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# Stories of a Dollhouse

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Exploring our Family  
Memory and Traditions

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*Mikołajki*

1918



**Mikołajki** is the celebration of Saint Nicholas in Poland. As in many other European countries, on this special day (6 December), children receive small presents and candies that **Mikołaj** (Santa) puts into their shoes, socks or under pillows.

In 1918, after four years of deprivation caused by WWI, the children of Warsaw had not forgotten **Mikołaj** but they did not expect much from him. Only few of them had a distant memory of pre-war times. At home and in school, they were suffering the hard condition of food scarcity and permanent cold.

For the Książyk Family, the first celebration of **Mikołajki** in Independent Poland was a milestone. This event was organized at school with the visit of *Święty Mikołaj*. He came with a small pack and a big box. Our Dollhouse story pictures this school years memory in post-WWI hardship.



©Książyk

**Mikołajki** is celebrated on 6 December, the day of Saint-Nicholas. **Święty Mikołaj** (Santa Claus) visits the houses and sometimes the schools. Four generations ago, the children excitement was always higher than the value of the modest presents they received. But whatever the present, Santa Claus was always long expected. This tradition (*tradycja mikołajek*) is still celebrated today, in spite of the dominant business of Christmas.

# MIKOŁAJKI



Polish postcard from 1900 to 1918 (Source: MyVu) – Saint Nicholas sculptures from the [Rzeszow Museum](https://www.rzeszowmuseum.pl/).

MIKOŁAJKI



## Post-war Hardship

Since 1911, the Książyk Family had been living 24 ul. Zielna, in Śródmieście, the central area of Warsaw. Their apartment was in the block located at the corner of ul. Świętokrzyska. The busy ul. Marszałkowska was just behind this block.

In this “bourgeois” environment, life was no better than elsewhere. The Książyk Family had survived the war thanks to the support of relatives who lived in the countryside some 30 km away. Once a month, Walenty strived to get whatever supplies left behind by war requisitions.

The three Książyk siblings were impacted by war just the same as any other kids. Aged 19, Małgorzata was the only one to remember pre-war times. The previous year, she had left her finishing school and began working as a seamstress to support the family. Her young brothers Leon (age 8) and Ciesław (aged 6) had no idea about what “normal life” could be.

In November 1918, the two boys knew that everybody was celebrating the end of a long darkness. For them, war was a portmanteau word used by grownups to talk about shortage of usual goods such as charcoal, lamp oil, paper and ink, fabrics, or sugar. Food was rationed to minimum portions and accessible only *na kartki*.

Over the last four years, the kids had heard the adults longing about coffee, tea, and chocolate. None of these products had been seen in the kitchen since the Summer 1915. In the pantry of the house, the pre-war metal tea and coffee canisters were empty. For the Książyk Family, food scarcity, power cuts and penuries of everything were a daily scourge.



Weekly food coupons from the year 1918 in Warsaw.



Such images printed on translucent paper were reportedly used to decorate the glass panels of windows. Collection Książyk.

The First World War ended on **11 November 1918**. The population of Warsaw celebrated this event with a massive patriotic march on 17 November. On 22 November a decree proclaimed the **Republic of Poland**. This decision ended 130 years of division and occupation by Austria, Germany and Russia. This country that had disappeared from the map of Europe was recovering a long-expected Independence. The sovereignty of Poland was confirmed by the Treaty of Versailles signed in June 1919.

## Celebrating Independence

Early in December 1918, people began to prepare the first “free Christmas” in 123 years. On 6 December, *Mikołajki* (Santa Claus) was opening the festivities period. Warsaw was still in the mood of Independence celebration. Red and white ribbons, patriotic leaflets and paper cockades were displayed in shop and home windows.

Walenty Książyk had been very busy over the five last weeks. At this time, he considered himself a moderate Socialist close to Piłsudski ideas and he was prepared for the changes to come. Walenty hoped that the recovered Independence would be conducive to social progress with universal education.

