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POLISH-AMERICAN



John Paul II

CULTURAL CENTER

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Julian Boryczewski

Wigilia at the Center

On December 11th, The Polish-American Cultural Center again presented the annual celebration of Wigilia, a beloved tradition anticipated by many in the Polonia.

With the growing popularity, and this being a reservation only event, the demand for tickets has exceeded the capacity, leaving no seats at the beautifully set tables. As the guests entered, they were greeted and escorted to their table, then invited to partake in an appetizer of pickled herring and rye bread, the first of the traditional 12 [for the number of Apostles] meatless dishes served during the Christmas Eve supper.



Once everyone was seated, Ray Vargas began the proceeding with the welcome remarks and introduction of the Center's President, Andrew Bajda, followed by the Chief Director Dariusz Wojno, who spoke in Polish, for the benefit of many whose native language is Polish. After the commentary, which included acknowledgment and praise of the volunteer cooking staff headed by Bernadette Zubel, the guests were presented with a short video describing the Wigilia tradition. A priest led prayer ensued, followed the breaking and sharing of oplatek [wafer] while exchanging personal greetings and wishes for a healthy, prosperous, etc., new year.

At this point, the dinner went into full swing, starting with the barszcz [beet broth] and uszka [small dumplings] followed by the buffet of the remaining 10 delicious offerings, and ending with the 'sweet-tooth's heaven of home baked treats. As the evening progressed, a live on stage ensemble played and sang Christmas Carols, encouraging the participants to use the provided songs' verses to sing along.



Nearing the closing of the evening, an announced appearance of St. Nicholas in full traditional garb, delighted everyone as he approached each table, accompanied by helpers and distributing gifts of apples and oranges. Eventually St. Nicholas wound up on the stage and attracted a crowd for additional photo opportunities.

As guests began to gather their coats and leave, one could hear many positive comments, including "I really enjoyed this" and "Can't wait for next year."

Can't wait indeed!





An Open Letter to Polish-American Cultural Center Members

When I was a young boy, I used to fantasize about travelling the seven seas to adventure and discover hidden treasures. That fantasy faded with time but the dream remained alive, and reading *The Alchemist* made me realize that the treasure we seek is often right in front of us. It may not appear in the way or manner that we expected, but if we follow our path's and open our senses, we can indeed discover the treasures right in our grasp.

I share that thought with this annual letter for the very simple notion that I've come to realize that we all have a treasure right before us. You see, every time I leave a PACC event I find myself echoing the words: this place is a treasure!

For that reason, it has been a sincere pleasure to serve as president of the PACC board this past year, and we should all be excited about the prospects for the coming years. To have a place where we can all experience and enjoy the rich Polish culture in a venue that heightens our senses. From the taste of delicious meals to the beauty of our garden to the richness behind artifacts to the sounds of live music, all prepared with obvious love and appreciation for the land that binds us all together.

The fact that we were able to accomplish so much in this past year is no small feat given that we were transitioning from the depths of a pandemic which tested our resolve. But our board pressed on, the volunteers never wavered, and you returned to make 2022 a truly memorable year. We forged new partnerships that are raising awareness across the entire region and continue planning on capital improvements that will further increase our joy and appreciation of Polish heritage for years to come.

Among the many changes and improvements that were made is an update of our website which we will manage to keep you abreast of all PACC events and activities. As an added benefit, this update allows you to enjoy a virtual tour of our spectacular museum in the comfort of your home from the Museum Page. This tour is also available through QR codes in the museum rooms to enhance your viewing pleasure in person.

For a sneak preview, simply scan the QR code below to learn more about this hidden treasure:



So, on behalf of the entire board, we thank you for your support and patronage of the Polish-American Cultural Center. And ask that you please take a few minutes to renew your membership and consider any donation (using either the enclosed form or scan to our website) to ensure that we can continue this treasure for all of Cleveland Polonia.

Sincerely,

Andrew Bajda, PACC President

A Simple Way to Renew Your Annual Membership

Our updated website (polishcenterofcleveland.com) has not only been updated to provide you with upcoming events and a virtual tour of our museum, but can also be used as a convenient way to update your PACC membership. Simply scan the QR code below using any smartphone and you will be directed to the Donation and Membership page.





