



# Polish Profiles

## To Praise The Lord

By: **Kaya Mirecka Ploss**, Ph.D., Executive Director  
Jan Karski Institute, Baltimore, MD

Poland is one of the richest countries in Christmas traditions. These differ from region to region and sometimes from one district to another. But one thing all Poles have in common is *Wigilia* - the Christmas Eve Supper. The word comes from the Latin *vigilare* - to watch, to await. We sit down to this most important of meals when the first star appears in the sky. First, we share with everyone in the house the traditional *oplatek*, a paper-thin white wafer. That word, too, comes from the Latin *oplatum*, or sacred bread. The food we consume for *Wigilia* also differs from place to place, but no meat is ever eaten that day.

I am a Silesian and so were all my ancestors. The place where I was born and grew up was a small town called Piekary. Many winter evenings did I listen to my Grandfather tell legends about our town dating back to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The real Christmas preparations began with the new Advent. In the morning we attended a special mass called *Roraty*. In the evening a homemade wreath with ribbons was hung from the ceiling. The many grandchildren stood around the piano waiting for Grandpa's first chord. One carol after another echoed through the century-old house, joyous with music and the exotic smell of spices coming from the enormous honey cake Grandma was baking.

With Granpa it was never just an evening of singing, but always a bit of a music lesson. He, like my great-grandfather, was professionally trained and an accomplished musician. Both occupied the prestigious position of head organist in our beautiful centuries-old St. Mary's Church.

We learned at an early age that the most popular of *kolędy* (carols), *W Żłobie Leży*, was really a polonaise first played at the coronation of King Władysław the Fourth (1632-1648). And that the composer was a great Polish scholar and political reformer, Piotr Skarga. An 18<sup>th</sup> century carol, *Bóg się Rodzi*, was also a polonaise with words written by the poet Franciszek Karpiński. And the oldest of our carols, *Aniol Pasterzom Mówił*, dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The Christmas tree was always a fir. The privilege of putting it up and decorating it belonged to the men in the family. It was put up a day before Christmas and then the room was locked. No children were allowed to see it before Christmas, even though most of the decorations were made by them. There was never a bit of tinsel on the tree and no decorations were ever bought in the store, except the candles.

At *Wigilia*, the custom of serving twelve different courses was not observed in Silesia as it was in most parts of Poland. Just *siemionka*, fish with freshly-boiled potatoes, and a poppyseed dessert called *makowki*.

It was an almost austere supper, served after a whole day of fasting. No heavy work was ever done on the day of Christmas Eve. No more last minute bustling, just finishing touches. It was a rather solemn and quiet day. Truly a day of waiting for Jesus Christ as the word *vigilare* suggests.

We children behaved our best as we were sternly reminded in the morning not to shout or quarrel with anyone. It was believed that whatever we did on that day would be repeated the whole of next year. Good or bad.

By eleven o'clock we children were back home from our caroling and prepared for the Shepherd's Mass held at midnight.

Grandmother, who was the only one in my family still to dress in the traditional Silesian costume, looked very festive. A fully-gathered, ankle-length, wine-colored skirt was worn on top of three underskirts. A thin batiste one came first, then a heavily embroidered white petticoat, next a quilted one. Her jacket was made of black alpaca and her head was covered with a red kerchief tightly knotted at the back. On her neck Grandma wore twelve strings of corals with a large gold cross attached at the front. Over her shoulders was draped a large woolen *chustka* (shawl) in a most exquisite paisley design.

But from underneath that beautiful shawl there peeked out a bundle of straw which Grandma took with her to church. Later she wrapped the straw around each fruit tree in our orchard, strongly believing that no frost would harm them.

Though Grandfather had two assistant organists it was he who sat at the organ for the

*Profiles - Praise the Lord to page 15*



## R.I.P (Rest In... PiS)

By: **Justyna Ball**

All Saints' Day. The sight of an Asian man carrying a wreath and candles at the Warsaw Powazki cemetery was the best. His children walked alongside. How sad, but how promising at the same time. Diversity, a new "old" Polish quality.

My cousins and I, we do the rounds with our grandparents first. Then grandma's two brothers whose remains are buried under one of those memorial plaques in a common grave dedicated to those killed during the Warsaw Uprising '44. The next stop is the monument to the Katyń massacre and an unknown grave that does not have a light yet, any grave.

My aunts and uncles usually come before the crowds so their candles, flowers, wreaths are already there. Around us, kids play with red squirrels and stuff their mouths with "pańska skórka" or strings of pretzels called "obwarzanki." Colorful stands full of fresh and dried flowers and a palette of candles comprised of every hue lean against two sides of the cemetery walls where the gates are. There are donut sellers and next to them, Home Army veterans selling pins, books, and DVDs - all Warsaw Uprising related. The atmosphere isn't quite as expected, sad and majestic: I actually found it rather cheerful. Sad would be not to have any visitors there, forgetting our loved ones on this special day.

Later on, at dusk, when all the merchants are gone, the place, illuminated with thousands of lights, becomes ...a magnificent phenomenon.

At the same time, some 30 miles east of Warsaw, my husband and his 90 year old grandmother pay their respects at the Minsk Mazowiecki Cemetery. There, they encounter a mesmerized French couple who are strolling through the alleys.

