The Woodcutters

 Wood fire was used for cooking, baking, and heating. My mother would buy logs of wood by the wagonloads. Many woodcutters were always available in the market place competing for wood cutting jobs, for which there was no set price. When I was not available because of helping father on a rush assignment, my mother would hire the woodcutters for the whole job, regardless of the time consumed. When I was available (which was most of the time) she hired them by the hour.

 The woodcutters, who usually worked in teams of two, followed the wagonloads to the house, in the back of which the logs were unloaded by merely being thrown on the ground. Their tools were a large, long saw with a handle at each end, a wooden horse on which to place the logs for sawing, and axes for splitting.

 The logs were about six feet long and in diameters of various sizes. The job called for cutting the logs in half, splitting each half into four, throwing the cut pieces up to the attic and stacking them there in neat rows to take up as little room as possible.

 To save time, I would place a log, or two (depending on the thickness), on the wooden horse for them to saw. I would then remove the cut logs to a nearby place for subsequent splitting with the axes. After all the logs were sawed and splitting began, I supplied each with several half logs so as not to waste their time, and removed the split pieces to the back hallway of the house which had the opening to the attic. For the final job, I was in the attic and they threw up to me the split pieces in two’s and three’s. I stacked them about as fast as they threw them up and the job was finished.

 My mother usually had the same team of woodcutters and I found them very pleasant to work with. They were young and strong Ukranians with very good singing voices. They also sang in the church choir. They made their work easy by singing as they were sawing, chopping, or doing anything. They sang popular songs, some of which I also knew, and some of which I learned from them. In either case we sang together.

 After figuring up the time, my mother always gave them something extra and something to eat. This was usually bread with onions and herring, or radishes; and in the summer, freshly cooked corn on the cob, and in the winter, sauerkraut, ending with tea and cookies.

By David B. Schreiber

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