

Traditions in the Czech Republic

Christmas

In the Czech Republic we celebrate Christmas in the second half of December, just as other countries. The most important day is December 24 called “Štědrý den” which literally means "Generous Day", probably for the wealth of food that has traditionally been served for Christmas dinner and fed to household and farm animals.

December 24 is Adam and Eva's name day. The Christmas tree is decorated with traditional Czech Christmas ornaments as well as other parts of our houses. For example – four weeks before Christmas we buy or make a Christmas wreath and each Sunday we light a candle on it. There are many Christmas traditions, for example some people don't eat the whole day in order to see a "golden piglet" (zlaté prasátko) in the evening. They also cut apples to see their future (when there is a star in the middle, it means good luck and when there is a cross, it means bad luck).



Czech people also bake various sweets:



Bee hives



Linzer cookies



Vanilla crescents



Bear paws



Gingerbread cookies



Coconut meringue



Dinner is served after sunset and consists of carp and potato salad, some people also eat fish soup. Some families keep their carp in the bathtub for several days. No one should ever get up from the Christmas table before dinner is finished. People should also wear their best clothes.

After dinner, everyone around the table may sing Christmas carols before moving to the Christmas tree, which is all lit up and beautiful. By then, presents have

been placed under the tree. Czech children believe that Christmas gifts are brought by Baby Jesus (Ježíšek) who comes into the room through the window to leave the presents. Unlike Santa Claus, Baby Jesus is a rather abstract figure with no particular physical image attached to him, and no one knows where he lives.

After Christmas Eve people usually visit their relatives and enjoy the free time with their family and friends. Religious families also go to church.

Easter

Today, Easter mainly celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but much earlier before coming of Christianity, people used to celebrate the upcoming spring and the awakening of nature. Much of the old customs survived until today, they were partly mixed with Christian traditions, but the most important is, that they are still practiced. However, the traditions are becoming less and less important in the Czech Republic.

The date when Easter is celebrated is not fixed. It's a movable feast. The date depends on the date of first full moon after spring equinox (usually around 21th March).

There are traditions on days before Easter Monday, but they are not very popular now. The days are called: Green Thursday (Zelený čtvrtek), Good Friday (Velký pátek), White Saturday (Bílá sobota)

Easter Sunday (Neděle velikonoční) is a day of preparations for Easter Monday. Girls paint, color and decorate eggs if they haven't done so already, and boys prepare their pomlázkas!



In my family, decorating Easter eggs is a simple affair: dip some hardboiled eggs in water filled with boiled onion peels and then place store-bought Easter stickers on the eggs.

Easter Monday (Pondělí velikonoční) is a day off, the day of the pomlázka.

The origin of the pomlázka tradition (pomlázka meaning both the whip and the tradition itself) dates back to pagan times. Its original purpose and symbolic meaning is to chase away illness and bad spirits and to bring health and youth for the rest of the year to everyone who is whipped with the young pussywillow twigs. Boys would whip girls lightly on the legs and possibly douse them with

water, which had a similar symbolic meaning. An Easter carol, usually asking for an egg or two, would be recited by the boy while whipping. The girl would then reward the boy with a painted egg or candy and tie a ribbon around his pomlázka. As the boys progressed through the village, their bags filled up with eggs and their pomlázkas were adorned with more and more colorful ribbons.



This tradition is still largely upheld, especially in villages and small towns, although it may have lost its symbolism and romance and is now performed mainly for fun. Some boys and men seem to have forgotten that the whipping is supposed to be only symbolic and girls don't always like that. The reward has also changed - money and shots of plum brandy (slivovice) are often given instead of or



in addition to painted eggs and candy. So by early afternoon, groups of happy men can be seen staggering along the roads... All that aside, Easter remains one of the most joyful holidays on the Czech calendar.

The Easter feast is mainly associated with the symbol of a lamb. In the past, people who could not afford a real lamb substituted this symbol with a cake of an identical shape. And so they baked lambs from sweet yeast dough, batter or sponge. People also make other dishes, such as “mazanec”, which is a kind of sugar bread.



Other traditions

The New Year's Eve is celebrated at 31st December. We call it “Silvestr” because it's the name day of Silvestr. It's not a typical family tradition, however, it's quite popular in the Czech Republic, people usually spend it with friends or family and have fun. At midnight, people propose a toast and there are also fireworks outside. The following day, people meet their families. For lunch, people usually eat lentil, because it's believed to bring wealth for the next year.

Halloween is not a Czech tradition. People celebrate “dušičky” instead and they honour the dead by going to their graves and remembering. However, recently, Halloween has become more popular, especially with the youth and it's more and more celebrated.

On the evening of April 30th, Czechs gather to build a bonfire and prepare an effigy of the witch that kept winter around so long. Czechs used to believe that the power of witches would weaken as the weather got warmer.