His wife Józefa had a matter-of-fact vision of Independence. She was just yearning for a normal life with the end of food shortages and a warm home. She also expected from the new authorities some serious measures to eradicate the pandemics that plagued the city.

The three Książyk siblings shared the general optimism. Małgorzata anticipated with delight a cultural opening to access foreign books and recent movies. Leon was pleased with the end of curfew that meant longest visits to his cousins. Ciesław just wanted an “Independence dog” to enter the new era with a new friend. Whatever the expectations, there was much excitation in the Książyk house.

The celebration of Independence was sincere but marred by much uncertainty about the future. During the four previous years, Poland had been the “Eastern front” in the battlefields of WWI. The war had left the country devastated, pillaged and ruined. In Warsaw, public transportations, energy capacities, health service and food delivery had not recovered pre-war capacities. Early December 1918, the withdrawing process of German occupants was achieving in Warsaw. The Poles had paid a heavy toll caused by requisitioning and the diversion of resources for the German “war effort” on the Western Front.

At this time, Warsaw was plagued by a series of pandemics caused by massive population displacement and the presence of refugees. In 1916, the loss of Władisław aged 5 had devastated the Książyk Family. In spite of a long stay with his cousins in the countryside, the little boy had not recovered health. Now, with the return of soldiers from the Western Front, the Spanish Flu (*Hiszpanka*) was beginning to spread. Some anxious parents were already keeping the kids at home. In some Warsaw schools, half the pupils were missing because of contagious infantile pandemics.



Pictures of the patriotic march organized on 17 November 1918 in Warsaw.



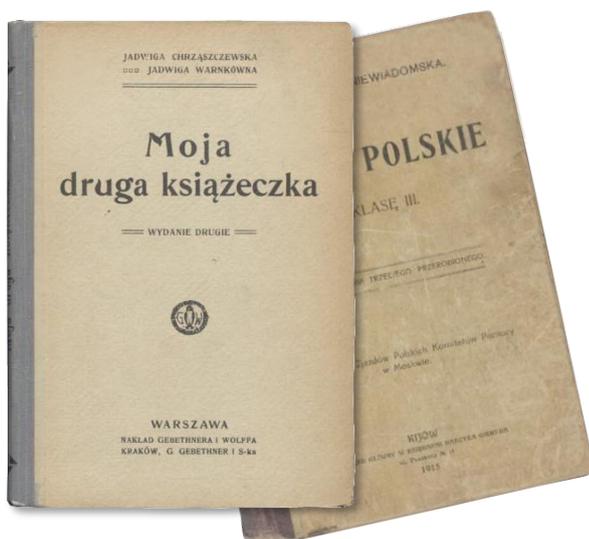
## Community School

The education system had been disorganized by the war. Accessing a public school was such a hurdle that local private schools were the best option for many parents. Some of these private schools were located in apartments with a retired teacher managing a single classroom.

Aged 8, Leon was a *Klara 3* student. He attended a Catholic primary school supervised by the All Saints Parish (*Parafia Wszystkich Świętych*). He had begun school in 1915. This same year, occupying German authorities had restored the education in Polish with Polish books. Before the war, primary and secondary education were in Russian. Only private and parish schools could escape the rule (within strict limits). By all extent, the generation of Leon was the first to fully access Polish speaking and reading.



Father Marcel Godlewski, the new provost of the All-Saints Parish (*Parafia Wszystkich Świętych*), was a social activist. Since 1915, he had introduced a wind of change. Below, the church in 1918.

