

## NATALIE SENJOV-MAKOHON AND NINA WHITTAKER

### ‘Enlightenment’: preserving the Ukrainian-Australian history of the Prosvita Press

When a rare book enters the State Library Victoria collections, it is subject to a series of rigorous processes to document and protect its physical condition. From careful checks for pests and damage through to treatment and rehousing, the Conservation and Preservation teams provide world-class care for the physical item at hand.

Hand in hand with this processing, but often overlooked, is the intellectual treatment that each item receives as it crosses into our catalogue. The process of cataloguing rare materials involves the re-creation of often forgotten intellectual, creative and industrial networks and histories. Through consultation with historians, linguists, communities and creators, the Library creates world-class data that aim to highlight the significance of each item.

In 2022, a small pile of books labelled ‘prayer book – Ukrainian’ led to a close collaboration between us: Nina Whittaker, the Library’s rare books cataloguer, and Dr Natalie Senjov-Makohon, the Library’s 2016 Ukrainian Studies Foundation Australia fellow. After following loose ends all the way to the city of Križevci, Croatia, our research eventually led us back to a small building on Canning Street, North Melbourne, and to a printing press run by Basilian nuns.

*The Sisters of St Basil at work at the Prosvita Press. Photograph appeared in *Sribny yuviley pratsi sester vasyliyanok v Avstraliji: 1967–1992* (Silver jubilee of the work of the Basilian Sisters in Australia, 1967–1992), Australia: Sisters of the Order of St Basil, 1992, p. 68. Donated by Natalie Senjov-Makohon, 2022.*







### Two Twigs: a short history of Ukrainians in Victoria

Ukraine suffered catastrophic losses before and during World War II, causing many Ukrainians to flee their homeland.<sup>1</sup> When Australian Minister of Immigration Arthur Calwell opened Australia's borders to Europeans fleeing their war-torn home countries in 1949,<sup>2</sup> Ukrainians from across the USSR and former Yugoslavia took the opportunity to emigrate.<sup>3</sup> Among these were 20,000 Ukrainian Catholics.

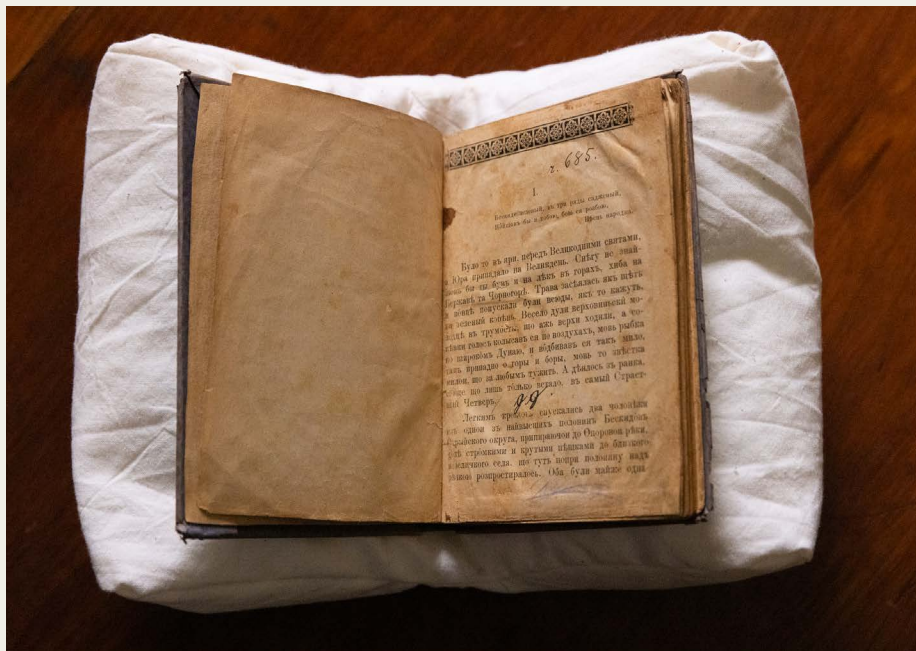
In 2016, academic researcher Dr Natalie Senjov-Makohon was awarded the State Library Victoria and Ukrainian Studies Foundation Australia Fellowship. Natalie's fellowship project used the Library's extensive collections to further the scholarly development and preservation of Ukrainian cultural heritage in Australia. The research focused on the history of first-generation Ukrainian immigrants in Geelong, covering newspapers, census data, municipal directories, annual reports, passage histories and more.

