

Justyna Ball from 2

back in Poland was a midwife and already had a five year old son here, gave me this advice: If I have a little boy when I hear in the hospital that word "circumcision" is used to just scream "NO!" See, that's what Polish friends are for.

I gave away pigs' feet that I found on our doorstep, but I saved the gallon of vodka, which we used to ... disinfect the baby's belly button.

Within days of baby Francis being born, we received a visitor. A guy showed up at our Central St. apartment, probably tipped by the hospital, on a mission to convince us (a couple of newest immigrants) that more than anything else in the world, and during this Christmas Season, we need to spend \$100 on a photo shoot with our newborn son. The kind that the whole family is included, filling up the left bottom corner of the picture completely, leaving space in the right corner big enough to fit a galaxy. I've seen it at friends' houses later on, but never regretted not getting one. The proud "floating on air" parents (That still will be us!) hold the baby on their laps. Not sure of how to say, "Get lost" in English and if it's even proper to dismiss such an intruder, we played along. They're not only barbarians, they are also nuts!

It was Sally Deremian who took the first pics of Francis when he was only hours old at no charge. Priscilla Kulas made a dish of go³bki. Good Christians Mr. and Mrs. Gagnon gave us \$20 and from the Blisses we received a Christmas tree! Florence Bolton (herself a daughter of a Polish-German immigrant couple) helped us write a thank you letter to the churches who sponsored us. She gave us area tours and...ideas.

Peter Coulthard (Betty's husband) got Jacek his first job. Mike Deremian (Sally's husband) helped Jacek buy our first family car, the Buick Skylark. The year was still 1986.

My kids either slept, rode or played in cribs, carriages, high chairs that were borrowed from the Watermans (Grandma Gail was a postal worker and a friend of Betty's), or wore clothes from Dyjak's children (school principal)... and they turned out ok. They seem it at least.

We all adjusted, as planned with Betty's help and many others. And that's what I'm thankful for each Thanksgiving. For people who showed up in our lives when we needed them or just to chat to lift up our spirits.

We indulged in American life but not necessarily the lifestyle.

Soccer practices, dance recitals, Macy's Day Parade. Skiing trips, bunny slopes and Black Diamonds. Mario Brothers, Disney World, Six Flags, South Beach ... did not spoil us. Tonsils and ingrown toenails, broken arms, wrists, ankles, poison ivy, dog bites... Those we could not avoid...and the class rings (rip-offs) and the Starter jacket craze that we could... (But never forgetting where we came from keeping our own traditions alive.)

The memories of Betty showing US how to use a stove are priceless.

Hiding from her new items like a set of steak knives in the closet to avoid the "no, you don't need those!" comments. I smile at the memory of Paul Korzec who sat in that van on the way from the airport and acted as a translator. He learned his Polish from grandma so he, himself a sixty-something guy, unknowingly, spoke like a ... woman which to us was quite amusing.

Polish "common sense" (na chłopski rozum) approach equipped us with the ability of not falling into the mass hysteria of buying the newest video game or other object of desire to keep up with the Jones'.

The New Yorker's humor (like comics from the 1930s with its "Room for sleeping or jumping?") and daily doses of Peanuts kept us sane. This Christmas

season I wear my "It's ok to wish me a Merry Christmas" pin.

Last year I paid special attention to how the media ignored or targeted, when needed, sometimes even ridiculing things that cannot be bought, the stuff they cannot sell like traditions, customs, and the symbolic aspect of Christmas. Holiday shopping is ok, but Christmas traditions are not, seems to be their motto. We'll see about that!

Traditionally, within days of Christmas Eve, we'll go to the ... hardware store to pick the ugliest tree, the one that nobody wanted and we'll make it look pretty and we'll keep it until Feb 2nd. You know, the Blessings of the Candles day that in America, over the years, evolved into... you'll never guess...Woodchuck, I mean Groundhog Day. In other countries, it is still the Purification of the Virgin and officially ends the Christmas season.

When according to ancient Jewish custom, 40 days after Jesus was born, his mother became purified. My grandma in Poland always told me that she takes the tree down right before my birthday, which is Feb 5th.

It's 2008. I will cook a whole Christmas Eve's supper, traditionally on two burners! (My notorious bad luck with appliances.) It's a challenge but I'm always up to it. To mark the beginning of Wigilia, we will share an opłatek, then have fish and „pierogi z kapusta,” barszcz and uszka, herring, an apple & leeks salad, gingerbread, poppy seed strudel, cheesecake, and the very next day, while we still nibble on bigos and paszteciki... I'll watch the saddest sight, a sight of a Christmas tree, naked for only the remnants of some Angel's hair, flickering in the wind in my neighbor's yard.

Sure, you can convince people to do that. Dump the tree, all together now! Retailers want you to prepare for Valentine's Day. But you cannot erase Christmas completely, because it brings too much profit.

What the media can do is make it appear less attractive, at the same time promoting shopping (It's called the "exchange of gifts" they want you to keep that one tradition going) and giving a boost to other holidays, so "others won't feel left out."

So, for now...Merry Christmas to All! Who knows, maybe some day our children will call it, "Mr. and Mrs. Santa's anniversary gala!" Or the "Snowman extravaganza."

