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The Polish Heritage Society meets at the Polish Falcons at 6:00 pm on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October.

The Polish Heritage Society publishes this newsletter monthly. Submit story ideas and content contributions to Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to: phsgrandrapids@gmail.com

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Paulette Longwell

Wigilia in Poland

PHS member shares Wigilia traditions followed by her Polish relatives.

I visited Poland some time ago and re-connected with over 40 relatives who now message me and send me things, especially on my FB page - Polish Family History. We love to compare things in the US with things in Poland for instance so they sent me these pictures and many others.

Many traditions celebrated by families in Poland during the Christmas season are also celebrated by Polish Americans with some variations. Advent is a prayerful time of waiting for the Nativity of Jesus, and Wigilia is a tradition celebrated in Poland on Christmas Eve.

Wigilia (Polish pronunciation: [vi'gilia]) comes from the Latin word "vigil" and is a feast after abstinence. The feast begins once the First Star is seen in the sky as a reminder of the Three Wiseman traveling to see the newborn Jesus. The table is set with a place setting for a stranger which is a symbol of hospitality.

An important part of the meal is the Christmas wafer "oplatek" which is a thin wafer with a religious scene pressed into it. It is shared as part of the Wigilia meal and is a symbol of daily bread.



Wiktoria, Julia, and Łukasz Raczekiewicz of Zamość, Poland at the beginning of their Wigilia meal.

When opłatek is shared, blessings for health and happiness to each other are expressed.

Eugeniusz Raczekiewicz (my mother's cousin who lives in Tomaszów Lubelskie, Poland) remembers that his father Bolesław used to mail wafers to his sister Mary (Raczekiewicz) Kufta in Muskegon, Michigan.

course may be fish such as hering or carp served instead of red meat because abstinence from meat is required. Other possible foods are goląbki (cabbage rolls), kluski (noodles), pierogi filled with cheese and potatoes, Challah bread, kapusta (sauerkraut), cabbage-apple salad, and dried fruit compote. Bread or cakes with poppy seeds are popular.



The Eugeniusz Raczekiewicz Family Wigilia

The Wigilia meal includes twelve separate dishes served to represent the 12 Apostles. Soup such as **Borscht**, mushroom, or sour rye is served first. The main

Eugeniusz told me that although they can buy everything in stores, that they are "old fashioned" and all dishes for their Wigilia are prepared at home by his wife Victoria Aurelia and shared with their children and grandchildren.

I remember my mother Shirley Longwell ordering opłatek made by local nuns from St. Adalbert. She remembers going as a young girl with her parents to Wigilia celebrations but we didn't celebrate that way as I was growing

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Polish Heritage Society Event Schedule

PHS Board Meeting, Monday January 19, 6:00 pm at Polish Falcons. All members welcomed. See page 2.

Dozynki Festival Planning Committee coming up in January, Volunteers are needed!

Polish Night at Griffins, Friday, January 30. See January Echo newsletter for ticket information.

Pysanki Egg Decorating Workshop, Save the date: March 21st. Watch newsletter and follow the PHS Facebook page for more information.

Polish Heritage Society President's Letter to Membership

Thank you for being a member of the Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids. Your membership demonstrates an interest in promoting Polish heritage and culture in the community. The Society, founded on October 23, 1973, is organized and operated for educational purposes which include the following:

1. Educating the public on the history of Poland and the influence of Americans of Polish descent on society.
2. Educating the public on Polish arts and culture in America.
3. Providing vocational school and college scholarships to persons of Polish descent.

Society general membership meetings are held in June and October. The June meeting is a picnic where families are invited to attend, and the October meeting consists of a lunch with historical or cultural programming for the membership and public. In addition to those meetings, the Executive Board of the society meets monthly to make decisions on the society's affairs. These meetings take place at 6:00 pm at the Polish Falcons, 957 Fulton St. in Grand Rapids on the third Monday of the month except for June, October and December.

Members interested in the activities of the board, and in planning society activities, are invited to attend the monthly Executive Board meetings. Attending these meetings is important because the Polish Heritage Society needs the continued engagement of its membership to carry out its mission. This is also a great chance to build community with social time and drinks at the Falcons after the meeting is adjourned.

I personally want to invite you to attend the upcoming Executive Board meeting on Monday, January 19th, 2026 to get involved in the activities of the PHS. We all have talents that can be used to contribute to the society's mission. Areas where we need more volunteers to help plan, organize, or conduct activities are as follows:

1. Wigilia Dinner
2. Bus trips/tours
3. Dozynki Festival
4. June membership picnic
5. Matka Boska Zielna Mass
6. Newsletter story contributions
7. Rozmowa Polish Language Club
8. Polish Music, Poetry and Fine Arts programs
9. Cultural programs for the October membership meeting
10. Sporting event outings (local pro hockey, baseball and basketball)
11. Collaborative activities with Polish Halls, Malbork Dance group, Meijer Gardens, GR Public Museum etc.