The resulting publication, *Two Twigs: the Unique Ukrainian Australian Emigrants in Geelong, Victoria* was launched at the Library in 2018. The book follows the stories of two groups of Ukrainian immigrants in Australia, with one group arriving via Germany as displaced persons after World War II, and the other group following the political upheavals of Yugoslavia. While documenting the extraordinary stories of these 'Geelongskis' and their contributions to Australian society, the publication also highlighted the breadth of the Library's collections relating to the history of Ukrainians in Australia. Natalie presented the work in Kyiv in 2018, and in 2019 it was recognised by the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture, and by the European Union's heritage collections database, Europeana.

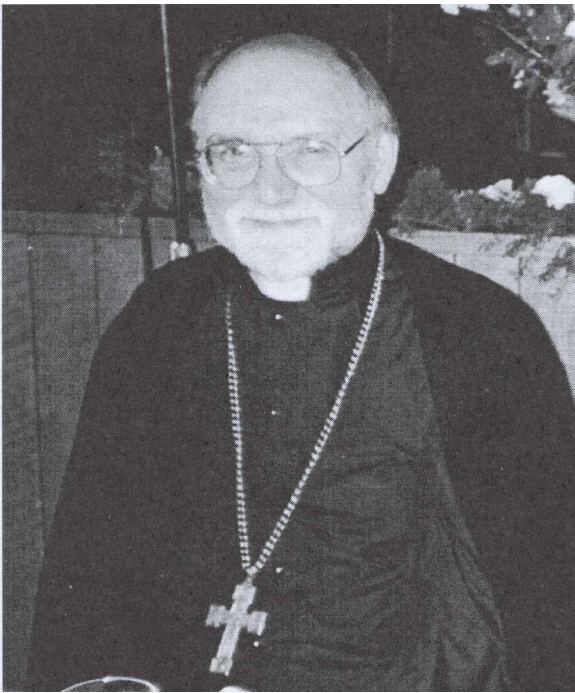
### Ukrainian books, Ukrainian stories

The collaborative partnership between Natalie and the Library continued after the completion of *Two Twigs* with the donation of her research archive, now catalogued as *Ukrainian Australian post war migrant histories*.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the archive, this donation included a small collection of books that had been passed down through the Senjov and Burlak families for generations.

Each of these rare books had complex histories, and cataloguing them took a close collaboration between cataloguers, librarians, academics and Ukrainian community members across Victoria. One particular book with no existing record required the improbable input of the bishop of a Ukrainian Catholic church in the city of Križevci, central Croatia.<sup>5</sup> The resulting catalogue records document a history of Ukrainian publishing and readership through war, displacement and emigration to Victoria.



Rare Ukrainian books in the Library's rare books collection. **Top** The title page of prayer book *Knizhochka dliā chlenov' nabozhnogo soiūza "zhivoho rozhantsā" v' eparkhii krizhevatskoi*, Zagreb: Kr. Zem. Tiskara, 1917, RARES 274.972 K749. **Bottom** A copy of *Strastny Chetver'*, volume 19 of *The Library for Rus Youth*. Kolomyiā: Z pechatni I. Bruka i spõlky, 1898. RARES 891.79 D655.



Left Rt Rev Ivan Szewciw, first editor of *Church and Life*. Photograph appeared in 'Fifty Years of Service', *Church and Life*, No. 25–27. Right The cover of the October 1960 issue of *TSerkva i zhyttia* (Church and Life).