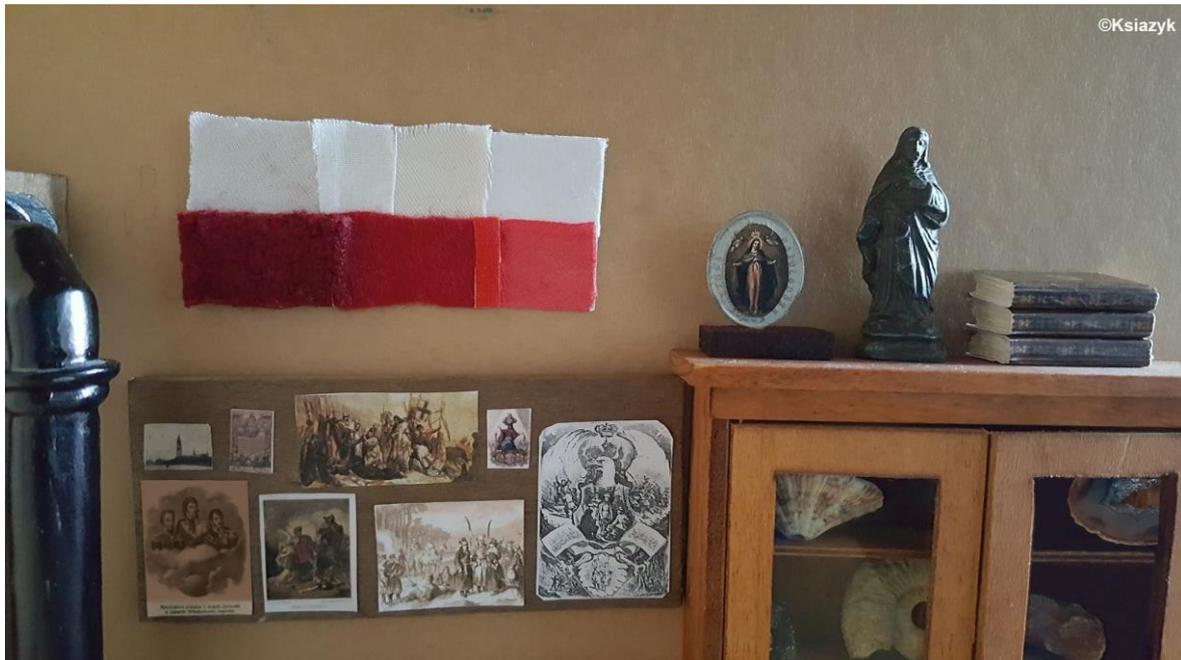


In this Catholic community school of Warsaw, patriotic feelings were preciously seeded, grown and harvested by the nuns.

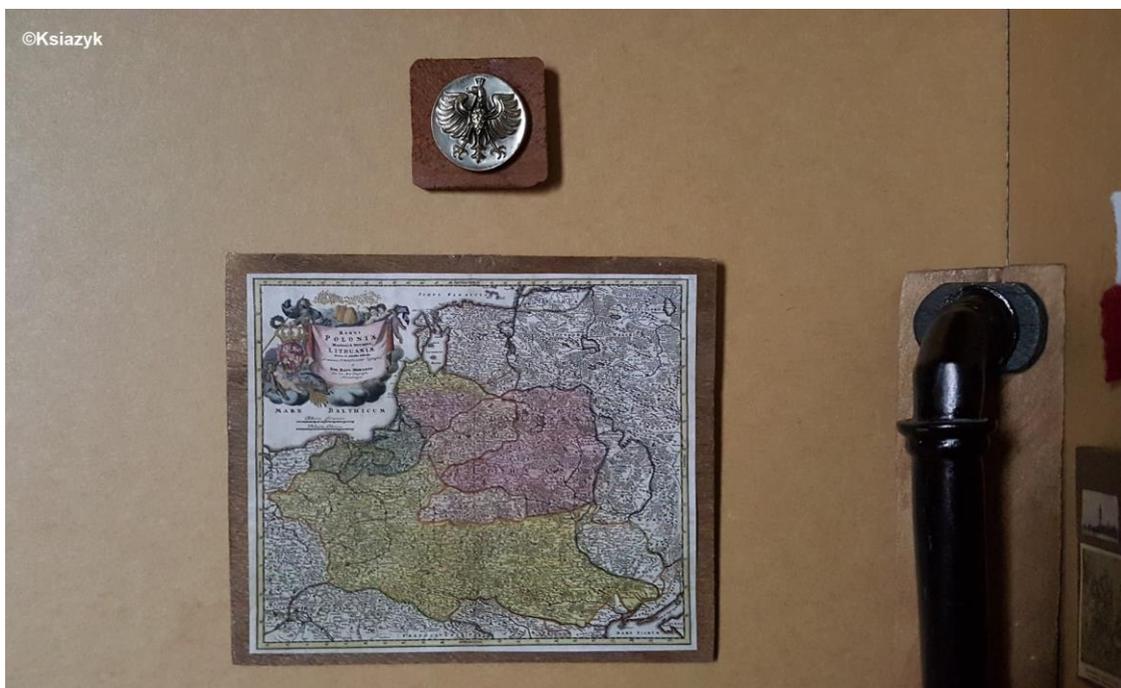
In *Klasa 3*, there was a large antic map of Poland. This reproduction a 17<sup>th</sup> c. map pictured the country with its extended borders. In reality, after three partitions and 123 years of occupation, no one knew exactly what would be the future map of Poland. Pupils were encouraged to pin pictures of national heroes on a large wood board. These pictures were cut in newspapers and magazines. To keep the patriotic fire alive, the nun changed the pictures every week.

