

POLISH FOLKLORE WEDDING TRADITIONS



ZARECZYNY / ENGAGEMENT

The main event on the night of engagement is to tie together hands of the couple to be married. There are numerous variations on this custom, but in whatever form it appears, the central elements are an uncut loaf of bread and a white towel or scarf. Because engagement is as binding as the marriage itself, it is always done in public in front of the family and friends who act as witnesses. A priest joins the right hands of the couple above the bread, ties them together with white cloth, and makes a sign of the cross over

their joined hands representing "the joined endeavors of the man and woman to prepare the bread" meaning that they always have bread beneath their hands.

THE PARENTAL BLESSING (alternative: after church ceremony and before the wedding venue)

The parental blessing takes place at the home of the bride prior to the church ceremony. The bridegroom goes to the bride's home to take her to church, but first her parents bestow their blessing on the bride and groom-to-be. A crucifix, a lighted candle, a bowl of holy water and a sprinkler (if the regular Polish brush-type sprinkler is not available, this can be a leafy tree branch) should be prepared. Flowers in a vase are always a nice touch. Either kneelers or fancy cushions are provided for the bride and groom to kneel on. They hold hands as they kneel in front of their parents. Traditionally the mother of the bride gives the blessing.

May God Almighty grant you health, happiness and mutual love on your new road through life together and may He bless you with numerous, healthy children -- the fruit of your love. And I also bless you: In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. "Niech Pan Bóg wszechmogący obdarzy Was zdrowiem, szczęściem i wzajemną miłością na Waszej nowej, wspólnej drodze życia i niech Was pobłogosławi licznym, zdrowym potomstwem -- owocem Waszej miłości. I ja Was błogosławię: W imię Ojca i Syna i Ducha Świętego. Amen."

The mother then sprinkles the bride and groom-to-be with Holy Water, whereupon they make the Sign of the Cross. She then gives them the crucifix to kiss. The father of the bride may utter a blessing of his own or simply sprinkle the couple with Holy Water. The bridegroom's parents may also impart their blessing. Others, for instance grandparents, or godparents may also bless the couple.

THE CHURCH CEREMONY

In Poland a bride and groom arrive to a church and walk towards the main altar together. The betrothed enter the church together as fiancés and leave it as man and wife. Hymns played and/or sung during the ceremony traditionally include 'Veni Creator' and Gounod's 'Ave Maria'. Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March' is usually played as the recessional hymn when the bride and groom walk down the aisle to the back of the church after the ceremony as man and wife.

A highly symbolic Polish touch during the marriage ceremony is the priest's blessing. The bride and groom's entwined hands are wrapped with the priest's stole as a sign of permanent unity in the eyes of God and the Holy Mother Church, whereupon the priest bestows his blessing and sprinkles the couple with Holy Water.

Before moving to the back of the church, where well-wishers await them, the bride and groom kneel and pray silently in front of the main altar for a while. They then may briefly retire to the side altar of the Blessed Virgin where the couple kneel for a brief prayer and the bride leaves a bouquet on the altar.

In Polish tradition, guests rained oats and barley down on the couple rather than rice or birdseed as they exited the ceremony. Today, coins are also known to be thrown at the newlyweds but they have to pick up all the coins that have been thrown upon them. This is an adaptation of the traditional custom of throwing grain at the couple to ensure a prosperous and productive future. The coins, similarly, represent wishes for a successful future.

During the church ceremony it was expected of the bride to cry. If she didn't it was believed that she would cry throughout her married life.

Leaving the church ceremony, the bride sometimes threw handfuls of straw on the young boys and girls who followed the wedding party. Whoever it landed on was prophesied to marry before the others. Another belief was that whichever one of the bridesmaids touched the bride or her wreath first after the marriage would marry that year.

THE WEDDING CELEBRATION

When the newlyweds, followed by the wedding party and invited guests, finally arrived to the Dom Weselny (wedding venue), they would find the door closed to them. The Starosta (intermediary) sang a song to open up and the door was opened by the mother who stood before the stoop, sprinkling the married couple with holy water.



