

Palm Sunday in Poland

The last week of Lent was ushered in by Palm Sunday. On this day, long before the first rays of dawn brightened the horizon, the village girls and boys gathered together in groups to go to the stables and barns where the young stablehands and servants slept, to wake them by hitting them with branches of willow. They wished them health, happiness, success, and enjoyment of the upcoming Easter holiday.

Lacking the "palms" indigenous to Jerusalem, the Polish people simply cut whatever greenery they found in the fields to use as palms. In the northern Mazowsze area, the "palms" brought to church were willow branches on which pussy willows had bloomed. If Palm Sunday fell early in the year while the earth was still covered with snow, the people would cut branches of birch, raspberry, or wild currant and place them in water in a warm room in order to force them to bud green. In close keeping with the scriptures, the people in the Mazowsze region placed their palms on the floor of the church so that the priest walked on them on the way to the altar during Palm Sunday procession.

Everyone took their palms home to place high in the rafters of the barns to protect the building against lightning and to encourage the cattle to grow strong. They were tucked into beehives so that the bees would produce a lot of honey, or under the nest of a goose to protect the future goslings from harm. Within the house they were also placed behind holy pictures in the belief that the palm would protect the house and its environment from lightning, fire and other misfortunes. Sometimes the blessed palms were walked around the house three times, the house touched by the palm each time around. Every member of the family in order to protect or prevent problems of the throat, teeth, or stomach swallowed three of the catkins of the pussy willows.

When the farmer drove his cattle out to pasture for the first time in spring, he used a palm, making the sign of the cross across the animal. He then stuck the plant into the earth to protect the fields against hail. A branch was fastened to the plow when it went out for the first plowing in spring. Dipped in holy water, it was used to sprinkle the house and outbuildings during a storm. A cross made from the palm was nailed over the main entry of the house to protect it against lightning. Burnt over hot coals, it acted as incense to drive away evil spirits. From year to year, the pussy willow branches were always appropriately taken care of. Old branches were burnt and the ashes distributed over the ground or chopped finely and mixed with the first sowing.

In other parts of Poland, the palms took on still other forms. In the heavily forested Kurpie region, the people made their palms of forest plants, such as club moss, that remained green through the winter. This greenery was attached to a stout pole or branch in order to be carried to church. Some individuals simply cut branches off a pine or juniper tree. Both these methods caused their palms to be unusually tall; sometimes ranging from one to seven meters high. Lacking real flowers because the earth still had not warmed, the older women of the villages fashioned artificial ones from the white interior of the bulrush. Much later, following the emergence of colored paper, the women switched to making paper flowers in hues of gold and orange or violet and yellow and braided these flowers between the tall, green branches.