

## Eastern Europe, West of the Alleghenies

### *Immigrant Foods of Steel Country, Part 1*



Photo: Library of Congress LC-USZ62-56634

Children make their way to school in Homestead, PA, on July 5, 1907, with houses and steel mills in background.

# MORSELS & TIDBITS

Curated by **Elizabeth A. Williams**, “Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance 1850–1970” is running at the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design (Providence, RI) from May 3 to December 1, 2019 and will later travel to the Cincinnati Art Museum and The Mint Museum (Charlotte, NC). This museum has the largest collection of ware from the Gorham Mfg. Company, which was established in Providence in 1831, and rose to become the largest silver company in the world. Creating everything from commissioned presentation pieces to show-stoppers for the dining room, it put uniquely American design on the international stage.

On June 9, CHAA member Dr. **Margaret Carney** (Director of the International Museum of Dinnerware Design) gave a new and improved version of her talk about Well of the Sea (1948-1972) to the Culinary Historians of Chicago— appropriately enough, since the acclaimed seafood restaurant was located in Chicago. Dr. **Miranda Brown** (UM Prof. of Chinese Studies), who gave a talk, “Of Cheese and Curds in China”, to CHAA last January, has a research article in the Summer 2019 issue of the journal *Gastronomica* (19:2), “Mr. Song’s Cheeses: Southern China, 1368-1644”. Dr. **Helen Zoe Veit** (Michigan State Univ.

Prof. of History), who spoke to CHAA in 2014 and 2018, is part of the Editorial Collective that took over the editing of *Gastronomica* this year.

“Food at the Univ. of Michigan: Then and Now” was a seminar for first-year UM students last Fall semester, taught by Anthropology Lecturer **Lisa Young**. The course is described in an article by **Emily Buckler**, “From Page to Plate: Uncovering Food History through Primary Source Documents”, in the 2019 issue of the UM Library’s magazine, *The Connector*. To uncover historical trends in eating at UM, the class used archival materials from the UM Bentley Historical Library and the **Janice Bluestein Longone** Culinary Archive (UM Library Special Collections), ranging from cookbooks more than 100 years old to fraternity and sorority banquet menus. A cooking team led by UM Dining Chef de Cuisine **John Merucci** recreated an array of the dishes for consumption by the class and by other students at South Quad one evening in early October. Examples included chicken fricassee with mashed potatoes and a side of pineapple salad.

Using archival collections from throughout Canada’s Maritime provinces, **Lyn Bennett** (Dalhousie Univ.), **Edith Snook** (Univ. of New Brunswick), and a team of research assistants have compiled published and manuscript recipes from before 1800 to create a searchable Early Modern Maritime Recipes Database (<https://emmr.lib.unb.ca>). The entries include digitized images of the original recipes, transcriptions, explanatory notes, and essays. The recipes are largely the works of English-speaking men, but some are in French, German, or Latin, and a number were recorded or compiled by English-speaking women. Submissions of additional recipes are encouraged.

The UK publisher **Bloomsbury**, which inaugurated the journal *Global Food History* in 2014, is now launching a monograph series focusing on food from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the present. The series highlights the nutritional, social, political, cultural, and economic transformations of food around the globe. The editors are committed to publishing manuscripts that feature geographical areas currently underrepresented in English-language publications, particularly Africa and Asia. For more information, contact the series editors, **Amy Bentley** of New York Univ. ([amy.bentley@nyu.edu](mailto:amy.bentley@nyu.edu)) and **Peter Scholliers** of Vrije Universiteit Brussel ([peter.scholliers@vub.be](mailto:peter.scholliers@vub.be)).

Upcoming food history conferences:

- Sep. 2-6, 2019: “A Feast of the Senses: European Food and History 18-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries”, in Albi, Tarn, France. Organized by the International Commission for Research into European Food History (ICREFH).
- Oct. 18-19, 2019: “At the Medieval Table: Cooking, Cultures & Customs”, at Rutgers University (New Brunswick, NJ). Organized by Rutgers and by Mens et Mensa: Society for the Study of Food in the Middle Ages.
- Nov. 15-16, 2019: “(Post)Colonial Foodways: Creating, Negotiating, and Resisting Transnational Food Systems”, the sixth annual Amsterdam Symposium on the History of Food, at the Aula of the Univ. of Amsterdam. Organized by the university’s Special Collections Library. ■

## Repast

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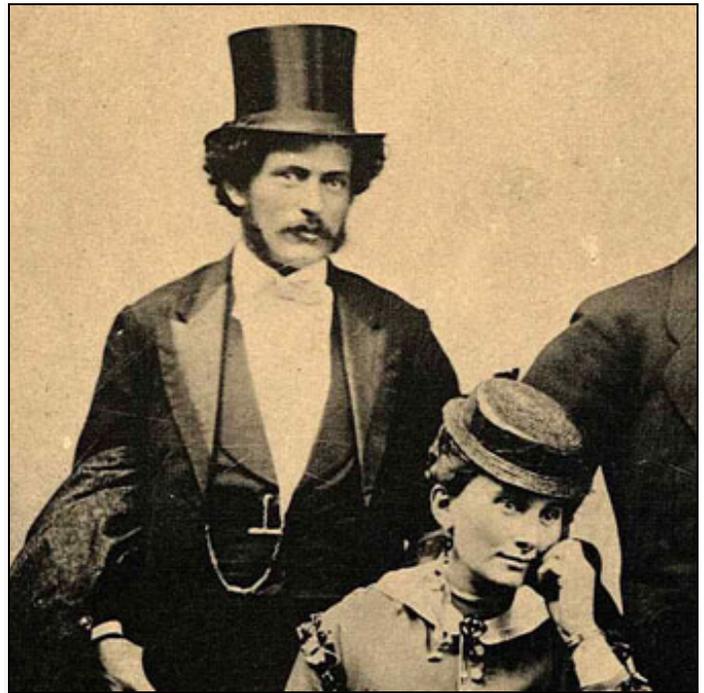
# SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE HEINZ COMPANY

Our focus on immigrant foods of Steel Country is inspired, in part, by this year's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Henry J. Heinz's first food-packing business, which he started in Sharpsburg, PA, near Pittsburgh. The year 2019 is also the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Heinz's birth, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his marriage, and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death.

Henry John Heinz was born near Pittsburgh to parents who had emigrated from Germany. (Interestingly, his father, John Henry Heinz, from the village of Kallstadt, was a second cousin of fellow Kallstadt immigrant Friedrich Trump, paternal grandfather of President Trump.) Henry's mother, Anna, kept a household garden beside the brickyard in Sharpsburg that her husband John managed for a living. Henry was reportedly as young as 8 years old when he began to ply the streets of Sharpsburg selling surplus produce from the garden and developing a list of customers. At age 12 he began to use a horse-drawn wagon for the burgeoning business, and at 25 he and a partner formally launched a commercial line of canned and bottled foods, starting with pickled horseradish. By the 1890s the H. J. Heinz Company was already marketing products overseas, and by the 1910s it had more than 20 processing plants in the U.S.

The "57 Varieties" that made Heinz world-famous included several types of olives like those being bottled in the photo at right. In 1909 Elizabeth Butler, a pioneering Progressive Movement social investigator who studied the Heinz facilities and other canning factories in Pittsburgh, wrote that the task of pickle-bottler was one of the most physically demanding and lowest-paid jobs there. It was typically filled by young Slavic women whose families had immigrated to the region from urban areas in Europe. A 12-hour workday was standard in U.S. industry at the time. Butler went on to observe:

Bottling pickles requires the highest dexterity. Blue-gowned, white-capped girls sit at long tables in rows transferring pickles from bowls to squat, thick glass bottles that signify vinegar and preserves to the mind of the retail customer. Each girl holds in her right hand a grooved stick which she thrusts into the bottle, then with her left hand she starts the pickle along the groove to the precise spot which, according to the model, it must occupy. The model jar shows how every pickle is to be placed. Bottles of olives and pickled cucumbers are planned to economize space, and bottles of mixed pickles are so arranged that each bit of color will be just right to make a harmonious whole. After the bottles are filled, they are inspected and compared with the model. The quick, sure touch with which the bottling girls follow the pattern and manage their tools is not learned in a day's apprenticeship, but must be acquired by continued practice (quotation and photo from Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, *Women and the Trades: Pittsburgh, 1907-1908*, Vol. 1 from *The Pittsburgh Survey* [New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1909], pp. 35, 41). ■



Henry John Heinz and his wife, Sarah Sloan Young ("Sallie") Heinz.  
Image: <http://www.johnheinzlegacy.org>.



Lewis W. Hine

Bottling olives in Pittsburgh.

