

Polish Folkways in America

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Polish Christmas folkways were celebrated in America with scarcely any change in the decades from 1880 to 1910; even today the principal features survive wherever there is a small Polish community. The four weeks of Advent were strictly observed, with fasting and cessation of gayety.

Preparations for the manger, the tree and Christmas Eve supper were started in good season. The organist or the Sisters made the wafers and either they or the altar boys took them to the homes of parishioners or the parishioners would call to buy them at the rectory or the Sisters' home. If there were married children or brothers and sisters living at a distance, a few pieces would be sent to them in a letter or card. Wafers received from Poland were particularly cherished. The custom of breaking the wafer, either dry or spread with honey, among the participants in the Christmas Eve supper and guests who came in later persists to this day, though it is no longer as universal as it was forty years ago.

The Christmas Eve supper then consisted, and still largely consists now, of the traditional dishes, though the rule that four (or five) sources of the family's food - the field (grain), the garden (vegetables), the orchard (fruit), the woods (mushrooms), the water (fish) - must be represented, was forgotten early and most of the peas and grain dishes disappeared long ago. But cheese and sauerkraut pastries (pierogi), fish in various forms, fish or mushroom soup with noodles, herring and boiled potatoes, dumplings with plums or poppy seeds, stewed prunes with lemon peel or a compote of dried fruit and poppy seed cake appear on every table to this day.

The rule about the odd number of dishes is observed quite generally, though, as in Poland, there is no prescription as to a precise number - usually it is nine or eleven. Care is taken, too, about the number of persons to be placed at the table. In Poland the number must be even or, according to the common belief, one of the number will die during the year. In America the number thirteen is avoided, less, apparently, on the score of being odd than on the score of being an unlucky number generally - a superstition obviously acquired here since in Poland thirteen is not considered particularly ill-omened. The belief that it is an evil omen if a person seated at the Christmas Eve table does not cast a shadow has survived in scattered localities.

A correspondent in Detroit reports that it is customary there for all to look behind them to see if their shadow is there, otherwise, the year will bring bad luck, such as illness or death. But, the correspondent adds, the head of the house sees to it that the light is so placed that everyone will cast a shadow. A correspondent from Newark reports that in her home when she was a child, if there were thirteen to be seated, her mother would not sit down but would serve; otherwise one of the thirteen would surely die, especially if he did not throw a shadow on the floor. The belief is scoffed at now, the correspondent writes, but written at table is avoided just the same.

Straw or hay under the tablecloth was used in the early days when available, and straws were pulled to tell fortunes, but it is seldom seen now except as a conscious revival, a deliberate effort to give a Polish touch to the occasion. The practice of putting a sheaf of each of the four principal grains in the corners of the room did not cross the ocean at all. Like other strictly agricultural customs, it could not be transplanted to an urban setting. The food is left on the table at the end of the meal in Detroit for guests who may come in during the evening. The fact that the custom has its origin in leaving or putting aside some of the food for departed members of the family is quite forgotten.

A manger is set up in every church and in many homes. Homes in which there are children always have a tree. This was not always the case in country homes in Poland. The trimmed top of a tree (*podlaznik, podlazniczka*), hung from the ceiling, did not come to this country; neither did the paper-and-straw "spiders" inspired by it. The "spider" is seen occasionally now, as a decorative object brought from Poland in the years before World War II.

Christmas tree decorations in the early days were much the same as those in Poland at the time - walnuts wrapped in silver and gold foil, bright red apples, gingerbread in fancy shapes, candy canes and chains made of glossy colored paper. Now these old-fashioned trimmings are seen infrequently; their place has been taken by glass globes, tinsel and other ornaments obtainable in the ten-cent store.

The appearance of the first star is still watched for as a signal for beginning supper. Devout families in the early days sometimes knelt in prayer after sighting the star; now this is rarely seen. But the wishes which are exchanged at the breaking of the wafer are, for the most part, couched in the form of a prayer: God bless you, God give you happiness - *Daj Ci Boze szczescie*.

And the star continues to be commemorated in the name *gwiazdka* -- the little star; it is applied to the holiday - usually, however, without realization of the origin of the name, just as is the case in Poland.

In St. Hedwig's parish in Trenton, N. J., there is a communal Christmas Eve supper with the pastor acting as host, breaking the wafer and exchanging good wishes and blessings with his parishioners.

