

Christmas Eve in the Carpathian Highlands

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In recent years many Carpatho-Rusins—also known as Rusins, Carpatho-Russians, Carpatho-Ruthenians or Ruthenians--have been showing a keen interest in their "roots," history, traditions and customs. Some of the traditions, so enthusiastically observed by our pioneers in America, then partially lapsed, are slowly but surely being revived. With the approach of the Feast Day of the Nativity of Our Lord, preparations are being made in many Rusin-American homes for Holy Supper on Christmas Eve.

For many centuries Holy Supper on the eve before Christmas was traditionally a special family meal for our Rusins. It was full of meaning and symbolism. Even those who have unfortunately abandoned this glorious tradition still recall and cherish the childhood memories of "Svjatj Večer."

In a booklet printed a few years ago, Fathers Joseph Ridella, Donald Petyo and Michael Huszti of the Parma Diocese have emphasized the importance of observing the traditional Holy Supper in the following words. "This custom of taking time to gather together in joy as a family and to share a special meal is not only something for fond memories but a vital way of reaffirming the importance of the family where we learn to love and be loved. Beginning our Christmas celebration with 'Holy Supper' is just as meaningful today as it was years ago; perhaps it is needed even more now than ever before." It is my hope that more of our Rusin-Americans will heed their call for a revival of the traditional Holy Supper on Christmas Eve.

Recalling his fond childhood memories of Christmas Eve in the Old Country, a Rusin writer-Michael I. Dzamka of Cleveland, Ohio—wrote a very illuminating article on "Roždestvo na Verchoviňi," Christmas in the Highlands. The Carpatho-Rusin article was published thirty years ago in another fraternal newspaper, microfilms of which are at the Hillman Library of the University of Pittsburgh. Most of the following paragraphs are based on notes taken while reading the microfilm of the article. Many of our older readers will recall that a strict fast was fully observed on the day before Christmas. Some families--in the Carpathians and in America---observed the fast so strictly that they did not eat any food until Holy Supper. Only the drinking of water was permitted. No wonder everyone waited for Holy Supper!

For the wife and mother or a Rusin family the day before Christmas was a very busy one indeed. She spent it entirely in the preparation of the various foods for Holy Supper and in cleaning the hue.

Holy Supper Table

When twilight arrived on Christmas Eve, the mother covered the table with a white cloth in memory of the swaddling clothes of Infant Jesus. She then set the various foods in their proper places on the table. The foods prepared in or with oil, included fish, herring, Bobalki, mushroom sauerkraut soup or lima bean sauerkraut soup, meatless holupki, stewed plums, mashed potatoes, honey, garlic, etc. In some villages, there were twelve foods on the table, symbolizing the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ.

In the center of the table was a large round loaf of bread which symbolized Jesus as the Bread of Life. The candle, which was placed in the bread, was a symbol of the Star of Bethlehem which guided the shepherds and wise men to worship and adore the Light of the World.

While mother prepared the table for Holy Supper, the father fed the cattle a little earlier than usual. He then picked up some straw and entered the hut, saying: *"We wish happiness, fortune and health with the approaching Feast Day of the Nativity of Our Lord, and we hope all of us may live to another Christmas, live in peace and happiness, and we ask God's blessings upon us."* The straw was strewn on the floor and some of it was also placed on the table symbolizing the fact that little Jesus lay on the straw in the manger.

Immediately before the beginning of Holy Supper, all participants therein went to a nearby stream or creek to wash their faces and hands. This was done in the belief that they would be clean and healthy during the coming new year. The washing also signified that the shepherds first washed themselves before they went to see the newly born Child.

Returning to the hut, they all enthusiastically greeted each other with "Christos Raždajetsja! Slavite Jeho!" Christ is born! Glorify Him! They then gathered around the table and the father, opening the Holy Supper with prayer, asked God's blessings on the foods they were about to eat.

The father then poured himself a drink and proposed the following toast: *"Grant, Oh God, that we may live to an even better Holy Night next year. May the Lord give good health to you, my dear wife, and to our children, to my good and bad neighbors, to my friends and enemies. May God bless all Christians here and abroad, and may He grant eternal memory and heaven to the departed. And above all, my Little Jesus, born this day, bring peace, health and happiness!"*

The mother replied: "Daj Bože!" Grant it. Oh Lord! She also took a little drink and expressed similar greetings. The older children were allowed to take a sip.