# FEEDING THE FAMILY IN HOMESTEAD, PENN.: AN OVERVIEW FROM THE PITTSBURGH SURVEY, 1907-8

by Leslie Przybylek

*Since 2013, Leslie Przybylek has been Senior Curator at the Senator John Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh, which is affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution and is Pennsylvania's largest history museum. Her previous curatorial positions included eight years at the Fort Smith Museum of History (Fort Smith, AR) and two years at the Crawford County Historical Society (Meadville, PA). She holds degrees in art and art history from Gettysburg College and the Univ. of Delaware.*

New immigrants who made their way to western Pennsylvania's steel towns in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century entered a forbidding industrial landscape that offered few reminders of the homeland they left behind. Immigrant workers, especially new arrivals, spent long, back-breaking hours toiling for low pay, sometimes as little as 13½ cents an hour. Competition for jobs was fierce and men sometimes agreed to work for even less. The Russell Sage Foundation's 1914 publication *Wage-Earning Pittsburgh* documented one such example. To secure a day's work, a group of Croatian immigrants offered their services to a Pittsburgh employer for just \$1.20 a day. In response, the Superintendent reportedly exclaimed, "My God ... How can a man live in Pittsburgh on \$1.20 per day?" The group's foreman replied, "Give them rye bread, a herring, and beer, and they are all right."<sup>1</sup>

Food offered one of the few familiar morsels of comfort available to immigrant workers and their families in mill communities such as Duquesne, Braddock, Pittsburgh's South Side neighborhoods, and the most famous (or infamous) of the mill towns, Homestead. Over time, the ethnic dishes cooked, savored, and preserved through generations of tradition in these communities became part of Pittsburgh's food heritage, best symbolized today by the pierogis or pirohy still sold in churches across the region and now popularized as smiling characters on pillows, posters, and even in a friendly "Pierogi Race" that occurs after the fifth inning of every Pirates' baseball game at Pittsburgh's PNC Park.<sup>2</sup>

But today's nostalgia for such cherished dishes should not obscure the challenge that immigrant families faced putting food on the table in Pittsburgh's industrial districts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1907-8, the Russell Sage Foundation from New York City undertook a milestone sociological study in southwestern Pennsylvania, sending a team of trained investigators into the region to document the living conditions that workers faced. Known as The Pittsburgh Survey, these efforts resulted in the publication of a series of articles in *Collier's Magazine* in 1908-9 and then a set of books between 1909 and 1914. One, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (1910), focused exclusively on daily living conditions in the community dominated by the Homestead Steel works, by 1907 one of the largest industrial plants of the United States Steel Corporation. The site had gained fame in 1892 as the location of the Homestead Steel Strike. By the early 1900s, it was the new home of many recent southern and eastern European immigrants who came to Homestead seeking work in the expanding mills.\*

The study's author, Margaret Byington, analyzed the factors that shaped the well-being of the families who lived in Homestead. While she focused attention on everything from rent

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\* Editor's note: The composition of the workforce at Homestead and at other U.S. Steel plants in Allegheny County as of March 1907 is detailed in a series of charts in Appendix X of another volume in the Pittsburgh Survey series: John A. Fitch, *The Steel Workers* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1910). The workforce is described as 25.9% U.S.-born (overwhelmingly white), 55.7% "Slav" (mostly Slovaks, Poles, and Croatians), 7.8% "Teuton" (mostly Hungarians and Germans), 6.0% "Celt" (mostly Irish and English), and 4.6% "Other Races" (mostly Italians). Only 26.8% of the jobs held by the foreign-born workers were skilled or semi-skilled, compared to 73.5% for the U.S.-born whites. Some 65.2% of the foreign-born workers were married, compared to 49.0% of the U.S.-born whites. Only about 48% of the Slavic and Italian workers could speak English, compared to more than 95% of the other foreign-born workers.



A one-room household for a worker and his family in Homestead, PA. All photos are by Lewis W. Hine, from Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1910).



At noon-time, workers sit with their lunch buckets in an opening in the side-wall of the steel mill in Homestead, 1909.

to plumbing, Byington was especially interested in family budgets. How did people stretch their meager wages as far as possible? Because food comprised such a significant part of the budget— from one third to nearly half— Byington gave it careful consideration, most notably in her Chapter V, “Table and Dinner Pail”. Her literal entry into the lives of Homestead families made food difficult to ignore. Byington recalled: “I found it of little avail to start knocking on front doors. It was wise to go straight to the back door, which opened into the warm and cheerful kitchen. Here I was sure to find the housekeeper busy preparing for the ever recurring meal, economically her most important task.”<sup>3</sup> While Byington did not set out to record specific recipes or ingredients, she observed what kinds of food families put on their tables and how daily meals were shaped by the rhythms of the mill. One note of caution: Byington’s access to non-English speaking families was limited due to language and the log-keeping aspects of her study. Nonetheless, her work contains enough details to paint a useful portrait of the food realities faced by Homestead’s working families.

From the outset, Byington was impressed with what many women could do and the care they took with meals even within their limited means. Certain foods, such as cabbage and potatoes, dominated the table fare, not surprising given their long history as staples in many of the eastern European groups customarily lumped together during this period as “Slavs”, groups that predominated among Homestead’s newest arrivals.<sup>4</sup> The reliance on certain foods by some groups was reflected by the local presence of at least one wholesale grocer who specialized in the distribution of apples, onions, potatoes, and cabbage.<sup>5</sup> But Byington’s work also clearly demonstrated that families in Homestead went beyond the stereotyped image to put other vegetables and fruits on the table when they could afford them. She observed offerings such as spinach, sweet potatoes, eggplant, turnips, red beets, beans, tomatoes, grapes, carrots, cucumbers, and rhubarb.<sup>6</sup> The dinner table relied on both fresh

and canned vegetables, although aside from canned corn the commercially canned options were rarely specified. Able homemakers also did their own canning, pickling, and making fruit preserves, which

Byington specifically noted as a “special treat” for the mill worker’s dinner pail.<sup>7</sup>

In general, the family’s primary group meals were breakfast and the evening meal, “supper”. Breakfast, at least for an English-speaking household making about \$3.00 a day, was a filling menu focused on starches and protein: oatmeal and bread or potatoes, corncakes, eggs and bacon, with sometimes a vegetable such as eggplant or rhubarb. Breakfast was nearly always hot, and eggs were practically a daily offering, not surprising given their economy as a protein source. Families enjoyed a more varied meal at supper, with a variety of meat or fish and multiple vegetables, and occasionally dessert. A sample menu might include lamb stew with dumplings, cucumber, eggplant, beans, corn, coffee, bread and butter, and fruit.<sup>8</sup> Weekday menus were relatively simple, stews and soups were common. The exception was Sunday, when extra meat was added to the fare, typically a “roast”, which was most likely to have been beef or pork.<sup>9</sup>

For lower-wage immigrant groups, meats and starches dominated. When Byington recorded the food expenditures of a Slavic family reliant on a wage of \$9.90 a week, more than half of the family food budget of \$5.19 went for the purchase of meat, eggs, and starches such as bread, flour, and potatoes. A mere 22¢ went for fruits and vegetables, most of that for fruit, possibly a reflection of the priority placed on making fruit preserves for the father’s lunch. The weekly coffee supply required 76¢.<sup>10</sup> In a similar study of Slavic groups drawn from a wider range of cities, sociologist Emily Greene Balch noted that some Slavs economized by purchasing inexpensive soup meat and bones, so much so that “it is hard for the butchers to get bones enough to supply their demand.”<sup>11</sup> Such use was also likely in Homestead, where many women took pride in being able to transform cheaper cuts of meat into nutritious meals, and labor newspapers in the region (for those who could read) of-

*continued on next page*

**HOMESTEAD***continued from page 5*

ferred suggestions to their readers about how to prepare cheaper cuts, such as boiling, braising, then baking each piece of meat.<sup>12</sup> Byington noted that some Homestead residents opted instead for a largely vegetable diet.<sup>13</sup>

Family buying habits also changed as people saved money and gained a more stable foothold in the community or responded to tough times. In one instance, Byington observed how a woman responded to her husband's loss of a job and subsequent re-employment at a much lower rate by cutting back on the purchase of meat and fruit and increasing the purchase of ingredients such as eggs, cheese, milk, and turnips, allowing her to still put nutritious meals on the table despite the family's diminished means.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, many families also supplemented purchased foods with home-grown produce. Quite a few raised chickens, and Byington reported one Scotch family that purchased a pig each winter destined to become salt pork and ham for their larder.<sup>15</sup> But the tenement housing arrangements for many of the newest groups did not create conditions favorable for home gardening.

In contrast to breakfast and supper, the mid-day meal ("dinner" in Byington's study) varied significantly depending on who was eating it: the working man or the rest of the family at home. As the chapter title implied, the working man's "dinner pail" dominated the attention of Homestead households. Although women had formerly been allowed to deliver hot meals to mills, at the time of the Russell Sage study this practice had been curtailed and most men carried cold food or soup. While a long folk tradition told of mill workers carrying raw steaks to cook on the hot metal plates of their machines, Byington did not witness this directly; she only mentioned it as a story she heard from others.<sup>16</sup> Dinner pail offerings were not elaborate, but wives tried to make them as filling as possible, often including soup, bread, and fruit or occasionally leftover meat and vegetables with a rare cake for dessert. While that might not sound like much, it was often substantially more than what was placed on the family table back home, which could be as minimal as "mush and milk with bread and molasses."<sup>17</sup> While many Homestead families did not go to such extremes, also offering modest lunchtime fare at home based on soup or leftovers from the evening before, Byington leveled some of her harshest criticisms in this area, noting that while many women took great care with the needs of their men, their attention or knowledge of the needs of the children suffered in comparison. Similar accounts came from other industrial communities in the region, such as a field report from Johnstown that noted a machinist's wife who fed her six-month old on "soup, milk, coffee, and crackers" with later additions of foods such as sauerkraut and cabbage by nine months.<sup>18</sup> It was not uncommon for settlement workers to report area women and children living on "bread and tea" so that the husband's dinner pail would be full.<sup>19</sup> While such practices drew condemnation from sociologists, they reflected the difficult compromise that many families of low-ranking workers were forced to make to support the efforts of the primary breadwinner.

