

## Ukrainian Christmas all about family, birth of Christ

BY FLORENCE LOYIE, EDMONTON JOURNAL JANUARY 7, 2010



Four generations of a Ukrainian-Canadian family sit down to enjoy their 12-course Christmas Eve supper at the home of Audrey Uzwyshyn on Wednesday. Family members, clockwise from left, are Eve Hobart, Sean Robertson, Josh Robertson, Tanis Uzwyshyn, Peter Robertson, Camille Robertson, Michael Hobart, Maureen Tomkins, Vera Semeniuk, Audrey Uzwyshyn, Isabelle Hobart and Anna Hobart.

**Photograph by:** Larry Wong, The Journal, Edmonton Journal

A pot of wheat simmers on the stove in Daria Luciw's kitchen. Once cooked, it will be sweetened with honey and dressed with poppy seeds to symbolize prosperity, peace and good health.

Called kutya, it is the first dish served in the 12-course meatless Christmas Eve Sviata Vecherya or Holy Supper that begins the Ukrainian Christmas festivities which end on Jan. 19, the Feast of the Epiphany.

"Tonight we have 21 people for supper. Everyone will be in their embroidered shirts, even the little kids. I will have my three loaves of braided bread which will be on the table. My husband will carry in a small sheaf of wheat, and the youngest will be watching the sky for the first star," Luciw said Wednesday as she finished preparations for the traditional meal.

Sviata Vecherya is the central tradition of Christmas Eve celebrations in Ukrainian homes. Luciw, president of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress Alberta Provincial Council, spent two solid days preparing for this important tradition in her home. Luckily, she had the week off from work so she had the time.

Two tables are set with embroidered tablecloths. A few wisps of hay on them are a reminder of the manger in Bethlehem.

As head of the household, Luciw's husband will carry in a decorated sheaf of wheat, or *didukh*, to symbolize the harvest while the youngest member of the household will watch the sky for the first star.

The *didukh*, which means "grandfather spirit," is an important aspect of the Ukrainian Christmas Eve tradition, Luciw said. "It represents our ancestors. It represents those who cannot be with us today, those who we have lost in our immediate family."

When the first star is announced, everyone will gather around the tables and Luciw's husband will give a blessing and offer guests a piece of bread dipped in honey as a sign of plenty and family unity.

The first course placed on the table will be the *kutya*. This will be followed by *borscht* with *vuska* -- beet soup with little dumplings filled with mushrooms and onion.

Afterwards, the remaining dishes will be placed on the table. The meal will conclude with a dessert featuring *uzvar* -- a compote of stewed fruit. The 12 courses are in honour of the 12 apostles.

"We will get through most of our dinner and reflect on those who aren't with us. And we will carol. Carolling is a very strong part of Christmas for us," she said. "Our carols very much focus almost entirely on the birth of Jesus Christ and what that signifies to the Christian world. They also reflect on good blessings and good health, everything that we would want for the upcoming year."

Afterwards, everyone will go to mass. If the household didn't make it to mass Wednesday evening, they will go today as Luciwi will keep her youngest home from school as many other traditional Ukrainian Canadian families will do.

There are some 145,000 people of Ukrainian heritage in the greater Edmonton metropolitan area, according to the 2006 census.

Christmas has a special place in the lives of many Ukrainian Canadians, Luciwi said.

"It is a time to appreciate the many blessings we enjoy and cherish, including our loving families, our sense of Ukrainian community and our Christian faith."

On Tuesday, the Bethlehem Peace Flame arrived in Edmonton from Winnipeg.

The flickering flame is fetched each year by a child from the grotto where Jesus Christ was born. The flame has been burning since November and has travelled through 23 European countries, including Ukraine and the United States before entering Canada.

The light was originally part of a charitable relief mission for children in need in Austria.

It came to Edmonton with the help of Plast -- the Edmonton chapter of the Ukrainian Scouting organization. Plast members will take the flame to members in Edmonton's Ukrainian community, churches, seniors homes and places of importance. It was made available to those attending services Wednesday at St. John's Ukrainian Orthodox Cathedral and at the Ukrainian Catholic Parish of St. George.

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