After supper, in former days, the candles on the tree were lighted by the entire family or by the children alone; then followed carol singing by the entire family. After that, the father or mother would tell old Polish Christmas legends and how Christmas was celebrated in the old country. The fact that there the Christmas wafer was taken to the beasts in the stable before it was offered to the family was also told-also the belief that the farm animals spoke in human voices at midnight.

In the course of the evening neighbor carolers would probably come in and sing for the family; in the early days here, as in Poland, groups of boys and young men went about, beginning on Christmas Eve and continuing through the holidays. They usually carried a *szopka* - a miniature stable, with figures of the Holy Family, the shepherds and the animals, mounted on a pole or a platform, to be carried shoulder-high. The star carried by carolers in Poland was less frequently seen and the term *gwiazdor* - the star boy or star man - applied in some sections of Poland to the boy or man who carried the star, came to be applied here solely to Saint Nicholas, not the mitered bishop of Polish hagiology but the jolly St. Nick of the reindeer and sleigh. The custom of caroling has largely passed away here, as has carol singing in the family circle, but the old Polish carols are still sung at Midnight Mass in the churches, by children in the parochial schools, at performances of Christmas plays and at gatherings of various clubs and circles held during the holiday season. But the custom of retelling the old Christmas legends persists. There are probably few children of Polish ancestry who do not know that in Poland the cow, the sheep and the donkey speak in human voices on Christmas Eve.

The custom of the Midnight Mass persists in all Polish parishes. The churches are filled with worshippers though attendance is not as general as it was in Poland or in the early days here.

The custom of gift giving, not general in Poland, has undergone both modification and extension here. In some parts of Poland, Saint Nicholas made his rounds on December 5th, questioned the children on their catechism and either spanked them if they answered poorly or rewarded them with sweets and small gifts if they answered well. During the Christmas holidays, carolers and other young visitors were given sweets or other food from the table or the tree. In America, Saint Nicholas became Santa Claus and comes on Christmas Eve. Following the American custom, he brings gifts not only to children but to adults. Card sending too is now general among Polish Americans.

Presentations of the Christmas play, *Jaselka*, are given to this day in many communities, annually in some, at longer intervals in others. Usually they are given in Polish by groups of children in parochial schools, by young people from a church organization or by a dramatic society. In 1934 in New York City a group of Polish American university women gave a presentation of *Jaselka* in English.

New Year's Eve was not observed with any degree of ceremony by the country people in Poland but in the cities the people danced the New Year in as they do in cities the world over. In America the city rather than the country custom was adopted and St. Sylvester Day balls (*bale sylwestrowe*) are held by the dozen in all Polish American communities to this day. New Year's Day itself, though felt as less important and less sacred than Christmas Day, is marked by attendance at Mass by the more devout, by a festive dinner and visits to friends. Many people, both old and young, still take its measure as an indication of the coming year's fortune. The making of New Year resolutions, a custom not known in Poland, is spreading among the younger people. In keeping with the American custom, the young people stress New Year's Eve, the older people in keeping with the old world tradition stress New Year's Day.

Epiphany, the Feast of the Magi, (*Trzech Króli*, the Three Kings, in Polish), was celebrated for a long time in the same manner as in Poland. Chalk, gold, and myrrh were blessed in church and the letters KMB separated by crosses were written with blessed chalk on all doors of the home. In some parishes the priest or the organist came to write the letters. The custom of blessing the symbolical gifts of the Magi persists to this day, and boxes containing a piece

of white chalk, some golden juniper berries and a thimbleful of myrrh may be obtained from the altar boys in some parishes, from a local druggist or by mail from Buffalo where a prominent Polish druggist puts up greater quantities of them each year. But the writing of the letters K+M+B is rapidly passing away. One still sees them occasionally but then only on one door, not on all doors as in former times.

In most homes, however, the inscription is lacking entirely. An aunt of the author in Buffalo, a very devout woman, who was brought to this country as a child of two, confessed that she writes it but in such a place that it may not be seen by scoffers-on the narrow, top edge of the door, facing the ceiling, where, indeed, only the eye of God can see it.

As interesting and fascinating as the Christmas folkways are the Polish marriage folkways to be found in America among Americans of Polish descent. Here, too, one finds sharp contrasts between observances in America and those in Poland.

