

HOLODOMOR MEMORIAL IN WASHINGTON, D.C.:

Interview with Architect Larysa Kurylas

by Olesia Wallo

The groundbreaking ceremony for the Washington, D.C., Holodomor Memorial, planned for December 4th, seems to be a most fitting way to conclude 2013—the year of the 80th anniversary of Ukraine’s greatest tragedy. With the construction of the Holodomor Memorial scheduled to begin in just a few months, it is a good time to take a closer look at its design and future site, as well as the extensive creative work that went into this project. It was my great honor and pleasure to discuss these matters with the person who knows them best—architect Larysa Kurylas, whose design, “Field of Wheat,” was chosen for the Holodomor Memorial. Granddaughter of Maria Khrupowycz, an active Soyuz Ukrainok member in Hrymaliv, Ukraine, and daughter of Olha Kurylas, a longtime member of the UNWLA Washington branch, Larysa Kurylas also belongs to our organization—as a member-at-large.



Laryso, among your many architectural projects the Holodomor Memorial in Washington, D.C., is the first commemorative one. Could you explain how you came to this project? Why did you decide to participate in that competition for the best design of the Holodomor Memorial?

I like participating in competitions, especially those in which entries are anonymous because then ideas are evaluated purely on their own merit and not judged by résumé or prior experience. Competitions for me are an opportunity to break out. I used to enter many competitions coming out of school, and at one point I won the Pennsylvania-based Stewardson traveling fellowship in architecture.

I happened to find out about the Holodomor Memorial competition by chance from a Ukrainian sculptor from Kyiv, who wanted to collaborate; we talked about it and then decided to submit entries independently. In a certain way, I felt duty-bound to participate since it was both a Ukrainian project and a project in my backyard, so to speak. I attended the blessing of the future memorial site in 2008. It was then that I really began to think about what would be an appropriate memorial and a good site strategy for what is a pretty challenging triangular site.

Obviously, I had some knowledge of the Holodomor. I think my earliest exposure to the Holodomor was through a Ukrainian school teacher, Mrs. Dibert, who was from the Kyiv region and whose family had lived through the Holodomor. Later on I took a Ukrainian history course at Harvard with James Mace. His course on twentieth-century Ukrainian history was a big

revelation because, typically, Ukrainian history taught at school ended in 1918 with the Ukrainian People’s Republic. One didn’t really know what happened since 1918. I found the whole period of Ukrainianization in the twenties very interesting, and the extent of repressions by Stalin, which began in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, was a revelation to me.

The Holodomor Memorial competition was announced in October 2009, and it was four weeks long. It was memorable because the deadline was Thanksgiving Day. I was thinking how I could possibly get my drawings and model to Kyiv and it’s as if the stars aligned: I put the word out to Ukrainian-American friends of mine, asking if they knew anyone who was traveling to Kyiv in the third week of November, and, luckily, there was a woman who was attending a conference in Washington in the week prior to Thanksgiving. I drove her to Dulles Airport with my model and drawings, and the next morning she emailed me to say that the competition materials were safely delivered to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Ukraine, which was the organization sponsoring the design competition.

Another interesting portion of this story is that the law to establish the Memorial was ratified in the U.S. Congress in 2006. It gave permission to the government of Ukraine to create a memorial in Washington, D.C., to the victims of the Holodomor. However, this law had a seven-year deadline: the law took effect on October 13, 2006, and a building permit had to be drawn by October 13, 2013. It so happened that the permit was drawn almost at the last minute—on October 1, 2013.

Did you come up with the concept for the Memorial—“Field of Wheat”—right away, or did you go through different possibilities before finally deciding on this particular design?

I had this idea even before the competition was announced. I started to think about how one would convey something about the Holodomor to a largely Western audience. As I have said to many people, for the average American wheat is an easy association with Ukraine. We all studied about Ukraine being the breadbasket of Europe in the early twentieth century. I wanted to reinforce what little knowledge the average viewer had as well as to convey the artificiality of the Famine—its deliberateness. The latter is conveyed in the bronze bas-relief sculpture through the transition of wheat from high relief to negative relief across 30 feet. In other words, starting with a six foot-tall by 30 foot-long plane, at the left edge, the wheat will project out of that plane 8 inches and across 30 feet, at the right end, it will be recessed into that plane an equal amount. This does not express a simple disappearance of wheat because of some natural event. The negative space conveys the deliberateness and artificiality of the Famine. I like the fact that the wheat is rendered very realistically while its treatment from positive to negative relief is an abstract concept—so that the Memorial functions on a few different levels.

