

VANISHING PROFESSIONS

by Aleksandra Kacprzak

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Everyone involved in genealogy knows how fascinating it can be. We let out a shout of joy as we crank through rolls of microfilm for hours or days or even weeks when we find our great grandfather's birth certificate or discover our great-grandmother's maiden name. Genealogy is a passion that draws us and gives us feelings of great satisfaction when we can add a new date or the name of a long forgotten ancestor to our family tree. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that although our ancestors were part of the history that unfolded around them, they *were* that history and took an active role in it.

Genealogy is also knowing about the daily lives of our ancestors, their sorrows and joys, their customs and rituals, how they dressed, what they ate, how they made a living, what conditions and illnesses they had, what they ate, what they believed in and what they loved. Genealogy is, in other words, the present time built on the foundations of history.

Let us take a journey into the past to explore one of the facets of our ancestors' lives—to learn about what they produced in their village to meet basic life needs. We will learn how and where we can see some of these no longer practiced crafts; and perhaps we ourselves can take a chance at making something ourselves based on the technology developed by our ancestors.

Up until the turn of the twentieth century, and in some regions up until the first few decades of the twentieth century, the typical Polish village was self-sufficient. This meant that on the majority of farms, all the work—beginning with the construction of a house and later making its furnishings, objects of daily use, clothing, and food—was done by the family and with the help of neighbors. Any surplus produced in this regard was bartered or sold at village trade fairs.

In cities, guilds and professional groups had existed for centuries. Villages, on the other hand, stood on the edge of any urbanization, thus necessitating self-reliance. This was particularly due to the fact that the owner of a manor, the aristocrat who owned the estate, was not interested in investing in the development of any sort of economic projects and felt that the primitive agricultural

milieu was incapable of producing anything that would put cash in his pocket. On the other side of the coin, the peasants were filled with a conservative fear of any type of change. They felt that the way things were done in the past was always better, something tested, tried and long ago adopted. It was safe.

However, we should not draw the erroneous conclusion that all these village wares were primitive and unattractive. Besides their functionality, these objects were distinguished by their individuality and aesthetic appeal, and some were quite artistic. In every village, there was at least one individual who possessed special talents in some area and was an expert at his or her craft. Frequently, these skills and talents were passed from father to son or mother to daughter through the generations. In some families, these rich and vibrant traditions of folk crafts and folk art have survived to our times and are practiced by the descendants of master blacksmiths, potters, utensil makers, weavers, and many other vanishing professions.

Through a 1994 initiative of the Podlasie Ethnographic Museum in Białystok, a Folk Craft Trail of Podlasie Province was established, one of several such projects that sprung up throughout the country. For anyone taking a sentimental journey to Poland, visiting the places along this Folk Craft Trail, the opportunity exists to make direct and personal contact with the traditions and the soul of our ancestors times.

Blacksmiths' Crafts

The trail leads to the western edge of the Knyszyn Forest. Our first stop is the forge of Mieczysław Hulewicz in the village of Czarna Wieś Kościelna. Mr. Hulewicz is an extremely colorful personage. This raconteur enthusiastically explains the history and present state of his craft with the deep and extensive knowledge of an expert in his field. For centuries, the blacksmith's forge was one of the most important places in the village. Here were created the basic tools and objects needed for farming, such as sickles, axes, plow blades, harrows, chains, and knives. As the village prospered, the blacksmith might be asked

to make decorative knobs or metal decorations for trunks or carriages.

To show their religious devotion, villagers may also have asked the blacksmith to produce cast iron crosses to be placed in roadside chapels or in the parish cemetery. The forge was a place where any and all repairs to any metal objects was performed. And of course, it was the blacksmith who made and "installed" all the horseshoes in the village. The village blacksmith was a highly respected individual and frequently knew how to read and write. He not only shod horses, he also served as an unofficial veterinarian.

And in some cases, the village blacksmith was also the village dentist. In practice, his role was restricted only to pulling teeth. An inseparable element of his dental practice was administering an anesthetic to the patient and then receiving thanks from the patient after the treatment was finished. In both cases, the same thing was used—a bottle of vodka.

The blacksmith's forge was also the focal point of social life in the village. This was a male-only affair where the men of the village gathered to exchange "male gossip" and take part in men-only discussions.

The main raw material used by the blacksmith was iron. In the early Middle Ages, the blacksmiths smelted the ore themselves in primitive smelting furnaces. Beginning in the nineteenth century, ironworks took over this function. The raw ore was rather expensive; thus, the blacksmith always had a small supply of scrap iron, which usually met the basic needs of the village.

In present times, blacksmiths solely are involved in making artistic decorative metal products. This is a difficult art, one that requires physical stamina as well as an appreciation and sense of what is beautiful and attractive, plus, of course, finely honed technical skill and knowledge.

The exquisite metal products that Mr. Hulewicz knows how to conjure up from a simple piece of metal are valued worldwide. He has received numerous prestigious awards. He often says that he creates his products as his soul moves him. Everything in life is possible to do, he says. The material needs to be heated. After it reaches the desired temperature, it is struck with a hammer, and each strike is like a soft kiss on a woman's cheek. Only then, the finished product takes on its ideal form.

