
Stories of a Dollhouse

Exploring our Family
Memory and Traditions

A War Bride 1917



A War Bride

Preparing a bridal *trousseau* is one of the oldest traditions in our family. The bridal trousseau was an extensive collection of items that included home linen (bedsheets, bath towels, table clothes, kitchen towels and napkins) as well as the personal clothing of the bride (underwear, petticoats and underskirts, nightgowns and handkerchiefs).

The larger pieces of household linen were washed only once a month, with the exception of the winter season when Poland was frozen by snow and ice. Hence, the impressive number of items in a bridal trousseau.

The trousseau was supposed to reflect the social status and future aspiration of the

bride. The trousseau was also the pride of caring mothers who took this matter very seriously. All the items were stored in dedicated trunks and big cupboards. Every visit of family and friends was the opportunity to show the latest addition. Over a cup of tea,

there were endless discussions about the provenance, number and quality of items.

In our Książyk branch, there is an unusual demographic unbalance. Over 4 generations between 1900 and 2000, the genealogy tree has 18 boys and only 6 girls. Consequently, the preparation of a bride trousseau was quite occasional and therefore mobilized much attention and energy. Małgorzata Książyk married in

1917. She was a war bride and preparing her trousseau was a challenge.



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Early preparation

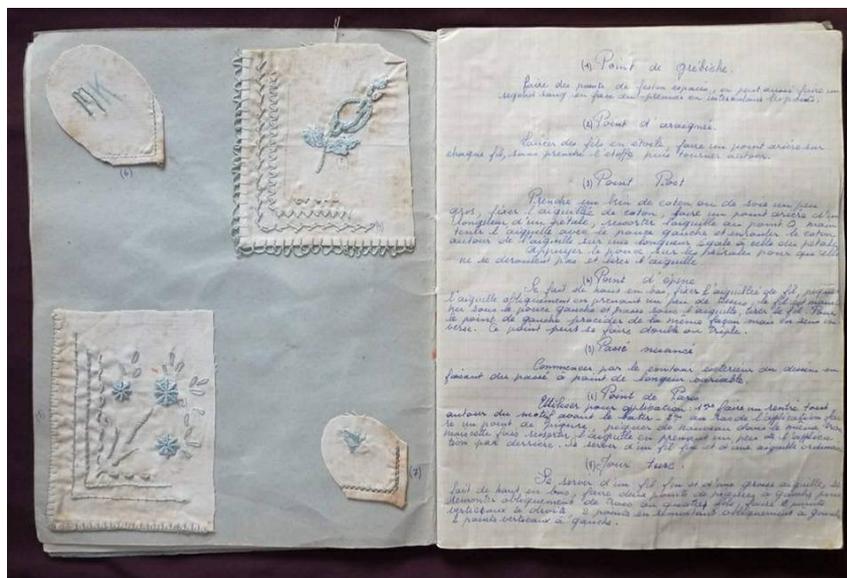
The trousseau of Małgorzata was prepared very early. Most of the time, mothers began to plan after the solemn Communion, when daughters turned 12. Preparing their trousseau was an important step towards adulthood for young girls.

With this activity, they would get ready for their statute of future wife and mother. The preparation was also an opportunity to develop housework awareness, knowledge and skills.

Very early, little girls developed needlework capacities for sewing, embroidering, mending and patching.

In our family collection, we have school samplers produced in 1909-1911 and 1951-52. Both of them highlight all the dexterity required for complex sewing tasks. At school, little girls learnt about darning and mending. At home, they learnt about

fabrics quality, linen preservation and laundry management.



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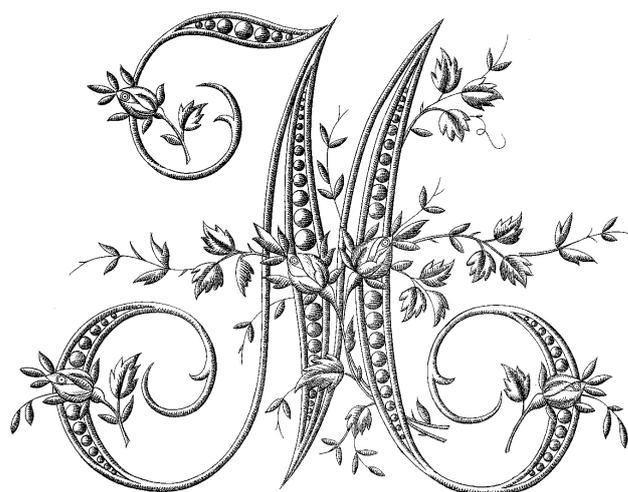
Embroidering initials

The engagement period was a busy time. During these few months before the wedding, the young *fiancée* completed her trousseau with embroidered initials. Family traditions can differ on this point. Some families mixed the names of the bride and her future husband. Other families selected only the maiden name.