Agata Wojno

Refleksyjne pożegnanie dobrego roku

Koniec roku jest czasem podsumowań, napięcia, refleksji, zadumy, rozliczeń, podejmowania decyzji, nieważne czy się do tego przyznajemy czy nie, czy to lubimy czy nie, w jakimś stopniu wszyscy to właśnie na koniec roku robimy bardziej świadomie lub mniej, ale robimy, bo koniec roku już tak ma.

Osobiście ten rok uznaję za udany i łaskawy, najbardziej dlatego, że udało mi się wyswobodzić z post covidowej depresji i strachu – co za ulga! Aż „zachłystuję się” samą sobą, a właściwie swoim powrotem do normalności. Ileż to takich powrotów do normalności jest wśród nas – właśnie – przecież rok 2022 oswoił nas z Covidem! Zaiste jest co celebrować.

W tym roku udało mi się podróżować i odwiedzić znów Polskę, a nawet zobaczyć Grecję. Właśnie, Grecję, którą miałam od lat na mojej „bucket list”, uznaję za przereklamowaną, greckie smaki, które idealizowałam bezkrytycznie, teraz uznaję za takie sobie, greckie miasteczka za zbyt ciasne i brudne, zaś widok i los greckich bezdomnych psów i kotów, których wszędzie pełno, załamał mnie całkowicie. Szczęście w nieszczęściu, zwierzaki przynajmniej mają ciepło. Za to woda w morzu była precudnie lazurowa i przezroczysta, a piasek na plaży albo białutki, albo mienił się najprawdziwszym odcieniem złota, no i był niebotycznie gorący, że parzył stopy bezlitośnie. Wędrowałam z rodziną po górach Olimpu, mając nieodparte wrażenie, że Zeus patrzy na nas łaskawym okiem swej potęgi. Zanurzyłam ręce i twarz w wodzie ze źródła Afrodyty. Woda z tego źródła podobno przywraca młodość i zapewnia szczęście w miłości, więc stałam w kolejce turystów, żeby wcisnąć się do wąziutkiego, czarnego, mrocznego, zimnego i mokrego tunelu, żeby na końcu pochłapać się wodą z malutkiego źródła. Moja klaustrofobia oczywiście, wzmagająca się z każdą minutą stania w owym tunelu, chciałam zawrócić, ale kusząca obietnica Afrodyty kazała dopchać się do źródła – i tak oto przekonałam się, że dla zachowania młodości można wiele poświęcić. Teraz niech się Afrodyta martwi moimi ewentualnymi zmarszczkami.

Czyli, można powiedzieć, że „zaliczyłam” Grecję i chyba muszę tam jeszcze kiedyś wrócić, może na Kretę, żeby zmienić zdanie na temat kraju, który wyidealizowałam sobie w wyobraźni na tyle, że łatwo dostąpiłam rozczarowania. Ale podróże kształcą i faktycznie sałatka grecka najlepiej smakuje w Grecji i jednak jest zupełnie inna, niż w jakiegokolwiek amerykańskiej restauracji. No i te oliwki... a oliwa... raj dla podniebienia.

Z gór Olimpu i złocistych greckich plaż wylądowałam w Polsce. I tam się dopiero zaczęło żonglowanie dylematami emigrantki: stąd jestem, kim jestem? Gdzie jest mój własny kąt? Doskonale pamiętam czasy, kiedy przez gardło mi nie przeszedł pumpkin pie, carrot cake, ani nawet amerykański cheesecake, musiał być polski sernik z polskiego twarogu i... tyle! Pamiętam pierwszą wigilię w Ameryce, kiedy ze świętym zgorznięciem patrzyłam na kolorowy obrus na wigilijnym stole w domu teścia – po prostu nie był biały, wykrochmalony, z domu mojego rodzinnego – w końcu wtedy tylko takie wigilie znałam. Ta w 1995 roku była pierwsza na obczyźnie, a ów kolorowy obrus urastał do rangi przestępstwa i zamachu na jedyną słuszną rację tradycji z domu pochodzenia. Kolorowy obrus symbolem zamachu na piękną tradycję – dobre sobie – myślę dziś ze śmiechem. Nie, wcale się nie wyśmiewam z siebie i wtedy i teraz jestem prawdziwą wersją siebie. Dziś choinkę i dom ustrajam tuż po Thanksgiving, a obrus na wigilię zależy od mojego nastroju, często stół bywa przykryty na czerwono. Bo liczy się atmosfera, bo liczą się ludzie, bo liczy się intencja a nie sztywne ramy tradycji. Tęskniłam za Polską przez pierwsze lata pobytu w Stanach – bardzo. Polska wtedy jawiła mi się jako wręcz „ziemia obiecana”, tyle, że opuszczona i tęsknie wzdychałam do życia zostawionego tam, zastanawiając się – co ja tutaj robię? I co by było, gdyby... gdybym tu nie przyjechała... To bolesne odczucie bycia poza nawiasem Ameryki, w wielu wypadkach obca, inna, przyciśnięta do swojej polskości i może nawet w niej jakby uwięziona. Pamiętam te odczucia doskonale, czas bardzo je zweryfikował. Właśnie w tym roku odbyłam kolejną wizytę w Polsce – wizytę emigrantki w krainie przeszłości... tak to sobie

