



Polish Festivals and Traditions

Special days

Name's day

Traditionally, name day celebrations (Polish: imieniny) have often enjoyed a celebratory emphasis greater than that of birthday celebrations in Poland. However, birthday celebrations are increasingly popular and important, particularly among the young generation.

A Name Day celebration in Poland is similar to a birthday, in that family and friends gather to eat, drink, and give gifts and flowers. Name Days differ from birthdays in that they do not celebrate a person's actual birth date, but mark the feast day for the saint whose name the celebrant bears. Note that most Catholic Poles are named for saints. The Catholic Church developed a calendar of saints, now called the General Roman Calendar – allotting a particular day for the faithful to celebrate a specific saint. Local calendars often contain the names celebrated on a given day.

Birthday

A number of families celebrate both name's days and birthdays. To celebrate one's birthday, family and friends gather to eat, drink, and give gifts and flowers.

21st January - Grandmother's Day

22nd January - Grandfather's Day

8th March – International Women's Day

All women in Poland receive special attention usually by getting flowers.

1st April - All Fools' Day or 'prima aprilis'

This is universally observed in Poland: expect endless pranks, jests, and innocent lies.

26th May – Mother's Day

23rd June – Father's Day

1st September - the day Germany invaded Poland in 1939, triggering World War II.

17th September the day Russia invaded Poland in 1939.

Festivals

Drowning of Marzanna

Marzanna is a pagan springtime festival in Poland that signals the end of winter. It usually takes place on the fourth Sunday of Lent. This old custom predates Christian rites, so Marzanna is not universally observed throughout Poland, but the "drowning" of Marzanna is still conducted as a way for Poles to stay in touch with their ancient heritage and have fun with superstitions and festive traditions. Marzanna represents winter or death, and the Sunday on which the Marzanna celebrations take place is sometimes called Death Sunday. On this day a straw or rag effigy of Marzanna (also known as Morena or Death) is constructed, sometimes by school children. The effigy is imbued with the negative qualities of the long, cold winter. Marzanna is set aflame, sometimes with herbs, and with her burning, springtime is beckoned to come. Then, for the bearers of the effigy to be rid of the death and illness that Marzanna represents, they throw her into a river or a lake to "drown" her. Some superstitions are associated with Marzanna's drowning – it's best to turn your back completely on the submerged effigy to complete the farewell to winter.

Fat Thursday

The last one before the Ash Wednesday, is a festival of overeating when every Pole devours the Fat Thursday's specials: 'favoriki' crunch cakes and the Polish doughnuts (balls with rose-petals jam filling) which are a must-eat treat on that day.

Shrovetide

(Polish 'Ostatki' or 'Zapusty') crowns two-month carnival season. The Shrove Tuesday's 'sledziowka' festivities traditionally last till dawn on the Ash Wednesday and they end with the Lent meal of herring after which repentant revellers go straight to the church to have their foreheads strewn with ash.

Ash Wednesday

Most Poles are Roman Catholic, so on Ash Wednesday or **Sroda Popielcowa**, Mass is heard and ashes are received on the forehead from a priest who says, "Remember man, thou art dust and to dust thou shall return." Ash Wednesday is also the day when pussy willows -- **bazie** or **kotki** -- are cut and placed in a vase of water.

Lent's 40 days

Lent days are marked by profusion of special services and ceremonies in beautiful Polish churches, culminating over the Holy Week, notably in the Good Friday' mournful rituals. For Polish Catholics, Lent is the most reflective spiritual season. During this time people are fasting, going to the confession, praying and visiting the specially decorated churches to see "Our Lord's Grave". Each parish strives to come up with the most artistically and religiously evocate arrangement in which the Blessed Sacrament, draped in a filmy veil, is prominently displayed. During the Lent most of the people do not eat meat on Fridays.

Easter

Easter is major holiday in Poland, and Easter celebrations are not limited to Easter Sunday. Easter-related traditions take place for more than a week in Poland. From Palm Sunday to Wet Monday, this period is marked with religious rites and practices with their origins in pagan times.

It is important to note that Easter in Poland is celebrated Western Roman Catholic calendar. Holy Week lasts from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday.

Palm Sunday, the week before Easter Sunday, is marked by church attendance with palm-leaf substitutes in the form of willow branches or handmade bouquets of dried flowers for the blessing.

Holly Saturday, Food Blessing/Swieconka

On Saturday people take to churches decorated baskets (Swieconka) containing a sampling of traditional food to be blessed.

Swieconka is one of the most enduring and beloved Polish traditions. On Saturday people take to churches decorated baskets containing a sampling of traditional food to be blessed: hard-boiled shelled eggs, ham, sausage, salt, horseradish, fruits, bread and cake. Prominently displayed among these is the Easter lamb, usually molded from butter and colorful pisanki.

