

Wigilia: The Polish Christmas Eve Celebration



Jadwiga Rylko and John Bauer sharing Optatek at Wigilia

By Sharon Hanks

Though she was born in Germany and raised in America, local PHS member Barbara Rylko-Bauer will spend hours this month preparing a traditional Wigilia on Christmas Eve as an enduring way to honor her Polish parents – just as they had done.

Her mother Jadwiga and father Wladyslaw were steadfast in celebrating Wigilia in Detroit after being displaced from Poland after World War II. They were forced to make the heart-wrenching decision to emigrate to America rather than live under Communist repression in Poland.

Wigilia to them was much more than a tradition, Barbara said.

“By celebrating a traditional Wigilia, my mother and my father were linked across time and space with the people they loved,” she said. “By celebrating this special day in the same or similar way as their families in Poland, they felt bonded with not only those they loved, but also with their culture and history.”

So it is with Barbara and her family.

A life-long member of the PHS, Barbara, 72, has shared with son John how to prepare the traditional meatless

meal that typically consists of a dozen or more dishes.

About a week before Christmas Eve, Barbara makes pierniki, a baked honey-ginger spiced treat that can be traced back to the 13th century. She stores the ginger treat in the refrigerator to ferment into a sweet and chewy dessert until the big day. Poppy seed bread can also be made ahead of time as well as kompot, an iconic drink in Poland consisting of stewed dried fruit compote flavored with lemon peel, spices or sugar. (She uses dried apples.)

Two days before Christmas Eve, Barbara makes the kapusta (sauerkraut), a cabbage dish seasoned with

caraway seeds, followed the next day with preparations of a potato-vegetable dish, beetroot (borscht) soup with small mushroom-filled

dumplings, gefilte fish and two types of pierogi (one usually filled with sautéed onions or kapusta and farmer’s cheese and another filled with mushrooms and onions for her son, John, who is vegan). Rye bread,

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Dec. 5 is the last day to get your tickets for the PHS Wigilia! See info on page 4 to purchase tickets via PayPal or check. Don’t miss this celebration of Polish heritage!

The Opłatek Wigilia Tradition

By Matthew Gryczan

One of the most beloved customs practiced locally by families of Polish/Lithuanian heritage is the sharing of the opłatek, or Christmas wafer, at the Christmas Eve supper.

The breaking of opłatek, (pronounced O-pwah-tek) between family members and any guests at the dinner is probably the most vividly remembered tradition of the holidays – and the one that is most often passed

from generation to generation.

There’s no time like the present to start this custom if you don’t celebrate it already, and there are more than six locations in the metro Grand Rapids area where you can obtain the wafers at a nominal price.

The sharing of the Christmas wafer originated more than

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Email us at phsgrandrapids@gmail.com.

The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes an appreciation of the Polish and Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society meets on the 2nd 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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Oplątek

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300 years ago in Poland it is also celebrated in parts of Lithuania, Latvia and Slovakia during Wigilia, the meatless supper of Christmas Eve. During the 19th century when Poland was partitioned, the sharing of oplątek took on an additional patriotic meaning that the nation would someday regain its independence.



Oplątek Wafers

The unleavened Christmas wafer itself is baked from wheat flour and water, the same ingredients as the altar bread distributed during a Roman Catholic Mass as the Eucharist. The oplątek is often a rectangular, almost paper thin wafer embossed with religious images that can be easily broken when grasped by two people.

While traditions vary somewhat, they all start with the oldest or most respected member of the family breaking pieces of the oplątek and distributing it to the rest of the people gathered. Each person then offers a piece to everyone else, generally stating in some way how they care about that individual.

In our family, we wish each other the best by saying this Polish phrase: "Daj, Boże, za rok doczekali." Loosely translated, its meaning is "God, let us live long enough to see each other next year."

Here is a list of locations that offer Oplątki (plural of Oplątek):

Angelus Religious Goods, 641 Diamond Ave. NE, phone (616) 776-0450, 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; 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, 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, 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, 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.

Polish Wigilia

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cooked carrots, butter cookies, herring in wine sauce and fried white fish fillets usually complete the huge spread of food she often serves Christmas Eve to her husband, Dan, and son.

Regional favorites play a role in the recipes and choices of these dishes as well as the number of guests at the table.



