

Basic Detail Report



Polish Cultural Club of Greater Hartford
P.O. Box 380699, East Hartford, Connecticut 06138



Polish Christmas Eve

Wigilia- Christmas Eve

Wigilia comes from the Latin *Vigilare*- to watch (*czuwać*). Christmas Eve has assumed a prominence over the centuries that has made it the most cherished holiday of the year. Through a combination of folklore and religious faith, this traditional observance carries with it mystical qualities and no holiday is more important. The *Wigilia* tradition has intense spiritual meaning and includes the concept of reconciliation. A sense of fellowship is felt, knowing that it is celebrated this way by Poles throughout the world. The preceding weeks of Advent and the day's customs are geared toward putting things in order, following good behavior and being ready and worthy for the gift of the Savior. The day begins with a fast and activities focus on preparation for the evening celebration, where symbolism is enacted in traditions that have been passed on from generation to generation.

The Table

Blades of hay are placed under the tablecloth, symbolizing the Christ child's manger crib. The tablecloth is always white, symbolizing the Holy Infant's swaddling clothes. *Opłatek* is placed on a plate over a few blades of hay at a prominent spot at the table. The best china is used and places are set for everyone. An extra setting is placed at the table in anticipation of the Christ child and in remembrance of absent loved ones. The extra setting and chair also represent a place for the unexpected guest or person in need.

The *Opłatek*- wafer

Opłatek, a thin wafer embossed with scenes of the Nativity and blessed in the church, is central to the *Wigilia* celebration. It symbolizes a community of spirit for all Poles, and is sent and shared with distant relatives and friends in a gesture of love and unity. The *opłatek* is broken and shared by everyone at the *Wigilia* table. The host or hostess or the oldest family member begins the ritual with a piece of the *opłatek* and a greeting and wish for the coming year, each person in turn exchanges his or her piece while extending best wishes. This sharing of the *opłatek* is the most cherished of traditions. This is when wrongs or bad feelings are forgiven and replaced by hope and good will for the future. The *opłatek* is also offered to the animals that are present, as they were the first to offer hospitality to the Christ child and were present at His birth. It is legend that at midnight on *Wigilia* the animals are gifted with the power of speech, but can only be heard by the pure at heart.

The *Wigilia* Dinner

The meal begins at the sight of the first star in the evening sky, the star symbolic of the one over the stable in Bethlehem. Menus vary from region to region but all are meatless. Following the *opłatek* ceremony, an odd number of dishes are served, representing the bounty of the fields, gardens, woods, rivers, and orchards. Traditional dishes may include red *barszcz* (beet soup) with *uszka* (ear shaped dumplings with mushroom filling), *śledzie* (pickled herring), *pierogi* with cheese or sauerkraut, carp or pike with horseradish sauce, noodles with poppy seeds, *kutia* (mixture of wheat, rye or barley sweetened with honey), *kompot* (fruit compote), pastries- *piernik* (honey spice cake or cookies), fruit squares, tortes, *chrust/ chrusciki/ faworki*- Angel Wings. Throughout the meal, the beautiful music of *koledy*- traditional carols is played or sung. Following the meal more *koledy* are sung while admiring the *choinka*- Christmas Tree, and then gifts are opened. Traditional folk style ornaments for the Christmas Tree in shapes of stars, angels, chains, birds and others are made from straw, paper, tin, foil, beads, eggshells and wafer. Culmination of the *Wigilia* includes attending the *Pasterka*- shepherds' Mass at midnight.



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• An Affiliate of the American Council for Polish Culture •

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