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Ukrainian-Americans: An Ethnic Portrait (Photo Essay)

Ukrainian-Americans: An Ethnic Portrait

Photographs by Donald P. Lokuta

Text by David S. Cohen

For the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands. . . . That is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time.

—James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

The writer James Agee described his collaboration with the photographer Walker Evans to document the lives of three tenant farm families as neither art nor science but “an effort in human actuality” (1941:x, 11). Lately the assumption that photography captures social reality has been questioned. In *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, William Stott (1973:283–287) says Agee realized that he and Evans would fall short of the ideal; Evans, he says, selected his photographs for their propaganda value, omitting those that didn't fit the social purpose of the book.

The great documentary photographers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—Edward S. Curtis, Robert J. Flaherty, Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine—combined artistic expression with social scientific interests. Critics recently have argued that in doing so these photographers distorted social reality. Curtis dressed his North American Indian subjects in costumes no longer worn in daily life and placed them in romantic poses that reflected his view of a “vanishing race” (Scherer 1975:67–79; Lyman 1982). Flaherty had an artificial half-igloo constructed for interior scenes of Eskimo life (Danzker 1980:5–32). Susan

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David S. Cohen has a Ph.D. in American Civilization from the University of Pennsylvania. He taught History and American Studies at Rutgers University (Newark) prior to assuming his present position as coordinator of the Folklife Program at the New Jersey Historical Commission. He is the author of The Ramapo Mountain People (1974) and a forthcoming book, The Folklore and Folklife of New Jersey.

Sontag (1973:6, 61–63) argues that the photographs of Riis and Hine are not objective depictions of social reality but political statements against slum conditions and child labor. She characterizes the photographs taken in the 1930s under the auspices of the Farm Securities Administration as “unabashedly propagandistic.” Despite “the presumption of veracity” in the way we view photographs, Sontag writes, “the work photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth.”

The trend since the thirties has been to separate art from social science. Art photography has gone in the direction of personal expression. Some photographers, such as Robert Frank, Danny Lyon, and Bill Owens, have continued in the social documentary tradition, but their work, according to Howard S. Becker (1974:12), “suffers from its failure to use explicit theories, such as might be found in the social sciences.” Social science has gone in another direction. In anthropology, according to Sol Worth (1980:15–22), the trend has been away from “visual anthropology” and toward “the anthropology of visual communication”; instead of studying the social and cultural content of photographs, anthropologists today are more interested in photographs as a medium of communication. In folklore, fieldworkers with cameras generally do their own visual documentation rather than collaborate with artistic, documentary photographers.

Bruce Jackson (1978:8, 43), a folklorist-photographer, claims that photographs alone never tell us what we see in them. To know more about what is pictured in photographs, Jackson says, we must know more about the decisions made behind the camera—decisions pertaining to selection, framing, and editing. But this epistemological problem affects every field of knowledge, not just photography, and it need not necessarily lead us to a position of total relativism. If we as viewers look only at historical photographs, there is a limit to what we can know about these decisions. But if we as fieldworkers are present when the photographs are taken and help to make the decisions, the assumption that there is little or no connection between the photographs and social reality need not apply.

Inspired by the collaboration of Agee and Evans, Donald Lokuta and I set out to document the contemporary folklife of an ethnic group in New Jersey. The idea was to combine Lokuta's vision as a photographer with mine as a folklorist. Both the artist and the social scientist should attempt to be true to the fieldwork experience. We understood that all experience is filtered through our own perceptions. What we wanted to see was whether there was any necessary contradiction between the point of view of an artist and that of a social scientist.

Because Slavic groups have highly visible folk traditions, we decided to choose one of them. So we looked in *The Ethnic Directory of New Jersey* to see which had the most organizations: clearly, it was the Ukrainians. The large number of Ukrainian organizations reflects an intense ethnic identification, which seems to derive from the feeling of many Ukrainians that they are a submerged nationality in Europe; therefore we do not claim that the persistence of folk traditions among Ukrainian-Americans is typical of other ethnic groups.

Furthermore, although there was a cross section of urban and suburban, white-collar and blue-collar subjects, we do not claim that the subjects we photographed are typical Ukrainian-Americans. We were looking specifically for "traditional" subjects—that is, people who have made a point of preserving their ethnic, folk traditions. We also note that the people we photographed are all from one region of the United States: the pictures were taken in northern New Jersey and at two Ukrainian resorts in the Catskill Mountains, Glen Spey and Ellenville, New York. And our subjects were recommended by members of their own community; it is always possible that such a method of selection will tilt the balance in favor of "model subjects."