For some households, the meal situation was further complicated by the fact that many Slavic families made ends meet by taking in boarders. A "household" often included at least one or two additional adults beyond the immediate family,

and sometimes as many as 20 extra men.<sup>20</sup> Food offerings that could be prepared easily in large quantities with inexpensive cuts of meat were an understandable choice made by many homemakers seeking to stretch the household income as far as possible. One such offering was described as a "hot apple cake and a stew of the cheapest cuts of meat."<sup>21</sup> Some women also allowed or expected boarders to add "extras" (e.g., to place special orders) for foods, for which they paid the additional cost. While men could order vegetables, fruit, or milk, among other items, meat was the preferred "extra", with pork the most popular choice reflected in Byington's data.<sup>22</sup> This practice of boarding attracted wide attention from other social scientists as well, most of it negative, and it fed into widely prevailing stereotypes that "Slavs" would "eat any kind of food that would keep the body and soul together."<sup>23</sup> There was once even an ugly rumor in one Pennsylvania steel town that lost dogs in the community could be found on the tables of the new Slavic immigrants. But this dated to the 1880s, and Byington did not report such slander by the time of her study.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, Margaret Byington found much to admire about the abilities of Homestead's wives and mothers to make their food dollars stretch as far as possible. While she criticized some of their strategies and found "unskilled" homemakers who relied upon inefficient daily purchases of small amounts of meat, vegetables, and other food at the more expensive local grocery stores to be especially frustrating, she nonetheless also recognized the true challenge that these women faced balancing the realities of family needs against the limitations of industrial wages in Homestead. She was impressed by those who found ways to put satisfying meals on the table every day, keep workers' dinner pails filled, and manage to provide a cheerful respite from the unrelenting demands of the mills. Byington wrote, "After watching the busy lives and the problems of these women, I came to believe that the woman who can keep her home healthful and attractive on \$15 or less a week has in her elements of genius."<sup>25</sup> That genius, replicated by thousands of women in steel towns across the region for multiple generations, built the foundation of the ethnic food traditions cherished throughout the Pittsburgh metro area and the Monongahela Valley today. ■

**Endnotes**

1. Paul Underwood Kellogg, *Wage-Earning Pittsburgh* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1914), p. 41.
2. Pierogis in Pittsburgh have become a media favorite; see, e.g., Beth Kracklauer, "Touring Pittsburgh, One Pierogi at a Time", *Wall Street Journal* (May 18, 2016).
3. Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1910), p. 63. A digitized copy of the book is freely accessible via Hathi Trust (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006292158>).
4. Thomas Čapek, *The Slovaks of Hungary, Slavs and Pan Slavism* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1906), p. 162; Edward Steiner, *The Immigrant Tide, Its Ebb and Flow* (New York: Fleming Revell Co., 1909), p. 204. Potatoes and cabbage, most notably in the form of sauerkraut, formed the backbone of many Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak holiday foods in the region, and still do. Such foods began garnering more



Slavic workers  
in front of their  
boarding house  
in Homestead,  
1909.

press during the 1980s as the steel crash reached its nadir. See, for example: “An Old-World Christmas”, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Dec. 17, 1980; Marilyn McDevitt Rubin, “Bobalky: A Slovak Tradition on Christmas Eve”, *Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 23, 1981.

5. Advertisement for A. A. Hibler Wholesaler, *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Homestead Directory* (Pittsburgh, PA: R. L. Polk & Co., 1906), p. 12.
6. Byington, pp. 63-64, 76, 78.
7. Byington, p. 64.
8. Byington compiled her average “bill of fare” for four days of the week, Monday through Thursday (pp. 63-64).
9. Byington, p. 65.
10. Byington, p. 141.
11. Emily Greene Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), p. 363.
12. S. J. Kleinberg, *The Shadow of the Mills: Working-Class Families in Pittsburgh, 1870-1907* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), p. 24.
13. Byington, p. 154.
14. Byington, pp. 77-78.
15. Byington, pp. 48, 74, 155.
16. Byington, p. 64. The tradition of steaks cooked on the hot metal of mill machinery led to the use of the term “Pittsburgh Rare” for meat charred on the outside and very rare on the inside. See, for example, Sarah Grey, “Pittsburgh Rare: A Culinary History of the Steel City”, *Serious Eats*, Mar. 7, 2016. In the use of the old lunch pails by 1907-1908, Homestead’s mill workers held to a practice that had markedly diminished in Pittsburgh itself, where downtown workers began to perceive carrying lunch in pails as an outdated practice; see

“Passing of the Tin Dinner Pail, Old Time Receptacle Seldom Seen in Cities Now”, *Pittsburgh Press*, Mar. 20, 1904.

17. Byington, p. 64.
18. Kleinberg, p. 111; Emma Duke (United States Children’s Bureau), *Infant Mortality: Results of a Field Study in Johnstown, Pa., Based on Births in One Calendar Year* (Washington, DC: Govt. Printing Office, 1915), pp. 83-84.
19. Kleinberg, p. 24.
20. Byington, p. 138. For immigrant families, the low status of the husband as a mill laborer, rather than one of the higher-ranking members of the skilled trades, also impacted the meager budget, and thus the prevalence of inexpensive ingredients such as potatoes on the family table: see Kleinberg, p. 23.
21. Byington, p. 138.
22. Byington, p. 139. The Slavic custom of hosting boarders was also observed by Emily Balch in her landmark 1910 study (footnote 11). She likewise documented the practice of each man purchasing his own supply of food (p. 350). See also “Study of Slavs by Emily G. Balch”, *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, Dec. 9, 1907.
23. Karel D. Bicha, “Hunkies: Stereotyping the Slavic Immigrants, 1890-1920”, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fall 1982), pp. 16-28. See also Frank Julian Warne, *The Slav Invasion and the Mine Workers* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1904), p. 67.
24. Bicha, p. 23. See also John Bodnar, *Immigration and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870-1940* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), p. 78.
25. Byington, p. 79.

# PASCHA AND GOBS



## SLOVAK IDENTITY AND FOODWAYS IN PITTSBURGH

by Susan J. Kalčík

*Susan Kalčík's parents were second-generation Slovak Americans from Cleveland, OH, and Barnesboro, PA. She earned BA and MA degrees in English at Miami University of Ohio, and did her graduate studies in Folklore at the Univ. of Texas, Austin. She worked at the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Festival and Development Office, taught at Miami University and the Pennsylvania Highlands Community College, worked on numerous public and community programs, and helped found the Slovak Heritage Society of the Laurel Highlands. Ms. Kalčík was awarded the first Johnstown Heritage Award presented by the Johnstown Area Heritage Association, and the American Folklore Society's Americo Paredes Prize for excellence in integrating scholarship and engagement with the people and communities one studies. She was the co-author, with Susan Manos, of South Slavic Cooking: Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian, Slovenian (National Park Service and Smithsonian Institution, 1981). She lives in the Pittsburgh area and is currently working on a book about the Slovaks of Western Pennsylvania.*

When Slovak immigrants entered the United States as part of the great migration from Central and Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they brought with them an entire culture, including traditions, beliefs, religion, labor practices, music, dance, song, and foodways. Like all immigrants, they would need to integrate the old and the new worlds, a complicated relationship.

Some of the Slovak immigrants gave up all ties to the past in an effort to Americanize. Others made compromises, often keeping some traditional aspects of tradition in the private parts of their lives. Still other immigrants made few actual adjustments. The first generation had relatively limited choices, and the second generation, the children born in America, faced with discrimination and even bullying, generally strove to be as American as possible; when they had children, they tried to shield them from discrimination. But often the third and fourth generations began a search for what had been lost, their Slovak identity. The Black Power movement encouraged other ethnic groups to express pride in their ethnic heritage, and the fall of communism in Slovakia made trips back to the homeland inviting. Americans have the opportunity to express their ethnic

identities if they want to, and many options for displaying and performing those identities.

What people eat every day or on special holidays or public ethnic events has usually been a safe way to express Slovak identity in America. Like all folk culture, foodways were subject to the forces of loss, preservation, change, revitalization, and adoption by the larger culture. This paper explores where Slovak foodways came from and how they fared in the U.S. as elements in the performance of ethnic identity.

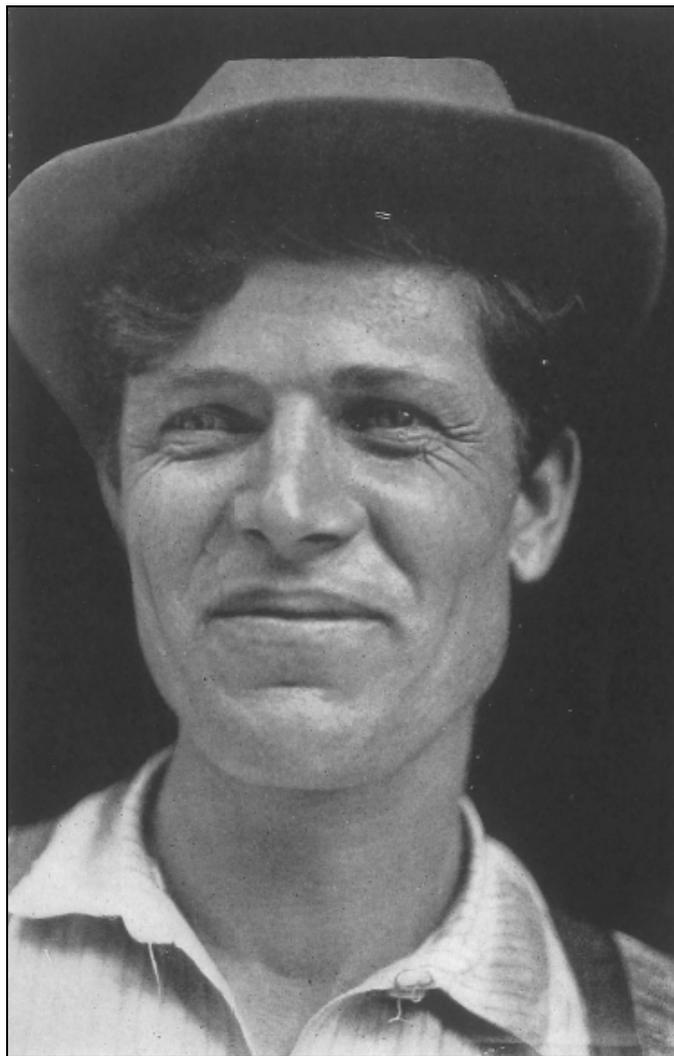
### Who Were the Slovak Immigrants?

