

Maria Bereza Preserves the Ukrainian Tradition of Pisanki



Maria Bereza uses a special drying rack for her pisanki

By Natalia Szczygiel

Maria Bereza hunches over the fragile shell of an egg and expertly draws intricate lines of wax along its curvature, practicing the art of pisanki as her mother had done to symbolize rebirth and fertility during the Easter season.

When she completes her work, the egg will be a kaleidoscope of designs and colors that far outshine the simple egg coloring that many families practice at Eastertime. Her richly decorated eggs may not be Faberge, but they are none-

theless exquisite works of art.

At 76, Bereza has taught the art of pisanki -- or pysanky in her native Ukrainian language -- for more than 30 years in the metro Grand Rapids area. While she doesn't hold classes regularly now, slowed by arthritis in her shoulder, Bereza still wields her wax pens and dipping scoops to decorate eggs for special occasions, such as raising funds to help war-torn Ukraine.

Pisanki, which derives from the Polish verb "to write," serves as a connection with

her Eastern European roots. Raised in Poland before moving to the United States, Bereza practiced the craft with her late husband John and their five children.

At age 12, Bereza learned of the tradition where the decorated eggs played a part in matchmaking. During the shortest night of the year, maidens would weave together flowered wreaths, adorn them with pysanky and then place them in flowing streams of water.

Young men would wait out of sight further downstream and charge into the water to get the wreaths and then perhaps capture their owner as a future bride. Families also would bring the eggs to church to be blessed, give them to relatives and friends at Eastertime and use them to decorate the Easter table. Sometimes the eggs are left on the graves of loved ones or stashed in barns to protect the structures from storms.

The craft is practiced by small

(Continued on page 2)

Porczynski Won't Seek Re-election

By Matthew Gryczan

A second seat on the Polish Heritage Society Board is open following the announcement by PHS President Adam Porczynski that he will not seek re-election for his 2-year term ending in May. There are now two open officer positions on the Board.



Adam Porczynski
Porczynski, 35, a Board member since 2010, said he feels

his greatest accomplishment during his tenure was the revitalization of the annual Dozynki Festival, which is the longest running ethnic festival in the city of Grand Rapids and the main PHS fundraiser.

"It has been a privilege to lead the PHS for these past two years as president and to serve on the board for the past 13 years," he said. "Thanks to the work of many volunteers over the years, the Dozynki Festival has become the best family friendly ethnic festival in Grand Rapids with a solid financial footing. I intend to remain very active in Dozynki, just not in a board capacity."

PHS Vice President John Theisen said the board expressed gratitude for Porczynski's years of service when he announced his decision at the board's Feb. 20

(Continued on page 2)

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The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes Polish/Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society meets on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October. The society publishes this newsletter monthly. We invite story ideas and content contributions. For more information, please contact Matthew Gryczan, Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to phsgrandrapids@gmail.com.

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Pysanki

(Continued from page 1)

groups of people who are drawn to its colors and details that have special meaning.

“Every part of the design means something,” Bereza says. “Curved lines are rams’ horns – a sign of strength – and the short straight lines are like the needles on an evergreen tree – a sign of life even during winter.”

To her, the resilience of pysanky harkens to a tumultuous time in Eastern Europe. Born in the Ukraine, she and her family were forced to leave their home when the country was absorbed by Russia following World War II. They settled in Poland, where Bereza taught grade school students and learned the art of pysanki.

Just about any type of egg can be used for pysanki: Bereza makes them from eggs laid by chickens, ducks -- even ostriches, which take about a week to decorate.

Bereza first learned pysanky by using a needle on a dowel that she heated in a flame and dipped in beeswax repeatedly as she drew designs. Now she uses a tiny metal pot with fine nozzle at the end of a stick that can be heated to melt the wax or an electric pen version that doesn’t require an open flame.

With the design completed, Bereza begins the art of adding layers of colors by dipping the eggs into vivid German dyes stored in canning jars. When she wants a part of the design to retain a color, Bereza covers that section with

wax so it won’t absorb the colors of subsequent dippings. Once satisfied with the colors, she heats the egg to melt off the beeswax and uncover the colorful patterns.

After the egg has been entirely decorated, she covers it with a coat of clear polyurethane and sets it on a stand of prongs so it can dry. The final step is blowing the contents from a raw egg. She carefully drills tiny holes at the two ends of the eggs, breaks the yolk and gently blows out the contents.

The results are time-consuming but breathtaking. In years past, Bereza would dedicate 2 or 3 months to creating 10 dozen pysanky.

Making pysanky doesn’t take a huge amount of space or costly materials. A beginner’s kit with decorating dowel, dyes, beeswax and instructions costs under \$20. “One egg takes just under two hours to complete so time and patience are probably the biggest investments in learning to decorate pysanky”, she says.

“Our tradition says that if you stop making pysanky, then the world stops,” Bereza says with a smile. “But don’t worry, because there’s always someone who is making them.”

PHS Scholarship Deadline is March 15

The deadline is March 15 for students to apply for a total of \$7,000 in scholarships awarded by the Polish Heritage Society to high school students of Polish descent who are looking to attend or are currently attending Michigan colleges and universities.

