



STRAW

the gold of our ancestors



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According to the definition of the Polish Language Dictionary, straw means *dry stalks of cereal plants, used as food for animals, bedding for livestock, raw material for making mats, decorative objects, and formerly also for roofing.*

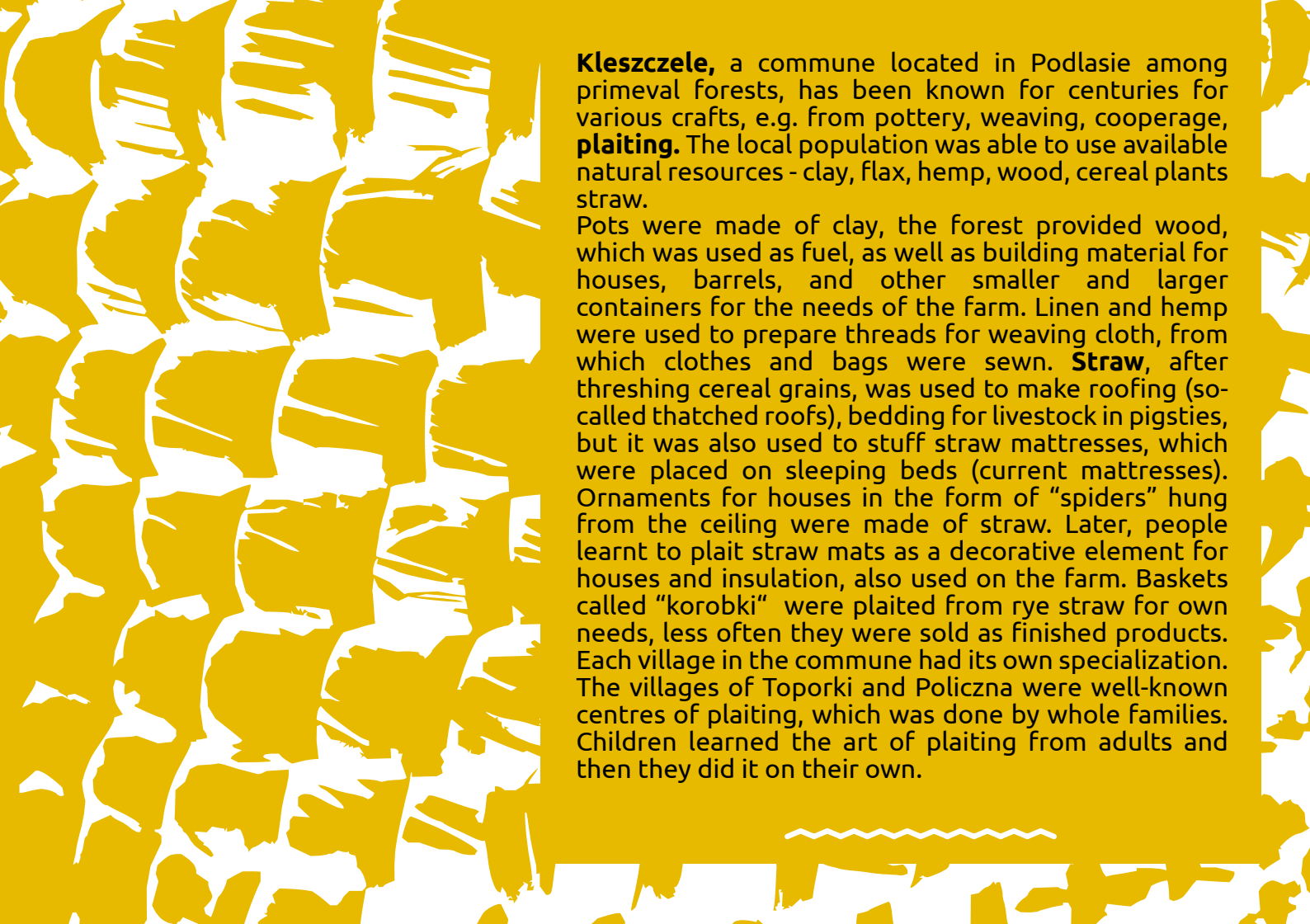
In this publication, we will focus on the "decorative" and utility use of STRAW in the Kleszczele commune.

The old folk art was largely based on natural resources, and the thriftiness of our ancestors in terms of the use of "matter", seemingly superfluous after the dark period when we as a society went into raptures over objects made of "plastic", returns to favour. More and more often we appreciate the uniqueness and originality of the products of the work of human hands.

The times have come when we started to appreciate the self-sufficiency of our grandmothers and grandfathers and their manual skills. Actions are taken to build an identity, ours and our children's, based on the past. The heritage of the places we come from and preserving them for the next generations becomes the mission of Cultural Centres, non-governmental organizations and individuals who, by acquiring skills and collecting stories related to disappearing crafts, are a natural bridge between generations. Workshops and meetings with Folk Artists are organized. More and more often artists and designers refer to old forms and techniques in their projects, giving them modern use, which has not only decorative but also practical function.