nazywam, bo i tak się tam czuję. Polska jest piękna, ale... coraz bardziej (a może już kompletnie) czuję się tam jak turystka a nie „swoja”. Ludzie się na mnie patrzą, czasem nawet jak na wariatkę, a ja po prostu zwyczajnie jestem turystką z Ameryki – uśmiecham się do nich w restauracji, dyskutuję, pytam, żartuję; a to ciągle jest tam kulturowo obce. Jak zamawiam tort urodzinowy to... ma być taki jak ja chcę, z napisem jak chcę, inny niż ten w lodówce... irytacja kobiety u której zamawiam rośnie... ja nie rozumiem o co babce chodzi, między wierszami w zdenerwowaniu wręcz się jąkam i przechodzę spontanicznie na angielski, po 20 minutach znoju zamawiania tortu, wychodzę spocona z cukierni. Spaceruję po warszawskiej starówce i myślę z szokiem, że to historyczne miejsce zamieniło się w szmirę dla turystów. Decyduję się w restauracji na placki ziemniaczane z gulaszem i ze zdumieniem stwierdzam, że to danie dla turystów, bo te które jem na polskim pikniku w Cleveland smakują dużo lepiej. Nawet pączki, na które zawsze mam ochotę, tym razem mnie rozczarowały bo smakowały jakoś tak „podrabianie”, a i moje ukochane gofry miały chemiczny posmak. A polskie biesiadowanie, rola kobiety i żywot psów to już kompletny science fiction dla mnie, żyjącej w Ameryce. Stosunek mężczyzn do kobiet, niby dobry, miły, sympatyczny, a jednak tak niebotycznie seksistowski, że przyglądam się temu z oczami jak stare 5 zł z rybakim! Nic nie komentuję, gryzę się w język co niemiara i żałuję, że już nie noszę maseczki bo moja biedna twarz pokazuje za dużo zdziwienia, co powoduje święte oburzenie i stwierdzenie: „ale z ciebie wielka Amerykanka się zrobiła, tu jest Polska”. No właśnie wiem, tam stosunek kobiet do tego jak są postrzegane i traktowane jest jeszcze bardziej zdumiewający niż seksistowskie żarty mężczyzn – może nawet nieświadome. Nie na moje to już nerwy, chyba... A jak widzę psa na łańcuchu, albo wyrzuconego na drodze wiejskiej – próbuję go uratować. Ten na drodze ucieka, ja płaczę pół dnia. Ten na łańcuchu, słyszę, że: „to

tylko pies i nie ma tak źle, bo biega nocą”. No ale w końcu, skąd mogę wiedzieć, że każdy z tych uwieczonych biedaków nocą biega. Idę do pani urzędniczki w urzędzie gminy, a ona pamięta mnie jeszcze jako dziecko – ha – i patrzy na mnie z niedowierzaniem, kiedy jej mówię, żeby coś z tymi psami zrobili, żeby wysłali jakiś patrol, który prawnie przyjrzy się konkretnym przypadkom i wyciągnie konsekwencje, i usiłuję jej uświadomić, że pies to członek rodziny, że zwykła przyzwoitość wymaga od nas reakcji..., a pani do mnie mówi: „Agatko, dziecko drogie to nie Ameryka, pies to tylko pies i wcale w tej naszej gminie nie jest jeszcze tak źle”. Panie Boże – od powietrza, głodu i wojny ale i od ignorantów za biurkiem chroń tamten kraj! Kiedy wracam do Stanów i przy kontroli paszportowej słyszę „welcome home”, czuję się w końcu u siebie, mogę być wolnym człowiekiem, zachowywać się spontanicznie i czuć bezpiecznie – w końcu przecież jestem u siebie w domu.

