

# EASTER IN UKRAINE

By T. LUCIOW

Mr. Luciw came from Ukraine before the World War II; He served in the U.S. Army, received his M.A. from the University of Minnesota, and was teaching in many schools in America. Because of illness, he likes to write to hear from others about their Easter and Christmas customs.

Easter in Ukraine is wonderful! It is celebrated even more than Christmas! It always comes with the spring and spring is full of power of color and rejuvena-

tion, both physical and spiritual.

In the Ukraine it is celebrated with the blend of pre-Christian spring rituals and the true Christians ideals. They include religious church services as well as special plays and dances, called "hailkas."

Since Easter is considered the greatest event in the Ukraine, it has a long and thorough preparation.

My grandmother, in whose house I spent my childhood, always took care of the cleaning and the white-washing of the

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exterior and the interior of our house. Everything was scrubbed, and all garments aired and cleaned. Grandmother saw to it that we had new suits, shoes, hats, and shirts. She expected us to look our best as we attended the numerous religious activities that preceded Easter Holidays. She also watched our diet carefully.

We were not to eat meat or anything containing animal fat for 40 days during lent before Easter; we were not to touch milk or cheese or oils for a week before the Resurrection Day. During that time we were to attend special church services known as hours of Recollections in order that we were well prepared for our Easter confession and the receiving of the Holy Communion. No one would dare to sit at the Easter dinner table and partake of the blessed Easter egg and other food without first cleansing himself of his sins by going to Confession and receiving Holy Communion.

Our Holy Week started with Palm Sunday, the triumphal entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. At this time small twigs of pussy-willows were blessed and distributed among the congregation.

While on Monday and Tuesday of that week we were still busy preparing food for Easter: Holy Wednesday was marked with special church services called in Ukrainian "Chrisopoklonna Sereda," or in a free translation: "Bowing to Christ Wednesday." During this service while singing the chants "We bow to Christ," the congregation would fall to their knees and prostrate themselves before the altar. This was easy to do because our churches usually had no pews. This act of reverence was repeated hundreds

The Passion service was held Maundy Thursday. It was a long and very sad service. The service was held in a dimly lighted church with icons and the Holy Gospel pertaining to the sufferings and the passion of our Lord. His voice filled with emotion and sorrow would reiterate the tragedy of Jesus' betrayal, trial, and crucifixion. The congregation literally relived the hours of sorrow and listened patiently as the celebrant was reading the Gospel in twelve different languages.

On Good Friday, which in Ukrainian is called the "The Torturous Friday," "Strastna Piatnica." It consisted of displaying a mural picture depicting His body in the tomb, called "Plaschevnicia" in Ukrainian.

On Saturday the Adoration of the Holy Grave would take place. The custom was to visit all the five churches in the area. Today I consider these visits some of the best moments of my life.

It is my ambition to visit these churches once again before I die. Unfortunately, I would be able to see only one church as it was before. The rest of these churches were changed by the godless government into storage rooms, stores, elevators. The largest and the most beautiful, the Convent of St. Basil, is now a machine shop. It was in this church on Saturday night that we used to witness the Holy Resurrection.

I can remember this great service as if I were seeing it right now. Thousands of people in their best clothes would gather around the outside of the church building. Their faces were 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 golden-light colored vestments and carried service books and small crosses in their hands. The highest priest, the Archmadrite, held a larger golden cross. He chanted: "Christ is

Risen! - Kristos Voskres" three times, each time words were repeated by the chorus and the congregation as he knocked with his cross at the closed door which at that 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 the dead, with His death, He has destroyed death itself giving life everlasting to those who were dead." (Kristos Voskres. Iz Mertvikh smertiyu smert poprav. I tim s'icho u hrobakh).

From Easter Day to the Ascension it was customary to greet people: "Christos Voskres" - Christ is Risen. To which one would answer: "Voistynu Voskres." He has Risen, Indeed!

Easter dinner would start with eggs and paska, or babka. The "Paska" and "Babka," are rich, round Easter breads with elaborate dough ornaments, and a cross in the center. The decorations are given much attention. This bread had been taken to the church on Easter morning along with the eggs, hams, sausages, cheese and other foods to be blessed at the altar.

Grandfather would cut the egg into pieces. As he ate a piece he would extend the greeting to his family and to his friends and neighbors. Everyone partakes a piece of this egg. A portion of the egg was sent to those who were not present. I still receive mine in the mail each year.

On Easter Monday it has long been the custom to sprinkle water on everyone. This custom goes into 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 literally fill the cemetery, each family would gather at the grave of their loved ones, kneeling and praying and often asking the minister to say special prayers for the departed souls. It is believed that anyone dying during the Easter season will go to heaven.

At about noon-time a church procession would march to the cemetery carrying church banners. The procession, led by the priest would circle the cemetery three times and stop at the large wooden cross with the Ukrainian national blue and yellow flags. There would then be a special memorial service for those who died for Ukrainian Independence, 1917-22, 1939-45.

One must remember that the Ukraine, a beautiful and rich land with cheerful and pious people incorporated in the Soviet Ukrainian Republic, thus it is not free in the sense we understand freedom. The 45 million Ukrainians are subjected to religious persecution, to constant communization and to the dictates of Moscow. The Ukraine like other satellite countries are still waiting their political resurrection. While the older people are still praying and visiting the graves, the younger set, both boys and girls in the nearby churchyard, are playing their happy Easter games, called "hay-ilkas."

The young men have their own songs and games reminiscent of old heroic deeds. The most vivid of their games, as I remember, was called: "The Rotating Belfry" (Devin). This was made up of a three tier circle of young men standing on the shoulders with arms interlocked. They sing Easter songs as they rotate clockwise.

The majority of songs and dances are done by girls dressed in colorful Ukrainian costumes.

These dances are usually performed in the church yard or on the cemetery grounds during the third day of the Easter Season, singing in circle the Zelman song or the "Soroka" (Bind) while the boys are tolling the bells without a stop.