In the project activities, "our" **Vector to the Past** was directed towards STRAW as a slightly forgotten matter, its application and use, which this publication deals with.





Kleszczele, a commune located in Podlasie among primeval forests, has been known for centuries for various crafts, e.g. from pottery, weaving, cooperage, **plaiting**. The local population was able to use available natural resources - clay, flax, hemp, wood, cereal plants straw.

Pots were made of clay, the forest provided wood, which was used as fuel, as well as building material for houses, barrels, and other smaller and larger containers for the needs of the farm. Linen and hemp were used to prepare threads for weaving cloth, from which clothes and bags were sewn. **Straw**, after threshing cereal grains, was used to make roofing (so-called thatched roofs), bedding for livestock in pigsties, but it was also used to stuff straw mattresses, which were placed on sleeping beds (current mattresses). Ornaments for houses in the form of "spiders" hung from the ceiling were made of straw. Later, people learnt to plait straw mats as a decorative element for houses and insulation, also used on the farm. Baskets called "korobki" were plaited from rye straw for own needs, less often they were sold as finished products. Each village in the commune had its own specialization. The villages of Toporki and Policzna were well-known centres of plaiting, which was done by whole families. Children learned the art of plaiting from adults and then they did it on their own.



In the 1960s and 1970s, it turned out that there was a demand for such products in Western Europe, especially in Germany. Orders were pouring in. It was a golden period for folk producers of straw products. They were purchased by Cepelia and exported to the West. For the income obtained from the sale of their products, the inhabitants became rich and could afford to build large brick houses and outbuildings. Income allowed for an affluent life. However, the 1980s came and the demand for the export of straw products began to decrease.

Orders from Cepelia were decreasing. This lasted until the nineties. The tradition of straw plaiting began to disappear. There were still craftsmen who showed up with their beautiful products at fairs and exhibitions organized in the region, but there was no greater demand. The Municipal Cultural Centre in Kleszczele, trying not to lose this tradition, cooperated for many years with **the Wowczyk family from Toporki**, with **Maria Kisiel from Policzna**. At communal festivals and away events, the Centre presented exhibitions of their straw products. They were rather decorative products - larger and smaller jugs, bread containers, plates, platters, seats. These craftsmen were able to "conjure up", without the use of a measuring tape and the project, everything according to their own imagination or the taste of the client (but only the domestic recipient). "Korobki" were made for individual orders.



Janina Romanowicz from Kleszczele was a specialist in making straw spiders. The workshops conducted by the Centre, and especially the description how to make these spiders, which was recorded by the Cultural Centre, can serve as an instruction for the next generations. Mrs. Janina passed away many years ago but a young staff must learn this.

Nowadays, the craftsmen are elderly people. Young people's lack of interest in learning traditional craftsmanship and the lack of successors to whom folk artists could pass on their knowledge and skills in processing raw materials leads to the disappearance of this handicraft.

Cultural centres, Clubs of Rural Housewives try to organize straw plaiting workshops - spiders, Christmas tree decorations (the way of making them obtained from Belarus), other everyday objects – the instructors at these workshops are a few older people. In Policzna, in the village club, the workshops were conducted by **Mikołaj Pietruczuk** - a resident of this village, and in Toporki by **Zoja Majstrowicz**.

Nowadays, there are difficulties with obtaining the right straw material. The technique that has entered the fields (harvesters) by reaping breaks and crumples the straw, which no longer meets the requirements for plaiting. In order to obtain good raw material, rye should be reaped with a scythe or a sickle, then the grain should be threshed manually and the straw cleaned. This requires physical strength and skill. A cyclical event has been organized in Toporki for several years - a harvest show. It includes manual reaping with a scythe and a sickle, setting rye sheaves to dry and threshing with a flail. These actions are taken to save from oblivion the traditional folk handicraft, which is straw plaiting.

Maria Klimowicz



Plaiting- Old Peasant Art

One of the oldest manufacturing techniques known to man since prehistoric times is plaiting. It responded to various needs related to everyday life. This is how various storage vessels were made for storing cereal grains, flour, bran, and even clothes. The Podlaskie Voivodship (an rural region) was one of the regions with most developed and lively forms of production.

Plaited products were made of natural raw materials obtained from the immediate environment. No one could complain about the lack of straw. Raw materials (willow, hazel, buckthorn, wicker) were also within reach to make "darkas", i.e. specific "threads".

However, these basic, massively occurring raw materials required a good knowledge of how to obtain and prepare them. This knowledge was passed down from generation to generation in families.

In the 1960s, straw products began to fall out of everyday use. They were replaced by metal and plastic products. They remained rather as decorative forms.



The process of creating straw products begins with sowing grain (rye).

Necessary materials

- STRAW

A basic material for plaiting products is rye straw. It must be reaped by hand (with a sickle or a scythe), threshed with a flail and then cleaned.

For decorative products, the creators often use straw cut earlier, when there are no grains in the ears yet. Such straw has a slightly greenish colour. It is very plastic and durable and shimmers beautifully.