Our discussions about which librarians to contact in cities like Kolomyia and Lviv took on a new sense of urgency when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. The reconstruction of the vibrant intellectual networks that criss-crossed Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora became part of a larger effort to protect and preserve Ukraine's cultural heritage amid fierce fighting in Ukraine's cities, towns and countryside. The *Library for Rus Youth* series, of which Natalie's donation included a copy,<sup>6</sup> had its biggest holdings in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv. The current war has caused major disruptions to Lviv, which became the Ukrainian government and military centre following the Russian threat to the capital Kyiv in the country's east. Natalie's contacts for researching the *Library for Rus Youth* volumes became difficult to reach.

The devastation in Ukraine led to a worldwide movement to both assist Ukrainians directly, and to preserve Ukrainian cultural heritage. As we continued to research and catalogue Natalie's books, we discussed how we could use our research to highlight the history of Ukrainian publishing. In particular, we wanted to explore the printing and publishing networks of the Ukrainian diaspora, as our research showed rich networks of communication and exchange from Ukraine to Argentina, Rome and finally Melbourne. Throughout our research, there was one name that kept recurring. At Ganning Street, North Melbourne was the hidden story of the Prosvita Press.





**Top** The nuns bid farewell to Argentina on board the ship *Giulio Cesare* heading for Rome. Photograph appeared in *Sisters of the Order of Saint Basil: Golden Jubilee 1967–2017*, Australia: Sisters of the Order of St Basil, 2017, p. 5. Donated by Natalie Senjov-Makohon, 2022. **Bottom** Bishop Ivan Prasko with the newly arrived sisters from Argentina – Konstantyna, Mother Maria, Anisia and Lukia. Photograph appeared in ‘Fifty Years of Service’, *Church and Life*, No. 25–27, p. 44.

### The Prosvita Press: the beginning

Twentieth-century Ukrainian immigrants in Australia quickly realised that they needed their own press, to provide cultural, religious and linguistic connection in their new homeland.<sup>7</sup> Reverend Ivan Szewciw approached the Union Internationale de la Presse Catholique in 1960 and in July that year received authorisation to establish the Ukrainian Catholic Press Association in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

The first edition of the quarterly Ukrainian newsletter *Церква і життя* (*Church and Life*) appeared in Sydney in April 1960, edited by Szewciw under the guidance of Rev Dr Petro Diachyshyn.<sup>9</sup> Ukrainian articles written in Ukrainian script were printed in the publishing house of Mr Boris Ignativ, a publisher from Ukraine who had previously founded the Ukrainian newspaper *Ukrainians in Australia*.<sup>10</sup> After seven issues, the production of *Church and Life* moved to Melbourne.

