

“Solidarity: The Slavic Community in Anthracite”

(Chapter 6 from *The Kingdom of Coal: Work, Enterprise, and Ethnic Communities in the Mine Fields*, by Donald L. Miller and Richard E. Sharpless. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985, pp. 177-212.)

They were something of a mystery to native-born Americans when they first appeared in the anthracite fields. They looked different, acted strangely, and kept to themselves. Newcomers were not very unfamiliar in hard coal country, but these people truly were puzzling. They came from places few mining people had ever heard of, lands with odd-sounding, almost unpronounceable names. Few could read or write even their own language. And they did not seem terribly interested in learning about their new land. When the first few arrived in the 1860s they aroused only passing curiosity. But as more and more poured into the coal towns in the following decades they stirred deeper emotions. Those emotions were described in a single word: "Hunky." [172]

They were called Slavs by the English-speaking and American-born, these people from the plains and mountains and marches of eastern Europe and the Balkans. They were Poles, Ukrainians, Czechs, Slovaks, Serbians, Croatians, and people of more than a dozen other nationalities, mostly from the empires of Czarist Russia and Austria-Hungary. There were non-Slavic peoples like Lithuanians and Hungarians, and Italians, too, among them, but they were all lumped together as "foreigners." A few arrived as early as the 1860s, but beginning in the 1880s they came in a great flood. Most were peasants, simple tillers of the soil, unskilled, unlettered, and unspeakably poor. Most were also Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox and they spoke a babel of incomprehensible languages. To the Americans they seemed a race apart, entirely strange, and wherever they went they encountered suspicion and undisguised discrimination.

They had been uprooted from their home soil by a complex set of factors. If they had been asked, some would have found it difficult to describe exactly why they had come. But one thing they knew—it had to do with survival. The unequal distribution of land, especially in Russia and Austria-Hungary, had a damaging effect on agricultural productivity. Vast expanses of land were owned—and often poorly used—by a landed aristocracy; the parcels held by small farmers and peasants were increasingly overworked and ill utilized by primitive farming methods which further depleted the soil. Mechanization and scientific agriculture were virtually unknown and beyond the economic means of the small landowners of Eastern Europe. Farm production was unable to keep up with rapidly rising birth rates. The population of what is now modern Poland doubled to 25 million in the last half of the nineteenth

century. By 1900, 50,000 people starved to death annually in Galicia, and Russian Poland had to resort to importing large amounts of foreign grain.¹

But economic conditions were not the sole reason for the exodus. Many of the peasants were held in a condition resembling slavery by powerful feudal overlords; many of the able-bodied men left to escape conscription into the army; and some were escaping political or religious repression. They did not all leave their homelands because they wanted a better job, but once in America, it was the first thing they tried to find. The search lured them to the anthracite region. The coal operators made every effort to encourage them to settle there. For the coal companies the immigrants were "cheap men, and it was in their interests to employ cheap men. . . . They were willing to work longer hours than the English-speaking miners, do heavier and more dangerous work, and put up with conditions that the English-speaking miners no longer tolerated. They had a lower standard of living, and produced their labor at less cost and sold it at a lower rate."² Many of the immigrants were expressly recruited by big companies such as the Reading because of the labor troubles they were having with their English-speaking miners. Companies contracted with labor agents in Europe, who could entice an unskilled Pole earning twenty-four cents a day with the promise of a dollar and more a day for work as a laborer in the hard coal fields. For many, the offer was irresistible, though leaving was emotionally painful. [173]

Many men who had gone to America earlier and returned to their villages for visits excited the imagination of those who had stayed behind. The immigrant writer Louis Adamic remembers what an impression such a "successful" man of the world made on the young men of his Slovenian village. "A man had quietly left the village for the United States," he writes, "a poor peasant clad in homespun, with a mustache under his nose and a bundle on his back; now, a clean-shaven *Amerikanec*, he sported a blue-serge suit, button shoes very large in the toes with india-rubber heels, a black derby, a shiny celluloid collar, and a loud necktie made even louder by a dazzling horseshoe pin, which, rumor had it, was made of gold, while his two suitcases of imitation leather, tied with straps, bulged with gifts from America for his relatives and friends in the village. . . . Indeed, to say that he thrilled my boyish fancy is putting it mildly."³ [174]

These visitors boasted of their new skills and achievements and the wages they earned in places called Carbondale and Mount Carmel. They claimed that in America everything was possible, that a common man could even shake hands with the president. They showed photographs, postcards, and newspaper clippings of coal towns, places peopled by fellow Slovenians who worked for good wages in the mines. You could go there and speak your own languages and be understood; you could practice your own faith in a church built and run by your own people. What a country this was—different, far better than any other on the face of the earth.⁴

So the exodus began—the journey to America. Like the Irish before them, these

late arrivals traveled in steerage but now in iron-clad ships. When Louis Adamic came to America he sailed from Le Havre, France, on the Niagara, an old and small ship that carried mostly immigrants. The steerage passengers were mostly Poles, Slovaks, Czechs, Croatians, Slovenians, and Bosnians. It was 1913, and the immigrants were young and middle-aged men and women and children of all ages. Most wore their colorful national dress. At New York's Ellis Island they were subjected to a confusing round of bureaucratic procedures, including examination by a stern and sour official who sat behind a desk on a high platform beneath the American flag and a portrait of George Washington. Eventually those who were not rejected because of ill health or for other reasons were waved through to the ferryboat bound for Manhattan.⁵

The steamship companies and railroads often arranged for the movement of the immigrants to the anthracite region. Those bound for Shenandoah, Scranton, and other coal towns were packed onto trains and were sent on their way bearing large identification tags addressed to a local shipping agent. The windows of some of the trains were blacked out so that the immigrants would not be tempted to get off before they entered the region. At their destinations they were herded together on the station platforms to await the shipping agent, who was usually of the same nationality. He took them to his house, often large enough to accommodate boarders, or distributed them in the boardinghouses of others of the same nationality. The next day the men marched off to work with bright new coveralls, caps, miners' carbide lamps, [175] and new picks. Fresh from the farms of far-off Europe, they were mine workers now, about to enter a world where daylight had been abolished. They were in America, but they were not yet a free people. In many cases their jobs had been "bought" from mine foremen by the shipping agent. On payday the agent received all their wages—and perhaps a commission from the coal company—and deducted the amount due for room and board. Any money left over was deposited in the "bank," often a strong box owned by the agent.⁶

The first Slavs in the region were curiosities to the Americans. A Slavic immigrant who arrived in Coaldale around 1885 found employment digging ditches near a colliery. Because he spoke no English he was the object of considerable local interest. Men, women, and children would gather where he was working and listen to him talk. Almost everyone had a different idea about his origins. Some thought that [176] he was Chinese or Indian, while others were sure that he was African. All agreed, however, that he and others like him had come to take their jobs. The coal companies had seen to that. In Gilberton, every time a train arrived and a foreigner descended, word spread and the boys would pick up stones and sticks and run down to the station to "welcome" him. Such welcoming was reenacted in countless patch towns.⁷

The very first arrivals were usually young men and adult males, aged fifteen to forty-five, who came without their families. Rarely did their women accompany them. Most intended to work for a time, save their money, and either send for their families or return to the old country and buy good farming land. A large number of

Slavs actually did return to the Old World, perhaps as many as four out of every ten who emigrated to America before World War I. But the majority remained, painfully accumulated their savings, and sent for their families, brought over brides through arranged marriages, or eventually married the widows and daughters of other Slavs. Many of the immigrants married before they left for America, following a practice prevalent among Slovaks. The long absences of husbands sometimes had unintended results. The Slovak-American press was filled with stories about husbands who learned of their wives' infidelities, returned to their villages to beat their spouses and beat or even kill their lovers, and sailed again for America. One steamship company agent boasted in his advertisements that he had gotten one such husband to the old country and back in three weeks, minimizing his loss of wages.⁸

