

# Nothing Says *Christmas* Like Polish Christmas Traditions

**By Olga Zapisek**

You know it's that time of the year again when your favorite radio station stops playing Lady Gaga's newest hit, and instead blasts Mariah Carey's, "All I Want for Christmas is You." The long awaited sparkling holiday window displays have surfaced enticing consumers to buy their gifts, and children have been busily making their Christmas lists in hope of Santa bringing them the latest, trendiest toy. Yes, there is simply no denying it. The holidays are almost here. As is the Christmas rush.

But before you dive into your kitchen and begin all your holiday preparations, there is one thing you may want to keep in mind: traditions. We all have them, especially during the holiday time, but for those of us who are Polish or of Polish descent there are certain customs that come into play around this time of year. So from my home to yours, here are a few Polish Christmas traditions that you may want to bring into your holiday, if you already haven't.

## The Christmas Tree

Nothing says it's the holidays like a big Christmas tree. While according to Polishcenter.org, the tradition of having a Christmas tree in one's house derives originally from Alsace, a region of France, at

the end of the fifteenth century, it became quite popular in Poland in the eighteenth century and has remained ever since. Before then a part of a fir tree had been hung from the ceiling dressed in apples and sweets. But what makes the Christmas tree so special in Poland, you ask? Simply put - the process of decorating it. Or rather the exact day it is done. Unlike in America where Christmas trees are often decorated and put up early in December, Poles bring home the tree and decorate it on Christmas Eve. The Christmas tree then remains in the household till January 6th, which is the end of the holiday season and the 12th day of Christmas, when the three kings finished their journey known as the Epiphany.

## The First Star

According to Polish tradition, the Wigilia supper meal cannot begin before the first star appears in the sky. The youngest child in the family is sent to look for it after the sun begins to set. Only when the star is sought out can the family sit down to supper. But nothing on the table is touched until everyone has broken off a piece of the opłatek.

## The Breaking of the Opłatek

The opłatek is a rectangular shaped, very thin wafer made from

pure wheat flour and water. It is usually white in color, and has a picture of the nativity scene on it, or a holiday related one. There are some that are made in pastel colors such as pink and green, and are usually used for decoration. Before the family sits down to enjoy the abundant Christmas Eve (Wigilia) supper, they gather around the table, and each take a piece of the opłatek. Then they each take turns breaking off small pieces of one another's opłatek, while giving heartfelt wishes to each other for the coming year. This is a very emotional and reflective moment that emphasizes the importance of forgiveness, family, those who have passed, and God.

If the household has house or farm animals, a piece of the opłatek is also shared with them at midnight. According to Polish folklore, animals will speak in a human voice when the opłatek is split with them.

## The Wigilia Supper and Table

Once the opłatek has been shared, the family sits down to the Wigilia feast. The supper itself is made up of 12 different courses as a representation of the 12 Apostles. The dishes may vary according to region and from family to family, but some common Polish ones are: various kinds of pierogi, kutia, which is a sweet dish, made up of

noodles with poppy seeds and cream, herring (sledzie) often in sour cream or oil, and fried carp. The meal almost always starts out with the wigilijny barszcz z uszka-mi (Christmas Eve red borscht with mushroom filled dumplings). Desserts often include Polish style cheesecake (sernik), poppyseed roll (makowiec), fruitcake (keks), fruit compote (kompot), and pierniki (gingerbread). And of course there is the alcohol ranging from cognac to various flavored liqueurs. One thing that is not eaten till Christmas day by the Poles is meat.

But before the 12 dishes are laid out, the table is covered in a white linen tablecloth, which according to About.com symbolizes Mary's veil. Sometimes a small replica of the szopka (nativity scene) and bits of hay are placed on the table as well.

While the table is set for all the members of the family and close friends, one empty setting and seat is always left at the table for a wandering, weary stranger. This represents the wandering Joseph going from house to house in search of a place for Mary to give birth.