In customs that can be documented back to the sixteenth century, when the newlyweds cross the threshold of the wedding venue the mother of the bride welcomes them with bread and salt as symbols of prosperity and bitterness that all couples encounter throughout their lives. This is preferably a round loaf of (unsliced!) rye bread and a small dish of salt. In some places, a glass of wine is also found on the tray. Bread represents never being hungry. Salt is a reminder that times may be difficult, but they will cope with whatever may happen. It was believed that salt had the power to heal and cleanse, uncover thieves, protect houses against fire, dispel storms and hail, and drive away evil spirits. Wine represents good health and good spirits. The bread is specially prepared and often decorated with the names of the couple. The mother might say:

*According to Old Polish tradition, I greet you with bread and salt, so that your home might always enjoy abundance.
"Staropolskim zwyczajem witamy Was chlebem i solą, aby w Waszym domu zawsze gościł dostatek."*

The groom sprinkles the bread with salt and kisses the loaf, then hands the bread to his bride to kiss. He might also break off a small piece and share it with the bride. If wine is provided, the newlyweds share it from a single glass in a sign of eternal togetherness.

Following the bread and salt, the couple traditionally had their first toast. Customarily, the father of the bride or groom presents the couple with two glasses – one of vodka, one of water. They are offered first to the bride, who must make her selection without knowing which is which. Tradition says that whoever ends up with the glass of vodka will be the dominant partner in the relationship. After their drink (and the portent of their future dynamic), the couple throws their glasses; if they break, it is a sign of good luck.

The wedding reception starts with the most famous of all Polish party songs "Sto lat" ("100 years").

Sto lat, sto lat, Niech żyje/żyja, żyje/żyją nam. Sto lat, sto lat, Niech żyje/żyja, żyje/żyją nam, Jeszcze raz, jeszcze raz, niech żyje/żyja, żyje/żyją nam, Niech żyje/żyją nam! A hundred years, a hundred years, we want him/her/them to live. A hundred years, a hundred years, we want him/her/them to live, Once again, once again, we want him/her/them to live, we want him/her/them to live.

When the toasts are proposed people chant "gorzko, gorzko" ("bitter, bitter") meaning the bitter taste of vodka. With this chant they actually ask for a kiss of the bride and groom – in other words they are asking for some sweetness.

Traditional Polish celebratory fare such as roasted duck and veal, pickled herring, dumplings, smoked sausages, potato leek soup, almond-filled pastries or dried fruits were served at the reception.

OCZEPINY / BECAPPING



It is debatable whether many of today's brides would still regard the 'oczepiny' (becapping ceremony) as something meaningful. In the olden days, the bride's floral wreath, the sign of virginity, was replaced a matron's cap to indicate a life of household chores and child-rearing.

The unveiling of the bride represents the bride's transformation from a girl to a woman. The single women circle the bride and the maid of honor removes her veil. A married woman pins a cap to her head. When this happens, the bride is officially considered married. Often the bride tosses the veil, rather than her bouquet, to the unmarried female guests.

Traditionally, the oczepiny ceremony began with the unbraiding and cutting of the young bride's hair. Long braids were symbolic of girlhood freedom; and as a newly married woman, the bride's hair was unbraided to reflect her new marital status. It is said that brides traditionally refused the cap three times, as it represented the loss of independence and youth. Once accepted, the cap became a special symbol of the marriage and was only worn on very special religious occasions.

POPRAWINY/ DAY AFTER

Then there is 'poprawiny', a follow-up party the day after the wedding. This is held at the home of one of the newlyweds' parents, especially when there is quite a bit of food and drink left over from the previous day's festivities.

OLD TRADITIONS (Superstitions)

- Good luck months for weddings are those that contain the letter R in their Polish names such as March (marzec), June (czerwiec), August (sierpień), September (wrzesień), October (październik) and December (grudzień).
- To preserve her good luck, the bride had to wear closed-toe shoes so that luck, future wealth and fortune do not escape through the toes.
- Avoid pearls as they bring a lifetime of misery.
- Do not to trip over her veil or look back when she walked down the aisle.
- If you see the bride subtly move a patch of her wedding dress to cover the top of her groom's shoe, she might be following the old belief that this will give her a position of dominance in the relationship.
- The bridesmaid who after the wedding ceremony first touches the bride is going to get married during next year.
- There is no Anglo-Saxon superstition preventing the bride and groom from seeing each other on the morning of the wedding.
- At a Polish wedding, the bride's father does not give his daughter away at church -- she's not a piece of property!
- Neither does the notion of something old, new, borrowed and blue exist.

Most typical wishes

"Życzę Wam wszystkiego najlepszego na nowej drodze życia zdrowia, szczęścia i zgody małżeńskiej I wish you all of the best on your new road through life health, happiness and marital harmony.

A more religious-flavored wish might run

"Życzę Wam obfitych łask Bożych, abyście się zawsze wzajemnie kochali, szanowali i zgadzali się tak jak Pan Bóg przykazał." I wish you our Lord's abundant blessings that you might always live in mutual love, respect and harmony according to God's plan.