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Polish Easter Traditions



Pisanki (Polish painted Easter eggs)

Poland has a series of unique rituals connected to Easter, ranging from joyful to spiritual, and of course always including plenty of homemade delicacies.

Easter in Poland is celebrated according to the Western Roman Catholic calendar. Easter Sunday falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring. Rites and practices are therefore marked by Christianity, but still remain strongly influenced by pagan traditions. It is usual for both modern and conservative families to partake in the celebrations, regardless of what their religious beliefs may be.



Women carrying hand-made 'palms' to be blessed in church on Palm Sunday

The first sign of approaching Easter in Poland is a large number of branches and dried flowers being brought to church. One week before Easter, Palm Sunday takes place. According to Catholic tradition, the day marks the entrance of Jesus in Jerusalem. Since palm trees are rare in Poland - churchgoers often bring pussy willows or 'palms' made of colourful woven dried branches.



Ornamental representation of the tomb of Christ

The Holy Week preceding Easter involves spring cleaning. In the countryside, people would use the occasion to repaint their barns. Religious fasts are sometimes observed in varying degrees of strictness. Families visit representations of the tomb of Christ, often decorated in a spectacular fashion for the occasion.



Easter basket containing ham, sausage, eggs, a sugar lamb and horseradish

On the Saturday before Easter Sunday, Poles paint hard-boiled eggs (called pisanki). Some use store-brought kits which make the coloring and decorating easier, others continue to make dyes the traditional way - with boiled onion skins. Egg painting is encountered in several other Slavic cultures, and is thought to date back to talismanic pagan rituals that are over 5000 years old.

Another Saturday activity is the preparation of Easter baskets. Lined with a white linen or lace napkin and decorated with sprigs of boxwood, the baskets contain a sampling of Easter foods: pisanki, a piece of sausage or ham, salt and pepper, bread, a piece of cake and an Easter Lamb made of sugar or even plastic. They are brought to church to be blessed.



Traditional Polish Easter meal

On the most important day, Easter Sunday, some go to church at 6am for the Resurrection mass – a ceremonial service and procession. Homes come alive with families who gather to eat breakfast.

Before the meal, in much the same way as for Christmas with the sharing of the *oplatek* (Christmas wafer), people share wedges of the blessed Easter eggs from the basket. They exchange wishes and Joyful Hallelujah.

The breakfast is dominated by cold dishes and is a feast for meat lovers: ham, sausage, roast meats, pâté, eggs, horseradish relish, bread.



Babka, a sweet yeast cake

What follows is a frenzy of Easter cakes: a tall, round 15-yolk sweet yeast cake with a hole in the middle (*babka*) that can be compared to the American election cake, a *mazurek* - cake with a fat layer of icing, decorated with dried fruit, walnuts, almonds, roasted seeds or a cheesecake.



The last festive day is Easter Monday, known as *Śmigus-Dyngus* (Wet Monday), on which tradition requires that boys throw water over girls and spank them with willow branches.



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