The Slovak people were one of the Western Slavic tribes that migrated to south central Europe in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. They settled in the northern arc of the Carpathian Mountains. After briefly belonging to the Empire of Great Moravia, Slovaks were conquered by the Magyars (Hungarians) who dominated them for a thousand years. In the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, Slovaks were Christianized by Saints Cyril and Methodius representing Byzantine Orthodox Christianity, and they were Catholicized by German clergy. The Reformation and Counter Reformation left Slovaks predominantly Catholic, along with approximately 15% Lutheran and a small number of Byzantine-Rite Catholics, Calvinists, and Orthodox Christians. The majority of Slovaks in pre-immigration times lived on self-sufficient farms and in small villages, especially in the mountainous and less prosperous eastern portions of the region.

When Hungary achieved separation from the Habsburgs in the 1860s, Slovaks faced a relentless Magyarization process that sought to remove all vestiges of Slovak identity, including the Slovak language. Some Slovaks emigrated to escape this Hungarian repression of their cultural identity, but the vast majority of them emigrated for more purely economic reasons. The lack of industrialization and land reform in Slovakia, which prevented landless Slovaks from earning a living, coincided with America's period of massive industrialization. Chain migration emptied families and even whole villages as first young single men, then single women, and finally wives and children traveled to the U.S., mainly from eastern Slovakia (from which Rusyns also emigrated). Some 500,000 people, or about 20% of the entire Slovak population, left in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Their migration peaked in 1905, and ebbed in 1920.

Young men were attracted to and recruited for the mills and mines of America's industrial Northeast and Midwest, with about half of the Slovaks settling in Pennsylvania. The 1990 census reports 1.8 million Americans of Slovak descent. Of these, about 450,000 live in Pennsylvania, including a quarter million in the Pittsburgh area. The Slovaks also contributed large numbers to the communities of Johnstown and Windber (located in the mountainous Laurel Highlands region southeast of Pittsburgh), and many smaller communities that started as coal patches.

The Slovak American communities of Pennsylvania centered at first around their work in steel mills and coal mines and the clubs, organizations, and fraternal groups they created in order to offer some protection for workers. As immigration progressed, families were reunited or formed, and churches were built. Educational institutions and social activities clustered around these. Since many American institutions were closed to



Slovak immigrants in Pittsburgh a century ago. Photos by Lewis W. Hine, from Paul Underwood Kellogg, *Wage-Earning Pittsburgh*, Vol. 6 from The Pittsburgh Survey (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1914).

the Slovak immigrants, they built their own, parallel institutions and maintained their language, traditions, and foodways in the private arena.

The Slovaks were not a well-known group. In local slang, they were often lumped together with other Eastern European immigrants as “Hunkies” or “mill Hunkies”, a term apparently derived from “Hun” and “Hungary”. Even in Europe, the history of shifting borders and rulers had left many Slovaks with more of a village identity than a national feeling. Further, U.S. immigration officers often assigned the Slovak immigrants the identity of their nation of origin, either Hungarian or Austrian.

Subsequent political and military events in Europe sparked some smaller waves of Slovak immigration to the U.S. later in the 1900s. Freed from Hungarian rule as a result of World War 1, the Slovaks joined with the Czechs to form Czechoslovakia in 1918. From 1939 until the end of World War 2, Slovakia was an independent state under the forced protection of Nazi Germany. In 1945 Czechoslovakia was re-formed, and communists took control in 1948. When Slovaks emigrated to the U.S. from Czechoslovakia, they were often labeled “Czechs” or were confused with the Slovenes. Slovaks, who had long chafed under

what they considered unequal status with the Czechs, split off from the Czech Republic in July 1992 to form the Slovak Republic in a process called the Velvet Divorce. Slovakia today is located in the exact center of Europe, bordered by Austria, Poland, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. It shares cultural and culinary traits with these countries and with the Rusyns of eastern Slovakia.

#### Slovak Foodways in Eastern Europe

Slovak foods and the traditions that surround them can be traced to a time when the majority of Slovaks lived in Eastern Europe on farms or in small villages and were self-sufficient. Relative isolation and poverty, along with the short growing season in the mountains and mountain valleys in Eastern Slovakia, limited the food choices that people had.

The foods had to withstand hot Summers and cold Winters. Sheep thrived in the mountain valleys and their milk was used to make a number of cheeses, including the iconic cheese of Slovakia, *bryndza*. Pork was the main meat and its products included sausages such as *klobása*, a cousin of Polish *kielbasa*

*continued on next page*

## SLOVAK PITTSBURGH *continued from page 9*

[see recipe, page 18], smoked bacon, and lard. Less common were beef, poultry, lamb, and goat. Also important were eggs and milk, which was made into butter, cream, sour cream, buttermilk, and cheeses. There were a few local vegetables, but the main one was cabbage, which grew well in the region and could be eaten fresh or preserved for Winter as sauerkraut.

Apples, plums, apricots, peaches, and cherries were common tree fruits. Plums were cooked into a jam called *lekvar* that was used in pastries and to fill *pirohy*, crescent-shaped dumplings similar to the Polish *pierogi* [see recipe, page 19]. Nuts and honey were used in pastries as well. Wild mushrooms were collected, dried, and used in soups. A few spices such as paprika and onions and garlic flavored dishes. Animal fats and butter were used instead of cooking oils. The main drinks were milk, sour milk, and beer.

Wheat was important in the cuisine, but it was expensive: it did not grow well in the eastern mountains and largely had to be imported from the west. The wheat was ground into flour for bread, dumplings, and noodles. Potatoes did grow well in the region and, as in other European countries, they provided a cheap, almost complete food for the poor. They were usually simply boiled for eating. But cooked and mashed potatoes were also mixed with flour to make potato dough that stretched the more precious wheat; this was used in a number of recipes for breads like *lokše* (lokshe), a thin potato and flour pancake. Rye bread was also common. One part of the cuisine in which wheat flour was used copiously was pastries. Slovaks had a seemingly endless repertoire of cookies and sweet rolls, most famously *koláče* (kolache), a sweet dough spread with a nut or poppy-seed filling, rolled, baked, and served in slices.

Because of the isolation of the deep mountain valleys, there developed and still exist regional variations in the recipes for traditional Slovak dishes, their cultural significance, and how and when they are served. And along with regional differences, Slovak cuisine was influenced by neighboring ethnic groups like the Hungarians (notable for their use of paprika), Polish, Austrian, and the Rusyns. These are often most apparent along borders, which shifted a great deal in the past.

### Slovak Immigrant Foods

The foodways of eastern Slovakia that were brought by the immigrants to the U.S. were simple and inexpensive dishes typical of the old country, largely healthy, and fit well with the economies of immigrant families. Three items that were common and almost obligatory on the Slovak immigrant's table were potatoes, soup, and bread. The potato furnished the immigrants who worked in the steel mills and coal mines with an inexpensive, versatile, and nutritious food, just as it had served the agricultural lifestyle in the Old Country. In a quick search of a few Slovak and Slovak American cookbooks, I found 35 recipes for traditional Slovak dishes using potatoes. Today in smaller villages in eastern Slovakia one can still see the front yards of homes planted with potatoes.

Many Slovaks in Pennsylvania began their dinners with soup. My Aunt Mary Thur served chicken soup with homemade noodles every Sunday, even in 90° Summer weather. Heavier

soups were thickened with a browned roux called *zapráška* (zaprashka), which could also be used as a gravy for some dishes. It was especially important when meat was prohibited (such as at Lent) or unavailable, as *zapráška* added more flavor to the soup or dish of vegetables. Bread was also central to life and considered sacred. My mother Ann Thur Kalčík believed that it was a sin to sit on a table, because bread is served on it.

The Slovaks had been used to providing their own dietary sustenance. Out of economic need and a preference for fresh food, the immigrants sought to replicate that system by planting gardens wherever possible. These were encouraged in many of the coal-patch towns by the mining companies, which ran gardening contests and printed photos of the winners in local newspapers. The gardens provided fresh vegetables to supplement the immigrant families' diets, and they were a thrifty alternative to markets likely to be unreachable especially in isolated mining towns. Some few immigrants were able to achieve a common dream of owning their own farms, as is chronicled in Robert J. Dvorchak's *Mike and Annie: From Slovakia to America, the Dvorchak Family History* (Blurb Books, 2017). Similarly the maternal side of my family, the Thurs, purchased their own farm, recreating a self-sufficient lifestyle by raising fruits and vegetables, chickens, pigs, and a dairy herd. In addition, they provided dairy products to the coal-patch town of Marsteller (Moss Creek) in northern Cambria County.

