

## Memories of Holy Week and Pascha (Easter) as a Child in the 1950s/1960s in Pennsylvania, USA

As we get older, we may perhaps think of our childhood more, not necessarily as better than the present, but because it is a part of our personal history and, as we have heard from specialists, experiences from childhood have a great impact on our subsequent development. Good memories are pleasant to recall, and they can also reveal details of times long past in places far away. It is in this spirit that I share these—my childhood recollections of Holy Week and Pascha growing up in the USA—with our readers.

When I was seven-years-old, Dad became the leader of the singing in our church, so we attended every service willingly. During the six weeks of Lent, there were services every Wednesday and Friday evening, and children were also expected to attend. Then for Holy Week, the week from Palm Sunday through Pascha, church services and related activities were much more intense and part of daily life.

Palm Sunday commemorates the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, where He was met with cheers and praises from the crowd waving palm branches. Palms are a part of the Palm Sunday Liturgy, but our ancestors came from Northern Europe, where palms do not grow, and Pennsylvania was also too cold for palms, so instead we used willow branches. We could have imported dried palm branches as other churches did, but we preferred to follow the tradition of our ancestors and use “pussy willows.” Unlike in Taiwan, where we can buy willow branches in the market for Lunar New Year, in Pennsylvania they had to be gathered from the nearby forests. Some men from the church always took care of this, not so easy because the determination of the date for Pascha is lunar and it can occur from the beginning of April to the beginning of May. This meant that some years the willows were not yet in bloom so the men had to travel an hour or two south to pick them, while other years they had to cut the branches a few weeks before Palm Sunday. This was always an important topic of discussion in our village: “Are they in bloom yet? Where can we get them? Will there be enough?” It always seemed to work out. When we took our pussy willows home, we placed them crosswise behind any pictures hanging on the wall, where they remained until the next Palm Sunday, when the old ones were either saved or burned.

On Palm Sunday afternoon we had an important activity at home—boiling eggs and then decorating them, but not in any ordinary way but the way our ancestors from Eastern Europe did. We called these “pysanky” meaning ‘written.’ The writing tool was handmade—a straight pin pushed into a wooden matchstick, the lighting part removed, to use as a handle. The head (round part) of the pin was dipped into melted wax and then quickly a stroke was made on the egg. Each stroke usually began as a circle and ended in a point as the pin was pulled off the egg. With a sequence of strokes various patterns were formed, such as the following.



SUN MOTIF



TRIPLE BARRED CROSS



SHEAF MOTIF

This was no ordinary wax; the best was beeswax from church candles. When the candles in the church burned down, they were replaced by new and taller candles. The women of the church saved these

seemingly useless bottom parts of candles for just this purpose, thus recycling. Pieces of the candle were cut off and put into a low pan, which was placed on low heat on a gas stove. One had to be careful as wax too hot could burst into flame. After the wax was applied, as in a batik process, the eggs were dipped into various colors, and then later the wax was scratched off, leaving the original pattern in white. More experienced older women applied a series of patterns/colors, getting a multicolored patterned result. They would also blow out the contents of the egg first so that the egg could then be kept indefinitely.

The next day of Holy Week that brings back memories is Holy Thursday. Mom would cook the meats for the Easter basket, the half of ham and the kolbasa (garlic sausage). The ends of the kolbasa were tied together, forming it into a ring. It was important to poke holes in it with a fork before cooking so that it would not crack, because it would be placed in the basket for all to see, and a cracked kolbasa was a sign of an inexperienced cook. Ah, the smells, but we could not even taste either the ham or the kolbasa because meat was not permitted during the forty days before Pascha.

Holy Thursday evening was especially hard for a child; the service took about two hours and involved a lot of standing. Most of it was reading—the priest reading the Twelve Gospels. These were from the four evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—but sequenced/alternated into twelve parts so that they told the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Twelve candles were lit, six on each side of the small table in the middle of the front of the church. At the end of the reading of each Gospel, one candle was extinguished. Usually at the end of any Gospel reading during the year, the church bells are rung, but after the reading of the sixth Gospel on this day, bells were no longer rung but wood was used (for more on this wood see Good Friday below).

The first Gospel on Holy Thursday evening was especially difficult, taking over 15 minutes, a long time for any child to stand still. We could sit for one or two minutes between the gospels, all of which required standing, but they got progressively shorter. There didn't even seem to be any good songs to look forward to singing. The child did not understand that this little bit of suffering while standing lets us participate in Jesus' suffering.

Great/Good Friday was usually a day off from school because for many people in the village this was a religious observance, and most workers could take off at least in the afternoon. Late in the afternoon we had the Solemn Vespers that commemorates Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial. A sensual recollection comes first—the smell of the many flowers decorating Jesus' grave, white lilies predominating. From the time I was of primary school age, sitting in the congregation with my mother, when singing was in the language of our ancestors only, not English, I felt how beautiful the songs were, sad and yet exquisitely and painfully beautiful at the same time. Later, in my teenage years, I joined my father in the balcony and sang with him as he had been carefully teaching me the songs. That was when I began to understand the meanings of the texts.

