

# POLISH CHRISTMAS

By Helen Bagdzinska

To a Pole there is no part of the year that is more sacred than Christmas, for this holiday means more than just an exchange of gifts. It means "Wigilia" and the sharing of "opłatek" (Polish wafer) on Christmas Eve with those dearest to one's heart. Blessed are those Polish homes where this beautiful Christmas tradition still abides!

In Poland, Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, is observed with great piety. It is a period of fervent praying and fasting and represents the four thousand years of waiting for the Messiah. In some districts, during this period, young boys disguised as bears, storks and goats visit the village huts where they make the children say their prayers and reward those who pass satisfactorily with nuts, apples and sweetmeats. Those who fail in their prayers, on the other hand, are beaten with a twisted rope.

The day before Christmas, the mistress of the house is busy from morn till night preparing the "postnik" (meatless feast) which is a several course dinner in which every product of the farm, with the exception of meat is represented. The number of dishes varies from five to eleven, the number always being uneven, to insure good luck and good health in the household during the coming year. The more dishes that are served the greater the good fortune that will come to a household. However, care is always taken that the number of guests at the table is even, an uneven number, according to tradition, meaning death to one of the party. A vacant place is left also for the guest who may call on "Wigilia", as no wanderer, regardless who he might be, is to be turned away from any Polish door on Christmas Eve.

The "postnik" is not served till the first star appears in the sky. In many homes no food is served during the whole day, and so, the appearance of the first star is eagerly awaited, especially by the children. The "choinka" (Christmas tree) decorated with gilded nuts, apples, candy and various hand-made ornaments, makes a pretty picture in one corner of the hut. Sheaves of wheat are also placed in the corners of the room. This is supposed to assure a plentiful crop for the coming year.

The table is covered with fragrant hay and a white tablecloth under which is hidden an "opłatek" (wafer), often called "chleb pokój" (bread of peace). The hay signifies the manger in which the Christ Child was born. Before supper, the master of the house shares the "opłatek" with his family and mutual wishes are exchanged. Then the "postnik" follows. The rye is represented by a soup called "barszcz" (beet soup) to which have been added mushrooms. "Pierogi" (turnovers with cabbage, cheese, potatoes and prunes) and "paluszki" (noodles in the shape of little fingers) are made of wheat flour, the latter usually being served with poppy seed. In addition, barley grits with prunes, buckwheat grits, lima beans, fried potatoes, sauerkraut with mushrooms and other dishes follow. In towns and at homes of the gentry, fish is also served. A little must be eaten from every dish, even if only a spoonful, tradition saying that for every dish that is left untouched, that number of times will bad luck and unhappiness enter the life of him who fails to partake of every dish that is placed before him on Christmas Eve.

Before going to church to a midnight mass called "Pasterka" (Shepherd's Mass), the peasant also shares the "opłatek" with his cattle. Of the many legends connected with the Christmas holidays, the most popular of these is the one about the cattle speaking the human language on Christmas night. However, only he who is without sin can understand their language. Reymont's book, the Peasants offers many of the legends and customs connected with Christmas in Poland.

In the Cassubian region, the farmer goes into his garden after the Christmas Eve supper has been served, knocks thrice on every fruit tree and tells it the joyful news of the birth of our Saviour. The labourers take sheaves from the room, twist them into straw rope and wind them against winter frosts. Some of the straw is also scattered on the winter crops to prevent them from suffering from frost.



Christmas night is also the time for various sorts of prognostications. Twelve onion peels cut during the night foreshow next morning by the moisture they have exuded whether each of the twelve months will be rainy or dry. Young maidens go out of doors and listen to the wind or to the barking of the dogs. From whichever direction the wind blows, or the barking of dogs is heard, a suitor will appear in the coming year. If neither one nor the other is to be heard, the young women call loudly listening to the direction from where the echo is heard.

In the region of Gniezno and Kruszwice the girls throw off their shoes, either ahead or behind them. The one who throws the shoe the farthest will be the next bride.

At Christmas time, carol singing in Poland is a quaint ceremonial. The Old Nativity Show is also inseparable from the Christmas period in Poland. Boys appear both in the village and the city with "Jaselka" (Manger in Bethlehem) showing the Infant Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the animals. A presentation of scenes from the life of Christ is given. Christmas goodies and coins are received by the participants.

No manual labor is performed on Christmas Day for it is considered the greatest holiday in Poland. The straw spread on the floor in peasant huts on Christmas Eve remains there until the day after Christmas when the girl of marriageable age is supposed to tidy the house before she is caught "na smiecach" (on the rubbish) by her future suitor.

On Saint Stephen's Day, the day after Christmas, the young people fill their pockets with oats when they go to church and upon leaving the church smite each other with the oats. This proves rather annoying to the girls, but they take it in the right spirit of gayety.

Thus, Christmas was observed in Poland in days of yore. Even though there may be a "postnik" in some Polish huts in Poland this Christmas, and the "opłatek" may be shared in Poland, as well as in other parts of the world, the only wish that will emanate from all Polish lips when this sacred moment arrives, will be, "Christ, Redeemer of Man, restore to us, our Fatherland!"

Then, and only then, with the restoration of Poland to the map as a free nation, will reign, for all time, Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men.