## Presents

In Poland, the presents are opened on Christmas Eve, usually after the Wigilia supper is finished. According to the English language newspaper in Poland, Cracow Life,

in certain regions of Poland it is believed that the presents are brought not by Santa Claus, but by an angel. However, most regions believe in the former.

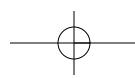
## Koledy and Pasterka

Before, during, and after the Wigilia supper, families join together in the singing of the kolędy (carols). In some regions of Poland, carolers dressed in costumes of animals and the Three Kings, go from home to home knocking on doors and singing traditional Polish carols to others. These are referred to as "kolednicy." Right before midnight, families and friends gather with their entire community, and walk together singing carols as they make their way to the pasterka (Shepherd's Mass) at their local church, which is held at midnight.

## Christmas Day (one and two)

In Poland, both December 25 and December 26 are considered to be Christmas days, referred to as "pierwszy dzień świąt" and "drugi dzień świąt" (first day of Christmas and second day of Christmas). Usually both Christmas Eve and the first day of Christmas are spent with one's close family and friends, while on

(PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 48)



## CHRISTMAS CARDS (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45)

fold there was room to include a symbolic *opłatek* and a personal message and sometimes a family update.

A universal inscription to include on a card is: *Zdrowych i radosnych Świąt Bożego Narodzenia oraz Szczęśliwego Nowego Roku* (Wishing you a healthy and joyous Christmas and a luck-filled New Year). A more private version: *Niech czas Bożego Narodzenia upływie w atmosferze radości i miłości, a Nowy Rok spełni wszystkie wasze marzenia* (Let this Christmas time be full of joy and love and the New Year makes all your wishes come true).

In current times, the tradition and design of Polish cards has been lost in the commercialism of the holiday in Poland and throughout the world. Santa Claus, reindeer, holly, mistle-



Modern cards. A Polish Bethlehem was a motif continued with modern one-fold cards.

toe, and cuddly dogs and cats have replaced the Nativity scene or its Polish folklore equivalent. The delightful Old World cards are difficult to obtain, but shopping around one can find their own truly religious or Polish religious expression for the holy days of the Christmas season.

*Wesołych Świąt Bożego Narodzenia!*

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36)

your family, friends, also Mae & The Polka Maniacs. **STO LAT!**

**NEW JERSEY** – Special Birthday wishes to Sr. Mary Adalbert (Wierciszewska) of the Immaculate Conception Convent of Lodi who will celebrate her birthday on Dec. 26th from your sister, Sr. Mary Hortulane (Wierciszewska) of the Our Lady of Lourdes Infirmary, your relatives, cousins, friends and sisters of the convent and infirmary. God Bless You and **STO LAT!**

**PENNSYLVANIA** – Birthday wishes to Marie (Manya) Dybicz-Lewandowski of Philadelphia who will celebrate her birthday December 27th. Special wishes from her brothers Ed, Tom, Chet; Bea & Rocky, all your relatives, friends, Jean Grabowski & *The Post Eagle* Staff (Marie's recipes appear in *The Post Eagle*). **STO LAT!**

**NEW JERSEY** – Happy 65th Birthday to Bob Mularz of Union celebrating on Dec. 27. Best Wishes being sent from sister Jean Marczak and husband Ted, also wife Carol and sons Edward and Matthew. **STO LAT!**

**MASSACHUSETTS** – Birthday wishes to Mary Masse of Palmer celebrating her birthday December 29th. Happy Birthday from your family, relatives & friends. **STO LAT!**

### Anniversary Wishes

**NEW JERSEY** – Anniversary wishes to Tom & Barbara Bentkowski of Cranford, celebrating their wedding anniversary January 1st. Best Wishes & Congratulations from your family, relatives, friends and all the Polka Maniacs. **STO LAT!**

### Sound-A-Bouts Fan Club

**BIRTHDAY WISHES** – Joe Chelstowski, NH - Dec. 21. Joseph Buczynski, MA - Dec. 25. Eddie Lynch, MA - Dec. 26. Helen Fichera, MA - Feb. 9.