A high point of the Good Friday Vespers was the procession near the end; the priest, imitating Joseph of Arimathea carrying the crucified Jesus for burial, puts the cloth with imprint or embroidered life-size image of Jesus in the tomb onto his back and, with the altar boys in front and people behind, walks

around the church in solemn procession. During this time, instead of bells ringing for a festive occasion, we hear the “turkotalo,”\* a wheel-like device made up of many pieces of wood connected by pieces of leather. When the handle was turned, and several boys would climb up into the belfry to take turns doing this during the long procession, the effect was very strange, like hundreds of pieces of wood falling together. Small children always made sounds of amazement upon hearing it.

After church we were busy at home. It was the time to bake the Paska—the special sweetened bread decorated with a cross on top, and to make the hrutka, a combination of eggs and milk with a bit of sugar and salt. The hrutka had to be cooked carefully over low heat and mixed constantly so that it would not burn, until it reached the consistency of scrambled eggs. At that time, we called my dad, and after we poured the contents into a cheese cloth, he squeezed it tight and tied it, hanging it and letting it drip into a pan until morning, when the solid hrutka would be placed on a plate and put into the refrigerator until it would be placed into the Easter basket. While Mom and I cooked and baked in the kitchen, Dad sat in his usual chair in the living room and practiced his music for the next day, Mom and I singing along from the kitchen now and then.

On Holy Saturday morning Dad went to church, but I usually stayed home and helped Mom with the cleaning and preparation. We had to wash out the straw basket and hang it on the clothes line outside to dry. If you had driven around the village and looked into people’s yards, you would have seen many baskets hanging from clothes lines. Later we ironed the clothes we would wear. When Dad came home, he made sure the car was clean. Some time before the 11 p.m. service, we began to place the foods into the basket—the ham, kolbasa, hrutka, bread, horseradish, the butter in a glass dish with a cross designed on the top (some people formed it into the shape of a lamb), with the decorated eggs placed last in spaces on the top. The meats remind us of God’s goodness and generosity, the bread is a symbol

of Christ, the hrutka the moderation all Christians should have, the horseradish the suffering of Christ, the eggs new life and resurrection. Some people also placed in the basket a piece of bacon, a bottle of red wine, and some chocolate. There also has to be a place to hold the candle, which would be lit when the baskets were blessed. The basket was then covered with a cloth embroidered with “Christ is Risen.” The cloth we used was embroidered by my great-grandmother.

All washed and in our best clothes, by 10:30 p.m. we placed the basket on the floor of the car and drove the five minutes to church. Everyone placed their baskets on long tables in the church basement and put their unlit candles into position, where they would be lit later before the baskets were blessed after the Matins. In older times, the service began at 5 a.m. and the people would place their baskets in line in the church yard. This required some men from the church to guard the



**Mom and Dad with Their Basket, 1993**

baskets—not against thieves but against the local dogs, who were only too eager to run off with a tasty ham or kolbasa!

As the service began, the church was dark, and then the priest started singing “Your Resurrection, O Christ our Saviour” and, following the priest, we processed outside and around the church. Some men had to remain in the balcony, one with his head out the window listening because when the priest got to the doors of the church and started singing the first “Christ is Risen,” the bells had to start ringing, ring each time after the five verses, and then continue ringing while the whole congregation sang it again and again until they all got back into the church. The Matins proceeded joyfully, lasting about an hour, and then we went downstairs for the 10-minute ceremony blessing the baskets.

We then went home, put the food away, and got a few hours sleep before returning to church in the morning for the Liturgy. Though statistically it could not be so, I always remember a sunny spring morning. Everyone was happy, greeting each other with “Christos voskres—Christ is Risen” and responding “Vo istinnu voskres—Indeed He is Risen.” The whole congregation sang and sang out joyfully, not worried about time. The Paschal foods were already cooked and waiting for us in our refrigerators, so no need to worry about cooking. When my grandparents were still alive, we spent the rest of the day with them and the visiting aunts and uncles and cousins, my father’s family up on High Street for the noon meal and part of the afternoon, my mother’s family down on Coal Street for the latter part of the afternoon and the evening meal. It was indeed the day of days, the festival of festivals.

We can’t go back to our childhoods; times change. We move on and make new memories with new people in new places, building on past experiences and hoping we leave something for today’s children to look back on fondly. But the essence of the feast does not change. Pascha remains the festival of festivals, the best day of the year.

\*The name likely comes from the time when Christians in Constantinople were forbidden from ringing bells and only allowed to strike pieces of wood together.