

The Craft of Basket Making in the Lubny Area Traditions and Contemporary Situation

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Article abstract

Locally made baskets from bulrushes have long been used by village women in the Lubny area (Poltava oblast) for carrying milk and vegetables to town for the market. People also used them to take food and water for themselves to the fields where they worked. The *zemstvo* (local landholders' administration) supported the development of artisanal crafts at the end of the 19th century. Substantial changes occurred in artisanal crafts with the arrival of Soviet rule. People were required to join an organized work brigade to continue such trades. Based on fieldwork, I provide a description of the artisanal craft in the first half of the 20th century and as it changed since that time. Gradually, with the development of industry, the need for baskets of this type decreased, and the craft began to decline. The generation that learned to make baskets in the 1950s and 1960s is now passing away.

THE CRAFT OF BASKET MAKING IN THE LUBNY AREA

Traditions and Contemporary Situation

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The beginnings of basket making in the Lubny area are unknown. Artisans at the end of the 19th century stated that it was known from the times of their grandparents (Lysenko 1904: 78-79). It was a “suburban” handicraft and village women used the baskets for carrying milk and vegetables to town for the market. People also took food and water for themselves to the fields where they worked. “Harvesters took water, food. And you put it there, cover it with some grass, and it keeps long in the basket. If the food is warm, it will stay warm, if the water is cool – it will stay cool a long time.” (Pidtoptanyi 2019).¹

In statistical and ethnographic works about handicrafts in the Poltava Governorate at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, we learn that basket making began in the village Lisova Slobidka, Chornukhy district, Poltava oblast (Lysenko 1904: 78-79).² Viktor I. Vasylenko documented the craft of preparing baskets and mats in the nearby town of Horodyshche, Chornukhy district (Vasylenko 1885: 53).³ A survey of domestic crafts of the Poltava Governorate in 1904 identified the spread of this craft to neighboring villages: In the Voronky parish – Horodyshche, Lisova Slobidka, Postav-muka, Poteriukhy and parts of Zahrebellia, Voron’ky and Melekhy; in the Chornukhy parish – Sukhonosivka, Kozlivka and Piznyky. The craft also spread south across the Udai River into the Lubny district. There, it became especially widespread in the Tarandyntsi parish (villages of Khaleptsi and Kalaidyntsi), Tyshky parish (villages of Krutyi Bereh, Khyttsi, Biivtsi and Lushnyky) and Denysivka parish (village

1. Petro Dmytrovych Pidtoptanyi was born in 1957 and is a member of the Union of Journalists of Ukraine.

2. The village was then called Slobidka, in the Lokhvytsia district.

3. Horodyshche was then administratively in the Lokhvytsia district.

of Zasullia). Gradually, the craft spread further into neighboring villages on both sides of the Udai River. Horodyshche became the center of activities since the most skilled artisans worked there, and most importantly, it had a market with buyers to whom all local production was carried (Lysenko 1904: 78).

The Rusinova and Korenieva landholder families helped popularize the craft, as they facilitated sending examples of the baskets to an exposition in Kharkiv and to sellers of similar goods in other towns. This contributed to a rise in the value of the baskets, which had previously been quite low. In the winter of 1892, the baskets sold locally for 10-12 kopeks each, but the next summer for 15-20 (Katalei 1892: 299-300).

The *zemstvo* (local landholders' administration) contributed significantly to the development of artisanal crafts in the Poltava area at the end of the 19th century. A crafts class, in which they taught reed weaving, was opened in the *zemstvo* people's school in Horodyshche in 1899. The best craftsman in the area was designated as teacher (Semenov 1903: 197).