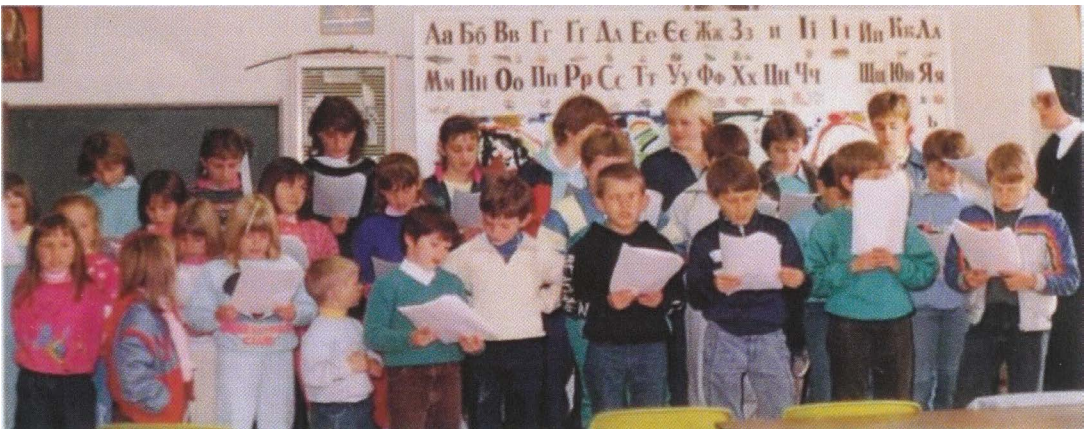
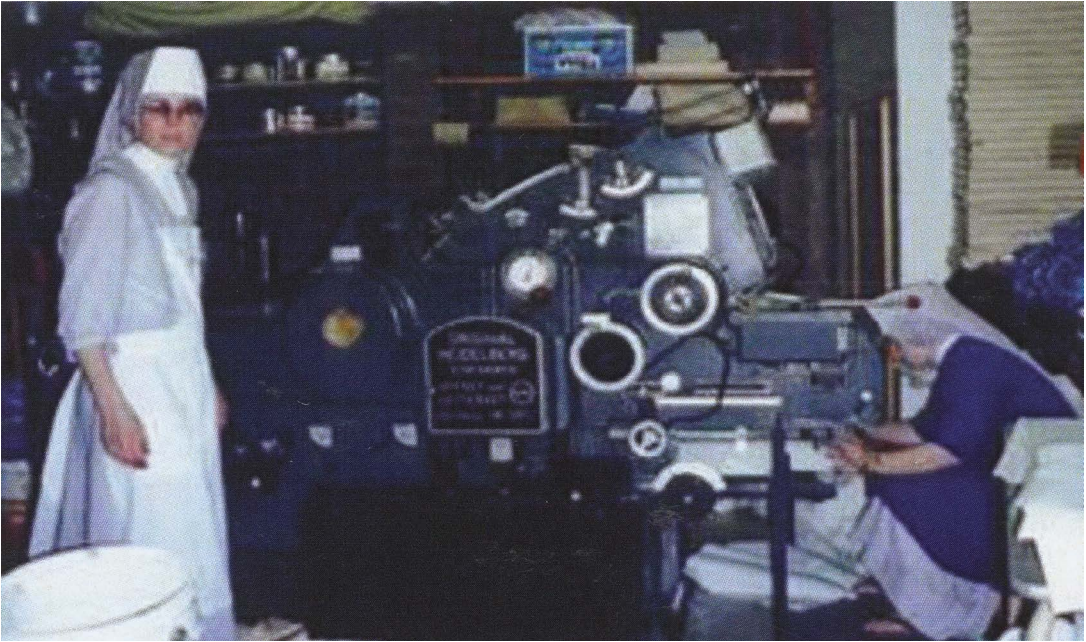
The Eparchy of Australia and Oceania in Melbourne continued to publish *Church and Life* until December 1967 with the help of Professor Eugene Zawalinsky and Mrs Sofia Zawalinsky.<sup>11</sup> In 1968, its publication was reconfigured and formalised under Bishop Dr Ivan Prasko, who purchased printing equipment including a Varityper, and established an editorial board. The name *Prosvita*, 'enlightenment' in Ukrainian, was chosen to connect the press to its cultural and linguistic roots.<sup>12</sup> A private Ukrainian Catholic publishing house in North Melbourne was born.

### The Sisters of Saint Basil

Meanwhile, in 1966, Bishop Prasko had written to the General Curia in Rome, asking them to send over some sisters from the Order of Saint Basil the Great, an international order of Eastern Catholic nuns.<sup>13</sup> Patriarch Josyf Slipyi, who would later visit Australia and tour the Prosvita Press, was instrumental in selecting Mother Maria to lead the Australian group. A Ukrainian emigrant to Argentina, Mother Maria was then the director of an elementary school in Buenos Aires. In March 1966 she received a letter appointing her as the founder of the Basilian Sisters in Australia.

