

НАРОДНА ВОЛЯ

НАРОДНА ВОЛЯ

CONCERN "MUSHROOMING" OVER DEATHS

by Jessica Kollar © 2000

Narodna Volya No. 28 August 2000



Photo by © Gene Maslar © 1994

Olga Yuhnick and her daughter Sonia Maslar, cleaning and sorting P'pinky mushrooms.

On the threshold of late-summer mushroom picking season here in America's northeast, mycologists and mycophagists alike are refreshing their safe collecting habits in the wake of 112 poisoning deaths in Ukraine this year [2000] alone. Like Ukraine, mushroom picking is also a popular American pastime. Most Americans, however, engage in it more for recreation and dining enjoyment rather than to eke out food supplies. The Health Ministry of Ukraine reported the rise in deaths from mushroom poisoning was already three times that of last year's figure, with the number still growing. This figure includes 33 children with some cases involving entire families. Meanwhile in neighboring Russia where nearly as many deaths have been reported, some of the poisonings were attributed to the fact that a local variety of the Death Cap (the world's deadliest mushroom, *Amanita phalloides*) had "mutated" to look like ordinary champignons, according to Russia's Surgeon General. Other news releases reported the banning of mushroom sales at local markets there. To further halt the culinary carnage, police were positioned at the edge of forests with loudspeakers warning foragers, "Pick no mushrooms, they are poisonous!"

What sounds like science-fiction is actually taking place in Eastern Europe. Concern for our brethren in Ukraine has some Americans not only looking in the

mirror, but looking at their mushrooms cross-eyed, wondering if the same phenomenon could happen here. Of those numbers, "That's a tremendous amount," said Richard Progovitz (formerly Progorowicz), president of the Susquehanna Valley Mycological Society. With sketchy details on how or why the fatalities in Ukraine occurred, Progovitz speculates that most likely, mushroom poisoning resulting in death is due to "people misidentifying them." While people with failing eyesight, vacationers, or new immigrants sometimes unwittingly gather dangerous look-alikes, the incidence is overwhelming. Since mushrooms are a reflection of their environment, contaminated woodlands are also suspected. Even though edibles far out-number the poisonous varieties often referred to as "toadstools," factors such as pollutants or insufficient cooking techniques can make normally edible mushrooms unsafe.

Gerry Janus, owner-operator of "Vileniki," an herb farm in Montdale, PA, is concerned that misconceptions about mushroom picking and preparation could prove fatal, and "people should be cautious of old-wives' tales and how they are presented." She cited one falsehood known as the "dime test" wherein a silver dime [silver spoon, etc.] placed in the cooking water will turn black if the mushrooms are poisonous. Actually, there is no reliable test, sophisticated gadgetry or fool-proof folk method to accurately gauge toxicity. Janus once observed a very authoritative personality advising novices to "pick anything, as long as you cook them." Wrong again! Janus is concerned that nonsense told by convincing individuals could end in catastrophe. Progovitz agrees, "Depending on the mushroom type, toxins are not always entirely removed during cooking." The Destroying Angel (*Amanita virosa*), for example, can be deadly raw or cooked.



Photo by Gene Maslar © 1994

P'pinky - "The Honey Mushroom."

While commercial mushrooms are abundant in grocery stores in fresh, canned, pickled, marinated and dried formats, Americans still forage through the woods for their favorite wild varieties. One such species, the Honey Mushroom also commonly called the "P'pinky" is not available in stores. The P'pinky is of the *Armillaria* genus, with up to seven different species fruiting world-wide. It is not only a favorite of Eastern-European Americans, but of Italian-Americans, who call it "Ichiodini." The

Susquehanna Valley Mycological Society, now ten years in existence, will soon be embarking on its fall "foray" in quest of P'pinkie and other regional favorites. A foray is an organized jaunt through the woods in search of mushrooms. "People join mycological societies mainly for information. Ours began with merely ten people, seven of whom were of Eastern-European descent. We number more than 100 today," said Progovitz, whose ancestry came from the Carpathians of far-eastern Poland. And there are hundreds of like societies continent-wide under the mushroom-cap of NAMA, North American Mycological Association. Yearly, NAMA registers mushroom poisoning ingestions for humans as well as dogs, where reported. While poisonings in North America can reach into the thousands, those resulting in death remain few. Certainly nothing near what is occurring in Ukraine.

One Susquehanna Valley associate of Ukrainian descent, Gerald Kiballa of Owego, NY, a member since 1992, joined his society not only for the knowledge it extends, but the comradeship it provides. He turns each foray into a family affair taking along his wife, Giovanna, and daughter Katherine, now five, who has been picking since the early age of two. The society serves as a surrogate for Kiballa's Carpathian grandfather who taught him the technique and is now deceased. With differing levels of expertise, each family member keeps their stash separate. Later, Kiballa checks their mushrooms for correctness. Of the little girl, her father says, "She does very well. No mistakes yet, and her small size gives her the advantage in spotting them." Their two young sons will soon be accompanying them on forays. The family is committed to continuing this heritage with each passing season, plundering through the woodlands like Cossacks . . . that is, knife-wielding, basket-toting Cossacks equipped with bug repellent and cell phones.