After 11 November 1918, the celebration of Independence was an opportunity to go beyond. The classroom was generously decorated with red and white paper decorations. The children had provided pieces of red and white material of all kinds to make a national flag. In the corner of the classroom, the venerated Black Madonna has received a fresh flow of ribbons. The kids were very proud and the nuns were encouraging a petty competition between the three classrooms of the school.





To celebrate the “new Independence”, the pupils had made a Polish flag with pieces of fabrics. Interestingly, at this time, there was a fierce debate about the official colour of the red.



In December 1918, the borders of the Poland were not definitive.

In the classroom, the reproduction of an old 17th c. map pictured the territories of the pre-partition Polish Commonwealth.

## School Resilience

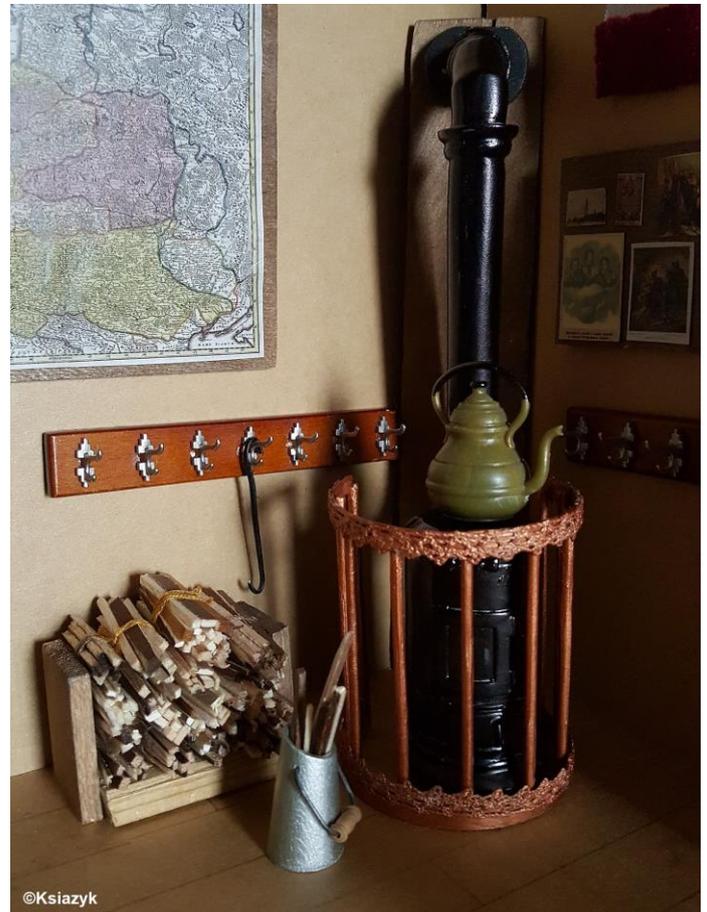
During the fall 1918, the Spanish Flu pandemic (Hiszpanka) arrived in Warsaw with the return of Polish soldiers from the Western front. At this time, the magnitude of this plague was not fully understood and the policy was to keep schools open.