Koniec roku u mnie to przeglądanie Plannera, w którym mam zapisane absolutnie wszystko i do tego ze szczegółami. Moją uwagę przyciągnęły zapiski z okresu tegorocznego postu. Tak już mam, że lubię stawiać sobie wyzwania, cele do osiągnięcia. Kiedy je wyznaczam, czuję, że ten bieg, który zwiemy życiem wciąż trwa. W tym roku w czasie postu postanowiłam zrezygnować z... zanim odezwą się oburzone głosy, że post to przeżytek, albo że kogo obchodzi średniowieczny post, albo, że nie po drodze mi z kościelnymi wymysłami, co tu mi będziesz bajki opowiadać o jakimś „poście”, to... naprawdę w tym roku postanowiłam w poście zrezygnować z... cukru. Ha,ha... prawda? Wybrałam sobie dziedzinę najtrudniejszą (dla mnie) – bo jestem węglowo-dano - żercą! Właściwie to jestem uzależniona od cukru i zupełnie tego świadoma i jeszcze nigdy, przenigdy nie udało mi się tej słabości w sobie „poskromić”. Zatem w egoizmie i ukrytej miłości własnej, wymyśliłam sobie ten cel, żeby na koniec 40 dni doznać oczywistej korzyści z

odstawienia cukru – spadku wagi. Taki banał? A może właśnie nie. Może świadomość, że usiłuję zrezygnować z tego, co najtrudniejsze daje mi poczucie sprawczości. Ale czemu post? Jak on się do tego ma? Ano właśnie ten egoizm jest odpowiedzią – jako, że w poście, to czekałam na specjalny dotyk Boga i cud, jakby miała się ta rezygnacja odbywać łatwiej, mniej boleśnie. I tu rodzi się wątpliwość, wcale łatwiej nie było, stare przyzwyczajenia umierają w agonii, Bóg nie wysłał zastępu Aniołów, co by mi zresetowały myślenie i usunęły nieodpartą potrzebę zjedzenia ciasta „tu i teraz”. Cud się nie zdarzył. Post się skończył i jak alkoholik do picia, tak i ja wróciłam ochoczo do spożywania cukru. Jakie to deprymujące! Jednak, piszę o swoim wyrzeczeniu na czas postu, bo jednak prawie wytrzymałam. „Prawie” robi różnicę, ale i tak byłam zadowolona. Nie udało mi się w 100%, ale byłam bliżej celu niż dalej. I tu i tam udało mi się nie zjeść ciasta. Nie kupiłam nic słodkiego i nie przytargałam do domu. Nie smażyłam naleśników. Ale czy przez to stałam się lepszym człowiekiem i zbliżyłam się do tajemniczego Boga? Lepszym człowiekiem nie, ale zwyciężyłam siebie setki tysięcy razy w ciągu 40 dni w poście tego roku i jestem pewna, że nie zrobiłam tego sama. Ktoś zasiliał mnie swoją mocą, której nie widziałam, a jednak czułam. Bo być bliżej Boga, albo przeżyć dobrze post, to w moim pojęciu jest podjąć walkę ze swoją słabością i tę walkę zwyciężyć. Choćby nawet tylko „prawie zwyciężyć”...

Mnóstwo jeszcze fantastycznych zapisków mam w moim Planerze z 2022 roku, bo to był cudowny rok – skończyłam 50 lat i się nie rozpadłam! Co za zdziwienie – kiedyś byłam przekonana, że to istna starość, dziś wciąż biegam na obcasach, noszę krótkie spódniczki i na cały Nowy 2023 Rok postanawiam przypiąć do własnego kapelusza kwiat pelargonii i być szczęśliwą.

I tego Wam kochani czytelnicy również życzę z całego serca.

Nowy rok, nowe nawyki

Porozmawiajmy o postanowieniach noworocznych. Czy kiedykolwiek udało wam się dotrzymać noworocznego postanowienia przez dłużej niż miesiąc? Palacze zawsze obiecują, że rzucą palenie a jednak nadal zapalają papierosa kiedy tylko mogą. Wiecie, że statystycznie dotrzymuje się mniej niż 10% postanowień noworocznych?

Gdy robimy postanowienie noworoczne, tak naprawdę próbujemy albo stworzyć nowy, dobry nawyk, albo pozbyć się starego, nie dobrego nawyku. Zmiana nawyku nie jest taka trudna, zwłaszcza jeśli wiecie jak to zrobić. Jak, zapytacie? Kluczem jest zastąpienie jednego nawyku, drugim.

