

## Wielkanoc (Easter)



The Lenten season precedes Easter with forty days of fasting and is symbolic of penance, fasting and self denial. Easter is a Christian holiday intertwined with unique customs. We share some highlights of the Polish Easter customs.



**"Topienie Marzanny"** (*sinking of Marzanna*) is symbolic of winter's end as winters have a tendency to be long and cold in Poland. A doll is made from old grass and tree branches, set afire, and thrown into the river.



**Tłusty Czwartek** (*Fat Thursday*). Tłusty Czwartek is also known to many as Pączki Day. In Poland it is the Thursday preceding Ash Wednesday. However, in the U.S. Paczki Day is celebrated on Fat Tuesday, which is the last day before Lent begins. Pączki are deep fried jelly filled pastries similar to doughnuts.



**Środa Popielcowa** (*Ash Wednesday*) marks the first day of the 40-day Lenten season in Catholic faith. It is the seventh Wednesday preceding Easter Sunday. During Mass, the priest makes the sign of the cross on one's forehead with ashes made from the previous year's palms. He utters the words "Z prochu powstałeś i w proch się obrócisz", (Thou art from dust and to dust thou shall return). This is a day of fasting and a traditional meal consists of herring and unpeeled boiled potatoes.



**Niedziela Palmowa** (*Palm Sunday*) In Poland, as a symbol of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, bażki (willow twigs) are used in lieu of palms. These are usually cut on Ash Wednesday and put in water. If their buds open in a few days, it is regarded as a good omen for a fair and mild spring. On Palm Sunday, the twigs are blessed in the church and kept for the rest of the year by being placed close to a holy cross or picture in the house. In certain parts of Poland, decorative palms are made of tightly weaved greens decorated with dried flowers and ribbons. They are carried around the church to secure fertility and good fortune.



**Pisanki** (*Easter Eggs*). The name Pisanki comes from the Polish word "pisać" (to write). Eggs are considered symbols of life - the source of creation. It is believed that Pisanki bring good fortune, wealth and health.

Not only are there numerous ways to prepare Pisanki, but each region of Poland developed their own very specific geometric and floral designs. Some are decorated with the traditional symbols of Easter such as Baranek (symbolizing the Lamb of God), pussy willows etc. Solid colored eggs decorated with natural dyes and beeswax are known as Kraszanki.



**Wielki Czwartek** (Holy Thursday) is the first of the last three days of "Wielki Tydzień" (Holy Week). During Mass, the ceremony of the washing of the feet is done in memory of the Last Supper. In the old days, Polish kings performed this rite.



**Wielki Piątek** (Good Friday) is the most somber day of the year and the entire season of Easter. It commemorates the Crucifixion of Christ. It is a day of fasting - nothing is eaten except a little bread and water. Worshipers visit "tombs of Christ".



**Wielka Sobota** (Holy Saturday) Lent ends Saturday at noon, but fasting is observed until Resurrection Mass.

**Blessing of the basket.** It is customary to prepare a colorful basket with a bit of each of the foods to be served at the Easter breakfast. The basket is taken to church and blessed by the priest.

The foods usually included are: eggs, sausages, ham, salt and pepper, bread, cakes, butter and horseradish. These foods have symbolic meanings - egg being a symbol of life, horseradish representing the Passion of Christ, breads, babka, and mazurek (which is usually topped with a cross or a fish) is symbolic of Bread of Life, and the lamb represents Christ. Once blessed, the food remains untouched until Sunday morning.



**Wielkanoc (Easter)** is the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb. Church bells ring and everyone attends Mass. Priests and parishioners circle the church three times as the church bells ring. After Mass, a large bonfire is started in the churchyard. Once blessed, the worshipers take pieces of the wood back to their own houses. Symbolic of the renewal of faith, old fires were put out and new ones started.

Now that the fast is over, the feast begins. Blessed eggs are sliced into pieces to be shared with each person in a similar fashion as the opłatek is shared at Wigilia. The table is covered with a white tablecloth representing the white cloth in which Jesus was placed in the Holy Sepulcher. Only cold foods are served as women traditionally do not cook on holidays. Feeling a bit competitive? Find out whose egg has the hardest shell by smashing eggs together... Watch which side of the egg your opponent is using.



**Smigus-Dyngus (Easter Monday)** It is a day of fun and excitement. The custom of dousing people with water is an ancient rite of spring representing cleansing, purification and fertility. It is a symbol of Christian rebirth and baptism. Traditionally, young men would douse young maidens with water, only to have the women reciprocate on Tuesday by drenching the men. It should be noted that using buckets of water was not unusual. It was also believed that the girl that ended up being most drenched, had the highest chances of getting married. And bit of history... Mieszko I was baptized on Easter Monday in 966.