Three generations ago, specialized publishers offered models for making beautiful monograms. In France, Maison Sajou was famous for the variety of its models. In Poland, women's magazines regularly featured drawings. The selected style of the letters can be very helpful to identify when a piece of linen was embroidered. In this regards, bridal trousseaux are some kind of genealogy journey because they tell a lot about the previous generations.

Besides the beautification aspect, tagging was required by laundry services. Kitchen clothes were marked with simple cross-stitch letters. Larger pieces received elaborated monograms. When the period of engagement was too short or the trousseau too extensive, most pieces would be sent to a seamstress

for embroidery. Before WWII, many Catholic convents proposed this service.



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Home Front

Małgorzata Książyk was born in 1899. She was the oldest of three sibling boys born a decade later. She would remain the only daughter of her parents, a situation that gave a special statute. We can imagine that her wedding was a very special event for the family.

Małgorzata was 18 when she married in 1917. This was a rather young age from our family perspective. Her mother had married when she was 20 and her grandmother was 33 when she tied the knot just one hundred years before in 1875. The great-grandmother of Małgorzata has married just one century earlier in 1817.

We do not know about the circumstances before the wedding. We only know that the

future husband had studied Law as confirmed by his later professional activities.

By all extent, this war period was not the best time to marry. Since 1915, Warsaw had been under German occupation. Combats were raging in the Western front and there was no end in sight. Still, many young people were getting married, sending a signal of optimism.

Historians, demographers and sociologists have another perspective. They highlight that the anxiety generated by the war is an accelerating factor for entering the marital status. During WWI, young girls wanted to secure their future, fearing the expected post-war scarcity of suitable *kawaler*. Young men wanted to strengthen a relationship that would help them confront danger and maybe the consequences of a war wound.



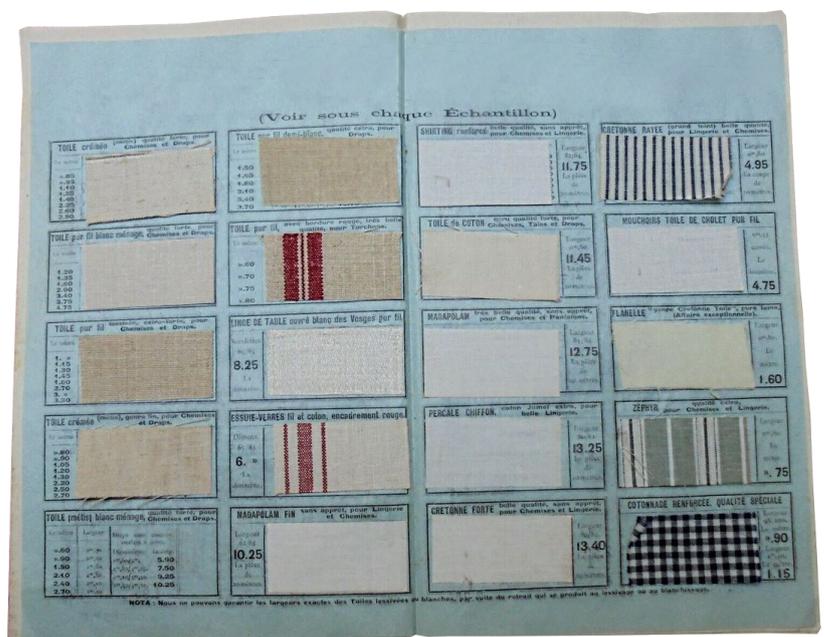
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War Restrictions