The very first Slavic and Italian immigrants endured abominable conditions. They were simply dropped off at the railroad sidings of towns and left to fend for themselves. Some of them, as George Korson writes, "lived in mine breaches like the ancient cave-dwellers because no provision had been made for their accommodation. ...They were reduced to the level of animals foraging for food in the woods. When barks and herbs failed to satisfy the hunger of the children they sent their women into the mine patches to beg for food. Unable to speak English, the women made their pathetic pleas by gesticulations."⁹

The Americans often refused to take in these immigrants as boarders. Since housing was scarce, the foreigners were forced to live in old stables and shanties any dry, sheltered place they could find. Barns were converted to dormitories where bunk space, sometimes no more than a pile of straw on the ground, was provided for as many as forty or fifty men, with rent of a dollar a month. One immigrant reported that he and others "slept on planks, having no pillows or bedding of any kind. There were double decks of bins, where a man couldn't even straighten out, and slept doubled up all night."¹⁰ English-speaking landlords willing to take in the foreigners jammed them together in wretched-smelling boardinghouses, a dozen people living in a one-room cellar or as many as six men packed together in a windowless, nine-by-sixteen-foot room.¹¹

Eventually a group of single men might jointly build a shanty made of scrap lumber and any other materials they could scrounge. They slept on the bare ground and shared the necessary chores. In many of the patches, after the immigrants started moving in, the coal companies assigned them to the shacks and shanties where the Irish had previously lived. A contemporary observer described them as "a settlement of the queerest structures, some of them not much larger than dog kennels. There is no sewage system, and the alley is the dumping ground for all offal. At every few steps of this winding, reeking way are little openings leading into other passageways, not much wider than will permit a man to walk through."¹² When the Slavs began arriving in large numbers some of the coal companies built houses for them, but they were small and poorly constructed. They might have four rooms, two on the first floor and two on the second, while others were merely two-room shacks. [177]

The houses were constructed of the poorest grade of lumber; wind and rain came in through cracks in the walls and roofs. Many had neither ceilings nor floors. Sanitary facilities did not exist. There was no running water or drainage. Inside the only furniture was a table and a few chairs and beds. The children and some of the boarders were often compelled to sleep on the floor in the crowded rooms.¹³

The scarcity of housing, the need to accommodate large numbers of single males, and the Slavs' frugality brought into existence the so-called boardinghouse system. Married immigrants who had decided to remain in America saved enough to bring their families over and set up housekeeping. They usually took in boarders, generally men of their own nationality. As many as twenty or thirty boarders would crowd into a four-room house along with the landlord and his wife and family. A lean-to would serve as the kitchen and living room, while the other rooms were used as bedrooms. The family slept in one room, while the boarders slept in the others, though not infrequently boarders slept in the same room with the family. Occasionally one group of boarders occupied the beds during the day, while another group slept in them at night if there were two shifts working in the mines. The wife of the owner, aided only by her small children, did the cooking, laundering, and all the other household chores—down to the traditional scrubbing of the boarders' backs. The boarders bought their own food and paid the housewife for cooking it. Rent for a room averaged one dollar a month; in 1890 in the region the average boarder could subsist on ten dollars a month. In the crowded conditions of the boardinghouses privacy did not exist; they were raucous, noisy places overrun with adults, children, and the chickens and ducks that wandered in from the yard.¹⁴

The settlements of the first generation of Slavs were decidedly unpleasant in appearance. Historian Victor Greene writes that "most of the structures, standing 10 feet high and 25 feet square, were huddled together on small plots. The grey scrap wood was unpainted, as was the ever-present outhouse a short distance away. The peasants were no architects, and the conglomeration looked like a huge dump rather than a settlement."¹⁵ They also smelled like dumps because of the mounds of garbage and offal lying everywhere. Until well into the second decade of the twentieth century, few towns in the region had either regular garbage collections or paved streets. [180]

The immigrants tolerated these conditions because they regarded them as temporary. Soon they would have a farm back in the homeland or their own home in the new land. For this goal they would have to save; expenses would have to be kept to a bare minimum. And save they did. Per capita expenditures for Slavs in a store in Schuylkill County in the 1890s averaged \$2.86 per month, while those of the English speakers averaged \$5.48. The Slavs had minimum furnishings in their homes and ate a diet of cereals, starches, cabbage, cheap pork, and oily fish. Their women and children worked like slaves. They cultivated every available space around the dwellings for vegetables and spent tedious hours scrounging for coal on the culm [181]

banks.¹⁶

For the immigrants who remained in the region the purchase of a house became an all-absorbing ideal. Observers often commented upon the high proportion of Slavs who owned their own homes. Many were able to do so after only five or six years of careful saving on income earned by family members, including children, and money brought in by boarders. Though the new houses might not be well built or much larger than the company-owned houses, they were the Slavs' own, and they provided a sense of security and place, superimportant considerations for the former peasants.

According to the Slavic settlement pattern that evolved, several males or perhaps a couple of families of a particular nationality established themselves in a patch or town. They were followed by others of the same nationality. Or the coal companies settled a group in one area of a company town. Eventually, when there was a sufficient number of families, a parish was formed. Later a small store or saloon or other business appeared. The result was a patchwork of various ethnic groups scattered over the region in almost self-contained communities, clinging together for security and mutual support and holding fast to their own languages and customs. While the Slavs became part of the region, they also remained apart from it in significant ways.

The Slavic immigration dramatically altered the ethnic composition of the anthracite fields. In 1880 English-speaking peoples made up more than 90 percent of the foreign born, but only twenty years later, English speakers were less than 52 percent. In the same period the number of Slavs grew from 2 percent to more than 40 percent. By 1900 there were more than 100,000 Slavs in the region, 38,000 of them of Polish origin.¹⁷ In the same year the number of foreign born, mostly Slavs, comprised about one-fourth of the populations of the cities of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. And Slavic workers of course changed the ethnic composition of the anthracite work force. In 1880 less than 5 percent of mine employees were Slavs. By the turn of the century this figure had risen to about 50 percent, or approximately 34,000 adult workers.¹⁸

As the Slavs moved into the region they gradually displaced the older English-speaking groups, who either left mining or moved away from the area. The smaller towns, like Mount Carmel in the Schuylkill field, took on more and more of an Eastern European cast and character. Nanticoke, in the Wyoming-Lackawanna field, became the most "Polish" town in the state and perhaps in the nation. The small city of Shenandoah was populated by a jumble of nationalities; within its one square mile lived not only English-speaking people and Germans but also Slavs from a half-dozen European countries. At first, most of these groups did not get along together [182] at all. People lived in places popularly known as Paddy's Land, Dutch Hollow, Little Italy, Hunky Hill, and Polack Street. The Slavs brought with them from the Old World the villager's suspicion of strangers and outsiders and a village clannishness.

Unable to speak English, they seemed unusually dour and stiff. In the presence of strangers the Slavs were formal and obsequious; toward people in positions of authority they were distrustful but deferential. They were not at all outgoing and talkative like the Irish. But they did drink like the Irish, eliciting the disapproval of many of the stricter Protestant sects. "You don't think they have souls, do you?" one Protestant woman wondered aloud after observing a three-day-long Slavic wedding feast. "No, they are beasts, and in their lust they'll perish!"

