
Stories of a Dollhouse

Exploring our Family
Memory and Traditions

Laundry Day 1914



Laundry Day



We all remember laundry days in our childhood house: the powerful smell of detergents, the fresh odour of clean linen, the delicate scent of lavender softener. Laundry day was one of the oldest memory of my Grandfather Leon born in 1910.

Our dollhouse pictures the utility room in the house of Julianna (1847-1919), the Grandmother of Leon. We imagine this tiny room in 1914, when Leon was aged 4. Located next to the kitchen, this tiny room

had a small window protected with iron bars. Such precaution highlights the importance of the items that were stored there: soaps and detergents, candles, oil for lamp, matches, ironers. The utility room was locked and our Great Great-grandmother kept the key (and many others) hanging from her chatelaine belt.

Leon was fascinated by the wringer, an antique crank machine half wood, half cast iron. He never missed an opportunity to watch soak linens transformed into flat sheet.

Laundry Day

Homemade Soap

Before WWI in Poland, soap and detergents were produced by few local firms. The market was dominated by German production, either with imported products or with local companies operating under licence. In 1914, the price of soaps and detergents was high and our Great Great-grandmother argued that their abrasive components damaged delicate fabrics such as silk or wool.

All the basic ingredients for making detergents could be found in her house: white vinegar, ammonia, chlorine bleach, baking soda... Our Great Great-grandmother produced her own soaps, detergents and stain removers. We do not know her saponification recipe but we suspect that she used some cooking fat, tallow, or paraffin mixed with soda, water, salt and lye. Some lavender oil (also homemade) was eventually added.

This homemade soap had a strong washing power and was not recommended for a daily body hygiene. Soap was precious and our Great Great-Grandmother had a special attention for the small pieces cut from big

soap blocs. She was suspicious about washerwomen keeping the soap for their personal use.

This parsimony did not rule out refinement and even some *chic*. Perfumed soaps from well established firms were used only for special occasions. In our Dollhouse, we picture soaps produced by some iconic Polish brands of the time.

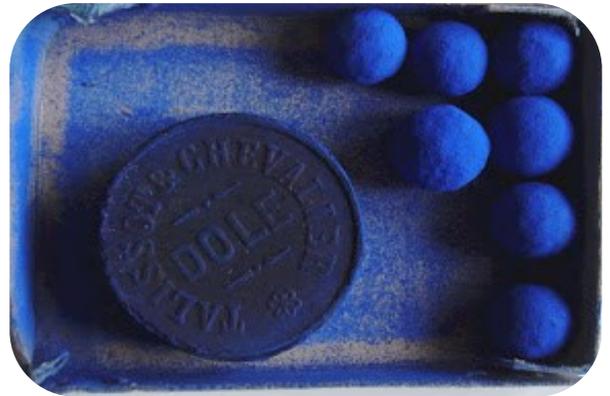


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In 1914, there was no valuable laundry without blue powder in the soaking water of the pre-rinsing process. At this time, the washing blue was based on blue iron salt called Prussian Blue (patriotic French named it Paris Blue).

In Poland, the blue powder known as *ultramaryna* was widely used to whiten fabrics. Groceries sold boxes of solid and compacted *ultramaryna*. This product was proposed either in blocs, pebbles or small balls. Blocs were cheaper. The bright blue colour of this product was fascinating.

Whatever the version, *ultramaryna* had to be reduced into a fine powder. This was a long and laborious task because only a flour-like powder could avoid blue stains on the fabrics.



Laundry Day

Big laundry

Before WWI, laundry was a serious business. There was the “big laundry” and the “small laundry”.

The “big laundry” concerned all household linen such as bedsheets, towels, tablecloths or napkins, as well as some ordinary large pieces of clothes (nightwear, petticoats).

Washerwomen from the village collected the bags of laundry once a month. Clothes were washed several times in the river. Then, they

were left to dry under the sun on the grass. This was an ancestral secret to keep linen white.

During the severe winters of Poland, rivers were frozen and snow covered everything. The “big laundry” was not possible, sometimes during several months. Dirty clothes and linens were stored in the attic. Hence the impressive number of items in the [wedding trousseau](#) of the bride. In our family, this tradition of stockpiling plenty of household linen was passed down across generations.



