

**Christmas Eve**  
**in the**  
**Carpathian Highlands**

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# Christmas Eve in the Carpathian Highlands

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 “Svjatyj Vecer.”

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 “Rozdestvo na Verchovini,” 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.

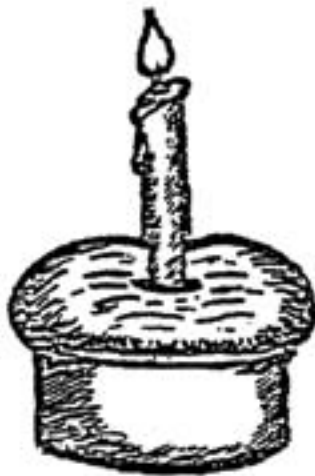
Many of our older readers will recall that a strict fast was fully observed on the day before Christmas. Some families—in the Carpathians and in America—observed the fast so strictly that they did not eat any food until Holy Supper. Only the drinking of water was permitted. No wonder everyone waited for Holy Supper!

For the wife and mother of 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 hut.

## 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 guid-



ed 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 all of 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 *"Christo Razdajetsja! 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, O 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 Boze!"* 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 the 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 (kol'ady) 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 "Bozij 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 "Rozdestvo 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 "Jaslickari" to re-enact 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 "Jaslickari" 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 "Jaslickari" 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 "Jaslickari," 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 Jeho. Christ is Born! Glorify Him!"

## Christ Is Born!

## Glorify Him!

# Christmas Recipes

## Christmas Eve Menu

**Wine Honey Garlic  
Christmas Bread**  
**Mushroom Soup Pirohi**  
**Bobalki Stewed Prunes**  
**Fish Pagach Kapustnik**  
**Fresh Fruit**  
**Nut Rolls Poppy Seed Rolls**

### PIROHI

1 cup flour  
1 egg  
about 4 tablespoons water

Mix flour and egg with enough water to make a soft dough; knead well. Roll out on floured board until thin. Cut into squares. Place 1 teaspoon filling on each square. Fold in half, making a triangle. Pinch edges well to keep filling inside. Drop into boiling salted water and cook until they rise to surface. Cook 5 minutes longer. Rinse in colander with hot water. Drain. Pour melted butter over pirohi and serve.

**Cheese Filling:**  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup dry cottage cheese, 1 egg yolk, 1 teaspoon butter, pinch salt. Mix together.

**Potato Filling:** 1 large potato cooked and mashed. Add 1 tablespoon butter. (Optional - grated cheese to taste.)

**Lekvar** may be used as filling. Cooked sauerkraut may also be used as filling. Drain and rinse sauerkraut in cold water. Brown diced onion in shortening, add sauerkraut. Cook for a few minutes.

### BREAD FOR CHRISTMAS EVE

1 package dry yeast  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup lukewarm water  
 $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon salt  
1 tablespoon sugar  
4 tablespoons sugar  
6 cups flour  
1 teaspoon salt  
4 tablespoons salad oil

Dissolve yeast in warm water with  $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon salt and 1 tablespoon sugar. Set in warm place to rise. Sift 6 cups flour in deep bowl, add 2 cups warm water, 4 tablespoons sugar, 1 teaspoon salt, 4 tablespoons salad oil.

Knead well and set aside to rise. When double in bulk, punch down, let rise second time until double. Punch down. Divide dough in two. Shape one part into round bread, cover and let stand 20 minutes. Punch down and reshape. Place in greased pan. Allow to rise until double in bulk.

Bake at 350° for 1 hour.

**Note:** The second part of this dough will be used for Bobalki.

### CHRISTMAS EVE BOBALKI

Use other half of above dough for bobalki. Knead and roll on floured board into rope. Cut and roll into balls about 1 inch in diameter. Place on floured pan, let rise 15 minutes. Bake at 350° for 10 minutes or until just slightly brown. Cook, then place in deep bowl, pour boiling water over just to soak a little. Drain in colander. Then place in serving dish, heat honey with a little water, pour over bobalki.

Mix  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup ground poppy seed and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup sugar and then add to bobalki. Let stand several hours in cool place (or refrigerator) for several hours before serving.

**Note:** Some bobalki are served with sweet cabbage or sauerkraut. Sautee cabbage or sauerkraut with onion in salad oil, then mix with bobalki.



### MUSHROOM SOUP (MACHANKA)

Wash dried mushrooms. Soak overnight. In morning cook mushrooms in the water. Add salt and pepper to taste. Cook slowly for 2 hours or more.

#### Zaprashka (Soup thickening)

Brown 1 chopped onion in 2 tablespoons salad oil, add browned onion to mushroom soup. To remaining oil add 2 tablespoons flour slowly, brown and then add to mushroom soup to thicken. Cook for a few minutes and serve hot.

### NUT ROLLS

- 8 cups flour
- 2 cups milk (scalded)
- 4 egg yolks
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 large yeast or 3 envelopes dry yeast
- ½ pound butter
- ½ pound oleo or crisco
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla

Dissolve yeast in 1 cup lukewarm milk. Stir well. Add sugar, shortening and salt to the rest of the milk and cool. Beat egg slightly and add to mixture, then add the yeast mixture to the rest of the lukewarm mixture. Put half of the flour in a bowl and add the above mixture a little at a time. Mix well. Add remainder of flour to make soft dough using just enough flour to knead without sticking. Cover. Let rise to double in bulk.

Keep in warm place. Takes about 2 hours to rise. Knead down a little to get out puffiness. Divide into 6 parts and let stand 10 minutes. Roll out and spread with nut mixture. Roll tightly and place on greased baking sheet and let rise about 1 hour and bake in 350° oven for 35 to 40 minutes. Brush each roll with slightly beaten egg before baking. Brush with melted butter after baked.

