

# Ukrainian Easter and its Traditions

## *Ukrainian Easter*

Ukrainian Easter is rich with traditions which stretch back thousands of years, even before the 988 A.D. conversion to Christianity in Ukraine. Those traditions started with the annual arrival of spring, the season of hope. After a long, cold and dreary winter in Ukraine, spring comes early, and with it, a renewal of hope and joy. As the snows melt and the ice thaws, the birds return with their happy songs and the smell of new life begins to seep out of the dark soil, now spotted in green. It was a time when nature seemed again to come to life, and joy filled the human heart.

## *Great Fast*

After Christianity came to Ukraine, the coming of spring took on new meaning, as it also signaled the approach of Easter. The forty days preceding Easter are known as the "Great Fast" (or Lenten Period) and are spent by the faithful readying themselves spiritually for the great day when Christ's Resurrection will be celebrated.

Prayer and penitence are a part of the "Great Fast". The faithful often deny themselves certain types of food and recreation in order to express remorse for their sins. "Stations of the Cross" are usually held on Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent. The "Stations" represent the fourteen instances of pain and suffering that Jesus endured in his final day on earth over two thousand years ago.

During the "Great Fast", there are also special services held for the deceased members of each parish. These requiem services, known as "Sorokousty", usually involve the reciting of the names of individual family members from the parish who have died. The word "Sorokousty" literally means "forty monks", and refers back to a time when requiem services were held in monasteries by forty monks who would pray in unison for the souls of the deceased. It was also tradition in Ukraine that, during the period of the "Great Fast", parishioners make it a "duty" to make a good confession of their sins. This would be done so that their souls may be prepared for the reception of the Body of Christ on Easter morning. Another custom closely following the idea of the "Easter Duty" was that of reconciliation of relatives and neighbors when there had been problems or difficulties in the family or neighborhood.

In Ukraine, Lent was also a time when great attention was paid preparing the home and family clothing for the arrival of Easter: Much fixing up and whitewashing was done to the home and articles of clothing were repaired and cleaned. In recognition of the new life

of Christ's raising from the dead, each family member was also provided with some new article of clothing.

### *Holy Week*

The Holy Week before Easter begins with Palm Sunday, also known as Willow Sunday in Ukraine. The day commemorates the triumphant entrance of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem, when so many proclaimed Him "King" and placed palm branches on the ground in the path of His travel. In Ukraine, it was often very difficult to obtain palms for this day, so pussy willow branches were substituted. The pussy willow was one of the first trees to show signs of early spring life, so its branches were selected as the ones to be blessed at Sunday services and distributed to the faithful.

### *Palm Sunday*

After Palm Sunday services, it was customary for Ukrainians exiting church to gently tap each other with the blessed pussy willow branches. This custom, known as "Boze Rany" ("God's Wounds") was done to imitate the scourging of Jesus by His captors on Holy Friday. But the tapping of friends with the pussy willow branches was actually a wish for good health, wealth and happiness. That is because the tapping was usually accompanied by the phrase: "*Bud' velyki yak verba, zdorovi 'yak voda, bohati yak zemlia'*". This expression translates as: "*Be as big as the willow, healthy as water, rich as the earth*". The blessed willow branches were then taken home. Some were planted by the father or oldest son. If they took root, it meant many good things would come to the family that year. Most of the blessed pussy willow branches were placed in front of, behind or above holy pictures in the home. These branches would replace the branches that had been placed the previous year. The branches which were taken down were carefully burned.

In Ukraine, the first three days of Holy Week, also called the Pure ("Chystyi") Week or Great ("Velykyi") Week, was a very busy period. All significant housework, repairs and cooking had to be accomplished on these three days before Holy Thursday. The women and girls of the home would do house cleaning and prepare foods and the Pysanky for the basket of blessed food. This included the baking of the Paska and Babka. The men and boys cleaned the barn and outbuildings and stored the firewood needed for the Holy Week.