### Food as an Emblem of Slovak American Heritage

Slovakia today features a wider array of traditional Slovak foodways than those brought to America. In fact, Slovak cuisine is now a pan-European cuisine that uses many different ingredients and spices as well as industrially processed foods. These Slovak dishes have been brought to the U.S. by modern cookbooks, the Internet, and by new immigrants and returning American tourists. Although *bryndzove halušky*, the simple dish of boiled potato-dough dumplings topped with *bryndza*, sheep's cheese, is proudly honored as the Slovak national dish, modern Slovaks consider as old-fashioned much of what American Slovaks think of as authentic food. "We don't eat that old stuff anymore", many disappointed Slovak American tourists have been told when they were seeking out the dishes served by their grandmothers.

But it is exactly some of those simple, traditional foods that Americans Slovaks still revel in. They are enjoyed in private venues such as family dinners, or the in-group intimacy of church or club events. They are part of a family's repertoire of recipes, and are associated with special holidays like Easter and Christmas. And they are served at events to which the public is invited, such as Slovak Day at Kennywood in Pittsburgh, and Slavic Fest in Johnstown. There, ethnic display is the point of the event.

What are the foods used consciously or unconsciously to mark Slovak identity? The tent-covered "Slovak Kitchen" at Slovak Day at Kennywood, an amusement park in Pittsburgh that has hosted this ethnic event for 95 years, advertises some of the most iconic dishes: *klobása* sandwich with sauerkraut, *pirohy* (dough pockets stuffed with mashed potatoes and cheese) served with butter and onions, *holubky* (cabbage rolls stuffed with pork and rice, also called "pigs in a blanket"), and *halušky* (boiled

The Metropolitan of the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese (Johnstown, PA) blesses family baskets for Easter.

dumplings or noodles, akin to German *spätzle* and served with chopped cabbage). The same items are on the menu at the Slovak Heritage Folk Festival held at the University of Pittsburgh each November. *Čeregi* or cheregie (fried and sugared knots of dough, also called Angel Wings) are the only pastry choice at the Kennywood event, but the Heritage Festival features a wide variety of pastries such as *koláče*, mentioned earlier. These same foods are served at countless other Slovak events in the U.S., and they are featured at some of the holidays and holy days as well as at family meals.

Such traditional dishes were originally prepared by the family cook and by members of church and fraternal organizations. They were often sold as fundraisers; a common saying is that many churches were built with *pirohy* money. In later years the church-made products also began to stand in for homemakers and working families who had become too busy to prepare the traditional foods, or no longer knew how. Today, even many churches are depleted of the little old Slovak ladies who can cook these foods.

Some time-saving adaptations have been created. For example, *halušky* was originally made with dumplings of wheat flour or a mixture of potato and flour, the finished dough either pressed through a form or cut with a knife into the boiling water [see two recipes on page 19]. Nowadays, the dumplings are often replaced with commercial noodles, which are sautéed with the chopped cabbage and onions to prepare the dish much more quickly. The steaming, stuffing, and roasting of cabbage leaves for *holubky* is often replaced with a stuffed-cabbage soup made of ground beef, rice, and sliced cabbage. The labor-intensive making, pinching, and boiling of dough for *pirohy* is replaced with pizza or lasagna made with mashed potatoes and cheese. In fact, some of these dishes can also be purchased commercially, such as the mass-market Mrs. T's Pierogies and Costco's *pirohy* and stuffed cabbage.

#### Christmas and Easter Foods

Christmas and Easter are the two holidays, or holy days, that are almost universally celebrated by Slovak Americans with prescribed foods and traditions. Most Slovak American cookbooks will provide a separate section for the appropriate recipes and traditions for these holidays, and they are featured in seasonal ethnic and church publications, sometimes exactly the same ones from year to year.



Christmas Eve (*stedry vecer*) is observed with a family meal called the *vilija*. It is a meatless meal featuring mushroom or sauerkraut soup, *pirohy*, fish, wine, and fresh or stewed fruit. *Bobálky*, small balls of dough softened with hot milk or water and covered with honey and poppy seeds or nuts, are also served, as is *koláče*. The *bobálky* provoke many debates between those who love them and those who hate them. The family also shares a thin wafer dipped in honey to ensure a sweet year. Some people like to slice apples horizontally to find a star that portends a good year, or crack walnuts open to reveal a good future if the nuts inside are perfect.

At Easter, a round, rich, raised bread loaf called *pascha* (*paska*) is the centerpiece of the meal (see photo and recipe in sidebar). A sumptuous array of the meat and dairy products traditionally prohibited during the fasting period of Lent is prepared, filling a basket that is taken to church and blessed before or on Easter Sunday. The food is then shared at breakfast with the family. *Klobása*, ham, bacon, and other meats go into the basket. So do eggs (*kraslice* decorated in traditional designs),

*continued on next page*

## SLOVAK PITTSBURGH *continued from page 11*

butter (sometimes presented in a lamb-shaped mold), and a homemade cheese or custard called *syrek* or *cirek* [see recipe, page 19]. These are spiced with *chren*, a pickled relish of ground beet and horseradish. *Koláče* and other baked goods and candies are the sweet foods, which many Slovak Americans also give up during Lent. A candle, flowers, and a bottle of wine can be added.

There are other less common traditions, including the pre-Lenten serving of fried foods such as pancakes. In Johnstown until a decade ago, students in the elementary school belonging to the St. Stephen Slovak Catholic Church enjoyed fried doughnuts made by Josephine Zahornec and other school cooks there. This tradition and others have generally faded. Like so many other Catholic churches, St. Stephen's was merged with other nearby churches and renamed. One reason given was that the Catholic Church is no longer in the business of promoting ethnic identity, at least in this diocese.

The regional differences among Slovak immigrants contributed to great variation in the recipes of such traditional dishes. An important part of Slovak American food customs is the endless debates over the authentic way to prepare a particular and seemingly simple dish. At holiday celebrations, family gatherings, and Slovak language classes, people will argue, for example, about the proper soup for Christmas Eve: sauerkraut, potato, or mushroom? These discussions are punctuated by claims such as, "My mother/grandmother made it this way." Even within families the debates rage. Each Christmas Eve, my Aunt Sue Jonav would insist that my grandmother Susanna Thur had never served fish at the *vilija*; my mother would come to the defense of the fish, perhaps embarrassed that her family might have been too poor to afford it.

### Cross-Ethnic Traditions

Slovak Americans have come to share certain foods and traditions with their neighbors of varying ethnic backgrounds in Western Pennsylvania, and some of these could be considered regional dishes and practices. One example is the eating of pork and sauerkraut on New Year's Day for good luck throughout the new year. Two others that are ubiquitous are the *pirohy* and the *gob*.

The *pirohy* (*pierogi* in Polish) is a boiled, stuffed crescent of dough whose traditional fillings include mashed potato and cheese, sautéed cabbage, sauerkraut, and *lekvar* (plum jam). Contemporary cooks and restaurants in our region have expanded the repertoire to include a wide variety of savory and sweet doughs and fillings, such as corn chowder pierogis, Nutella pierogis, Buffalo chicken pierogis, and pierogis sautéed with broccoli, tomatoes, and garlic sauce. The annual Steel Valley Pierogie Festival And Cook Off is a fundraising event for Rainbow Kitchen Community Services, a non-profit organization providing anti-hunger and child care programs for residents in the Monongahela River Valley.

The *gob* is a kind of hybrid cake/cookie consisting of two cookie-shaped pieces of cake sandwiched together with a thick, sweet frosting (see photo and recipe in sidebar). While many

bakers have claimed to have invented it, most likely it originated in Germany and was brought by German immigrants to Pennsylvania. "Gob" is originally a coal-mining term referring to the non-coal matter or waste rock produced in mining and set out in "gob piles". The classic gob confection is made of chocolate cake and a white, cooked filling of milk, Crisco shortening, sugar, flour, and vanilla. It is similar to the whoopee pie that is popular in Southeastern Pennsylvania and New England— although far superior to it, as anyone from Western Pennsylvania can tell you. The gob was well suited to working men carrying lunch pails into mines and mills, and to the women filling those pails, because the cake frosting is on the inside between the cake layers (rather than on the top and sides as with a regular slice of cake), so it does not stick to the waxed paper or other wrapping. Standard variations include banana, peanut butter, and pumpkin flavors, and in recent years creative bakers have unleashed a wide variety of exotic flavors of gobs and fillings. At the annual Gob Fest, held on National Gob Day at Johnstown's Galleria Mall for the ninth time in Spring 2019, flavors included cherry chip, mint, orange raspberry, birthday cake, and even gluten-free and the spurious square gob. Regional bakeries, restaurants, and commercial bakeries offer gobs, and local cooks prepare gobs and gob cakes, sometimes using time-savers such as cake mixes.

### Cookbooks and Other Resources

The wonderful first- and second-generation Slovak women who prepared and preserved traditional foods for families and community groups made another major contribution to the preservation of Slovak foodways: they wrote cookbooks.

Some of these were informal compilations of the favorite recipes of a particular cook or family; for instance, Peter L. Jurash's *Mother's Favorite Recipes from Czechoslovakia* (Washington, DC, 1968) is a tribute to his mother Eva. Others were produced by major Slovak women's organizations, including *The Anniversary Slovak-American Cook Book* (Chicago, 1952; frequently reprinted) from the First Catholic Slovak Ladies Association; *The Slovak Catholic Sokol Cookbook* (Passaic, NJ, 1964, 1976) from the Sokol organization (an Olympics-style youth movement that arose in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was brought by immigrants to the U.S.); and *The Slovak World Congress Cookbook* (Toronto, 1995), edited by Anne Zvara Sarosy and Sandra Sarosy Duve.

