

Christmas Traditions

Christmas Tree

It is a reference to the Old Testament symbol of the tree growing in paradise: the biblical tree with its message of good and evil. The Old Testament justification for Christmas trees is found in Isaiah: „fir-pine and box-wood together to adorn a place of holiness”. In the Middle Ages, during Advent, so-called paradises were placed in the vestibules of churches - bundles of green coniferous twigs from the „tree of life in paradise”, which the faithful then took home. The custom of decorating the tree on Christmas Eve was adopted by Poles from Prussian Protestants who arrived in Poland between 1795 and 1806. In the beginning, Christmas trees were only decorated by the nobility, and only for children. Later, „paradise trees” were also brought into peasants’ homes. Today, we cannot imagine Christmas without a tree - we decorate it before Christmas Eve, light it up and hide presents under it.



Christmas Tree Decorations

The star on the top of the tree symbolizes the star of Bethlehem. Apples, once an obligatory Christmas tree decoration, are a reminder of the apple of paradise, which have now been replaced by red baubles. The tinsel is a symbol of the serpent, the tempter of paradise. The Polish custom of

making Christmas decorations from dyed wafer scraps has almost disappeared. Colorful wafer stars hung on horsehair used to decorate the ceilings of rooms. Hanging decorations glued together from shaped wafer pieces were called „wilijki” or „światy”. They were placed over the house-

hold altar or table or hung on Christmas trees. According to beliefs, they were supposed to bring luck, health and harmony to household members. Some sources say that baubles derive from „światy”. Christmas lights (formerly candles) are said to bring to mind „the light above all lights”.

Twelve Dishes

The number of dishes that were served during Christmas Eve supper depended on the era and region of Poland. As ethnographers have discovered, in the villages 5 or 7 dishes were prepared, while in the manor houses of the nobility there were 9. Aristocratic residences used to prepare 13 dishes. Eventually, tradition opted for 12, which refers to the 12 apostles of Christ.

Christmas Eve during the partitions became a way for Poles to survive as a community sharing the same faith (and hope). Christmas became more Polish. It was written that they expressed our national soul and religiosity. Culinary traditions then began to be drawn from „Pan Tadeusz,” believing that the „national church of remembrance” could also be served at the table.

Boiled and fried carp began to commonly appear on Polish tables only after World War II. It was a foreign species, coming from the west of Asia, which was introduced into farming by the Cistercians. For years, they bred wild carp - sazan - in ponds, in order to breed a fatter fish that is traditionally served on Polish Christmas Eve.

Hay under the Tablecloth

Straw and hay, the symbol of the poverty of the manger, have accompanied Polish Christmas Eve for centuries. In the past, whole sheaves of grain were placed in the corners of village huts, noblemen’s parlors and even magnates’ drawing rooms on Christmas Eve. A thick layer of hay was spread on the table, covered with a tablecloth, and sprinkled with grain. In the east and south of Poland the whole floor was covered with straw! A memento of those times is a bit of hay under the tablecloth today.



An Empty Seat at the Table

Known only in Poland. It derives from the tradition of hosting relatives of the deceased on Christmas Eve. According to this tradition, Christmas Eve is a day of grace, on which the dead are allowed to return. An extra place set „for a stray wanderer” is a reminder of the times of Polish national uprisings. Following the January Uprising, the nobility, whose estates were confiscated by the partitioning authorities for their participation in the uprising, wandered around the country, hosted at manor houses.