In the observance of family holidays some customs were retained intact, some modified, some given up entirely. Marriage customs underwent considerable change. In Poland weddings were held most frequently in the fall, after the harvest; in America in former days, the largest number occurred in the carnival season between Christmas and Lent, though, of course, one could marry in the summer and fall also and even, by special dispensation, in Lent or Advent, though it would then have to be a quiet wedding, without music or dancing.

Courtship changed. The institution of go-betweens (*swaty*) vanished. The choice of bride or groom was not made or even inspired by the parents, partly because, in many cases, the parents were not here, but chiefly because the young people felt that coming to this country set them free from parental control. And so they made their own selections, though not without interference by friends and relatives - interference frequently no less drastic than that of parents. The prospective bride was always appraised severely, accused of being poor material for a wife; every fault, real or imaginary, was brought out, hotly discussed and pointed out to the perplexed suitor. It took a strong willed man, or one deeply in love, to withstand all this uninvited counsel. Sometimes the gossips won out and the groom bolted on the eve of the marriage.

The situation was quite different as regards the groom. No one sat in judgment on him even if he was a notorious ne'er-do-well. Somehow it was felt that a husband was a prize in any case, that marriage would steady him, that the girl was lucky to get any sort of husband. The higher appraisal of the male continued here for a long time. Spinsterhood was a disgrace. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the institution of dowry for the girl had vanished completely here. There were no heiresses and no girl was a prize. Two things mitigated the hard lot of the girl, however. If she was here with her family and was the eldest daughter, she and her husband could live with her family for a year or two, and this would compensate for the lack of dowry.

The other favorable factor was that the men far outnumbered the girls. Thus, by and large, for every case of misalliance made by the girl, one could find a case of a young man who picked a poor wife. On the whole, since matchmaking and wealth were inoperative here, most marriages were love matches and turned out well.

The first step towards the wedding was the publishing of the first banns on the third Sunday before the date of the wedding. Then came the inviting of guests, usually in a personal call made by the bride or the groom or the two together. Seemingly only in Buffalo, a prenuptial party was held which had no counterpart in anything in Poland. It was known as "*wybieranki*" - a choosing party. At this function, the young men and women who were to attend the bride and groom at the wedding chose their partners, for they always attended in couples, the splendor and importance of the wedding being measured by the number of couples in the bridal train - "*ile par stalo do boku.*" The men were the groom's friends, the girls the bride's; brothers and sisters and other kin of both bride and groom, if of suitable age, had to be included also. At the choosing party, the young people looked each other over and considered the partners tentatively assigned to them by the bride and groom, who conferred on the subject beforehand and sought to match personalities, appearance, social standing and wealth.

The final choice was left to the young people themselves as far as possible, but brothers and sisters were sometimes asked to accommodate the bride or groom and take a partner whom no one wanted; tears and recriminations were not uncommon. The matter was important to the young people because of the custom which prevailed in photographing the bridal train. The bridal train was photographed as a group, and the photographs were given to the

participants as presents from the bride and groom; in addition to this, each couple was photographed separately, the man footing the bill and giving the girl six of the customary dozen photographs. Naturally, no one wanted to be thus immortalized in photographic print with a distasteful partner. More important still, these quite adventitious pairings often resulted in courtship and marriage, and so the choice was not regarded lightly by anyone.

Weddings were lavish and gay in the old days, with music and dancing for two days. As in Poland, the wedding was held at the home of the bride or, if her parents were not here, at the home of relatives or in a hall hired for the purpose. The wedding day sometimes began with the musicians going to the home of the groom and playing him some sad tunes. He would receive his parents' blessing, and then follow the musicians to the home of the bride. More commonly, however, the musicians would be at the bride's home where friends and attendants gathered round her, helped to arrange her veil, the older women sometimes chanting old traditional wedding songs remembered from their youth, admonishing the bride about her duties in the new state. Just before departing for the church, the bridal couple knelt before the bride's parents, was sprinkled by them with holy water and received their blessing. The musicians played for them as they left. During all this time tears flowed freely.

During the church ceremony, the candles on the altar were watched. The belief persisted that it was an omen of death if a candle went out - death of the bride if on her side, death of the groom if on his. A rainy day for the wedding was considered unlucky, but it was a good one if the bride wept. In ever weakening form, these superstitions have come down to this day, but all other numerous ones associated with a country wedding in Poland were a thing of the past even in the early days of the Polish immigration to this country, and are quite forgotten now.

