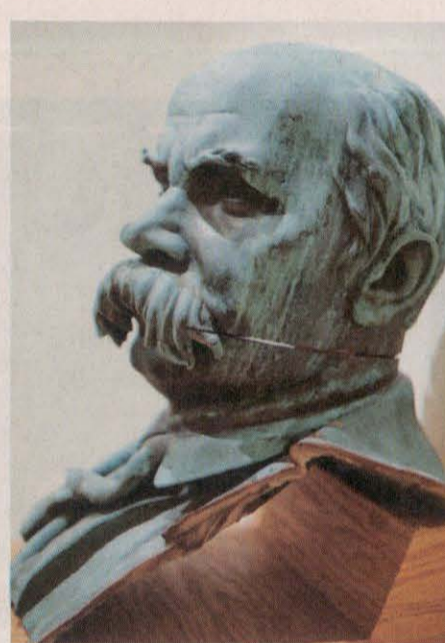


# The Shevchenko effect

From an 18-foot photograph above the museum that commemorates him, Taras Shevchenko watches over Bloor Street West. Inside, director Lyudmyla Pogoryelova has made it her mission to bring the Ukrainian literary heavyweight's work to the rest of us

STORY BY ADAM MCDOWELL PHOTOS BY JAVIER LOVERA



READERS OF THE *NEW YORKER* may remember the recent story of Iryna Havryliuk, who returned to her home city of Bucha, Ukraine, to find her husband, brother and pitbull Valik had been executed by Russian soldiers. Immediately after seeing the bodies, Iryna walked upstairs and felt under a bed for perhaps the only thing that might give her solace: a book of poetry by Taras Shevchenko.

Could Canadians ever come to appreciate Shevchenko — the 19th-century Ukrainian poet, artist and nationalist agitator — as Ukrainians do?

Lyudmyla Pogoryelova wants to use her position as director of the Taras Shevchenko Museum to show that anyone of any background can become a Shevchenko devotee. “He deserves to be better known,” she says. “Our mission is to promote Shevchenko, his life and works, and to promote Ukrainian and Ukrainian-Canadian culture.”

Located on Bloor Street just west of Dundas, this is the only Shevchenko museum in the Americas. Fronted by a towering grille of aluminum bars bearing the artist's serious, bearded face and nothing but “SHEVCHENKO” in giant, vivid blue letters, the museum is impossible to miss — but just as easy to stroll past. Pogoryelova says many visitors nowadays are locals who had been meaning to visit for years. Now, Russia's invasion is prompting them to finally venture inside. “We've had 300 per cent more interest. Maybe 500 per cent,” she says.

Visitors enter a bright, tidy museum with three main gallery rooms on the ground floor. The artifacts on display range from serfdom-era farm implements to ballroom-sized paintings based on Shevchenko's poems, as well as copies of his engravings and paintings.

Another draw is Pogoryelova herself. A musician by training, she got the job as director in 2007 after serving for four years as the museum's office manager. As the only full-time employee of the museum, it's often her to guide visitors through the galleries. Most first-timers take her up on a tour. In a soft voice, she delivers a carefully paced narration of Shevchenko's life.

A highly condensed version: Shevchenko was born a serf in 1814 and was orphaned at 11. His master beat him for painting at night, but talent was his ticket to an art apprenticeship — and his calling card with posh friends, who bought his freedom. Got him sent into exile in harsh, remote penal colonies under orders not to write or paint. He did anyway, and died at 47.

Like everyone born and raised in Ukraine, Pogoryelova has been familiar

with his story since she was a little girl in Odessa. But sitting in the mid-century-style wood-paneled library on the second floor, she loses her composure to think of it yet again. “It's unbelievable what happened with him,” she says, shutting her eyes.

To keep Shevchenko's memory alive in their new country, Ukrainian-Canadian community members built the first iteration of the museum in Oakville in 1952. Then, as now, it was funded mostly by private donations. That building burned down in 1988. The museum then relocated to Bloor Street West in 1995, and moved a few doors east to its current spot in 2019.

