

Institute of National Remembrance

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ARTICLE by Karol Nawrocki, Ph.D: Very Polish Holidays



The words of the Christmas carol 'God is born, great powers tremble' have been sung in Polish homes for generations. The joyful news of Christmas approaching would often comfort Poles even in the most

difficult moments of history.

A steaming samovar evokes memories of the warmth and cosiness of home. But there is not a single smile on the faces of the men sitting down at the table. 'Christmas Eve in Siberia' of 1892 is one of the most poignant paintings by Jacek Malczewski. It depicts Polish exiles, whose fate was to spend the most family-focused of all the holidays in our tradition at an almost empty table, thousands of kilometres away from their wives and children.

There were many moments when it was difficult for Polish families to celebrate Christmas joyfully also in the 20th century.

Such was the case with the December holidays in 1939 when our compatriots found themselves in a country occupied by two totalitarian regimes: Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Even the prisoners held in NKVD camps ensured that the tradition would nevertheless be preserved. 'Sharing the Christmas wafer, fish, herring with onions, tea, bread. Carols, a chat' - Włodzimierz Wajda noted in Kozelsk. Major Henryk Dobrzański 'Hubal' spent the same Christmas Eve in the Bielawy forester's lodge near Opoczno with his Detached Unit of the Polish Army, which had not surrendered its weapons in September 1939. 'Smell of hay under the white tablecloth, the Christmas wafer on the table' - Marek Szymański 'Sęp', one of the participants of that unique dinner, recalled after many years. For 'Hubal', it turned out to be the last Christmas Eve: he died at the hands of the Germans in April 1940. About the same time, Wajda was murdered by the Soviets in Katyń.

Sad Christmas Eves and holidays also took place in the People's Republic of Poland. For instance, in December 1970, when Poland tried to recover from the workers' massacre organised by the communist authorities in the Tricity. 11 years later, when Wojciech Jaruzelski declared Martial Law and, once again, sent tanks into the streets. Back then, Pope John Paul II and US President Ronald Reagan sent their words of encouragement to the Polish people.

Today, while looking out for the first star, and later singing carols and sharing the traditional wafer, let us remember those past Christmas Eves - fully appreciating the privilege of celebrating this very Polish holiday in a free Homeland.

Karol Nawrocki, Ph.D.

President of the Institute of National Remembrance

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