Substantial changes occurred in artisanal crafts with the arrival of Soviet rule. Private property and individual activity were banned, and people were required to join a newly organized work brigade (*artil'*, артіль) to continue their occupations. A brigade for making baskets out of reeds operated in Horodyshche:

There was a very big brigade in the 1920s, and all our people from Khaleptsi, Kalaidyntsi, and Khyttsi brought their baskets there. So, they took some kind of material from the brigade facility, or maybe prepared their own raw materials, and submitted them to the brigade. There was a brigade leader, who got paid for this position. It was somehow under state control and operated in larger towns. (Pidtoptanyi 2019)

There were also branches of the work brigade in the villages, where they received the goods and paid the artisans. One such branch operated in the village of Khaleptsi. Svitlana Oleksandrivna Iakuba, a master from the village of Khaleptsi, born in 1940, remembers that her father-in-law, Tymish Musiiiovych Halushka, received baskets from people, "The old man was a *"zahotovach"* (заготовач, preparer); that's how it was called then. But they organized the brigade somewhere higher and there were bosses. My father-in-law walked with the baskets to the bank in Lubny for money. And then the baskets were taken by conveyors to the goods station and loaded into wagons." (Iakuba 2019) In addition, some villages had houses in which the craftspeople came to weave the baskets:

There was one in Horodyshchi, and also one in our village, in Khaleptsi. It was called a 'promov' house, from the word 'Promartil' (Промартіль, a portmanteau for 'industry brigade'). They set up looms there, and as many girls sat there and wove. Because at home, if you are not busy with the cow, then the pigs, then the chickens. You need burn a bundle of cane reeds in the clay oven to heat the house. And if you go to the Promartil' house – there's nowhere to go. You peel them, rip them, weave them, and that's all. There you just focus on one job. (Iakuba 2019)

The basket weaving industry brought substantial income for families. This was particularly relevant in the post-war period when people were especially poor. Everyone in the family might work, actively engaging youth and children. Svitlana Iakuba described how, "I was seven years old. My mother put me there [in front of the loom] because we didn't have a single penny". (Iakuba 2019) Anastasia Kononivna Rud', a master from the village of Lushnyky, explained that she was orphaned young and had to learn to make baskets as a young child:

When my father passed away, I was nine. I was left alone with my mother, as my sister was married away. My mother goes to the work in the collective farm, and I sit [in front of the loom]. I had to weave ten pairs [of baskets] in a week. That was twenty to make. That was the quota that I had to bring in. The brigade center was open on Saturdays. So, when I wove ten pairs, mother tied them off, and I braided them. I carried them in, and they gave me ten rubles. So, a ruble for each pair. And for one ruble we could buy seven loaves of bread. And then we could live. Or we could buy five kilograms of sugar. (Rud' 2019)

Bulrushes grew locally on the banks of the Udai River and were used to prepare the baskets.

Everyone made them in front of their houses. When the industry gained momentum, sometimes there weren't even enough bulrushes in the mud, because there were so many people [harvesting them]. At those times, they brought in the reeds on barges from Kalkaiv. (Iakuba 2019)

The bullrushes were prepared from June to September. They were cut with sickles, dried and stacked somewhere in an enclosure, so that they could be used in the fall and winter to weave baskets.

There was a period for preparing the reeds. In some places they mowed hay, and then this a little. Mother walked into the mud and cut those bulrushes. I didn't go in there. Then they carried it out onto the bank. They laid it out, dried it. We lived near a mudflat, here next to the river. So, mother used to pull it out. We had a woven fence in the yard, enclosing one side from the gates all the way to the barn. And so, we

laid out bundles of reeds there, so that they would dry. They dry until they are dry. They didn't throw away the raw pieces. If the weather was good, it could dry even in a week. And when it was dry, they bound it and placed it up in the other barn, in the attic, and then we wove it all winter long. (Rud' 2019)

Baskets were made by the entire family, from the oldest to the youngest, and everyone had their responsibilities. The work continued through the week, from Monday to Saturday, when the baskets had to be submitted.

So, the whole family is sitting during the week, eight or nine people, including three daughters-in-law. And so we begin on Monday, if there is no holiday, to peel the reeds. Then grandmother Khvedos'ka sits on the edge of the bed and strips the reeds on the floor. Grandfather stands beside the bench and weaves the handles, so that we will have enough for the week. I help to strip the reeds. Then on Tuesday we sit [at the looms]. Grandfather doesn't sit, he puts a loom on a bench, stringing and weaving little ones like this. And I am weaving the big ones, because I'm a young daughter-in-law, and I have to weave seven of them in one day and one evening. That was the quota, so that we would produce a whole packet of baskets by the end of the week. In three and a half days we wove forty-seven of them, it was called a packet. And then half a day on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, we braid them. And on Saturday grandfather tied the baskets together in bundles for transport. And people start coming on Saturday, carrying baskets for grandfather into the barn. (Iakuba 2019)

The bulrush strands had to be prepared before weaving. The stems were sorted into three categories, and each went for a different part of the basket. "So, the plant grows quite tall. We cut it, and it has to dry over the summer and then we strip it. The first and thickest goes for the handles. Then that part goes for the weft in the weave. And the central part of the reed, for the warp, which is mounted up on the loom. If it is wormy, then we put it aside for fuel." (Iakuba 2019).

