

Ukrainian Customs and Traditions

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27 March, 2022

Good Morning. My name is Dan Janik and I have been coming to this church since 1979. I was married in August of 1980 by Louis Foulds in this very church. Sarah approached me to see if I would do a talk on Ukrainian Culture and history. I accepted! I remember when we were in between ministers and John Upcott spoke on growing up Universalist. John said everyone has one good sermon in them. John, I hope you were right! So here we go.



My maternal Grandfather Wasyl Rekuta (William) was born in the Ukraine in 1895. He had 16 brothers and sisters of which 2 sets were twin boys. Most of them died of Typhoid Fever. Only Wasyl and 2 sisters survived.

When Wasyl was 17 years old, he enlisted or was drafted into the army. I'm not sure which. Wasyl was only 5 feet, 6 inches tall but his sergeant said he must be old enough, "Look how hairy he is." Many Ukrainians are hairy – I have that going for me. My Grandfather was captured by the Germans. But it was not like Hogans Heroes. The prisoners were part of the work crew, farming, chopping wood, etc. My Grandfather learned to be a Cobbler and repair shoes.

Wasyl came over to Canada in 1929 by himself leaving 2 sons and 2 daughters and his wife with relatives. The Canadian Government was offering Crown Land. Whatever you cleared and farmed was yours. It took him 4 years to clear 40 acres and build a house 50 miles South of Edmonton. Then he called for his family to join him. You hear pioneer stories but this one was true and is pretty cool to tell. My Mom, Lena (Wasilina) was born in 1933 and Uncle Mervin two years later, on the newly cleared family homestead.

They scratched out a meager existence and survived cold winters for a few years. Grandpa was a good shot. If he did not hunt and bring back something for the cooking pot, you did not eat that day. The oldest son, Uncle Luke, had moved to Ontario and wrote to his dad saying, "Dad, bring the family here. Its warm and there is good farmland." They packed everyone up and took the train and moved to Leamington. They sharecropped for three years and once they had saved up \$3,000 bought 75 acres of farmland where they grew soybeans, onion, wheat, corn, and tobacco.

Religion was very important to them. It gave them hope for a new life. Ukrainian Orthodox priests were allowed to marry and have children. What better way to learn than from an elder who had lived life. I was best man at my cousin's wedding. Everything is done in threes – for the trinity. They cross themselves three times not just once as the Roman Catholics do. As best man I had to hold a Gold Crown above the groom's head. But not let it touch his head – that would have been a blasphemy. You wear a white glove, so you don't touch the crown yourself. The maid of honour does the same thing for the bride. The ceremony lasted about 90 minutes. That is a long time to hold this crown. At the end of the marriage ceremony, you circle the altar three times. All four of you, the Bride, the Groom, Best Man, Maid of Honour and the priest. All the while holding the crowns above the Bride and Groom. At the marriage ceremony they have Communion but with real Egg Bread, called Paska, also known as Easter Bread. This bread is blessed by the priest. The marriage bread has elaborate braided patterns on them, a true work of art. It is a shame to eat it, but it is shared during the wedding communion.



After the Wedding Dinner Ukrainians have a Receiving Line called the Diravata. Meaning – To Give. Everyone does a shot of whiskey with the Bride and Groom and gives them a gift of money to start their new life together. The women can have Cherry Whiskey but Real Men must drink Horilka Whiskey. Then you need a good Polka Band to enjoy an evening of Dancing and Merry Making. At Wedding Receptions, the band plays a few bars of a Wedding March as people are ushered in with music. My Mom and Uncle Merv were Ukraine dancers often performing the Kolomeyka. If you have ever been at Carousel of Nations, you may have seen the dancers perform at a Ukrainian Church. It is very similar to Russian Dancers with very lively music and high athletic kicks and spins. Here's the link to a YouTube Video performing this dance. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLOz20KuLWw>



Other traditions include the Ukrainian Easter Eggs called Pysanky. They are elaborate coloured eggs with many symbols. Wheat signifies a wish for a good harvest. The egg itself is a symbol of rebirth. The Sun is depicted as a circle with or without rays. Bees Wax is applied and removed with a kistka for each colour starting with the lightest colour to be applied to that egg. (Toni is now going to share more about the Pysanky and other Ukrainian traditions.)



Pysanky are the best examples of Ukrainian folk art. Historically they were made by young girls and women, monks and icon painters, bakers and many others in the spring, right before Easter. Their decorations vary so much because of the background of the individuals creating these works of art.

