

Polska Chicago Bus Trip to Explore Polish Heritage

By Matthew Gryczan

While you can't visit Poland in a day, this upcoming April you can do the next best thing: take a Saturday bus trip to Chicago to see personal effects of Gen. Thaddeus Kościuszko and the piano played by the famed composer Ignacy Paderewski, feast at a Polish restaurant, and browse exotic foods at an authentic Polish grocery store.

Best of all, society members will pay only \$60 per person for the whole package -- the round trip bus ticket, admission to The Polish Museum of America, and lunch at the Staropolska restaurant!

The bus will seat 40 individuals, and PHS members and their family members will be given priority.

The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids has made it a goal next year to support and expand cultural activities beyond Wigilia, the Dozynki Festival, Matka Boska Zielna and the

Malbork Dance Group. As such, the PHS board voted to subsidize the Polska Bus Trip so that virtually anyone can learn more about his or her Polish heritage at a low cost.

"The Polska Bus Trip is only the first of what we hope will be more cultural offerings for Polonia of metro Grand Rapids," PHS President Teresa Bonham said. "We'd love to hear ideas from the membership on other opportunities, maybe bringing Polish artists to Grand Rapids or organizing a trip to Poland.

Bus tour organizer Richard Panek made a trip to Chicago in November to visit The Polish Museum of America and flesh out the itinerary. The proposed plan would use the Park and Ride lot at I-96 and the East Beltline as the departure point for the trip.

8 a.m. EST -- Depart Ride lot

10 a.m. CST -- Arrive at Polish Museum of America (PMA)

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Mirek Stanielun tuning Paderewski's Piano at the Polish Museum of America in Chicago (photo courtesy of Malgorzata Kot)

Butryn Recalls the Polish Family Christmas Tradition of Oplatek at Wigilia

By Marzanna Butryn

If you don't already observe the tradition of sharing oplatek on Christmas Eve, it's a wonderful way for you to forge a direct connection in Grand Rapids with Poland through a centuries-old custom that celebrates God's love and for-

giveness.

In this tradition, family and friends break off pieces of a thin unleavened bread wafer -- similar to, but much larger, than a Communion host -- and share wishes of good will with each other before sitting down to the Wigilia feast.

I grew up in the Podkarpacie

Voivodeship (province) of Poland, and like many children, the Christmas holidays and Wigilia were a magical time for me.

All of my senses were engaged in that magic: the smell of ginger, cloves and orange, mixed with the scent of pine; the taste of honey, mushrooms, sour cream and fish; the feel of a

freshly ironed tablecloth and hay; the sight of lit candles and festive table arrangements; and the sound of my dziadek (grandpa) playing accordion and singing koledy (Christmas carols).

All of these wonderful memories of the Christmas Eve din-

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of Grand Rapids**

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The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes Polish/Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society meets on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October. The society publishes this newsletter monthly. We invite story ideas and content contributions. For more information, please contact Matthew Gryczan, Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to phsgrandrapids@gmail.com.

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Bus Trip

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984 North Milwaukee Ave. for 2 hour tour. PMA has docents to lead small groups as well as a small gift shop.

Noon to 1:30 -- Staropolska Polish Restaurant, 3030 North Milwaukee Ave., for family style lunch.

1:30 to 4 -- After lunch, options within an 8-minute walk from the restaurant include visit to St. Hyacinth Basilica, 3636 West Wolfram, a historic Polish church with ornate Baroque interior. (Access dependent on scheduled weddings or services). An alternative would be a visit to Kurowski Sausage Shop and Grocery, 2976 North Milwaukee Ave. (small shop but lots of sausage)

8 p.m. EST -- Arrive Ride lot

Panek, who was named 2023 Polish Citizens of the Year with his wife Mary, said The Polish Museum of America has some-



The Jan Ignacy Paderewski Exhibit at the Polish Museum of America in Chicago (photo courtesy of PMA)

thing for anyone who is interested in the history of Poland, music, art and the Polish American experience in the Midwest.

"I was truly impressed by the fabulous collections of the museum -- all so close to Grand Rapids," Panek said. "PHS member Stephen Kusmierczak is on the Board of the Museum and got me in contact with the museum's Director Malgorzata Kot.

Ms. Kot and her assistants, provided a warm welcome and an in-depth tour of the collections."

The Polish Museum of America offers permanent and temporary exhibits, as well as cultural events. The permanent exhibits include a military collection, a history of Poles in the City of Chicago, a folk art collection, the Kusmierczak Art Gallery, as well as the Paderewski Collection.

The military collection largely centers on the participation of the Poles in U.S. war efforts, the paramilitary organizations of Polonia, and the Polish military formations around the world during World Wars I and II. There are many photos of WW I Polish American Militia groups.

The museum also has several items from Kosciuszko, who served in the American Revolutionary War, and exhibits that recall the victory of the Polish King, Jan Sobieski, over the Turks at Vienna in 1683. Two relics of the Polish Cavalry's winged armor are on exhibit.

