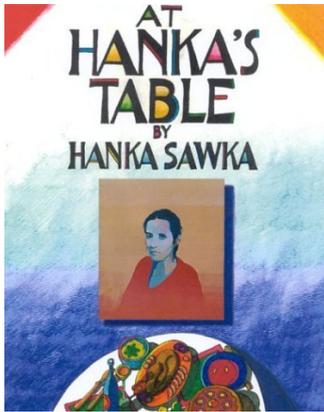


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**At Hanka's Table by Hanka Sawka (with Hanna Maria Sawka), cover and text art by Jan Sawka, book design by Janusz Kapusta, published by Lake Isle Press, Inc. 2004, 280 pages.**



The Polish Library Book Club has recently organized a very successful evening focusing on a culinary autobiography of Mrs. Capponi-Borawska, an Italian aristocrat who moved to Poland in the 1980s. I thought it was quite a coincidence when a couple of weeks later I received a phone call from a nice Polish lady from New York state who was promoting her new book -- a life story seasoned with her favorite cooking recipes. Hanka Sawka had to leave Poland almost at the same time that Tessa Capponi decided to move behind the Iron Curtain. Dealing with the difficulties of their new lives both of them ... cooked. They, like most of us, expressed love for their homelands in the kitchen.

I want to start by talking about form before substance. The book *At Hanka's Table* is incredibly beautiful. The cover is colorful, with an interesting portrait of the author on the front page and a wonderful painting (and a yummy meat loaf) on the back page. I looked quickly through the book and admired all the drawings, graphics, and photographs. Even page numbers are works of art! I was struck by how well designed the book was! At that moment I was an architect (my profession) and not a librarian (my passion). When I read a couple of pages I knew why the book hypnotized me before I even opened it. I started to read, and I kept reading without a break until the very last page. Then I took it to my kitchen and I cooked.

Hanka and her two sisters were born and raised in Częstochowa. Their mother -- a physician -- had to work long hours in order to support the family by herself. She tried to keep the girls busy: piano, French and cooking. The sisters cooked when they moved to Warsaw to study. Hanka cooked for her new boyfriend Jan and his friends. Hanka's mother cooked a special dish when Jan came for his first visit. He was served .... "czarna polewka." Black soup is a traditional dish that shows rejection to a marriage proposal. The long-haired young artist ate the soup, complimented the hostess and proposed. And this is where Hanka's life adventure started. She did marry Jan Sawka. The Jan Sawka -- now one of the most famous artists and designers in the world. However, there was a long way to go from this dinner to Jan's success and Hanka's great memoir.

The book consists of two parts: the first is Hanka's, Jan's, and little Hanna's life story. Before the Solidarity movement Jan was not able to work in Poland. The family had to move to Paris and New York and finally to their country house in upper New York state. They had to start over. Hanka's family members who stayed in Poland went through some dramatic experiences. Nevertheless, the book is very optimistic. Hanna Maria, the daughter, came back to Poland and studied at the National Film School. Hanka and Jan talk about free Poland and their new homeland with enthusiasm.

In the second part you can find about 100 delicious recipes (sorrel soup, bigos, stuffed cabbage, pa-czki, many international meals) and useful hints. This is the first book where I could learn how to make white borsch from scratch and where to buy duck blood (for czarna polewka). Dishes are served in a very creative way. Mrs. Sawka often uses her husband's pictures as backgrounds or even in the dishes (Gypsy Mazurek with icing inspired by Jan's painting is my favorite). Many famous people -- painters, designers, and movie directors have enjoyed Hanka's cooking art.

This is a book that you can read, use, or admire (or all of the three). You will also feel that there is a lot of love at Hanka's table.

I would like to share with you here Sawka's recipe for white borsch—enjoy it on Christmas Day. As for the rest—well, you will just have to come to the Library and borrow the book!

**White Borsch (serves 6):**

*1 medium onion, 1 dried mushroom, 1 bay leaf, 1 pound smoked meat (ham or kielbasa), cubed, 4 cups water, 2 medium potatoes, scrubbed, Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste, 1 garlic glove, chopped, 1-2 cups liquid from pickled bran, or to taste*

*Pickled bran: 8 cups of water, one quarter pound of wheat bran, one small garlic head peeled and sliced, crust from one slice sourdough or pumpernickel bread. Boil the water and cool to lukewarm, put the bran, water and sliced garlic into a glass or stoneware container, add the bread crust. Cover with cheese cloth or perforated plastic wrap and secure with a rubber band. Set aside in a warm dark place for 4-5 days. It is ready when it has a pleasant, pungent and acidic smell.*

**Slurry:**

*1 tablespoon all-purpose flour, 1/2 cup cold water, 2 heaping tablespoons sour cream*

*1. Put the onion, mushroom, bay leaf, meat into a pot and bring to boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 40 minutes.*

*2. Peel and dice the potatoes.*

*3. Add salt and pepper to the soup. Add the potatoes and garlic and cook over medium heat until the potatoes are soft. Once the potatoes are done, add the pickled bran liquid (the acidity will prevent the potatoes from cooking if added too soon).*

*4 Make the slurry and add it to the soup. Remove bay leaf. Add salt and pepper.*

**Ania Firsowicz**