Wigilia Table

While growing up in Detroit in the 1950s and '60s, Barbara and her family selected a combination of dishes based on their personal taste and regional preferences to celebrate Wigilia, an especially meaningful occasion for her parents because of their life journeys. Her parents were both post-World War II Polish Catholic immigrants who arrived in Detroit in 1950. They came from Germany after being confined as prisoners of war and deeply longed to connect with family in Poland.

"I think that for my parents

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Wigilia Celebration

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in particular – they were refugees and essentially exiled from their country – so Wigilia was very important to them because it connected them to the people they love. They were both imprisoned by the Germans and liberated from their respective POW and concentration camps by the U.S. Army.”

Barbara’s mother, Jadwiga Lenartowicz Rylko, lived in various displaced persons’ German camps upon release from prison.

While in Germany after the war, Jadwiga met and married her husband, Wladyslaw, in 1947 and had Barbara, their only child, in 1950. It was clear to both newlyweds that they were not safe in Europe and they decided to flee with their 10-month old daughter out of fear of Communists’ reprisals. They believed Communists targeted them because of their education and leadership abilities that might lead to organizing an uprising against Communism.

Jadwiga was a successful physician and was arrested in 1944 on suspicion of being involved in the resistance. She was sent to several concentration camps during her 1 ½ years of captivity, Barbara’s father was a Colonel in the Polish Army and spent 5 1/2 years as a POW. After the war, Wladyslaw saw the fatal fate of some of his military comrades who simply disappeared in Poland and were never heard from again. Fleeing the country meant leaving their entire

family in Poland and enduring years of separation from their loved ones

Growing up in a Polish-American enclave in Detroit, Barbara remembers celebrating the Wigilia dinner with her parents and her godfather, a bachelor who had no other family in the U.S. “My parents basically maintained the same traditions throughout the years in the U.S. and I have tried to do the same, even after my mother died – with some modifications. We just can’t eat as much food as we did then!

“Most of the families that my parents associated with were post World War II immigrants, like themselves,” she says. “And like us, many did not have other family members in the U.S. I think they all celebrated a traditional Wigilia although their menus might have differed a bit from ours, depending on their own past traditions in Poland and the region that they came from. Friends that didn’t have family here were often included.”

Most were former POWs from Germany, she recalls. “In later years, a family we were close to who also immigrated to the U.S. after World War II always shared Wigilia with us,” she remembers. “We, in turn, went to their house for Christmas dinner.

“After my mother moved from Detroit to Grand Rapids in 1984, the Wigilia dinner was held in my house although my mother continued to prepare most of the dishes well into her 90s.”

Jadwiga always set the table with a white linen tablecloth from Poland and used her finest dishes and silverware, an indication as to how special she viewed the Wigilia. Everyone got dressed in their Sunday best.

“I think Christmas Eve was the most important day for my mother,” recalls Barbara. “I don’t recall a single Christmas Eve she missed.” She suspects her mother, a nurse’s aide at Henry Ford Hospital, would trade her assigned work shift if it landed on Christmas Eve so she could be home to prepare the huge dinner.

“I wouldn’t put it past her to call in sick once or twice when she was assigned work on that day!” she laughs.

To this day, Barbara and her husband, Dan, an Ionia native, celebrate a traditional Polish Wigilia each year. “It’s always a way to honor my mother,” says Barbara. “It’s a way of connecting to the history, the country.”

The couple’s son, John, a former professional chef and now self-employed landscaper, lives in Oregon and helps prepare Wigilia dishes when he is able to get away to Michigan for the holidays, she says. In years past, members of Dan’s side of the family joined them in celebrating the Wigilia along with other close friends.

“We always begin the meal with the breaking and sharing of the opłatek,” Barbara says. “Everyone takes a piece and exchanges Christmas wishes before sitting down to eat. We have al-

ways upheld this tradition. And family in Poland would often enclose a small piece of opłatek in the Christmas cards they sent as a way of connecting across space and time on this most important day.”

After a long and leisurely dinner sometimes enjoyed with wine, the family would exchange presents, sing Polish Christmas carols (koledy) and years ago sometimes attend midnight Mass at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Grand Rapids. While growing up, she remembers singing songs in Polish and listening to Polish records. “We spoke Polish in my house exclusively,” she recalls.