Harkening to its Midwest

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A photo in the Polish Army in France exhibit. Many Grand Rapids Poles left Michigan to fight for Poland in WW I

Oplatek and Wigilia

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Oplatek with Nativity scenes

ner called Wigilia came flooding back to me as I wrote this piece, and central to Wigilia was the sharing of the Christmas Wafer called oplatek, a symbol of love, friendship, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Some research indicates that Poles began the tradition of sharing oplatek in the 17th century and possibly earlier, and the tradition took on a patriotic subtext in the 19th century when Poland was partitioned and ceased to be an independent nation for 123 years.

As a child, my family would celebrate Wigilia and share oplatek with my grandparents, Franciszek and Stefania. A minor miracle always occurred when we had Wigilia at their house: all 16 of us were able to fit together into a tiny room and actually sit at the table!

In preparation for Wigilia, my grandparents had the oplatki (plural of oplatek) blessed by a priest usually on the first Sunday of Advent. On Christmas Eve morning, Franciszek would spread a handful of hay (sianko) on the table, and Stefania would

cover the table with a white freshly ironed tablecloth. The hay represented the manger, and the white tablecloth represented Mary's veil that she used as swaddle for baby Jesus. On this bed of hay there lay the oplatek, the symbol of newborn Jesus.

After sharing oplatek at Wigilia, we placed any remnants of the wafers under our plates. If the oplatek stuck to the bottom of our plates at the end of the evening, we were told we would have an abundant mushroom harvest the next year!

Little broken pieces of oplatki were added to leftover food and shared with cats, dogs and barnyard animals. It was believed that if you shared oplatki with animals, the act would spare them from disease and allow them to produce good milk, eggs and meat.

My grandparents are long gone, but I try to leave an empty seat at the Wigilia table for them and other

loved ones who have passed. In remembrance of them, I'd like to offer to you an early oplatek wish of good health and happiness in 2024. And if you don't already share oplatki at Christmas Eve, consider making this a tradition for your family. *Wesołych Swiat!*

Marzanna Butryn is a certified instructor interested in teaching Polish for travel and as a second language. Contact the PHS for more information.

Here is a list of locations that offer oplatki in Grand Rapids:

Angelus Religious Goods, 641 Diamond Ave. NE, phone (616) 776-0450, oplatki available during store hours T-Sat., 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., \$2.95 per envelope.

Holy Spirit Church, 2230 Lake Michigan Drive NW, phone (616) 453-6369; oplatki available at the parish office open on weekdays, call ahead due to varying hours at the office, \$2 per envelope.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, 151 Garfield Ave SW, phone (616) 459-8362, oplatki available at the parish office at 156 Valley, office hours are M-F. 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., \$3 per envelope.

St. Adalbert Basilica and St. James, 654 Davis Ave NW, phone (616) 458-3065, oplatki available after Masses during the weekend and at the back of church during weekdays from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., access to the church is through the handicapped entrance, \$3 per envelope.

St. Anthony of Padua, 2510 Richmond Street NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504, phone (616) 453-8229, office hours T-Fri. 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., \$3 per envelope.

St. Isidore Church, 628 Diamond Ave. NE, phone 459-4731, oplatki available after Masses on the weekend or at the parish office at 625 Spring during the weekdays, M-F 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., \$2 per envelope.

"1670" Polish Historical Comedy Now on Netflix

In this satirical comedy, set in 1670, a zany nobleman contends with family feuds and clashes with peasants in his quest to become the most famous person in Poland. Starring: Bartłomiej Topa, Katarzyna Herman, Martyna Byczkowska. Described as deadpan, offbeat and witty Polish humor!



Scene from the Netflix Series 1670

PHS Membership News



By Marilyn Lignell

As we move into the Christmas season and the New Year, I'd like to wish everyone the best that 2024 has to offer!

And as I look over the PHS calendar with exciting new events such as the Polska Bus Trip and Volunteer Appreciation Day and old favorites like the Polish Night at the Griffins, I see that our society is thriving in terms of membership and volunteerism. Let's keep the ball rolling!

For membership news, November was a month of ups and downs for the family of life-member Matt Gryczan and his wife Ann. Ann's mother, Mary Lu Pindar, passed away comfortably and peacefully on Nov. 25 at the age of 93, surrounded by her six children. While Ann and her siblings felt the sorrow of loss, they also saw Mary Lu's passing as a blessing as she now joins Ann's father, Dick, who died six years ago. Please accept our condolences, Ann and Matt.

But on the upside, Matt was awarded the prestigious Pro Patria medal of honor by the Republic of Poland at the Independence Day celebration Nov. 9 at the Polish Consulate in Chicago. Matt re-

ceived the civilian award for his work on identifying and restoring the Blue Army Monument at Holy Cross Cemetery this year.

Consul General Pawel Zyzak presented the medal to Matt and four other recipients from the Chicago area at an elaborate gathering of 150 people at the Copernicus Center. Established in 2011, the Pro Patria medal is awarded by the Head of the Office for War Veterans and Victims of Oppression to mark special merit in commemorating the memory of the Polish people's



fight for the independence of the Polish Republic.