The sisters sailed via Rome, where they met with the Basilians' Mother General Claudia and received the blessing of Patriarch Slipyi. They arrived in Melbourne in March 1967.<sup>14</sup> They stopped only briefly, for the ordination of Rt Rev Archprotopresbyter Dmytro Seniw, the first Ukrainian Catholic priest ordained in Australia, before continuing on to Sydney. There they began their pastoral duties, taking on a range of religious, educational and community work ranging from embroidery lessons and baking through to



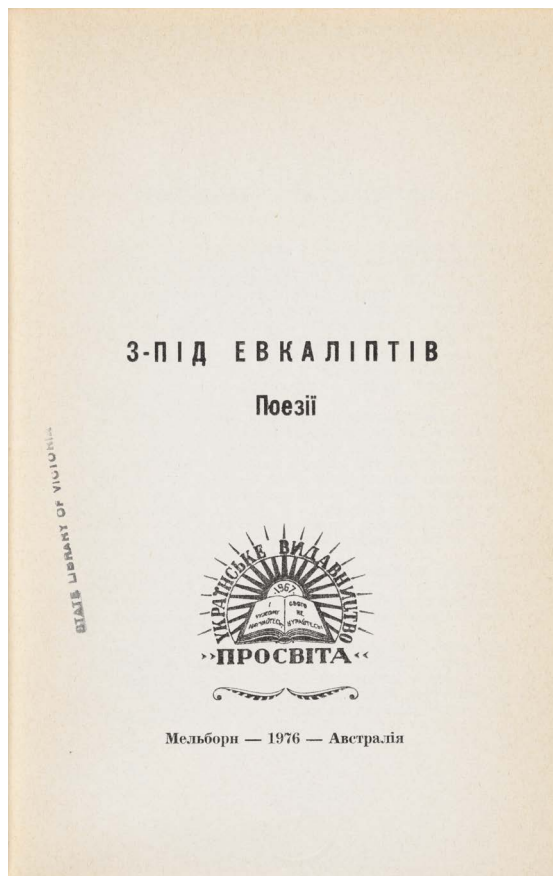


Top Mother Anisia at work. Bottom Ukrainian language and culture school. Photographs appeared in *Sisters of the Order of Saint Basil: Golden Jubilee 1967–2017*, Australia: Sisters of the Order of St Basil, 2017. Donated by Natalie Senjov-Makohon, 2022.

weekend religion and language classes.<sup>15</sup> They supported community events, christenings and communions, and provided religious, cultural and linguistic education for children in Ukrainian schools. The childcare centre opened by the sisters in Sydney continues to operate today.

At the further request of Bishop Prasko, four sisters – Anisia, Zenovia, Clementia and Sofronia – were transferred to Melbourne in October, 1970. They moved into Canning Street in North Melbourne, where a new convent was established in a renovated building opposite the Sts Peter and Paul Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral. They initially performed similar pastoral work





The title page of *Ukrainian poets in Australia: an anthology* (English title) printed by Prosvita and showing the Prosvita rising sun logo. Wasyl Symonenko Literary and Arts Club of Melbourne, *Z-pid evkaliptiv: poezii* (Ukrainian title, direct translation 'From under the gumtrees: poetry'), North Melbourne: Prosvita, 1976.

to what they had done in Sydney, but it was less than six months before Bishop Ivan Prasko wrote to Mother General Claudia in Rome to ask another favour. Prasko requested her blessing for the sisters to begin working in the Prosvita printing house.<sup>16</sup> On 2 February 1971, the nuns began their work with Prosvita.

The move proved a success, with the sisters soon taking over the publication of *Church and Life* under the joint leadership of Wengliovskyy and Mother Anisia. Their massive efforts led to an increase in Prosvita's output and in March 1973, *Church and Life* became a weekly newspaper. A vital point of connection for the Ukrainian diaspora in Australia and New Zealand, the newspaper was filled with news from the community in Victoria and wider Australia, and also from Ukraine. This Ukrainian news was sourced with great difficulty. Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, and the sisters often received underground news through a network of Catholic contacts, jotting down notes from phone calls received at two or three in the morning.



Natalie's wedding invitation, co-designed with the sisters and printed on the Prosvita Press, 1976.