Laundry Day

Small laundry

The housekeeper did the “small laundry” of underwear and delicate clothes at home. In 1914, the utility room had recently received a water pump. This much expected equipment was fixed on a washing cabinet.

The washing cabinet had replaced the traditional wooden tub in the early 1900s. At this time, this was a jump into modernity. Before the arrival of the pump, the washing cabinet had a washbasin but no water drain. The dirty water was collected in a large basin

positioned under the washbasin. Emptying this lower basin all along the washing process was necessary to avoid an overflow!

The “small laundry” involved the use of many specific ingredients and every family had precious secrets to remove stains. Starch (from potatoes) helped stiffen lace and shirt collars. Rain water was arguably the best to soak silk.

When the laundry process was over, keeping the door open was enough to accelerate the drying process.



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Laundry Day



The washing cabinet had replaced the traditional wooden tube in the early 1900s. At this time, this was a jump into modernity.

Before the arrival of the pump (picture above), this washing cabinet had a washbasin but no water drain. The dirty water was collected in a large basin positioned under the washbasin.

Emptying this lower basin all along the washing process was necessary to avoid an overflow!

Today, a washing machine uses 40 to 90 L water (10 to 23 gal.). We can imagine the number of water buckets necessary for a laundry in before the water pump.

Laundry Day

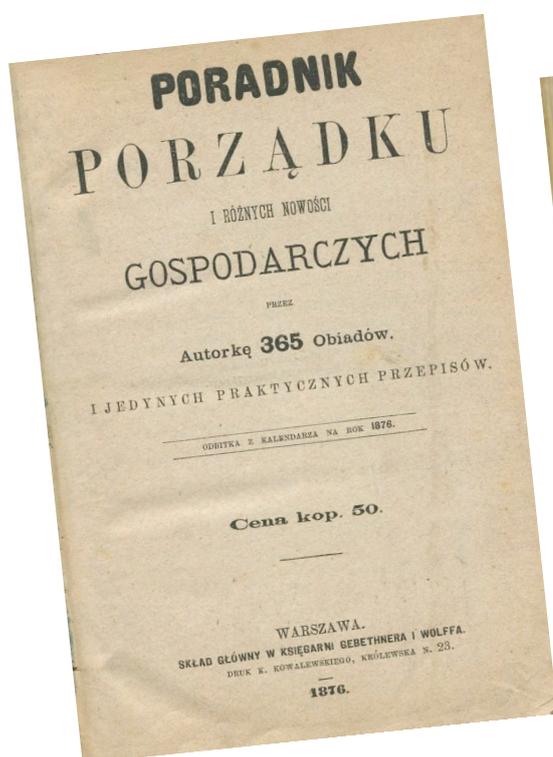
Special laundry

In 1914, the care of delicate fabrics (silk, velvet, lace) was a challenge. Paying for the service of a cleaning specialist in town was the best option to preserve precious and expensive clothes. Most of the time, this was money well spent that avoided irreversible laundry accidents. Moreover, the cleaning specialist also proposed dyeing services to renovate or change colours.

The [book](#) *Poradnik porządku i różnych nowości gospodarczych* written by Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa was first published in

1876. This book became a reference for 5 generations of young housewives, including my Great-grandmother Jozefa who was born the year of the first edition of this book.

In the second part of the book, no less than 28 chapters are dedicated to laundry care. The author presents a series of monthly charts to manage the laundry sent to a cleaning service. Her listing *Co dano do prania?* (what was given to the laundry?) can still be used today.



The image shows a page from the book with a table titled "Co dano do prania?". The table has three columns for months: KWIECIEŃ, MAJ, and CZERWIEC. The rows list various laundry items, including men's and women's clothing, linens, and children's clothing. The items listed are: Koszuli męskich dziennych, nocnych; Spodni par; Skarpetek par; Koszuli damskich dziennych, nocnych; Kaftaników; Majtek par; Spódnic; Pończoch par; Ręczników; Chustek do nosa; Prascieradeł; Poszewek; Jasiów; Ciepłok nocnych; Otrusów; Serwet kolorowych; Serwet stołowych; Serwetek deserowych; Bielizna dziecięca; Koszulek; Majtek; Pończoszek; Kaftaników; Drebiazi; Kołnierzyków męskich, damskich; Rękawików par; Ciepłoków rannych; Podwłóśników; Chustek łazienkowych; Koronek łokci; Firanek.