Jeśli chcecie dotrzymać noworocznych postanowień, wybierzcie coś małego, czemu możecie podołać. Nie obiecujcie, że całkowicie zmienicie kim jesteście, bo to nie podziała. Nie wybierajcie ogólnych celów, raczej coś bardziej konkretnego. Więc, zamiast mówienia „Będę więcej ćwiczyć”, konkretnie powiedz ile razy w tygodniu czy w miesiącu chcesz ćwiczyć.

Spory wpływ na zmianę nawyków ma to, jak o sobie myślimy. Jeśli uważamy się za negatywnych ludzi, tak też będziemy się zachowywać. Najlepszym sposobem na to, by na stałe zmienić nasze zachowanie, to najpierw zmienić nasze nastawienie.



Barbara Betlejewska

My First Wigilia *Moja Pierwsza Wigilia*

My first wigilia (vee-gee-lyah) occurred - yes, it's true - last year - at the age of 65! So how does a Polish - American girl never attended a wigilia until her mid - sixties? Well, long story short, cultural robbery combined with family dysfunction. All four of my grandparents had emigrated from Poland in the 1910's. My maternal *babcia* died when my mom was a young girl, and so she had little cultural contact after that, even though she could speak Polish. My maternal *dziadzia* was a functional semi-alcoholic. I can understand why, working in a foundry in 120 degree heat where he was blinded in one eye in an accident. *Moja matka* was sadly sexually abused by a family member and prostituted out for food for the family in the Great Depression and she, very understandably, became a *rageaholic*. I was unfortunately one of her primary victims. *Mój tata*, who also spoke Polish, was physically and emotionally abused by his parents, and my paternal grandfather was a semi-nonfunctional semi-alcoholic. In his youth, he was a "tramp" riding the rails and living in boxcars. He was also partly disabled from his work as a *stevedore* on the *Cuyahoga*. My paternal grandmother was also sexually abused as a lone 16-year-old teenager working as a nanny for a wealthy Jewish family in NYC, and she also developed an anger addiction as a reaction to the abuse. What we cannot give back, we pass on, usually to new victims. Every family has dysfunction—to a greater or lesser degree. Because my dad's father was 13 years older than my paternal *babcia*, and was partly disabled, my dad was "spousified" by his mom for family survival, and became the main breadwinner. This lasted for 20 years before he could free himself emotionally. Once he realized his parents had "stolen" 20 years of his young manhood, he cut contact with them. Of course, all four of my grandparents came from a peasant background with families of a dozen or more neglected, half-starved children. Then add in all the trauma of emigration. I occasionally wonder whatever my great-grandparents could have been thinking, having so many children they could not feed. Children never earn their keep. Eastern woodland Native Americans, like my ancestors, also engaged in substantial amounts of

farming, hunting and gathering; but they generally had only 3-4 children per family so as "not to outstrip their land or resources." What a common sense idea that completely eluded my eight great-grandparents! We are only as sick as our secrets. So as part of my recovery, I've tried to overcome inappropriate family loyalty, elucidate all my family secrets, and bring all the dirty laundry out into the open for a good airing. My parents did the best they could; and it wasn't good enough.... Face it, feel it, share it, heal it, and let it go. Yet our family trauma was below average, as all of us were still able to become educated, self-supporting, productive members of society.

Alcohol abuse by the peasants was encouraged via "propination" laws (from Latin *propinare*, to pour out), because the *szlachta*, the landed Polish gentry, often earned the bulk of their income from the sale of alcohol that peasants were actually forced to buy, even though it debauched them. Many of the distilleries were run by Jewish middlemen distillers, but even some monasteries had distilleries! At that time, the bulk of the world's Jewish people lived in Poland and had done so for centuries. Currently, 45% of the world's Jews live in the US, 40% in Israel, and 15% scattered throughout the globe. Alcohol makes easy money for the elite.... As a result, the Polish peasantry had a long history of forced alcohol abuse, and my family did not escape that scourge. And we also have an extensive history of emotional overeating and food addiction, both understandable as survival tools given the rampant childhood trauma we all experienced. Drugs make easy money, too. A similar example today is the promotion of opioid addiction by debauching the population with *OxyContin*® by Purdue Pharma, a company founded by three Jewish physicians named Sackler, whose parents emigrated from the region of Galicia in Poland, not far from my maternal grandparents' villages.