Military requisitioning had wiped away coal from the market. Every day, children were invited to provide “little wood” to fuel the stove. They were proud to come with whatever firewood they could find. Since German authorities had strictly forbidden to cut the trees in the parks of Warsaw, the only way to get wood was to buy bundles in the street. This firewood came from nearby forests or was made from broken pieces of planks. The children had to cut these pieces to fit the stove dimensions.

Early December 1918, the weather was quite warm in Warsaw (by Polish standards). The wood supply was spared for the worst days to come when temperature would fall below 5° C. Still, students had already their coats on because it was probably no more than 12° C. in the classroom.

In December 1918, according to the data of the station Warsaw-Observatorium, the average air temperature was -1,4°.

Source: Jerzy Boryczka and others - XIV. *The Forecast of the Climate Change in Warsaw – Chart page 95 1779-1999* (H. Lorenc, 2000)



A stock of dry firewood was ready for “the winter to come”.





Every day, pupils were required to bring a small bundle of dry firewood.

The nun asked for a specific size to fit the stove capacity.



In the countryside, firewood was easy to collect. In Warsaw, it was mostly produced from broken boards saved from destroyed buildings. Street vendors sold little bundles.



Covered up with coats and scarves, the children looked like Eskimos from the North Pole.

Above the stove, a beam welcomed wet coats to dry. During the harsh winter times, the nun hung them this way to give warm clothes for the kids when they returned home. When snow arrived, pupils wore slippers in the classroom. Their shoes were stored in wood cases along the corridor wall.



## Mikołaj is Back

During the first week of December 1918, the children were informed that **Święty Mikołaj** would visit the school. This news was a sensation. **Mikołaj** was back because the war was over. He was in Warsaw because Poland had recovered Independence.

**Święty Mikołaj** came with “special goodies”. In a small pack, there was two large chocolate bars. In the big box, oranges were carefully stored in straw bale. While looking like a venerable patriarch, **Święty Mikołaj** had the fresh voice of a young seminarist. The kids did not notice, so mesmerized they were by this divine visit.



The nun reminded **Święty Mikołaj** that half the pupils of *Klasa 3* were absent for illness (mostly chicken pox and mumps). Never mind, they would also get their *Mikołajki* goodies.

Before opening his presents, **Święty Mikołaj** wanted to know how good the children had been during the year. He asked questions about catechism. He also checked that all prayers were learnt (including the *Credo*, a long text so tricky to memorize). **Święty Mikołaj** also insisted on the importance to be kind to others and to attend the Holy Mass once a week. Then the kids offered the Christmas song they had prepared for this special *Mikołaj* day.



To immortalize the event, the nun wanted a picture of the honourable guest with the pupils who were present this day. The classroom was so small that the teacher desk was moved back against the wall. For this occasion, the kids were proud to hold the paper *Sztandar Polski* they had made a few weeks before.

This photo opportunity took a little time because the old nun called upon to assist wanted a perfect image. The school had an antique 19<sup>th</sup> c. camera and only a few glass plates from the pre-war supply. In 1918, **Święty Mikołaj** was great event for a great day!





