

My Polish Embroidery

by Carole Modjeski Glass

Moczydlowski, Cieslik, Wojciechowski, Brzonkala, Kochnowicz.... So went the roll call for my class at St. Josaphat's elementary school. In the 1950s, nearly every student was of Polish descent. The school had bilingual teachers and the priests said Mass in Polish. Located on the south side of Milwaukee, St. Josaphat's was in the heart of a Polish enclave. The neighborhood physician was Dr. Chojnacki, the undertaker, Mr. Rozga. Nearby, the local chapter of the Polish National Alliance sponsored dances.

Our family was American, but Polish, too. I thought of being Polish the same way I thought I was Catholic or that I was tall and female. It was part of who I was. But it would be years before I would fully understand my heritage and realize that being Polish and participating in its customs was like adding seasonings to being American. It added uniqueness, with its language and customs.



I was only a second-generation American, as all four of my grandparents emigrated from Poland or Russia when they were teenagers. They were part of the great wave of immigrants that came to America at the turn of the century.

Although my grandparents became U.S. citizens, they spoke very little English. We lived in the flat above my grandparents' home, and Polish phrases were constantly in the air. Buzzing z-z-z sounds like *Dzien dobrzy* (Hello), or *Dziekuiya* (Thank you). These phrases were drilled into us, almost as soon as we could talk.

When I was seven or eight my parents sent me to a Polish summer school held in nearby Kosciusko Park (named, by the way, for an 18th-century Polish general who also fought in the U.S. War for Independence). We sang songs and learned more phrases, but, unfortunately, very little of it stuck. At that age, I did not understand the value of learning other languages.

My parents, however, often spoke Polish to each other. It was their code when they didn't want the children to know what they were talking about. So, while they tried to encourage us to learn Polish, they really didn't

want to lose their secret language. But we also resisted our parents' efforts to reinforce Polish, the way all kids rebel against anything their parents think is a good idea.

Polish customs and foods were incorporated into our lives through holidays and celebrations. *Puczki* (prune-filled doughnuts) were made for Fat Tuesday. *Kielbasa* (sausage) was served for Easter and, of course, the *Oplatek* on Christmas Eve.

Oplatek is a thin, unleavened wafer like a communion wafer, stamped with the images of Jesus and Mary. It is referred to as the "bread of love." And, like a communion wafer, it has almost no taste. On Christmas Eve, everyone gets a large square and then breaks off



small pieces, exchanging with every member of the family along with good wishes for the coming year. With every exchange, you also had to kiss each well wisher so my siblings and cousins and I would run and hide when Dziadzia (grandfather) brought out the *Oplatek*.

My personal favorite was the blessing of Easter foods on Holy Saturday. My mother would reach back into the closet and bring out a large basket, which she lined with a pretty, embroidered cloth, freshly laundered and ironed just for this occasion. Then she carefully placed inside the basket samplings of all the foods that would be served on Easter Sunday. There was a molded butter lamb garnished with a red flag to symbolize the martyrdom of Jesus; spicy, cooked *kielbasa*; tangy horseradish; salt and pepper; rye bread and a few of the *pysanky*, the ornately decorated hard-boiled eggs. The aromas alone would make my stomach rumble.

Besides the food, what I loved was the ritual of taking the basket to church. I changed out of my Saturday clothes into a clean blouse and skirt and my "good" shoes. Solemnly, I walked the short block carrying the heavy basket to the cool, dim church.

The normally glorious interior took on an eerie feeling with all the statues draped in purple for Lent. There, I would place our basket among the others on the sacristy railing and wait in the pews for the priest. In Latin, the priest would bless the baskets, waving his arms

wrapped in richly colored vestments while the altar boys swung the smoking pots of incense. After the prayers, I proudly delivered the basket back home, anticipating the flavorful meal we would have on Easter Sunday.

My second favorite holiday was Halloween. Although not a Polish tradition, I cajoled my Mother into allowing me to wear my sister Christine's Polish dancing costumes to school for Halloween. The costumes were elegant and exotic. One had a yellow satin flared skirt with a military style jacket trimmed with fake white fur. Another consisted of an embroidered white blouse worn with a black velvet vest that laced up the front, festooned with a sequined eagle on the back. It was paired with a full, white skirt trimmed with multi-colored ribbons and topped with a ribbon-trimmed sheer white apron. I'm sure Sister Roseanne thought me odd, but I felt regal. They were costumes, after all.

Dance was an integral part of Polish celebrations and the polka the most popular. You cannot dance the polka without smiling. Attending weddings as a little girl, I would do my own little hop to the peppy accordion music. Years later, dancing with my uncles, I learned the steps. Like mad, whirling dervishes, we flew around the room, catching glimpses of other dancers who had dropped out of the marathon, but still clapped in enthusiasm for others. Finally when the music ended, happily panting, wiping the sweat from our faces, in silent congratulations we beamed; we made it!



But so much about Poland seemed to be a mystery. The Poles I knew looked sad and tight-lipped. They didn't talk about the place they left behind. They worked hard and always shared what they had with others.

We often collected clothing and household discards to send to our poorer relations in the "old country." As I helped my Mother pack these huge boxes, I wondered. *Is Poland a bad place? Why are the people so poor? Why don't they come here?* Photographs that were sent with letters of acknowledgment showed people who looked like they were from another time. To me, Poland seemed trapped in the past.

I didn't know that Poland's history is filled with profound dep-

rivation and oppression. That it was once a major European power, but had suffered hundreds of years of conquering armies. The death and persecution that accompanies war had devastated generation upon generation.

It wasn't until I was in my 30s, when I saw a program on public television about World War I, that I started to understand the history of Poland and its people. I wish I had known the story of Poland when I was younger. It would've helped me to defend myself against the "Polak" jokes and to take a greater interest in learning more about Poland.

My ancestors made sacrifices and took risks so they and their progeny would have a better life. They instilled in me discipline, frugality and perseverance; lessons that have served me well. And most of all, they gave me a heritage that adds uniqueness to my genealogy, when so much of our culture is bland.

Old country customs, though taken for granted when I was a child, today are like a rich embroidery that ties my family memories together. Unfortunately, many of these rituals have faded away since my grandparents died. While my father still brings out the *Oplatek* on Christmas Eve, you will hardly hear Polish spoken at all. And now that my sisters and I have chosen spouses who are Scottish, German and French, I guess we're becoming part of the melting pot. After all, we are Americans.



Carole Glass writes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She keeps her Polish heritage alive by writing family stories and making *kielbasa*.

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