

Immigrants' ethnic traditions enrich their lives in a new land

By Teresa A. Parsons

For Elzbieta Karpinska, 36, a Polish Christmas is one spent around the kitchen tables of friends and relatives who fortify themselves for hours of talk with endless cups of tea and trays of sweets.

Thomas, 30, remembers the 40-minute walk through his Polish hometown to midnight Mass, surrounded by hundreds of fellow churchgoers, enveloped in darkness and a reverent silence broken only by the squeak of boots on the snow. "It was a special kind of atmosphere — so many people on the street going to the church, yet so quiet, so dark," he said. "You go into the church, and there was only one light where Jesus was, and one star lit above."

This year, both Elzbieta and Thomas will celebrate Christmas far removed by time and distance from their native land and their holidays of memory. Yet their present-day celebrations continue to reflect many of the same traditions that illuminate the past.

Christmas will begin as it always has for Elzbieta — when the first star appears in the December 24th sky.

That's when her family — husband, Piotr, 40; their children Michal, 13, Zuzanna, 12, and Natalia, 8; and Piotr's mother Paulina, 76 — will end a long day of fasting and preparation to gather at the dinner table.

In Poland, Advent is regarded as a solemn period akin to Lent. Many Poles shun dancing, drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking and parties during the four-week period to concentrate on a regimen of sacrifice and spiritual preparation.

The Karpinskis, like many of their countrymen, wait until Christmas Eve to decorate their Fairport home, trim their tree and prepare the feast with which they will begin the Yuletide celebration.

"In Poland, we had problems that were unbearable, that we couldn't solve ourselves. Here we have problems too, but they are the same problems that everyone has — nothing too difficult."

Elzbieta Karpinska

Their dining table is set with special dishes and linens used only on Christmas-Eve — including one extra place which is covered as a reminder of those who are homeless or hungry, and of those who have died.

After pausing to pray, the family will exchange pieces of the traditional Polish wafer, *oplatek*, while offering their Christmas wishes for one another.

The sharing of *oplatek* will also be a time

to remember friends and other family members whom the Karpinskis left behind in Poland five years ago, and to give thanks for the good fortune that brought them to the United States together.

Thomas was not so lucky. This year, as he shares Christmas Eve dinner with relatives, his foremost wish will be that his wife and daughter can join him before another year passes.

He left them late one night in February, 1986, to cross the border into Germany. In order to avoid arousing the suspicions of Polish secret police, who he said had been harassing and threatening him because of his political activities, Thomas took nothing with him but a little money and the clothes on his back.

For months, he was too frightened to speak openly on the telephone to his family because he suspected that the phones were tapped. He still fears for their safety, which is why he asked that his last name be withheld.

Their holiday memories may be pleasant, but neither Thomas nor the Karpinskis brought with them many fond recollections of present-day Poland. They lived in daily fear of an invasion by what Thomas called "our big brother with the big hands next door" — the Soviet Union.

They also left behind what they regarded as a life of chronic economic hardship.

Both Piotr and Elzbieta Karpinski held good jobs with universities in southwestern Poland, near Wroclaw. They employed a private babysitter and owned their own apartment as well as a car — all signs of considerable affluence.

Yet they were unable to pay their bills unless they supplemented their income with extra jobs and assignments abroad. "Very few Poles live on their regular income alone," Elzbieta explained. "One year (of working abroad in Japan) kept us going for five years (in Poland)."

When they did manage to save enough to make a purchase, the Karpinskis were frustrated by the scarcity and poor quality of the goods available. "I think you are born with a hate for the system," Elzbieta said. "You grow very tired of always standing in lines, using coupons for everything."

Thomas, an electronics technician, cited a similar lack of economic opportunity. "When gas is \$1 per gallon and your wages are 30 cents per hour; when you must work three-quarters of a year, saving everything, for a color TV, there is not much satisfaction from the job," he explained. "There's no prospect for change unless you join the (Communist) party; otherwise the ways to advance yourself are closed to you. But if you are a Catholic and a patriot, (joining the party requires that) you must first change your mind."

In spite of the hardships they endured, neither Thomas nor the Karpinskis left Poland easily. "It was a very tough decision to bring our children to another country," Elzbieta said. "Even after we came, it was, 'Maybe yes (we'll stay), maybe not.'"

The family's opportunity to leave Poland arose in 1982, when Piotr Karpinski was offered a year-long visiting professorship at Iowa State University. The Karpinskis warned



Bonnie Trafolet/Courier-Journal

For the Karpinski family, who emigrated from Poland to the United States five years ago, Christmas is a time to celebrate traditions reminiscent of their homeland while at the same time giving thanks for leaving the hardships of Polish life behind.

only their closest friends and relatives that they might not return.

As they prepared to depart, Elzbieta recalled, her husband was watched by members of Poland's secret police. They threatened to "get" him at the airport if they had any indication that the family planned to stay in the United States.

As the Karpinskis awaited their flight at the airport, they heard Piotr's name called over the airport intercom. Five pairs of eyes watched with trepidation as he went off to answer the page, but he returned moments later to report a simple mix-up over his plane ticket.

For Elzbieta, life in Iowa was "peace like in heaven." Supermarkets and department stores displayed goods in a profusion she found almost unbelievable. The people she met were friendly — even the police. "For one year (after arriving), when I saw a policeman, I was shaking," she said. "Then I realized that they can only give you a ticket, that they are very nice, very gentle people."

After a year in Iowa, the family moved to Worcester, Mass., where they spent two-and-a-half years. They arrived in Rochester in 1985, when Piotr accepted a job with Eastman Kodak.

The Karpinskis' new life in the United States has not been without problems. Landlords took advantage of the family's obvious inexperience with rental agreements to cheat them out of security deposits and charge them extra money at every turn. Banking was a challenge since in Poland workers are paid in cash and commonly keep their money at home. In particular, the language barrier continues to frustrate Elzbieta and Piotr, although their children speak English without even a trace of accent.

An American Christmas tradition which after five years continues to amuse Elzbieta is the practice of buying gifts for a wide circle of acquaintances. "You spend hours and hours to buy everybody everything," she observed.

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