Kiballa is particularly disturbed over the poisoning deaths in Ukraine since his parents, in the past, had received parcels of dried mushrooms from relatives there and cooked them up for Christmas Eve supper. In retrospect, he says, "We took a chance! That was not safe. A dried mushroom is very difficult to identify. You lose important characteristics in the dried state such as original color, shape and texture. Often they're broken with stems detached." He knows that a deadly mushroom retains that potential even in the dried state. What might appear to be dried P'pinkie could in fact be dried Deadly Galerinas (the P'pinkie's dangerous look-alike). "Whether they come from your relatives in Ukraine or your neighbor across the street, you should never assume they are safe," he said of non-commercial dried wild mushrooms.

Kiballa, likewise, is concerned about the persistence of "beguiling" old-wives' tales, and sees an urgency to separate fact from fiction. These "mush-rumors" - Poisonous mushrooms stain when bruised; secrete milky sap; turn garlic blue; turn silver black; have scales and rough surfaces - are all wrong to certain degrees. In following these myths, one may pass up edible species, however, "It's more important NOT to eat a poisonous mushroom than to eat an edible one," he quotes. And these reverse-folktales could prove deadly: Safe mushrooms grow on wood; are infested with slugs and insects; have been nibbled by animals; are dried, boiled, salted or pickled in vinegar; are pure white in color. Citing the one about animals

nibbling, Kiballa says, "How do you know the animal isn't dead somewhere?" And forget about blaming the "old wives" when Hollywood might be just as much to blame for common delusions. In the 1970 Clint Eastwood flick, "The Beguiled," Eastwood's character is presented with a delectable dish of deadly mushrooms picked by a deceived, vengeful admirer. Upon gobbling them, suddenly his vision becomes blurry and he falls dead to the floor. "That's not how it happens, usually," says Kiballa, "and people may derive the misconception that death from mushrooms is likely instantaneous." This belief might delay people from seeking proper medical treatment. Progovitz further clarifies, "Again, depending on the mushroom type, the onset of symptoms could be 10-13 hours when a tightening in the abdomen occurs. When this discomfort goes away, that's when you're in trouble." Often mistaken for indigestion or a stomach virus, with mushrooms not even suspected, "the toxins are now positioning to infiltrate the vital organs. Usually the liver shuts down. Medically, it has to be caught quickly," said Progovitz.

In Ukraine where suddenly a lot of foragers are mistakenly misidentifying makes the opinion of "mutation" almost feasible, however, Americans remain skeptical. Nor is it rational that a nation of mushroom connoisseurs had suddenly gotten careless, especially where lives are at stake. "Certainly, if there's something new and deadly out there, mycologists would want to know about it. Whatever the cause, something is definitely going on," said Kiballa, who is cautious about pollutants. "We never pick along roadsides due to fuel emissions, or near golf courses because of possible chemical treatment," he said. That goes for any industrial infiltration, no matter how pristine the woods appear. "And all of these overseas reports can fuel 'fungophobia' making people too afraid to pick and eat mushrooms," he said. Fear and hysteria, however justified, could devalue a revered, romantic ethnic pastime that has been called, among monikers, an art, a science, a skill, a meditation and a process. Some mycological societies deem it a sport, where pickers are called "hunters."

Nutritionally, mushrooms are low in fat, calories and carbohydrates, compare to most vegetables with vitamin content, and are sources of protein and trace minerals. Notwithstanding, they are delicious. They are, however, hard to digest and should only be eaten in small quantities, especially by small children, the elderly, and the infirm. When sampling a new mushroom for the first time, other varieties should be excluded for at least 48 hours. Some mycophagists save intact samples just in case they do get sick. Mushrooms should always be well cooked unless known to be safe eaten raw. Sometimes sickness occurs not because the mushrooms themselves were poisonous, but because they spoiled, causing poisons similar to those in putrefied meats and vegetables to generate. Some mushrooms cause sickness when consumed with alcohol such as wine. With plenty of information to disseminate when picking, preparing, and consuming mushrooms, many people would sooner forego the forest fungi. Others are poetic die-hards: "They smell of the woods and the clean air and mysterious shadows where pretty little elves dance together," said Corporal John McBurney, moments before his death by mushrooms (Clint Eastwood, *The Beguiled*).

For the brave at heart, if you never heeded your grandparents when they wanted

to show you how it's properly done, you haven't missed the boat. Mycological societies are sprouting up everywhere and they are dedicated to keeping the art of mushroom picking alive . . . as well as the people who eat them. Help is at your fingertips. Using any search engine and the key word "mycology" will yield hundreds of web-sites related to the subject of mushrooms on the INTERNET. Enjoying mushrooms shouldn't be a life-and-death situation. Progovitz offers an old wives' tale with merit, which came from his grandmother, that is, "Cook the mushrooms twice. Boil them once and discard the dirty water, then boil them again in new water." The number-one rule is to never eat a mushroom unless it has been positively identified as being edible. "And always remember," Progovitz quotes this cardinal rhyme, "*When in doubt, throw it out.*"



Photo by Gene Maslar © 1994

Olga and Sonia continue the tradition of their Ukrainian Lemko ancestors.

Visit this website for more information: [North American Mycological Societies](#)