### Jimmy Sturr Fan Club

**BIRTHDAY WISHES TO:** Margaret Smaistrla, TX; Joe McCann, NY - Dec. 19. Robert Clifford, MA - Dec. 20. Vic Ference, PA; Edith Bogus, CT - Dec. 23.

**ANNIVERSARY WISHES TO:** Daniel & Evelyn Braikovich, NJ; Jim & Genie Faughnan, NY - Dec. 18.

## DISTRICT SEVEN

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36)

thoughts of long ago. Here is an idea of where and when some of the choruses will be singing:

### Saturday, December 18

Hejnal #323 presents their Christmas Concert at 177 Kent Street, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, NY. For details call Halina Fabianska at 718-782-1363.

### Sunday, December 19

Chopin Singing Society #182 participates in Queen of Peace Chorus in a Christmas Concert at Queen of Peace R.C. Church in North Arlington, NJ

## LETTERS

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2)

stration and to oust the supporters of lustration from the PAC. This weakens the efficiency and effectiveness of the PAC, which is the goal of the Communist agents who do not want a voice for a truly free and sovereign Poland to be heard in this country.

The anti-McCarthyism reflex also avoids discussion about the continuity of Communist influence in today's Poland. In an effort to be politically correct, some of these PAC leaders either dismiss, or ignore, persuasive documentation showing how former Communists who have transformed themselves into Eurocrats continue to rule Poland. These true perspectives on what goes on in Poland today are put forward by Professor Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, who holds the Kosciuszko Chair at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, DC.

The high merit of SNEAK ATTACK is to persuade readers that Communist agents like Harry Dexter White, and by extension spies in general, have been able to assume positions of trust at the highest levels of government in order to betray the trust of the people that they have sworn an oath to serve. Recalling the histrionics of Senator Joseph McCarthy is not a persuasive argument against lustration, or against vigilance against spies who in fact do real harm.

A translation of SNEAK ATTACK into Japanese is in progress. Koster's book should be translated into Polish too. Those whose first, or working, language is Polish and who have a strong interest in contemporary history should write to me about this translation opportunity at: durho244@yahoo.com.

– John Czop

## NOTHING

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26)

the second day of Christmas usually Poles will visit friends and family that live further away.

The first day of Christmas is also the day that meat is introduced back. Some well-known courses that can be found on the breakfast and dinner table at this time consist of: pasztet (pate), duck, ham, kielbasa, and bigos (hunter's stew).

So if you yourself are Polish, or have ancestors that were, bring these traditions into your home, after all, they are a part of who you are, and should be cherished and nurtured due to their unique and unprecedented beauty. Merry Christmas to you all (*Wesołych Świąt!*)

at 3 pm.

### Saturday, December 25

Chopin Singing Society #182 sings kolędy at the 10:30 AM Mass at St. Joseph R.C. Church in Passaic, NJ.

### Sunday, December 26

Chopin Singing Society #182 sings in Clifton, NJ at St. John Kanty R.C. Church's 10:30 AM Mass.

### Saturday, January 1

Chopin Singing Society #182 sings at the 10:30 AM Mass at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Garfield, NJ. Aria #303 sings during 12:15 PM Mass at Sacred Heart Church in Wallington, NJ

### Sunday, January 2

Chopin Singing Society #182 sings at the 11:30 AM Mass at St. Bonaventure Church in Paterson, NJ

### Saturday, January 8

Chopin Singing Society #182 sings at the 6:30 PM Mass at Most Sacred Heart Church in Wallington, NJ. Hejnal #323 presents a repeat per-

formance of their Christmas Concert held 12-18-10 at 177 Kent Street in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, NY. Call the secretary Halina Fabianska for further information at 718-782-1363.

### Sunday, January 9

Chopin Singing Society #182 sings during Passaic's (NJ) Holy Rosary Church's 10:30 AM Mass.