In the popular press Slavs were widely described as lawless, slovenly, fatalistic, and stupid. The daughter of a Slovak immigrant described the kind of behavior that often arose from these attitudes. "My mother used to tell me that [back in the 1880s] when it was time to go to work the men would start gathering on the porch to go to work in a group. Because they were afraid they would be attacked by someone. But when they traveled in a group they felt protected. And my father was a big strong man, and he was given a team of four mules and he was to develop the ground [183] around the breaker. And he was paid \$1.60 because it was hard work. And they all stayed there because they thought he was a big strong man and they would be protected. In 1888 there was still trouble. The people didn't want the new immigrants coming in and taking their jobs. And it soon became a sport to hurt these people"¹⁹

Slavic religious practices contributed to the intolerance. Protestants were made increasingly uncomfortable by the appearance of more and more Catholic and Orthodox churches, many with strange-looking, bulb-shaped domes, and the Sunday spectacle of hundreds of Catholics marching in procession in the streets behind a priest carrying a seven-foot iron cross. Many of the governments of mining towns began to outlaw Catholic religious processions on public streets. The abstemious English and Welsh Methodists were especially offended by other Slavic Sunday habits which included drinking, card playing, and dancing. One old Baptist deacon who visited a Slavic ward in Mahanoy City on a Sunday afternoon exclaimed "It was terrible; saloons full blast; singing and dancing and drinking everywhere- it was Sodom and Gomorrah revived; the judgment of God, Sir, will fall upon us."²⁰

The English-speaking miners saw the Slavs as competitors for scarce work who had been brought in by the mining companies to break the unity of the workers. They worked alongside the Slavs only because they had no choice. The Slavs who began as laborers, were often prevented by one means or another from earning the status of skilled miners; in some cases state-required examinations were rigged against them. Although a separate wage scale for miners and laborers had been set in 1869, it was frequently violated. Skilled miners who hired Slavic laborers sometimes paid them what they liked or squandered their wages without bothering to pay them at all. The wife of a Polish miner remembers the difficulties her husband had, for he was unable to speak English:

My husband knew a little bit about German and there was a guy there that knew German good and he knew Polish too but he would never let on that he knew anything about Poland.... But Irish people were very terrible

to the Polish people. I'm not condemning them. I was working for Irish people and they were very nice to me but here they were rotten They were the sick ones I guess. . . . They used to take their lunches in pails The pail was tin, and they used to go to the bars and get 10¢ worth of beer, and sometimes they would take ladies in and sometimes I would go. But they would get their pails filled with beer and then sometimes the Irish or somebody else would come over and spit in the beer.²¹

In the mines the skilled English-speaking miners sometimes made signs to their Slavic laborers to use the shovel or load the coal car or repeated the names of things frequently until they were learned. But young English-speaking miners [184] often taught the Slavs only cuss words, so that when the foreigners were spoken to they answered with a curse and received a swift and unexpected punch in return.

In the face of these conditions, the Slavs developed an intense communalism. To survive—to obtain work, housing, and an understanding of American ways—immigrants had to cooperate, to band together against a hostile or, at best, indifferent world. This ethnic communalism was something new; it was not typically found in eastern Europe. There the peasant identified with the village or region. Rarely did he come to America with a national identification, the sense of being a Slovak or Pole. Even in America such peoples as Serbs and Croats were divided at first by Old World village loyalties. Only when these and other Slavic groups recognized that they shared common problems and enemies did they unite along national lines or as a common Slavic people. Despite their dissimilarities, Poles, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and people of other nationalities eventually realized that they had more in common with each other than they did with the older, established "American" ethnic groups. Thus as the Slavic people settled themselves firmly in the region—and no matter how many diverse nationalities there were—they formed united communities with a strong ethnic consciousness. The resulting national pride and cooperation helped them to survive the uncertainties of life in the new world.

To understand the Slavic communities we must understand the immigrants' attitude toward work, for they had come to America, above all, to work. To many Slavic men life was work—almost their whole life. It was something they learned in the villages of the Old World, where wealth and material goods were limited and in short supply and where mere survival depended upon persistent, unending toil. But while they believed in the importance of hard work, among the Slavs there was little expectation of economic advancement; that was something generally beyond their reach. What they sought, most of all, was some security in a world over which they knew they had little control.

As John Bodnar points out, for first-generation Slavs in particular, economic mobility and advancement were the antithesis of the two values they prized most order and continuity. Furthermore, they did not expect satisfaction in work, nor did they expect to make a fortune. Work was simply something that had to be done. They worked to survive and to save for their children, most of whom they expected

to be workers or the wives of workers. What Slavic workers valued was finding a good job, working hard at it, saving money, and owning a house.

The Slavic work ethic differed profoundly from the prevailing American Protestant work ethic, which stressed mobility, economic advancement, and the acquisition of wealth. For the peasants, however, who for countless centuries had not seen work pay off in terms of advancement, work meant security. Upward mobility seemed almost impossible. A whole tradition told them so. Since they possessed few sophisticated industrial skills, economic advancement seemed a distant dream, even in America. [185]

Emphasis upon individual advancement was also seen as destructive of community solidarity. To progress in business, for example, a person might have to take action that cost his neighbors, or he might have to leave the community altogether. When Slavic immigrants changed jobs they did so more often because of economic dislocation (strikes, mine closings, and so forth) than from a desire for social advancement. Second-generation Slavs typically shared these attitudes. Even during economic hard times when they were forced to leave the community temporarily and sometimes found better jobs elsewhere, they usually returned. They preferred to live among their own people, in their own neighborhoods. So while the lack of economic opportunity to advance often curbed Slavic workers' economic aspirations, a reluctance to sever family and community ties did so as well.²²

The overwhelming majority of Slavic immigrant workers arrived in the region without any industrial or trade skills; yet because of these deficiencies they were prized as workers by the coal operators. Peter Roberts, writing at the turn of the century, understood the reason. "The Slav [sic] is a good machine in the hands of competent directors. He is obedient and amenable to discipline, courageous and willing to work, prodigal of his physical strength and capable of great physical endurance. ... His confidence in competent leadership is absolute, and both in work and in society he is quick to copy others."²³ Roberts added that Slavs were fatalistic and stoic in the face of suffering and calamity, attributes which served them well in the mines. [186]

The Slavs went into mining for the simple reason that wages in that industry were among the highest for unskilled workers in America. And since miners were paid by the amount of coal produced, hard work, something for which Slavs were known, seemed to pay off. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, 50 percent of the total anthracite work force was Eastern European. In 1910 the majority of Slovak males in America worked in the mines, as did 90 percent of all Polish workers in the anthracite region.

For the first-generation immigrants, untutored in the ways of a dangerous industry, the normal hazards of mining were increased. They were often assigned to the most difficult and dangerous tasks, or in their eagerness to prove themselves

they took risks that more experienced men would not. They eventually earned a reputation as courageous workers, especially when accidents occurred, when they were often the first to volunteer for extremely risky rescue operations; for this bravery they paid a heavy price in deaths and injuries. Of the 12,032 men killed in the anthracite fields between 1900 and 1920, 3,177 were Poles, a number that exceeded the figures for every other nationality.²⁴

As important as work was for them, Slavic men did not make it their life. They gave their most precious hours to family, faith, and friends. The church, not the mine site, was the soul and center of the ethnic community. Only with the formation of a parish did an active community come into existence. In fact, the words "settlement" and "parish" in Polish, Slovak, and Lithuanian are identical. Even physically, the parish church was the center of the community. The people lavished great wealth, love, and attention upon their churches, many of which were built by volunteer labor. In the towns and cities of the region, impressive red-brick edifices with towering steeples, their interiors adorned with marble altars, exquisite stained-glass windows and lamps, silver and gold candelabra, stand as monuments to strong faith and devotion. Around these houses of worship in the larger towns, and often in sharp contrast to their magnificence, clustered the parochial schools, clubs, bars, stores, and miners' homes. For those immigrants, almost everything was here in the enclave. Only on a few occasions did they need to venture beyond the perimeters of the settlement. [187]

The priests, many of whom came from the Old World to serve their parishioners, held a highly respected, sometimes revered place in the community. Their counsel and guidance on spiritual matters went virtually unquestioned. Since they usually spoke English as well as the Slavic national language, they served as an important link with the wider community and dealt with an array of questions and problems beyond the purely religious. They served as moral authorities, arbiters of family and social matters, interpreters, teachers—and even bankers. Many an old widow, ignorant of English and distrustful of banks, placed her hard-won savings in the hands of the parish priest for safekeeping.