The sisters also began to use the press for the service of their community, producing Ukrainian community notices, invitations and other ephemera, and various religious and educational programs for Ukrainian school and church activities.<sup>17</sup> They were skilled enough to offer custom designs for wedding invitations and other ephemera. Prosvita also printed educational materials free of charge for the Ukrainian school teachers (who were unpaid at the time, and taught Saturdays).

Aside from the significant amount of ephemera printed to support the community, between 1973 and 1993 the nuns printed approximately 30 full-length publications on varying topics, from *Under the gum trees: poetry* to *Theory of Literature and the Science of Stylistics*. Alongside *Church and Life*, these Prosvita publications were sold by Melbourne's Ukrainian booksellers including Fokshan Library & Book Supply in Glenroy (Українська Висилкова Книгарня в Австралії) and Bayda Books in Brunswick, which still operates on Lygon Street today.<sup>18</sup> The eparchy also covered Aotearoa New Zealand, where Prosvita publications were sent for distribution.

Of their prolific output, Bishop Prasko wrote in *Ukrainians in Australia*:

In Melbourne the Sisters of St. Basil assisted with apostolic work through working in 'Prosvita'. The publishing by the Sisters was important for the spiritual work of our Eparchy. Through 'Church and Life', we were able to reach 2,000 to 3,000 families weekly... They were instrumental in the



printing of religious educational material... They printed in Ukrainian and English a prayer book which is still used today in Ukrainian churches across Australia... They were involved in the printing of the prayer book 'Lord, to you I lift my soul' which was issued by Patriarch Josef Slipyj... This prayer book is used widely by Ukrainians in Ukraine and the Diaspora...<sup>19</sup>

### The growth of the press

Under the sisters' watch, the Prosvita Press became not only a vital source of printed material for the Ukrainian community, but also a platform for local Ukrainian research and literature. Each member of the Ukrainian community who contributed to the press introduced new and dynamic literary networks to Prosvita. Key connectors included Lidiya Hayevs'ka-Denys, a passionate educator, activist and author of Ukrainian childrens' curricula, books and poems.<sup>20</sup> Lidiya sat on the editorial boards of both *Church and Life* and *Nashe Slovo*, the journal of the Ukrainian Women's Association in Australia.<sup>21</sup>

Another network of relationships was established through Sofia Zawalinsky's work with the press.<sup>22</sup> Bibliographically astute, Sofia worked to develop the most significant Ukrainian church library in Australia – the Ukrainian Bishop's Library at the Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul – to a collection of 14,000 volumes by the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> A highly active member of the Ukrainian community, she was the President of Ukrainian Associations in Victoria (1955–56), and the President of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (1956–57).

As times changed, so did the Prosvita Press. In August 1983, Bishop Prasko officially presented Prosvita to the Sisters of St Basil, in recognition of their 'great selfless work and sacrifice'.<sup>24</sup> Three years later the printing house switched to a computerised system, again with Bishop Prasko's support. The sisters took it in their stride, learning to use the new machinery.

### The end of Prosvita

One final change proved to be too much for the press. In 1993, the new Bishop Peter Stasiuk arrived from Canada to take over from Bishop Prasko, whose support for the sisters' work had been crucial to Prosvita's success. Stasiuk took over the press, dismissed the sisters and hired a contracted editor.<sup>25</sup> The controversial handover took place on October 19, 1994. The sisters were made to leave without negotiation or compensation.<sup>26</sup>

Mother Anisia, a long-time editor of *Church and Life* and one of the four appointed trustees, wrote an open letter to Stasiuk in 1995.<sup>27</sup> In it she rejected Stasiuk's assertion that the sisters had been looking to leave the Press, and clearly stated the sisters' position:



**Top** The computerisation of Prosvita. **Bottom** Children performing 'hajilka' on Easter Sunday as taught by the sisters. Photographs appeared in *Sribny yuviley pratsi sester vasyliyanok v Avstraliyi: 1967–1992* (Silver jubilee of the work of the Basilian Sisters in Australia, 1967–1992), Australia: Sisters of the Order of St Basil, 1992. Donated by Natalie Senjov-Makohon, 2022.



