

“Krakow Ukrainians - Ukrainian Krakowians”. Andriy Oliynyk

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We talk to Andriy Oliynyk - President of the Kraków branch of the Union of Ukrainians in Poland.

KRAKÓW OPEN TO THE WORLD: We know you as an activist and leader of the Kraków branch of the Union of Ukrainians, but we're also curious about your personal story. When and how did you come to Kraków?

ANDRIY OLIYNYK: My adventure with Kraków began quite some time ago. When I was in the 2nd grade of primary school, I was gifted a book about Dratewka the Shoemaker. It was then that I first heard of the city of Kraków, where the Wawel Dragon used to reign, and where there is a castle today... I come from Ternopil and growing up in western Ukraine in the early 1990s, my peers and I were all introduced to the Polish culture and language from television.

I had the opportunity to visit Kraków for the first time only after finishing school, in 2003. I have been part of the Scouts of Europe organisation for almost 25 years now. Back in the days, I and other scouts from Ukraine, participated in an international camp in Poland, in Żelazko. With a group of 12 people, of whom only two were of age, we were coming back home via Kraków. It was supposed to be a quick transfer, but it turned out that bus tickets were not available until the following day (there was no Internet back then and it was difficult to access certain information). Kraków looked very differently then than it does today, and we didn't really have anywhere to go. But I remembered that this city had educated a lot of Ukrainian intelligentsia - e.g. the writers Stefanyk, Franko, Lepkyi or Metropolitan Sheptytskyi, whom I hold in high esteem. And since the Ukrainian intelligentsia lived here, there had to be an Orthodox church in town. But how to find it? We walked around and asked people until a man directed us to a tourist office in front of the Słowacki Theatre. The woman working there treated us with coffee and gave us a map showing the route to the church. This is how we ended up in Wiślna Street. There we met the parish priest - a wonderful man, now of blessed memory - who allowed us to spend the night in the student dormitory. So this first encounter with Kraków was very positive. I remember how impressed I was by the city and its Ukrainian accents.

In 2006, when I was already a student, I found out that it was possible to transfer from a Ukrainian university to a Polish one. At the time, it was a new practice, still completely unpopular. Since I was drawn to Kraków, I decided to continue my studies here. As a student, I lived on Wiślna Street - right in the city centre. This was very conducive to getting to know the city and the culture. Kraków in general has a very good student climate. I graduated from the Pontifical University of John Paul II with a degree in theology for laymen... When I talk about my education, many people react with a smile. Because you'd think you can't do much after such studies, right? Wrong! My studies focused on analysis and interpretation of texts, knowledge of law and foreign languages, logic, psychology, and the development of discussion and interpersonal skills. I use all this in my work today - in business relations.

What do you do professionally?

AO: I have been involved in the international steel and steel products trade for years. I have worked for various companies in this sector and, because I have always been drawn to my home country, I have used my trips to Ukraine to establish contacts with local producers and



entrepreneurs. I came into this environment as someone who spoke several foreign languages, so I was immediately responsible for communication and establishing international cooperation. Ukraine plays an important role in this market. For years, Polish companies have been interested in cooperation with Ukrainian producers. And this is especially important in the current situation when many Ukrainian companies are forced to relocate to protect their interests. Additionally, I cooperate with an international insurance company - I deal with corporate liability and private healthcare. These work experiences are compatible, as it is key to know the regulations, to be able to work in an international environment and consider the interests of different parties or to negotiate. Not many people know it, but steel trade between Poland and Ukraine has a rich history and constitutes an important part of bilateral economic relations. And support for Ukrainian entrepreneurs who want to relocate their production to a safe place, to open their representative offices or branches in Poland - is now very much needed.

We will return to the topic of helping Ukrainians and Ukraine in a moment. Do you have thoughts about returning to Ukraine?

AO: I know that now I can do more for Ukrainians by acting in Poland. But years ago, I was close to returning, in fact, I returned once. In 2013, I closed my professional affairs in Kraków, organised a farewell party for 70 people and left at the end of the year to finally "work for myself". I then came to Poland for what I thought would be a short visit, for a friend's wedding. However, a job found me in Poland on this occasion - as if it was just waiting for me to come back and take on new tasks. So it seemed necessary to stay here.