#### Nut Mixture

- 4 pounds nuts (ground)
- 4 cups sugar
- 1 stick butter (melted)
- ¼ cup milk (enough to moisten nut mixture)

### MUSHROOM SOUP

- 7 cups fresh mushrooms (chopped)
- 3 quarts water
- 1 quart sauerkraut juice
- Salt and pepper (to taste)
- 1 small onion
- 3 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons flour

Cook mushrooms in water about 1 hour. Brown butter and onion; add flour and brown well. Add sauerkraut juice and boil this for 5 minutes. Add to soup and boil ½ hour longer.



### PAGACH

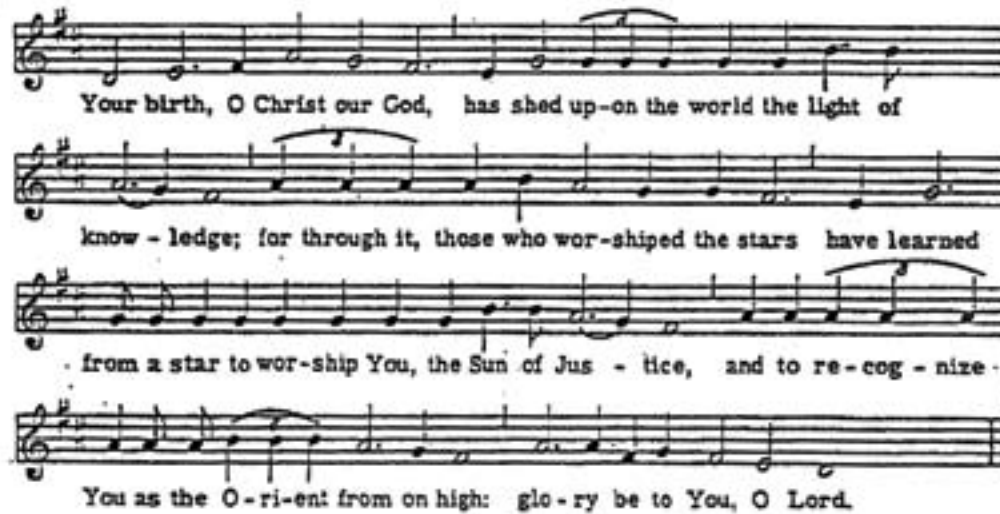
- 10 cups flour
- 2 yeast cakes (or 2 packages dry yeast)
- 2 sticks margarine
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons salt
- ¼ cup sugar
- 2½ cups milk (or more if necessary)

Knead all together until well blended as for bread dough. Let rise double in bulk in warm place. Punch down, let rise once again. Turn out on floured board, separate into 8 or 10 portions. Let rise until light. With rolling pin flatten enough to place about 1 cup of filling in center of each mound of dough. Bring dough up over mound and pinch together to shape a round ball. Let rest about ½ hour with filling then carefully roll out as thin as you want it. Place on cookie sheet. Bake until golden brown then butter on both sides. Rounds should be about 14 inches in diameter or as thin as you like them.

Filling: Fried cabbage or potato and cheese.

# CHRISTMAS TROPARION

## Troparion (Tone 4)



Your birth, O Christ our God, has shed up-on the world the light of  
 know - ledge; for through it, those who wor-shiped the stars have learned  
 from a star to wor-ship You, the Sun of Jus - tice, and to re - cog - nize -  
 You as the O - ri-ent from on high: glo - ry be to You, O Lord.

Tropar' hl. 4. Roždestvo Tvoje Christe Bože naš, vozsjia mirovi svit razuma; v nem bo zvizdam služasčii, zvizdoju učachusja, Tebi klaňatisja Solncu pravdy, i Tebe vid'iti s vysoty Vostoka. Hospodi slava Tebi.

Тропарь гл. 4. Рождество твое Христе Боже нашъ, возсія мірови свѣтъ разума: въ немъ бо звѣздамъ служащии, звѣздою учачуся, тебѣ кланятся Солнцу правды, и тебе видѣти съ высоты Востока, Господи слава тебѣ.

### Словарь

### Slovar'

### Vocabulary

Христосъ раждается!	*ristos raždajetsja!	Christ is born!
святый вечеръ	svjatyj večer	Holy Night
вилая	vilija	Christmas Eve
молитва	molitva	prayer
славите его.	slavite Jeho.	Glorify Him.
хлѣбъ	hl'ib	bread
свѣчка	svička	candle
строгий постъ	strohij post	strict fast

ВИНО	vino	wine
знакъ Креста	znak kresta	sign of cross
медъ	med	honey
свята вечеря	svjata večerja	holy supper
солома	soloma	straw
столъ	stol	table
Съ нами Богъ.	S nami Boh!	God with us!
скоть	skot	cattle
три мудрецы	tri mudrecy	Three Wise Men
Триъ цари	triје сари	Three Kings
чеснок	česnok	garlic
пастыри	pastyri	shepherds
ангелы	anhely	angels
звѣзда	zvizda	star
Коляда	kolada	carol
небо	nebo	sky - heaven
Грибна поливка	hřibna polivka	mushroom soup
пирогы	pirohi	pirohi
Бобальки	bobal'ki	bobalki - <sup>very</sup> <sub>small</sub> <sup>buns</sup>
рыба	ryba	fish
пагачъ капустникъ	paгачъ kapustnik	oil cabbage cake
орѣховникъ	or'ihovnik	nut roll
маковникъ	makovnik	poppy seed roll

Желаю всѣмъ вамъ радостный праздникъ Рождества Христоваго.  
 Želaju vs'im vam radostnyj prazdnik Roždestva Hristovago.  
 I wish all of you a merry feastday of Christ's Nativity.