### *Holy Thursday*

Holy Thursday or Passion Thursday ("Strastney Chetver") services recall the Passion of

Our Lord Jesus Christ. The passion ("Strasti") service consists of the reading of twelve Gospels from the Bible which tell the entire story of the suffering and hardship of Christ. These Gospels are sung or read along with prayers and hymns. Bells are rung after each chapter until the last one. At that time the bells are silenced and are not rung again until Easter morning. After the bells are silenced, they are replaced by wooden clappers ("kalatala") which, when struck, sounds like the nails being driven into the cross. This is done as a sign of grief for Christ. Sometimes, the services include twelve candle bearers who stand near the altar. One bearer walks away with his candle at the end of the reading of each Gospel, to represent the Apostles who denied and deserted Christ.

At the end of the "Strasti" service in Ukraine, a lighted candle was carefully carried home by each family. This special candle was used to burn a cross on the crossbeam of the home and was kept there until the next year. It was the first candle used during the year to begin any and all religious rituals and was always the candle placed in the hand of anyone who was dying. Usually, the candle was kept in front of one of the Icons in the home.

### *Good Friday*

"Velykodn 'ia Piatnytsia", Good Friday, is a solemn time that commemorates the day our Lord was crucified. This day is observed as a strict fast, so no meat or dairy products are consumed. No manual labor is allowed. All conversation is done quietly. Part of the services of that day includes the ancient custom of the Veneration of the Holy Shroud ("Plaschenytsia"). The Holy Shroud is a representation of the sheet that Christ was buried in following his death on the cross. The body of Jesus with His wounds is depicted, laying in repose, often pictured with other individuals who were part of the events of Good Friday, such as Joseph and Nicodemus, who took Jesus down from the cross.

There is also a solemn procession around the church, lead by a worshipper carrying the Crucifix. In the procession, the elders of the parish carry the Holy Shroud, the priest carries the Holy Eucharist and the altar boys carry lighted candles and the wooden clappers. This procession is symbolic of the journey from Christ's Crucifixion on Calvary to His Tomb. The procession reenters the front doors of the church and the Holy Shroud is placed on a representative tomb. The tomb is usually surrounded on three sides by candles, palms and flowers. As a show of devotion and adoration, the faithful approach the "Plaschenytsia" on their knees, make the Sign of the Cross and kiss all five wounds of Christ pictured on the Holy Shroud. The time between noon and three o'clock is known as the "Devotion of Three Hours". During that time, members of

families and church organizations take turns keeping vigil as guards of honor at the Holy Grave.

### *Holy Saturday*

Holy Saturday is a day of continued fasting and abstinence and is the final day for the faithful to prepare their souls for Easter by making a good confession if they have not already done so. During this time, the parishioners visit the "Plaschenytsia" to worship and kiss the wounds of Christ. In many places, including the United States, the traditional blessing of Easter foods ("Sviachnia") is done at a special Holy Saturday service. In Ukraine, the blessing of foods was done following the Resurrection services on Easter morning.

### *Easter Food Basket*

It is traditional that during the Great Fast (Lent), the faithful fast and abstain from meat and dairy products as much as possible. To show their joy and gratitude at the end of this time of fasting, people take to Church baskets of food which are to be blessed and then consumed on Easter morning to "break-fast". The traditional Ukrainian Easter morning breakfast of hard-boiled eggs, various meats, sausages and ham, butter, decorative paska, salt, horseradish, and cheese is a very special treat. This meal is very much looked forward to, especially in light of the symbolism of the foods that are consumed. In the Ukrainian tradition, the Easter basket foods symbolize:

- Paska — Christ, Our Bread of Life
- Eggs — New Life and the Resurrection of Christ
- Horseradish — The Passion of Christ
- Bacon — God's Mercy
- Cheese — the moderation that Christians should show in all things
- Salt — The duty of Christians to others
- Ham — The great Joy and abundance of Easter
- Butter — The Goodness of Christ
- Kielbasa — God's Favor and Generosity

### *Decorating Eggs*

Along with the great symbolism of the Easter basket foods, Ukrainians are very particular in their efforts when preparing their decorative Easter eggs, known as "Pysanky". The art of Pysanky is so ancient that no one really knows its exact origins. It is known, however, that at least 200 years ago, primitive people who lived in the area

which is now Ukraine worshipped the sun. The pagan people saw a similarity between the yellow yoke of the egg and the sun, the white of the egg and the moon. In those ancient times, the egg was believed to actually have magical powers. Eggs were often used during sun worship ceremonies. These people also understood that the egg could be the source of life.

