Ritual Renewal:

POLISH-AMERICAN EASTER TRADITIONS

Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery
of Niagara University

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Ash Wednesday marks the start of an Easter pilgrimage for Western New York's Polish-Americans. This is a journey of the heart. It leads not to far-off holy places, but to a better appreciation for the core of sacred meanings at the center of their lives. Through richly layered symbolism, the Easter traditions of Polish-Americans recall their particular historic experience and reveal a Catholicism thoroughly syncretized with an earlier system of beliefs deeply rooted in their ancestral homeland.

In spring of 1988, the Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery hosted "The Iconography of Rebirth." Organized around a photo-documentation by Marion Faller, the exhibit told the story of the *swienconka* (blessed foods) ritual by offering viewers a close look at the contents of Polish-American Easter baskets. Our 1989 exhibit presents a broader perspective on the Polish-American community's premiere holiday.

In "Ritual Renewal: Polish-American Easter Traditions," Faller's expanded documentation is grouped to show: Buffalo's Broadway Market at Easter; Holy Week devotional displays; *swienconka* customs; and Easter Monday festivities. These four groupings follow an approximate chronology of Easter week events, as well as those ocurring immediately before and after them. The Polish-American Easter celebration might be more accurately described as a single cumulative event in which sacred and secular symbols and rituals complement each other's meaning. Since this easy juxtaposition can be visually jarring to those outside the tradition, photographs of all devotional displays have been placed together.

EASTER AT THE BROADWAY MARKET

Dating from the late 1870's, Buffalo's Broadway Market grew up with the Polish-American neighborhood surrounding it on the city's east side. The market is deluged with shoppers at Easter, its busiest season. The crowds include Polish-Americans from throughout Western New York and from as far away as Pennsylvania and Canada in search of the "right" ingredients for their *swienconka* meals. It's understood that this special feast cannot be created from plastic wrapped Polish sausage and pre-sliced rye bread from the supermarket. Real *swienconka* food comes from "the old neighborhood," whether you do or not. Sausage must be freshly made "holiday style," with just the right touch of bright green marjoram added. You might ask for it in Polish. Samples of rye bread from a half dozen bakery stands can be tasted before buying a loaf still warm from the oven.

Several portraits of merchants and workers are included with the Broadway Market photos. Those photographed unfailingly convey a pride which comes with the conviction that "it just wouldn't be Easter" without their particular product. The market photos capture much of its irresistible spring-time appeal for Poles and non-Poles alike: bundles of pussywillows; cartons of wooden Easter eggs imported from Poland; stockpiles of chocolates; coils of sausage and rows of hams; a counter full of ancient looking horseradish roots; hand-lettered signs in Polish and English; a small group of saints' statues crowded by chocolates; and, in the middle of a montage of signs advertising neck bones, ham hocks, and "fresh churned" tub butter, an important message: "DON'T FORGET YOUR BUTTERLAMB."

Cover: Sepulcher display, St. John Kanty Parish, Buffalo, N.Y. 1987

Butter lambs, Broadway Market, Buffalo, N.Y. 1988

Paschal lambs of butter seem to be a Polish-American convention; small plaster or sugar lambs grace Easter tables in Poland. Representing Christ, the sacrificial lamb, they provide the proper centerpiece for the *swienconka* meal. Butter lambs were being hand-carved at home sixty years ago when Dorothy Malczewski's parents first sold theirs from the family's corner grocery. Last year, "starting right around Ash Wednesday," a dozen Malczewski family members turned two tons of butter into 95,000 lambs at a small storefront "factory." The lambs are all hand-cast in wooden molds. Smaller ones are decorated straight from the mold with a traditional red ribbon and banner commemorating Christ's death and Resurrection. Larger lambs are first piped with a coat of whipped butter. The lambs are distributed throughout Western New York, but only those sold exclusively at the Malczewski's Broadway Market stand wear Dorothy's trademark lavendar ribbons.

DEVOTIONAL DISPLAYS

Polish-Americans use a series of devotional displays to "freeze" moments of the Passion story. Their dramatic narrative quality invites a meditative pause amid holiday activity.

Holy Thursday repository shrines evoke the Passion story's first scene. The repository, or Altar of Reposition, is a side altar at which the consecrated communion host is temporarily stored. Since no masses are celebrated on Good Friday, the Eucharist from Holy Thursday's evening mass is locked in a tabernacle at the repository for distribution during alternate services. In popular imagination, the time the Eucharist spends in the repository is associated with Christ's imprisonment before His sentencing and death.

This association has inspired folk additions to formal repository ritual in many cultures. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the repository took the form of a towering "sacred hill," or monumento, among the Latin countries of Europe and South America. Here, the Eucharist was enshrined atop a hidden scaffolding amid a forest of lilies, palms, and burning candles.