Dr Kich-Masłej told us a lot about the history of the Union of Ukrainians in Poland in our first interview. Since it is an association founded by the diaspora, the Union is largely managed by Poles whose families come from the territory of contemporary Ukraine. How did it happen that you - a "Ukrainian from Ukraine" - became the head of the Kraków branch of the Union?

AO: Actually, the aim of the Union is to look after the interests of both groups - ethnic Ukrainians in Poland and visitors. After the Second World War - largely thanks to the infamous "help" of our neighbours, that is the USSR and Nazi Germany - historical conflicts and animosities intensified, resulting in persecutions of the Ukrainian minority in Poland. At that time, Ukraine itself had a difficult time and for a long time could not obtain the right to statehood. The Union of Ukrainians in Poland, which has its origins in the Ukrainian Social and Cultural Society, was founded - on the one hand - to reconcile Poles and Ukrainians on the basis of the centuries-long history of peaceful coexistence of the two nations and their mutual relations, and on the other hand - to defend the rights of the people who remained in Poland, even though the borders of the country had changed. These people had the right to cultivate their native culture, traditions, or language. They had the right to their own identity. A tree survives if it has strong roots. And only a healthy tree bears good fruit. This may sound allegorical, but it is true in social life.

In my case - as for many other Ukrainian immigrants - maintaining a connection with the native culture was linked to spiritual practice and going to a Greek-Catholic church. The church, as has already been mentioned, was and is one of the most important institutions that consolidate



Ukrainians in Poland. While going to mass or meetings on Wiślna Street, I was meeting local, ethnic Ukrainians in Kraków. I learned that they are a very large group, I learned about their culture, and I learned about the activities of the Union. I was a young person, a student who found himself in Poland far from his homeland, and this community became a new family for me. A beautiful tradition of Kraków Ukrainians was, for example, to meet at the Piwnica pod Baranami and sing carols together on the eve of "Malanka", also called Shchedryi Vechir. During the Old New Year (celebrated in Ukraine before the change of the calendar from Julian to Gregorian) we would meet on 13 January on the Market Square by the Mickiewicz monument. The Polish and tourists would always join us. Now that Ukraine has decided to celebrate Christmas and New Year at the same time as Europeans, this tradition will probably disappear.

Ethnic Ukrainians attracted Ukrainian students like a magnet, but we - Ukrainian students - strengthened this group and came up with creative ideas for integration. When Facebook appeared - we set up the group "Ukrainians in Kraków". There, we informed people about meetings, dances, concerts, and poetry evenings. By reading Ukrainian poets, discussing their works, we made new acquaintances and friendships. Some of us - Krystyna Zanyk, Nadiya Moroz, Olena Sydorak, for example - found inspiration for further professional development in this way. Such evenings created a synergy that was later translated into concrete Polish-Ukrainian projects. These meetings were attended by all those who are currently developing the Ukrainian culture in Kraków or running Ukrainian NGOs. And there are quite a few of them! This formula of integration lasted until the beginning of the war in 2014. After the Euromaidan everything changed, and a new chapter began.

This was a new chapter for me as well. I met my future wife. Work brought me from Ukraine to Kraków again. Years later, I view it as a fortuitous coincidence, because thanks to my professional contacts I can now - in times of war - organise aid for Ukraine. Immediately after the Euromaidan, my friends and I started organising collections for the treatment or rehabilitation of the injured. We often hosted people in need of help in our homes to cut costs. Since I was well-known in Ukrainian circles and my activities were appreciated, I was invited to become a member of the Union. This is, as you know, a nationwide organisation, but it has its local branches. At some meeting, I was recommended as a candidate for the position of the president of the Kraków branch, and the recommendation was voted through. That's how I took up the mission I've been carrying out for almost four years now. And I personally think that it helps a lot when there are people in the Union who know the "little Ukraine" in Poland, but who also understand the contemporary "big Ukraine".

How has the work of the Union changed in the last two years? How does the responsibility for 'big Ukraine' translate into concrete actions?