Barbara Rylko-Bauer

In 2015, Barbara wrote a book about her mother’s childhood, medical training and experiences as a young Polish-Catholic prisoner doctor in Jewish slave labor camps and her struggles to create a new life in the post-war world. “A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps: My Mother’s Memories of Imprisonment, Immigration, and a Life Remade” won recognition as a 2015 Michigan Notable Book.



Polish Heritage Society's Annual Wigilia Dinner and Program

Saturday, December 10, 2022

West Leonard Banquet Facility/1140 Muskegon NW

Includes: Nine Course Wigilia Dinner

Oplatek, Rye Bread with Horseradish Butter, Cream Herring, Mushroom Soup,

Homemade Pierogi

Lemon-Dill Baked Cod, Roasted Vegetables, Potatoes

Delectable Authentic Homemade Polish Desserts

Coffee served throughout/Wine served with fish course

Social Hour 5:00-6:00PM/Dinner and Program at 6:00PM

Door Prizes

Polish Koledy: Featuring Jarek Kozal and Nick Palmer

\$40.00 per person-prepaid: Checks payable to Polish Heritage Society

******Reservation deadline December 1, 2022******

Send to PHS-c/o Marilyn Lignell Phone: 616-443-3773

2858 W Sandrel CT NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49505

Name _____

Phone # _____

of tickets @\$40.00 _____

Amount enclosed _____

I would like to be seated with _____

Community News — Preparing for the Holidays!



By Marilyn Lignell

Christmas Wishes

As we enter the month of December, I'd like to wish an early Merry and Blessed Christmas to all of our members!

And if I might be your little Christmas elf, think about giving a PHS membership to a family member or friend as a gift – probably the best value that you can ever get for \$20! You get our swanky membership pin, a year's worth of mailed newsletters, membership card good for discounts at local businesses and our Words of Encouragement service where we send cards of congratulations or sympathy, free of charge!

PHS Wigilia

In a month full of festive events, you've got a great opportunity to connect with your Polish roots by attending the PHS Wigilia event on Dec. 10 that features a singalong with Polish carols, wonderful Polish food, door prizes, the traditional sharing of Oplátky and a presentation on Christmas customs.

Thanks to all the volunteers that make this happen, but a Santa-sized thanks to Jarek Kozal, Nick Palmer, Terri Sierzant and Mary Helenbrand who got together during that blizzard at the end of November in Whitehall to make pierogi for the PHS Wigilia.



Nick, Terri and Mary

Jarek crafted the dough from a recipe his aunt told him about that does not use eggs. "If you think about it, Poles did not have eggs in the winter months and they made their pierogi with flour, water, salt and oil," Jarek said. "It is a little tricky and took me a couple attempts to get it right, but once you get the feel of it, you know it is right."



Pierogi ready to serve!

As they have for the past several PHS Wiligias, Jarek and Nick will be performing beautiful Koledy at the din-



Jarek Kozal and Nick Palmer

ner of Polish songs sung at Christmas, with English translations. Jarek and Nick will be fortunate to go to Poland for their own Wigilia later in December.

Polish Pottery

Life member David Sokolowski, owner of the Polish Pottery Castle in Grand Rapids, donated some pieces of Polish pottery to be raffled off at the PHS Wigilia Dinner.



Inside the Polish Pottery Warehouse

David extends an invitation to all PHS members to receive 20% off all of his warehouse pottery until the end of the year. His warehouse is located at 2311 E Beltline

Ave SE, Suite LL 100. Please call first (734) 272-8119.

Words of Encouragement

The PHS mails cards at no cost to any individual or family who is to be congratulated or in need of encouragement. Card recipients do not have to be PHS members.

PHS members should send their requests to phsgrandrapids@gmail.com with the following information: Name; Mailing address and one or two sentences that describes the situation, so the proper card is used with a short personalized note.

A card of congratulations went out to life member Mitch Mileski and his wife Ginger on the birth of their first grandchild, Vincent James, born to daughter Madeline and husband Joe Fazzio. Vincent was born on 11-10-2022 and weighed 8 lbs. 3 oz. Also, great-grandma Donna Mileski is pretty excited too!



Vincent James Fazzio

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

ONLINE

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.

MAIL

Fill out this form and send a personal check made out to the Polish Heritage Society to this address:

Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids

P.O. Box 1844

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