

Stories of a Dollhouse

**Exploring our Family
Memory and Traditions**

Exploring the Pantry 1916



Exploring the Pantry



The interest of children for the pantry (*spizarnia*) was hardly contained when they visited the house of our great-great-grandparents in Dąbrowa. To some extent, this place next to the kitchen was the most precious room in the house. There, the family stored dairy products, cold and cured meats, all kind of staples, household's preserves, and grocery products.

To avoid any intrusions from house servants or farm workers, the keys were kept by Julianna, the Grandmother of Leon

Książek. They were hooked to an antique chatelaine. Wherever "Grand Babcia" might go, her presence was notified by the pinging sound of the keys.

Sneaking inside the pantry was a rare privilege. Many distinctive flavors have left a footprint in the childhood memory of our Grandfather: homemade cream, dried mushrooms, smoked sausages, dry cured ham, fermented cabbage, pickles, aromatic herbs... Zapraszamy in our country pantry in 1916, when Leon was aged 6.

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Dairy smells

Every week, fresh butter was produced from a wooden churn. The homemade butter had an inviting creamed colour and a very soft consistency. The butter was kept in a clean white piece of clothe. Refrigerated cabinets had come to the Polish market with electricity. Mostly used in towns, they were considered expensive items with a very limited capacity for storage. In the countryside, the freshness of the underground cellar was enough.



On "cheese days", milk curdling in large wooden jars was diffusing a sour odour. This dairy smell was the promise of a delicious *twarzog* (quark) and many other homemade products. Today, the Polish *Twarzog* is a cottage cheese proposed with several varieties: tłusty (fat), półtłusty (semi-fat), chudy (no fat). *Twarzog* is also named *ser biały* (white cheese) as opposed to *ser żółty* (yellow cheese) or *ser twardy* (hard cheese) that refer to cheeses with longer fermentation. *Twarzog* is the main ingredient to make *sernik* (cheesecake) or *pierogis* (filled dumplings).

All his life, Leon would treasure his favourite Polish dish: mash potatoes with bacon, fried onions and a generous serving of sour milk.

This is also a memory of my own childhood, when my French Grandmother served this delicious dish, saying "*aujourd'hui, on mange polonais*". Her "*lait caillé*" was made in a small bowl left one night and one day in the warmest place of the kitchen.

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Smoked meats

Poland is a country of sausages (*kiełbasa*). A legend states that a good cook should be able to serve one same sausage into 24 different dishes. All regions have their own specialties and as the saying goes, the country has 365 different sausages, one for every single day. Today, Polish sausages are industrially processed and they come in all tastes, sizes and colours.

Six generations ago, homemade sausages were dried and smoked for a better conservation. Our pantry pictures cold cuts

and dry-cured meat hung on perches for an upcoming uptake. In 1910, sausages, ham, lard and bacon were stored in a big wooden trunk. Once started, the whole ham leg or shoulder were hung and wrapped into a dark piece of linen cloth to keep fresh and avoid insects.



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Cabbage tradition

As other countries in Central Europe, Poland is a land for cabbages of all sorts. Some *jarmuż* (kale cabbages) are so big that they can exceed a 1-meter diameter. Preparing *kiszona* or *kwaszona kapusta* (sour cabbages also known as *sauerkraut*)

was a ritual that farmers repeated every year before October. This activity usually mobilized all the family, all servants and sometimes even friends...and servants of friends.

During this process, fresh cabbages were first chopped in 2 parts, grated on a large wooden board, then piled up in a barrel or a wooden chest. A young girl trampled them with her feet to squeeze. We don't know about our ancient family recipe but we suspect that some carrots and apples were added to the different layers of salted cabbages.

Several times a week, the big wooden *sauerkraut* trunk was opened, liberating a strong, acid and persisting smell. There are several Polish variants to translate *sauerkraut*: *kiszona kapusta*, *kapusta kiszona*, *kapusta kwaszona*, and *kwaśna kapusta*. Whatever the taste, *Sauerkraut* is widely used in Polish cuisine to prepare *kapusta* (cabbage soup), *bigos* (cabbage stew) or *pierogi z kapustą* (cabbage-filled dumplings). "Gdzie jest barszcz, kapusta, tam chata nie pusta"



Potatoes are the best friends of cabbages. They were introduced in Poland by the French Queen Marysieńka, wife of King Jan III Sobieski during the 17th century. In the pantry of Babcia, a few kilos were kept at hand in a wooden barrel. The whole harvest is held in the cellar.

