



Wianki (Wreaths)

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In the old Slavic beliefs and customs whose roots date back to pre-Christian times an essential part was played by the observance of the natural cycle of life. The days of solstices between one and another season of the year are of particular import. Then the key celebrations and festivities were held. Such a day or rather night was the spring/summer solstice when the night is shortest and the day longest. We should emphasise the role of night because the central celebrations took place at night.

The pagan customs attached great role to signs. During this day the most important two were *darkness* and *light*. In the middle of the night the community of the Slavic settlement went to a secluded place, often an old cemetery. The secluded place reinforced the gloomy impact of darkness that symbolised all fears of man, including the greatest fear of death. On this night there was an end to darkness. On the sacred spots huge bonfires were started and burnt till morning to accompany the songs, dances, and various revelry and frolics. At the culmination moment of the celebrations girls floated wreaths plaited of various herbs and flowers on the water. People assigned magical effects to these wreaths, believing in their power to ensure good harvests. They were also symbols of virginity. A girl who floated a wreath hoped that it would be fished out by the one ... closest to her heart who would be able to reach her hand together with ... the wreath. These customs were named 'Sobótki' which is not associated with the sixth day of the week but with the secluded place.

After the Christianisation of Europe, the pagan customs were replaced by the Church with its own holidays. The example of this activity is the establishment of the reminiscence of St. John the Baptist at that time in the year calendar when Sobótki was celebrated. The Sobótki celebrations were still cultivated, but they lost their pagan character becoming a kind of folk picnic. The wreath day was known throughout Poland. It was observed very ceremoniously in Warsaw upon the Vistula River where the crowds of city inhabitants gathered. In Kraków celebrations took place upon the Vistula River and its tributaries: Rudawa, Dłubnia, Prądnik and Wilga. The Sobótki fires were burnt at the neighbouring hills surrounding the city by a fire circle. After the Kraków's annexation to Austria (1846) the cultivation of old Slavic customs became one of the examples of patriotic manifestation. That is why Wianki gathered greater and greater audience. The Sobótki celebrations gained the patriotic nature. What was also important was that in Kraków the tradition of floating wreaths on the Vistula River merged in one with the legend about Wanda *who did not want to marry a German*. This probably resulted from the fact that the Wawel princess died in defence of both her people and her virginity. A particular role was played here by *Legenda (Legend)* by Stanisław Wyspiański where the brilliant artist created extremely expressive world of the Vistula water nymphs that welcome Wanda in their underwater kingdom. Stanisław Wyspiański's vision made a considerable impact on the course of Wianki celebrations in Kraków. From the end of the 19th century the permanent and only place of celebrations has been the Vistula River bend near Wawel which the artist considered as a remarkably beautiful natural amphitheatre. For some time before the First World War Wianki were organised by the Sokół Gymnastic Society. During the twenty years of the inter-war period the performances gained new quality as part of the then established Kraków Days. Clear elements drawing upon the history of Poland and Kraków were introduced to the performance. The whole gained both refinement and greater scale. After the Second World War a new 'light and sound' show was created at Wawel Hill. It always consisted of two parts. The first one included a peculiar theatre performance on the Vistula boulevards, while the second part featured the great fireworks show, the best attraction of the day awaited by



**Magiczny
Kraków**

Kraków inhabitants. In the 1970s Wianki was organised by *Gazeta Krakowska* (known for a short time as *Gazeta Południowa*). In the 1980s (after the introduction of the martial law) there were no Wianki celebrations. Revived in 1992 upon the initiative of the Kraków City Hall, they instantly regained their popularity. In the course of the last eight years the City authorities entrusted the organisation of this event to various institutions, and the Kraków inhabitants could view performances of various scenarios and quality of execution. The demanding audience evaluated these spectacles either favourably or critically. Maybe this is right. The beautiful and magical space at Wawel that focuses the long-term past of Kraków requires remarkable artistic creation.