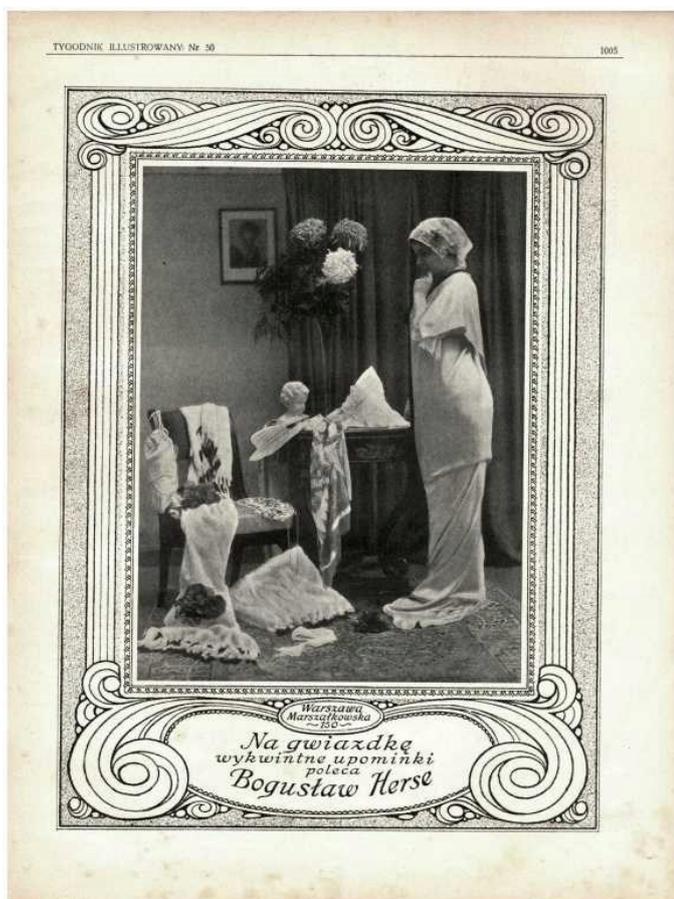
War restrictions affected the preparation of the bridal trousseau. At this time, most household items, including the bride dress were handmade. But finding fabrics, lace, ribbons and even the basic equipment for sewing was quite impossible. Breaking the strap of the Singer sewing machine was a domestic catastrophe. It could take months before getting a new one.

Everywhere, war restrictions limited choice and quality. Warsaw was no exception. In the city, there were two big department stores: the Jablkowski Brothers (*Dom Towarowy Braci Jabłkowskich*) and Herse (*Dom Handlowy Firmy B. Herse*). In normal times, they had a fine supply of imported cotton and woollen fabrics.

Some factory outlets (*sklep fabryczny*) specialized in household linens and trousseau preparation. The Żyrardów store was one of the most famous, with the possibility to order ready-made items but the cost was prohibitive.



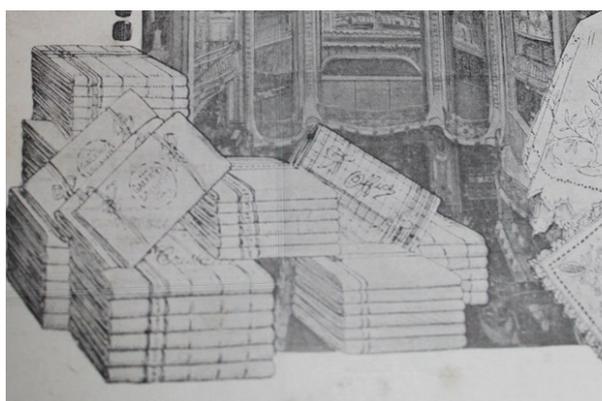
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In 1917, the Książyk Family was living ul. Świętokrzyska, in the bloc between ul. Nowy Świat and ul. Caskiego (previously Włodzimierską). Their building was just a few minutes away from the main department stores.



Before WWI, Herse was a top-end fashion department store with quality imported clothing. The business dynamics was not recovered before the early 1920s. The flagship store was ul. Marszałkowska.



The Żyrardów store was located ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw. The quality of household fabrics (linen, curtains, table clothes) was a reference in Europe.

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Lavoisier Principle

Once again, the rule of Lavoisier applied in the Książyk house: “*Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed*”. According to this principle, Małgorzata transformed many pieces of her mom’s trousseau. She made table clothes from bed linen and she converted pillowcases into napkins.

Aunts and cousins contributed by giving whatever they could. The value of these gift was in the fabrics. Everything could be used.

With much talent and creativity, Małgorzata revamped underwears from past generations. Large petticoats, open drawers panties, and antique corset chemises received a new life.



The result was gratifying with a trousseau aligned on the new fashion for *lingerie*: long corsets (front opening), petticoat panties, large underbodices and cropped camisoles.

This war trousseau was certainly below the usual family standards but the bride had all the basics. Małgorzata entered her new life with an impressive number of linen tea towels, cotton sheets, poplin nightgowns, flannel underwear, and batiste hankies.



