



*Polish Assistance thanks you for your support
Wishes You Joyous Holiday Season and
A Very Happy New Year*

Old World Polish Holiday Traditions, some old, some current, mostly folklore - but always treasured. Prepared especially for you so you may share these traditions with family and friends and take pride in our heritage. Culture is the glue that keeps families together and unites us as a group.

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.

For that reason, the early morning Mass, the Roraty, is said. It is held before dawn to symbolize the darkness of the world and the birth of Christ--the Light of mankind. Also, as a reminder that Christmas is approaching, a special candle--Roratna Świeca--is lit on the altar. The lighting of the candle is a very old custom which was begun during the reign of Bolesław Wstydlwy (1226-1279). Still today in Poland, many people attend the Roraty, especially in villages.

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.

Some ceremonies take place before the actual Wigilia/Christmas Eve Supper. Among farmers, a popular ritual is the blessing of the fields with holy water and the placing of sheaves made from wheat, rye, barley and oat straws into the four corners of the room. These sheaves of grain are eventually removed, taken to the orchard and tied to the trees in the hopes of a plentiful fruit crop.

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, simplicity and modesty. The white tablecloth symbolized the purity of Mary. 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. A green one foretells marriage, a withered one signifies waiting; a yellow one predicts spinsterhood; and a very short one foreshadows an early grave.

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.

A lit candle is placed in the middle of the table after it has been blessed by the priest in church, as a symbol of Jesus, Light of the World.

The Wigilia Feast

Wigilia festivities begin with the appearance of the first star "Gwiazdka" in the eastern sky symbolizing the Star of Bethlehem. It is followed by the Reading of the Gospel Luke 2:1-14 by the eldest member of the family.

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 "Koledy" (carols).

It is believed that during Holy Night domestic animals speak in human voices, but only the innocent of heart may hear them. It is also customary to feed the domestic animals with opłatek and dinner leftovers, especially cows to assure the production of plenty of milk. Girls listen to hear from which direction a dog barks because, as the saying goes, it is from that direction her prospective husband would come. Children and teenagers go to the orchard and beat fruit trees with small branches, so there will be plenty of fruit next year. Old stories are told and carols are sung. This goes on until it is time to attend the midnight Mass.

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.

Christmas Day

Christmas is known as the "feast of light", as Jesus, the Light of the World, the Rising Dawn, the Light to be revealed to the Nations (Luke 2, 32), is born. 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 wonder 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.

Szopka

The Christmas creche (Szopka) is common to all of the Christian faith, but the szopka is unique to Poland. The custom originated with St. Francis of Assisi, who set the first Nativity tableau in 1223. It was brought to Poland by Franciscan monks around the 13th century. The earliest sign of a manager scene in Poland was in St. Andrew's church in Kraków. By the 19th century several elements defined the szopka's shape, finding inspiration in the existing structures of Kraków. The stable's roof was covered by a second story and was flanked by two towers. The two towers eventually resembled the Kościół Mariacki (St. Mary's Church) and the central Renaissance dome was reminiscent of Wawel Castle's Zygmunt Chapel. By the end of the 19th century the stable was moved to the second floor and bottom floor was filled with figures of folklore and history.

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.

Reading of the Gospel Luke 2:1-14 by the eldest member of the family

The Birth of Jesus

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.
2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.
3 All went to their own towns to be registered.
4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.
5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.
6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.
7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,[a] the Lord.
12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”
13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,[b] praising God and saying,
14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

In Polish

1 W owym czasie wyszło rozporządzenie Cezara Augusta*, żeby przeprowadzić spis ludności w całym państwie.
2 Pierwszy ten spis odbył się wówczas, gdy wielkorządcą Syrii był Kwiryniusz*.
3 Wybierali się więc wszyscy, aby się dać zapisać, każdy do swego miasta.
4 Udał się także Józef z Galilei, z miasta Nazaret, do Judei, do miasta Dawidowego, zwanego Betlejem, ponieważ pochodził z domu i rodu Dawida,
5 żeby się dać zapisać z poślubioną sobie Maryją, która była brzemienna.
6 Kiedy tam przebywali, nadszedł dla Maryi czas rozwiązania.
7 Porodziła swego pierworodnego* Syna, owinęła Go w pieluszki i położyła w żłobie, gdyż nie było dla nich miejsca w gospodzie.

Pasterze u żłobka

8 W tej samej okolicy przebywali w polu pasterze i trzymali straż nocną nad swoją trzodą.
9 Naraz stanął przy nich anioł Pański i chwałańska zewsząd ich oświeciła, tak że bardzo się przestraszyli.
10 Lecz anioł rzekł do nich: «Nie bójcie się! Oto zwiastuję wam radość wielką, która będzie udziałem całego narodu:
11 dziś w mieście Dawida narodził się wam Zbawiciel, którym jest Mesjasz, Pan.
12 A to będzie znakiem dla was: Znajdziecie Niemowlę, owinięte w pieluszki i leżące w żłobie».
13 I nagle przyłączyło się do anioła mnóstwo zastępów niebieskich, które wielbiły Boga słowami:
14 «Chwała Bogu na wysokościach, a na ziemi pokój ludziom Jego upodobania»*