

*Polish
Wedding
Traditions*
Instruction Booklet



Dziękuję (Thank You!)

Thank you for purchasing “Polish Wedding Traditions”.

Over the years, an increasing number of wedding receptions began to incorporate Polish traditions regardless of the ethnic background of the families. This is not surprising since such traditions enhance a wedding reception in many ways. In ceremonial fashion, they draw upon the heart-felt emotions the newlyweds, families and friends experience during this special event. In doing so, these traditions create long-lasting pleasant memories for the participants while providing perfect photographic opportunities to capture the moments forever.

In addition to Polish Wedding traditions, this booklet also covers all of the most popular standard traditions currently celebrated at most wedding receptions.

We trust the contents of this package will equip you to arrange, perform or preside over a memorable wedding reception that includes authentic Polish-American traditions.

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Table of Contents

The Bridal Party Introduction and Promenade_____	Page 3
The Bread, Wine and Salt Ceremony_____	Page 4
The Blessing & Toast_____	Page 5
A Wedding Blessing_____	Page 6
The First Dance_____	Page 7
The Unveiling of the Bride_____	Page 8
Traditional Medley_____	Page 9
The Tossing of Bouquet and Garter_____	Page 10
The Bridal Dance_____	Page 12
The Cutting of the Cake_____	Page 14
Daddy’s Little Girl / Tatusiu Waltz_____	Page 15
The Last Dance & A Final Wish_____	Page 16

The Bridal Party Introduction and Promenade

After the actual wedding ceremony, the newlyweds, their parents, and their bridal party assemble in the vestibule, lobby or private room at the location of the wedding reception. Here the Maitre'd, Master of Ceremonies, or bandleader (referred to as the "announcer" from this point on) reviews the sequence of events with the bridal party and establishes the order in which the couples will be introduced. Typically, the bride's parents, groom's parents, bridesmaids and groomsmen, flower girl and ring bearer, maid/matron of honor and best man, and finally the bride and groom, are announced in that order. After the guests have arrived, the bridal party introduction and promenade begin the reception. The band plays an appropriate "walking tune" as the newlyweds' parents are introduced into the main hall and take their positions standing in front of the bridal (head) table, and behind the smaller bread, wine and salt table. In similar fashion, the remaining bridal party members are announced and take their positions standing behind the head table. After the maid/matron of honor and best man are introduced and reach the table, the band stops playing momentarily. The bride and groom are introduced and the band resumes with gusto playing the "Polish Wedding March" [Track #1 on the CD]. The newlyweds promenade around the dance floor as a general greeting to their guests and then take their positions opposite their parents at the bread, wine and salt table.

The Bread, Wine and Salt Ceremony

In front of the bridal party (head) table, another small table has been positioned in full view of the guests. On a tray on this table the following elements have been placed; a small dish of salt, two slices (or cubes) of rye bread, and two glasses of wine. When the newlyweds have taken their positions at this table opposite their parents, the band stops playing the Polish Wedding March.

Recommended narration for the Announcer:

“This is a long cherished Polish tradition that has been passed down through the centuries. It symbolizes the union of the bride and groom and their families. The newlyweds are being greeted by their parents with three elements; bread, wine and salt. The parents sprinkle the bread with salt and offer it to their children to eat. The bread expresses their parent’s hope that the newlyweds will never experience hunger or need. The bitter salt reminds the couple that their life together may be touched by some difficulty, but like salt’s effect on food, their love will preserve their marriage. With the wine, the parents extend their best wishes to their children that they will enjoy a life of good health and cheer, and share the company of many good friends. The parents now join in kissing the bride and groom as a sign of love, unity, and welcome of each respective family.”

At the end of the ceremony, the announcer invokes the applause of the audience and the newlyweds find their places at the head table awaiting grace before the meal.

The Blessing & Toast

When the bridal party and guests have found their places, the announcer requests everyone to stand and calls upon the clergyman to offer an invocation and blessing.

In the absence of the clergyman an appropriate blessing has been included just for this occasion.

(See next page)

Immediately afterwards, guests are invited to take in hand their drinking glasses as the best man is introduced. The best man offers a toast to the bride and groom as all the guests raise their glasses in concurrence. A hearty “Na Zdrowie (nah-zdraw-vye)” or “Good Luck” is cordially expressed.

All guests are invited to be seated as the serving of dinner commences.