AO: The Union of Ukrainians in Poland belongs to the Ukrainian World Congress. One of our tasks is to advocate for Ukraine in the international arena and to lobby in its interests. Already six months before the attack on Ukraine, anyone who was familiar with politics or military strategy could suspect how the situation was to evolve. The first actions of the leaders of the Ukrainian diaspora all over the world were therefore aimed at raising awareness among the public and the authorities of the respective countries. On the part of the Union, we then wrote to the President and Prime Minister of the Polish government asking them to step up their diplomatic efforts and prepare for what might come. We organised public actions in support of



Ukraine, which were attended by thousands of people. The tension was enormous. At the end of February 2022, everything started moving at lightning speed. Shortly after the Russian attack, we announced that there would be a Ukrainian demonstration at the Russian Consulate and that this action was indefinite in time. I remember the rage that we felt. I remember the indignant people who were ready to set fire to this Consulate. At the same time, we knew that as organisers of the protest we had to control the emotions of the crowd and not allow any acts of vandalism or provocations (this was the type of behaviour the enemy expected in order to be able to discredit Ukrainians later). We were greatly helped by the city services and the police, who professionally organised security.

We knew that a spontaneous action could not last forever and we needed to organise ourselves before a longer battle. Even a month before the war, we held consultations at the Provincial Office and the Department of Social Policy of the City Hall, where we signalled how the city should prepare for the possible influx of war refugees, that it would be worthwhile to involve, for example, the fire brigade or scouts. This was the way we acted later on, and it was only thanks to the synchronisation of activities at provincial, city and NGO levels that we managed to survive the difficult weeks to come. On the part of the Union, we gathered volunteers who helped at the train station from the first days. We emphasised that our activities were - as a rule - apolitical and tried to level out disputes of this nature. Most of us put aside our professional responsibilities for a few months and devoted themselves entirely to volunteering.

After a huge campaign to receive, house and register the refugees, we started an ambitious attempt to supply the civilian population in Ukraine and the soldiers with what they needed most. Everyone started collecting and carting humanitarian aid, generators, equipment for the army. We brought medicines, organised transports, went to the border to transport people. Also, the international community started to bring aid to Kraków that needed to be distributed. My house looked like a warehouse of medicines and militaria at that time, with 3-4 families living there on a rotational basis. The flats of friends - whether Ukrainians or Poles - involved in the aid effort looked similar. Like many other organisations, we had to learn diligently how to do things that no one had done before. Thus, within the framework of the Ukrainian World Congress, as well as the Union of Ukrainians in Poland, we were blazing a trail and working out anew the structures necessary to operate efficiently in the new reality.

After the first three, most 'hectic', months of the war, the situation clarified to a certain extent. Institutions and organisations understood what kind of aid they could organise most effectively and a kind of "division of tasks" took place. Someone specialised in helping refugees in Poland, someone in providing humanitarian aid to civilians in Ukraine, someone in providing military or medical assistance. We no longer acted chaotically, but in a coordinated manner. It is worth emphasising that the aid that we have managed to organise - and that we are still carrying out - would not have been possible if it were not for the flexibility of the institutions working together, but also for the human will, arising from empathy, the wish to 'do more'. Even when this required going beyond competence. To meet the formal requirements, for example, we had to register our own charitable foundation on the part of Union of Ukrainians in Kraków. We managed to do this within 2 weeks... Someone will say, how was this even possible?! It was possible - because everyone wanted to help us!

The key centre of the Union at the time was the Ukrainian House in Przemysł, which was closest



to the border. The whole world learned about Przemyśl during the war. Official delegations stayed here, and it was here that UNICEF, UNHCR and the World Kitchen opened their first aid centres. Aid for Ukraine was transported through Przemyśl and it was here that refugees first arrived. The Ukrainian House, which in peacetime was a centre for cultural and educational meetings, became the first address they went to.

