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## Holiday Tribute to the Homeland

By FLORENCE FABRICANT

**F**OOD can provide sustenance even when the cupboard is bare. Memoirs of food in times of privation have been written about places as far-flung as Russia, China, Eastern Europe and the American West.

And now Hanka Sawka, a Polish immigrant, has added her voice to this canon, recalling the hearty soups and rich cakes that families managed to serve, especially for holidays like Easter, despite shortages under the Communist regime.

In her book, "At Hanka's Table" (Lake Isle Press, 2004), which she wrote with her daughter, Hanna Maria Sawka, Mrs. Sawka shines a spotlight on her life in Poland and the strong emotional ties her native country still holds for her, even after nearly 30 years of living in the West.

In 1976 Mrs. Sawka, then 23, her husband, Jan Sawka, an artist, and their infant daughter left Poland for Paris, where Mr. Sawka had a job at the Pompidou Center. In the book, Mrs. Sawka described Paris as a lonely place where she could not afford tempting luxuries and had no friends because she did not speak French.

But in 1977, after Mr. Sawka's often dissident art and his popular posters attracted too much attention in the West, the Communists tried to force him to return to Poland and toe the party line. In the book, Mrs. Sawka recounts their hair-raising escape from Paris to America.

Over the years, friends had urged Mrs. Sawka to write a book. Some of them, who have enjoyed her cooking,



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

**FOOD OF MEMORY** Hanka Sawka's duck stuffed with apples and prunes.

especially classic Polish dishes like veal tongue with horseradish sauce and sumptuous meringue cake with coffee butter cream, suggested that she write a cookbook.

She has done both and has brought the story of her life right up to the present. "At Hanka's Table" was a family affair, a collaboration not just with her daughter, now 29 and a filmmaker, but also with her husband, who illustrated the book. And throughout there is food, remembered in the text and recreated in recipes, many for traditional dishes like several kinds of borscht, a yeast-raised mushroom strudel and stuffed cabbage.

Some of the recipes give Mrs. Sawka's personal interpretations of international fare like curried chicken, French onion soup and cheesecake mousse. But reading the text is a requirement, because otherwise you may miss recipes that are not included in their separate section or the index.

In 1985, the Sawkas, who settled in Manhattan when they arrived in America, moved to High Falls, N.Y., in the Catskills. It was there a few weeks ago, in their cottage with walls painted and decorated by Mr. Sawka with an artist's brush, not a roller, that Mrs. Sawka prepared some of the recipes to demonstrate the traditions that were so important to her and her family.

During a lunch and dinner, she and her husband talked more about their life, in conversations tinged with bitter recollections that almost seemed at odds with the delicious food on the table. Mrs. Sawka is dissatisfied with the pumpernickel bread she can buy so she bakes her own. And she is happy only with the garlic pickles she cures herself and with the tomatoes

she grows in her garden. But those complaints are quibbles compared with what life was like in Poland.

"We had very little in Poland and we left with nothing," she said. "At times like that, when you have nothing, you struggle to keep traditions alive, to remember what your mother and grandmother did, especially at holidays like Easter. Tradition is what keeps us connected."

She said their parents insisted on discussing traditions and history around the table because such subjects were highly censored and distorted in the schools and news reports. "We were told about the history of Poland, the great kings, the writers, the artists and musicians," she said.

Setting out the bowls and platters laden with Easter food, Mrs. Sawka discussed the hardships under Communism, when, for those who were not favored by the party, it was necessary to spend hours in long lines for meager supplies. Yet, she recalled, at Easter the table rarely reflected the day-to-day shortages.

"The Easter meal always began with exchanging bits of egg," she said. The main course was duck stuffed with prunes and apples, with warm grated beets seasoned with lemon alongside. "In Poland you'll always have beets with duck," Mrs. Sawka said. The meal ended with a parade of cakes, with wine poured into platinum-lined stemware.

"Friends with socialist leanings have criticized me for some of the nice things I have on my table, like the platinum glasses I bought when I went back to visit in Poland," she said. "They have to understand that having nice things is not bourgeois; it restores your dignity, especially when you have had nothing."