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Colorful Polish Cookbook Has Story to Tell

By Oksana Dragan
Washington, D.C.
30 August 2005

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Hanka Sawka

A new addition to the shelves upon shelves of cookbooks in American bookstores is a handsome volume of mostly Polish recipes called *At Hanka's Table*, by Hanka Sawka and her daughter Hanna Maria Sawka. But this is much more than a cookbook.

It is also an account of the Sawka family's odyssey from the repressive communist Poland of the 1970s to the peaceful haven of New York state's Catskill Mountains. The authors talk about their book, and their life in America, in this edition of *New American Voices*.



Little Hanka and her twin, Ewa, with their mother



Artist Jan Sawka with Hanka 2 months after meeting

At the heart of the Sawka family's saga is its *pater familias*, artist [Jan Sawka](#). As a young, independent-minded painter in communist Poland in the early 1970s, he was limited by the regime to creating poster art. But as his posters gained popularity, not only in Poland but abroad as well, and as he turned into a cult figure for Poland's vibrant counter-culture, he became an unwelcome thorn in the regime's side. So in 1976 Jan Sawka, his wife Hanka and their 9-month old daughter Hanna were given one week to pack up and leave the country. "My husband was really very dangerous for the communists because his attitude and art, which was absolutely free, was not an example of what they wanted," Hanka Sawka recalls. "They were afraid to jail him or kill him because of bad propaganda for them, so they decided if they will throw us out of Poland, he will simply disappear in the West."

The family spent two years in Paris. Jan Sawka painted feverishly and organized several well-received exhibitions of his art. But money was scarce, so Hanka Sawka learned to create what she calls "super-minimalistic" dishes out of almost nothing to feed her family. In the process, she also learned the basics of French cooking. When

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it became apparent that Paris was not the place for Jan Sawka to develop his career, the family applied for and were granted visas to the United States as political refugees.

They arrived in New York with fifty-two dollars to their name. Hanka Sawka says on the plane to America she cried the entire time.

"It was very difficult, because I was really scared when I closed the house in France.

You know, when you're left totally alone without a base of family or your friends, and you're traveling basically you don't know where..." she says. "When we were going to America the communists were creating an absolutely awful image, especially of America, so I was suddenly thinking, 'My God, how will it be over there? How will we start our life again over there?'"



Jan Sawka's famous 1981 poster was used by AFL-CIO to raise funds for the Polish trade union *Solidarity*

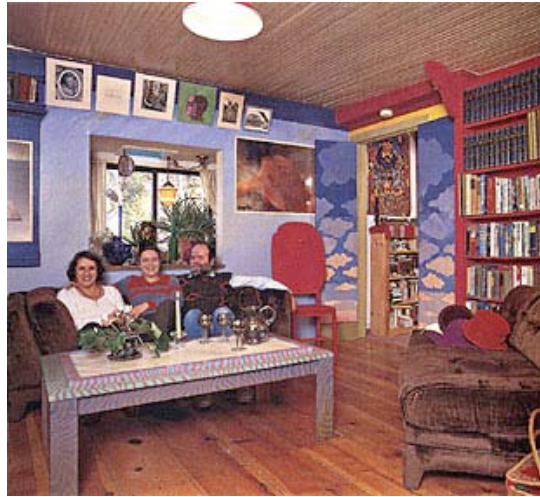
Hanka Sawka quickly learned that her fears were unfounded. "When we came here it was so incredible, because so many people started to help us," she says, adding, "of course my husband already had a reputation when he came here because his posters were all over the world. There was this incredible welcome of American artists, who started to help my husband. So in three weeks he started to illustrate the New York Times op-ed page,

then in half a year he had a gallery and started to build his career to be a painter."

For many years, the Sawkas lived in a little apartment on Manhattan's east side, not far from the United Nations headquarters. While Jan was building an increasingly successful career as a many-faceted artist, Hanka was raising their daughter and entertaining their many friends. "In our home it was basically business, because he was working at home all his life," Hanka Sawka explains.

"We had no money to invite people for lunches or dinners in Manhattan, so I decided okay, I have to start to cook and do it at home. So for twenty dollars I was making these huge parties, basically, with three meals for six-eight people. And this is how I started to master my culinary talent."





Eventually the family moved to an old farmhouse in the picturesque Catskill Mountains north of New York City. Hanka Sawka continued hosting friends in her art-filled home and honing her culinary skills. The culmination of this is the

The Sawka family in their art-filled living room
cookbook-autobiography, *At Hanka's Table*. It features some French recipes, some from other countries Hanka visited in her extensive travels abroad with her husband, as well as many traditional Polish recipes simplified for the time-pressed modern American cook.

The book was a family undertaking: Jan Sawka provided the imaginative, colorful illustrations, and daughter Hanna, a film director, helped her mother tell their story. "My job as co-author was to bring my mother's voice and her way of thinking across as well as possible to the American reader," she explains. "This was a challenge, because first of all I grew up being very aware of Polish history. I grew up being aware that life under communism was very difficult and unusual, so when we were writing the book I had to put myself in the place of an American reader and think what questions would arise in the reader's mind, kind of what gaps we'd have to fill that someone without this background would have."



Popular puffy Polish paczki dessert is eaten just before Lent



Filmmaker Hanna Maria Sawka behind the camera

Hanna Sawka says that collaborating with her mother on the book and doing research for it strengthened her connection with her Polish heritage. "My mother always did her best to raise me to be proud of where I came from, to be aware, so I would just be a stronger person with an identity that I understood," she recalled. "It definitely was a big confrontation with a lot of things, writing this book, but a very healthy one, because I just learned a lot more about my background, about where the family is originally from - which makes life in a way richer, when you're aware of history, when you're aware of things that happened in the past."

Now Hanka and Hanna Sawka are working on their next project: turning the book into a television show that will feature not only cooking and recipes, but also tips on living.

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