



Children preserve Ukrainian traditions

By Teresa A. Parsons

Pauline Yarema, Helen Masely and Olga Gelembiuk have lived most of their lives far from the plains and steppes of the Ukraine. But each year as Easter approaches, they form a link between their peasant ancestors there and youngsters at St. Peter and Paul School here in Auburn.

Immigrants from the Ukraine began settling in Auburn close to five generations ago. But they still take the old country's traditions seriously at St. Peter and Paul, which was established by the Ukrainian Catholic Diocese of Stamford, Conn., in 1939. Some children begin learning traditional folk dances as early as kindergarten. In third grade, students may also choose to study the Ukrainian language.

Shortly before Easter each year, Masely, whose parents emigrated to the United States in the 1920s, visits St. Peter and Paul School to share with students the history and symbolism of Ukrainian folk art. She brings along a carload of colorful costumes and decorated objects to display, from eggs to aprons and candlesticks.

Yarema, who escaped with her husband from her Nazi-occupied homeland during World War II, teaches traditional embroidery to the eighth-grade girls. Each year with her help, they decorate their white graduation dresses with embroidery at the waist and sleeves.

Down in the school cafeteria, meanwhile, Gelembiuk patiently instructs students in the traditional art of decorating the pysanka or Easter eggs, using beeswax and dye.

Easter in the Ukrainian tradition marks a triple celebration — Christ's Resurrection, Thanksgiving and Valentine's Day.

So when they put together an Easter basket, Ukrainians go far beyond jelly beans and chocolate rabbits. Their baskets typically contain kielbasa, bacon, ham, horseradish, butter in the shape of a lamb or cross, jams and jellies, salt, cheese, "paska" or decorated Easter bread and intricately patterned pysanka.

Most are foods not eaten during Lent, but they are also symbolic. Horseradish, for example, is a reminder of the bitterness of Calvary, and ham a symbol of joy and abundance. Kielbasa recalls God's favor and generosity, and bacon, God's mercy. The cheese, which is bland and slightly sweet, admonishes Christians to be moderate in all things. Bread is a reminder of Christ, the true Bread of Life.

The eggs represent not only new life and resurrection, but also the imprisonment of the soul within the body. Easter eggs intended for eating are painted in a single color with edible dyes, while the decorative ones are covered with intricate geometric, floral or animal shapes.

Each of the shapes and colors used on the pysanka has meaning. The color yellow, for instance, represents spirituality, while white is purity, green is money, red is love and lavender is power. The triangle represents the Blessed Trinity as well as the three elements of fire, air and water. Fishes are the symbol of Christianity. An egg covered in a sunburst pattern means "May the sun shine on you and may you never have a rainy day," Masely said.

Likewise, each region of the Ukraine has its own style of egg decoration. Gelembiuk dips an egg in dye, then uses a stylus or kistka to draw patterns on the egg with beeswax before dipping the egg into another color. She begins with the lightest-colored dye, usually yellow, and works toward the darkest, generally black. All the wax is then removed and the pattern appears.

Other methods include dyeing the egg and then scratching patterns into it with a pin, or applying the wax to the egg with a pin, thereby creating patterns from tiny lines.

All sorts of legends are told about the origin of egg decorating, which began more than 10 centuries ago. One tale relates that the Blessed Mother offered a basket of decorated eggs to Pontius Pilate as a plea for the life of her Son. Bright dots of color on today's eggs represent her tears.

Another story tells how a peddler on his way to market with a basket of eggs passed a man staggering under the weight of a cross. A crowd surrounded the man, jeering and



Olga Gelembiuk, left, points out some of the more intricate patterns on a Ukrainian Easter egg to Kirista DiMora, Alicia Wolford, Chris Carnicelli, Tom Goodelle, and Mary Hlya.



Alicia Wolford inspects a wooden egg.

mocking him. The peddler set his basket aside and went to the victim's aid. When he returned, he found his eggs brilliantly decorated. The peddler in the story is of course Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus carry the Cross.

To the children, the legends are romantic superstitions that make them feel proud of their cultural identities, whether Ukrainian or not.

To Masely, who has spent years documenting and preserving the patterns and styles used by different regions, Ukrainian folk art is also a lasting reminder of the stubborn endurance of her ancestors through years of oppression and struggle.

Learning the art of decorating pysankas was a struggle for her as well during the Depression years, when eggs were at a premium. "I used to sneak into the kitchen after my mother went to bed and steal one egg at a time to practice," she said, laughing.

But they take their roles as teachers seriously. "There's something in your blood that gets to you," Gelembiuk explained. "Who will keep that alive if the children don't?"



A papal cross is surrounded by traditional Ukrainian Easter foods and ornaments.