It’s certainly a very striking design and I’m sure it will look even more striking when seen in real life.

Yes, the rendering did not give it justice. That is the limitation of the rendering program, I must say. However, the foundry has already started work on the sculpture. The first step was to photograph real wheat, which I collected near Winnipeg, Canada, last summer from an uncle of mine. The foundry has the equipment to photograph the wheat and then manipulate it in a digital modeling program to create the desired effect. Theoretically, the right half of the sculpture is just the mirror image of the left half. This is somewhat experimental work, but the foundry felt that they could do it. For me, it was a good way to go because initially I thought that I would have to hire a sculptor to produce a scale model of the sculpture. Yet using the digital modeling program eliminated that step altogether, and the first images which I received from the foundry are very, very encouraging.



Collecting the wheat: Larysa Kurylas with her uncle Walter Kaminskyj near Winnipeg, Canada

Of course, the work on the Memorial included designing not only the sculpture but also the space of the triangular plaza where the sculpture will be located. Could you talk a little bit about the challenges and constraints with which you had to work in designing that space?

The triangular geometry of the site in and of itself is a challenge. It happens a lot in Washington with the diagonal avenues cutting through the rectilinear street network. One thing that struck me at the very start was the uncomfortable relationship of two restaurants that have sidewalk seating across the street from the Holodomor Memorial site. That inspired me to think of a sculpture that had the potential of screening out the sidewalk seating, and that is why the bas-relief sculpture took on a wall-like quality.

After my design project was approved at the conceptual level by the Commission of Fine Arts, all kinds of modifications were discussed for another year or so. The biggest area of focus from all the reviewing agencies was what this sculpture would look like from the reverse side—that is, from the side which actually faces those sidewalk cafes. Reviewers expressed concern about the pedestrian experience along that street. They felt

that a blank surface was not enough. In the end—and I am very happy with this result—I suggested using the pattern which I had initially proposed for the plaza paving, inspired by graphic designs of Vasyl Krychevsky, a Kyiv architect and graphic designer who worked in the early twentieth century. There is a pattern of his that I abstracted a few more steps for the plaza paving. It has an angular, somewhat barbed look to it. I decided to have the stone panels on the reverse side of the sculpture etched with this abstracted Krychevsky pattern. To me, it is a visually engaging pattern, so when you look under the tree canopy there will be this interesting pattern on the sculpture wall. The pattern is also an element that clearly speaks of the attack on Ukrainian culture. As a result of the Famine, a tremendous creative potential of a generation of Ukrainians was extinguished.

To reinforce that separation from the cafes, there will also be a row of trees. In addition, these trees will create a backdrop for the sculpture when viewed from the primary side. I wanted the tree leaves to have a purple color, which will distinguish them amongst the average street trees adjacent to the site. This, I think, will draw attention to the site from afar and give the Memorial a somber backdrop.

The final element that is important about the primary side of the sculpture is the word “Holodomor.” I feel strongly that this word should be prominent and should enter into the English lexicon. If people see it enough, perhaps they will be curious to read about it, and the word will begin to be commonly used.

What would you like to see the plaza around the Memorial used for in the future?

It is conceived to be able to accommodate both individual and small group contemplation. As a matter of fact, one of the changes from concept design to final approval was to add a bench where one could sit and think about the Memorial. The space in front of the sculpture is mostly paved, which will allow for group gatherings as well, and this is an important aspect of the Memorial. There will be annual commemorations as well as commemorations at other times of the year. In addition, there are always delegations visiting Washington from Ukraine, who now, on their regular circuit, stop at the Shevchenko Memorial. The Holodomor Memorial will likely become another place for delegations to visit.

I’m sure you have been asked this question many times before, but why do you think it is important to have the Holodomor Memorial in the capital of the United States?

By example to prevent this from happening anywhere in the world again. It was such a horrific thing—the withholding of food and the use of hunger as a weapon against people. It was not the only time, but hopefully, with enough people understanding the magnitude of the Holodomor, this will not happen in the world again.

Thank you so much, Laryso!



Front view of the future Holodomor Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Image by Hartman-Cox Architects