The musicians were in front of the house again when the wedding party returned from church. Bread and salt were held out to the young pair by the bride's mother; this practice is still seen occasionally now. The wedding

breakfast was then served - really a dinner as far as the nature and abundance of the food was concerned - with music playing all the while. A master of ceremonies - *starosta* - figured at some weddings and still does in Detroit, giving serious and mock-serious advice to the bridal pair. The major part of the afternoon was given up to taking pictures at the photographer's.

Dancing began as soon as all were back, and led off by the bride and groom. The bride was in for a good deal of dancing for she had to dance with every male guest. The dancing was interrupted for supper; then there was dancing again all evening. A collection was usually made for the bride and groom in lieu of gifts. This took various forms. Sometimes the men guests paid for dancing with the bride; sometimes one of the older women or a flower girl passed a plate "for the cap" during the breakfast or supper, or bills were pinned on the bride's dress. Still another method was the breaking of heavy dinner plates with silver dollars. A barrel or two of heavy restaurant china was secured for this purpose. A stack of plates was put in the middle of the floor and the male guests took turns attempting to break the plates with silver dollars. A dollar once thrown could not be picked up for a second try and, so since the plates were hard to break, many dollars were taken in. In some localities, instead of being stacked on the floor, the plates were held out in a large napkin, one at a time, by one of the older women.

Whatever method was used, generally enough money was collected to pay the cost of the wedding and leave a comfortable nest egg. Now the collection is largely a thing of the past, though bills are still pinned on the bride in scattered localities. In New Britain, Connecticut, a variant of the plate-breaking ceremony still remains popular even among the young generation: while the wedding company is seated at dinner, the male guests come up to the bridal couple and place bills upon a heavy plate in front of them, and for this have the privilege of breaking the plate with their fist.

Toward midnight of the wedding day (not on the second day as in Poland), the capping ceremony was held. The bride was seated in the middle of the room and, with the guests standing in a large circle round her, one of the matrons took off her veil. Though still called "*oczepiny*" (capping), the cap seems not to have figured in the ceremonies by 1910. The custom consisted simply in the removal of the elaborate coiffure of the day. Today the term "*oczepiny*" is quite forgotten, but the ceremony of removing the veil remains, known to the younger generation under the English term "unveiling". From New Britain,

Connecticut, a new superstition is reported - that it is unlucky for the bride to remove her veil before retiring.

The custom of chanting seems to have persisted in Milwaukee longer than elsewhere, but on the whole very little ceremonial singing was done during the wedding. The author recalls but one instance of a guest timidly offering a stanza of the "hops song" (*piosenka o chmielu*) at a wedding in 1910. No others joined in, and the song trailed off in an embarrassed diminuendo. But there was sufficient singing of gay, non-ritual songs; the musicians interspersed snatches of song with the music and the guests, too, broke into outcries and song as they danced.

A midnight supper was held soon after the unveiling. Dancing was resumed as soon as it was over and continued with undiminished vigor until morning. Then sleep for few hours, then dancing and feasting all of the following day. In Buffalo, in former days, the wedding celebration was not over even then. About two weeks later, a party called "*poprawiny*" (an untranslatable word, suggesting improvement, confirmation, seconding) was held for the young people who were in the bridal train. The event was anticipated eagerly by the young people-the girls, perhaps, more the men-since it often decided whether or not anything was to come of the pairings made at the wedding. Like the prenuptial "*wybieranki*," this type of "*poprawiny*" seems to have been an institution peculiar to the Poles in Buffalo. It has not come down to the present. The term itself was used also in Detroit, and is still found there to this day, but it is applied to the second feast, when relatives and close friends returned to help finish the food that was left and to enjoy themselves again.

All this has changed very much with the passing of the years, and a Polish American wedding today differs but little from the general American norm. Here and there, an unveiling ceremony is still held, but for the most part the bride wears her veil until she changes into a travel costume for the wedding trip. The prenuptial events are showers for the bride and a bachelor dinner for the groom. Collections have been largely replaced by gift-giving. But Polish music is still played, at least number for number, at all weddings at which there is dancing, and all strive to be gay and have a good time for the belief persists that the young couple's life will be what their wedding is - *jakie wesele, takie zycie*.