



Polish Holiday Traditions

some old, some current, mostly folklore - but always treasured..

Wesołych Świąt Szczęśliwego Nowego Roku

Prepared by Polish Assistance especially for you so you may share these traditions with family and friends.

Advent

Christmas season begins with Advent and lasts until the Feast of the Three Kings. Advent itself begins four Sundays before Christmas. It is a time for spiritual preparation for the birth of Christ. Advent is a period of fasting and mourning with a few traditional celebrations leading up to the Christmas Day.

Andrzejki

Andrzej is Andrew in Polish and Andrzejki are observed on the eve of St. Andrew's Day (November 29). This celebration focuses on fortune telling. Fortunes are revealed by reading shapes of melted wax that is poured through an ear of old key into water. The wax is then placed between candle's flame and a wall. The shades that are produced on the wall have different meanings. Another superstition requires girls to take off their shoes, and arrange them straight from wall to door. A young maiden, whose shoe first crosses a door sill, will marry soon. The boys, on the other hand, throw needles into a pot of water. It is believed that the needle will point the direction from which his future bride will come. If the needle sinks, the dream will not come true.

Barbórka

is celebrated on December 4th. Barbórka, derived from St. Barbara, is a patron saint of the miners. Many celebrations are organized including parades, especially in the Silesia region (Southern Poland) with miners wearing their festive uniforms.

Świętego Mikołaja

December 6th is St. Nicholas Day. (Mikołaj) Św. Mikołaj stops by each home to inquire if the children were good or bad during the year. They are usually asked to recite a prayer. If they were good, they receive gifts, usually apples, nuts, pierniki (ginger cookies). If there were bad, they get coal or twigs.

Wigilia

Wigilia means Christmas Eve and it comes from the Latin word "vigilare" to keep vigil, to await. Wigilia is the day of strict fast and abstinence as it is a season of penance. Whatever is done that day, will have an effect on the following year. No one quarrels and all is forgiven. If your first visitor is a man, it means luck; if a woman, that might signal misfortune. Mailman means money and success.

Preparations for the Wigilia Feast

The Christmas Tree, first introduced in the 15th century, is usually decorated on Christmas Eve. Symbolizing the Garden of Eden's tree of life, the Christmas Tree traditionally was decorated with apples which represent the forbidden fruit. Paper chains symbolized the serpent. Eventually, candies were added. The trick was to remove the candy and leave the wrapper perfectly intact. Today, the Polish Christmas ornaments are famous around the world.

The Table. Even today, the straw or hay is placed under the white tablecloth, symbolizing the manger. Another tradition refers to straw as the hair of Mother Earth, a symbol of fertility and plenty. By drawing hay from under the tablecloth, it is believed that one can find out how soon one will get married.

The table is also set with an extra setting and there are two interpretations - spiritual and folklore. According to folklore, the extra seating at the dinner table is for the spirits of the ancestors that visit homes on Christmas Eve. Thus, many will

clap hands before sitting down as not to upset a ghost that may already be sitting in that seat. Customarily, the extra place setting is set for the unexpected guest who should not be turned away or for those family members who are absent. This is also to remind us that Joseph and Mary were looking for shelter.

The Wigilia Feast

Wigilia festivities begin with the appearance of the first star "Gwiazdka" in the eastern sky symbolizing the Star of Bethlehem.

The Christmas meal begins with sharing of the blessed Opłatek (communion wafer), which is a symbol of unity with Christ. The head of the household breaks the opłatek with his wife and they wish each other health, wealth and happiness. This offering and exchange of wishes is repeated with each person beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest. For those far away, the opłatek is mailed with good wishes.

There is no meat served and the number of dishes is usually 11 or 13. It is believed that uneven number of dishes brings harvest and good luck in the following year. On the other hand, an even number will destroy a chance of anything that was desired such as wealth, another child etc. However, some believe that there should be 12 dishes to represent twelve apostles.

Meatless dishes include: Fish that is prepared many ways - herring (śledzik), carp or pike. Choice of soups - red borscht, mushroom and sauerkraut soups are most common and are complemented with uszka or krokiety (Polish version of tortellini or egg roll). Pierogi (dumplings) are served with different fillings - usually sauerkraut and mushrooms. The desserts consist of such delicacies as dried fruit compote and kutia (with poppy seeds).

During the meal, św. Mikołaj comes and leaves presents.

At the end of the supper, the host signals and all rise in unison. That custom prevails due to another superstition which foretells that the first to rise will die before the next Christmas Eve. Then all proceed to sit around the Christmas tree and it's time for old stories and singing "Kolędy" (carols).

Pasterka

In Polish, Midnight Mass is called Pasterka. As the name signifies, the Mass of the Shepherd commemorates the shepherds who were the first to greet the newborn baby Jesus. After the Mass, people go home and have a glass of hot compote and a piece of cake. Some have been known to partake in a bit of bigos (hunter's stew) upon return from the Mass.

It is believed that during Holy Night domestic animals speak in human voices, but only the innocent of heart may hear them.

Christmas Day

This day is spent quietly with immediate family. Christmas Day is free of all unnecessary work and dishes are prepared ahead of time. Most popular is bigos (hunter's stew).

St. Stephen's Day

is known as the second holiday and this day is spent on visiting family and friends. At night, carolers wander out carrying a Szopka (crèche). Herody sing as well as reenact scenes from King Herod's life. Herody are usually made up of boys and an accordionist. They are dressed up as Three Kings, King Herod, a soldier, an angel, a devil, death, shepherds etc. Most are given tokens of appreciation such as money or a drink to warm up.

Epiphany

On the feast of the Epiphany, the priest and the organist visit homes. They bless them and write over the doors initials of the three wise men - KMB (Kasper, Melchior and Balthazar) - in the belief that this will spare the homes from misfortune.