

MAGAZINE

ART

No 13

NEW YORK

WINTER-SPRING

2005



New York Dance &
Arts Innovations, Inc.

A Not-for-Profit Organization

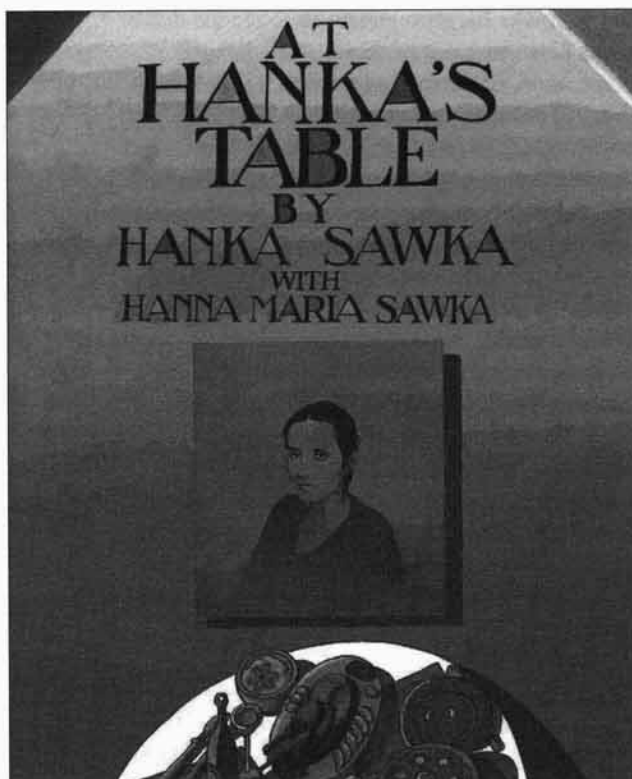
Thursday Dinners... and More

BY IKA SOBCZAK

During the 18th century, the Polish King Stanisław August Poniatowski became familiar with the tradition of the cultural salon during his sojourns as a young man in the courts of Paris. There the best minds, prominent artists and powerful people would socialize and exchange ideas in an informal setting. King Poniatowski introduced this tradition into his own country, mobilizing the intellectual atmosphere of Poland and setting an example for society. Thus his famous "Thursday dinners" came into being, where the King would host important figures of the literary and art world. Hanka Sawka is a Polish immigrant whose table has become a place with a social tradition of its own, where amazing meetings have taken place and artistic collaborations have been born. At Art Nights during this past December, Hanka Sawka made a guest appearance and talked about her new book, *At Hanka's Table*.

This historical-culinary autobiography has just been published by Lake Isle Press in New York City. Hanka Sawka is the wife of the multi-talented visual artist Jan Sawka,

From the left: Hanka Sawka - author of "At Hanka's Table", Wiltrud Weber - singer, Hanna Maria Sawka - co-author of the book and Marian Zak - President of New York Dance & Arts Innovations, Inc. organizer of Art Nights in Europa Club.



Cover of the book "At Hanka's Table"

painter, set designer and creator of multimedia installations. She left Poland with her husband during the 1970's, stopping in Paris for a couple of years and finally landing in New York. Starting with just 52 dollars in their pockets, a couple of suitcases and a baby, they began to rebuild their lives, establish new careers and adapt to a new world.

Their struggle was not easy, but their nostalgia for Poland was lessened by gathering around a table set with familiar

food prepared by the hostess of the Sawka household. What began as ordinary Polish dinners with friends soon became a cultural phenomenon. The association with the Thursday Dinners of King Poniatowski is quite appropriate, for the cream of Polish expatriates were soon joined by such members of the American elite as the late playwright Arthur Miller and the late Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead. The meetings at the table contributed to building Mr. Sawka's artistic career, and Mrs. Sawka and her husband became ambassadors of Polish culture in this country. Through the years, Hanka Sawka has brought to life the saying "to the heart through the stomach," showing and imparting Polishness to their guests. After years of convincing she has finally agreed to gather her recipes to publish them for posterity.

At Hanka's Table is much more than a



Photo: Zosia Zeleska-Bobrowski

cookbook. It offers a historical journey through the centuries and a gold mine of knowledge about Polish cuisine and its influences on other cuisines. It shows the contrary influences as well, for through the centuries Poland has been a crucible of nations in which Jewish, German, Italian, Tatar, Lithuanian and Russian cuisine influences have blended. What Poles eat today derives more from this mingling of cultures than they are usually aware. It took the author about three years to gather the historical information that enriches the book.

Mrs. Sawka's daughter Hanna Maria helped to write the book. This illustrates another theme from *At Hanka's Table*: the tradition of strong and independent Polish women and how values are passed between the generations within the family. It was somewhat surprising to the Sawkas that this element of "women's issues" has generated almost as much interest among American readers as the cooking, the Polish history and the themes of contemporary art.

At Hanka's Table is a book that covers a broad territory in an interesting and personal way. Whether you are interested in cooking, in art, in culinary history, in Poland or in women's issues, you will find much to delight you in this beautifully illustrated book. The illustrations, of course, are by Mr. Sawka, and the book was designed by another outstanding artist well known to those who attend Art Nights, Mr. Janusz Kapusta. *At Hanka's Table* is available at Barnes & Noble and other bookstores as well as from Amazon.com.

TRANS. CHRISTINE ZAWICKI