A Honeyed Sign of the Cross

After dipping her forefinger into the honey, the mother made a sign of the cross on the foreheads of all present including herself. The use of honey symbolized the mother's prayer that the lives of all present will be sweet, without any bitterness. However, when the mother made a honeyed sign of the cross on the forehead of her eligible-for-marriage daughter, she expressed her prayerful wish: *"May Jesus grant that the young men will go after you like bees go after honey!"*

The mother then dipped garlic into honey and each one present had to taste it. Our Rusin ancestors believed that garlic chased away all pagan and evil spirits and kept them healthy. While giving the garlic to taste, the mother said: *"May God grant that you be as healthy as this garlic!"* Yes, even in this day and age there are many Rusin old people who believe that garlic has curative powers.

With the symbolic preliminaries out of the way, all started to eat the delicious strict-fast foods on the table. No one was permitted to by-pass a food; he or she had to taste it at least.

After Holy Supper the cattle also received a portion of each of the foods that were on the table, thus symbolizing the fact that Jesus at His Birth was surrounded by cattle.

The Holy Supper ended with an extemporaneous prayer by the head of the household who again expressed gratitude to Infant Jesus and wished everyone a Happy and Blessed Christmas.

Most of the Rusin parents did not have Christmas trees to decorate. Those that did have trees decorated them with the help of their children immediately after Holy Supper. Singing Christmas Carols (kolady) and hymns, they placed home-made ornaments on the trees.

Christmas Carols

Christmas carols and hymns were sung in every hut in the village. starting immediately after the conclusion of Holy Supper. One of the favorite carols was "Božij Syn dnes' narodilsja." God's Son is born today, composed by Bishop Basil Popovich.

The mothers participated in the carol singing with their husbands and children. They had no dishes, pots, pans, knives, forks and spoons to clean. There was a superstitious belief that someone who had died in the family was hungry and would return on Christmas Eve to fill himself up with what was left on the dishes or in the pots and pans.

Hut-to-hut singing of carols and hymns also began after Holy Supper. Young lads, upon entering the hut, started singing "Roždestvo Tvoje," "Your Birth," "Divnaja Novina," "Wondrous News," after which one of them extended the following greeting: *"Following an ancient custom, we too, like shepherds of old, have come to adore little Jesus. We humbly show our adoration and thus glorify Jesus. May we, with His help, be able to celebrate these joyous Holy Days in peace and happiness. We wish all of you peaceful and happy holy days."* Receiving a monetary gift, the lads departed and continued on their merry and carol-singing way.

And then came the Bethlehem Carolers or "Jasličkari" to reenact the Nativity Scene, stating that they were shepherds who had come from Bethlehem and who had brought with them the manger of Bethlehem. While performing the Nativity Scene, the "Jasličkari" sang a few Christmas Carols, concluding with greetings from the Old Shepherd, "Staryj Pastyr": *"My dear fellow Christians, we are deeply grateful for your warm reception. Our sincere 'Thank You' and the best of wishes of this Holy Christmas Season. May the good Lord Jesus grant you all that you need. May He bless you with health and happiness. May these gifts of the Lord be yours for many years!"*

Shortly after the "Jasličkari" had departed, the father and the oldest son and daughter trudged through the snow to participate in the midnight services in the church, during which the entire congregation, led by the pastor and cantor, in unison welcomed Infant Jesus with enthusiastic, moving and hearty rendition of "S Nami Boh," "God With Us!"

Yes, the enthusiastic singing of "S Nami Boh" was a climactic conclusion to an unforgettable Christmas Eve in the Carpathian Highlands. May the just as enthusiastic rendition of "God With Us" be a fitting climax to an always remembered Christmas Eve in the Appalachians, the Alleghenys, the Rockies, the Plains or anywhere in America!

Paraphrasing the Old Shepherd of the "Jasličkari" I conclude with the following sincerest greetings: *"My dear fellow Christians, I extend the best of wishes of this Holy Christmas Season. May Infant Jesus grant all that you need and may He bless you with health and happiness now and during the New Year. Christos Razdajetsja! Slavite Jehu. Christ is Born! Glorify Him!"*