The symbols used on the Pysanky include plant symbols, animals, and many others. Plants frequently seen on the Easter eggs are often flowers and grains. In my collection of pysanky that I have received over the years from my Mother-in-law, the animals used most often were the horse, deer and sheep. The cross is the ancient symbol of the sun, fire, and soul. The cross is often depicted as the intersection of two lines: eternity is represented as vertical and time as horizontal. It is a symbol of beginning and end.

In examining a variety of Easter eggs, I saw the sun in the form of five, six, and eight-cornered stars. The hexagonal star is a sign of six sides of the horizon in correlation with the sky, as well as the sign of the year: two halves for each of the six months. The octagonal star is a symbol of love. Pysanka with a star were often presented as a gift to a loved one. Each Easter my Mother-in-law has given an Easter Egg of her own design to each of her children, their spouses, and the grandchildren. Each one different from the next.

The National Flower of the Ukraine is the Sunflower (*soniashnyk* in Ukrainian) and sunflower oil is widely used particularly during Lent as the church does not limit its use. The sunflower represents the warmth and power of the sun and are a symbol of peace. The Ukraine is a leader worldwide in the export of sunflower oil and seeds for snacks.

Flowers in the Ukrainian tradition were a symbol associated with children. If a woman was trying to conceive, she would be advised to decorate Easter eggs with flowers and gift them to children. The Pine needle as well as green trees, branches and leaves are a symbol of life, spring renewal, health and growth. Many patterns include curls and spirals which are symbols of vitality and the birth of life. Infinity symbols are found on many Pysanky in the forms of doodles. They symbolize water and its fluidity. On Easter eggs, water is depicted in the form of doodles as well as zigzags and wavy patterns.

A pysanka may have 40 or more sword triangles. The number 40 is symbolic in human life: 40 weeks a woman is pregnant. In Christianity: 40 days is the period of Lent. The Tree of Life symbolizes the universe where every creature has its own place. The image combines time, space, life and death. The tree is divided into several parts: the tree crown is the world of heaven of birds, bees, the sun, stars and moon, the tree trunk is the earth world of large animals and people, and tree roots for the underground world and water with snakes, frogs, fish and waterfowl.

Rakes, Combs, and Triangles with Combs patterns also symbolize water, clouds and rain. Pysanky with these symbols were made in drought to "invite" rains for a good harvest. The Oak Leaf symbolizes

strength, longevity, and patience. In combination with acorns, it symbolizes spiritual and physical maturity. Sheep are often seen on Easter eggs as symbols of humility, innocence, boundless love and fertility. The “sheep horns” represent young shoots of plants. These are but a few of the symbols used on many of the Pysanky.

As with most traditions they are passed down from Mother to Daughter, and Grandmother to Granddaughter. Our daughter Lisa learned from her grandmother the art of creating Ukrainian Easter eggs. We were able to get her a traditional Kistka, beeswax and traditional dyes from a Ukrainian lady in Edmonton.

The traditional foods and the recipes are also handed down from generation to generation. It wasn't long after I was introduced to my mother-in-law -to- be that I started cooking with her to learn of the special foods that graced her table at holiday times. Our family favourites include cabbage rolls, perogies filled with cheddar cheese and served with fried bacon, onions and sour cream, and city chicken. City chicken had its roots in Ukrainian cuisine when chicken became very expensive for family dinners. Mothers and grandmothers would take pork, cut it into cubes and put it on skewers to resemble chicken legs. The next step is to set up 3 dredging stations with flour, egg and breadcrumbs. Once ready lightly fry to brown all sides, then roast in a low temperature oven for 90 minutes. Another family favourite is Beef Goulash which our son loves so much he spent some time cooking with his grandmother so he could perfect his technique to make it.



I found that the trickiest part of trying to recreate my mother-in-law's recipes has come from the understanding that these recipes were past down without ingredient measurements. She would tell me the dough should feel a certain way, not how much to put in the bowl. So, one day as she prepped the dough for perogies I asked her to put each ingredient in a separate bowl, then I measured it, and wrote out a recipe card. After a few attempts on my own we – my sisters-in-law and I, believe we have the recipe just right. The tradition of passing down recipes has already begun with our grandchildren. Our grandson regularly asks if he can make borscht with me. Borscht is a traditional Ukrainian soup made with beets and cabbage spiced with garlic and lots of fresh dill and served with a dollop of sour cream. I learned from my mother-in-law to make a heartier version adding beef, barley, beans and often adding fresh vegetables from the garden such as green beans and carrots. All we need is a slice or two of rye bread and the meal is complete.

I hope we have given you a glimpse into our heritage and traditions of my family.

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