This shows the importance and role of such institutions, their 'universality'. For several years - with the support of the Consulate General of Ukraine - the Union of Ukrainians has been actively lobbying for such a Ukrainian House to be opened in Kraków as well. Despite the favourable opinion of the Mayor and City Council, we have not yet managed to resolve this issue. This is a pity, because the increasingly numerous Ukrainian minority in Kraków needs a permanent meeting place with which it can identify. A centre that would bring together under one roof the various Ukrainian-related, but currently dispersed, organisations. It would be a place for their dialogue and cooperation, as the example of Przemyśl beautifully demonstrated. The effectiveness of the Ukrainian House in a crisis has often been held up as a model, and the solutions developed there, are now being replicated as good practice. Given the fact that the Ukrainian diaspora not only generates costs, but also profit (e.g. in the form of locally paid taxes), the Ukrainian House could also be a place for promoting Ukrainian entrepreneurship. Using the example of the Union, we see that people seek contact with a credible organisation that they associate with Ukraine. The Ukrainian House would facilitate access to verified information and assistance - both for Ukrainians and Poles seeking contact with Ukrainian culture or business. As a trade professional, I am convinced that people get to know each other best when they must work together. This also applies to Poles and Ukrainians. If we start communicating better and working together, we will be better neighbours on a daily basis. Then our difficult history will not stand in the way of a better future.

In general, as far as the task of the Union is concerned - defending the interests of Ukrainians and supporting Ukraine - it has remained the same for decades. Only the ongoing war in Ukraine has given these slogans a completely new dimension and meaning. Today, our branch specialises in organising medical and military aid, insofar as this is not beyond our remit. We also continue to promote Ukrainian culture, strive to represent our homeland with dignity, and work to strengthen civil society and democratic values in Ukraine.

In your opinion, is Kraków changing the Ukrainians? Are Ukrainians changing our city for the better?

AO: It's a two-way synergy. For Ukrainians coming here, Kraków is a city that opens up new opportunities. But we have to understand that Ukrainians coming to Kraków years ago and today have a completely different baggage of experiences and needs. 20 years ago, it was mainly students who came here. Slowly, the first Ukrainian IT companies entered the Polish market and now employ thousands of people. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine opened Poland and Kraków up to a wave of refugees of different ages, education and work experience. They range from simple, unskilled people to outstanding professionals. A large group are entrepreneurs looking to save their businesses. And all this is reflected in the statistics. We see how many new businesses - from family businesses to large corporations - have opened in Kraków. We see that most Ukrainians feel comfortable here and are open to integration. Similarly, most Krakówians welcome their neighbours from the east very kindly. Of



course, there are infamous exceptions among both, but dishonesty and xenophobia are not national characteristics. They can happen anywhere, because it all depends on what kind of person you are.

Today I have brought with me some archive editions of Kraków newspapers from the interwar period. I wanted to show that this 'Ukrainisation' of Kraków, which we may perceive as a phenomenon of recent years, is in fact nothing new, and that our cooperation has been going on for over a thousand years. Almost a hundred years ago - before we were divided by borders and animosities resulting from the Second World War - Ukrainians in Kraków were very numerous and active. Because multiculturalism and multinationalism is written in the genes of this city. If you read a newspaper from 1935, you will see that in addition to articles about Christmas, there were articles about the "Schedryi Vechir" (Malanka), that a city tradition was to bless water during the celebration of the feast of Jordan... These are rituals and traditions associated with Eastern spirituality, which were nurtured in Kraków by the Ukrainians. They co-created the character of this city and are doing it again today. In the last century, the synergy was also bilateral. Kraków was a well-known scientific and cultural centre, so it attracted the best. On the other hand, after the First World War, many eminent Ukrainian artists, scientists, or entrepreneurs came here and, working in Kraków, developed the potential of this city. It is possible that history has come full circle, and we will see better the effects of the activities of the Ukrainians who came to Kraków in recent times from a later perspective.

What happened in Ukraine and Poland after February 2022 can no longer be erased. The enormous support that the Polish showed to the Ukrainians after the outbreak of war will never be forgotten. I am sure that it changed the Polish themselves. It showed that what unites us - simple human empathy - is stronger than what divides us. Many Ukrainians who have moved further west are returning to Poland, including Kraków. This is because Polish culture is more comprehensible to them than that of other nations. They can assimilate with it more quickly, as well as with the Polish language, and this gives them the opportunity to become actively involved in the development of the city and the local community. Ukrainians use the tools and opportunities offered by the EU or Poland, but they often create a new quality here, something that will serve the next generation of Krakówians and beyond. Ukrainian children generally do very well in Polish schools. I've even encountered the opinion that they have "excess energy". The level of science teaching is very high in Ukraine, so by coming to a Polish school these children can spend more time learning Polish and integrating. And as young and educated people here - they will know the languages and work to bring Poland and Ukraine closer together.