In 2000, we spent Christmas in Warsaw, one brisk morning, as we were leaving for downtown, Grandma yelled after my husband, „Jacusiu, a założyłeś ciepłe majtki?" (Which translates to: "Jacus, are you wearing warm underwear?" The forty-year old father of two replied rolling his eyes, „Tak, babciu, założyłem!" Some things never change! □

Polish Profiles from 2

Angel names with them and portrayed them to have wings. In other words wings were indeed associated with Angels way back.

It all sounds beautiful, but reading those books it did not clarify things, yet it helped me to give it my own interpretation. And so I believe that the Good Lord has to have some assistants, and that the Angels play that role. Just like we have ministrants assisting the priest during Mass. It makes perfect sense. Except in heaven they are called Angels. I still have many questions, like "Who becomes an Angel?" I know, who can become a Saint, but who becomes an Angel? Some people say that children who die young become Angels. I want very much to believe it. That's why I know that my son who died at an early age is my Guardian Angel. Those children are too young to become saints and so the Dear Lord made them Angels. That too makes perfect sense to me.

And how about you? Do you think that you have a Guardian Angel? I think that you have! □

Grandpa's opłatek from 8

centered on the sharing of love and peace, captured in that age-old custom.

A quick phone call to the pastor confirmed that a few packets of Christmas wafer were still available, so the brief walk over icy streets to me became a true Christmas pilgrimage away from the commercialism that brought me a few steps closer to the Bethlehem stable. That evening, Grandpa relived the love of his long-deceased wife and transcended time and distance to share the Christmas ritual just as he had as a boy in the Tatra Mountain foothills. On what indeed would prove to be Grandpa's last Christmas, in the sharing of the opłatek I discovered the true meaning and joy of Christ's coming. □

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8:30 AM Eng 7:30 PM. PL

First Saturday of month

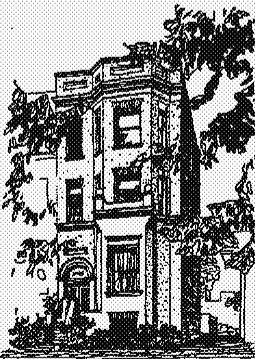
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What's Your Legacy

Many people talk about leaving their will to worthy causes, but don't have a will, and do not realize it requires a will to do so. The laws of most states make it clear that personal property goes automatically, by law, to your nearest relative, even if they are quite distant ones, unless you have a legal will that says otherwise. If you have no relative, it goes to the state. More than half of all adult Americans die without having made their wills. Most of them undoubtedly planned to do so, but never got around to it. Some had wills but didn't keep them current. When you have a will, you should update it every few years as conditions change. Also, always name an executor who will carry out your wishes. Besides money, non-cash possessions can also be used and contributions and various donation plans can be carried out. Be a philanthropist: leave your stocks, bonds, real estate, art, valuable collection or insurance to continue the Polish - American traditions. Your will is the most important way of giving. When you're gone, it is a legacy that is not forgotten. In your will, you can specify what you would like your donation to be used for. For help in making your will, contact a competent lawyer. **The American Center of Polish Culture, Inc. is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization that needs your help and legacy.**

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Christmas cribs from 1

once pious congregations began acting more and more like audiences watching jugglers and other entertainers at open-air markets. They pushed, shoved, crowded around the jasełka (nativity scene), laughed and shouted. In fact, things got so unruly that in the mid-18th century Church authorities banned such nativity presentations from churches. The custom was taken over of by poor students who entertained townsfolk by donning makeshift "biblical" costumes or staging nativity puppet shows house to house.

Unlike the grotto-type shelter used to depict Christ's birthplace in Italy and other southern lands, in Poland the nativity scene was usually portrayed in a wooden, often thatched-roof stable, or something that vaguely resembled a country church or the housing of a wayside shrine. The Christmas crèches ranged from the primitive-rustic model typical of the countryside to more refined styles encountered in towns. But absolutely nothing could compare with the breathtakingly beautiful Szopka Krakowska (Kraków Crèche).

The Szopka Krakowska is an urban art-form of relatively recent vintage. It all started round the mid-19th century, when Vistula raftsmen and workmen needed a source of income during the off-season. Some began whittling nativity figurines and fashioning "stables" in which to display them, but they seemed to draw a lot of their inspirations from the towers and steeples of Old Royal Kraków. What evolved was a several-story structure far more reminiscent of an Old World Cathedral or story-book castle than the humble stable of Bethlehem.

A crèche-making contest, held each year in early December in Kraków's Rynek Główny (Main Marketplace) goes back only to the 1930s, making it a relatively recent custom, as Polish traditions go. Contestants display their entries round the base of the Adam Mickiewicz Monument, and they can be admired all year round at the nearby ethnographic museum. And to think that these shimmering masterpieces are put together from such flimsy materials as cardboard, thin strips of wood, colored cellophane (for the stained-glass windows), and metallic foil.

Since the collapse of communism in 1989, a new form of nativity tableau has made the scene. Known as a "living crèche", it incorporates live animals and displays some of the features of a petting zoo. Adding rabbits, pigeons, llamas and Shetland ponies to the sheep, cows and donkeys may not be biblically correct, but this approach does capture the attention and pique the interest of preschoolers. After Mass they beg their parents to take them to the stable, usually situated on the parish grounds. This form of grass-roots "evangelization" is highly recommended, because it forcefully reminds youngsters at an early age why we celebrate Christmas in the first place. □

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