A Wedding Blessing



God our Father.
Look with favor on this day,
And bless the food we share.

Embrace this couple, joined as one.
Their love is in your care.

Celebrate with us dear Lord,
Their lives are now complete.

And grant them health for many years,
Until they're at your feet.

The First Dance

After dinner, the newlyweds make their first public appearance on the dance floor in order to dance to a special song they've selected in advance. Usually this is a ballad that has some emotional significance to the couple.

The announcer introduces the bride and groom and the name of "their" song. After the couple has danced to at least one verse of the song, the announcer invites the parents of the bride and groom to join the newlyweds on the dance floor. A short time later, the entire bridal party is invited to participate. Finally, the announcer asks all the guests to take part in the first dance to demonstrate their support and love for the couple.

The first dance marks the beginning of the social dancing segment of the reception, so guests typically refrain from dancing until invited to do so during this event. From this point on, the band usually plays a variety of music that encourages guests to dance.

The Unveiling of the Bride “Oczepiny (Czepek)”

Traditional weddings lasted three days in Poland. On the last night of the wedding, Oczepiny (O-che-pee-ni), the most important wedding custom of all, took place. It was the moment when the Czepek (Che-peck), the headdress of the married woman, was placed upon the head of the bride. In old Poland, this was so significant that only after the Oczepiny, and not the church ceremony, could a man exercise his marriage privileges towards his new wife. The marriage headdress was usually a gift to the bride from her grandmother.

Today, around the midpoint of the wedding reception, this ceremony takes place. The announcer invites the entire bridal party to return to their seats at the head table. The bride’s godmother, or significant female relative, stands behind the seated bride. The band plays a hymn entitled, “Serdeczna Matko” or “Beloved Mother” [Track #2 on the CD] as the godmother and guests sing. This hymn invokes the blessings of the Virgin Mary upon the new bride.

Immediately after the hymn, a lively tune “Spadla Zwiszni” [Track #3 on the CD] is played in celebration of the bride’s transition from maidenhood to womanhood. During this song, the guests sing and make festive noises as the godmother removes her bridal veil from the bride’s head and replaces it with the Czepek. Usually, necklaces decorated with tiny baby dolls are placed around the necks of both the bride and groom (a fertility gesture), and a decorated top hat is placed on the groom’s head to add to the festive nature of the ceremony.

Traditional Medley

Traditions are dear to many of Polish ancestry, as well as the old traditional songs that are often learned and sung from generation to generation. At Polish weddings, two particular waltzes are usually played, sung and danced to at some point during the reception. These are “Glemboka Studzienko” (The Wishing Well) and “Jak Szybko Mijaja Kwile” (Memories Are Precious). Just as their titles imply, these waltzes evoke sentimental feelings for loved ones past and present. They are arranged as a medley on the CD [Track #4].

The Tossing of Bouquet and Garter Traditions

Interestingly, these oldest of wedding traditions share a common origin. Back in the Dark Ages, it was customary for friends and relatives to accompany the bridal couple to their home to validate the consummation of their marriage. Guests would then attempt to snatch an item of the bride's clothing, often a garter, as evidence of the deed. Since such items were believed to bring good luck, they were prized by everyone. Over time, brides pre-empted this invasion of privacy by tossing their garters, or even their bouquets, to satisfy the eager and often bawdy crowds in advance. Eventually, the groom assumed this responsibility to avoid possible injury to his new wife.

Today, this tradition is celebrated as two events during the latter part of the wedding reception. Typically the bride takes her position near the center of the dance floor, as all the unmarried women among the guests are invited by the Master of Ceremonies to join her. The bride turns her back to the assembled women and prepares to toss her bouquet. As the MC reaches the count of three, she launches the bouquet over her shoulder toward the women. The lucky woman who catches the bouquet is said to be the next one to marry.

The bride is then seated in a chair as the groom is invited by the MC to perform his first husbandly duty. This is the removal of the garter that the bride has previously placed on one of her legs above the knee. Often the band will play a risqué melody such as "The Stripper" as the groom slowly slides the garter down the leg of his bride. Once he removes the garter, all the single men are invited to join the groom on the

floor. As with the bouquet toss, the groom turns his back to the assembled men and awaits the MC's count. At the count of three, he launches the garter over his shoulder toward the group. The man who catches the garter is likewise said to be the next one to marry. Sometimes a mock ceremony is conducted with the woman who caught the bouquet and the man who caught the garter. To the same risqué music, the man slowly slides the garter up the woman's leg until it reaches her thigh. Supposedly, the higher it's placed the more luck the newlyweds will enjoy. Afterward, the woman returns the garter to the man, who then proudly displays his trophy on his arm for the remainder of the reception.