First, handles were handwoven for each basket. They were braided from a triplet of reeds.

The rest of the basket was woven on a loom. The number of looms in a house depended on the number of people in the family that could weave. "We had a loom in the house. One loom, because there was not much time to weave. But in some houses, there were two or three looms. In grandfather Kilistrat's place, for example, they had a family of five daughters, mother and father, and also a grandmother. Three looms stood in their house." (Rud' 2019)

Looms were wooden rectangles, with two vertical posts (*stiika*, стійка, *berestia*, берестя), connected at the top and the bottom with horizontal bars (*zherdochky*, жердочки). The vertical elements were inserted into bases (*lapky*, лапки).

We tie the warp to the top and the bottom *zherdochky*. Here at the bottom, that is the beater (ляда, liada). It goes back and forth. For every [weft] reed, you have to hit it, to knock it. The beater is made for 30 or 32 warp strands (*osnovyny*, основини). That depends on the size of the basket you are making. Here I have it made with thirty. It will make a smaller basket. For a larger basket that can hold three jars, I add on two more spaces [in the beater]. You could also weave something using the entire width of the beater, but my hands hurt then, and I don't overextend to make them. (Iakuba 2019)



Figure 1. A loom for making baskets, with the warp reeds tied in. Property of Svitlana Oleksandriivna Iakuba (Bolotiuk) in the village of Khaleptsi, Lubny district, Poltava oblast. Photo by Maria Verhovska, 2019.

Once the warp reeds are secured vertically onto the loom frame, the reeds that form the weft are woven from bottom to top on the loom, producing a large flat woven sheet that will become the basket, oriented sideways. The first few rows of weft (at the bottom while on the loom) will become one short side of the basket. In the middle of these first few rows of weft, the weaver leaves unwoven spaces in the middle of the weft – called “*vushka*” (вушка, singular *vushok*) or locally “*srachky*” (срачи) (see Figure 1). These *vushky* will determine the short width of the basket’s bottom. When about a third part is woven, one end of the handles is woven onto the left and right sides. Then another third is woven and the second end of each handle is woven in. Then the final third is woven, the same height as the first. The final (upper) rows of weft on the loom are woven in the same way as the first, including a symmetrical *vushok*. These final rows will become the opposite short side wall of the basket. When the weaving is complete and cut off from the loom, the large flat piece is placed on the ground and turned 90 degrees so that the parts that were top and bottom now become the sides. The piece is folded twice to clarify the bottom and lift the long sides to vertical. The sides with the *vushky* are bent towards each other to form the short sides of the basket, joining together with the *vushky* at the basket’s bottom. The remaining extensions of the warp reeds are woven in manually to join the side walls together and connect them to the bottom. After that, the top edge is braided (see Figure 2).

And then, when I have woven a section, then I weave in [one base of each] handle. When I have woven a second part of the basket body, I measure where to put in the handle and I weave in the second [base of each] handle. Then I weave the last section and the “*vushka*” (we called them “*srachky*”). When I have the three sections woven, I cut it off the loom and untie it. And this is what comes out. Then I place it on the floor, flatten it out and adjust the handles. Then I bend it over on these *srachky*. I begin to braid it together. I soak it, so it will be wet and soft. Then I tie together the two sides. I have a wooden peg (*shvaika*, швайка). So, I puncture four holes in the woven mat and insert the remaining ends of the warp reeds, making the bottom of the basket. And that’s how a basket comes out. Then we place it up on supports and I begin to braid [around the top edges to secure and decorate them]. (Iakuba 2019)



Figure 2. A traditional reed basket. Property of Svitlana Oleksandrivna Iakuba (Bolotiuk) in the village of Khaleptsi, Lubny district, Poltava oblast.

