

Czech Easter (Velikonoce)

Although Czechoslovakia no longer exists, in the years before 1989 in Czechoslovakia, 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, Czechs are again aware of the strong Christian background 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 Easter traditions and customs.



The Easter pomlázkas in action. Left: Moravian postcard illustration by M. Gardavská, circa 1910 from the region of Olomouc, Czech Republic (source: Wikipedia.org). Right: a young girl named Lenka with her pomlázka (source: czechmediary.com).

Czech Republic Easter Symbols

Many Czech Easter symbols are related to spring and the beginning of new life. Some of the best known are:

Easter Eggs and *kraslice*

The hand-painted or otherwise decorated egg (*kraslice*) is the most recognizable symbol of Czech Easter.

Girls decorate Easter eggs to give them to boys on Easter Monday. There are many Easter egg decorating techniques and the more elaborate ones require a certain level of skill. Different materials can be used, such as bee's wax, straw, watercolors, onion peels, picture stickers. The most common designs are probably geometrical patterns, but you can also see flowers, leaves or snowflake patterns in a whole range of colors. There are no limitations to creating pretty, colorful eggs.

A nationwide Easter egg contest is held in Prague and other Czech cities around Easter time.

Pussywillow and *pomlázka*

Young, live pussywillow twigs are thought to bring health and youth to anyone who is whipped with them. An Easter *pomlázka* (from *pomladit* or "make younger") is a braided whip made from pussywillow twigs. It has been used for centuries by boys who go caroling on Easter Monday and symbolically whip girls on the legs. In the past, *pomlázka* was also used by the farmer's wife to whip the livestock and everyone in the household, including men and children. There would be no Czech Easter without the *pomlázka*.

Boys used to make their own *pomlázkas* in the past. The more twigs, the more difficult it was to braid one. This skill is not widespread anymore and *pomlázkas* can be bought in stores and street stands. Some men don't even bother and use a single twig or even a wooden spoon!

Baby Animals - Lamb, Bunny Rabbits, & Chicks

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

Dousing

Dousing a girl with water has a similar symbolic meaning as the *pomlázka* (whip)

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

The following summarizes the Easter experience in the Northern Moravia region of the Czech Republic:

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 (*řehťáčka*), 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 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 already, 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 to bring health and youth for the rest of the year to everyone who is whipped with the young pussywillow twigs. 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 (*slivovice*) 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 roads... All that aside, Easter remains one of the most joyful holidays on the Czech calendar (Source: www.myczechrepublic.com).

Happy Easter! - Veselé Velikonoce!

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