



Polish Custom of Oplatek... Holy Bread

By Carolanne Kilichowski

The Oplatek is essentially unconsecrated bread wafer of the type used during Holy Communion in many different Christian religions. It has been suggested by Polish ethnographers that the sharing of this bread wafer at the wigilia table (Christmas Eve dinner) is a modification of what was once the sharing of a ritual bread called podplomyk. This was a thin, flat bread traditionally baked before placing the loaves of bread dough in the oven. The baking of this first bread was not a chance happening, but an absolute responsibility. The housewife shaped this thin bread on a flat surface and, scraping aside the glowing embers of the fire, placed it right on the edge of the oven before the flames, giving its name - before the flames. To easily break this bread into parts after baking, the housewife made heavy marks of a checkerboard pattern across the top. This bread baked quickly, with bubbles forming on the top. It was eaten not only by the inhabitants of the house, but was also sent to friendly neighbors who would reciprocate in kind. The appearance of this bread in conjunction with the oplatek gave rise to the conjecture that it was an early form of the bread wafer. In the middle of the 19th century it was noted that immediately after the oplatek, podplomyk with honey was shared.

The equivalent of the wafer as it is known today was baked by the Benedictines of Cluny in Burgundy, France. The flour for baking the wafers had to be ground in special mills and could not be used to bake regular bread. Special recipes held by the monastery were used to bake the wafers at Cluny and then taken up by other monasteries throughout Europe. In Poland, the bread wafer was known from the time of Christianity, but used only during Holy Mass. By the 15th century, the bread wafers were being made on a larger scale for popular use.

The mutual sharing and breaking of the bread wafer was, and still is, the very core and essence of Christmas Eve throughout Poland. The male head of the house began the solemn ceremony by taking the oplatek and turning to the wife, wished her good health for the upcoming year, success in her housekeeping, the fulfillment of her heart's desires and perhaps – if there was strain between them – to forgive him his faults and that the year ahead of them would be a good one. At his conclusion, she expressed her thanks, broke off a piece of the wafer that was extended to her and consumed it. She then offered to her husband a piece of her bread wafer, responding to him in kind: wishing good health and fortune, that they all be together at the next wigilia dinner and, because in the sharing of the oplatek one overlooks any ill-feeling, forgets hurts and ends any enmity, she accepts his words of reconciliation and asks that he too, overlook her deficiencies. The husband would then break off a piece of her bread and consume it. The wafer was then shared with any older relatives present, guests, and then with the children, starting with the oldest and so on down the line. One of the wishes commonly offered was: Wishing you health, good luck, and great fortune, and after death, a crown in heaven. After everyone had the opportunity to share the wafer, the supper would begin.

So accept the gift of the wafer and share it with your family and friends this Christmas, wishing them good health and happiness and forgiving any hurt feelings with promises to begin anew.

Merry Christmas!