Slovak cooks also contributed to church and community cookbooks, such as *The Johnstown Area Heritage Association Cookbook: Ethnic Recipes of Johnstown* (Johnstown, PA, 1990), edited by Henry Boni; *Sharing Our Pride: Saint Stephen's Parish 1891-1991* (Johnstown, PA, 1991) from the St. Stephen's Slovak Catholic Church; and the *American Carpatho-Russian Cookbook* (Johnstown, PA, 2000) from the Christ the Saviour Cathedral.

These traditional Slovak American resources have been supplemented in recent years by cookbooks with a wider range of recipes, written in English by Slovaks or contemporary Slovak immigrants. An example is *Best of Slovak Cooking* by Sylvia and John Lorince. Sylvia was born in Bratislava (the capital of Slovakia) and currently lives in Bradfordwoods, PA. *Otilia's Slovak Kitchen: A Collection of Recipes* (Second edi-

tion, 2018) was written and self-published by Otilia Golis, who was born and raised in Košice, Slovakia, and moved to Pittsburgh with her American husband. There are also Slovak cookbooks translated into English, such as one by Josef Rybár, Martin Kállay, and Eva Budjačová, *Slovak Cooking* (Bratislava, 2000). Finally, there are some good Internet resources such as [lubos@slovakcooking.com](mailto:lubos@slovakcooking.com).

Slovak foodways traveled from Europe with the immigrants, and not only sustained them in America but also served as a reminder of who they were— and now, of who they are. The dishes and traditions described here mark, consciously or unconsciously, in public or private, their Slovak and regional identities. ■



*Pascha* loaf and other items in a family's basket for Easter.

### ***Pascha* (Easter Bread)**

*From Ann Thur Kalčík, mother of Susan Kalčík*

- 1 cake of yeast
- ½ cup lukewarm water
- ½ cup margarine, melted
- 1 cup lukewarm milk
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup sugar

Dissolve yeast in lukewarm water; set aside until bubbly. Mix together melted margarine, warm milk, and eggs. In a large mixing bowl, combine and mix flour, salt, and sugar. Make a well in the flour mixture. Add milk and yeast mixture; mix well. Knead until smooth and elastic, adding flour if necessary. Cover and let rise 1 hour. Punch down, then let rise another hour. Turn dough out on a floured cloth; divide, knead slightly, and shape into a large loaf or two small ones. Place into oiled round pans. Brush top(s) with melted butter. Cover and let rise again until doubled. Bake at 350° F. for 40-50 minutes, depending on size of loaf. Remove from pan(s) and let cool.

NOTE: A small piece of the dough can be used to form a cross or braid to decorate the loaf before it is buttered and left to rise the last time.



### **Gobs**

*From Mrs. Mary Minahan, Christ the Saviour Cathedral, Johnstown, PA*

For the cakes:

- Mix together 2 cups sugar, 2 eggs, ½ cup Crisco.
- Add 1 cup sour milk, 1 cup boiling water, 1 teaspoon vanilla
- Sift together and add 4 cups flour, ½ teaspoon baking powder, ½ cup cocoa, 2 teaspoons baking soda, pinch of salt.
- Mix and drop by tablespoons onto ungreased cookie sheets and bake for 5 minutes at 450° F.

For the filling:

- Cook until thick 5 tablespoons flour in 1 cup milk. Let cool.
- Mix with 1 cup Crisco or oleo (margarine), 1 cup powdered sugar, 1 teaspoon vanilla. Mix together and spread between pairs of cakes.

# YOUNGSTOWN KEEPS UP THE TRADITIONAL SLOVAK *VILIIJA* DINNER

by Loretta A. Ekoniak

*Loretta Ekoniak of Canfield, OH, is the grandchild of Slovak immigrants and a promoter of Eastern European cultural traditions. She is President of the American Slovak Cultural Association of the Mahoning Valley and an organizer of its annual Vilija Christmas Eve holy supper. Ms. Ekoniak coauthored, with Susan J. Summers, the book Slovaks of the Greater Mahoning Valley (Arcadia Books, 2011), which includes photos and stories of more than 100 local families. She holds BS, BSEd, and MEd degrees from Youngstown State Univ. and has retired from her teaching career.*

Immigrants to America bring with them a gift: a personal history rich with the culture and customs of their native land. They pass this gift to their children, who pass it on to their children; but with each successive generation much is lost to integration and assimilation, even while new customs and culture are created from the same. There is, however, at least one treasured thing that better resists the pressure to conform, to fit in, to discard the old fashions for the fads: namely, the food customs. Perhaps this is because of food's close association with love of family—the apron-strings at the oven, dinners around the table,

lunches lovingly packed for school or work, making sweets for the holidays. After a generation or two you might not understand the old language, but you'll surely know plenty of words for food!

In places like Youngstown and Cleveland in Ohio, or Pittsburgh and Hazelton in Pennsylvania—which were heavily settled by newly-American Slovaks between 1880 and 1920—words like *kolač*, *pirohy*, *holubky*, *klobáši*, and *halušky* have survived for generations, although their spellings might have changed. Even when English terms like “stuffed cabbage” or “nut roll” are used instead, or when a few traditional ingredients from the Old Country have been replaced with others more easily found in Midwestern supermarkets, the food yet survives. I can assure you that you will find many of these foods, no matter how you spell them now, in the local grocery stores and bakeries and at Slavic churches, including Slovak, Polish, Croatian, etc. These churches and groups still sell many of these wonderful foods for fundraisers, especially around the holidays.

One of the most treasured Slovak meals at Christmas time is the Vilija Dinner (pronounced vee-lee-yah). This special dinner is filled with specific customs, foods, and religious symbolism. Even here in America many of the traditions are still carried on in American-Slovak homes, and many Slovak-founded churches and Slovak cultural organizations organize Vilija dinners each December.

The word Vilija, which means Vigil, refers to the Christmas Eve dinner served in the villages of eastern Slovakia as a meatless meal. In western Slovakia the term Štedrý Večer (Generous Evening, pronounced SHTEH-dree VEH-chair) is more frequently used, and various meats are included. Such regional dietary differences arose because western Slovakia was historically more influenced by German Lutherans, while eastern Slovakia was more influenced by Roman and Byzantine Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. In addition, eastern Slovakia is very mountainous; its villages were rather isolated before the era in which roads and train tracks connected them. There are even some village to village variations in food customs, but overall, the basic Vilija celebration and meal remained fairly consistent throughout the region.



This photo from roughly a century ago shows women volunteers with the Immanuel Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church. From left to right are (back row) Zuzanna Kovach, Kathryn Leporis, Anna Pagac, Suzanna Payer, and Anna Puhalla; (front row) Annie Kovach, Mike Kovach, and Milan Pagac.

Photo from Mark Miller (Concordia Lutheran Church, Youngstown, OH) via Loretta A. Ekoniak and Susan J. Summers, *Slovaks of the Greater Mahoning Valley* (Arcadia Books, 2011).



An Annual *Vilija* Dinner in Youngstown

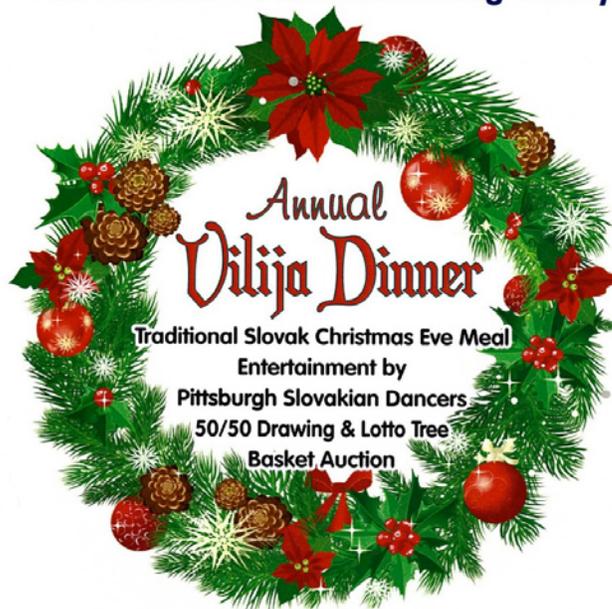
The majority of Slovak immigrants in the Youngstown and Mahoning Valley area are descended from people who emigrated from eastern Slovakia, specifically from the old Hungarian counties of Spiš, Šariš, and Zemplin. There are close to 20 churches in the area, of various denominations, that were established by immigrants of Slovak descent, not counting those established by the Carpatho-Rusyn immigrants who also came from what is now part of Slovakia. In addition to the churches there are at least six Slovak fraternal organizations that were represented (and still are) here, and some of the Slovak cultural clubs and associations also still exist. Many of these churches and organizations formerly, and a number of them still currently, organize *Vilija* Dinners during December. These, of course, are large public events as opposed to the intimate family gatherings traditionally held on Christmas Eve.

As an example, our American Slovak Cultural Association of the Mahoning Valley (ASCA) holds an annual *Vilija* Dinner on the second Sunday of December, and we average between 200 and 250 attendees. This dinner has been held in Youngstown by the ASCA since 1992; before that it was presented by St. Matthias Roman Catholic Parish, who had taken it over from the Youngstown Slovak Catholic Sokol organization that first established this *Vilija* celebration in 1971. That makes 48 years that the dinner has been held on the south side of Youngstown!

