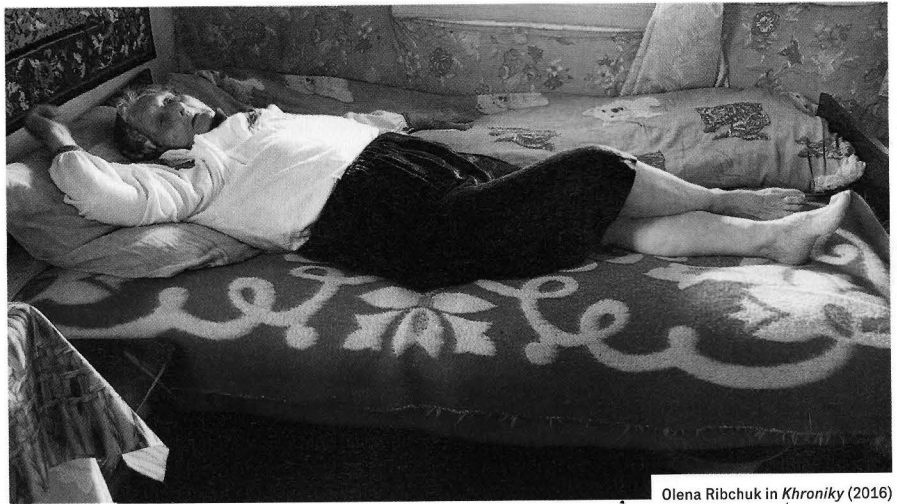


The Filth And The Fury

The riotous songs of khroniky music are passed down through word of mouth in a tight-knit Slavic community repressed on all sides in Central Europe. By **Claire Sawers**



Olena Ribchuk in *Khroniky* (2016)

High in the Carpathian mountains, in a Ukrainian village that most cars can't get to, an old woman is lying on her bed. She's been singing nonstop from memory for three hours and needs a nap before carrying on. She invites Lucia Nimcova, who grew up on the other side of the border with Slovakia, to nap next to her. Nimcova has returned to the region where she was born to record the traditional khroniky songs she heard as a child. Olena Ribchuk, 87, is singing ballads, coded in a way, that describe her memories of war, of hardship, murder, torture, heavy drinking, outsmarting men, love affairs. There's a comedy one, too, about a broken dick. The woman is angry with her husband so she breaks off his penis in a rage, then regrets it and sends him to the market the next day to buy another, because she misses it. There's a whole subcategory of khroniky songs called potka (vagina) songs.

"This woman never had children, which is why she says she doesn't mind singing the potka songs to me," explains Nimcova. "She'd be embarrassed to sing these kind of filthy songs in front of her kids. Often there are messages and jokes hidden in the songs, so the women can share ideas with other women. The woman doesn't say that she was raped, but it's implied. The potka goes to war in one, or is shaved and turned into wool for a glove."

Nimcova is part of the Rusyn (Ruthenian) minority ethnic group found in the borderlands between Hungary, Romania, Ukraine and Poland. A centuries-old Slavic language, Rusyn was looked down upon as a poor, uneducated dialect by neighbouring Ukraine and Slovakia, and it was forbidden to talk about Rusyn culture at Nimcova's primary school. Yet it has persisted against the odds.

"I remember weddings when I was young," recalls Nimcova, an artist and film maker based in Ethiopia. "At the end of the night, when everyone was drunk and the young couple would go around their guests, people would sing in Rusyn. There was singing and dancing, and songs about being in prison or falling in love. I picked up the lyrics and sometimes my mum would make my sister and I sing them for people we met on the train. I remember my grandma singing too. I've still got a cassette where we taped over Abba songs with our singing. I was about five or six but the lyrics still come back when I sing to my kids."

Khroniky music is largely undocumented; either because the songs were considered too crude, or contained lyrics that were problematic politically. As part of a largely oral culture, the songs in their true form are passed down from singer to singer. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian folk songs that have been archived are normally a sanitised version of the

ones Nimcova remembers. So in 2014 she visited Rusyn villages to rediscover the songs and make a documentary, *Khroniky*, joined by London based experimental musician Sholto Dobie.

"The Rusyn community is a very closed one," explains Nimcova. "Sometimes we'd have to wait several days to hear someone sing; we had to earn their trust before they shared something very personal to them. We'd stay up until 5am at a wedding, then go straight to a morning baptism, or collect haystacks with the villagers, hoping they'd sing while they were working."

The songs are sublime; sometimes heartbreakingly raw, other times bawdy and daft. There is rarely any rhyme, instead they take the form of sung dialogue, often 15 or 20 minutes long, entirely learned by heart. Hearing two old women singing an apparently meandering and improvised song for quarter of an hour in perfect harmony is an astonishing thing.

"A few times people had written down lyrics in notebooks. Generally they were singing from memory. Most people were illiterate, but there was also the danger of someone discovering the songs, especially the ones that spoke of ethnic cleansing or invasions and revolution."

One Rusyn man was sent to a gulag in the 1950s and made up songs for his friends while he was

imprisoned. It was his way of telling each person's life story. Now, only close family members remember them and when they die, there is a risk the songs will disappear with them.

Dobie, who can't speak Rusyn, recorded the sound while Nimcova translated. His ear was responding more to the emotions and melodies coming across. "Some of the songs were so powerful, we thought the windows would blow!" laughs Nimcova.

"When these songs are presented now, it's in more official contexts, or state-funded festivals with traditional costumes," says Dobie. "We weren't interested in that glossy, romanticised version. We wanted to record unprofessional singers at home. Sometimes they weren't even that musical! These are

survivor songs, a way of processing incredibly hard times and staying defiant."

They seem like a kind of fuck-you to the people who tried to oppress them, a way of preserving their culture, like a punk folklore, I suggest. "Absolutely," agrees Dobie. "Even the fact that they memorised them in their head seems important. When these villagers were forced to relocate" – seven villages were destroyed in order to build a dam and the Rusyns were moved to a Communist housing block – "they had to leave behind everything."

Nimcova remembers playing in empty houses, where people had abandoned family photos in frames and their pets had been killed by Communists before they moved to a new life. "These songs have almost no

physical trace, apart from the odd physical recording, or our documentary," says Dobie. Without sheet music, or digitised recordings, they exist only in people's memories, or when they're sung at private events, where outsiders aren't usually welcome.

"It seems like it's not just the songs that are dying out, but also that way of learning them," reflects Dobie. "Maybe you need to be in a particular headspace – like being sent to Siberia! – before you can find that discipline and concentration to memorise a 15 minute song."

"Some khroniky are gossip songs about people in the village, sometimes they're something much more spiritual," says Nimcova. "People can't say as much as they can sing." □