

# MEMORIES of a UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS EVE



Sledding time

Frank Wysochansky, the artist whose work featuring the life and times of the anthracite miners of Northeastern Pennsylvania shown in this issue of *Coal People*, was part of a family of 12 children. The large Wysochansky clan celebrated Christmas according to the traditions and customs their parents brought to America from Western Ukraine. Frank's sister Olga shared her memories of that special ceremony in an article she wrote late in her life describing the Christmas Eve of 1935, the last Christmas her family shared with their father. He was killed in a cave-in a nearby mine on Jan. 16, 1936.

"I remember our last Christmas with Dad in 1935. We had 11 children then and one on the way. We lived in Peckville, PA, in a six-room cold water flat that once was a schoolhouse. The Great Depression had already gripped us. Life was Spartan. It was no disgrace to be poor. Our poverty was accepted as a condition of life," Olga wrote.

Two of the family members were absent that year, with the oldest brother Michael attending a religious order in Canada, and brother Frank away at a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in California, sending home what money he could to support the family.

All the family members old enough to work did so, supplementing

their father's mining income with brother Nick's wages from selling lard door to door, Olga's meager earnings from setting hair, and sister Carol's income from domestic work. Together they struggled to survive.

The ritual of the Christmas Eve celebration began with the spreading of the white tablecloth, signifying the swaddling clothes of the infant Jesus, across the dining table. A bed of straw was placed in the exact center of the tablecloth, a reminder of the manger. The centerpiece was a large home-baked braided bread, which represented Christ. A candle was placed in the center of the bread, its light becoming the star of Bethlehem. Straw was scattered under the table and on the kitchen floor to the dismay of the older children.

"We would remind Dad that he was in America now. Good grief! What would our friends think?" Olga said.

The 12-course meal, one course for each apostle, began with blessed bread and honey. "Dad dipped bread into the honey, bringing it up to his mouth, while saying 'Christ is born,' to which we all replied, 'Let us glorify him.'"

The meatless menu consisted of the bread and honey, a Christmas wheat dish called kutia, made with honey, raisins and nuts; cabbage soup and rye bread; varenky or dumplings



filled with potato, cabbage or prunes; cabbage rolls with rice and mushrooms; fish, peas, mushrooms, rice with prunes and nuts; fruit compote; non-dairy boil cake; tea, soda, and nuts. Between courses the family sang carols. At the end of the meal, all exchanged hugs and Christmas greetings. The dishes were washed, and the tableware bound with wisps of straw and placed under the table, symbolizing the togetherness that binds a family.

Christmas morning the children assembled in the warm kitchen where their Christmas stockings held their gifts, simple gifts of nuts and candy and sometimes an orange. In some years a well-to-do neighbor might bring a box of treats for the family to share.

"Two services were held at the church," said Olga. "A High Mass and a Low Mass. The adults alternated their attendance. The kids stayed home for lack of warm clothing for the long walk in the bitter cold."

Following the death of the family patriarch, the Christmas Eve celebrations continued, but with a sadness. The coming of World War II helped turn the economy around, and the Wysochansky family managed to buy a seven-room house in Blakely with two bathrooms, a true luxury. Three of the girls were married by 1948, and each had a child of her own. Olga attempted to persuade her mother to abolish the family Christmas Eve gatherings to alleviate the pressure and tensions of the holidays.

"As long as I live and am able, we shall observe this beautiful

tradition as a family unit," her mother said. "Your children will remember this when they're on their own."

Giving in to their mother's will, the grown children and their children assembled for the ceremony in 1948, 12 years after the death of their father. As they prepared to serve the meal, they heard footsteps on the front porch.

"There was a sudden stillness as our eyes darted toward the door. It opened slowly, letting in a gust of cold air. We were all astounded to see our brother Michael, a monk, from Alberta, Canada, standing tall and magnificent in his heavy overcoat and cossack cap, covered with soft flakes of snow."

After a round of greetings and celebration, the family turned to the table, with Michael, the oldest, assuming his place at the head of the table. For the first time in 14 years, the whole family was united at Christmas Eve.

"Mother's lucid blue eyes glowed like lighted lamps... her countenance revealed a sense of relief after discarding a heavy burden. There was also a kind of complete authority taking over that was once my father's when he lived. My brother's presence was a special gift to Mother and the family. With very deep emotion, we all witnessed another joyful Christmas." Olga remembered.

"Today, regardless of the greater sophistication and higher standard of living, we are proud to see our own married children carry on in this same tradition that has been passed on to them."  
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