

## ***Some Old Holiday Customs***

IN LITHUANIA, the eve of a feast is no less significant, and may be even more so, than the feast itself and has various old customs and traditions. Some of these traditions have deep meaning and great significance for all Lithuanians, while some magical ceremonies, which probably originated in pre-Christian times, are now usually performed just for fun and amusement. Many of these customs and traditions have a mixture of Christian and pagan origins.

### **CHRISTMAS EVE**

CHRISTMAS Eve celebrations start at the appearance of the first star in the sky, or around six o'clock in the evening. After a day of hard work, during which a very strict fast was observed and everything was prepared for Christmas, the family is eager to gather at the table. But this supper is very different from the usual evening meal.

All the members of the family try to gather together at one place for this Christmas Eve supper. The table is first decked with hay and is then covered with a white linen cloth. Wafers (plotkeles) are placed in the middle of the table and, around them, other special dishes prepared just for Christmas Eve. There have to be at least 12 different dishes (12 signifying either the twelve apostles or the 12 months of the year); most of the dishes are served cold. The foods consist mainly of fish, mushrooms and vegetables; some hot soup, various puddings made from cereals and berries, special tiny cookies (sli-zlkai) with poppy seed sauce, apples, and nuts are also served. These are all foods of fasting, and a different set of foods — meats, cakes, etc. — are prepared for Christmas itself.

After the table is set, everyone gathers around it. A prayer is said, and the father of the family takes a wafer for himself and then passes them to each member of the family. He then goes around the table and breaks off a piece of each person's wafer, while they, at the same time break off a piece of his. This same procedure is then followed by all the other members of the family. After supper, the food is left on the table, for spirits of the deceased members of the family supposedly come to eat it during the night.

When supper is over, the night of miracles and magic starts. Everyone tries to discover the answers to the very interesting questions about marriage and death, and what the outlook is for the next year's harvest.

First of all, while still sitting at the table each draws out a blade of hay from under the tablecloth — if it is long and straight, one's remaining life will be long and happy, if it is short, death is near.

Then the young people run outside to the pile of wood, and without counting the pieces bring some to the kitchen; if the number of pieces is even, one will get married next year, if not, too bad, one will have to wait and hope for better luck next year. While outside, the girls embrace some fence sticks, also without counting them, and then see if they have them in pairs. The direction from which the dogs bark is supposed to show the direction from which the matchmaker will come.

Once inside again, another look at the future is tried. Two pieces of coal are dropped into a bowl of water which is then stirred; the coals are watched to see if they will come together. Molten wax is also put into the water and the figures which are formed are searched for meaning — a coffin, a coach, a house, a child, and so on can be quite expressive signs of the future.

Even the older people go outside to have a look at the sky — if it is clear and dotted with numerous stars, the hens are expected to lay many eggs next year; if it is misty, the cows will give much milk: either way it is not so bad. It is said, that even the animals talk at midnight; one must only go and listen.

There are many more such beliefs, sayings, etc. Only, usually before all are tried, it is time to go to midnight mass. Through the quiet and peaceful winter night, lighted by the moon and the stars, through the glistening snow which covers the wide expanse of fields, little sleigh-bells come from all directions in answer to the call of the great bell in the village church. It is Christmas!

### **NEW YEAR'S EVE**

NEW YEAR'S Eve celebrations take two forms —dramatizations of the coming of the New Year and the passing of the old, and all kinds of supposed magic. Man is always curious about the future, but New Year's Eve seems to be an especially

fitting time to try to find out something of the fate that awaits one during the coming year. The two interesting questions of marriage and death are probed again, and much of the magic is the same as on Christmas Eve.

Disguise during New Year's Eve is quite common. Girls dress up as boys and vice versa, and walk through the whole village. Disguise as animals is also practiced in certain places. The Old Year and New Year are sometimes represented by an old man dressed in rags and a young girl in a beautiful white dress.

Three youths might get together and enact the coming of the New Year. One would dress as an old man (Old Year), one as a young man (New Year), and the third as Death. They visit the houses in the village and, while the young man extends the best New Year's greetings, an unequal and funny "fight" ensues between the Old Year and Death, until, finally, Death is victorious and the New Year reigns.

Magic is also practiced on the same evening. Molten lead or wax is poured into water and the resulting figures are observed. Or a piece of newspaper is burned and its shadow on a wall is watched. Girls think of many ways to find out whom they will marry — a piece of road might be leveled with a rake, and in the morning the footsteps of the one who passed would be visible. From the type of shoe, the wealth of the future husband is guessed.

The shadow that one's figure makes in the light of the moon is supposed to tell whether one will live through the next year, depending upon whether or not the shadow has a head. The mirror at midnight, looked at alone by the light of two candles, is supposed to be one of the best sources for seeing the future: a coffin, a husband, or whatever else awaits one will appear.

New Year's Day itself is thought to be fateful; all the coming year is supposed to be similar to it, so everyone must be happy, get something accomplished, have some money, etc. Much is deduced from the weather on New Year's Day. The figures made by the frost on the windows, the sky, whether or not it is snowing — all are supposed to give some indication about the next year's harvest.

At midnight on New Year's Eve, even the smallest children are awakened, so that they will not miss their luck while sleeping. Either then, or in the morning after church, New Year's greetings (often humorous) are exchanged. The best of luck, whatever the future might hold in store'

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**REFERENCE:**

Dr. J. Balys, **Lietuvių Tautosakos Skaitymai**, Patria, Tuebingen, 1948, pp. 99—108.