Specifically we wanted to show how folk traditions have become symbols of ethnic identity. Here we were interested in communal and private expressions rather than what the folklorist Richard Dorson (1981:110) has called "public-presentational" ones. That is, we were looking for folk expressions of ethnicity within the home and the community, not in the festivals that present folk music, folk dance, national dress, and ethnic foods to the public at large. For example, we photographed the *hahilka*, songs and dances performed by young girls on Easter Sunday morning that retain much of their folk flavor even though they are rehearsed. But we didn't photograph the dance ensembles that perform at the Garden State Arts Center, because they are too choreographed.

Furthermore, we were not looking for only the "pure" survivals of folk tradition. In his study of Ukrainian folklore Robert B. Klymasz (1980) argues that folklorists should study, along with the survivals of European folk traditions in America, those that have died out as well as newly created variations. In a rural community in Canada he found Ukrainian country-and-western music. In New Jersey we found commercial ceramics decorated with traditional embroidery patterns.

We call this project "an ethnic portrait" because many of the photographs in it were posed. This is in keeping with Donald Lokuta's style. Erving Goffman distinguishes between "caught," or candid, scenes and portraits, or posed scenes. He states that

"caught" scenes depict "objects and events as they are in regard to some matters other than photography" (1976:81). As Goffman notes, there is a limit to what can be depicted in this way. For example, we could not include the bride, groom, priest, and altar in a picture of the wedding ceremony without showing someone's back. Hence the need for portraits. But, Goffman notes, posing for portraits is not a normal social activity; it is an activity specifically devised for the needs of the camera (ibid.:85). He seems to imply that the only social reality in portraits is the act of posing.

But there is more in a posed photograph than merely the act of posing. There is a world of information about how the subjects present themselves and what their personal environments contain. We discussed the poses with the subjects. We did not tell anyone what to wear; it is of note that few of our subjects chose to be photographed in Ukrainian national dress. I often suggested which room should be used as the setting, usually because that room reflected something about the subject. Lokuta framed the photographs within these settings and suggested minor changes in poses and expressions.

Some of the photographs of folk ceremonies were candid; a few were posed. On one occasion we resorted to a reenactment; we missed the Saint Thomas Sunday memorial service in the cemetery, but the subjects were willing to simulate it for us later with some rearrangement so that we could show both their faces and the front of the tombstone. The photograph has the quality of a portrait. The picture of the blessing of the bride and groom shows the actual event, but we moved it outdoors so that we could include the entire wedding party. The subjects positioned themselves for the camera, creating a partly candid, partly posed photograph.

To avoid reducing the photographs to single meanings, we have chosen not to explain them in our own words. Instead we have accompanied them with excerpts from tape-recorded interviews. Some are in the words of the subjects of the photographs, others in the words of relatives or friends who, because of the subject's language difficulties or for other reasons, acted as spokespersons. Still others are appropriate comments made by persons unknown to the subjects.

What are some of the social realities in these photographs? First, they show how ethnic identity is expressed in celebrations, especially those pertaining to the life cycle and yearly calendar. As one priest noted, Epiphany has become a Ukrainian ethnic as well as religious holiday. This is also true of Easter and Christmas. Many of these traditions have been adapted to new circumstances in America. For example, the *didukh* (last sheaf of wheat), which had important symbolic meaning at Christmas in Ukraine, has been reduced in America to a tabletop center-

piece. Other traditions continue as a mixture of old and new. The bride in our photograph wears a non-traditional white gown embroidered according to tradition, but not with a traditional Ukrainian pattern; the groom wears a nontraditional tuxedo with a traditional embroidered shirt.

Second, the photographs show the importance of food as an expression of ethnicity. Ukraine has been called the "bread basket of Europe," and Ukrainian decorative breads, such as the *kolach* (Christmas bread), *paska* (Easter bread), and *korovaj* (wedding bread), play an important role in ethnic celebrations. Certain foods are associated with specific celebrations, such as *kutia* (wheat, honey, nuts, and poppy seeds) with Christmas. Sometimes food has a symbolic function; for example, the Christmas Eve dinner includes twelve dishes representing the Twelve Apostles. Food is incorporated into the ethnic/religious rituals, as when the food in the Easter baskets is blessed and then taken home for the Easter breakfast. Perhaps the most striking food tradition is the sharing of food and drink in the cemetery near the graves of deceased relatives on Saint Thomas Sunday.

