

Sydney Taylor Book Award Acceptance Speeches

The Keeping Quilt

Patricia Polacco, Author and Illustrator
Picture Book Award Winner

Introduction by
Aileen D. Grossberg

Our first Sydney Taylor honoree is having an outstanding year. She recently received the International Reading Association's Award for one of her first published books, *Rechenka's Eggs*. Patricia Polacco is a Californian with a world view. A descendant of an immigrant Russian-Jewish family that included storytellers, poets, farmers, teachers, and artists, Ms. Polacco is both an artist and a writer. Her interest in Russian culture took her to the USSR in 1988 for a citizens' exchange of Writers and Illustrators of Children's Literature. This year, she will accompany 50 American school children to an art camp outside Leningrad. There, the American children, along with 50 Russian children, will paint a large mobile mural depicting the 21st century.

Patricia Polacco has a degree in fine arts and holds a Ph.D. in art history, specializing in Russian and Greek painting. Appropriately for a person with a world view, she has attended schools in both the United States and Australia. Five of her books have been published within the last two years, and several more will be appearing in late 1989 and into 1990. Many more are waiting in the wings.

The Keeping Quilt, the winner of the Sydney Taylor Book Award for younger readers, is a warm retelling of the author's family history through the generations, and the continuity that a quilt, passed from mother to daughter through the generations, represents. Appearing in pictures of family activity and Jewish life-cycle events, the quilt is the only touch of color in the pencil drawings.

Of the folklike drawings and the homey story, our reviewers have said, "The illustrations are warm and emotional, and the quilt, the only colorful part of them, lets us know (like a Greek chorus) what we should be paying attention to." In addition, the Committee observed that "the narrative is simple and infused with a tender and almost private sensibility, much like one would use to tell a beloved family story."

This is a book in the true Sydney Taylor tradition, for it tells the stories of families. But now we'll let Patricia Polacco tell the story of her story.

Remarks by Patricia Polacco

First of all, I would like to thank the Association of Jewish Libraries for this very great honor! Before I accept this wonderful award, I must tell you that I am accepting it on behalf of a number of souls who are standing here with me tonight. None of this would be happening if it weren't for this little girl whom you see on this page here [indicating in *The Keeping Quilt*]. That little girl was my great-grandmother, Anna, who came to this country on a crowded ship more than a hundred years ago. She landed at Ellis Island. She came with her mother, father, and sister. She could not speak one word of English. She was very lonely and in a new land. In those days when you left Russia, you could never return . . . write to relatives . . . or hear about family members again! The break was a final one.

Can you imagine this child's loneliness in the middle of Manhattan? When she went to school, the other children would come very close to her and speak to her. She couldn't understand them, so she would reach up and touch the "babushka" scarf on her head. They would come even closer and shout at her. She would back away and hold her dress and babushka, for these two items were the only things of her homeland that she still possessed. Whenever she touched them, it made her feel better about being in a strange land. Finally, the school children would come even closer yet and scream in her face in an effort to help her understand English. She used to say to her family, "These American children are very strange. They must not see well, because they have to come so close to your face, and they don't hear well either, because all they do is shout."

Within one year, Anna could speak English. But she missed her homeland. She missed the ways of her people. She sorely missed relatives whom she knew she would never see again, as long as she lived. The only things that made her feel

better were to put on her dress from "back home Russia," and to dance with her babushka scarf.

One day she went to her mother in near panic. Her beloved dress was too small for her to wear. The babushka was too small too.

Her mother said, "I know a way to keep these things that make you happy around you always." Then she took a pair of scissors and cut up the dress and babushka. She took clothes out of a basket that had belonged to relatives from back home Russia and cut them up too.

Then she invited ladies whom she knew to come and help her sew a quilt. The edge of it was Anna's babushka, the symbols were made not only from her dress, but from the clothes of her people in Russia.

"There now," her mother said, "Now you can keep them with you always!" This is why we called it *The Keeping Quilt*.

Our family used the quilt for many things. As a tablecloth for the Sabbath. As a picnic blanket . . . the day Sasha proposed marriage to Anna. Then it was Anna's wedding huppa.

Some time later Anna gave birth to a baby girl . . . Carle. She was wrapped in the quilt and named: the first American in our family.

As Carle grew, her mother Anna taught her to keep the Sabbath and the ways of her people. Finally the quilt became Carle's wedding huppa. Then she gave birth to a little girl, Mary, my mother. She was wrapped in the quilt and named.

By this time Anna was an old woman and frail. She moved into the farmhouse in Michigan with her daughter and family. The quilt was put over her knees in the yard when she was taking the sun. It was used as a tablecloth for her 98th birthday!

Then the day came that the whole family dreaded . . . Lady Anna passed away. The quilt was used yet again to cover her body

while prayers were said to take her soul to heaven.

My mother was a young woman, and it was time for her to leave her mother's house. She took the quilt with her. Then it became her wedding huppa.

Then a rather astonishing thing happened: I was born to this family. Yes, I too was wrapped in the keeping quilt and named. The little boy you see there next to me [in the book] is my "evil, red-headed older brother!"

The quilt was used as a table cover for my first birthday Yes, there is my evil red-headed older brother again I even used the quilt on my bed

I brought it tonight because you might like to see the "Keeping Quilt." [At this time it is brought out and held up.] It is over 100 years old. I used to have this on my bed when I was little. I used to trace my fingers around the edges of the animals. . . . Even doing it now . . . if I close my eyes. . . . I can still smell my Grandmother's perfume. . . . She wore lilac water. . . . I can feel her here with me now. . . . She used to sit on the edge of my bed and tell me whose clothes made the animals in the quilt. She even used to let me take it outdoors and play with it. . . . I used to pin it under my chin and fly around the yard, pretending to be Superman . . . or I would pretend I was a bullfighter, or I used it for a tent over the clothesline. . . .

This quilt was my best friend. . . . With every stitch on it a memory was kept. . . . The love of Anna and my family is preserved in cloth.

Finally the quilt was my wedding huppa. This is my husband Enzo-Mario—He is an Italian Jew. I didn't know they existed until I married him. He was a victim of the Holocaust in Trieste. Three quarters of his family died in Buchenwald and in the Rissiere, a death camp in Trieste. He is a butcher and a wondrous chef. CAN HE COOK! I gained 57 lbs. the first year of our marriage, and it has taken me all these years to lose it. . . . HA!

Yes, there is my evil red-headed older brother in the wedding. This was the same kid that used to say to me, "I ain't never gonna have no kids. . . . Not gonna get married neither!" He is the father of eight! Three of them are red-headed, naughty little devils, just like he was!

The keeping quilt then wrapped both of my children when they were born. In our family, when new babies are born, they are

presented with a piece of bread, so that they will never know hunger; salt, so that their lives will have flavor; flowers, so that they will be blessed with love; wine, so that they will know laughter and good times; and finally, a gold coin, so that they will never know the sting of poverty.

My children are now grown; soon my daughter will leave her mother's house, and, perhaps, this quilt will be her wedding huppa . . . and maybe we will welcome more babies into the world. . . .

That is the story of the keeping quilt! I am, therefore, greatly honored to accept this award for all of the people whom you have just heard about . . . as well as on behalf of my publisher, Simon & Schuster, and editor, Pam Pollack, who believed deeply in this project from the very start.

I thank you all . . . the keepers of the flame!

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