Just as the church was more than a religious institution, the priests became more than religious leaders. Through citizenship classes and English lessons held in the church basement, priests helped the immigrants adapt to their new world. Priests were among the very few in the community who could read and write, so they were asked to write letters to the home country or to speak in court in defense of a parishioner. Through the religious feast days and festivals they organized, the priests ensured the observation of national customs. In the parochial schools they taught national histories and religious traditions as well as the national languages. Until well into the twentieth century they said masses more often in the national languages than in English and frequently delivered the same sermon in both languages. They published parish newsletters or diocesan newspapers in Slavic languages, keeping the community in touch with local developments as well as with

those in the old country. All of the Slavic church-related institutions stressed spiritual values and strongly reinforced the immigrants' intense suspicions of purely materialistic goals. The "Dollar God" of American culture was continuously and robustly criticized. "Those who measure success by the material things acquired are lost in the fog of life," a typical Slavic paper editorialized.²⁵

Generally the dominant Irish Catholic hierarchy fostered and promoted distinct ethnic parishes. The Irish bishops clearly understood the desires of Slavs for their own national churches with specific cultural loyalties. Rather than viewing this need as a threat to Catholicism, the bishops regarded it as a positive factor in an ethnically diverse but universal church. Yet conflicts did occur, both within the church as a whole and within national groups. Slavic laymen, for example, who helped organize their parishes and financed the building of the churches, assumed, according to the custom of their homeland, that they exercised certain rights. These included control over financial matters and the appointment or dismissal of pastors, practices which differed with church policies in America. They also supervised the collection of annual family parish dues, another departure from the Irish habit of Sunday collections. Such control over church treasuries gave the laymen an unusually high degree of independence, which they often demonstrated in the extreme, despite their usual respect for the clergy. One Slovak pastor in Hazleton had an ongoing quarrel with his flock, which found his nationalist sentiments too weak. When he attempted to fire the popular church organist, some parishioners bombed the rectory. Naturally, the priest departed. In another case, when a bishop appointed a priest against the wishes of the parishioners, a hundred of the parish women marched on the rectory, broke down the door, chased the unfortunate reverend into the attic, and ransacked the house. The Slovak paper *Jednota* deplored the action but called upon the bishop to "be more responsive to the needs of the people."²⁶ [188]

The heightened ethnic consciousness and nationalism that resulted from the churches' singular role also brought about internal splits. When Polish workers in south Scranton in 1897 began to agitate for a greater voice in church affairs, they were flatly refused by the local Irish bishop. The workers then established their own independent church, with Polish instead of Latin services, and found a young priest to serve them. This action started the Polish National Catholic Church movement, which spread to more than fifty congregations in America and even to Poland itself.²⁷

Such conflicts, however, were rare, and generally the Slavs in the region accommodated themselves to the structures of American Catholicism as long as their parishes were able to maintain their national identities. But what they did have to endure jointly was the continuing antipathy toward Catholics by the Protestants. Though the Irish had made Catholicism at least familiar in the anthracite region, the socially and economically dominant Protestants continued to view the faith with distrust and suspicion. The ethnocentricity of the Slavic churches, as centers of separate communities, contributed to this ill feeling. The declining Protestant popula-

tion in the region merely intensified the antagonism.

The Slavs met religious intolerance in characteristic fashion. They simply would not be deterred from the active practice of their faith, which gave them unity and consciousness ("Polishness and Catholicism are one"). In Nanticoke in the mid-1870s Poles who worshiped at a temporary church were harassed by catcalls and stone throwing on their way to mass. One Sunday the parish fraternal organization, made up entirely of tough mine workers, paraded through the streets before mass in full regalia with drawn swords. Whether or not the demonstration was intended to intimidate the hecklers, it did so. There were no more abuses.²⁸

The parish fraternal organization was another important part of Slavic life. Virtually every parish had its lodge or society for both male and female parishioners. These sometimes developed to raise money for constructing churches and schools; from building and finance committees they evolved into permanent organizations of lay members. More frequently they came into existence to fill both spiritual and so- [189] cial functions. They ensured attendance at mass and other religious ceremonies especially of male parishioners. They organized dances, picnics, dramatic presentations, festivals, and athletic events. Though these groups were voluntary, parishioners were expected to join. And almost every parishioner belonged to one or another church fraternal group. Women who sewed vestments for the priests, prepared the church for religious holidays, and cooked and served on social occasions found useful roles and fellowship outside family and home. A man who was required to attend an unpopular lodge member's funeral could feel secure that, no matter what kind of life he led, he would be guaranteed a well-attended send-off.

Like the Irish, the Slavs had national fraternal and beneficial societies, many of which had their roots in craft guilds and religious brotherhoods in the Old World. If the society had a religious orientation, it was a source of support and devotion for the faith. Often, however, like the more secular societies, it gave financial aid to needy members, sometimes providing extremely generous help over a long period. A major function was the provision of insurance for members at low premiums. The elaborate and extended funerals beloved by the Slavs placed a heavy burden on limited family resources; insurance guaranteed a proper burial. Sometimes the funds provided for an improvement in the family's standard of living. A Polish miner's daughter remembers that, after her father's death and the funeral, \$400 remained.

My mother said to my oldest brother, I want you to go looking for a house. And my mother said to be sure it had a garden. He hunted and he found a house that had eight rooms. Imagine six children moving into an eight-room house, we had a bedroom of our own, imagine! So I thought she did very well for an illiterate woman. . . . We lived there until the family grew up and moved away.²⁹

Among the Poles, at least, national fraternal and benevolent associations had little success in the region in the early days. As one observer remarked, "The Polish

peasant's distrust of outside organizations, even Polish ones, had to be broken down before he consented to part with his hard-earned dollar to invest it in an insurance policy." Not only did the immigrant fear being cheated; he also suspected that his children might hasten his death in order to reap the benefits. Only after such suspicions had been allayed did organizations like the Polish National Alliance and the Polish Women's Alliance gain widespread membership in the region.³⁰

Eventually the national societies won a prominent place in the American Slavic world. Through their publications, meetings, and local affiliates they contributed to ethnic consciousness and unity and served as forums where important issues were discussed. Some of them, like the churches, split over nationalist and religious questions—the Slovak Catholic Union {Sokol) formed in 1905 after members disagreed with the growing anticlericalism of the Slovak Gymnastic Union Falcon, for example. But whatever their orientation, they became an important focus of Slavic communal life.

On Sundays and church or national holidays the lodges gathered families—the boarders, too—for fellowship and celebration. The people feasted around tables groaning beneath the weight of ethnic foods washed down with hefty drafts of beer from a substantial keg. Afterward there were card games for the older men and wrestling or feats of strength for the younger. While teenagers danced folk dances to the accompaniment of accordion or violin, gossiping mothers kept an eye on possible spouses for their children of marriageable age. As evening came, the men gathered together to talk politics, wage scales in the mines, grievances against bosses. Later the people reminisced about home, about life in the old country—what had been gained and what had been lost. Then in the morning the shrill blast of the mine whistle returned everyone to the daily round of toil.

The family formed the heart of the Slavic community. The immigrants transferred family structures intact from the Old World. The family was, above all, a survival mechanism, especially important in the first years of adjustment. The typical family was hierarchical, with the father and older males cast in authority roles, and generally close-knit. The family might also be extended as well; certainly the proximity of relatives in the neighborhood made it seem so. [191]

The patriarchal nature of the family allowed little place for equality among its various members. Though there might be discussions between husband and wife, the man had final say. With children, usually little physical discipline was needed. They learned early to submit to parental authority, though the youngest children generally had more latitude than the older ones. Even in small matters of discipline the father's authority was extreme. Age was no factor—all children living under the same roof were ultimately subject to his discipline.