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## Learning the World

In Warsaw, all exotic products had disappeared during the war. Long distance transports were exclusively used for military purposes. Before the war, oranges and chocolate were sold in colonial stores (*sklep kolonialny*). German and Austrian chocolate had a dominant position on the Polish market. The Russian Empire supplied citrus fruits growing along Black Sea shores and tea from Central Asia.

In the school corridors, the words *pomarańcze* and *czekolada* generated much excitement. We suspect that the oranges supply was a “relief box” coming either from France or Great-Britain. These two allied countries had sustained their prosperous colonial business during the war.

The miraculous presence of oranges and chocolate in the classroom was an occasion to learn about geography, botanic, and transport. With much enthusiasm, the teacher jumped on the opportunity to talk about latitudes, climates, distances.

The children discovered the secret anatomy of an orange. They learnt that beside oranges, citruses included lemons, grapefruits, pomelos, and limes –many fruits that they would not see before long. The teacher remarked that before the war, orange trees were growing in the botanical garden. The kids were invited to keep the seeds.

Pupils also marvelled about the black gold of cacao pods. Leon remarked some similarity with coffee beans and explained that green coffee could be grilled and grinded at home. He received a reward token (a small image cut from a newspaper or an old calendar).

*Klasa 3* learnt about the distant provenance of these treasures, oranges from the sunny Mediterranean shores, chocolate from the deep tropical rainforest. This ad hoc teaching made the kids even more excited to get the world in their little hands.



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wskutek procesu fermentacyjnego nie nabiorą brązowej barwy. Potem ziarna suszą, tłuką, rozcierają i wyciskają z nich tłuszcz, lub psalę i mielą zawarte w niem oleiste jądro. W ten sposób otrzymuje się proszek barwy brązowej, znany pod nazwą: *kakao*. Ziarna mają zapach przyjemny, smak w większych gatunkach słodki, w gorszych nieco gorzki. Kakao, ugotowane na wodzie lub mleku i osłodzone, daje najpóź pożywną i wzmacniającą. K. służy do



Fig. 182. **Pomarańcza**, drzewo (wys. 15 m.).

Wyrzucił się z eukrem proszkowanym, z dodatkiem wanilii). Lupinki kakaowe służą również do przygotowania napoju podobnego do K. Ziarna kakaowca zawierają od 30 do 60% oleju, który wyciskają

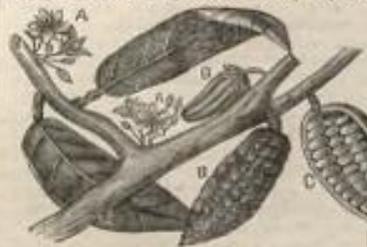


Fig. 181. **Owoc kakaowca.**

I spieszają pod nazwą *wanilia kakaowca*. W ziarnach K. zawiera się także niewielka ilość alkaloidu: *teobrominy*, która posiada działanie podniecające.



**Pomarańcza** — drzewo, należące do rodzaju *Cytryna* (fig. 1832), uprawiane na całym południu Europy dla owoców. Pozostawiona sama sobie zaczyna dawać owoce od 15-go roku i daje ich wielką ilość. Za pomocą szczepienia i odpowiedniego obcinania, osiąga się ten rezultat, że owoców jest mniej, ale są większe i soczyste. Zbierają je zwykle trzy ra-



Fig. 1832. **Pomarańcza** (kwiat i owoc).

zy do roku: w październiku, gdy nie są jeszcze zupełnie dojrzałe i w grudniu — owoce tych dwóch zbiorów mogą być przewożone i konserwują się długo. Trzeci zbiór robią na wiosnę; ale wtedy owoce są zupełnie dojrzałe, i mogą być tylko spożyte na miejscu. Skórka pomarańczowa używa się na konfitury i likiery (*kurasao*). Z kwiatów dobywa się wonna esencja (*olejek neroli*).

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In 1918, there was no modern learning material. The only available images for teaching were in encyclopaedias, many of them printed during the 19<sup>th</sup> c. The teacher left open the book on a pulpit to allow every student to watch, read and comment.