Since the war, the museum has been pressed into service as a cultural hub for the new wave of Ukrainian refugees in Toronto, as well as those curious about Ukrainian culture. The building bustles with a renewed energy, holding open houses, talks, plays in Ukrainian, get-togethers for local Ukrainian filmmakers, workshops to make your own pysanky (traditional Ukrainian Easter eggs) and more.

What won't happen here under Pogoryelova's watch? “We won't bring war here to this museum,” she says. “It's too painful. The war affects every minute of our lives, up to the point that you cannot think straight. We just want to show the beauty of our culture.” (There may be one exception; the museum is running art therapy exercises for recent refugees, and may display some of the results, which could involve scenes from the war.)

Instead of direct political instruction, Pogoryelova hopes Canadians of all backgrounds will discover in Shevchenko's poetry a timeless, universal voice for peace and resistance. Even in translation, “the poetry speaks to you, no matter what time you live in,” she says. And his more political works can seem especially topical. “He's talking about independence. He is talking about freedom, about living in dignity.”

Where to begin reading Shevchenko, then? She pulls a book from a shelf and starts to read a few lines aloud from “It Makes No Difference to Me” — a poem Pogoryelova says “kicked her right here” at age 14, tapping her heart. Tears welling up in her eyes, she breaks off. “You read it by yourself,” she says, and hands the book to me. Written in 1847, it ends with these prophetic lines: *It makes great difference to me / That evil folk now lull to sleep / Our mother Ukraine, and will rouse / Her, when she's plundered, in the flames. / That makes great difference to me.*

Lyudmyla Pogoryelova (top) says visits to the museum (1604 Bloor St. W.) have increased more than 300 per cent since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But Shevchenko's poetry resonates “no matter what time you live in,” she says. “He's talking about freedom.”

IN THE NEWS

## Tunnelling-machine rescue efforts anything but boring. “It's a nightmare,” locals say of disruptions

Residents living on Old Mill Drive near Bloor Street say they are fed up with the City of Toronto's mismanagement and lack of communication regarding an infrastructure project that began last year to address chronic basement flooding.

In March 2022, the city lowered a micro-tunnelling boring machine into the ground to create a new sewer tunnel to divert rainfall away from homes in the area. When the work stopped in the summer, residents like Tanya Boswick had no idea the machine had become tangled up in steel tiebacks from a previous project.

“It's been a nightmare,” says the 33-year-old, who lives on Old Mill Drive near Bloor Street. “The noise, the shaking of our houses, the constant sound of trucks that starts at 7 a.m. and doesn't stop until 7 p.m.” She encounters obstacles taking her dog and one-and-a-half-year-old on walks. “There are potholes, dirt, construction debris, fencing and water everywhere,” Boswick says.

The city hired Clearway Construction Limited to rescue the boring machine in a contract that will cost taxpayers \$9 million. The removal was set to be completed by March 2023, but ground stabilization work is progressing slower than expected, says Mika Raisanen, a director with the City of Toronto's division of Engineering and Construction Services.

“Once this is complete, the rescue of the micro-tunnelling machine will resume,” Raisanen said in an emailed statement.

In the meantime, residents have rallied together to stop the noise and disruption. Boswick wrote a letter to Councillor Gord Perks and the city on behalf of the community, urging more transparency and a town hall to address concerns.

Through the ordeal, Boswick says the community has felt neglected by Perks and the city.

“I know it's hard to deliver hard messages,” says Boswick, “but what's worse is hiding a hard message and having an absentee councillor who doesn't advocate for you in any of the meetings.”

In response to complaints, the city has set up bi-weekly virtual meetings with residents to provide regular updates about the project.

— Mariam Matti

Have a hot tip about Ukraine happening in your 'hood? Send it to: stories@westendphoenix.com