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At Hanka's Table

by Hanka Sawka with Hanna Maria Sawka, New York: Lake Isle
Press, 2004. 280 pp. \$21.95.

At Hanka's Table is a book which provides a feast for the palate, the eye, and the heart-but not in every particular. The book belongs to a genre of literature which seems to be growing in popularity: a category which showcases collections of recipes but which uses the collections as frameworks for autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, historical reports, and even fictional stories.

In Hanka's case, the majority of the recipes are Polish; and they include Hanka's versions of Polish Christmas and Easter specialties and other well known dishes such as barszcz, pierogi, paczki, and bigos as well as slightly more exotic dishes like befszyk tartarski, czarnina and zimne nogi. The range of the recipes is not as extensive as some other Polish cookbooks; but it is more than adequate, and the quality of Hanka's cooking is never in doubt. It includes recipes for dishes from other countries, too, because Poland is the crossroads of the continent and because Hanka and her husband have traveled extensively. One distracting feature is that some of the Polish dishes are listed by their Polish names while others are assigned English names; consistency on the names would have been good. This editorial oversight notwithstanding, a delicious food by any name is a culinary treat, and Hanka does credit to her table and to Polish cooking.

At Hanka's Table is also a visual treasure. The attractiveness of the book is enhanced by photographs of many of the Hanka's dishes by Andrea Barrist Stern, family photos, and illustrations of the artwork of Hanka's husband, noted Polish artist Jan Sawka. On this feature, the only disappointment is that there are no examples of Jan's pro-Solidarity posters which are mentioned with so much admiration by Hanka.

The heart of this book, however, is the personal story of Hanka and Jan's struggles in Communist Poland, their often difficult adjustments to life in the West, and their eventual triumphs in America. Here is a heartwarming success story which all can appreciate but which will resonate in a special way with Poles and Polish Americans.

Describing the hardships of life in Communist Poland, Hanka presents the failures of Marxism in a narrative of the experiences of her family, friends, and the early years of her marriage. Everything from the near impossibility of owning a home, purchasing a car, and obtaining decent healthcare to more mundane matters such as the rationing of food and the endemic shortages of toilet paper document a system which was a travesty. These conditions, combined with political restrictions on traveling abroad and the lack of fundamental freedoms at home, made Poland a giant prison. Furthermore, allusions to the history of Hanka's mother and father and that of her in-laws during World War II provide personal accounts of the Soviet "invasion" of Poland in 1939, including references to the Katyn massacre of Polish army officers, and the transfer from one form of foreign occupation to another after the Allied victory in 1945. In a similar fashion, Hanka's accounts of the Communist distortions of Polish history provide a wonderful opportunity to present readers with a more accurate picture of Polish history and culture, including the "spiritual comfort and hope" provided by the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. Along the way, Hanka also outlines how the Communist government of Poland attempted to present itself to the West as a "liberal democratic government" and how many in the West were pleased to accept the ruse. Here is a microcosm of much of the Polish experience of the last century; and all Poles and Polish Americans will profit from the better understanding which Hanka promotes among her non-Polish readers.

In a similar fashion, the reports of the trials and adjustments faced by Hanka and her husband after their relocation in the West are also universal and inspiring. Their poverty and efforts to re-establish their lives and careers are familiar to many; and those who are unfamiliar with such struggles will be better people for their new insights. Particularly distressing are Hanka's reports of the discrimination which her daughter Hanna faced at new schools with some regularity. All parents, but especially immigrant parents, can imagine the pain of Hanka and her husband as they try to protect their talented daughter from chants that she was a "stupid Polack." Through it all, however, Hanka and her husband persevere; and their successes become the triumph of us all.

As universal as Hanka's story is, there are some dimensions of it which hinder complete empathy from some readers. Despite a church wedding, on which her mother insisted, and references to Easter and Christmas holiday dishes, Hanka and her husband Jan are clearly secular Poles; they do not share many of the values and understandings held by most other Poles and Polish Americans with religious identities, particularly with Catholic identities. As a result, there are some aspects of the book which for such readers will seem odd. For example, Hanka nowhere even mentions Pope John Paul II. At Hanka's Table is a book of many rewards and tasty pleasures; and it would be unfair to allow its occasional lapses to obscure its many strengths.