The Bridal Dance (Maly Taniec)

In days of old, guests would bring various foods to the wedding as gifts to the newlyweds. The food would be collected in sacks, baskets, or blankets as the guests arrived at the reception. In keeping with the spirit of the tradition, the “Bridal Dance” or “Small Dance (Maly Taniec)”, has become a modern wedding tradition.

During the latter part of the reception, the announcer informs the guests that they will be afforded the opportunity to dance with the bride during the Bridal Dance. However, guests are expected to place a small amount of money into an apron, worn by a close female relative or friend of the bride, as a token of their good will. The dance usually begins with the father of the bride dancing with his daughter as the band starts playing a lively medley of polkas. Guests form a large circle around the dance floor and take their turn dancing with the bride. Sometimes a friend or relative of the newlyweds will stand next to the “apron lady” and hold a tray of small glasses of liquor. Each dancer is offered a “shot” as a reward for making their “contribution” into the apron. While the bride is dancing with the guests, the groom waits patiently while enjoying adult beverages with his groomsmen or ushers. When all the guests have had at least one opportunity to dance with the bride, the groom makes an attempt to “claim” his bride. In fun, some guests form a tight circle around the bride as if to protect her from the groom. Finally, the groom breaks through the circle, puts his wallet in the apron (as if to pay her ransom), picks up his bride, and makes a hasty exit from the dance floor. At this point, the band ends their medley with the Polish Wedding March.

The Bridal Dance (continued)

Included on the CD [Track #5] is a medley of Polish and American polkas, 20 minutes in length, appropriate for the Bridal Dance. “The Polish Wedding March”, the last song of the medley, signals the groom to collect his bride in the fashion described above.

The Cake Cutting Ceremony

A wedding tradition practiced at virtually all receptions, regardless of the ethnicity, is the Cake Cutting Ceremony.

After the newlyweds have had a chance to greet their guests at each table, the announcer invites them to take their positions adjacent to the wedding cake. After he alerts the guests to ready their cameras, the announcer cues the band to start playing a merry little tune, “The Bride Cuts The Cake”, as background music.

**Note: If it has been decided to use the “The Cake Cutting Song” [Track #6] included in this package, the newlyweds are to follow along with the instructional lyrics of the tune (i.e. “The bride cuts the cake...”, “The groom cuts the cake...” and so on).*

Otherwise, the bride and groom hold a cake knife and slowly make the first cut into the cake. They hold their pose as the photographer and guests capture the moment on film. After cutting their first slice of the cake, the newlyweds jointly feed each other. It’s not unusual for the couple to have some fun in the process by smearing cake on each other’s faces to the pleasure of all onlookers. The newlyweds then kiss to end the ceremony to the applause of the audience. The catering staff then cuts the cake into pieces that are distributed to all the guests.

Daddy's Little Girl / Tatusiu Waltz

Near the end of the reception, the announcer invites the father of the bride to meet his daughter in the center of the dance floor. This is daddy's opportunity to demonstrate what his daughter means to him as they dance to an appropriate song. "Daddy's Little Girl" is often played for this dance.

At more traditional receptions, a sentimental Polish song entitle, "Tatusiu Waltz" (Tah-Too-Shoo) [Track #7 on the CD] is played for this tender moment. This song describes the daughter's reassurance to her dad, that although she has found a husband, she will always love and respect her father. Typically each line of the lyric is sung in Polish with an immediate English translation.

The Last Dance

For the last event of the reception, guests are given their final opportunity to express their love and support of the new bride and groom as the newlyweds dance to a song that's special to both of them.

The announcer reintroduces the newlyweds into the hall. They've returned from changing clothes from their formal ware into more appropriate casual attire. They take their place at the center of the dance floor as the band begins to play their pre-selected special song. The guests form a large circle around the couple and sway to the melody. The song ends to the applause of the guests as final best wishes are shared. At some Polish wedding receptions, the audience may sing "Sto lat" (Stoh-lot), a little tune wishing the couple many years together [Track #8 on the CD]. Sometimes, the house Maitre'd will present the newlyweds with a bottle of champagne and bring the reception to a close with words of congratulations.