Unfortunately, here too there is an incorrect coverage of the facts. Until now, for 24 years, we have worked together, in solidarity, directly for nothing, out of a sense of duty and with the intention of doing it for the glory of God and for the good of our Church. The work in the printing house and all the disadvantages of the Sisters were considered as part of the Apostolate of the good press. Therefore, the statement that the sisters “wanted to leave the printing house 10 years ago” is incorrect. We were ready to continue working in the printing house, but not in such conditions as you, Lord, prepared for us.

With the core group that ran the press thus disbanded, output decreased significantly. One of the four original trustees of Prosvita Publishing, Rev. Szewciw, continued to write – but with no-one left to print his work, he sent it back to Lviv to be published underground. Eventually the name Prosvita itself splintered, with the nuns continuing to self-publish occasional works under their treasured name Prosvita until 1994, while the Prosvita Publishing Co. Pty. Ltd continued to print *Church and Life* in North Melbourne until it was disbanded in 2023.

Although the nuns were dismissed from their role as printers in 1994, their contributions to the preservation and teaching of culture and language continues today. They run childcare centres, prepare children for Holy Communion, teach embroidery and traditional baking, tend to community gardens, and care for the elderly and infirm. They visit Ukrainian families and they are often invited to Ukrainian social and community gatherings, and to festive and special occasions.

Their efforts are reflected today in the tireless work of the Ukrainian diaspora in protecting and advocating for their cultural heritage, in the face of the massive losses faced in Ukraine.

### Preserving the stories of community presses

Like many other small, community-run presses, Prosvita’s history is not captured in broader histories of printing. While much has been written about small presses, these histories tend to focus on fine art presses or literary presses, rather than presses that print functional ephemera.<sup>28</sup>

All over the world, however, those with access to presses have used them for small, local operations – producing wedding invitations and flyers, or supporting the education of children. These materials are mostly not intended for wider distribution, making the context of their creation difficult to capture, let alone study on a broad scale. The stories of these community

presses are more likely scattered in local histories than in general works on book history or bibliography. However, these presses have in common a core belief that through the lens of the press, they are able to create works of value to their communities. As UCLA's Radical Librarianship Institute notes,

The underlying assumption here is that print has the unique ability to facilitate public and social communication and physical gathering, and thus serves as a powerful tool of cultural exchange and social change in ways that accessing information in the digital realm does not. Further, print is durable, persistent, and resilient.<sup>29</sup>

The Prosvita Press exists in this loose category of the functional community press. The main role of the Prosvita Press, whilst occasionally publishing significant works, was to support the much larger work that these women took on in the preservation and transmission of Ukrainian cultural heritage in Victoria.

At the time of writing, we have been working to build the first-ever bibliography of all works produced at the Prosvita Press. Many of its details come from old articles and footnotes of community journals, mostly in Ukrainian. Navigating these would have been impossible without Natalie's expert eye. Of the 57 publications now recorded, some are not held or listed anywhere in the world. Seven exist in the State Library Victoria collections, where further work has produced bilingually accessible catalogue records. Work also continues to fill in the small remaining gaps in the Library's holdings of *Church and Life*. We are also grateful for the deep community expertise offered by those associated with Prosvita, including Mother Anisia, who Natalie interviewed for the project in 2022.

The history of printing and publishing in Australia remains incomplete without the histories of community-based, grassroots presses. It is the artists, authors, historians and storytellers from within these communities that have the knowledge to explore, research and share these stories. Collaborations like Natalie's fellowship establish vital avenues for shared knowledge, representative storytelling, and community involvement in revealing the full story of the Library's collections.

*The Library gratefully receives offers of physical and digital material for the collection from the community. Visit [slv.vic.gov.au/get-involved/offer-collection-material-library](http://slv.vic.gov.au/get-involved/offer-collection-material-library)*