

POLISH WEDDING CUSTOMS & TRADITIONS

By Loretta Sawyer

Chicago has the largest Polish population outside of Warsaw, Poland itself. The wedding is one of the most important family celebrations. If you, or your groom, has Polish roots there are several ways you can express your heritage on your wedding day.

For centuries most marriages in Poland took place starting the beginning of September and continued through fall and winter except for the holy weeks of advent and lent. This was at a time when the all-important harvest and field work was completed; and food was at abundance to hold and host a major celebration as a wedding.

The engagement period: Zareczyny or Zrekowiny. The main event on the night of engagement was the tying together of the hands of the couple to be married. There were numerous variations on this custom, but in whatever form it appeared, the central elements were an uncut loaf of bread and a white towel or scarf. Because engagement was as binding as the marriage itself, it was always done in a public act in front of family and friends who acted as witnesses. Starosta (an intermediary) joined the right hands of the couple above the bread, tied them together with white cloth, and made the sign of the cross over their joined hands representing "the joined endeavors of the man and woman to prepare the bread" that they always have bread beneath their hands.

Then there were Oprosiny or Zaprosiny (the invitations). Wedding traditions demanded that guests be invited in a certain obligatory manner. First, invitations were issued to relatives or friends to act as groomsmen or bridesmaids. The bride and groom then went to invite their godparents. In some sections of Poland old custom forbade the exclusion of anyone in the village from being invited to the wedding.

On the wedding day it was customary to have musicians playing as the wedding guests began arriving at the Dom Weselny (wedding home). On seeing a guest approaching they would begin to play, for which they were sometimes rewarded with a small tip.

When the groom arrived with his Starosta, groomsman and family members, the maid of honor began dressing the bride. Everyone would gather at the home of the bride to accompany the bridal couple to the church, but also to witness the blessing and symbolic farewells of the bride with her parents, relatives, and friends. The blessing by the parents was seen as more important than the church ceremony itself. After the receiving of the blessing, everyone stood in a circle around the couple and the mother blessed them with holy water. The blessings were so important that, if a mother or father had died, the wedding party would stop at the cemetery where the groom or bride asked for a blessing from the deceased parent

The trip to the church took place in various ways, with the bride and groom riding together or in separate wagons. Usually several horse wagons with stately horses and guests dressed in their Sunday best with bouquets of flowers pinned to their heads, followed them. pulling a wagon on which stood the driver, cracking his whip for

everyone to get out of his way. Behind him were a fiddler and double base player playing a merry tune. Behind the wagon, on horseback, rode the master of ceremonies, the Starosta and the best man with a bottle of vodka who alternately offered it to the wagon driver. Everyone sang — the bridesmaids, the groomsman, the musicians and the wagon driver.

During the church ceremony it was expected of the bride to cry. If she didn't it was believed that she would cry throughout her married life. In some parts of Poland, the bride and groom took bread with them which had been given them during blessings. Leaving the church ceremony, the bride sometimes threw handfuls of straw on the young boys and girls who followed the wedding party. Whoever it landed on was prophesied to marry before the others. Another belief was that whichever one of the bridesmaids touched the bride or her wreath first after the marriage would marry that year.

When the newlyweds, followed by the wedding party and invited guests, finally arrived to the Dom Weselny (wedding home), they found the door closed to them. The Starosta sang a song to open up and the door was opened by the mother who stood before the stoop, sprinkling the married couple with holy water.

In customs that can be documented back to the sixteenth century, the young couple was most often greeted at the entrance of the house with bread and salt. Salt had equal footing with bread in all family customs from birth to death. It was believed that salt had the power to heal and cleanse, uncover thieves, protect houses against fire, dispel storms and hail, and drive away evil spirits.

The wedding feast also followed established traditions. The couple always sat at the table which was located along the wall containing holy pictures. First to be placed on the tables were bottles of vodka and beer, and the wedding banquet began with "Zapicie", i.e., to wash down or to drink. This was done with one glass which traveled from hand to hand. During the drinking, everyone wished one another good health and fortune, kissed one another and if moved, sang patriotic songs. The crowd ate, drank and danced. If a father could afford it, the wedding sometimes lasted three days.