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Dream Dress

A wedding in 1917 was the occasion to bring the family together but the conditions limited the expression of joy. Many relatives of the Książyk had suffered terrible losses during combats. Cousins from Wielkopolskie and Mazowieckie were fighting in opposite camps. Some of them were reported missing. Others were prisoners in unidentified places. Some mothers and sisters were wearing black.

In this environment of sorrow, magazines insisted that wedding celebrations should be modest and discreet. Fashion sections highlighted the benefits of using simple fabrics such as cotton poppeline or linen. They insisted that a new pair of shoes wasn't necessary if an existing pair could do.

For Małgorzata, borrowing a bridal gown from a friend was not an option. Her Mom had married in 1896 in a bustle dress with extremely small waist, puffed sleeves and high neckline. Transforming this bridal gown was impossible.

A seamstress was engaged to make the best from pieces of lace and white ribbons on a white Summer dress. The result was simple but quite elegant.



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Family Tradition

This family tradition of bridal trousseau was passed down to the unique niece of Małgorzata.

Born in 1937, this French little Książyk girl received a first trousseau when she entered her Catholic boarding school. In the late 40's, the nuns had very specific requirements regarding the number of bed sheets and wool covers, table napkins, underwear and school uniform.

The list of required items included a corset to compress the bust and avoid the development of "big breasts". Today, the family keeps preciously the big wood trunk that contained this trousseau. A small white nightgown has survived, marked with a

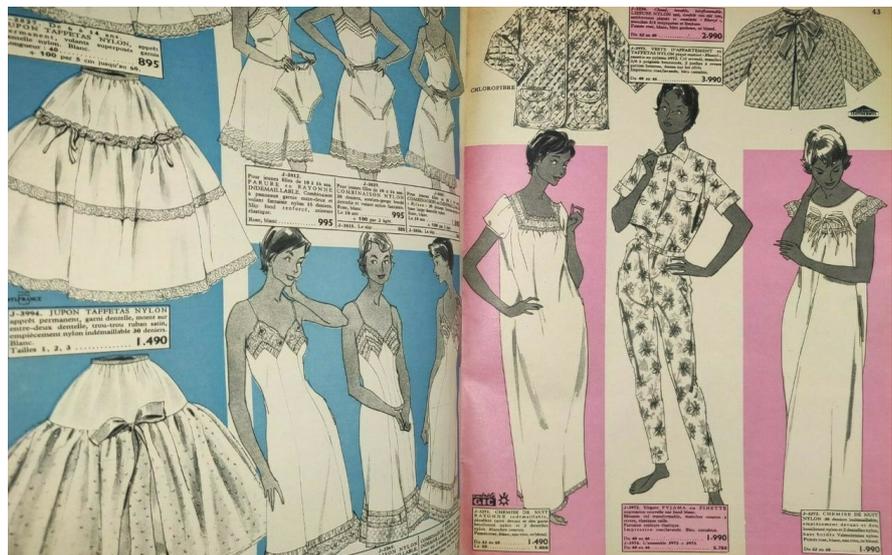
red cross-stitch "137", the boarding number of the little owner.

When the niece of Małgorzata married in 1960, her bridal trousseau was ready three years before the wedding. Actually, the preparation had begun when she turned 12. Over a decade, her Mom had patiently collected the items, ordering from catalogues of *Les Grands Magasins du Louvres* and from the *Galleries de France* collections.

This modern trousseau had the best quality available in the late 50's with *Linge des Vosges* bed linen, *Jalla* bath towels and *Valisère* underwears. No monogram was embroidered and the top quality of the items was the only signature. We have a precise list of this trousseau (see next page). More than 60 years later, many items are still used every day.



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A French bride trousseau in 1960

Kitchen

- 3x12 kitchen towels including cotton, linen and metis dishtowels
- several cooking aprons

Dining room

- 3 reception table clothes,
- 3x12 damask napkins (matching table clothes)

Bedroom

- 6 sets of complete double bed linen including sheets, pillowcases, bolster cases, and cotton fleece (*molletons*) mattress covers
- 3 wool blankets in mohair and merino
- 1 large eiderdown (red satin covered)

Bathroom

- 2x12 wash clothes (French “toilet gloves”)
- 2x12 pink and blue bath towels
- 12 white honeycomb bath towels
- 2 white bathrobes
- 4 large bath towels

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