- DARTKA

A thin strip made of fresh wood, most often willow, but it can also be made of wicker, buckthorn, hazel. It has the same thickness along the entire length and has the same width. Its characteristic feature is that it has two sides. By touching with a finger, we can perfectly feel the side. Burrs - left side, smooth - right side.



- NEEDLE for plaiting straw

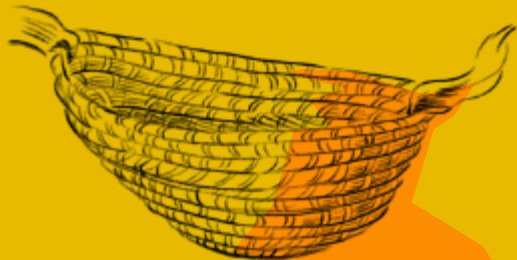
A metal needle made of a piece of sheet metal. At one end it must be empty inside - which allows you to fix a dartka, while at another end it is pointed, which allows you to plunge it into twisted straw.



Examples of old forms of straw products used in everyday life.

Straw dishes were light and durable, protected food products from moisture (which they absorbed) and, most importantly, due to their naturalness, they were breathable.

Siejanka (a name from a traditional folk dialect) - baskets used for sowing the field, a belt was tied on both sides, which the sower put over his shoulder and poured, in the winter they were used for feeding horses.



Measuring cups - vessels for measuring grain.



Korobka (a name from a traditional folk dialect) - large or small, of various volumes for various purposes. They were kind of vessels for storing grain /barley, millet, buckwheat/ with a lid that prevented rodents from getting into the contents. The smaller ones were used to store ground flour.



After some time, folk artists who knew the matter well, began to experiment and give various types of decorative forms to the objects they created.

Plates - decorative, for hanging on the walls, for displaying fruit

Jugs - decorative, for compositions of dried flowers

Baskets - padded with cotton cloth for bread, rolls, fruit. For the blessing of food at Easter.

Bells - inspired by metal forms, for decoration, bringing good luck

Stools, Chairs - utilitarian items

Knee mats - long carpets woven on looms, made for the needs of Cepelia - 2 m long. Colourful linen threads - dyed with natural dyes - were used to weave them. They were a good insulation from the cold wall, they beautified a lot of rooms.

Toys/dolls, puppets, teddy bears - depending on the imagination of the creator, they often, knowing the matter of Straw, created unique toys for children to satisfy the need to have a unique toy.

Spiral plaiting of baskets - consists in plaiting successive scrolls (plaits) of spirally arranged straw.



Plaiting "Step by step"

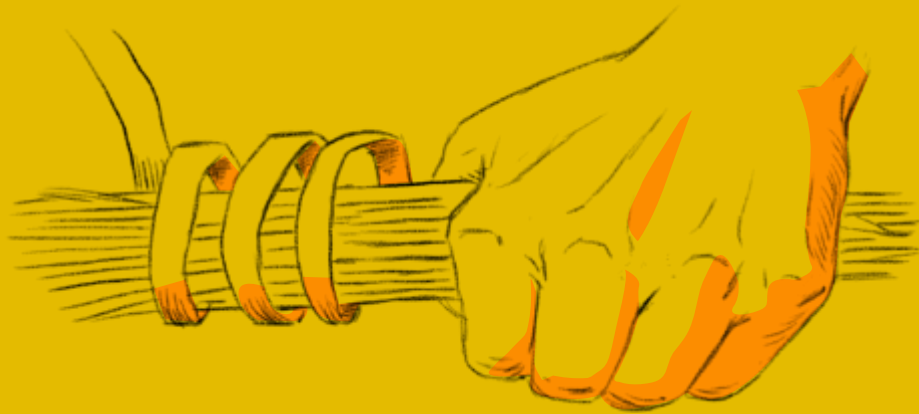
Preparation

Put the "thread" prepared from wicker or dartka into the needle.

1. Left side of the needle - match the left side of the needle to the left side of the dartka.
2. Right side of the needle - we match the right side of the dartka to the right side.

When the dartka ends, fold it in between the rows and put on a new one, continue plaiting with a great care to hide it in a way that does not reduce the aesthetic value.