Laundry Day

French Laundry

Born in 1909, my French Grandmother became the wife of Leon. A regular visitor of the Salon des Arts Ménagers, she had an electric washing machine quite early by 1930s standards.

Still, seven decades later, she remembered the laundry days of her childhood. She loved to tell the complex process of “*couler la cendre*” (putting soda ashes) in a *lessiveuse* (boiling washtub). My Grandmother

argued that whatever sophisticated modern washing machines might be, the *lessiveuse* procedure remains unmatched to keep linen white. Interestingly, in the mid 1990s, she was still using the old word “*cristaux*” (from soda ash) for any cleaning detergent.



The *lessiveuse* is a French invention. This washtub has a system to siphon and sprinkle boiling water with soap (*cendres*) over soaking clothes and linen. In the attic of many French families, there is an old *lessiveuse*.

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Ironing

This part of the laundry is not the most exciting today. In 1910, it was the closest place to hell. Ironing involved the use of two heavy irons. One was heated on the kitchen stove while the other one was used.

Ironing could be a deceptive effort whenever a scarp of coke or a snippet of dirt was spread over the clean laundry. Ironing was also dangerous because the equipment had

to be handled with precaution. Burning the laundry was a common incident. Burning one's hand was a serious accident.

In well equipped houses, there was all sorts of irons for delicate works on puff sleeves, ruches, ruffles, pleats and many other difficulties. These special irons required much patience and attention. Whatever the skills of servants, many housewives preferred to do such delicate ironing by themselves.



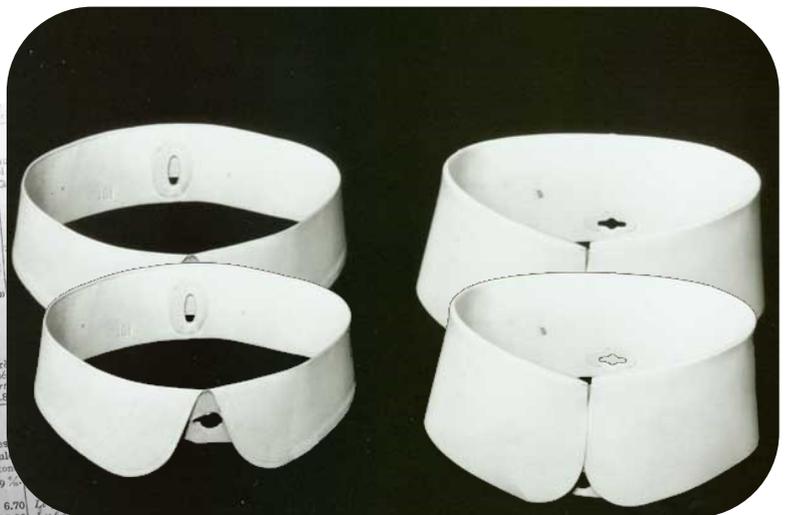
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Polish Gentleman

My Grandmother used to joke about the laundry torment inflicted by my Grandfather Leon.

Until the first months of WWII, Leon Książyk wore detachable collars and cuffs. This fashion for gentleman had ended one decade before but obviously, my Grandfather didn't care. After several years in the U.S., he came back in France in the mid 30's with these gentlemen accessories and did not change his routine.

Remembering this time, my Grandmother insisted on the difficulty to keep such antique outfits "snow white". Joking about the outdated elegance of Leon, she highlighted the difference between "vrais faux cols" (real stiff collars) made in starched linen and "faux faux-cols" (fake stiff collars) made with a white fabric glued on cardboard. Proudly, she insisted that thanks to her laundry care, my Grandfather never wore cheap rubber or celluloid collars. From this story, I suspect that Leon had enjoyed a quality laundry at home during his young years in Warsaw.



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Find this story in our Dollhouse