Our annual *Vilija* Dinner starts with a welcome, an opening prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance and singing of the American and Slovak national anthems, followed by a traditional Slovak *Vinš* (Christmas Wish). The menu consists of very traditional foods:

- *oplátky*, an unleavened communion-type wafer stamped with a Christmas scene, which can be dipped in honey
- *bobálky*, little baked dough balls steamed or moistened and coated in honey, then rolled in poppy seed or served coated in browned butter and mixed with fried sweet cabbage (see recipe on next page)
- *kapustnica*, a type of mushroom soup usually with sauerkraut (see recipe on next page)

## The American Slovak Cultural Association of the Mahoning Valley



**Sunday, December 10, 2017 • 4:00 p.m.**

**FATHER SNOCK CENTER**

Our Lady of Sorrows Parish

2800 SHADY RUN ROAD • YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO

For Tickets Contact: Ron Garchar 330.533.7077

Loretta Ekoniak 330.549.3760 or E-mail: [loretta.ekoniak@gmail.com](mailto:loretta.ekoniak@gmail.com)

*Tickets Must be Purchased in Advance by 12/1/17*

**Tickets \$20.00 • Under 12 / \$10.00 • Under 4 / Free**

- fish, traditionally *kapor* (carp), but usually cod or haddock here in the U.S.
- *pierohy* (akin to the Polish *pierogi*), pockets of dough stuffed with mashed potatoes and cheese and served with browned butter and onions (see recipe, page 19)
- green peas
- *kolače*, which are nut-roll pastries
- fresh apples.

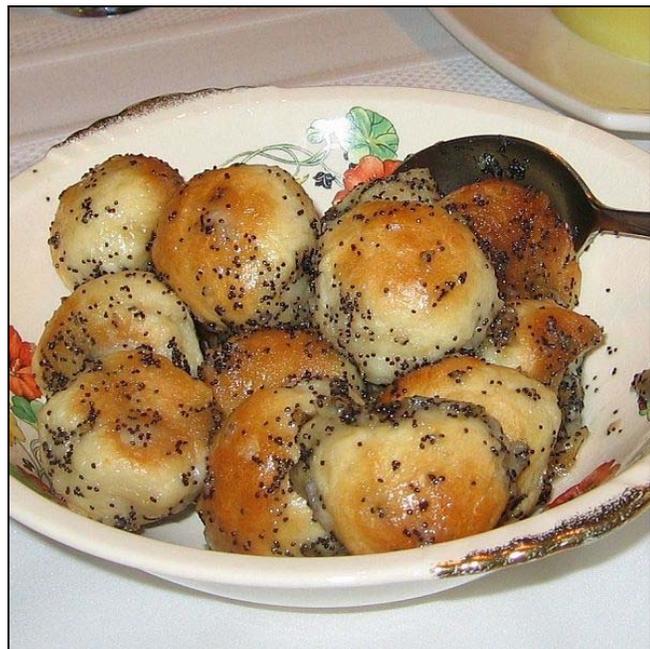
Along with the traditional foods, the dinner also includes entertainment (usually a folk-dance group or a band that plays Slovak folk music), presentation of the two scholarships that we award each year to deserving students, and raffles to raise funds for the scholarships (a gift-basket raffle and a 50/50 raffle, in which the winner keeps 50% of the raffle sales). The dinner itself is basically break-even: since we organize the event mainly to keep this wonderful tradition alive, we purposely keep the price as low as possible.

### A Traditional Family *Vilija* in Slovakia

Here is the way that a *Vilija* dinner would be carried out in a traditional family context in Slovakia.

It begins when the first star appears in the sky on Christmas eve. The youngest child is often told to watch for its appearance

*continued on next page*



### **Bobálky (Sweet Dough Balls)**

*From Loretta Ekoniak*

*Bobálky at home was always made with fresh bread dough, but today, one can use frozen sweet bread roll dough from the supermarket. Either prepare or buy about 1 pound of bread dough.*

1. Pinch off portions of the bread dough to form oblong pieces about 1 inch in diameter.
2. Place on a greased cookie sheet, set in a warm location, and let rise for 15 minutes.
3. Bake at 375° F. for 15 minutes or until lightly browned. When cool, break the bread pieces in half and place in a colander.
4. Cook 1½ cups of ground poppy seed in ¾ cup of water or milk for 10 minutes, stirring in 1 cup of honey (more or less, according to how sweet you want the bobálky to be).
5. Pour about 2 cups of boiling water over the bread pieces in the colander, letting the water drain quickly (as an alternative, steam the pieces until *slightly* softened).
6. Remove the bread pieces to a plate or bowl. Pour the poppy seed/ honey syrup over them. Mix well and you have bobálky.

Can be served either warm or cooled from the refrigerator. It was traditional to have bobálky every Christmas and New Year.

Editor's note: Traditionally, after the bread pieces were baked they were allowed to become very dry and hard for storage and use over the Winter. When ready to use, the pieces were re-softened by pouring boiling water over them (step 5 above).



*Kapustnica with mushrooms and orzo.*

### **Kapustnica (Christmas Eve Soup)**

*From Loretta Ekoniak*

*Here, I have included several ways to make it and several variations. Hopefully one will be similar to your Christmas memories!*

1. You can use any type of mushroom, called *huby* in Slovak (keep the liquid for use in the soup):
  - 1 lb. fresh mushrooms, cleaned, cut, and cooked in about 1 quart water, OR
  - 3 oz. dried mushrooms soaked overnight, OR
  - one 8-oz. can of mushroom pieces.
2. Make a *zapaška* (roux) with 1 Tbsp. butter and 1 Tbsp. flour, frying until golden brown (be careful not to burn it).
3. With the *zapaška* still in the pan on the heat, slowly stir in about 1 qt. of liquid (the cooking water, the soaking water, or the liquid from the canned mushrooms).
4. Add in the mushrooms, along with:
  - sauerkraut juice to taste
  - ½ cup or so of sauerkraut
  - vinegar to taste.
5. Then you vary it according to taste and memory! You can add cooked noodles— any small noodle such as star-shaped, orzo, or egg flakes. Some people add lentils or beans— I like to use Great Northern beans. Actually, this is a very good soup with just the noodles and beans for those who do not like mushrooms (like my son!).

### **SLOVAK YOUNGSTOWN** *continued from page 11*

(possibly this was a means to keep the little ones out of the way while the adults were preparing everything!). Frequently the dinner table is set with the table cloth laid over straw, or else straw is placed under the table, to remind us that the Baby Jesus was born in a stable. Often, an empty place is left at the table to remind us of those who couldn't share this meal with us, or who died the previous year and were thought to return to visit during the Christmas season, or to welcome a traveler seeking shelter as with the Holy Family.



The parents or the oldest family member lead everyone to the table with a lit candle representing the Christ Child. The father or mother begins with a blessing and a prayer. Then the father breaks the *oplatky*, which have been baked and blessed on St. Lucy's feast day (Dec. 13) and distributed to the villagers ahead of time in case snowy mountain passes delay the delivery. The father breaks off a piece of the wafer, and the rest is passed from oldest to youngest for each to break off a piece. The pieces of wafer are then dipped in or spread with honey. The mother or father might also dip their thumb in honey and make a sign of the cross on each person's forehead, reminding them to keep Christ first in all things, wishing them a sweet disposition through the coming year, and asking them to remember the sweetness of life.

Typically, the meal itself starts with some type of mushroom soup, usually with sauerkraut and, depending on the region, either beans, dried plums, or small bits of pasta. Other areas instead have a pea soup or a cream soup. In western Slovakia, *klobása* (see recipe, page 18), a meat sausage akin to Polish *kielbasa*, might be added to the soup. The sourness in many versions of the *Vilija* soup is a reminder that life is sometimes bitter.

The next course is often the poppy seed-covered *bobálky*, also called *opekance*. Dry poppy seed might be scattered in the doorways to keep the devil out, the idea being that he has to stop and pick up all of the poppy seeds first.

Traditionally the main course in eastern Slovakia is fish, since the meal is meatless (in western Slovakia there can also be sausage or ham). The fish, carp, is purchased live at the Christmas markets and kept in the family bathtub until it is killed and prepared on Christmas Eve. (I've been told that it wasn't unusual for the young children to begin thinking of it as a pet, and poor dad had to go buy fillets instead for the *Vilija* dinner!) *Pirohy* are often served, and peas are eaten as an assurance of a prosperous year. In some regions a 12-course meal is traditional to represent the 12 apostles, similar to what is done in Italy. *Pagač* (pagach), a stuffed dough, is also common. Stewed prunes are served in some areas, always in pairs, which is thought to ensure that everyone returns for the next Christmas. This is also why no one is allowed to leave the table until everyone is finished.

Toasts are made with homemade wines or *slivovica* (a plum brandy), and cheers of *Na zdravie!* (To your health!). In some regions an apple is cut horizontally across, and if a full star is visible at the core, then it's a sign of a good year ahead. In other regions, a walnut is split open, and if all of the sections are full and plump then it foretells good times ahead.

After dinner is finished and everything is cleaned up, the family dresses warmly and walks together through the village, joining their friends and neighbors on the way to Midnight Mass. *Veselé Vianoce!* (Merry Christmas!) ■

# MORE RECIPES OF CZECH AND SLOVAK HERITAGE

The first recipe below, for the Czech version of kolachy, was one of several that were sent to us by CHAA member Pam Dishman of La Porte, IN. It is from "Kitchen Shelf", a recipe exchange column in a late 1960s or early 1970s issue of the magazine *Steel Labor* (United Steel Workers of America, Pittsburgh, PA). The other six recipes are selected from the chapter "Slovaks" in Daniel A. Karaczun, ed., *Out of This Kitchen: A History of the Ethnic Groups and Their Foods in the Steel Valley*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Pittsburgh, PA: Publassist, 2010).

