



A Visit With The People Next Door

Each edition, we spend time with the everyday heroes who make up this great community, asking them what makes them tick and learning more about who they are and what they do. In the everyday world of Ulster County, these folks are the real celebrities.

The Sawka Family

Names: Jan, Hanka, and Hanna Maria Sawka
Ages: J: 57. H: Forever young. HM: 29.
Residence: High Falls
Zodiac Signs: J: Sagittarius. H: Gemini. HM: Virgo.
Occupation: J: Artist, set designer, architect. H: Wife, mother, cookbook/autobiography author. HM: Film and theater director, writer.

Food for Love (and Art)

The term "Renaissance Man" is rarely used lightly, but it must apply to Jan Sawka. A painter, architect, and theatrical set designer, Jan and his wife, Hanka, were exiled from their native Poland in 1977 during the Communist regime. Jan's visual gifts and Hanka's culinary legacy helped establish them here, when other struggling artists would descend on their first home for conversation and home cooking. Their writer/director daughter, Hanna Maria, helped Hanka compose a memoir/cookbook, *At Hanka's Table* (Lake Isle Press, 2004), with illustrations by Jan and photos by Andrea Barrist Stern. Jan is currently in Japan (read on), but Hanka and Hanna Maria were at home in High Falls.

When did your family settle in High Falls?
 1985

Hanna Maria, where did you go to high school and college/grad school?

HM: I graduated high school from Rondout Valley. My undergraduate degree is from Smith College and in January I earned an MFA from the Polish National Film School.

Lake Isle Press just published your group effort, *At Hanka's Table*. Why did you write this book?

H: My husband and I have had an unusual life, filled with struggles, but also with incredible collaborations and friendships. As young people behind the Iron Curtain, it didn't seem that we had a chance to do anything worthwhile and fulfilling with our lives. Despite adversity, we managed to escape a prison-like system, adapt to new countries, and even to work together to build a formidable artistic career for Jan. The cookbook part of the book comes out of the philosophy of surviving and living that I present in the memoir section. This way, I don't just talk about it, I also give people recipes that will get them around a table with family and friends, which forms the base under our feet for everything we must handle in life.

You arrived in New York in 1977, exiled from Poland. Yet Jan was an award-winning illustrator and poster artist there. What was the connection?

H: Jan was trained as a painter and printmaker (as well as an architect), but there was no way in Communist Poland for an artist to make a living except to design posters. Jan became a virtual star of the poster by the age of 27, winning him worldwide fame equivalent to Andy Warhol in the US...When things got out of hand, however, he could not be killed or jailed, as he was too well known and even people in the West would find out (which would be bad propaganda), so there was no choice but to exile him. They were counting on his being unable to manage in the West.

Hanna Maria, with such creativity in your family, how did art manifest within you?

HM: I basically grew up surrounded by art. When I was a kid, my father was doing sets and visuals for the Harold Clurman Theater and for Samuel Beckett in New York. I regularly ended up at rehearsals and backstage at concerts (like when Dad did the 25th anniversary set design for the Grateful Dead), not to mention all the visual art that I was exposed to not only at home, but abroad, at all my father's openings and shows. My father's art is in over 60 museums around the world.

So your father's theater experience had a lasting effect?

HM: I guess it was natural that during college, at Smith, where I majored in English, I ended up doing a second major in theater. Since then, I have directed five short films (which had 11 nominations at festivals around the world) and I have debuted professionally as a theater director in an excellent theater in Poland. As it happens, the play I directed there, called "The Carcass," is by a Hudson Valley playwright, Richard Corozine. Right now I am writing a screenplay for a full-length film that I want to produce locally.



Hanna Maria and Hanka Sawka

Hanka, your cuisine has been called "surprisingly light." Is Polish-American cuisine (kielbasa, pierogi, stuffed cabbage) a misconception?

H: I write a lot about cultural exchanges, especially in cooking, in *At Hanka's Table*. Ethnic cuisine in America is often very different from the country of origin. Once you cross an ocean, cooking develops in different ways for many different reasons, the most obvious being different ingredients and contact between different cultures. For example, everyone knows corned beef as an Irish dish in America—however, did you know that corned beef did not originate in Ireland and is not a well-known dish there? Although kielbasa, pierogi, and stuffed cabbage are Polish dishes that were invented in Poland, the Polish-American versions are different and much heavier than what you would eat in Krakow, Gdansk, or at my table, for that matter. Maybe Polish immigrants needed the extra calories!

***At Hanka's Table* is a visual feast for the eyes. Local photographer Andrea Barrist Stern did the food photography. How did this tie in with the book?**

H: There are 40 color pictures by Andrea, which, besides being delightful visually, tie in closely with the values I am trying to convey in the book. They were not done in a studio, with chemicals to make the food glisten artificially. Instead, Andrea came to my home and photographed the food, made by me and served on the dishes that I have in my cupboards. We often used Jan's artworks in the background, as his art is indeed a part of our house, present everywhere. Being a person with a great heart, Andrea brought warmth to the pictures, reflecting the warmth within a home and family.

Jan is currently working with Japanese companies on sculptures made of UMU glass. How did this alliance come about between a Polish-American artist and Japanese industrialism?

H: Japanese artists and critics have admired Jan for 30 years, being among the first to write about him when he was young. The UMU glass sculptures are works where art and technology meet to create a unique experience. These types of artworks were displayed in the US for the first time this summer, as part of Jan's huge show at the renowned ACA Galleries in New York. The alliance between a Polish-American artist and Japanese technology is very logical when looked at in the context of the arts. Throughout history, art has often been linked to technological advances. The Renaissance is a great example. Another important collaboration is on a large-scale multimedia spectacle that is under development right now—"the Voyage," which is based on Jan's hand-made visuals (over 2000). Hanna Maria will participate in this project, as director, and it will be a co-production between the US, Japan, and Germany. "The Voyage" is a universal story about human achievements in culture through the world and about the human spirit in general.

—Compiled by Wavy Davy

CORRECTION

In a Kudos piece [Kudos, 10/1/04, p. 20], Troy Bilyeu's high school graduation date was incorrectly stated. Bilyeu graduated from Ellenville High School in 1988, not 1998.