Given the history of their homeland, it's not surprising that Polish-Americans have placed particular emphasis on the theme of imprisonment in their folk elaboration of the repository. Repeatedly invaded and occupied, Poland suffered three partitions in the 18th century which literally wiped it off the map until after World War I. Usurped by communist Russia after World War II, Poland remains a captive nation in the minds of many Polish-Americans, intimately aware of continuing hardship and injustice there through contact with family and friends. Polish-American repositories express a special empathy for the imprisoned Christ, and for a homeland popularly labeled, "the Christ of Nations."

In one repository arrangement, a pensive figure of Christ looks out from a cross-shaped window behind heavy black bars. In a painting done by parish coordinator, Tony Chmura for a contemporary variation of the repository at Transfiguration Church, a swirling rope of thorns surrounds, but does not touch, a bowed Christ. The painting implies a "double message" more pronounced in traditional Polish-American repositories. While it is difficult to see past images of suffering and sorrow, Polish-Americans never lose sight of the fact that the Passion story has a happy ending. The over-all impression conveyed by repositories is one of anticipation. They commemorate Christ's brief captivity while suggesting His inevitable triumph. Holy Thursday repository displays literally "set the stage" for Easter week's coming events. Flowing arrangements of curtains and intricate spotlighting strategies are an indispensable part of their design.

The repository provides a focal point for two folk devotions. During a vigil traditionally kept at the altar until midnight on Holy Thursday, representatives from an array of parish organizations demonstrate their solidarity with each other as well as with the imprisoned Christ. The second devotion, a "pilgrimage" to the repository displays at seven churches, extends solidarity beyond individual parishes.

Mural for Holy Thursday display by Tony Chmura, Transfiguration Parish, Buffalo, N.Y. 1988

Repository shrines are customarily displayed for less than twenty four hours. Images of the imprisoned Christ must be dismantled before the ritual retelling of the Passion story can move forward. The photos of Holy Week devotional displays next include several crucifixes arranged for Good Friday's "Adoration of the Cross." Sepulcher shrines follow these.

Sepulcher shrines, recreations of Christ's tomb, are thought to have originated in Jerusalem during the earliest days of the church. Never officially sanctioned, the tradition has enjoyed wide popularity among the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Traditional sepulchers place a figure of Christ's body in a stone tomb surrounded by a blooming profusion of greenery and spring flowers. A tangle of meanings emerges from these lush arrangements. Sepulchers are, most obviously, a pointed reminder of Christ's humanity. For many Polish-Americans, visiting the sepulcher shrine is very much like stopping at a friend's wake. Like repository altars, sepulchers also foreshadow the Resurrection. Spring flowers are meant as a reminder that Christ's rebirth will follow His death as inevitably as spring follows winter. But sepulchers ultimately reveal a deep undercurrent of pre-Christian belief: sacrifices must be made to insure the earth's ongoing fertility. The offerings of spring's ancient first fruits rituals, including the sacrificial lamb of the Hebrew Passover, testified to the conviction that in order to live, one must give back a portion of what one takes out. Sepulcher displays convey the impression that Christ is responsible not just for man's spiritual rebirth, but for the vigor of the spring growth emanating from His tomb.

The retelling of Christ's Passion ends on Easter Sunday when a statue of the risen Christ is placed at the sepulcher. The Easter mass begins with a procession originating at the gravesite in which the statue and Eucharist, encased in a sunburst shaped monstrance, circle the congregation three times. The procession is intended to impart to the believers within the circle it describes, a share in Christ's reborn vitality, an assurance that their defeats will also be temporary, and a sense of the possibilities of new beginnings.

SWIENCONKA

After Easter Sunday's mass, Polish-Americans hurry home to enjoy the *swienconka* meal. A joke that there is so much Polish sausage cooking on Easter morning, you can smell it in church, suggests a more serious connection between the sacred communion meal and "secular" *swienconka* feast. Blessed during the afternoon on Holy Saturday, *swienconka* meals include three symbolic embodiments of Christ: the Easter egg, bread marked with a cross, and butter lamb. The meal traditionally begins with the ritual sharing of a single blessed egg. As the egg and good wishes are exchanged with family members, all are customarily obliged to forgive any wrongs committed against them during the previous year. Like the sacrament of communion, the *swienconka* meal is essentially a healing ritual meant to strengthen solidarity and fellowship.

The *swienconka* photos convey aspects of the tradition not included in last year's exhibit. We see not just baskets, but the Polish-Americans who prepare them. *Swienconka* tables make it abundantly clear that the laying out of food is an important part of the ritual. Like devotional displays, these ceremonial arrangements of food force us to pay attention. They are a wonderfully decorative tribute to what we eat; that is, to the living things that die so we may survive. *Swienconka* is a reminder that eating is the oldest of sacramental acts.

