

## **Bread culture in Slovakia**

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An understanding of the role and the significance of bread in the view of adults and children, males and females has originated in upbringing and social status; the difference in the way the role of bread is appreciated by those living in towns to those living in the country, by those working in factories to those working in the fields (i.e. farmers) has been evident.

One who produces bread values it higher as he has been organically connected to it. One who is only buying it in the shop often forgets or does not even know what ingredients are necessary to make it and how long the way of preparing bread is which begins with seeding grains of wheat, watching its growth, until recently even blessing wheat fields on 25<sup>th</sup> of April (an St.Marks day), when village people visited the fields accompanied by the local priest and begged to God for a good harvest. “Common” people looked differently at bread than the rich to whom it was a lowly commodity, it was food of the poor and the “peasants”, not suitable to the rich who had plenty of means to indulge in more noble dishes.

Maidens contemplating marriage were supposed to master the art of bread making.

In the past bread was a basic and highly valued food item and often it was the only available component of food. Anybody moving somewhat away from his home had to carry at least a piece of bread crust. Even today it is our daily bread as mentioned in a common prayer. It is irreplaceable. It is a synonym of being well fed, of a feeling of wellness and of certainties of life. If a home lacks it, it lacks something substantial, something important. Our food store is incomplete without bread. We cannot imagine how we could manage without bread. It is namely the kind of foodstuff we cannot overeat ourselves with. We love consuming it and eating it is never tedious. So we eat it daily at many times (regularly for breakfast, often with main meals, between meals as snacks, it goes well with any meal, mainly with soups). It saves us in our need when we get hungry and also when we have no other meal at the ready as it substitutes any meal and fills us up. Bread, even when dry, used to be an acceptable meal for the country folk. Often water only was drunk with it. A derogatory saying was born: “She is such a rat bag, she would not even touch dry bread”. People used to eat bread with walnuts and with raw prunes. Not negligible are the nutritional values of bread with its vitamin and mineral contents and that it supplies us with a third of our calorie needs.

In the past, old bread and crumbs as well as other leftovers were never discarded but were given to birds or fed to farm animals. With traditional Christmas and Easter meals, especially bread and crumbs used to be treated as sacrosanct (Figure 1, 2). They used to be ploughed in in spring or used to be utilised as folk remedies for humans and animals alike. This proves that traditional country farms represented a fully closed ecological system. As food was

considered to be God's gift, it gave origin to a meal norm which required prudent treatment of meals. It was not allowed to waste food without reason or to waste it or to treat it without due respect.

Bread used to be kept on the table, placed in drawers or in kitchen cupboards (Figure 3). Wrapping utensils used to store bread, bread buns or doughnuts were the pride of all housewives. They were woven of hemp, cotton or of a mixture of the two.

The family table had a uniting role. Family members congregating at the table formed close and intimate ties.

The content of bread symbolised the sum of all the earthly substance and the reproduction of life in a subsistent way of life aimed at self-sufficiency. At child christenings bread was brought by godmother into a family where the child was to be brought up and such an act also symbolised a certain blessing. Among traditional socialising rites, christenings were a sign of accepting children into the family; therefore pieces of bread were shared by the participants to confirm their presence at this act connected with celebrating the arrival of the newly born child.

In the whole of Europe bread (or other wheat pastry) played a significant role at weddings, too. Its existence is entwined in many forms as a key moments of wedding celebrations. Bread brought from the brides home into the groom's symbolised future prosperity, welcomed the bride into her new household and united the two families (Figure 4).

Bread (cake) was used to signify thanks and rewards for services rendered and for work well done. It was given to shepherds looking after stock by stock owners. An apprentice farmhand carried home bread on his shoulder as a visible sign of completing his year of apprenticeship. Bread made from freshly ground flour played a part in celebrating the end of harvest.

Some old time sayings survived to this day such as "One who cannot earn his bread, does not know how to slice it", "To grow up on one loaf of bread" - referring to orphans, "One who cannot slice bread evenly, cannot deal evenly with people" – referring to an obligation (a strict one) to give out even slices, "You may give him bread but not wisdom", "If you are hit by a stone, hit back with bread", "Every bread has two crusts", "One can see Vienna through it" – referring to stinginess, "To be good as a piece of bread" - referring to great goodness.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figures:

1. Blessing of Easter food (Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry Slovenska, 1.)
2. Easter cake "Paska" (Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry Slovenska, 1.)
3. Interior of a village house; first half of 20th century. (Z. Mintalová: Slovenské národné múzeum Etnografický ústav, Martin, výstava Čaro prikrytého stola)
4. Welcome of the young couple after the wedding ( M. Madačov: Tradície slovenskej rodiny, Fotoarchív Slovenského národného múzea)