Common foods brought for blessing include: eggs, bread, butter lamb, salt, horseradish, ham, and sausage.

The food blessed in the church remains untouched until Sunday morning.

Written Eggs / Pisanki

The custom of coloring eggs for Easter is still observed in Polish custom. The eggs are decorated with many traditional Polish symbols of Easter. Most popular are lamb, cross, floral designs or Easter's greetings.

On **Easter Sunday**, the Easter table will be covered with a white tablecloth. On the middle of the table in most homes housewife will put colored eggs, cold meats, coils of sausages, ham, yeast cakes, pound cakes, poppy-seed cakes, and a lamb made of sugar. Polish Easter Soup called Zurek or White Barszcz is often served at the Easter meal, garnished with the hard-boiled eggs and sausage. There is also tradition to share blessed eggs with the members of the family and wish each other good health, happiness for the rest of the year. In some parts of Poland, children are visited by Easter Bunny which leaves small gifts for them.

Wet Monday / Lany Poniedzialek

Monday (just after easter) is a holiday in Poland and is called in polish "Lany Poniedzialek" or "Smigus- Dyngus". This is a wonderful day of fun. The ancient Polish tradition on Easter Monday is celebrated by everyone with enthusiasm by sprinkling each other with water. Especially kids have fun this day. Some people say that by being splashed with water on Easter Monday will bring you good luck throughout the year

1st May Labour Day

Under communist rule, the 1st of May was celebrated as Labour Day with government-endorsed parades, concerts and similar events. Following the 1989 changes, the government decided to keep this day a public holiday but to give it the neutral name of State Holiday. In addition, the 3rd of May was created as Constitution Day. The May holidays (1st, 2nd and 3rd of May) are

called "Majówka" in Polish, a pun made from the May month name (it can be translated as **May-day picnic**)

3rd May Constitution Day

Even though May 3 is celebrated throughout Poland as the day that marks the signing of the Polish Constitution in 1791, this is not the exact day that Poland received their independence. The constitution of 1791 only lasted one short year prior to an invasion that divided Poland among Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Finally, in November of 1918, Poland received its independence. This day however, is still an important date that offers visitors a glimpse into the culture and pride of the Polish people with an array of Polish festivals and parades in the larger cities throughout Poland.

1st June – International Children's Day

In Poland, Children's Day (Dzień Dziecka) is celebrated on June 1. The International Children's Day was introduced in Poland in 1952. It coincides with the beginning of summer and it is usually treated as a holiday, as it takes place near the end of the school year. Schools usually organize special activities for the day of the celebration, and the first week of June is a time of festivities organized in parks and entertainment centres for children. Parents buy small gifts for their children

9th Thursday after Easter - Corpus Christi

A national and religious holiday, a public holiday. A traditional procession leaves the church and continues on the streets with banners, holy pictures and in the central part of the procession a priest holding The Holy Host covered by a canopy. Children at the front of the procession sprinkle flowers in front of the priest. The procession stops at four altars along the route where prayers are said and hymns are sung.

The meaning of this holy day is the worship and adoration of Christ as symbolised by the Host. It is a way of declaring in public the faith and the identity of a believer. The Church declares that on this day faith is not a private matter and that glorifying Christ is an obligation for all believers. Many people place garlands and pictures in their windows but the most decorative are the villages that decorate all the fences and streets where the procession is to take place with flowers, green leaves and sacral objects.

On the night from June 23rd to 24th - Garlands ('Wianki' or Noc Swietojanska)

A Midsummer's Night Eve. Maidens construct wianki (intricate wreaths) decorated with herbs and flowers. At dusk they launch them, candle lit, into the river hoping the boy who finds her wianki will ask for her hand. Bonfires smoke the crop fields for good luck in growing and harvest. Boys show off jumping over the flames. Fertility rites abound and the barren fern blooms this night for only a moment. Summer solstice.

15th August Feast of the Assumption

A religious holiday. The day that Catholics have long celebrated what is called the Dormition (falling asleep) or Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The Feast of the Assumption celebrates both the happy departure of Mary from this life, and her assumption bodily into heaven.

1st November ALL SAINTS' DAY and 2nd November All Souls' Day

All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day are accompanied by the beautiful tradition of decorating cemeteries with thousands of glowing candles. On this night, the worlds of the living and the dead come closer to one another. Poles honour their deceased family and friends with memories, church services, and, of course, the flickering candles that brighten graveyards all over Poland. All Saints' Day, November 1 (as well as, to a lesser degree, All Souls' Day, November 2) is spent in Poland on visiting cemeteries and commuting between them. Everybody prays at graves, decked with fresh flowers for the occasion, of the deceased relatives, and lights candles.