## Bohemian Kolachy

*Contributed by Mrs. Pete A. Herrera of Silver City, NM*

### For the Dough:

3 cups all-purpose flour	¼ cup soft butter
¾ cup milk, scalded	¼ cup sugar
1 reg. cake compressed yeast or 1 pkg. dry yeast	½ tsp. salt
¼ cup lukewarm water	1 egg yolk
1 tsp. sugar	½ tsp. grated lemon rind
	1 pkg. powdered sugar

Sift flour and measure it. Scald milk and cool to lukewarm. Crumble compressed yeast or turn dry yeast into lukewarm water, stir in one teaspoon sugar and let soften 10 minutes. In a three-quart mixing bowl, cream butter, add sugar, salt, egg yolk and lemon rind. Beat until smooth. Stir in yeast mixture, then add the flour and milk alternately in three portions, stirring and beating after each to form a smooth, soft dough. Round up dough and return to washed and greased bowl, turning once to bring greased side up. Cover and let rise in warm place until double (about two hours). Turn out on lightly floured board or pastry cloth. Roll out one-fourth inch thick. Cut out with a 2½-inch biscuit cutter and place on a greased cookie sheet. Let rest 10 minutes, then make wide, deep indentation in center of each round with greased thumb. Fill with one tablespoon desired Kolachy filling. Let rise in warm place until a little more than double (about 15 minutes). Bake in a moderately hot oven (400° F.) 15 to 20 minutes. Remove to cake rack, and while warm sprinkle with powdered sugar.

### For cottage cheese filling:

½ lb. creamed cottage cheese	1 Tbsp. melted butter
2 egg yolks, beaten	⅛ tsp. mace
2 Tbsp. sugar	Dash of salt
	¼ cup golden raisins

Wash raisins and turn into colander. Cover, place over boiling water and let steam for five minutes. Cool.

Combine all ingredients and mix just enough to blend well.

### For apricot filling:

½ lb. dried apricots	1½ cups water
⅓ cup sugar	1 Tbsp. butter

Wash apricots quickly in cold water. Place in saucepan with sugar and water, heat to boiling, reduce heat, cover and simmer 45 minutes. When cool, press fruit and juice through a food mill or coarse sieve. Stir in butter. Makes 1½ cups purée.

## Slovak Homemade Kolbasi (Klobási)

*Contributed by Stephen M. Vamos of Whitaker, PA, who worked for U.S. Steel for 36 years. He remembers his family making sausage when he was six years old in 1927, and he still owns the meat grinder and other kitchen tools that his parents brought with them from the old country for this purpose:*

In those days, a couple of families would go in together and purchase a pig from someone's farm or the slaughter house. The cleaning and distributing of the pig was a festive event. First they'd burn the hair off of the pig and scrape the skin with a sharp knife. Every single part of the pig was used for some dish, including the feet, blood, and organs. The children gathered around for a special treat—a piece of the pig's ear or tail to chew on! Someone in the neighborhood usually had a smokehouse and they'd let you store your meat in there if your family didn't have one.

5 lbs. pork butts	1 tsp. pepper
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped	casings, enough to use
2 Tbsp. salt	up prepared meat

Grind meat in coarse grinder and mix well with other ingredients. Stuff cleaned casings with meat mixture. Some local markets carry cleaned, prepackaged casings around the Easter season. Put in smokehouse and smoke daily for about a week, using hickory wood. A temporary smokehouse can be made from a large tin drum.

## Slovak Kochanina (Jellied Pigs Feet)

*Contributed by Adele Vamos of Munhall, PA*

3 lbs. pigs feet, each chopped in half lengthwise	⅛ tsp. pepper
1 Tbsp. salt	¼ tsp. sweet paprika, optional
water	2 cloves garlic

Singe pigs feet, wash and boil. Pour off water. Add fresh water, just enough to cover. Bring to boiling point, skim if necessary. Simmer slowly. Add the seasonings. Cook until bones fall apart, about 4 to 5 hours. Pour into soup plates and let stand overnight in a cool place.

### Slovak Pirohy

*Contributed by Mrs. Margaret Majercik*

1 cup flour	4-5 Tbsp. water
1 egg	2-3 Tbsp. butter
pinch of salt	

Combine all ingredients to make a medium soft dough. Knead well. Roll dough out thin and cut into 2-inch squares. Put a little of any desired filling on each square and fold to form a triangle. Pinch edges together to keep the filling in. Drop into boiling salted water and cook until all rise to top. Cook additional 5 minutes. Drain and place in serving bowl. Brown some additional butter and pour over cooked pirohy. Mix lightly until all are buttered. Serve hot.

**For cottage cheese filling:** Combine ½ cup dry cottage cheese, 1 egg yolk, 1 Tbsp. sugar.

**For sauerkraut filling:** Drain and wash kraut, and parboil about 10 minutes. Drain and squeeze dry. Sauté 1 chopped medium onion in butter. Add sauerkraut and salt to taste, and brown.

**For potato filling:** Blend together 1 potato (cooked and mashed), salt, and grated yellow cheese.

### Slovak Haluski (Dumplings)

*Contributed by Emilia Ivaska*

2 eggs	2 cups flour
½ cup cold water	boiling water
1 tsp. salt	

Break eggs into a bowl, add cold water, salt, and mix together. Add enough flour to make a medium-stiff dough. Let it sit while the water comes to boil. Place dough on a small paddle-type board, cut off small pieces with table knife, dropping into boiling water. Boil gently until noodle-like dumplings rise to top of water. Cook for 5 minutes covered, but watch to keep it from boiling over. Remove from boiling water with sieve and blanch with cold water. Place in bowl with a little butter and mix lightly.

### Slovak Bundurcov Haluski (Potato Dumplings)

*The woman who submitted this recipe chose to remain anonymous. Born in 1917 on Hays Lane in Munhall, PA, she worked in the mills in the early 1940s. "I started out on the labor gang pitching bricks from boxcars." The bricks were passed from person to person, hand to hand, stacked, and later used to replace the burned-out bricks in the open-hearth furnace.*

*She worked three shifts, six days a week, and walked from her Munhall home— including a flight of 75 steps each way— to get to her job. She still lives in her family's home, which is over 100 years old.*

It was an experience and at the same time it was a fearful job because once the furnace would burn out, different groups of people would come and clean out the furnace. They would let the furnace cool and once it cooled they were only allowed in there for a few minutes. The bricks would burn down and they wouldn't work anymore. The fire was all gas and it was under a big pot. That's what it was like. I always said that when I die I'll never go to hell because I was in hell for four years.

*During her years in the mill, she said the cafeteria employed a Slovak cook. Although she did not eat lunch at the cafeteria, she did know that they served a lot of haluski and soups such as bean or mushroom.*

2 cups raw potatoes	1 tsp. salt
2 medium eggs	1 cup flour (approx.)

Finely grate potatoes. Add egg, salt, flour. Mix well to create a pasty dough. Add a little water if dough is too pasty.

Take a handful of dough, place it on a plate and chip off pieces of dough with the tip of a teaspoon into a pot of boiling water. You can test to see if they are done by cooling and tasting one or when dough takes on a shiny appearance. Rinse in hot water, drain. Mix lightly with browned butter or margarine, and dry cottage cheese and sauerkraut.

### Slovak Cirek (Easter Cheese)

*Contributed by Adele Vamos of Munhall, PA. She writes:*

You must have extreme patience in making this dish. It takes about one hour to heat slowly and cook. This recipe has a rather bland but sweet taste indicative of the moderation that Christians should have in all things. My childhood memories of Cirek include the many households in Whitaker with Cirek balls hanging [to dry] outside on clotheslines at Easter time. When I saw my baba's [grandmother's] Cirek hanging out on the line or from the spigot in the bathtub, I knew we'd be taking the Easter basket to church for the traditional blessing of the baskets on Holy Saturday.

1 doz. eggs, break yolks but do not beat	1 qt. milk
1-2 tsp. vanilla extract	½ cup sugar

Combine all ingredients in a white enamel pan. Cook over medium to low heat, stirring constantly, until eggs curdle and form a heavy curd. Pour mixture into a colander that is lined with several layers of cheesecloth or a cotton dish-towel. Once drained, pick it up, cheesecloth and all, and twist the top part of the cloth tight until you've formed a ball. Tightly tie the open end with string, keeping the string very close to the top of the ball. Mixture will be very hot so be careful. Hang over the sink or on a clothesline until cool. Once it is cooled and formed, remove cheesecloth, wrap and refrigerate. Serve cold, sliced or cubed, with ham and Veal Loaf (*pulnina*).

# CHAA CALENDAR

(Except where noted, programs are scheduled for 3:00 – 5:00 p.m. and are held at the Ann Arbor District Library – Malletts Creek Branch, 3090 E. Eisenhower Parkway.)

**Sunday, September 15, 2019**

Shachar M. Pinsker, Prof. of Judaic Studies and Middle East Studies, Univ. of Michigan, discusses his book, *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture*

**On the Back Burner:** We welcome ideas and submissions from all readers of *Repast*, including for the following planned future issues. Suggestions for future themes are also welcome.

- Fall 2019: Culinary Excursions (Part 2)
- Winter and Spring 2020: Immigrant Foods of Steel Country (Parts 2-3)

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