



POLISH AMERICAN **n**ews

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Treasured Polish Traditions Unite Polonia All Over the World



Wesolych Swiat Bozego Narodzenia! That is the way to say "Merry Christmas" in Polish. Among Poles, wherever they are, the most beloved and beautiful of all traditional festivities is that of Christmas Eve. It is then that the Wigilia, or Christmas Eve Dinner is served. It is a solemnly celebrated occasion and arouses deep feelings of kinship among family members.

For days in advance, Poles prepare the traditional foods and everyone anxiously awaits the moment when the first star, known as the Gwiazdka, appears in the eastern sky, for that is when the feast to commemorate the birth of the Christ Child begins.

There is always a thin layer of hay under the white tablecloth in memory of the Godchild in the manger. Before sitting down at the table, everyone breaks the traditional wafer, or Oplatek, and exchanges good wishes for health, wealth and happiness in the New Year. This is such a deeply moving moment that often tears of love and joy are evoked from the family members who are breaking this symbolic bread. The Oplatek is a thin, unleavened wafer similar to the altar bread in the Roman Catholic Church. It is stamped with the figures of the Godchild, the blessed Mary, and the holy angels. The wafer is known as the bread of love and is often sent by mail to the absent members of the family.

The dinner itself differs from other evening meals in that the number of courses is fixed at seven, nine or eleven. According to myth, in no case must there be an odd number of people at the table, otherwise it is said that some of the feasters would not live to see another Christmas. A lighted candle in the windows symbolizes the hope that the Godchild, in the form of a stranger, may come to share the Wigilia and an extra place is set at the table for the unexpected guest. This belief stems from the ancient Polish adage, "A guest in the home is God in the home."

The Wigilia is a meatless meal, no doubt the result of a long-time Church mandate that a strict fast and abstinence be observed on this day before Christmas. Although the Church laws have been revised and permit meat to be eaten on this day, the traditional meal remains meatless. Items that would normally be included in a traditional Wigilia menu include mushroom soup, boiled potatoes (kartofle), pickled herring (sledzie), fried fish, pierogi, beans and sauerkraut (groch i kapusta), a dried fruit compote, babka, platek, assorted pastries, nuts and candies.

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After the meal the members of the family sing Polish Christmas Carols called the koledy while the children wait impatiently around the Christmas tree or choinka for the gifts to be exchanged. Polish Christmas Carols are numerous and beautiful, especially when sung in Polish parishes at the Christmas Eve Mass. This Mass is called the Pasterka, which means the Shepherds Watch, and there is a popular belief in Poland that while the congregation is praying, peace descends on the snow-clad, sleeping earth and that during that holy night, the humble companions of men - the domestic animals - assume voices. But only the innocent of heart may hear them.

Aside from the beautiful Wigilia, the Polish people have a number of other traditions that they practice throughout the Christmas season. Christmas Day itself is spent in rest, prayer, and visits to various members of the family. In Poland, from Christmas Day until the twelfth night, boys trudge from village to village with an illuminated star and a ranting King Herod among them to sing carols. Sometimes, they travel through the towns in expectation of more generous gifts. In some districts, the boys carry on puppet shows called szopki. These are built like a little house with two towers, open in the front where a small crib is set.

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

The Christmas season closes on February 2, known as Candlemas Day. On that day, people carry candles to church and have them blessed for use in their homes during storms, sickness and death.

Wesolych Swiat, Bozego Narodzenia i Szczesliwego Nowego Roku!



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