Photo by Maria Verhovska, 2019.

Sometimes the baskets were decorated with a grill pattern on the top part. Sometimes the reeds were dyed and a colored ornament was woven in. When needed, they made a lid for the top.

You can make a basket with a grill pattern (*reshotka*, решотка) or without it. You can also make it with a lid (*kryshka*, кришка). Earlier, at work, we made them with lids. Then we also made another kind of basket: One side is woven lower and the other side is higher. And you tie that taller side up, so that it becomes the lid. And you twist something up like buttons here, and the lid closes. And sometimes we made them with separate lids. Or you can make them with two sides [as lids]. Once you cover the basket with the lid, a crow can't come in and pull the food out of the basket. Because in the field, the harvesters leave it there and go scything. And it stays somewhere alone. And the crow smells the food. If it is covered with a towel, the crow will pull it off. But if it has a lid, then the crow will pull and pull, and it would take a long time to rip the lid apart with its beak. We braided little threads, and there a kind of button made from reed, and it closed well. (Iakuba 2019)

Baskets were woven in pairs: a bigger one and a smaller one. When they were being prepared for submission to the brigade facility, three of these pairs were tied together.

We make two baskets at a time. One is large enough for two jars, and the other has the volume of three. And these are paired together, and it is called a “*para*” (пара). When they received the baskets at the brigade, it was in pairs. To pack them together, these were grouped into three. A packet had forty-eight items. One [pair of baskets] was placed there, a second pair into it vertically, and a third pair [upside down] covering it. And that’s a triplet. Two here, two here and two here. A triplet has six baskets in it. And then eight triplets like this are tied together in a row – and this was called a “*pachka*” (пачка). Then they would put fifteen or so *pachky* onto a platform and tie them together with a rope. And they would have two, three or four platforms. At that time, the collective farm only had horses. So, they hauled them to Lubny to the collecting station, loaded them in a wagon, and they were gone. (Iakuba 2019)

Traditionally, in the older times, simple baskets were woven for domestic purposes. They had diverse dimensions, depending on their intended use. The size depended on the number of warp reeds. The largest baskets were made with 34 or 36 warp reeds. These were used for storing seeds. Such baskets were rare however, since one needed very tall bulrushes for this and a very tall loom. Baskets for carrying vegetables and milk to the market were woven with 30, 32, or 34 warp reeds. These were called “*molochnyky*” (молочники) or “*rohati prosti koshyky*” (рогати прості кошики). A basket with 28 warp reeds was medium sized. The smallest ones with 18 warp reeds were made for children, 20-24 reeded baskets were for school children to take their textbooks to school. This was a seasonal handicraft, made until Christmas, after which time there were fewer buyers and the prices fell (Lysenko 1904: 85-86).

Later, in the 1980s, smaller lace-like baskets (with openings created between some of the reed threads to form a design) came to be woven by hand, rather than on a loom. “That’s a regular basket, and that’s a “*korzynka*” (корзинка) or “*koshulia*” (кошуля). They started weaving them sometime in the 1980s. Those were often sent off to Kyiv” (Rud’ 2019). “One lady in Horodyshche makes lace-like *korzynky*. They are woven by hand, and really beautiful” (Iakuba 2019).

Gradually, with the development of industry, the need for baskets of this type decreased, and the craft began to decline. The generation that learned to make baskets in the 1950s and 1960s is now passing away. Young people are not interested in this craft. In the 1990s, one could buy a hand-made basket in the market in Lubny. Now they are rarities.

Svitlana Iakuba describes the situation: «Now they fight for my baskets. Where do they send them? Certainly, I have clients!”. At the time of our

interview in the summer of 2019, she had injured her hands and could not make baskets. A month and a half before that, she was still weaving baskets. She had a stock of prepared bulrush material, a woven but not braided basket and warp ready on her loom for the next one. People told her that there was apparently an elderly woman who still wove baskets in the village of Tyshky. Anastasia Rud', our interviewee from the village of Lushnyky, had already quit making baskets by the time of our interview. She made her last basket four or five years prior, for her own use, not for sale. In this way, we see that the basket making craft in the Lubny area is on the verge of disappearance. Fieldwork in 2019 indicated that only a very few individuals still made baskets or remembered how to make them.

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