Third, the folk art has become a symbol of ethnic identity. To some Ukrainians the preservation of authentic folk art from Ukraine has become a personal, political cause. Yet the folk art has not remained "pure." Reproductions of Hutsul (from the Carpathian Mountains) and Trypillian (a prehistoric culture in Ukraine, ca. 2500–2000 B.C.) ceramics are made in America, and folk art has inspired various kinds of commercial art, such as the ceramics with embroidery patterns. Both the folk art and the commercial art are purchased in ethnic stores, which, according to Richard Dorson, function as "repositories of artifacts and food" and provide "an inventory of things in everyday and holiday use among specific nationalities" (Dorson 1981:116).

Furthermore, the photographs and our fieldwork refute two common misconceptions about ethnicity. First, ethnic traditions do not necessarily die out in the suburbs. Although suburban houses may look similar on the outside, many Ukrainian-Americans decorate the interiors to reflect their ethnic identity. Second, folk traditions do not necessarily survive longer among the lower classes than among the upper classes. We found that they survive in different ways. Wealthy, educated, and professional Ukrainian-Americans have become "purists" about folk art, distinguishing between authentic Hutsul ceramics and Hutsul-American reproductions and denying that the reproductions of Trypillian ceramics are "real" folk art. Blue-collar Ukrainian-Americans, on the other hand, often buy commercial items such as the embroidery-patterned ceramics and juxtapose them with folk art in their homes. Sometimes these commercial

products are used traditionally. One of our photographs, for example, shows a reproduction of a traditional icon in a mass-produced wooden frame draped with a machine-made *rushnyk* (ritual cloth). Another reveals even greater diversity: a reproduction of *The Last Supper* (which is in the Italian Catholic tradition), draped with a *rushnyk*, hangs on the wall above a *didukh* with commercial porcelain angels on either side.

In summary, these photographs document, to paraphrase Robert Klymasz, the transformation of the Ukrainian-American folklore tradition from an immigrant to an ethnic folklore complex. "The result," Klymasz writes,

is the emergence of a new and uniquely comprehensive dimension for continuity that is inextricably attuned to the demands and pressures of a swiftly-moving, modern civilization. . . . Like the old, however, the new ethnic complex reflects the same universal ability of folklore to bridge the gaps of time and to meet the needs of today by providing an ever-ready vehicle which, without fail, always leads jaded appetites to an amazingly-rich and seemingly limitless source of entertainment, instruction, wonder and pride. [Klymasz 1980:129]

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Marie Paluch, Wayne,
New Jersey.

Zirka Stebelsky,
Dnipro store, Newark,
New Jersey.



This is mostly a Ukrainian art store. We also have books, but mostly Ukrainian art. Our clientele is mostly Ukrainian, because this is the only Ukrainian art store here in the neighborhood. So Ukrainians come here and buy Ukrainian art, Ukrainian books, embroidery thread. We get our merchandise from all over, from the United States, from Ukraine, from Canada, and from some local people. We have a local lady who does ceramics.

We have Hutsul wood carvings, hand carved, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. We have Ukrainian ceramics. All different kinds. Trypillian, which is ancient Ukrainian, and Hutsul ceramics. And we also have commercial porcelain. This is not art work, but it is very popular. Then we have Easter eggs. Beautiful hand-decorated Ukrainian eggs—real eggs. And we have wooden eggs also. They are painted and then carved. All different kinds. Then we have books, embroidery supplies. We also sell Ukrainian records and tapes, and dolls in Ukrainian costumes.

—Alexandra Stebelsky

Commercial ceramics with embroidery pattern, Livingston, New Jersey.



Roxana Kuzmak, South
Orange, New Jersey.



Most Ukrainians love their folk art, and this is why they use it to decorate their homes. This is why we use it too. We have one room done all in Hutsul style, and we have some Trypillian ceramics here, dating back to 2,250 years before Christ. None of this is original. They're reproductions, because no originals exist here in the West. These were made here. There are several women artists who do it. They're always in three colors: terra cotta, black, and white. Spiral designs with animals. They're reproductions of what was dug up.

We are collectors only of the Hutsul art. The Trypillian is readily available. It's used only for decorative purposes. It does not have much value as far as collection is concerned.

Even though the Trypillian is very old, the shapes are contemporary. It goes in very well with contemporary furnishings. I think it adds to the beauty of any room.