I am glad that the perception of Ukraine and Ukrainians is changing for the better. I once had a ride with a taxi driver who remembered me from a demonstration and told me how he started to take an interest in Ukraine after the war broke out. He used to think of Ukrainians as "peasants for shovelling" and, like many people, reduced our culture to "borscht, dumplings and salo", and here he suddenly learned, for example, about the merits of Ukrainian scientists for cosmonautics and developed technological thought in Ukraine. Shock! Fortunately, more and more people are realising that modern Ukraine is a digitised country, developing modern technologies, with not only a rich heritage but also incredible development potential. We just need to get this one thing right - to win over our enemy - and the future will stand open for us. I believe that Poland - our friend - will accompany us in these better times.



We are beginning a new year. What can we expect from it?

AO: Unfortunately, we can see that russia will not let go. It is a difficult opponent that fights not only with missiles, but also conducts hybrid and information warfare, trying to discredit the Ukrainians wherever it can. Our task is to support Ukraine on all fronts and in every possible way. Humanitarian, medical, military, but also informational, political, economic. We have high hopes in the Ukrainian armed forces because no other European country has such experienced soldiers today. The public trust of Ukrainians in the military is many times higher than in politicians and is almost 90%. We all try to support those who are fighting for our freedom as much as we can. Winter - as previous years have shown - is particularly difficult in wartime. But Ukrainians have learned how to prepare for it. Everyone is tired, but the fighting spirit in the nation has not died. It is sad that war is still sometimes used in our country to pursue particularistic goals and political interests that are not compatible with the interests of society. Therefore, it is important not to lump everyone together. Ukrainian society is no longer blind, it is definitely more mature and aware. Now it is busy fighting and helping, but as soon as the crisis is over - Ukrainians will certainly want to account for possible scams within the country.

Today, the majority of governments in Europe have matured to the realisation that helping Ukraine is necessary, because the collapse of our country will mean a threat to the whole of Europe. putin's russia is like the ancient Hydra - if we do not finally fight it with fire, it will be reborn stronger and will attack sooner or later. If not Ukraine, then another country. After 2014, russia broke all international rules and agreements. It cannot get away with this and I believe that justice will be done. That with the help of the West, Ukraine will win the war and instead of the death and destruction that russia brings to the world (and we see from history that the muscovites can do no other!), we will end the expansion of imperialism and start to build constructively. To create and develop in order to live better. This is the human vocation that all the world's religions speak of. There is a reason why Ukrainian soldiers say they are fighting the forces of evil. Because when we look at what the russians do to women, to children, to prisoners - we see that they are not driven by humanity, but by pure evil. putin himself is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the problem that plagues contemporary russia. For the russians WANT war, and until they are dissuaded from fighting - or discouraged from doing so - the whole world will be at risk.

Fortunately, more and more positive signals are reaching us: Ukraine's pre-accession negotiations with the European Union, promises of support from NATO. Of course, much depends on the attitude of individual countries, but I want to believe that 2024 will be a breakthrough year for Ukraine. Our task is to fight and to proclaim the truth to the world. The truth about Ukraine, which the russians have been falsifying for centuries. And the truth about russia, which wants to pass itself off internationally as the 'just arbiter' and 'victor of the Great Patriotic War', but in reality, was as responsible for the Second World War as Nazi Germany. russia 'won' the war it caused itself, and now wants to sell the same false narrative to the West in the context of the Ukraine. We must remember that Ukraine is a victim, not an aggressor, but also that it has its own dignity and will defend itself to the end.

** The name of the aggressor is deliberately written with a lower case letter, because "an entity*



**Magiczny
Kraków**

that does not respect the principles of international law and the principles of humanity is not worthy to be written with a capital letter" (quote by the Interviewee).