EASTER MONDAY DYNGUS CUSTOMS

The word *'dyngus'* is probably derived from the German *dingen:* "to buy back or redeem." An 84-year-old Polish-American describes Buffalo's turn of the century *dyngus* tradition this way.

> Just before Easter all the fellas in our gang would be looking around for a good twig with a lot of flexibility. All the aunts and uncles in our families would try to induce us to come over on *Dyngus* Day and whip their daughters' lower legs with the twig. We'd start out real early in the morning so we could make as many stops as possible, because for each house we visited we'd get five cents or so to share for *"dyngusing"* the girls. The girls would sort of go along with it. Of course, they were screaming and running around, so we tried not to hit them too hard.

The playful switching of young women evolved from the ancient belief that touching a woman with new growth imparted the budding branch's fertility to her. In Poland, pussywillow branches were favored for this rite. In a related custom, young women were doused with water on Easter Monday in some parts of the country.

Dyngus Day customs had nearly disappeared in Buffalo when they were revived by members of the Chopin Singing Society about twenty years ago. Local tavern owners soon joined in their promotion. In its revived format, *Dyngus* Day is both a performance of mainly forgotten spring rites and a colossal polka party. At the Chopin Singing Society's club rooms, *dyngus* officially begins with the ceremonial blessing of a *swienconka* table encircled by local dignitaries and politicians. Young ladies dressed in "peasant costume" may be switched, doused, or kissed for a small tip. Mr. *Dyngus*, an elegant gentleman in snow white tails and top hat, asks women patrons to join him in leading off dances. Meanwhile, the cameras from all three local news stations are rolling.

Many Polish-Americans begin *Dyngus* Day at Chopin's before heading out to taverns and restaurants throughout Greater Buffalo. For the past several years, the city's biggest *dyngus* party has been held at the old Central Terminal train station where crowds of between three and

Swienconka, St. Stanislaus Parish, Buffalo, N.Y. 1988

Swienconka table, St. John Kanty Convent, Buffalo, N.Y. 1988

six thousand are easily accommodated. There's little switching or dousing in evidence at these stops, though many men and women carry pussywillows and the atmosphere is full of flirtatious playfulness. The aim at these places is to dance, not a little, but to the point of exhilarating giddiness. The manager at the "Town Edge" tavern exhorts his patrons to "live it up!". There's back-slapping, hugs, shouted greetings; and a non-stop exchange of joking banter between polka bands and dancers. Polka dances generally provide the Polish-American community with an opportunity to "recharge" itself, but coming after a long succession of Easter week events may give *Dyngus* Day polka fests a special potency. Many of the "lessons" of sacred ritual: the reminders of shared history, the importance of solidarity, the need for forgiveness and real fellowship, are carried into the everyday life of the community in a whirl of polka motion.

Palm weavings, Immaculata Convent, Hamburg, N.Y. 1988

PALM WEAVING

Two groups of artifacts complement the exhibit's photo component. Woven palm fronds, traditionally used during church services heralding the beginning of Holy Week, welcome visitors to the exhibit. Decoratively woven fronds, or *palmy*, were carried by priests in a procession preceding Palm Sunday's mass in Polish immigrant churches at the turn of the century. In Jerusalem, palms and olive branches were a part of popular devotions re-enacting Christ's entry into the city as early as the 4th century. By the 8th century, palms were being blessed in Northern Italian churches.

But the triumphant potency of trees and greens was long recognized before cut branches hailed Christ's arrival in Jerusalem. New greens were an important aspect of spring rites among pre-Christian Indo-Europeans. After the 10th century introduction of Christianity in Poland, the pussywillow was incorporated in both folk and formal

Easter rituals. Pussywillows blessed in church on Palm Sunday were kept in icon corners year round as a protection against sickness and storms. In a variation of *dyngus* rites, children were switched with pussywillows on Palm Sunday in imitation of Christ's scourging.

Easter pussywillow lore arrived in America with Polish immigrants but was soon undermined by more generically Catholic palm traditions. As pussywillows were forced out of Palm Sunday rituals, Polish-Americans transferred much of their symbolic significance to blessed palms. Two folk art traditions developed from this newly fascinating material: the weaving of *palmy* from large fronds for use during church services; the weaving or folding of boutonnieres and miniature objects from strips of frond for personal use.

Among Western New York's Polish-Americans, both traditions seem to have originated with a Polish order of Franciscan Sisters who may have initially acquired these skills through contact with Italian religious. Several decorative weaves characterize *palmy* including a type ingeniously named *baszki* after the Polish *bazie*: "pussy-willows", and a circular style which produces rose shapes. Many variations of cross-shaped boutonnieres have been devised. Palm miniatures of birds represent the Holy Spirit; fish recall "the fisher of men." The exhibit's palm component contains both *palmy* and miniatures done mainly by the Sisters at Immaculata Convent in Hamburg, New York. Though the making of *palmy* and miniatures is no longer widespread, this year Sister Mary Frances Matecki has orders for nearly six hundred wall hangings which combine traditional palm weavings with other materials to make popular contemporary Easter symbols like the butterfly.