Children were not only subject to greater discipline in the immigrant family; they stayed at home longer, especially if they were males. Some Southern Slavs

practiced a system called the *zadruga*, a communal family structure based upon the supremacy of the oldest male member and the belief that male progeny should not leave their parents' home. Instead, after they were married, they were expected to bring their wives back to their parents' home and work to support the *zadruga*. The sense of family interdependency was instilled early in Slavic children. They, like the children of Italian immigrants, were often pressured to leave school early in order to contribute to the household. In Scranton, in 1911, Polish children contributed as much as 35 percent of the family income, working as breaker boys, mule drivers, and door boys or doing other lowly jobs in the mines.³¹ [192]

The male child was doubly preferred over the female. He could carry on the family name and could contribute more money to the family purse. He would also help his father about the house. The Slavic preference for males showed up in obvious ways; sons usually received the lion's share of any inheritance or property. One elderly Lithuanian woman worked without pay in the soda factory her son inherited from her husband until her death at eighty-four. At the same time she lived with a daughter and her family for many years and did not pay a cent for room and board.³²

Despite the father's authority, at the center of family life was the wife, and her word carried real weight in matters strictly connected with the home. She often controlled the family's finances (with proper allowance for her husband's drinking, smoking, and gambling habits), had responsibility for the rearing of the children, and performed work that was endless and tedious but necessary. And in a hard world, she was often the sole source of warmth, affection, and close parental love. [193]

What was valued in the Slavic woman were the same qualities most prized in a man: strength and endurance. In a society in which the greatest compliment that could be paid to a man was "He's a good worker," the same held true for the woman. What she gave was hard-won help in circumstances of constant struggle. The woman had to be an adroit manager of always scarce funds; family needs had to be met regardless of strikes, layoffs, and the other irregularities of mine employment. She made up the difference as best she could by keeping a garden, by shepherding the wages of children and income from boarders, or even by doing outside work. If necessary, she found employment in the silk mills and tobacco factories that came into the region to take advantage of the abundance of cheap female labor. She sent her young daughters into the homes of affluent families to work as servants at \$1.50 per week. She watched with pain but stoic understanding on the day her husband took their nine-year-old son off to the breakers for the first time.

Her days began early and ended late. Up before dawn to stoke the coal stove, she packed lunches for the miners' pails and prepared breakfasts of coffee, soup, and black bread. With no electricity or gas for refrigeration, and ice a random luxury, she had to shop almost daily for the cheap cuts of pork, the occasional fresh vegetables, and the potatoes and cabbage that composed the family's fare. One or two days a week she made bread, a dozen or more loaves at a time, perhaps baked in an [194]

outside community oven. Mondays traditionally were wash days; buckets of water drawn from an outside pump were brought in to heat on the stove. The laundry was boiled on the stove top, scrubbed by hand with coarse soap on tin washboards until fingers were red and raw, then wrung out by hand and tossed over fences or spread upon the grass to dry. Soapy water was carried outside and emptied in the yard or ditch along the road, and more water was brought in and heated for rinsing. If the clothes were badly soiled, as they often were, the process had to be repeated, outside in the warm months and in the kitchen in winter. Ironing was done on the table brought close to the hot stove where the two or three heavy irons were heated.

There were no indoor toilets, so slop buckets from the previous night had to be emptied and cleansed. Floors were scrubbed on hands and knees, the carpets made of old rags washed or dusted with heavy sticks, and cast iron stove tops scoured with rough-edged bricks. Clothes were patched and mended by hand or, later, on treadle-operated sewing machines. In summer the garden needed tending, vegetables had to be canned, fruits preserved, and sauerkraut made and stored for use through the winter. Chickens, ducks, and sometimes a cow or pig had to be fed and watered, coops swept out, and, for holidays, the fowl killed and plucked. [195]

Women participated with men in the slaughter of pigs. The son of a Lithuanian immigrant recalled:

There was no refrigeration, and in the Fall most of them would buy a good-size pig . . . , about 300 pounds. . . well, everybody in the street, all your neighbors would come over and help slaughter the pig. And all the women and all the men would clean it up and cut it up and in the back yard there was always sheds. . . they were smoke houses. Certain kinds of wood-apple, apple trees were the best. We would smoke the hams and make all the base in them and stuff. . . nothing was wasted. . . and then next week you went to the next house and helped them.³³

There were other tasks: the tending of small children, care of the sick and injured, cleaning and polishing of the kerosene lamps, a trip to the culm bank to scrounge for coal. In the afternoons water was heated for the men's baths, a bucket of beer sent for, preparation of the evening meal begun. Day after day the round went on, in cramped quarters, with few labor-saving appliances and only some help from the younger children.

A Slavic husband saw his wife's most important role as the bearing and rearing of children. In Eastern Europe peasant families were large, the result of both Catholic influence and the economic necessity for labor, and this tradition carried over to America. The women usually married young, soon after reaching marriageable age, and bore a large number of children. Eight or nine was not uncommon, though seldom did all of them survive. A physician with considerable experience among the Slavs commented that "among these women it's a birth every year." He may have exaggerated, but the birth rate of 70 per 1,000 population among the Slavs in the region at the turn of the century, a figure considerably higher than among native-

born Americans, testifies to the fecundity of Slavic women. One observer noted that the streets of Slavic neighborhoods always seemed to be filled with children.³⁴

Both childbearing and child rearing were fraught with danger. Physicians were not always available or affordable, and women, as in Europe, turned to midwives for help with birth in the home. With poor diets and sanitary conditions prevailing, infant mortality was appallingly high. In some mining towns 40 percent of the children died before they reached maturity, 70 percent of them within the first five years of life.³⁵ They were carried off by a multitude of diseases ranging from measles to typhoid, for none of which were there adequate antidotes. Photographs of family members surrounding a small pine coffin containing the white-clothed body of a child were often seen in Slavic homes. [196]

Childbirth, however, gave the woman little reprieve from work. She was expected to be up and about her chores within a few days at most. One woman was seen milking her cow on the third day after the birth other child; another was picking coal on a culm bank and wading home through an icy stream within a week after giving birth.³⁶ The women received little understanding from their husbands, as the following note from a 1915 report on Johnstown, a city outside the anthracite region, indicates:

Mother aged 35 years; 6 births in 12 years; 4 live births and 2 still births. All live born died in first year. . . Says she had worked too hard keeping boarders in this country and cutting wood and carrying it on her back in the old country. . . . Father furious because all babies die; wore red necktie to funeral of last to show his disrespect for wife who can only produce children that die.³⁷

The conditions in which women lived in the coalfields produced predictable results. They were worn from work and childbirth long before middle age and appeared much older than they actually were. The tragedy of burying children contributed to a deep sense of fatalism and resignation among them and reinforced the peasant perception of the world as a place of limited good.

There was no such thing as adolescence in the coalfields. Childhood gave way to adulthood. The children might play for a time with homemade rag dolls and crude wooden toys, but by age five or six they were helping with chores around the house or were looking out for younger children. The boys learned early that they would follow their fathers into the mines; often they looked forward to starting in the breakers, for it meant some money and a certain independence—the reward for entering the world of working men. The girls stayed home longer, learning the routine of the house and sometimes running the entire household if the mother was sick or had died. Play was often an adjunct of work: herding ducks and geese in the fields, running errands to fetch beer or a needed staple, throwing lumber beneath the wheels of moving mine cars to jar out and steal lumps of coal. The highlight of the day might be nothing more than meeting the men as they came up from below; it was customary for the miners to save a bit of lunch for the children. [197]

In the streets of the mining towns, lessons were hard and came early. The children learned to fend for themselves, to develop a tough independence free of otherwise occupied adults. Games were invented and were played with imagination and roughness and with the barest of castoff or handmade materials. Baseball required no more than a broomstick, a hard rubber ball, and flat rocks for bases.

