

Ukrainian Easter Customs

The Easter customs which the Ukrainian people enjoyed are rich in heritage. Their love of beauty can be seen in their hand embroidered clothes, in their folk songs, and in their beautifully decorated houses. This love of beauty permeated the rich religious holy period as well. For Easter is not a three day period but a cycle of forty days when their age old associations with man and nature comes to a religious climax in the resurrection of Christ.

Both the inside and outside of the family home was carefully whitewashed during Lent. The inside walls were often painted with colorful designs, especially in the kitchen area where the family spent much of their time. Everything in the house was dusted and scrubbed and garments were aired and cleaned. If possible, the family was outfitted with new suits and shoes. Since newly baptized Christians in the early centuries wore garments of new white linen it became a tradition for the faithful to wear new clothes to symbolize the "new life" bestowed by the Lord through his resurrection. One must look his best for the coming festive occasion.

Food was prepared differently during lent. Meat and animal fats were not to be eaten for the entire forty days. Milk, cheese, and oils were restricted for seven days before Easter Sunday. During Lent there were special church services, known as hours of recollection, in order that people would be prepared for Easter confession and the



receiving of Holy Communion. No one, after all, would dare to sit at the Easter dinner table and partake of the blessed krashanka and other food without first cleansing himself of his sins by going to confession and receiving Holy Communion.

One Wednesday in the middle of Lent was marked with special church services called *Christopoklonna Sereda* in Ukrainian, or, in a free translation, (Bowing to Christ Wednesday). The congregation would fall to their knees and prostrate themselves before the altar. This was easy to do since there were usually no pews in the church. This act of reverence was repeated hundreds of times during Lent.

Holy Week started with Palm Sunday, the triumphant entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. In Ukraine, a single pussy willow branch is carried, and friends who met by chance tapped one another with it saying: "Not I that strike thee, but the willow". On Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week the household was kept busy preparing food for Easter.

The passion service was held on Maundy Thursday. It was a long and very sad service. The celebrant would read the parts from the holy scriptures pertaining to the sufferings and the passion of our Lord. His voice, filled with emotion and sorrow, would speak of the tragedy of Jesus, His betrayal, trial and crucifixion. The congregation literally

relived the hours of sorrow listening patiently. Red eggs were prepared this day in great reverence for departed souls.

On Good Friday, which is called the (Passion Friday), *Strastna Pyatnica* in Ukrainian, the burial service and the procession with the Holy Shroud were observed. In the procession an unframed canvass oil painting depicting Christ's body in the tomb was displayed. Each church had such a painting which was called the "Plaschanytsia", the Holy Shroud. On Saturday the adoration of the Holy Shroud would take place. The custom was to visit all the churches and pray at every tomb so prepared. It was not unusual for a congregation to walk fifteen miles to visit five churches in an area.

On Saturday night all returned to witness the resurrection services. Hundreds of people dressed in their finest clothes would gather around the outside of the church, their faces turned towards the main entrance. The door was closed to signify the sealed tomb of Christ and, before it, stood the clergy. They were dressed in bright gold vestments and carried service books and small crosses in their hands. The main celebrant, the Archimandrite, held a large golden cross. He chanted, "Christ is Risen", "Christos Voskres", three times, each time the words were repeated by the choir and the congregation as he knocked with his cross at the closed door which, at a given moment, opened. This moment signifies the opening of Christ's tomb and His resurrection.

After this, the service of the resurrection would continue inside the church and would last two hours. The main chant of the service was a victorious "Christ is risen from the dead". By His death, He conquered death and to those in the grave, he granted life.

From Easter day to Ascension it was customary to greet people with *Christos Voskrese!* (Christ is Risen), to which one would answer, *Voistynu Voskres!*, (He is Risen Indeed!)



After the mass, pysanky were commonly exchanged as the people greeted one another. Ukrainians intended any gift of decorated eggs, whether large or small, as a sign of fondness for a person. They also embraced and kissed each other on the cheeks three times. This was a warm time of friendship, and even forgiveness; for even those who had not been speaking to each other because of an argument must greet and embrace. The new season started with a spiritual as well as a physical house cleaning. Hutzuls, the mountain dwellers, made it a communal occasion. Everyone gathered in front of the church on Easter day with food for the priest to bless, offering one another colored eggs and begging forgiveness for past wrongs. Later on, boys tried to snatch these eggs from the girls. If a girl made a gift of an egg to a boy, it showed how much she cared for him.



Each family brought a basket to be blessed by the priest on Easter morning following the resurrection services. Depending on the time schedules, this could sometimes be as early as two a.m. The baskets would usually contain a paska, a rich round bread with elaborate dough ornaments, several hard boiled colorful krashanky, one or two psyanky, ham, sausage, cheese, small containers of butter, salt, and grated horseradish. The horseradish was included to remind the people of Christ's bitter ordeal before his death. Covering the basket would be mother's most beautiful embroidered cloth. In good weather the baskets were arranged in a circle around the outside of church. The cloth was set aside and the candle in each basket was lit to signify new life; How they flickered in the cool spring mornings. The tired but happy parishioners would wait for the priest to sprinkle Holy Water on the beautiful array of foods, then home for a good rest. Later the family gathered around the table to break the long strict fast, Grandfather would cut a boiled krashanka into pieces. As he ate a piece, he would extend the "Kristos



Voskres" greeting to his family, friends, and neighbors. Everyone would partake of a piece of this egg. A portion of the egg would even be sent to family, friends, and neighbors who were not present.

On Easter Monday, the old custom has been to sprinkle water on everyone. This custom comes from the pre-Christian era when the people "washed their diseased and bad spirits away". Easter Tuesday was spent in the local churchyard where the cemetery was located. Church bells rang joyfully all during the day. The people would fill the cemetery and each family would gather at the grave of their loved ones, kneeling and praying and often asking the priest to say a special prayer for the departed souls. It was believed that anyone dying during the Easter season would go to heaven.

As the older people prayed and visited the graves, the younger set enjoyed the *hahilky*, traditional spring games

and songs. The *hahilky* contained many elements of round dances and mimicry closely combined with interpretive song, and their themes were mostly concerned with the welcoming of the sun, the burial of winter, and calling upon the forces of nature.

Like many other traditional spring rituals, the *hahilky* dates back to pagan times when our ancestors worshipped nature and sought to appease nature's gods.

In later times the *hahilky* began to incorporate many pantomime scenes from Ukrainian history, such as the Tatar attacks, and the expeditions of the Ukrainian forces.

One of the games the youngsters enjoyed was when the pointed tip of an egg was tapped against an opponent's egg and the winner holding the unbroken egg kept the spoils. Indeed, the entire community celebrated Easter Sunday with pleasure and good will!

Oblivany ponedilok or (Sprinkled Monday), so called because of the custom among young men and women to (Sprinkle) each other with water, was an old tradition dating back to the pagan worship of water as the life giving element. In those days a bath, taken in the spring, symbolized an emergence from winter's spiritual (imprisonment).