



EASTER IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Czech Easter (Velikonoce)

In the years before 1989 when Czechoslovakia became a free country again, the meaning of Easter (*Velikonoce* - from *Veliké noci* or *Great Nights*) was limited to the welcoming of spring. The religious connotations of Easter were suppressed under the communist regime. Nowadays, people are again aware of the religious origin of Easter, but Easter has not become a serious religious holiday. Easter in the Czech Republic is a fun time. Many traditions are still observed and practiced, especially in villages, and different regions may have their own traditions and customs. Many symbols of Easter are related to the spring and beginning of new life. In the Czech Republic, Easter symbols include:

Eggs and *kraslice*

The hand-painted or decorated egg (*kraslice*) is the most recognizable symbol of Czech Easter. Easter eggs are decorated by girls to be given to boys on Easter Monday. There are many techniques to decorate Easter eggs and they usually require a certain level of skill. Different materials can be used, such as bee's wax, straw (hay), watercolors, onion peels, and picture stickers. There are no limitations in creating pretty, colorful eggs. A nationwide Easter egg contest is held in many Czech cities around Easter time.

Baby animals - lamb, bunny rabbit, chicken

One Easter tradition is to bake a lamb, but in the Czech Republic real lamb is usually replaced by one made from gingerbread.

Pussywillow and *pomlázka*

Young, live pussywillow twigs are thought to bring health and youth to anyone who is whipped with them. A *pomlázka* (from *pomladit* or "make younger") - a braided whip made from pussywillow twigs - has therefore been used for centuries by boys who go caroling on Easter Monday and symbolically whip girls on the legs. Boys used to make their own *pomlázkas* in the past (the more twigs, the more difficult it was to braid one), but this tradition and skill is long gone and *pomlázkas* can be bought in stores and on the streets. Some men don't even bother and use a single twig or even a wooden spoon!

Dousing

Dousing a girl with water has a similar symbolic meaning as the *pomlázka*.

The color red

Red and other bright colors symbolize health, joy, happiness and new life that comes with the spring.

The Days Before Easter Sunday

Children finish school on Ugly Wednesday (*Škaredá středa*), which is a good idea because they need to spend some serious time on making Easter what it should be. In the evening of Green Thursday (*Zelený čtvrtek*), every boy in the village equips himself with a wooden rattle (*řehačka*), which is

specially made for the purpose, the boys form a group and walk through the village, rattling their rattles vigorously so the noise can be heard from afar. The meaning of the rattling is to chase away Judas. The same procedure repeats on Good Friday (*Velký pátek*) and then one more time on White Saturday (*Bílá sobota*) when the boys don't only walk through the village but stop at every house in the morning and rattle until they're given money which they then split between themselves.

Easter Sunday

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

Easter Monday

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 bring health and youth for the rest of the year to everyone who is whipped with the young pussywillow twigs. In the past, *pomlázka* was not only used by boys to whip girls, but also by the farmer's wife to whip the livestock, as well as everyone in the household, including men and children. 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 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 road... All that aside, Easter still remains one of the most joyful and fun holidays on the Czech calendar.

Czech Easter - Holy Week: Good Friday

In English, the name "Good Friday" is generally believed to be a corruption of "God's Friday." From very early times, the Holy Day has been observed by Christians everywhere as the most solemn feast of the year, a day of sadness, mourning, fasting and prayer, when the Passion and Death of our Lord is remembered in countless churches by services of sorrow and gratitude. Good Friday was always regarded by the Roman Catholic Church as the day of greatest grief in the Church. It's the only day in the year when Mass is not held anywhere in the world. Also, organs are silent, all ornaments are cleared from the altar, and no lights are burned. The cross is shrouded in a black veil. Great Friday (*Velký pátek*) is the popular name for the day in the Czech Republic. *Velký pátek* is a day of fasting for Roman Catholics who will not eat meat until Saturday evening after the church bells start ringing on their legendary return from Rome.

On *Velký pátek*, Czech and Moravian cooks prepare their holiday bread (coffee cake) which must not be cut or eaten until the priest says, "Christ is risen!" (Kristus vstal z mrtvých!) on Easter Sunday. It is a universal custom to mark a new loaf of bread with the sign of the cross before cutting it, in order to bless it and thank God for it. On special occasions, the cross is imprinted on the loaf before baking it. Bread baked on *Velký pátek* - if hardened in the oven - can be kept all year, and its presence protects the house from fire. Good Friday has always inspired folk poetry and has been the subject of many romantic superstitions. Women carry out their quilts to air out, in order to chase illnesses out of the house. Some believe that water dipped before sunrise without a spoken word has healing power and will stay pure all year. People get up very early on this day and hurry down to the brook or river, where they wash themselves with cold water and then cross the brook or stream with bare legs because they believed that this ensured good health for the whole next year. They also take their daughters down to wash at the well, so they'll be pretty and well spoken for. It is also believed that water sprites come out onto dry land on this day.