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Kasza parade

We cannot imagine a family pantry in Poland without an impressive stock of *kasza*, a catchall word for groats. *Kasza* is a daily staple of cereal grains and the Poles have no less than 32 proverbs and colloquialisms dedicated to groats. Six generations later, *kasza* is still part of our family food tradition. I was raised by my Grandmother with wheat *semolina* served with garlic or sugar. My day begins and ends with an oat porridge served for breakfast and late evening snack (*kolacja*).

Kasza is not only used to prepare soups, porridges and cakes but is also served in a large number of dishes. Today, *kasza* remains a very popular staple in all the regions of Poland. Cheap restaurants (*bar mleczny*) propose a wide choice of dishes with delicious gravies. In supermarkets, shelves are full of all sorts of mixed, roasted, smoked, aromatic, bio, pre-cooked and diet *kasza*.

Every family had specific ways regarding the preparation of roasted groats and the degrees of "burnt taste" could vary. We can assume

that in our family pantry, these different varieties *kasza* were present:

- barley (*kasza jaglana*);
- buckwheat (*kasza grzyczana*);
- millet (*kasza jaglana*);
- oat (*kasza owsiana*);
- rye (*kasza żytnia*);
- wheat (*kasza manna/semolina*).

Our Great Great-grandfather stored his cereals harvest in the first floor of a large barn separated from his house. Fire, flooding and rodents were the main threats. A farm worker who slept in the barn was in charge of protecting the crop.



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Kolonialny Products

In the pantry of the Dąbrowa house, the main point of interest of my Grandfather was the wooden cabinet where his Grandmother stored her most precious products: sugar, tea, coffee and chocolate. The cabinet was locked and Babcia Julianna kept the key on the keychain hanging off her belt. At this time, all these *kolonialny* products were a luxury. A piece of sugar or a liquorice stick were the most common treats for children. Candies, toffies and other confectioneries were reserved for special occasions such as Christmas or Easter.

Most of the *kolonialny* products were sold in bulk at the local grocery, a small shop that was pompously named *sklep kolonialny*

(colonial shop). This store also sold spices and rice. At home, sugar cones and chocolate blocks were wrapped in newspaper, stored in tin boxes and cut into small pieces whenever needed. Sometimes, children had the privilege (under close supervision) to produce powdered sugar with the rolling pin.

Green beans of coffee had to be roasted and grinded. The strong aroma of freshly roasted coffee enveloped the house, sending a strong message to the neighbourhood. Loose tea, sometimes sold in leaves, was also stored in tin boxes. In Europe, the years from 1880 to 1920 were the golden age of screen-printed tin boxes. In Poland, they were a precious item, often written in Russian or German.



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Polish brands

In this regards, *kolonialny* products from Polish companies (*fabryka*) were also a luxury. Many brands such as Wedel or Blikle had already developed a successful business still existing today.

Imported products usually came in original boxes with a paper label written in Polish and glued in the back or at the bottom. In the years 1900 to 1920, some iconic foreign brands such as Lipton (Great Britain), Maggi (Switzerland), Julius Meinl (Austria) or Meunier (France) were circulating. The French *Fosfatyna Faliera* (Phosphatine Falières) was used for sick or recovering persons. Our little pantry scenery displays the following Polish brands:

- Chocolate produced by Wedel, Markowski i Jaskiewicz, Fuchs, J. Zbrozek i S.ka, and Jean Fruzinski.
- Tea produced by Tryumf, Atlas, Indochina, and Schubuth.



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Homemade Preserves

The kitchen pantry was only the top of the food iceberg stored by our great-great grandparents. Most of the home preserves were kept in a huge cellar. In the countryside of Mazovia, cellars were usually built underground outside the house. We don't know about the details of our former family cellar but we suspect that there were several rooms to store vegetables, fruits and mountains of potatoes.

The artisanal process of homemade preserves did not allow a conservation beyond one year. The content was poured into a glass jar, covered with a layer of wax and closed with a cork plug. The top was then wrapped into a wax paper and protected by a piece of cloth.

Children had a special interest for honey and jams. They also loved drinking *sok*, a juice made from boiled fruits, usually dried plums.

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