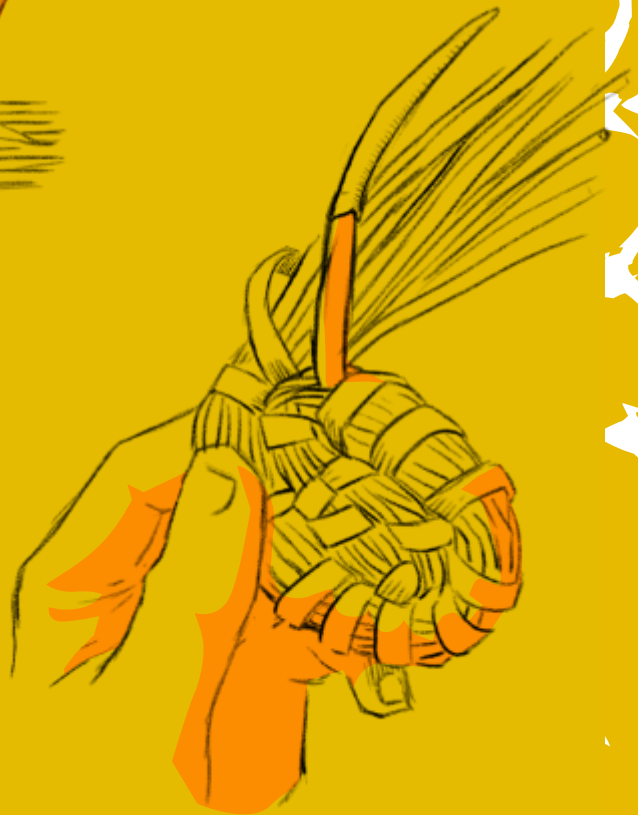




Starting of plaiting of the spiral sewing

Take straw (several blades) in your left hand and stretch it. We keep in the middle.
Take a dartka strip in your right hand and wind it several times. We hold straw with the left finger, fold it in half. Roll up and make a snail.
Then insert the end of the dartka strip into the needle. We plait the resulting snail.
Turn it slightly and add a few more straw blades.
Then we twist it like a snail and plait the layers of straw together.

When the dartka ends, fold it in between the rows and put on a new one, continue plaiting with a great care to hide it in a way that does not reduce the aesthetic value.



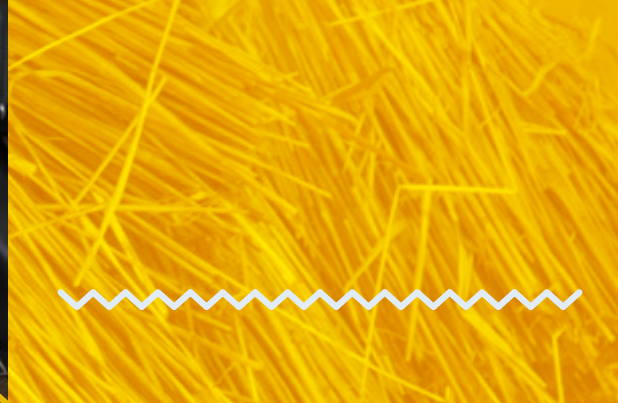
Building a wall

We model the wall of any product by bending a straw plait outwards or inwards.



Putting the finishing touches

At a distance of 10 cm before the planned end, the plait should be cut at an angle, leaving about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the volume of straw blades. Slowly plait successively until completely aligned.













