

A Polish-American Christmas story

A prodigal son

By: **Robert Strybel**,
Polish/Polonian Affairs Writer

Woż was aimlessly strolling through a shopping mall of a southern California town, a few days before Christmas. Although the weather was sunny, mild and thoroughly un-Christmassy to the 27-year-old transplanted Milwaukeean (Cudahy, Wisconsin to be precise), the place was full of fake snowmen, Santas, reindeer, elves, candy canes, blinking lights and all the other well known seasonal specials. Last year had been his first Christmas away from home and he spent it all alone in his studio apartment nursing a headache after a party with a few of the guys from his company on Christmas Eve. As he wondered what his holidays would be like this year and whether any of his married colleagues would invite him over for Christmas dinner, he suddenly heard coming from the loudspeaker outside of a music shop a familiar melody and the words "...do Betlejem poeopieszajcie, przywitae Pana..." A kolęda here of all places!

He went inside the music store to inquire and the store's manager showed him a CD titled "Christmas Around the Globe" which he bought just for that one Polish selection "Węród nocnej ciszy". But it went far beyond just buying a new recording. That melody and those words stirred something in Woż way deep down. (Incidentally, our hero's real name was Bruce Wożniakowski, but his non-Polish friends couldn't pronounce his name and simply called him Woż).

That single fragment of one kolęda in that unlikely California setting took him back to his Polonian Christmases in Milwaukee - Wigilia at Busia's, a tradition his mother had continued for the whole family after her mother had passed away. The op'atek and all those fabulous dishes he was raised on - beet soup, creamed herring, fried fish, pierogi, stewed prunes and gingerbread. Then Wujek Staæ would play Polish kolędy and American carols on his accordion as everybody sang along, and then they would all drive across town for Pasterka at magnificent St. Josaphat's, Milwaukee Polonia's crown jewel.

Actually, when still in his teens and early 20s, Woż had viewed all this as a quaint and corny Old World side-show and preferred to hang out with his buddies instead. Now he realized what a far cry last year's Christmas Eve partying had been from his family's celebrations back home. Woż was not really the sentimental type, but somehow just the right mix of memories, homesickness and all the bright but meaningless commercial glitter touched off an irresistible urge to go home for Christmas. The thought of a KFC meal on Christmas really turned him off, and he didn't even know if they would be open.

Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? Now it was impossible to book a plane seat. Someone suggested Amtrak. A couple of days on a train was hardly an inviting prospect, but he had no choice. His car was temporarily out of commission at a garage.

As it turned out, his train ground to a halt in blizzard-swept Iowa, and he and his fellow-passengers got stranded. As a result, it took days longer than planned to reach his destination. It was not until December 27th that his dad picked him up at the train station. When he finally climbed the porch and opened the door of his family's neat but modest home, he couldn't believe his eyes.

There was Mother holding a plate of op'atek and welcoming him to the table, beautifully set with tufts of hay protruding from beneath a snowy-white table-cloth, glowing candles, platters of food and the soft strains of Mazowsze singing kolędy in the background off an old LP. There was his older brother Bob, a priest, Sis who had driven up from Chicago with her husband and three kids, Ciocia Harriet and Wujek Staæ, and the elderly neighbor lady Pani Nowak who had been a part of his family's Wigilia scene for as long as he could recall. "But this is December 27th!" Woż exclaimed. "So we're having two Wigilias this year, because our prodigal son has just come home. There's no law against it, is there?" joked mother with a loving smile. And then they all began breaking off and sharing bits of op'atek, tenderly embracing, kissing, wishing each other health, happiness and God's abundant blessings and nostalgically recalling the Christmases of bygone years. There was hardly a dry eye in the crowd! □



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