One very common manifestation on *Velký pátek* is a reluctance to do customary work then, either from genuine respect for the religious festival, or from superstitious fears that to do it will somehow bring misfortune. According to an old Czech saying, for example, farming should not be done on Good Friday. Na Velký pátek zemi nehýbej. ("On Good Friday, do not move the soil."). The weather for the whole year is foretold from the weather on *Velký pátek*. For instance, if it rains on *Velký pátek*, then the rest of the year will be dry. Velký pátek deštivý dělává rok žíznivý. ("A rainy Good Friday makes for a thirsty year.") On *Velký pátek*, according to legend, anyone can look upon the sun without being blinded by its glare.

In folk tradition this day is closely connected with the belief in the magic powers of the Earth. Many believe that on this day the Earth gives up its secret treasures before sunrise. It was believed that Mt. Blaník opens up for a couple of hours on this day. Mt. Blaník is famous among the Czechs as it's said that an army of Czech knights lies asleep within the mountain, waiting to come forth and help the nation in its hour of greatest danger.

An ancient ballad tells of a woman who went before sunrise on *Velký pátek* to a mountainside. The rocks opened and she beheld quantities of shining gold. Hastily laying down her child, she filled her apron with gold and then ran home for a large vessel to hold more treasure. By the time she returned, however, the sun was up and her child was shut up in the mountain. A year later she returned to the same spot before sunrise; the mountain opened and she found her child alive and well.

Another old legend states that high up in the mountains amidst the cliffs there is the stone figure of a maiden. She is seated and holds in her lap an unfinished shirt, also of stone. Each year, on *Velký pátek*, at the hour of the Passion, she sews a stitch: one year, one stitch. When the shirt is finished, the world will end. Everything under the sun will die, and Judgment Day will be at hand.

Czech Easter - The Red Eggs of Easter

"When the stone had been sealed by the Jews; while the soldiers were guarding Thy most pure Body; Thou didst rise on the third day, O Savior, granting life to the world. The powers of Heaven

therefore cried to Thee, O Giver of Life: Glory to Thy Resurrection, O Christ! Glory to Thy Kingdom! Glory to Thy dispensation, O Thou Who lovest mankind." (Troparion).

The ancient idea of the egg as symbol of New Life was readily transferred by the people of early Christendom to become the symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. To the Christians, the Paschal egg became the sealed tomb wherein the body of the Lord had been placed after His crucifixion. Tradition tells us that the custom of the egg had its start with St. Mary Magdalene, who is often depicted in icons holding a red egg. She may have been aware that the Romans would know the meaning of the egg as something that brings forth life from a sealed chamber. After Jesus was crucified and rose up to Heaven, Mary was in Rome. When she met with the Roman Emperor Tiberius, she gave him a red colored egg and announced, "Christ is Risen!" She then went on to preach to Tiberius about Jesus. It was an intelligent choice on her part because it was something the Romans would have understood. In the early days of Christendom, red was the only color used in coloring the eggs, as it signified the sacred blood of Jesus which had been shed on Calvary. The Greek Orthodox belief is that the color red also has protective power. However, other colors commonly used today came gradually into use. Tan or ivory shades symbolized the fine linen cloth in which Jesus was bound before being placed in the grave. Green was used for the fresh vegetation of springtime. Blue represented the sky in all of its glory, and purple was used to represent the Passion of Jesus crucified. Gathered together, all the many eggs of varied hues represent the glorious springtime in which Christendom does unite to rejoice at the Resurrection of Life. As the people gather from the Paschal services, they see these eggs blessed and distributed to all, and all receive of this commemoration a personal gift and blessing. The worshipers then go about greeting one another with "Christ is Risen!", and hitting their eggs one upon the other, cracking them. Each person thus greeted, responds, "Indeed He is Risen!" The cracking of the red eggs among the Orthodox symbolizes a mutual prayer for breaking one's bonds of sins and misery and for entering the new life issuing from the resurrection of Jesus. None of the eggs should remain unbroken for the breaking characterizes emphatically that our Lord has conquered death and is risen, granting New Life to all. The eating of the egg which follows is symbolic of the breaking of the fast in which, of course, eggs are not eaten.