PHS Board Member Matt Gryczan being awarded the Pro Patria Medal by Polish Consul General Pawel Zyzak



Wigilia Ornament makers showing their efforts

Gratulacje, Matt, on a well-deserved honor!

A card of caring went out to life-member Laura Szczepanek to encourage a speedy recovery from the back surgery she had on Nov. 7. Laura said she is feeling a little better every day and the forced downtime is a different but necessary part of her

recovery. We wish you the best, Laura!

If you are attending our Wigilia dinner on Dec. 9, make sure to thank the group of Santa's helpers who hand crafted the ornaments that will be placed at every table setting for you to take home! 2023 Polish Citizens of the Year Rich and Mary Panek graciously opened their home on Nov. 18 for an ornament-construction party that included yours truly and my sister Sally Stephenson, Gary and Mary Ann Mancewicz, Susan Ulanowicz, Stephanie Kovitz and Ann Gryczan.

It's a custom in Poland to fashion homemade ornaments for Wigilia using primarily items from around the home, and we've been carrying on that tradition for years for our annual Wigilia dinner in Grand Rapids. The ornaments turned out beautifully, and I am excited for Wigilia guests to see them.

The Paneks set up staging areas for us to decorate papier mâché ornaments that Mary had prepped. In the spirit of Polish Christmas' of past, items from their home were repu-

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posed, as well as new items. Mary also made a delightful brunch, which included a breakfast strata with spinach and gruyere cheese and savory items from Andy's Deli in Chicago.

It was truly a relaxing and fun morning filled with great conversation and camaraderie!



Chef Krystal of Krystal Palace Catering is busy preparing for our 2023 Wigilia Dinner

Polish Night at the Griffins February 9, 2024

In what has become a winter tradition, the PHS has again set aside a block of 150 seats at Van Andel Arena for Polish Heritage Night at a Griffins hockey game.

This year Polish Heritage Night is set for Feb. 9 when the Griffins will face off against the Manitoba Moose at 7 p.m. Admission is \$25 a ticket, which can be purchased by following the link on the PHS Facebook Page. Alternatively, you may purchase on the



Griffins website using the Promo Code POLISH.

Game organizer Anthony Zasuwa said the entire block of seats sold out this past year, so he encourages people to buy their tickets early.

If you were a volunteer in '23, let's party in '24!

Anyone who has volunteered her or his time during 2023 at PHS sponsored events such as the Dozynki Festival, the Wigilia dinner, Matka Boska Zielna or other function should circle Feb. 24 on next year's calendar for a volunteer appreciation party at Diamond Hall, 435 Diamond Ave NE.

"There's no better way to say 'thanks' in Polish than to throw a party," PHS President Teresa Bonham said. "2023 was a wonderful year for the PHS, and it's due in large part to all the individuals who gave their time to make these events successful."

The January newsletter and PHS Facebook page will have further details on how volunteers can sign up for the party that will feature food and refreshments.

Bus Trip

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roots, the Polish Chicago 1850-1939 exhibition focuses on the early history of the Polish community in the district around the intersection of Milwaukee, Ashland, and Division streets. It features the first settlers and their families, houses, businesses, organizations, parishes and various forms of artistic and cultural endeavors.

The highlight of the archival collection at The Polish Museum of America is the extraordinary repository of memorabilia documenting the multi-faceted career of Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941).

Paderewski was an internationally acclaimed concert pianist and composer who was also a Polish statesman and Prime Minister of Poland after World War I.

Among the items on display is the gold pen in the shape of a goose feather, which Paderewski is said to have used in signing the Peace Treaty of Versailles.

Following a two-year renovation, the Paderewski Room features furnishings of the New York City hotel where the Maestro last resided while in America, personal items, and a piano which was a gift from Steinway and Sons.

"I was thrilled to get a close up look at Paderewski's personal practice piano," Panek said. "On the day of my visit, Mirek Stanielun was tuning the console piano, so I was allowed to go

behind the glass that normally walls off the piano from visitors. Mirek said his uncle attended Paderewski's last public piano performance in the United States."

In addition to exhibits, the Polish Museum of America houses extensive resources for scholarly research on Polish history. The Museum Archives preserves historic documents, maps and photographs from various Polish and Polish-American organizations and individuals.

After the museum part of the bus tour, the plan is for the group to have lunch at the Staropolska Polish Restaurant, which has gotten rave reviews on TripAdvisor and Yelp for authentic Polish food.

"We'll be able to set a more defined itinerary after the new year Panek said. "We may have to adjust the itinerary depending on circumstances, but there's no doubt this will be a fun and educational trip."

Trip reservation information will be in future newsletters and on the PHS website.



The Polish Museum of America on Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago



Join the Polish Heritage Society to receive our monthly newsletter and other benefits!

Annual Student Membership for full-time students through college \$5

Annual Adult Membership \$20

Annual Family or Business Membership \$35

Lifetime Membership \$150

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You can join the Polish Heritage Society online by going to our website at <https://polishheritagesociety.com/>, filling out the Membership form and paying by using the PayPal Button.

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