In the larger towns girls of nine or ten frequently found employment in the homes of prosperous families. The work was hard, the pay low, and the hours long, but there were often compensations. A Lithuanian grandmother looked back with a certain fondness on the years she had spent, beginning at age eight, working in the home of a Welsh insurance agent in the early twentieth century. The woman of the house had taught her to cook, launder, and do the other household chores necessary for her later married life. She had corrected and improved the girl's poor English and had taught her "respectable" manners. When the girl fell ill with pneumonia, the woman took her in and nursed her back to health because she did not believe that the girl would receive proper care in her own home. Always there was some leftover food from the weekend to take home to the family and occasionally a castoff piece of clothing that had some wear left in it. Even the Saturday polishing of silver for the traditional Sunday roast beef dinner had some appeal, for one could at least sit and rub at the kitchen table beside the warm coal stove.³⁸ [198] [199]

After the turn of the century, adolescent girls as young as twelve frequently went to work in the silk mills that sprang up in the region. The mills were massive brick structures four or more stories tall and half a block long, with many rows of windows—to catch all available light. They were ill heated and drafty, stifling in summer, damp and cold in winter. The mechanical looms made a horrendous racket, and the air was filled with dust and particles of silk. The silk racing through the machinery required undeviating concentration and attention, especially if it was from a bad lot and tore easily. Cuts on the fingers from the fine silk were an ignored commonplace. The girls stood at their machines for ten hours a day, worked five and a half days a week, and undoubtedly dreamed of early marriage as a means of escape.

The mining towns provided limited entertainment for young people. There were occasional dances and other social activities sponsored by the churches and fraternal groups, usually under the watchful eyes of priests and adults. For adolescent boys and young men, who had or took more freedom, there were more questionable diversions. In the roughhouse towns all kinds of gambling, especially on the favored slot machines and cock fights, were pervasive, and priests and ministers deplored the tendency of the young to squander their money on such activities. Few towns worth the name were without a brothel, tolerated and even protected by the authorities, and many young men went there for their first sexual experience. Drinking was learned early, and the time from fetching a pail of beer for "the old man" to taking a first nip at the bar was short.

Despite the constant cautioning of parents and priests against premarital sex, there was apparently a lot of it. Peter Roberts was appalled by the "licentiousness" and "bastardy" he claimed to see everywhere. It was not unusual, he noted, to see young girls parading on summer evenings on lonely paths or admitted to saloons for purposes of "trafficking." One of the girls, he wrote, when asked if she were not afraid of the consequences, replied, "Not as long as the drug store is handy." A Protestant pastor Roberts knew once told him that, "In most of my weddings I marry three and not two." Roberts ascribed these conditions to the lack of moral and religious training and the "want of moral sensitiveness" in the homes. But he added that irregular employment in the mines and the lack of industrial training for other trades contributed.³⁹

Every town had its juvenile gangs. The competition and hostility between the various ethnic groups was learned early, and the youth of a particular nationality and neighborhood soon discovered that protection lay in numbers. Often imitating the behavior of their elders, they organized themselves for sportive forays against other gangs. Criminal activities, from the setting of random fires to robbery and assault, were common. Fractured families resulting from the deaths of parents or abandonment by husbands and fathers cast many children loose to fend for themselves. By the turn of the century numerous institutions with names like "Home of the Friendless" and "St. Patrick's Orphanage Asylum" had been founded by the churches and public authorities to deal with homeless, dependent, and delinquent children, who were frequently thrown together without discrimination.⁴⁰ [200]

Most children, however, though gaining the hard experiences necessary to their survival, held fast to the traditions and values learned in their communities. Their childhoods may have been short and mean, and their prospects limited, but they gained independence, pride, and above all, the required sense of life as an incessant struggle.

Toward education, Slavic immigrants had a peculiar attitude: they valued it and they feared it, so naturally they sought to control it. Virtually every ethnic community of sufficient size to support one had its parochial school staffed by a few overworked but determined nuns. Though it might have few instructional materials and woefully unqualified teachers, it was preferred to the better-funded public schools because parents could be assured that their children received instruction in the values and traditions they themselves honored.

For many Slavic parents, the public schools were the great enemy. These immigrants did not accept the common notion that education opened the way for fast advancement in the larger world. In school you learned the skills essential to survive in society, and when you learned them, you left. But it was not how long public education lasted but what was taught that bothered them most. Public schools were condemned for their "antireligious" teachings and emphasis upon materialism and

assimilation to "American" ways. They were seen as places which turned children against their parents and their ethnic heritage. The Slovak writer, J. T. Porincak, wrote:

With a public school education they [children] go forth into the world, lost completely to the Slovaks. Their idea of life is a breezy and snappy novel, a blood-curdling movie and lots of money.

But our duty to our people commands us to save our youth from the moral catastrophe that is confronting them.⁴¹

The parish school stressed other and older values. There the principal subject was catechism, often taught in the national language. There children prayed in Latin before they saluted the flag. [201]

Slavic attitudes toward education show up in school attendance figures. A 1911 national study by the U.S. Immigration Commission revealed that the percentage of Slavic children in schools beyond the sixth grade was lower than the rate for recent Irish and Jewish immigrants' children and Negroes. The numbers in high schools also were exceedingly low. Even the figures for parochial schools reveal low attendance in the higher grades. In Scranton, in 1910, 99 percent of Polish immigrant children were in the first five grades only, and in Shenandoah, where 32 percent of the children of native-born Catholics went beyond fourth grade, no Polish children advanced that far despite the presence of Poles in the region for at least a decade.⁴²

For many Slavs education beyond the rudimentary requirements of learning some simple reading, writing, and arithmetic wasn't considered important. Among first generation Slavs at least, education was not considered a tool in social advancement. Was a high school diploma really necessary if they were to spend their lives in mines and mills or as housewives? Many children also became discouraged because they did not speak English well. Frequently attending school was their first real exposure to the language. In addition, since economic necessity required most children to begin working at age ten or twelve, even the brightest and most ambitious children usually had their formal education cut off early. [202]

An essential part of a Slavic child's education was his education in the customs and ceremonies of his nationality. Slavic ceremonies, nearly all of which had religious as well as national meaning, followed the natural cycle of a person's life. Baptism was an introduction to the church and the community. After the birth of a child, relatives and friends were invited to the house for a feast. The friends, called the "Kum," were now considered bound to the family by special ties of friendship. Apart from the godparents, who stood for the child at the baptism ceremony, they had an informal paternal relationship to the child that implied spiritual guidance and material protection. On later occasions, such as first communion, confirmation, and marriage, they assumed personal interest and symbolic roles emphasizing their relationship to the individual and family. [203]

Slavs were heartily criticized for their ceremonies, which were not understood by outsiders, who often considered them demonstrations of a barbarous and corrupt culture. Since many of the ceremonies involved drinking and dancing, they were eyed with particular suspicion by conservative Protestants. One wide-eyed reporter for a national publication, who witnessed a Hungarian baptism celebration, wrote about it with a mixture of wonderment and displeasure. After leaving the church, he reported, the party returned to the house, where the host had filled a huge vat with beer laced with two jugs of whiskey and a handful of hot peppers. While the mixture—called "polinki"—was stirred, the Hungarians sang and danced in a circle around it, "like Apaches," first on one foot, then the other. During the course of the celebration, as things heated up, the newly baptized infant was deposited in the out-house safe from harm.⁴³

Courtship was an important and serious business, especially in the early years when there was a scarcity of eligible women. "Matchmaking" filled the leisure hours of many fathers who had left their families behind in Europe and longed to have their wives and children with them in America. Saving sufficient funds to bring the family from the Old World and establishing a home required much saving and sacrifice; the mine worker who had a daughter of marriageable age, on the other hand, recognized that she was an asset which could be used toward that end.