Applications can be made through high school or college counselors, and the counselors

Elections

(Continued from page 1)

meeting. “We’ll sorely miss Adam’s leadership as president and as trustee, but we are thankful that he’ll stay involved with putting on the Dozynki,” Theisen said. “He’s been a spark plug for getting things going in the organization, and particularly on the festival.”

Those interested in the vacant seat on the 11-member board must be active members who are current with annual dues or who have lifetime memberships. Individuals can submit their names to the three-member Nominating Committee by writing an email to phsgrandrapidsl@gmail.com before the close of nominations on April 31.

The board named directors Michael Jasperse, Michael Kozal and Teresa Bonham as members of the Nominating Committee. Candidate names will be published in the May PHS newsletter before the election.

The election is scheduled to take place during the PHS general membership meeting to be held noon June 25 at Oriole Park, 1380 42nd St. SW in Wyoming.

will forward the applications to the PHS. The society will select the recipients and notify the financial aid officers in April of the dollar amount that each recipient has been awarded.

To view the scholarship guidelines and application form, interested individuals should visit the PHS website at <https://polishheritagesociety.com/scholarships>.

PHS Membership News



By Marilyn Lignell

Look for your membership cards in your April newsletter – but only if you are current with your dues! Your dues and your faithful mail carrier help land this publication in your mailbox every month, so please make sure your dues are paid to continue receiving your copy of *The Echo*.

The Polish Heritage Society occasionally sends out emails and updates. If you are not receiving emails from us, please email phsgrandrapids@gmail.com and we can add you to our contact list.

Did you know that Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Ind. has all of our society's newsletters from 1998 to 2018 cataloged, bound, and shelved within its permanent collection? Apparently issues from 2019 through 2023 are not yet bound, but available to researchers.

"The serials of historical, genealogical, and ethnic societies are critical sources of important information for family historians," said Curt Witcher, director of Special Collections at the library. "Hence, they

are a priority for us to have among our Genealogy Center holdings. Everything from the quarterly of the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society to the 'Swedish Texan' help our patrons find their families' histories and stories. We have several thousand organizations from whom we subscribe to receive their serial publications."



Allen County Public Library

Curt went on to say that the library is "indeed fortunate to have the ability to maintain so many serial subscriptions. We make this commitment because these publications are so valuable to our patrons." I think the Polish Heritage Society is the fortunate one!

The PHS sent a card of caring out to Donna Tomasik. On Dec. 22, Donna was in a car accident that left her with broken ribs and a car that was a total loss. Donna said she didn't have her seatbelt on and felt very fortunate that the airbags saved her life. She has a positive spirit and is thankful to be alive!

A second card went out to Dr. Richard Panek to congratulate him on his retirement from the Center for

Oral Surgery & Dental Implants, with offices in Grand Rapids and Rockford.

A former partner in the practice, Dr. Panek is a specialist in oral and maxillofacial surgery. Dr. Panek earned his DDS degree from Marquette University and went on to his residency program at Loyola University in Chicago. After completing his residency in 1989, he began practicing here in Grand Rapids.



Richard Panek

Rich served on the PHS board for three years and is our knowledgeable curator and host of the Dozynki Festival cultural tent.

"The PHS Heritage collection that was put together by the late Mike Swidwinski, is a cultural gem" Rich said, adding that he "looks forward to further developing the exhibition in the coming years."

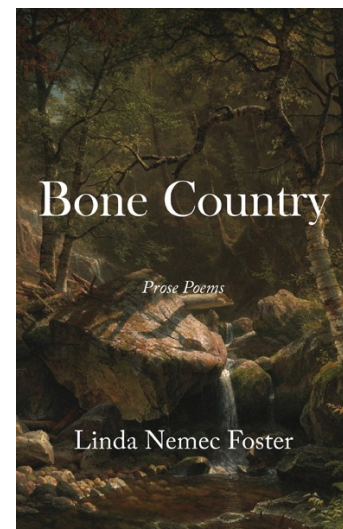
Anyone interested in contributing to or helping out with the tent should contact Rich Panek by emailing phsgrandrapids@gmail.com

Member Linda Nemec-Foster is having a book launch at Schuler Books in Grand Rapids on April 20 at 7 p.m. for her latest book *Bone Country*.



Linda Nemec-Foster

"After 12 collections of poetry, it's my first book of prose poems and flash fiction," Linda said. "My collection of prose poems is a reflection of the world before Covid. All of the pieces are inspired by other parts of the world -- Istanbul, Rome, Krakow, Prague, Vienna, Seville -- not the familiar landscape of the United States."



Join the Polish Heritage Society to receive our monthly newsletter and other benefits!

Annual Student Membership for full-time students through college \$5

Annual Adult Membership \$20

Annual Family or Business Membership \$35

Lifetime Membership \$150

ONLINE

You can join the Polish Heritage Society online by going to our website at <https://polishheritagesociety.com/>, filling out the Membership form and paying by using the PayPal Button.

MAIL

Fill out this form and send a personal check made out to the Polish Heritage Society to this address:

Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids

P.O. Box 1844

Grand Rapids MI 49501-1844

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