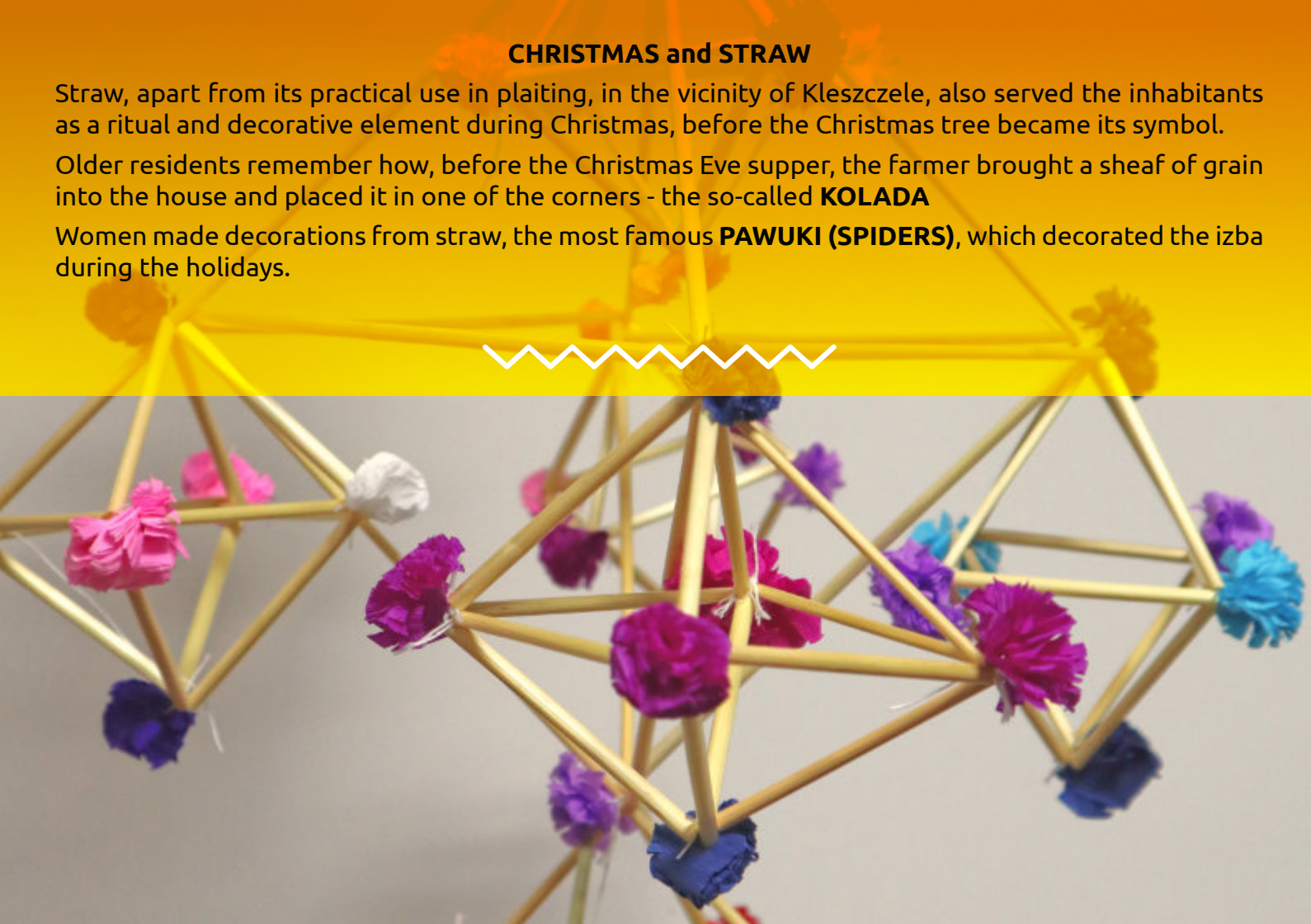


CHRISTMAS and STRAW

Straw, apart from its practical use in plaiting, in the vicinity of Kleszczele, also served the inhabitants as a ritual and decorative element during Christmas, before the Christmas tree became its symbol.

Older residents remember how, before the Christmas Eve supper, the farmer brought a sheaf of grain into the house and placed it in one of the corners - the so-called **KOLADA**

Women made decorations from straw, the most famous **PAWUKI (SPIDERS)**, which decorated the izba during the holidays.



PAWUKI

"Happy is the house where the spiders are"

Today, in the 21st century, spiders are mainly associated with not very pleasant and well-liked land animals. However, returning to the tradition based on folklore, the spider - in the local dialect - PAWUK, is a colourful, intricately made spatial structure, made of straw. Hanged under the ceiling in the izba. In the Kleszczele commune PAWUKI were decorations of the Christmas period, only later spiders were also made during the Easter holidays.

They were hung either in the middle of the izba or in a sacred corner. It was important to place it near the window - so that people walking down the street could see what a beautiful work the housewife had created. Hung on horsehair, which was durable and practically invisible, it gave the impression of being hung in a vacuum. Moving around, the spider drove away from the farmstead what was bad and "swept" inside happiness, prosperity and success for the coming year.

As Zoja Majstrowicz says, *it was hung when the house was clean. It symbolized the family. The largest meant the father - the doyen of the family, the smaller - the family: children, daughters-in-law, grandchildren.*



Preparation of the material:

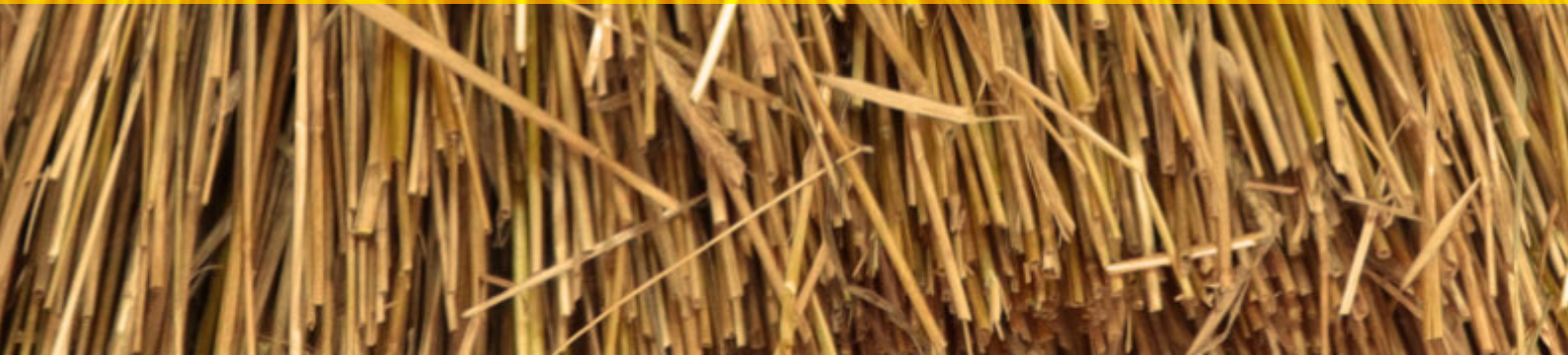
It was necessary to start thinking about creating spiders already during the harvest season to prepare the best possible straw for their production. An experienced housewife already at the turn of July and August "reaped" rye so as not to break the blades, then she stored them with great care so that they did not break, and just before cutting them into smaller pieces (6, 12, 18 cm), she sprinkled them with drops of water so that the ends did not crumble.

To build an average-sized PAWUK, it was necessary to prepare about five hundred pieces of straw. And then use extreme precision to combine them into cubes.