Pottery

Pottery making is one of the oldest crafts on earth, known since Neolithic times. In the territory that is now Poland, pottery appeared in 5400 B.C. In early times, pottery was made by hand from thin strips of clay and heated in a fire. About 300 B.C.,

the Celts came to Poland and enriched the methods of pottery making, and they introduced the use of special kilns for firing. These innovations included the use of hand-powered wheels used to make various vessels. Two people were needed to operate the wheel. Several centuries later, when contacts with western Europe were more extensive, foot-powered wheels that operated at much higher speeds were introduced. This allowed the molding of the pottery right on the wheel.

Our next stop on the Folk Craft Trail is in the same village, Czarna Wieś Kościelna. The first potter in the village was Antoni Piechowski, who came to the village from Knyszyn in 1799. The pottery maker at 27 Piękna Street is Mirosław Piechowski, whose father is likewise a pottery maker, as were his grandfather and great-grandfather. Unfortunately, it was unable to be determined if the first pottery maker who bore the same surname was an ancestor.

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Mirosław enthusiastically tells us about the entire procedure to create pottery, showing us how quickly one can produce a beautiful piece. He even lets us sit at the wheel and try to make something ourselves. Watching him produce a simple vessel so effortlessly gives us the impression that it is a simple task. But when we take our seat at the helm, we quickly come to the realization that this is not the case and that making even a simple piece requires great skill and a perfected technique. Mr. Piechowski's family farm contains clay deposits, so the entire pottery-making process is done on site.

The clay needed to create pottery has to be of a certain quality, free of lumps and impurities. It has to be dug in the fall so that it thoroughly freezes in the winter. Later, water is added to make it malleable; then it is beaten. In older times, hammer-like tools were used, but they have been replaced by special rollers. Subsequently, the clay needs to be ground and any remaining impurities removed. This process needs to be repeated several times, and the clay needs to be kneaded like bread dough, by hand. Only then, it becomes ready to transform itself into an attractive piece of pottery. The raw product then needs to sit for three weeks. Next, it undergoes the firing process at approximately 1,000 degrees Celsius. The potter can determine the correct temperature using the naked eye and observing the colors of the flames. The firing process lasts over ten hours. The kiln

has to cool off for twenty-four hours and then the piece can be removed. The kiln is fueled by wood. All these steps require skills, abilities and experience, something a machine is incapable of doing.

Most of the products produced are of a decorative and ornamental nature. But some can, of course, be used for practical purposes, the way our ancestors used them. You will be convinced of this when you eat a dill pickle made in one of these pots or poppyseed bread whose ingredients were prepared in a clay mixing bowl. There is no comparison to mass-produced products. If we purchase a piece of pottery from a craftsman such as Mr. Piechowski, you can be 100% sure that it was handmade in Poland. It will evoke memories of our childhood, and we will always view it with great sentiment.

Spoon Making

Now that we have a supply of pots, bowls and similar objects, we need something to mix with. So off we go to the village of Zamczyska, which seems to be literally in the middle of nowhere. The asphalt road has ended and we are traveling on gravel and dirt roads to the farmstead of Mieczysław Baranowski. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, the entire village, composed of ten farms, was involved in spoon making. Today Mr. Baranowski is the last old-style spoon maker in the entire province. As was done centuries ago, Mr. Baranowski using the most simple and basic tools is able to conjure up, in a matter of minutes, spoons and ladles from a block of wood. Most of the wood used is freshly-cut aspen, alder or birch. Many of the utensils are of a decorative nature, but we can still use them to dole out a helping of traditional pea soup or draw some fresh milk from a clay vessel.

Weaving

Village weaving was once a seasonal activity. Farming families spent the summer busy in the field but the long winters were a time to make clothes, tablecloths, rugs and blankets. Weaving was and is done almost exclusively by women.

The most common type of weaving done in the Podlasie region was double-warped weaving, which is one of the most popular forms of Polish folk crafts. This type of weaving became popular in the mid-nineteenth century, and the technique was introduced in the region from East Prussia. Double-warped weaving is a specific type of weaving and is rather complicated. The cloth is composed of two layers in opposing colors that are combined in the pattern and on its edges. The pattern is identical on both sides but with the colors reversed. Creating the patterns requires both technical skills and artistic creativity.



It's not as easy as it looks! Aleksandra takes a turn at the spinning wheel in the workshop of Teresa Pryzmont.

The most recognized expert in the region is Teresa Pryzmont, from the village of Wasilówka. Her works hang in museums and in private collections, both in Poland and abroad, and she has won numerous awards in international competitions. Teresa grew up in a home of weavers and was surrounded by looms and piles of wool. She learned the art of weaving from her grandmother. Although the work is very strenuous, it gives the weaver the opportunity to inject her thoughts, imagination, and memories into the product. It allows the weaver to manifest and reveal her soul. If a client orders a specific item, it is sketched on paper first. However, if she is creating her own work, no paper is used. She simply sits down and begins to weave.

During my visit, Teresa showed me how the threads were made and how the loom worked. I was invited to sit at the spinning wheel and see what I could do. I can assure you, it is not easy and requires precise coordination of hands and feet. With Teresa's help, I managed to spin a woolen thread, which I then had to soak in boiling water to soften it and dye it using natural colorings, perhaps to be used in making a beret for a doll. The complicated process resulted in me not being able to make more than one thread.

The old professions that we should take care not to let slip into obscurity are many. Today in Poland, government agencies and private associations have been created to preserve these traditions and the old culture. Festivals and folklore events have been organized for this purpose. Participating in and attending such events brings us closer to our ancestors and the culture from which they came. It is our culture as well. □