats: TWG NEWS editor and publisher, journalist, and photographer. As graphic designer, he produced Conference Programs, Cultural Fund concert programs, and membership directories. And he did all this without even being asked. Yaro was a workhorse, not a showhorse. For Yaro, TWG was a passion, and for us, Yaro was indispensable. He was a true friend and mentor to many of us. And with his computer skills, he brought us into the information age.

And speaking of hats, who could forget Yaro wearing a jaunty fedora that made him look just like the famous actor Robert Mitchum, in the movie "Out of the Past"?

During the last 15 years, Yaro dedicated himself to taking care of his longtime partner Ada Kulyk's mother, who had Alzheimer's. After she passed away, he cared for Ada, who also suffers from Alzheimer's.

On behalf of The Washington Group, I would like to extend our deepest sympathy to Yaro's family, especially to his brother Andy Bihun, also a former TWG President, and Andy's wife Lesia Bihun, a longtime member of the TWG Cultural Fund committee.

May Yaro rest in peace.
Vichnaya pamyat.

Laryssa Courtney
President, The Washington Group
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