My trip took place only days after the announcement of the results of the new elections. The new government isn't set up yet, but the change is visible. People are relaxed, and there is no tension in their voices or anger triggered by the new "revelations" of daily news as it was in past months. Anger from feeling that the image of their precious Poland built by Polish people and their previous governments was now in ruins due to two years of "primitive and xenophobic language" used by the governing powers and their own inferiority complexes. Overnight, embarrassment and frustration, for many, was replaced by hope, a sense of stability and most desired... normality.

On Oct 21st, millions of Poles sighed with relief.

As The Economist put it: "The era of the terrible twins is over." Common sense won.

And the victory is undisputable. The Polish-American press endorsing P&S missed the opportunity to show their readers the detailed results. Here are the numbers.

Over 41.55% of Poles have chosen the Civic Platform (PO) over Law & Justice (PiS) 32.11%. L&D (Left and Democrats, which is the ex-SLD communist party) was way behind with 13.15%, and PSL (Peasants Party) received 8.91%.

54% registered voters may not seem much to us, but it was actually a record number. In Warsaw, three polling stations ran out of voting cards, which caused a three hour long delay. It was concluded that although the PO won in all the cities, PiS still had majority in the plains. Compared to the elections of 2005, PiS gained in the countryside from 23% to 39%. But the PO's numbers doubled, from 15% to 31%.

In general, PiS gained extra votes from its coalition with Samoobrona and LPR (League of Polish Families) that previously attracted many country folks. However, those parties are gone now. They caused Poland a lot of headaches and as predicted, at the end, were completely destroyed from within. Samoobrona became known for its sex scandals and LPR for its controversial nationalistic ideas.

I wish the Polish American press would print (available on internet) maps so readers can better understand how Poles voted regionally. Farther to the East, it's more likely that people voted for PiS, while Central Poland and Western Poland supported PO. In conclusion, more women than men voted with PO's electorate being better educated, and with PiS attracting more elderly voters.

So what happened? What caused PiS to fall? Several reasons: the last televised debate between Tusk and Kaczyński was a definite gain for Tusk. Many claimed that it was the ugly campaign led by Law & Justice, a campaign full of aggressiveness and craving for absolute power. So even those who did not support PO voted against PiS. Add Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro, who was looking for any dirt on their opponents and set up a press conference every time there was a hint of wrongdoing. That did not play well with the masses as people started feeling insecure about their own future. The language and the style was insulting.

The ruling power never realized that war on corruption means not only prosecuting the criminal but also investigating and resolving the cause of the problem.

Later on, Jacek Kurski (specialist of black PR) blamed Adam Bielan (both from the PiS campaign committee), and Bielan blamed Kurski. PiS was cracking up. Ludwik Dorn, Minister of Internal Affairs, attacked Jarosław Kaczyński, comparing him to a "drunk Kwaśniewski." Sayonara Mr. Dorn!

He was excluded from speaking at several events and eventually resigned, along with two other members. Lost and confused, Nelly Rokita (wife of Jan Maria) also ended her short affair with PiS.

The Vice-Minister of Health is now being investigated as he admitted that after the visit from a representative of the lobbyist group, he added expensive medicine to the list of subsidized drugs. The atmosphere in the ranks of PiS was getting heavy, because as predicted, those who were supposed to be clean and just, weren't. As long as they were loyal to their leaders, the leaders looked the other way.

It also turned out that the previous workers of the Ministry of Education, after only two years of their reign, proposed a 17% raise for... themselves while teachers were to receive ...3%. This is "cleaning up" politics

*Justyna Ball to page to page 156*

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## Calendar of Events

**December 29, 11:30 a.m. Whittier - Oplatek Luncheon & Scholarship Presentation** organized by the Polish University Club in Swiss Park Banquet Center, 1905 Workman Mill Road, Information: (562)699-1525.

**31, Los Angeles - Sylwester Ball by "Krakusy"** - Polish Parrish Hall in LA, Information: (818)248-7176

**31, 7:00 till morning Yorba Linda Sylwester Ball by "Polanie"** - 3999 Rose Drive, Ośrodek Polski, orchestra "Firebeat" from Chicago. Information: (949) 235-3256 and reservations: (714) 964-9165.

**January 5, Sat, 6:30 p.m., New Year's Caroling**, at the Polish Center in Yorba Linda, Information: Viola Turek (949)235-3256.

**12, Queen Mary in Long Beach - Krakusy Carnival Ball**, \$85.00 per person... students 21 and under \$75.00 Jacek Gałazka Orch. information Janusz Wilczek (818)248-7176

**19, 7:00 p.m., Yorba Linda Polish Center - Carnival Ball organized by "Polanie"** Information: Viola Turek (949)235-3256.

**26, San Francisco - Krakusy will perform A Christmas Show "Gody"** information Janusz Wilczek (818)248-7176.

**Feb 2, - Yorba Linda - Carnival Ball - Polish School** info: Ela Rudzińska (310)831-0708.

**Apr 24 - May 4, 2008, Los Angeles - Ninth Polish Film Festival**, information: ajandaeearthlink.net

*Please send information for the calendar to Bish Petryka - e-mail: zbykoopet@aol.com ★*