

Easter Traditions of Our Region

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That was the subject of the lesson attended by the second-grade students of gymnasium and their tutors organized at the Archaeological Museum of History in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski.

During a slide-illustrated presentation, the students learnt that Easter was initially celebrated always after the first full moon and in the pagan times it was called "the festival of the spring." It was believed that violent storms were the signs that the gods were fertilizing the soil so it would bring abundant crops. It is these pagan times which gave the beginning to the custom of "The Drowning of Marzanna." (throwing a dummy symbolizing the passing winter into a river). One of popular customs in the region of the Świętokrzyskie was so called "Judaszkis" (The Judases) which included hanging a dummy of Judas on a pole or a tree and beating it and insulting mercilessly. This was held on Holy Thursday.

Later in history, Easter celebrations started on the Palm Sunday during which palms were blessed and the pussy willows from them were eaten as a preventive measure against throat diseases. Also barnyard animals were whipped with the palms to ensure protection from ailments and their faithful service. Blessed palms were tucked behind the holy picture hanging in every single house.

Holy Friday brought the tradition of "the Easter Turki." They were supposed to prevent strangers from entering the village, because, as it was believed, those could be witches, who took the human form during daytime and were trying to live normally among the villagers. Holy Friday was also the day of mass bathing as water was believed to have cleansing powers.

Holy Saturday was, as it is now, the day of the food blessing, only in the past priest used to visit homes and bless all the food laid upon the table, mainly Written Eggs made with the wax method or coloured in onion peels (more common in our region). Also water, fire and thorns were blessed. The oldest Written Egg found in Poland is 800 years old. Another custom stated that respected people should be presented with black written eggs and old bachelors with purple ones.

On Holy Saturday, in some parts of the present Świętokrzyski region, the so called "Bziuki Wielkanocne" (Easter Bziuki) was held. This tradition has survived till the present day. It is performed by firemen who blow a mouthful of kerosene onto a torch which gives a magnificent effect of a pillar of fire.

Easter Sunday is dominated by feasting started with the Easter Breakfast and ... the burial of the żur and the herring. (żur - a soup made from fermented rye flour). In the old days the fasting actually lasted 40 days and people were fed up with eating mainly żur and herring. So no wonder that, when the fast was over, the two meals were hung by the ceiling so that everyone could kick and punch them.

Easter feasting frequently resulted in stomach sickness or even death. (horseradish served as a remedy). It was at that time when the custom of "egg sharing" was born. Also the traditional Easter cakes made their debut on the Easter tables. They were "baba" (sponge cakes made from 120 eggs) and "mazurek" (a shortcrust tart which originated in Turkey and got its Polish name after the Mazury region where it was first baked and served).

Easter Monday, like nowadays, was the day of mutual water splashing. "Dziady Młigusne" (men with wooden buckets filled with well water) used to roam around villages pouring water onto young maidens and whipping them gently with willow twigs. The roles were reversed for the next 4 days. It was the girls who attempted numerous tricks to get the men soaked with ice-cold water.

This extremely informative presentation was followed by a visit the teachers and students' visit to the exhibition entitled "The Passion scenes in Folk Arts" from the archives of the National Museum in Kielce. It perfectly related to subject of the museum lesson as the works of amateur artists were inspired by the biblical descriptions of the Passion. Hence we could see the Last Supper, Christ before Pilate, the Whipping, the Crucifixion, the Deposition, Lying Christ in the Tomb and the Resurrection. All the works had been visibly painted in a simplistic way which could suggest lack of high skills but a tremendous need for expression.

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