The spider is a symbol of the family, hung by the window on horsehair, when the house was clean / it was always on the move chasing away what was bad, sweeping inside the home what was good. Spider at "the end of his life" - had to be burned, God forbid it could not be thrown away.

There is also a story/legend associated with PAWUK itself. Namely:

"The spider was one of the animals accompanying the birth of Jesus" and hence its presence in this period.



Necessary materials:

- STRAW,

Cut into 3 lengths: 6 cm (432 pieces of straw), 12 cm (72 pieces of straw), 24 cm (12 pieces of straw) / to maintain proportions there is an important rule to multiply the length of the shortest piece of straw by 2 and 3.



- THREAD,

Today, size 10 cotton thread is used. In the past, horsehair, which was durable and guaranteed the effect of "flimsiness", was used to connect the pieces of straw.



- NEEDLE

A thicker needle, with a larger eyelet, 10 cm long, so that it can be easily threaded onto a straw. It must be heavy so that it can be "thrown" through longer pieces of straw.



- BLOTTING PAPER

For making flowers, on the corners of individual cubes, in different colours, depending on your taste.



Making of the spider:

Before cutting into smaller pieces, straw should be "blanched". We put it in a bowl so as not to break it and pour boiling water over it, take it out and spread it on a cloth, slightly dry it. The purpose of the treatment is to make the blades more flexible so that they do not crumble at the edges when cut.

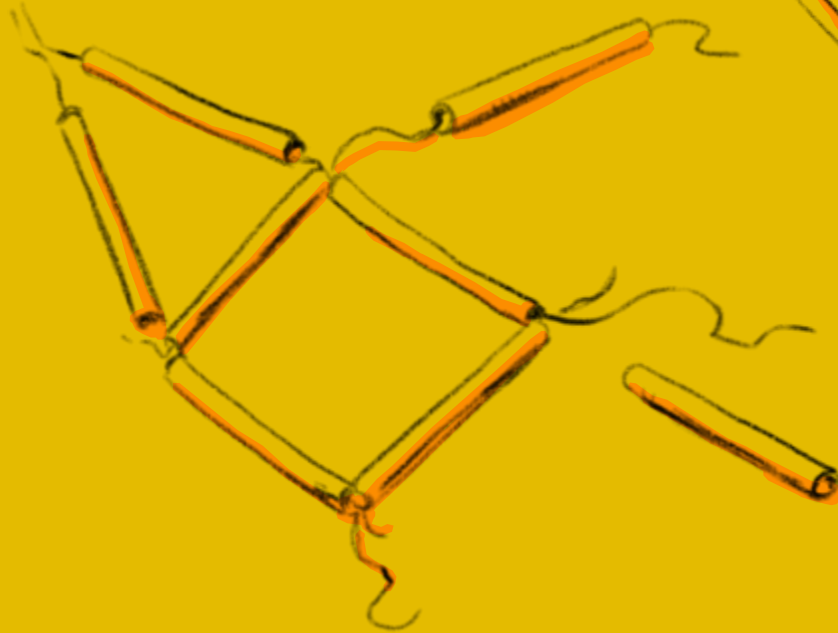
Depending on the housewife, the process started with the largest element and the smaller and smallest ones were added. Some housewives worked from the smallest to the largest.

We'll start with the smallest "cubes":



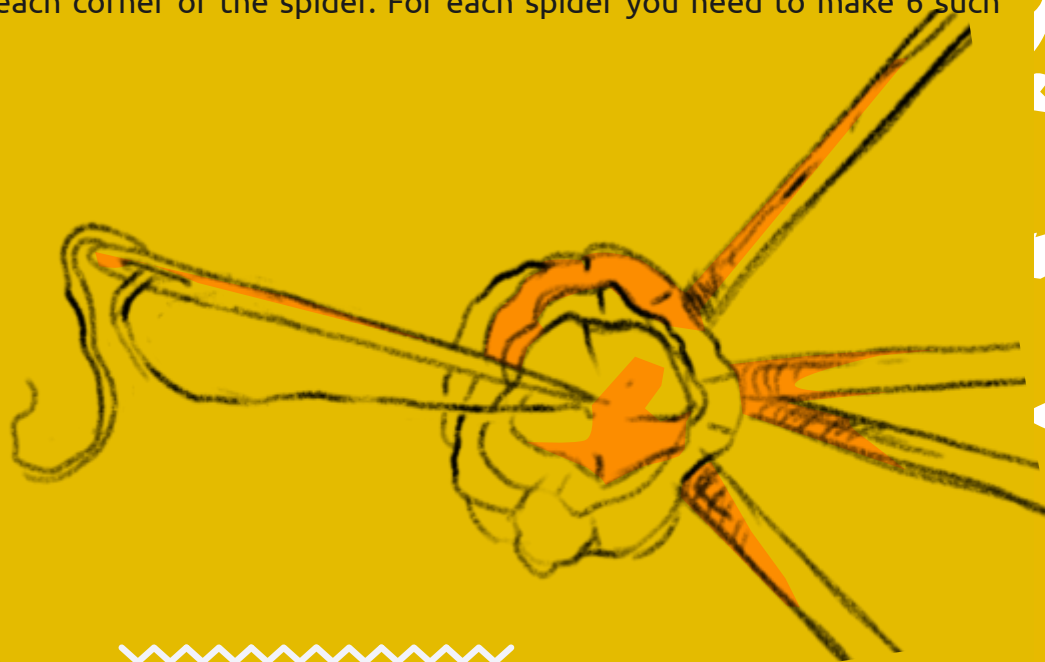
We prepare 12 pieces of straw 6 cm long. We thread with the help of a needle - four pieces of straw. We tie up to form a square, we do not cut the thread.