Growing up with two raging parents who were incompatible and should never have had any children together, holidays always deteriorated into huge arguments in our family. My older brother was criticized constantly by my dad and bullied at school. About this time, "dumb Polack" jokes started to appear on national television. Even though we didn't have a TV, my classmates gleefully repeated all the jokes to me so that I could wallow even deeper in shame and despair.... Most of my brother's classmates attempted to beat him up for being Polish. But he managed to hold his own in the fistfights and even win some. Because of that, my little brother didn't get into many fights. Similar to my

older brother, I was criticized constantly by my mom and bullied at school. Unlike the present, girls didn't get into fistfights then, so I was simply ostracized. I had the power to empty a cafeteria table full of girls simply by sitting down, as none of my mostly German classmates wanted to sit next to a "dumb Polack." All the girls would move away in about 10 minutes and I would be sitting there alone... At the time, I was devastated and wanted to melt into the floor; now I would revel in the situation. A whole table all to myself as a happy solo! The captain of the football team also took a particularly malicious interest in me, and when the football team could waylay me alone in the halls when no teachers were around, they made sure to loudly oink "Souiiee, souiiee, souiiee" at me, which is how you call hogs in for a slop in our rural area of Ohio, populated mainly by German farmers. I didn't know how to manage being bullied and told only my mom about it, but she provided no guidance at all. I suffered PTSD from it. Then I replicated this pattern by marrying a man who was violent. After getting beat up one time too many, I divorced him, never remarried, and over time became a joyful free spirit. I got into recovery and found many useful anti-bullying techniques. Bullies should be ignored when possible and confronted when not. A bullied person should adopt a confident, nonchalant attitude and be ready with several one-liner responses, sometimes honing in on a flaw or defect in the bullier. One should never betray in any way that one is distressed by the bullying. And, most importantly, one should become one's own best friend, a happy solo. Oh, to turn back the clock and face those bullies now, armed with self-confidence and workable tools. But "the moving finger writes; and, having writ, moves on..."—(from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*). So I had to abandon all hope of a better past, and concentrate on the present. Bullying, of course, is always a cry for help, and the football team captain later committed suicide.... After World War Two, "Polack jokes" were disseminated by the American media, mainly by NBC, founded by a Russian Jewish immigrant, in such shows as "Laugh-In," "The Johnny Carson Show," "Gimme a Break," "All in the Family," and "LA Law." NBC still occasionally uses these jokes even today (see the 11/4/17 Saturday Night Live skit by the Jewish producer Lorne (Michaels) Lipowitz, in which a "dumb Polack is dumber than a box of rocks"). Netflix, founded by two Jewish men, also used a tasteless "Polack joke" in the 2020 movie "Hillbilly Elegy." The joke was not in the book by JD Vance upon which the film is based. Hollywood used "Polack" jokes because there were a substantial number of communist sympathizers, primarily of Jewish origin, who were covertly supporting the Russians in suppressing Polish independence. (See "An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews invented Hollywood," by Neil Gabler.)

And so there I was, a young, innocent Polish-American girl, entrapped between the crosshairs of centuries-old conflicts among Germans, Jews, Russians, and Poles but in the middle of the US in rural Ohio! Right along with the rest of my family. And out of fatigue and desperation in an attempt to survive, we all ran to hide in the "Polish" closet as much as possible. That was the end of nearly all Polish contact and culture.

Decades later, after my parents passed on and my brothers disappeared from my life (not surprising, given our family trauma), I felt the need and had developed the courage to rediscover my cultural roots. I surfed the net and found *Polish American Journal* and for the first time I heard about Wigilia. The thought popped into my head that it must mean "vigil." And it does! The Christmas Eve vigil. I also started studying Polish five minutes a day on my own and have made some progress. I'm still looking for someone to chat with and practice speaking a few Polish words once a week to increase my motivation. If you are interested, please e-mail me at basia242@yahoo.com.