The father of such a young woman usually looked for a young, unmarried worker with a reputation for thrift and good habits. He then became friendly with the potential son-in-law and was soon talking about his daughter. A tintype of her was a valuable aid; in its absence he simply described her physical charms, sound traits of character, and capacity for companionship. Invariably he stressed his daughter's fitness for marriage, her health, strength, and family training. Frequently the young man, faced with the scarcity of women and the social barriers surrounding those of other nationalities, agreed to forward money for her passage. The father of the bride then pledged her troth and agreed to live with the newlyweds and contribute to the maintenance of the new home until he could bring the remainder of his family and establish a home of his own.

This kind of matchmaking in the region resulted in the arrival of hundreds of young women, to meet and marry husbands they had never seen. Almost immediately, the couple's new home became a boardinghouse for others of their nationality. As an observer noted:

Inborn thrift and the will to labor laid the foundation for a competence which, once accumulated, later meant a private home and the rearing and education of a family in the newer, higher standard American way of living.⁴⁴

Courtship, of course, was not only the responsibility of fathers. Young people in the region took matters into their own hands. A singular custom among Russians was for a group of young women to surround a group of young men on certain days and shout and yell until the boys responded by chasing after them. The men caught

the girls of their choice and had the right to spend the remainder of the evening with them. On Easter Monday, young Slavic women had the privilege of throwing water on the young men of their choice, which was both a sign of partiality and a wish of good luck. On Easter Tuesday the men responded. The custom grew out of the habit of bringing some extra happiness to friends after the long Lenten season; the Slavic nobility in the Old World expressed this sentiment with a delicate spray of perfume on the coats and dresses of friends; the peasants, unable to buy perfume, used water.⁴⁵

When marriage partners were selected, elaborate preparations began for one of the momentous events in the lives of the Slavs. Though their marriage ceremonies differed, depending upon the ethnic group, they always involved sizable numbers of the community in joyous celebration. Prior to the engagement, the groom took his best friend along to the home of his potential bride and asked her parents for their formal consent to the marriage. The girl's parents then visited the boy's parents, and the whole matter was settled. The boy and girl obtained a marriage license; a public announcement was made before the ceremony. There were also several visits to the priest for instruction and announcement of the banns in church. The bride-to-be at this time gave her future husband a hand-picked bouquet of roses to wear in his hat until the day of the wedding, when she presented him with another one. In the weeks before the marriage the bride's mother cooked and baked, receiving help from relatives, friends, and neighbors, while the father built up a generous supply of beer and whiskey. In some groups the bridegroom purchased the wedding garment for the bride and contributed money for the wedding feast.⁴⁶

Among Lithuanians, the wedding usually lasted three days. It began the day before the ceremony, when a bridal party, consisting of five to eight couples besides the bride and groom, was selected. The men were selected first and they, in turn, picked their partners for the following day. A party was held, at which the men gave flowers and candies to their partners before the dancing and singing began. On the following day, before departure for the church, the bridal party sat at the wedding table, and the bride and groom were given a cross to kiss. A song of farewell was sung. As the orchestra played a march, the bridal party walked around the table for luck and out of the house. Following the mass when the bridal party returned to the house, the bride and groom were given wine, bread, and salt to eat and were serenaded by the orchestra. When the newlyweds sat for the wedding feast, they were toasted by all present, and songs were sung in their honor. [205]

Dancing, singing, and game playing followed through the afternoon. Tables were set for all who desired to eat and drink. After the evening meal came the "donations" for the bride and groom. The parents and relatives of the newlyweds came first. As the orchestra played, the married couple were congratulated, the donations were given, and the donor tried to break a plate, usually with a silver dollar. After the bride's veil had been removed and her hair let down by other married women to signify her new status, the bride danced with all the guests, who were required to deposit money in her apron for the privilege. Mock bidding might also be held for [206]

the veil, which the bridegroom was expected to purchase. The money collected by the bride and groom helped them to set up housekeeping.

Following donations for the bride, money was solicited for the musicians, who were not paid in any other way. A comically dressed couple entertained the guests with jokes and stories to encourage their generosity. On the evening of the third day donations were given to the cooks, who then gave the donors a piece of the wedding cake and the right to a drink. The cake and drinks were usually provided by the best man. At the conclusion of these donations the final dinner was served, and dancing and singing followed again until the guests departed in the early evening.

Late in the evening of the wedding day, after she had danced with the guests, the bride danced one final time with her husband, who then rushed her out toward the house where they were to spend their wedding night, accompanied on their way by much shouted encouragement and advice. The following morning the couple were awakened by a member of the household, who presented them with a wash basin and water. The person who awakened them was given something in return.⁴⁷

The Slavic bride often received a new pair of boots on her wedding day. She seldom put them on again for fear of wearing them out, but she would carry them to church and festive occasions over her shoulder—to show that she had a pair. Many women saved their boots to be buried in.⁴⁸

Weddings were clearly important in the immigrant community, but the funeral perhaps best epitomized the communal, village tradition of the ethnic settlements. After the death of a parishioner—let us say a respected worker who had helped build the immigrant colony—the church bells tolled three times a day, at dawn, noon, and evening. The tolling continued every day until the deceased was buried and the "Eternal Memory" had been sung. The viewing took place in the home of the deceased. Lodge members and friends would gather in the coal cellar, after the priest had led the rosary, to drink and celebrate a life lived in commitment and strength. When the viewers had left, and late night approached, they would, one after another, lead an all-night vigil by the side of the coffin. In rural settlements lodge or parish members would dig the grave on the morning of the burial. On the day of the burial a procession formed after the mass. First came the priest and altar boys, followed by men from the neighborhood carrying church banners, the pallbearers, the family, and other mourners. After the burial all attended a feast prepared by the family, relatives, and neighbors. For weeks, sometimes months afterward, lodge members and ladies from the church visited the widow regularly to help provide for her material and emotional needs. Here was the immigrant community at its best [207] a world and a tradition a thousand years in the making—communal, compassionate, intensely religious, calling itself together in one final celebration for a son who had given himself in equal measure to family, lodge, church, and community.

Religious feast days also provided ceremony and celebration, both for the community as a whole and within individual families. What annoyed the English-

speaking miners and inhabitants of the region, however, was the number of feast days. The Greek Catholics had twenty-nine and the Roman Catholics twenty-six, nearly all of which were observed. To the despair of the coal operators and the disgust of miners who wanted to work, many mines were frequently idled because half the force was absent.

The most important religious holy days were, of course, Easter and Christmas. On Easter large crucifixes were laid in the churches near the altars and close to votive candles, and after the mandatory confession of sins during the Lenten season, parishioners came forward, sometimes on their knees from the rear of the church, to kiss the feet of the crucified Christ. They then lit a candle and prayed for souls in purgatory. Tombs were often constructed over the site, and male members of the church's religious organization stood guard for a period equal to that in which Christ remained in the tomb. Good Friday was observed with a great deal of ceremony; many people stayed in the church and prayed during the hours when Christ hung on [208] the cross. On Good Saturday baskets of food were brought to the church and were left near the altar, where they were blessed by the priest. Following divine liturgy on Easter Sunday morning the consecrated food was eaten by the family.