On the last night of the wedding, the most important wedding custom of all took place. The custom was called Oczepiny. It was the moment when the Czepek — the cap of married woman — was placed upon the head at her wedding celebration. **This tradition is still the mainstay of many Polish brides, representing a rite of passage from young woman to married woman. All single ladies circle the bride as the maid or matron of honor stands behind the bride and removes the veil from the bride's head as music is played. A married woman is given the responsibility of pinning the cap on the bride as all married women circle around the bride. At this moment, the bride is officially considered a married woman. In some weddings, after the unveiling the bride will toss the veil, rather than the bouquet, to one of the single women. The marriage cap was usually a gift to the bride from her godmother. This cap was always held as special and reserved for wear to church, for special folk festivals, and on her death, for burial.**

Saint Hyacinth Church in Chicago has a parish of 10,000 members. Approximately 140-150 weddings are performed there each year and 50 % of the ceremonies are done in the Polish language. One tradition in the Polish church ceremony is the taking of the priest's stole and wrapping it around the joined hands of the bride and groom. What has become a universal tradition is the bride's visitation to the Blessed Mother with a bouquet of flowers. This has become modified that today that both the bride and the groom now make the visitation together. Presentations of roses are also made to the mother's of the bride and groom.

When planning ceremony music, it is important to consider where the wedding will take place; in a church, hotel, etc. When at a church, check with the church as to their rules regarding music. While guests are being seated consider background music by Polish artists such as: Chopin, Moniuszko, Szymanowski, and Górecki. *Veni Creator Spiritus* has been the music of choice for wedding processions in Poland for centuries. Translated from Latin it means Come Greater Spirit. If you are trying to decide on a color scheme for a church, remember that Red and White are the colors of the flag of Poland.

When it comes to bridal clothing for the past 150 years white has been the predominant color for the bride. Today, a bride need not stay within that limitation. Bridal dresses were not always white in the past and nor were they worn only once. Many women used their bridal dresses as their best dress for special occasions as long as possible. This was true in many parts of Europe including England, France and Poland.

The act of parents blessing their children is still done today. Parents have blessed their offspring since the time of the Old Testament. The importance of receiving parental blessing has continued in Polish life over the centuries and none was more important than the blessings given on one's wedding day. According to custom, the bride and groom would ask for a blessing from their respective parents before each left for the church to be married.

Many of today's caterers report that couples are paying greater attention to selecting the appropriately planned menus that compliment the spirit of the wedding reception. **The White Eagle Banquets and Restaurant located in Niles, Illinois has been a choice of more area Chicago brides than any other banquet facility. For over fifty years, this family owned and operated facility has catered over 25,000 bridal receptions and banquets. "We can accommodate 40-2000 guests. Our customized menus offer many choices in dining. Whether it is traditional American, Polish, Greek, or Italian fare you are looking to serve our chefs can cater to your eyes as well as your appetite. We believe every bride is special and every wedding unique. At the White Eagle, we cater to more than the banquet, we cater to you."**

The Bread and Salt Blessing tradition is still used today at wedding celebrations. At the wedding reception, the parents of the bride and groom greet the newly married couple with bread, which is lightly sprinkled with salt and a goblet of wine. With the bread, the parents are hoping that their children will never hunger or be in

need. With the salt, they are reminding the couple that their life may be difficult at times, and they must learn to cope with life's struggles. The parents then kiss the newly married couple as a sign of welcome, unity, and love.

Entertaining guests after the wedding dinner has been the norm for centuries. Music is such an important part of the wedding event that a great deal of emphasis is placed on selecting a band or disc jockey for the reception; as well as musician for the ceremony. . **Consider hiring a polka band and pass out words to Polish songs so your guests can participate.**

The Money Dance (Apron Dance) was a custom original to Poland. Guests pay money, placed in an apron worn by the bride over her wedding dress, for the privilege to dance with her.

Whatever your heritage, one of the best resources for family tradition is within your own family; Parents, Grandparents, Aunts and Uncles. Asking them about their weddings will not only give you some insight on your family traditions but it will also help move the tradition forward into your own ceremony and bring back some wonderful memories for them.