11th November National Independence Day

Poland signed its historic constitution in 1791 but its independence was to be short-lived as invading forces partitioned the country between Russia, Prussia and Austria the following year. It was not until 11 November 1918 that Poland was to regain its independence. To this day, 11 November is an important civic holiday that is recognised throughout the country and is marked with patriotic parades and festivities in many of the larger towns and cities.

29th November 'Andrzejki'

Universal partying on the night of St Andrew's Day has folk origin; on this day people (mainly children and teens) are making prophecy by pouring candle wax by key hole to water and guessing what the wax shape means. Andrzejki, or St. Andrew's Day, is a traditional holiday and is an evening of superstition and fortune telling. On this night, young women can predict who they'll meet and fall in love with.

Advent

In Poland, Advent is the beginning of Christmas Time. It's a time when people try to be peaceful and remember the real reason for Christmas. People try not to have excess of anything. Some people give up their favourite foods or drinks and parties and discos are not widely held. Some people also go to Church quite frequently. There is the tradition of the 'roraty', special masses (or communion services) held at dawn and dedicated to Mary for receiving the good news from the angel Gabriel.

During Advent, people also prepare their houses for Christmas. There's lots of cleaning and people wash their windows and clean their carpets very thoroughly. Everything must be clean for Christmas day!

6th December - 'Mikolaj' on St Nicholas' Day

This has been always the date when children in Poland expected Santa Clause bringing gifts. The gifts are put under sleeping children's pillows to be discovered by them in the morning of 6th December. It is believed that Mikolaj only brings gifts for well-behaved children. The naughty ones get switches to remind them that they must do better next year.

Wigilia, the Christmas Eve supper

In Poland, Christmas Eve is a day first of fasting, then of feasting. The Wigilia feast begins at the appearance of the first star. There is no red meat served but fish, usually carp. The supper, which includes many traditional dishes and desserts, can sometimes last for over two hours. It is followed by the exchange of gifts. The next day, the Christmas Day, is often spent visiting friends. In Polish tradition, people combine religion and family closeness at

Christmas. Although gift-giving plays a major role in the rituals, emphasis is placed more on the making of special foods and decorations.

On the night of Christmas Eve, so important is the appearance of the first star in remembrance of the Star of Bethlehem, that it has been given an affectionate name of "the little star" or Gwiazdka (the female counterpart of St. Nicholas). On that evening, children watch the sky anxiously hoping to be the first to cry out, "The star has come!" Only after it appears, the family members sit down to a dinner table.

According to tradition, bits of hay are spread beneath the tablecloth as a reminder that Christ was born in a manger. Others partake in the practice of placing money under the table cloth for each guest, in order to wish for prosperity in the coming year. Some practice the superstition that an even number of people must be seated around the table. In many homes an empty place setting is symbolically left at the table for the Baby Jesus or, for a lonely wanderer who may be in need of food, or if a deceased relative should come and would like to share in the meal.

The supper begins with the breaking of the opłatek. Everyone at the table breaks off a piece and eats it as a symbol of their unity with Christ. They then share a piece with each family member. A tradition exists among some families to serve twelve different dishes at Wigilia symbolizing the Twelve Apostles, or perhaps, an odd number of dishes for good luck (usually five, seven, or nine).

A traditional Wigilia supper in Poland includes fried carp and barszcz (beetroot soup) with uszka (ravioli). Carp provides a main component of the Christmas Eve meal across Poland; carp fillet, carp in aspic etc. Universal Polish Christmas foods are pierogi as well as some herring dishes, and for desert, makowiec or noodles with poppy seed. Often, there is a compote of dry fruits for a drink.

The remainder of the evening is given to stories and songs around the Christmas tree. In some areas of the country, children are taught that "The Little Star" brings the gifts. As presents are unwrapped, carollers may walk from house to house receiving treats along the way.

Christmas Eve ends with **Pasterka, the Midnight Mass** at the local church. The tradition commemorates the arrival of the Three Wise Men to Bethlehem and their paying of respect and bearing witness to the new born Messiah. The custom of Christmas night liturgy was introduced in the Christian churches after the second half of the 5th century. In Poland that custom arrived together with the coming of Christianity.

The next day (**December 25**) begins with the early morning mass followed by daytime masses. According to scripture, the Christmas Day masses are interchangeable allowing for greater flexibility in choosing the religious services by individual parishioners. Christmas and notably the following holiday on December 26 are traditionally occasions in Poland for visiting friends and relatives. In the ensuing holiday season also popular are such family pastimes as nativity plays, nativity puppet shows, seeing elaborate Christmas cribs (nativity scenes) in various churches.

New Year's Eve (Sylwester)

Celebrations include both indoor and outdoor festivities. Large open-air concerts are held in many cities in Poland where the New Year is celebrated with live music and fireworks display.