Since I had never been to a wigilia before and don't know anyone Polish in my area who would be interested in one, I decided to have my own, and I invited a Polish friend to share it with me. Not being culinarily gifted, she brought opłatki and kolendy while I cooked the rest of the meal. Here is our menu: barszcz czerwony (red beet soup), kapusta z grochem/groch z kapustą (cabbage with split peas). This dish is at least 8 centuries old and was considered poor peasant food in the past, but now shines as a healthy vegetarian dish. Ziemniaki razem ze śledziami w kwaśnej śmietanie (boiled, buttered potatoes together with pickled herring in sour cream.), surówka z marchewki (carrot salad with raisins), kutia (wheat berries with poppy seeds, honey, and dried fruit). This dish is also centuries old. Kompot owocowy (fruit compote, usually apples, pears, spices), łamańce z makiem (poppyseed bars), śliwka w czekoladzie (plums in chocolate), herbata, kawa (tea, coffee), and nalewka (home-made fruited vodka). What wonderful cuisine for a country almost as far north as Alaska! Following tradition, I had an odd number of dishes on a white tablecloth. How does one ever put hay under the tablecloth without tipping over the dishes? I put the hay on top. We shared opłatki and then served each dish one at a time. An extra place was set for those passed on. Beverages were only available after the meal, so as to leave plenty of room for the food! I got the recipes from *PAJ* and from Robert and Maria Strybel's tome, *Polish Heritage Cookery*. I initially thought the recipes were a bit unusual and I wouldn't like them, but after we dined, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the dishes are actually very tasty! We later sang kolendy, but forgot to walk outside to look for the first star, which is something young children usually do. And so that was moja pierwsza wigilia. Wesolych Świąt!

Karolina Rostafiński Merk

Pająki

A number of weeks ago, in a NY Times article, I saw a reference to a form of Polish folk art that I had not been familiar with, “Pająki.” In English, the literal translation is, “spiders.” So, I did some research. As it turns out, *pająki* were a very common, traditional element of interior decoration in Polish village homes in the past.

Pająki are geometric straw ornaments made in a myriad of shapes that vary from simple designs to very intricate ones. They were usually hung from the ceiling or from indoor construction beams. In some regions of Poland, *pająki* were decorated with colorful yarn or strips of paper. In others, they were adorned with dry peas, beans or other elements strung on a thread. Poles in the countryside made fresh *pająki* each year from straw collected from their fields during the harvest season. Old ones were burned in fires called “sobótki,” which traditionally took place during autumnal festivals when homes were being thoroughly cleaned before the arrival of winter. *Pająki* were prepared in time for Christmas, and sometimes for the arrival of spring and the celebration of Easter, as well. Originally, they were connected to old Slavic rituals performed for the winter solstice and the spring equinox and were meant to help protect the inhabitants of the home during the long and difficult winter season.

In the past, *pająki* served as protective ornaments. Polish peasants believed that they helped disperse bad luck and ward off evil spirits and demons. *Pająki* were often placed close to the bed, above a home altar or near a window or door. Depending on which additional elements were incorporated into the *pająki*, they assumed further properties. Those decorated with dry peas or beans were believed to enhance fertility and general abundance. In regions where colorful yarn and paper were used, *pająki* were thought to bring good fortune and prosperity.

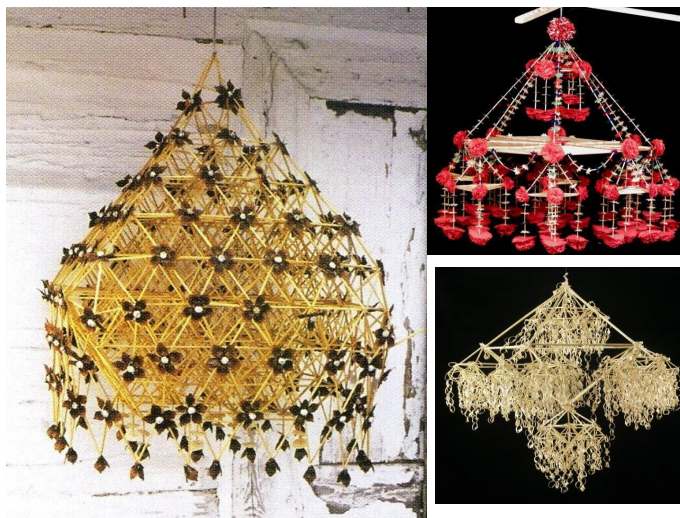
In some areas of Poland a “pająk” (singular form, aka, spider) was also called a “kierec” (word native to the Kurpie region in northeastern Poland), or a “żyrandol” (chandelier) for obvious reasons. In the 19th century, when ethnography as a systematic study arrived in Poland and Polish rural customs were first described in precise detail, the presence of *pająki* was documented in all ethnically Polish lands.