A Ukrainian priest, Monsignor Stephen Hrynuch of Saints Cyril and Methodius Church in Olyphant, remembers Easter during his youth:

Easter was the time when we rejoiced in the resurrection of the Christ. Before Easter all the children wait for the priest to come bless them, and their Easter basket, and usually he would come to each house ... and give the cross to the kids. . . . Easter day was a solemn day also, and then we would go to church and ring the bells all day long. ... the boys and girls would dance.⁴⁹

Christmas was a gala time for the gathering of family and friends, the consumption of ethnic foods, and the most intensive observance of Old World customs. In Polish families, for example, the Christmas season was ushered in with the traditional Christmas Eve supper—*wilja*—at which every member of the family gathered in the home of the parents or grandparents. For the dead and for the living who [209] were unable to be present a place was set at the table. Straw or pine boughs to represent the manger were placed on the table, which was covered with a white cloth. Meatless dishes, as many as ten or more, were served. During the supper the age-old custom, the breaking of the communion wafer—*opiatek*—blessed by the church, took place. Everyone ate a bite of the wafer and wished all people present good health, wealth, and happiness as well as forgiveness for all misunderstandings. After supper the candles on the tree were lit and gifts presented to the children. That was followed by the group singing of Christmas carols—*kolendy*—and midnight mass—*pasterka*. After mass there were visits with neighbors for the exchange of greetings.⁵⁰

Holidays, especially Christmas, were occasions for the preparation of special

foods. The son of a Slavic immigrant remembered:

the things that they had [at Christmas] they had to work hard for. . . . And some of the special things were homemade butter. They didn't have any churners, and you had a two-quart bottle and you would roll that bottle until the butter started to appear. . . . *Pierog* was good, and *collachie*, which was poppie seed rolls, and crescent rolls. But it was a festive occasion when they had meat. The Christmas Eve supper we had *collat*, which was a wafer and they would come out on a platter. . . . they used honey and a little smear of garlic, and they would eat that before they sat down to eat. But they ate that to be reminded of how sweet life can be.⁵¹

One of the most picturesque Christmas customs among the Slavs was the traveling narrative. Several men, dressed in costumes, went from house to house, telling of the birth of Christ, in a performance of considerable dignity but also much fun. There were three "Brothers of the Church" representing the wise men from the East. One carried a miniature house on the end of a pole to represent the church. His two companions walked at his side and with songs told the story of the Nativity. The group was accompanied by grotesque figures dressed to represent the devil, heathens, and nonbelievers, and they danced and indulged in ludicrous performances to furnish the fun. The "Brothers" tried to persuade the nonbelievers to worship, efforts which were rewarded by money or cakes. The money was turned over to the church.

The week between Christmas and New Year's Day was a time of merrymaking. During the week, instead of exchanging presents, friends distributed *piroge*, small cakes containing either fruits or vegetables. Each family made an enormous pie, about thirty inches in diameter and several inches thick, containing seventeen different ingredients, from which each member of the family had to eat. Barley mixed with honey was also a dainty made during this period. When it was first made, the head of the house threw a spoonful against the ceiling. If it stuck, it was a sign of prosperity and happiness in the new year. If it failed to stick, it was a sign of bad luck and all fun-making in the house ended. [210]

On New Year's Eve members of the community marched to the house of the wealthiest among them and threw handfuls of wheat, corn, or rye upon him because they wished it to grow upon good ground and ensure continued prosperity. In return, the recipient was expected to furnish drinks and cakes to his well-wishers.⁵²

In addition to the family and church with their ceremonies and celebrations, members of the community came together in various informal ways. A favorite diversion among women in winter was the gathering to make articles used in the home. During the cold months people often slept under feather covers, which were continually refurbished and in some cases were passed down from generation to generation. Whenever possible the people kept chickens, ducks, and geese, and after they had been slaughtered for food the feathers were gathered, put in bags, and stored until they were dried. When several bags had been collected, a number of

women or girls were invited to help tear and peel the feathers. This was regarded as a social occasion that gave the ladies an opportunity to exchange stories, jokes, and gossip. At the conclusion of the peeling, a big dinner was served or a party held for the members of the group. The feathers were then used to make pillows or feather covers; very few people bought readymade pillows. Quilting also provided social evenings. It was common to find several women sitting around quilting frames while others prepared dinner.⁵³

The social institution that most frequently brought the men together was the saloon. Slavs were famous for their hard drinking—but probably no more so than miners of other nationalities—a fact that earned for them a considerable and not necessarily upstanding reputation among certain native-born Americans. But for the Slavs the saloon was more than a place for carousing with friends and neighbors. In the early days it was a center of information and services: a place where the immigrant might find temporary lodging, exchange news, find an interpreter or translator or have a letter written, notarize papers, purchase a money order to send home, obtain credit, and even deposit savings—the so-called "immigrant bank." Perhaps the saloons' most important function was that of hiring hall, where mine foremen knew that they could find readily available labor. Since the saloons opened early and remained open until late, they offered convenient hours for the transaction of business.⁵⁴

It was customary, even mandatory, for the miners to have their drink at the end of a shift. Part of the folklore of the region was that a "shot and a beer—"the classic and still-favored setup—helped to clear the body of coal dust. So at certain hours of the day the saloons would be filled with men with lunch pails, miner's hats, and mud-encrusted boots, seeking relaxation after the rigors of a workday underground [211] and regaling their fellows with stories, insults, and jokes.

The saloons could be anything from a simple shack with a bar made of rough planks resting on several overturned barrels to an establishment with polished mahogany bar, brass spittoons and bar rail, and large mirrors. In the larger saloons there would be tables, sometimes set up in a back room, for card playing or "lady guests." (Women, except those of a certain type, were frequently prohibited from entering the bar area itself.) On paydays miners often paid off their laborers in the saloons, and on Sundays, despite local ordinances against opening on the Sabbath, the men would flock to the saloons after mass. Many saloonkeepers on such days would offer free lunches as an additional enticement. On election day the saloons sometimes served as polling places.

The most common beverages were beer, ale, and porter, made in the breweries established in the region by Germans. Whiskey was also favored, substantial shots being drawn from large barrels. The origin of much of the whiskey was questionable; the designation of the common "five cents a drink" type as "rotgut" is suggestive. Yet the miners consumed it in vast quantities, while frequently complaining

about its vile taste and doubtful qualities. Despite the pervasiveness of drinking in the region, alcoholism did not appear to be a greater problem than in other industrial centers. Roberts estimated that the average miner spent from four to six dollars a month on alcohol not an excessive amount.⁵⁵ [212]

Established saloonkeepers held a place of considerable influence in their communities, often serving as representatives or mediators for their particular ethnic group. Opening a saloon, even the simplest, required some capital and more risk, and those who did so usually had a flair for enterprise. A few of them went on to invest in other businesses and became men of substantial wealth and local standing. Since the Slavs were the best frequenters of saloons, it was not surprising that many of the saloons in the region ended up in their hands, purchased from the original German owners. Then they became true ethnic community centers.

* * *

By the final decade of the nineteenth century the Slavs had become firmly established in the region. Those who had decided to remain in the hard coal fields—and they were the majority—had set down roots, started families, built parishes, founded organizations, and begun the process of becoming Americans even as they held on to what they had been. They were tough people, most of them, but their toughness was tempered by their strong attachments to family, church, lodge, and neighborhood. And from their families and communities they drew the strength and steel-hard perseverance that helped them in their enormous struggles to better their lives and working conditions.

ENDNOTES

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3. Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (1930; reprint, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1980), 3.

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6. For this citation, see Job 54, Field Notes 277, WPA Writers' Project.

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15. Greene, 42.
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17. Greene, 34
18. Roberts, 2
19. "You don't think they have souls ..." quoted from Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, Vintage, 1977), 25; Protestant women quoted from Roberts, 49-56, 219, 236, 291, 294-95; Scranton Oral History Project, Bodnar-Vauter interview, tape 11, side 2, June 19, 1973. The tapes and transcripts of the project are located in the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg.
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22. John Bodnar, "Immigration and Modernization: The Case of Slavic Peasants in Industrial America," in Milton Cantor, ed., *American Working Class Culture: Explorations in American Labor and Social History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 341-46; see also John Bodnar, "The Formation of Ethnic Consciousness: Slavic Immigrants in Steelton," in *The Ethnic Experience in Pennsylvania* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1973), 309-30. On the village outlook of Poles, see Caroline Golab, "The Polish Communities of Philadelphia, 1870-1920: Immigrant Distribution and Adaptation in Urban America" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1971); Josef J. Barton, *Peasants and Strangers: Italians, Rumanians, and Slovaks in an American City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1975).
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30. Sister M. Accursia, 9.
31. Bodnar in Cantor, 335.
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49. Scranton Oral History Project, Hrynuck interview, tape 9, side 1.

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