EASTER EGGS

While last year's exhibit surveyed five Polish-American Easter egg styles, two, *pisanki* and *nalepianki*, are shown in greater depth this year. Archeological evidence suggests that, because of its ability to produce life from its seemingly inanimate self, the egg became one of mankind's earliest religious objects. Used extensively in pre-Christian fertility and curing rituals, eggs were later identified with the reborn Christ's tomb. The remains of *pisanki*, eggs decorated with the wax-resist method, dating from the 10th or 11th century have been found in Poland. *Nalepianki*, eggs to which straw or paper cut-outs are glued, were developed during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Since the contents of eggs were thought to give them their special powers, *pisanki* are traditionally created from whole, raw eggs. A stylus filled with melted candle or beeswax is used to draw designs on *pisanki*. Known as a *pisak* (from the Polish *pisac*: "to write"), the stylus is constructed by fastening a small metal funnel to a wooden stick. As the eggs are dipped in successive dye baths, colors covered with a protective wax design are preserved. After all designs are added, the accumulated wax is melted over a candle flame and removed.

The *pisanki* included in the exhibit's Easter egg component are the work of folk artists, Mrs. Henia Makowski and Father Chester Krysa. Born in Bialystok, Poland, Mrs. Makowski decorates *pisanki* as her mother did; not with a stylus, but with a tool made by sticking a pin into a cherry wood twig. Her *pisanki* are colored in rich mahogany tones with a dye extracted from onion skins.

Over the past eighteen years, Father Krysa, a native of Niagara Falls, New York, has produced hundreds of *pisanki* based on information from Polish folk artists and ethnographic museums. Many of the earliest were composed with designs shared by a Great Aunt in Rzeszow, Poland. There has been much borrowing among *pisanki* artists throughout Poland and, indeed, throughout Eastern Europe during the tradition's long history. Father Krysa's *pisanki* are grouped to show designs typical of, though not exclusive to, various regions in Poland: Bialystok, Podlasie, Lublin, and Rzeszow along the country's eastern border; Nowy Sacz in the southeast; and Opoczno in Central Poland. In Podlasie, *pisanki* are usually divided into eight triangular spaces. *Pisanki* from

Opoczno are distinguished by white lacy patterns against a solid colored background. Pussywillow and evergreen motifs, both representing good health and long life, often appear on *pisanki* from Podlasie and Rzeszow. We can only guess at the meaning of archaic motifs lilke zig-zags, dots, and curled lines found in Lublin. *Pisanki* are now understood in more general terms, but even the youngest of Father Krysa's many student *pisanki*-makers and admirers recognize the eggs as a cheery sign of springtime renewal.

Nalepianki done with paper cut-outs by Buffalo folk artist, Judy Krauza, complete the exhibit's Easter egg component. The history of *nalepianki* stretches only as far back as the late 19th century, when colored paper became widely available in Poland. This type of Easter egg is believed to be derived from the popular *wycinanki* tradition. *Wycinanki*, finely detailed paper cuttings, were used as wall decorations in many parts of rural Poland. They were customarily made at Christmas, and especially at Easter, when homes received a careful spring cleaning and whitewash. *Nalepianki* probably originated in Lowicz, an area known for its vivid layered *wycinanki*. Though abstract geometric designs sometimes appear on *nalepianki*, stylized animal and floral motifs predominate.

"Ritual Renewal" presents a sample of the ritual objects and experiences which crowd the Polish-American Easter celebration. Easter eggs, woven palms, devotional displays and symbolic foods help to bring the hidden network of memories and beliefs at the heart of Polish-American culture into view. This refreshed vision of itself lifts the Polish-American community's spirit at Easter, making all seem new again.

Kate Koperski

Nalepianki by Judy Krauza, 1988

Mr. Dyngus and partner, Chopin Singing Society Club Rooms, Buffalo, N.Y. 1988

KATE KOPERSKI, guest curator

with photographs by
MARION FALLER

Workshops with folk artists

Pisanki: wax-resist Easter eggs, Alice Bak
Saturday, March 18th, 2 p.m.

Nalepianki: Easter eggs decorated with paper cut-outs, Judy Krauza
Sunday March 19th, 2 p.m.

Our special thanks to the Polish-Americans who have graciously shared their Easter traditions with us. Thanks also to Easter egg consultants Judy Krauza and Father Chester Krysa; to Mr. William Clemente for his kind loan of Easter eggs; and to Kim Yarwood, the Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery's Gallery Director, for his help in designing the exhibit. Exhibition prints of Marion Faller's photographs were made by Lauren Tent, Frank Luterk, and the Campos Photography Center.

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