When Ukraine accepted Christianity in 988 A.D., the egg was adopted as a religious symbol of the Easter celebration. Not long after that, there are written references that show a well developed custom of decorating eggs with designs of Christian significance. That beautiful art of Pysanky tradition continues today, even among many who do not enjoy a Ukrainian heritage. Each egg which is decorated is recognition of the significance of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ on that first Easter morning.

### *Resurrection Services*

Easter Sunday morning in the Ukrainian tradition begins at sunrise. That is when the faithful arrive for Resurrection Services. The service before the Divine Liturgy consists of a procession which circles the church three times. The journey is made to symbolize the trip of the women to the tomb to anoint the Body of Christ on that first Easter morning. The makeup of the procession is similar to the one on Good Friday, led by a worshipper carrying the crucifix and altar boys using the kalatala (wooden clappers). Parish elders carry the Plaschenytsia (Holy Burial Shroud).

After the third passage, the procession stops in front of the church doors, which symbolize the impossibility of being able to enter the Kingdom of God before the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The priest sings the joyful Easter song "Khrytos Voskres" ("Christ is Risen") the first time himself. All of the faithful repeat the triumphant hymn a second time. Then, striking the doors of the church with the crucifix to open them, the priest begins "Khrytos Voskres" a third time, as the congregation joins in. This dramatic entrance reminds us that Heaven is now available to all because our Savior has conquered death with His death. All enter the church and the Divine Liturgy of Easter, the Great Day, begins.

### *Khrytos Voskres – Christ Is Risen*

Many times during the Easter Sunday Liturgy, the happy refrains of "Khrytos Voskres" are sung by the congregation. It is sometimes difficult for church visitors to understand why this tune, and its variations, is repeated so frequently during the Easter season. We should remind our visitors that in the Resurrection of Jesus, we are all resurrected from the bonds of death. Our joyful Easter tune, "Sohlasmo Zaspivaimo" perhaps says it

best when it proclaims "*With His death He conquered death, and to those in their graves He granted Life!*"

### *Voistynu Voskres – Indeed He Is Risen*

Following the Easter Sunday Resurrection Services and Divine Liturgy, Ukrainian families would gather outside the church and exchange the joyful greeting "Khrystos Voskres"! That would be answered with the equally cheerful "Voistynu Voskres"!

Hugs and kisses for long absent friends and family would follow, as many would come great distances to be together on this holiday. The family would then return home, where the traditional blessed Easter foods basket would be brought out. The father or head of the household would then begin the Easter breakfast by taking one of the blessed hard boiled eggs and dividing it up among the family members. As each member is given a piece of the egg, the father would proclaim "Khrystos Voskres"! The member would reply "Voistynu Voskres"! The passing out and consumption of the egg was a very important start to the meal. The egg symbolized new life and the Resurrection of Christ, and therefore, the basis of the entire celebration. In eating it together, family unity was strengthened, as was the prospect for a healthy and happy year ahead.

### *Ringing of the Church Bell*

Often, while the family was still having the Easter breakfast, the sound of the joyous ringing of the church bell would be heard. The ringing was done to proclaim the joy of the Resurrection of our Lord. The task was accomplished by one of the boys of the village. He would have been the first to hurry home, have his Easter family breakfast and run back to the church. It was considered an honor to do the Easter morning bell ringing, and whoever the fleet footed lad was who accomplished the ringing was then predicted to be the First in many accomplishments in the coming year.

### *Easter was celebrated for three days*

In Ukraine, Easter was celebrated for three days. There was usually no work done, much food consumed and many hours spent in church, as well as with family and friends. Being such a happy time, there were also stories told and games played by the children. Among the games was the rolling of the krashanky (plain colored, hard boiled eggs. single egg: "krashanka", from the word "kraska", meaning "color"). There were many variations of that game. The one popular among the girls was the line rolling. In that, girls would stand in two parallel lines and roll the eggs back and forth between partners. The two girls with the last remaining un-cracked egg would win all of the

eggs that had cracked. Another game with krashanky was known as "chockamia". In this game, two children would tap each others eggs together until one of the eggs cracked. The winner, whose egg did not crack, got to keep the cracked egg. Older children would do the airborne variation of the parallel line game. The eggs would be thrown between the teenagers in the lines. Again, the team with the last un-cracked egg would be the winner.

