

Easter Customs of the Carpatho-Rusyn People

by Michael Roman, *Amerikansky Russky Viestnik*, 17 April 1941

The festival of the Resurrection of Our Lord is celebrated with a variety of customs in many parts of the world. Our Carpatho-Rusyn people, who have a folk culture which dates back for many centuries, also celebrate Easter in a colorful and interesting way. Many of the customs have been handed down from pagan times when the Ancient Slavs believed in gods and goddesses whom they created to explain the mysteries of nature. Thus some of our present day Easter customs are in some way or another connected with the Paleo-Slavonic Mythology

Many of these interesting customs have been brought over to America from the other side and are practiced by our people, both old and young.

The customs of our people vary depending on the locality. In Zemplinska and Sariska different customs are practiced than in the other provinces such as Spisska, Marmoroska, Berecka or the Lemko region. However there are some that are alike in all of the provinces.

Every Carpatho-Rusyn family strives to have a pascha, dyed eggs, delicious meals, cheese, butter and other goodies taken to church where they are blessed. The foods are eaten on Easter Sunday. This custom is a traditional one and is practiced by every true Carpatho-Rusyn family whether in America or in the homeland.

The variation in customs can be found in the games, songs and dances, the origin of which, can, in most cases, be traced to the Slavonic Mythology. Rev. Nestor Volensky, a distinguished Carpatho-Rusyn man of letters and a historian, traced many of the customs to the pagan times and had written much about them.

The game of "***Pohrebenije Kostrubon'ka***", played on Easter Sunday afternoon by the girls in some of the Carpatho-Rusyn villages, has been handed down from the pagan times when it was a religious ceremony on the festival of the spring sun. ***Kostrubon'ka*** in Rusyn, refers to the somewhat undulating rays of the sun in winter time. In the game, one of the girls, who is called the ***Kostrubon'ka***, is acting as though she is falling while the other girls sing mournful songs. All of a sudden the ***Kostrubon'ka*** stands erect in a happy manner and the girls start singing happy songs.

In a few words this game signifies the "burial" (***pohrebenije***) or the passing away of the undulating and weak rays of the sun of winter time for those of Spring, which are more direct.

Some of the common Easter games dealing with beautifully painted eggs include a game known as "*Cokatisja*". This game is played like marbles except that instead of marbles, eggs are used. The boys roll them on the meadows. If an egg is cracked, then it belongs to the boy whose egg cracked it. [webmaster note: My family has a similar tradition, but instead of rolling the eggs, they are held and tapped against each other with the same result]

In many villages it is a custom to throw the shells of Easter eggs into the rivers and streams because that is supposed to make the geese and ducks fruitful. It should be remembered that an egg in pagan times symbolized fertility.

Another game played by the Carpatho-Rusyn youth is the one in which the girls hide the dyed eggs in their hands while the fellows try to take the eggs away from them. The victory of a fellow over a girl signified in pagan times, the victory of the spring sun over winter.

During the Easter holidays bells are rung almost constantly in the homeland. This is done because bell ringing is supposed to cause bees to swarm. It is a known fact, however, that metallic sounds do influence the bees.

In many of the villages in the province of Zemplin a game called "*Kralovna*" is played by the girls. In our language "*Kralovna*" means "Queen". Many girls dressed in their best finery form a long line and in rhythmic step, walk through the village for two hours at a time singing lovely songs about a pretty queen "*kralovna*". The refrain to the song is usually the melodious - "La, la, la, la, la...."

These songs have no connection whatsoever to the Resurrection of Our Lord. They have been traced to the story in Slavonic Mythology where Lala, son of goddess "Lada", with his queen and his retinue travelled throughout his domain to see how his people lived. The counterpart of Lala in Greek-Roman mythology is Cupid while that of Lada is Venus.

On a lovely Easter Sunday, any Carpatho-Rusyn village is picturesque. Everyone dressed in their best clothing is outdoors. The little boys can be seen together in one group playing "*Cokatisja*" with their Easter eggs. The women are in another group talking about things that are of interest only to them, usually about cooking, sewing, or they are trying to predict who will be the first to get married after Easter. The men are also in a group by themselves discussing the spring plowing or the international situation. The young girls and the fellows are having a grand time together. Here and there can be seen young adolescents enthusiastically scheming how to best surprise some of the popular maidens on the next day and give them a good "*polivanja*." Occasionally the melodious strains of a violin or an accordion can be heard or the beautiful singing of the young people who have been restrained from singing for seven weeks because of Lent. It is, indeed, a beautiful sight to observe a Carpatho-Rusyn village on Easter Sunday. There is a happy spirit of joy which is experienced by everyone. Because of this, Easter is one of the

happiest holy days in the native lands of our parents. The people await it with eagerness for many weeks.

On Easter Monday the men and young boys visit the homes of their friends where they throw water on the women usually on the hands. In doing so they say "**Christos Voskres!**" (Christ is Risen!) while the girls reply "**Voistinu Voskres!**" (Indeed - He is Risen!). Many times the young men like to have fun when they go "**polivati**" and go beyond the bounds. They probably will pour buckets of water on the girl or lead her to a well and give her a good soaking. Easter Tuesday is the time when the women take revenge on the men. That is their day for "**polivanja**". This custom is a very sociable one since it brings together the young people. Also as a result of it, enemies forget their differences and become friends. It is considered bad luck if a home is passed by during the "**polivanja**".

This custom has been traced to the time when the Jews threw water on the followers of Christ who with joy were announcing the Resurrection of Our Saviour. This custom is also practiced because it is believed that the fresh water from the melted snow will give a beautiful complexion to people and also bring luck if it is poured during this "**polivanja**" of Easter time.

In some localities on Easter Monday after Vespers, the families visit the graves in the cemetery where relatives are buried.

Such are the colorful and picturesque Easter customs of the Carpatho-Rusyns. Although many of these customs originated in pagan times and have been carried over into Christianity, it does not mean that our people still have pagan ideas. They are observed because they make up the rich heritage of our people which has been handed down from generation to generation. These customs make up the rich folk culture of our people, which is probably richer, older, more unique and more colorful than that of any other nationality. Other nationalities have just begun to notice our folk culture and to study it.