Then, we add two pieces of straw to each side, tying them in the next corner, so that a triangle is formed on each side of the square. When we tie the 4th side, we lift two parallel triangles up, tying them on both sides.



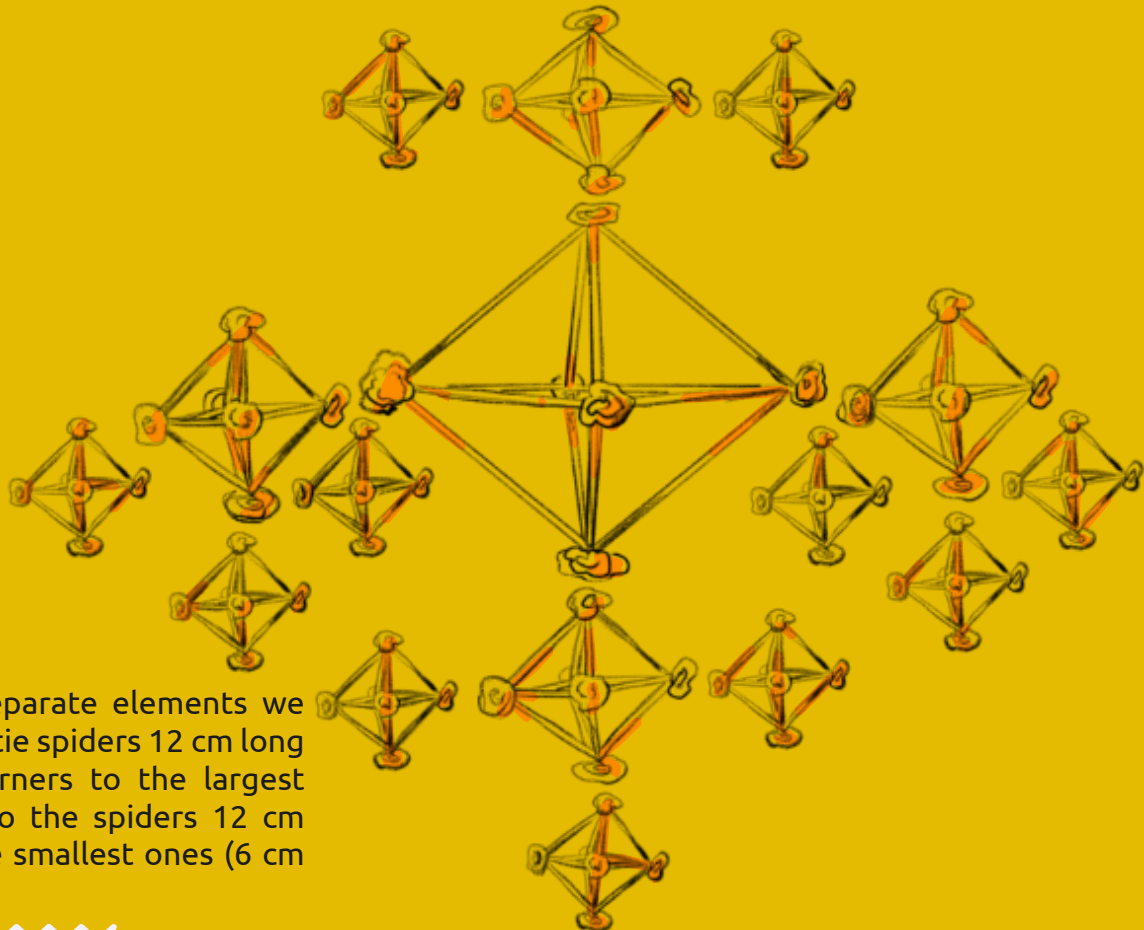
We repeat this action 36 times. Therefore, you need to create 36 pieces of such small spiders.

We "dress" each spider with flowers made of blotting paper. We need to fold blotting paper 6 times and cut out a circle, which we slightly fray - cut, pierce the needle with a thread in the middle, slightly form a "flower" and tie it in each corner of the spider. For each spider you need to make 6 such flowers.



Then we take pieces of straw 12 cm long / 12 pieces for each spider and in the same way we create 6 spiders this time. We "dress" them.

At the end, we tie and "dress" the spider with a side of 24 cm.