You can see that there are a lot of exciting opportunities for the PHS to promote Polish heritage and enrich our local culture. The Polish Heritage Society now has over 300 members. Let's all get involved together to strengthen our society. To learn more about the PHS, you can go to our website www.polishheritagesociety.com for information regarding local Polish history, culture and community. If you have any questions or ideas, email me via phsgrandrapids@gmail.com. I look forward to seeing you at our meetings and activities.

Teresa Bonham
President



Polish Heritage Society Membership News and Events

By Marilyn Lignell

Hello members! The PHS is happy to welcome new member Gretchen Dettloff. Gretchen isn't new to the PHS, joining us at Wigilia, a Chicago bus trip and other activities. We are excited to have you join us as a member!



Gretchen Dettloff

The Grand Rapids Public Museum hosted their annual Cultural Heritage Festival on Saturday, November 8, from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. This annual event is a vibrant celebration of community, featuring music, dancing, and hands-on activities. The PHS was among more than 10 community ethnic organizations with exhibits presenting the cultural richness of the residents of Grand Rapids. Over 1900 people attended the event and many stopped by the PHS exhibit table to get to know our society and learn about Polish Heritage. Thank you to those PHS members who help make this such a successful event.

A big thank you goes out to Rich and Mary Panek for hosting a Wigilia ornament crafting and social gathering. We had about 12 "elves" working hard on ornaments for guests at Wigilia on December 13. Rich and Mary, our gracious hosts, prepared a brunch that we all took delight in. As

usual, the fellowship of others was also a highlight of the afternoon.



Happy Wigilia ornament makers

On a solemn note, it is with great sadness that we offer our condolences to the following Polish Heritage Society members Bonnie Grzegorski, Sarah Sharpe and Fritz Stanitzek.



Casimir "Chuck" Grzegorski

Bonnie lost her husband of 70 years, Casimer "Chuck" Grzegorski, on Saturday, October 25. Chuck was 95 years old. Chuck proudly served his country during the Korean War. Serving in the U.S. Navy Amphibious Assault Forces, he also served in the evacuation of the Northern French Indo-China's "Passage to Freedom." He was a member of the American Legion Post 356, Catholic War Veterans Post 1058, Saint Ladislaus Aid Society, and Polish Heritage Society. Chuck retired from Steelcase as the as-

sistant foreman of the machine room after 34 years of service. The Mass of Christian burial was celebrated Tuesday November 4, 2025 at 11 am at St. Anthony of Padua Church.



Phyllis Newell

Sarah Sharpe lost her beloved grandmother Phyllis Newell. Phyllis Ann Newell, age 85, of Howell, Michigan, passed away peacefully on November 8, 2025. She was born on March 31, 1940, in Elkhart, Indiana, to the late Cecil and Bernice Ward. A funeral service was held on Thursday, November 13, 2025, at 11:00 AM at Watkins Brothers Funeral Homes, Howell, MI.



Karl Jon Stanitzek

Fritz Stanitzek lost his uncle Karl Jon Stanitzek on November 9, 2025 at the age of 84. Through high school he enjoyed helping and working for his father's business, Frank's Meat Market that was established in 1933 and is

still in business today. He was also proud of the work he did for B&O/C&O/CSX Railroad where he worked for 32 years in every position until he ultimately became a supervisor for the final 10 years of his career. Karl was a lifetime member for 50 years at Saint Anthony of Padua Catholic Parish where he served as a Eucharistic Minister and volunteered on a variety of committees.

As a reminder, if you have membership news you would like to share, please email us at phsgrandrapids@gmail.com.

If you have not been receiving emails from PHS we ask that you update your email to phsgrandrapids@gmail.com so we will have an accurate up to date list.

(Wigilia in Poland continued from page 1)

up. We did, however, eat together with our family, open one present and go early to midnight Mass to enjoy the Christmas carols. You can still purchase opłatek at local church supply/Catholic bookstores or on Amazon.

On Christmas Day, we opened presents at home and then visited extended family for a large, festive meal. So some of the traditions were the same as celebrated by family in Poland but there was no longer a formal Wigilia meal.

A new tradition in the past few years is that I receive Wigilia wishes from family that lives in Poland such as "Wszystkiego najlepszego w życiu dla całej rodziny" (All the best for the whole family) and "Życzenia pokoju i szczęścia" (Wishes for peace and happiness).

Learning how my relatives celebrate Wigilia in Poland helps me understand more of the traditions of my family. How did (or does) your family celebrate? *Wesołych Świąt!*



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

TO JOIN ONLINE: go to POLISHHERITAGESOCIETY.COM and select CONTACT US

BY MAIL

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

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