What we have downstairs is, well, more than just decorating. It's a whole room. The walls and everything are done in the Hutsul style. We have the whole room done this way simply because we love it. We love that folk art. We are Ukrainians. We think it is beautiful. Why collect something else if we could have collected ours, done in our Ukrainian tradition? And especially since we have a young daughter, we would like her to grow up in this way. When she brings her friends over, they can see that Ukrainian art is also beautiful.

—Roxana Kuzmak

Lubomyr Kuzmak, South
Orange, New Jersey.





The *didukh*, Livingston, New Jersey.

*If you were in Ukraine, the last sheaf that is harvested is left in the stable until Christmas time. It was called the *didukh*. On Christmas Eve the head of the house with the oldest son would bring in the *didukh* and put it in a place of prominence in the house. The *didukh* is a link between the people that have passed away and the people that are going to be eating. It symbolizes the ancestors of the family. It is the last sheaf of the harvest time, whose grain is used to sow the first furrow in the spring.*

*Now I'm referring here to those people who live in the agricultural villages. In the towns this was done slightly differently. You buy the *didukh* from a florist or you can get it from the farmers. They will give you a piece to have in the cities.*

*In this country, unless you live in Pennsylvania or up in Canada, where you have fields to do this, you must go to a florist. The farmers usually will cut it a particular length. The *didukh* usually stands from the floor to the height of a regular sheaf of wheat. But the florists here usually make it as a big centerpiece. So you more or less have to modify it a little. But you stick to the traditional meaning of the *didukh*.*

—Raissa Woluyczyk

Easter baskets,
Maplewood, New Jersey.



On Saturday evening before Easter we have the blessing of the Easter baskets. In Ukraine, depending on what part of the country you're from, this will vary. In some parts they will bless the baskets just after midnight. In other parts they will bless them early Easter Sunday morning. Around six or seven o'clock in the morning. In the village where my parents came from they normally blessed the baskets right after church services and just before lunch. And then there's a big race to the house to see who can get home first. There's anywhere from two to five thousand people who cram the church grounds. After the baskets are blessed everybody gets on their horses or wagons and there would be a mad rush. Here, of course, we don't have that.

And then we come home from church and we have Easter breakfast. It's supposed to be a breakfast, but we eat it around lunchtime.

—Peter Paluch



*Hahilka, Newark,
New Jersey.*

The hahilka are a fusion of early pagan songs and dances that were to welcome the coming of spring, which was the rebirth of life. With the sun and the warmth the earth will be producing. With the coming of Christianity these pagan songs were fused or accepted into the Christian calendar. They were then sung, not necessarily with the coming of spring, but at the time that the Easter festival was being celebrated.

Primarily, the hahilka are sung by young unmarried girls. The interference of the young men is strictly incidental. These are pranks which happen spontaneously. They're not planned. Since spectators were there, the young men would join in or interfere, because there might be one or two young ladies in whom they might have been interested. So it was really a joking and happy way in which to enter these all-female, all-girl dances.

The symbolism of them was the greeting of the sun and warmth. The circle is very important. So very many of these dances have the circular form. They also have dances in which the girls are divided into two groups, and there is a dialogue in which they exchange information. Birds play a very important role in these spring songs. The birds are the ones who bring warmth and the coming of spring. Almost as if they were the physical transporters of the sun.

Today, when our young girls dance and sing, they prepare. They have to go and study and get the words. They usually learn the words from the older girls. They will prepare a dance sequence. Originally these dances were never really rehearsed. They were spontaneous. Today they are more stylized because we go to the trouble of preparing them. That's the only way they can be performed.

—Zirka Voronka

Wedding blessing,
Ellenville, New York.



It will not be a traditional wedding as in Ukraine. It'll be more a modern version. The traditions that are easily accommodated to the situation in the United States now.

Before the wedding ceremony itself there is the blessing of the bride and groom by the parents. It's the bride's father who gives the blessing. Both the groom's parents and the bride's parents are present, and the immediate family and closest friends.

I've translated into English the blessing that my father has written in Ukrainian: "We bless you, children, with this old icon, which has been in our family for hundreds of years. It has survived the joyous times as well as strife. Go now on your new path in life with God in your hearts. Remember to trust, honor, respect, and love each other. Love your fatherland, your church, and your family. Respect and love the country you live in. Be frugal in life, but be generous in time of need. Obey the Lord's commandments. And in turn he will guide and protect you. With God's blessing and best wishes of your parents, step under the wreath of matrimony. May the Lord and the Blessed Virgin always be with you."