Jutrzenka Singing Society #226 sings during the 11 AM Mass at Our Lady of Częstochowa - St. Casimir R.C. Church in South Brooklyn, NY. This year, after Mass, the chorus will present their Annual Christmas Concert and later will join the parishioners in the Parish Opłatek at 2 pm.

### Sunday, January 23

Izabella Kobus-Salkin, District Seven Choral Director, is engaging District Seven Choruses in presenting at 2:00 PM a Christmas Concert at St. Stephen's Church on East 27th Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenues in Manhattan, NY.

## OP-ED ... IS IT

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2)

was instituted, and for centuries kept, as a religious holiday (as in "holy day"). Originally, Christmas included festivities, but its primary purpose was to provide a time for spiritual renewal.

Unfortunately, far too many parents, students and teachers erroneously believe they cannot celebrate Christmas in the public schools. Whether through ignorance, fear or political correctness, Americans are painfully misguided about the recognition of religious holidays. (The word *holiday* it must be emphasized means *holy day*.) Ironically, the most targeted religious holiday for exclusion is Christmas--also the most popular in American culture. Are American schoolchildren to be forbidden from learning about one of the most culturally significant events because it has spiritual overtones?

To the contrary, there are ways to celebrate Christmas in the public schools without violating the United States Constitution. These are succinctly set forth in The Rutherford Institute's "Twelve Rules of Christmas," available at [www.rutherford.org](http://www.rutherford.org). While it is true that public school teachers, as agents of the state, may not advance religion, they are allowed to discuss the role of religion in all aspects of American culture and its history. And this includes the religious aspects of the Christmas holiday.

Indeed, teachers can use Christmas art, music, literature and drama in their classrooms, as long as they illustrate the cultural heritage from which the holiday has developed. Religious symbols, such as a Nativity scene, can be used in this context as well. Of course, any holiday observance should occur in an educational setting, rather than in a devotional atmosphere. Teachers should also make students and their parents aware of the school district's opt-out policy as an alternative to the teaching about any particular religion.

While our Constitution does not give *carte blanche* to promote religion in the public schools, neither does it dictate a cleansing of Christmas from the classroom. Students may enjoy the same freedom of religious expression that is allowed any other time of the year--in or out of the classroom. This means that students can freely distribute Christmas or Hanukkah cards to their friends and teachers, just as they would a birthday card. Such cards can even mention the words God and Jesus Christ.

Erasing traditional Christmas practices from our daily life is discouraging and disheartening. In a society already known for its selfishness and consumerism, it seems that a religious holiday would be an opportunity to celebrate something more essential, something wholesome and good and also something that would remind us of our nation's history--one that is dominated by a spiritual and religious heritage.

In fact, rather than making Christmas the height of the selling season, why can't the focus be on celebrating family and friendship, camaraderie and memories? Why can't it be a time to reflect and celebrate our freedoms? Why can't it be a season of extending a helping hand to the less fortunate? Why can't it be a time to step back and meditate on the original meaning behind the Christmas holiday? And why can't these important traditions be taught in our schools?

It has been more than 40 years since Charlie Brown, as he puzzled over the glitz and commercialism of the modern age, asked, "Doesn't anyone know the true meaning of Christmas?" Linus responded by telling the story of Jesus Christ's birth, as recounted in Luke 2:7-14, to his friends and classmates. What Charles Schulz' beloved 1965 cartoon did not capture, however, was the growing aversion on the part of many school officials and public figures to anything remotely related to the true Christmas story. Hopefully, as our children ponder what Christmas is all about--a subject that almost certainly arises in the classroom--our teachers at least will realize that they have the right to truthfully answer the question. If so, our children will have the opportunity to experience the richness of our traditions and culture. And what better time than Christmas?

*Constitutional attorney and author John W. Whitehead is founder and president of The Rutherford Institute. He can be contacted at johnw@rutherford.org. Information about The Rutherford Institute is available at [www.rutherford.org](http://www.rutherford.org).*