### *Easter egg carries a powerful symbolism*

There were many stories told at Easter; most of them highlighting importance of Pysanky. The Easter egg carries a powerful symbolism for Ukrainian Catholics. The "Pysanky" represents the tomb (shell), the burial linen (egg white), and Jesus, the Son of God, (the yoke) Who raised from the dead and thereby conquered death! The "pysanky", at a glance, is the total representation of Easter: The Resurrection and our New Life. It is not surprising that the highly decorated Easter eggs, pysanky, (single egg: pysanka, from the word "pysaty" meaning "to write"), were so powerfully charged in traditional Ukrainian folk stories.

### *Pysanky Legends*

One of the most popular; and oldest, pysanky legends tells of a young woman who was on her way home from the market in town. She had with her a jug of fresh water for her journey and a basket of eggs. On her way she met a stranger sitting on a rock. Thinking he must be a tired traveler, she offered him a drink of her water. When he handed the water back to her, she was surprised to see that he had wounds on his hands. The stranger said nothing, but got up and went in the opposite direction of the young woman. When she arrived home, she uncovered her basket and discovered her eggs had been turned into beautiful pysanky. The stranger, of course, had been Jesus Christ, and that was the first Easter morning.

Another story is of a poor man who was on his way to the market in town with a basket of eggs. Just outside of town, he came upon a crowd of people who were mocking and jeering a man who was carrying two wooden beams. The poor man put his basket down and ran to help the man to carry the heavy wooden load. After helping, the poor man returned to his basket of eggs by the road. Then he discovered that all of the eggs had become beautifully decorated in stunning designs and lovely colors. The poor man was Simon of Cyrene, and the man carrying the wooden beams was, of course, Jesus Christ.

A different pysanky story tied to Holy Week tells that after Jesus was arrested, His

mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, prepared a basket of eggs to present to Pilate. She hoped to present them and ask for mercy for her Son's life. As she prepared the eggs, her tears fell on them, forming designs of many colors. When Mary went before Pilate, she fell to the floor in grief and the eggs rolled out of the basket and across the floor. The eggs continued to roll until they were found by people all around the world.

Perhaps one of the most repeated pysanky stories tells of the journey of Mary Magdalene and her companions on the morning after the Sabbath. The women were on their way to Christ's tomb to anoint His body with sweet spices. They had taken along a basket of hard boiled eggs to eat after their work was completed. But when they got to the tomb, the stone was moved aside. They set down their basket and spices and went inside, only to find the tomb was empty. When they joyfully left the burial place, having discovered that Christ had risen, they found that the eggs in their basket had been changed into many bright and beautiful colors.

There is this old legend that underscores the power and influence that Ukrainians believe pysanky have in the world. Far away, it is said, there is a very large and evil monster chained to a cliff. This monster has servants who travel in every country each year taking a count of how many pysanky have been made for Easter. Each year that fewer eggs have been decorated, the monster's chains are loosened and there is more evil in the world. If ever there are no pysanky made, the evil one would be released and he would destroy the world. But, in years that many pysanky are made, the monster's chains are held tight. In those years the power of love and the goodness that the pysanky bring is felt throughout all nations, bringing peace and harmony to all.

### *Discover the fate of deceased relatives*

It is said that in the Ukraine many years ago, people who wanted to discover the fate of deceased relatives would place a black krashanky on the grave and cover it with some dirt. The next morning, if the egg was disturbed in any way, it was believed that the soul of the deceased was in need of additional prayer. If the egg was still in place and unmarked in the morning, it was believed that the soul of the departed had already entered into heaven.

### *Easter egg colors and what they symbolize*

Just as the various foods in the Ukrainian Easter Basket are symbolic, so are the colors that are used on krashanky and pysanky. Although the interpretation of color significance can be different from person to person, there are some generally accepted meanings associated with certain colors. In the Ukrainian tradition, Easter egg colors

symbolize:

- White - Purity and innocence
- Green — Hope and renewal
- Brown — Happiness
- Yellow — Wisdom and recognition
- Orange - Strength, endurance and ambition
- Red - Happiness, hope and passion
- Blue — Wishes for good health
- Purple - The royal color symbolizing faith and trust
- Black - Remembrance for the dead.