—Tania Bijcum

Wedding of Christina and Roman Kolinsky, Ellenville, New York.



The bride arrives at the church with her father. All the people will be seated in the church, and the bridal party will enter. And then the father of the bride gives the bride away to the groom at the door, not as it is done in other churches where the bride is escorted all the way to the altar by her father. The father gives the daughter away at the door. At the door he kisses her, and kisses the groom, and at that point the bride belongs to the groom, no longer to her father.

At the door they are greeted by the priest, who has the rings. First he blesses the rings. Then he places the rings on the fingers of the groom and the bride. The bride and the groom do not themselves exchange rings, as they do in some other traditions.

And then the priest leads them up to the altar. While they are at the altar, they are standing on an embroidered towel—a rushnyk. And at the altar there are prayers said. Then the priest places wreaths made of myrtle on the heads of the bride and the groom. The wreaths signify the crowning of a new king and a new queen—the beginning of a new family, a new dynasty. And there are some

prayers said, they exchange vows, and the wreaths are taken off. And at that point they are pronounced man and wife.

—Tania Bijcum

Christina and Roman
Kolinsky, Ellenville,
New York.



The bride will have a white gown, and it will be embroidered. It's not traditional embroidery as we know it. She decided instead to have flowers embroidered in blue going down her dress, which is also allowable on the wedding dress. She can either have a traditional pattern design or flowers. And she will not have a veil. She will have a wreath of flowers and ribbons coming down from her hair, just as in Ukraine. In the traditional Ukrainian costume the ribbons are colorful, but hers will be white.

The groom will wear a tuxedo, and he will have an embroidered shirt with a pattern that the bride and the groom chose. The bride embroidered the shirt by herself for the groom.

Instead of a wedding cake, as we know it, with the white frosting, Ukrainians have the korovaj, which is a sweet dough bread. It's usually two or three tiers high. The korovajs differ, depending on what region of the Ukraine you come from. The one which Christina will have at her wedding is decorated with doves, grape leaves, and flowers made of dough. On top is what they call a Tree of Life. It has two branches meeting, which signifies Roman's

and Christina's families meeting. Then it branches out into many little branches at the top. Two branches meet and then you've got all these little branches coming out from the top. In other words, two families meet, and they multiply, and they start a new family.

—Tania Bijcum

Saint Thomas Sunday,
South Bound Brook,
New Jersey.



According to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the week after Easter we remember the dead and its relationship to the Resurrection. In Ukraine these services were held at different times—Monday, Tuesday, throughout the week. Here in the United States it's different. In Ukraine, where the entire nation was of the Orthodox religion—especially in the eastern part—the people took off from work. Here we have obstacles. In order to carry out the tradition, this takes place on the first Sunday after Easter, which is called Saint Thomas Sunday.

—Father John Nakonechnyj

We call it (the Easter bread) paska. Paska means "passover." The placing of the paska at the grave is a pagan belief, and it is kept for those people that died and that are not able to come to Easter. Because the deceased ones missed the paska and the eggs that had been blessed in church, we leave them by the grave in the belief that they will be for the dead. When we bury the dead, we bury them with food, in the belief that they might have enough food for eternity.

—Father Steven Bilak



Saint Thomas Sunday,
South Bound Brook,
New Jersey.

We go from grave to grave, and we commemorate the individual or individuals that have died and are buried here. And we pray for them. The traditional foods—the paska (Easter bread), the eggs—are put on the grave, and later on they will be eaten by the family members. It's for the living and the dead to participate together in celebrating the Resurrection. Especially the foods that are eaten—the paska and the egg. The egg is the symbol of resurrection.

—Father John Nakonechnyj



Saint Thomas Sunday,
South Bound Brook,
New Jersey.

Saint Thomas Sunday is a celebration of Easter with the deceased. Our deceased stay with us, one can say, because we do not honor them just once at the funeral, but also on the ninth and fourteenth days after the death, and then at least once a year, on Saint Thomas Sunday.

The food at the graves is a tradition that survives from pagan times. We became Christian in the tenth century, and there are still rituals the church did not do away with. Many are gone, but this one is traditional. It is not frowned upon. It is just the family getting together. Food and life go together. It is a strong symbolism for us to include our deceased.

—Bishop Iziaslav