©Ksiazyk

On the pulpit, an old encyclopaedia pictured  
the branch of a cocoa tree with leaves, flowers, pod and beans.

Before WWI, chocolate ersatz was sold in “colonial stores” (*sklep kolonialny*) with other tropical and exotic products. Chocolate was a common goody in Polish pantries. This product was mostly sold by weight. From large pieces.

Many Polish local firms had developed successful business in the transformation of chocolate products. Some major Polish producers had gained excellent reputation abroad. Among them were Wedel, Fuchs, Blikle, Piasecki, and Wawel, a new producer established in Warsaw. These brands had their own flagship stores.

Introduced in 1915 by the German army, chocolate *ersatz* was an aromatized, solidified and greasy mix. The colour was dark brown and it had no smell whatsoever. Chocolate ersatz was proposed in bars and powder.



**KAWA, HERBATA, KAKAO, CZEKOLADA, MARMELADA, GRZYBY.** Kawa ziarnista, świeżo palona, od 18.— marok, orag mieszanka na czarną od 4.50, na białą od 2, toleńziowa 1.50. Cykorja. Herbata: chińska i cejlońska od 56, owocowa na waga 14, arakowa 50, 1.00 i 2.00. Kakao Van Houtena kilo 130, funt 56.—. Benadorfa 40 i 35, holenderskie lupinkowe 20.—. **Czekolada w proszku 15.20.** Sacharyna po cenach hurtowych. Powidla śliwkowe 3.50. Marmelada konfiturowa na cukrze 4.50. Miód 14 funta 5.50, lipcowy 8.50. Karmelki. Cukierki. Landrynki. Herbatniki. Grzyby od 5.—. Buljon w kostkach. Pieprz. Cynamon. Mąka kartoflana 2.00. «Zródło Polskie», Marszałkowska 95, filja: Krucza 36A. 4243r

◀ Kurjer Warszawski. R. 98, 1918, nr 338 - 7 December 1918 - This advertisement promotes grocery products. Powder chocolate costs 15.20 marks, 3 times more than the 4.50 marks sugared marmalade. The text doesn't specify the weight, composition or provenance of this product. One kilo of Van Houten chocolate costs 150 marks.

## Friday Obligation

A serious concern was emerging. Celebrated on 6 December, **Mikołajki** was a Friday, the day of fasting and abstinence for the Catholics.

The nun was facing a terrible dilemma: either distribute the goodies or delete the operation until Monday. Distribute was encouraging a sin. Deleting was offending Święty Mikołaj. She opted for an exceptional distribution.

The nun lectured the kids about virtue of abstinence, insisting that *“this is about avoiding or refraining from something that is good”*. She requested that every child wait to be at home to share **Mikołajki** goodies with parents and siblings. The nun insisted that patience was a virtue and a test for Friday obligations. There wasn't much to share but a single bit of chocolate would make the day in post-war scarcity.



## Childhood Memory

Leon and his buddies returned home with their **mikołajki** trophies, singing „*Mamy Niepodległość, pomarańcze i czekoladę*” (We have Independence, oranges and chocolate). To make sure everybody had got the news, they walked Marszałkowska street down to the Vienna train Station and they were back home late.

We suspect that there weren't many people to get the message. In Poland, the night comes early in December and the streets had only little light. Back home, they were sharply scolded for wandering unaccompanied in the early winter cold. Never mind!

Black as coal and heavy like a brick, the **mikołajki** chocolate had a rather bitter taste. The oranges were too ripe and close to early decay condition. Anyway, for the kids this was the taste of Independence.

Several decades later, this rallying cry in Warsaw streets would still resonate as the words of childhood happiness. Living in the USA, a country where oranges grew plentiful and chocolate was everywhere, Leon staunchly argued that the best he had ever tasted were the goodies from his Warsaw school.