To give additional context to these straw ornaments, *pająki*, it is important to mention the ancient belief of Polish peasants in the “magical” properties of straw. Straw that was collected, cleaned and dried with

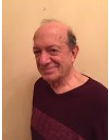
one’s own hands was believed to carry the strongest protective properties for one’s home. In the old days, Polish peasants used straw as a sort of defensive barrier or shield, scattering it on floors for various feasts and rituals in order to keep bad spirits away.



Another reference point regarding *pająki*, is the widely-held belief in the Polish countryside that actual spiders bring luck and happiness to the house and its occupants. Incidentally, in the Chinese culture spiders in the home are viewed as omens of good fortune, as well. Killing spiders in the house is discouraged. It is preferable to catch them for release outdoors. Poland has no spiders native to its climate that are deadly to humans. Spiders were always tolerated for their ability to get rid of other less desirable insects. Additionally, spider webs were admired for their beauty and endurance, and served as inspiration for the handmade lace that was common among Polish women in the countryside.



This charming form of folk art is in danger of dying out. Nowadays, *pająki* can be seen mostly in Polish ethnography museums. There are individuals who continue to make them specifically in order to preserve this element of traditional Polish décor. Others, who maintain vestiges of old superstitions, create them to serve as protective amulets that could be compared to the dream catchers of Native American cultures.



Joseph Hart

Thoughts of a Pensioner

Years ago, I was just a boy with a tendency to ask a lot of questions. I was curious how things work, why things work this way, but not another way. Unfortunately, I had a hard time getting answers to my questions. Teachers at my school were too busy just teaching, and my parents were too tired trying to make a living to even consider stopping what they were doing to try to answer my questions. Among the few books we owned there was an old German encyclopedia, so I just looked at the pictures and imagined things. At this time, the word “computer” was known only to a few scientists, and the word “Internet” was not yet invented. And so, the unanswered questions just kept piling up. Let’s also remember that as I was growing up, some of the questions were not allowed to be voiced. My mother, being a wise woman, saw my growing frustration, and decided to steer me in a direction that would take away a lot of my free time and keep me busy – she sent me to a music school! As a result, I spent my youth running from one school to another, barely having time to become either a good student, or a great musician.

Today I am a man of age. I have access to many sources to seek answers to my questions (yes, I still have many questions). I learned very quickly that it is impossible to find answers to all my questions, because the world in which we live today is so complicated. I was lucky to learn about a concept called “black box” which greatly simplifies many questions. The concept is that we really do not need to know what goes on inside this “black box”, we just need to know what it is supposed to do, and what to do when it is not working. Most of the times, though, if it is not working properly – replace it. Sure enough, that is how most things work in our world today. If our computers have problems, we take them to a shop where technicians replace parts to get them working. The same thing happens with our appliances, cars, TVs. Sometimes the technicians are not able to fix them, and we have to buy new computers, TVs, appliances. Sometimes the cost of fixing the problem is so high that we get new...

I realized that when we live in a complicated world, full of technological wonders, our society must be organized into groups of specialists. Each of these groups must trust each other and cooperate with each other. If they don’t, our world will fall apart. We must trust our mailmen to bring us our mail, the computer technician to fix our computer, the pilot flying the plane to take us safely to our destination, the teacher to teach our children things they need to know. We trust each other because we become specialists, we spend time and money to become specialists. We trust – there is no other option.

And now “Question of the Day”: Why is it so hard for us to exchange our views in a courteous manner while trying to find a common ground? I believe the answer is two-fold, misinformation and emotions. Each of us knows where to look for information, but how many of us use our critical judgement to evaluate this information? We KNOW that judgment can be readily clouded by emotions. Most of us have good instincts. We understand that as humans we need each other. When we see that one of us is in trouble, we rush in to help, without asking about political affiliation. The problem occurs when our emotions are manipulated by all kinds of influencers. Anger and fear can be easily induced to rise to the surface and overcome our rational thinking. On the other hand, calm and friendliness help us to consider the presented information rationally. It is with this in mind that I extend to all of you wishes for a peaceful New 2023 Year, a year of hope and happiness for all.

Szczęśliwego Nowego Roku.



Social and Cultural Events at the Center & Slavic Village

Every Wednesday 7 PM

Adult Polish Language Classes

2023 events will be updated on next Forum

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Polish Radio Program – “Memories of Poland”, Anna Klik i Monika Sochecki
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