Ul. Marszałkowska in 1918, still the main shopping avenue of Warsaw today. The Książyk Family was living Ul. Zielna, a parallel street just behind Ul. Marszałkowska.

This Dollhouse memory  
is a tribute to  
all the dedicated  
Catholic nuns  
who have educated  
many Ksiazyk children  
over several generations,  
in Poland and in France.







Schools in Poland during the 1920s.

Source: [Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe](https://www.nac.gov.pl/)

We express our gratitude to **Agnieszka Kisielewicz Misiurska**, research director in History at the Silesian Institute ([Instytut Śląski](#)). Agnieszka is a fluent French speaker. She has outstanding knowledge and expertise in Polish and French historiography. We greatly value all her advices and suggestions in all our miniature projects.

We have a special thank you to **Jolanta Ilnicka** for her kind support and interest. Jolanta is a Professor of History, President of the Opole Genealogy Society ([Opolscy Genealodzy](#)) and President of the International Conference of Polish Genealogy [GENEAMI](#) organized in Brzeg every year. We warmly suggest a visit her blog [Moje potyczki z genealogią](#).



Reconstitution of a classroom in the countryside. [Ethnographic Museum](#) (*skansen*) in Kłóbka. This village is part of the Museum of the Włocławek County (*Ziemi Kujawskiej i Dobrzyńskiej we Włocławku*), located in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship.

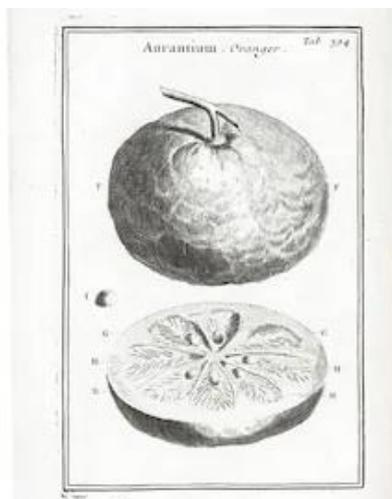
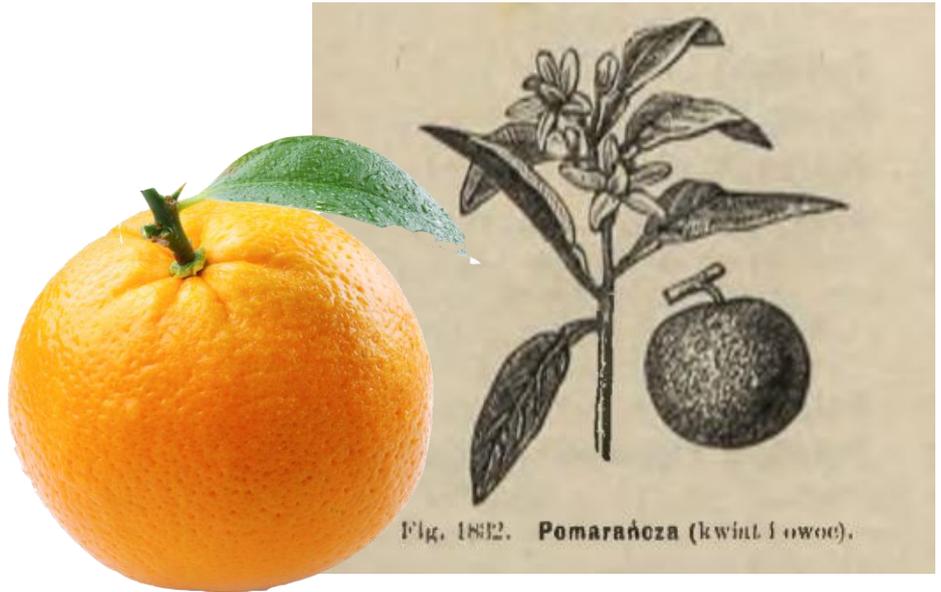




Fig. 851. Owoc kakaowca.