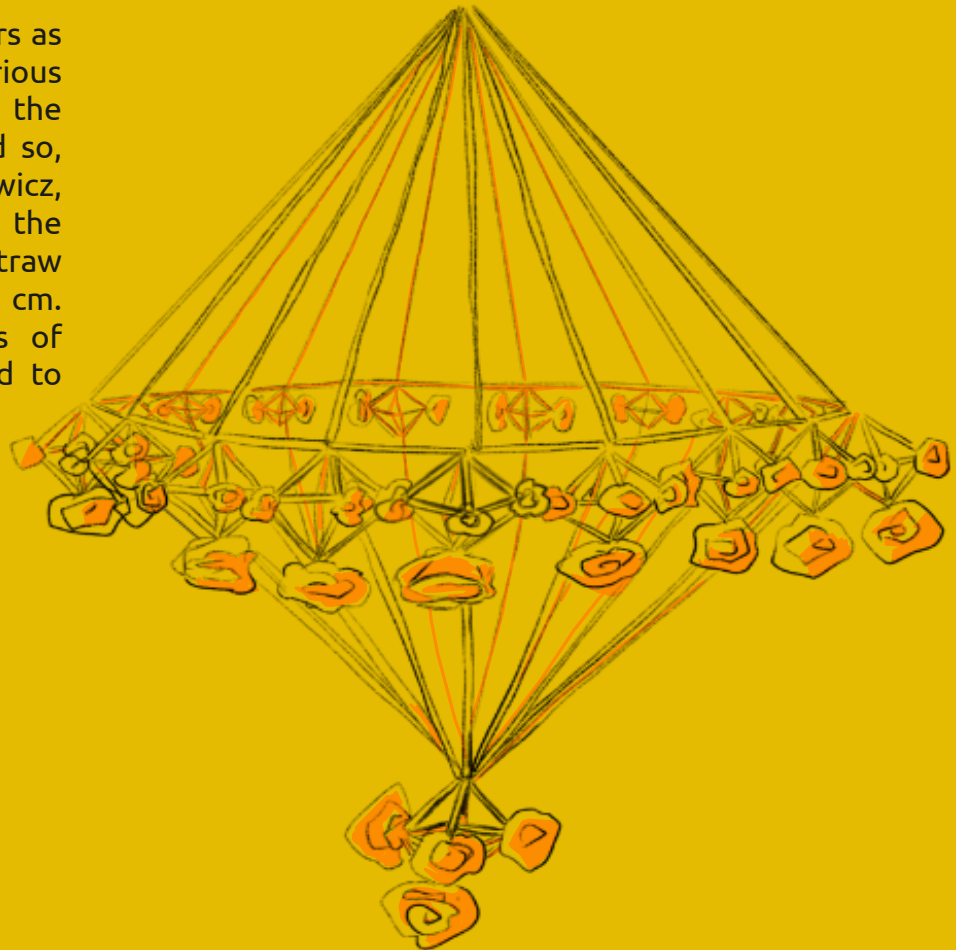


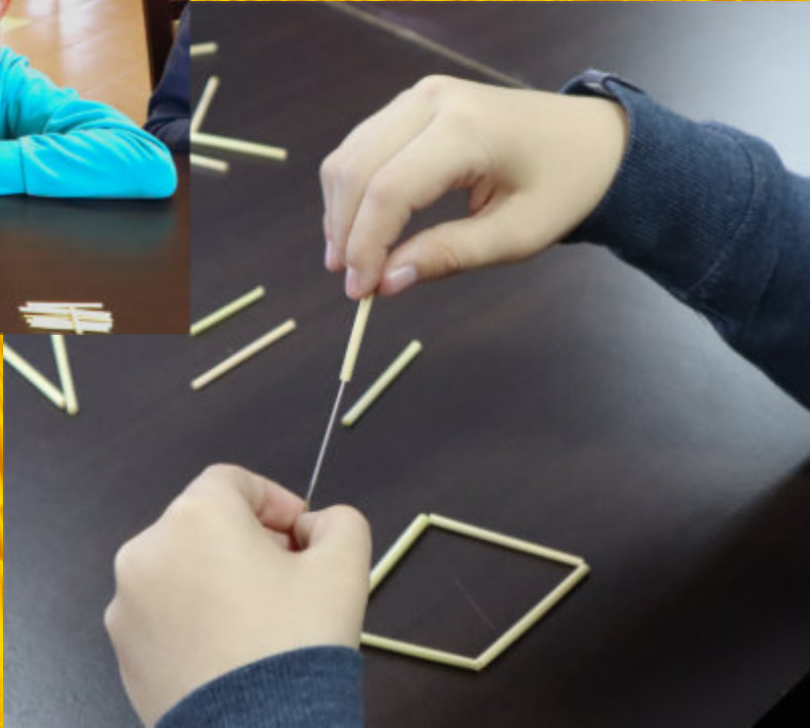
After preparing separate elements we connect them. We tie spiders 12 cm long in each of the corners to the largest spider, and then to the spiders 12 cm long we attach the smallest ones (6 cm on a side).



An interesting fact is that spiders as forms have evolved into various shapes and forms. Depending on the imagination of a housewife. And so, for example, late Janina Romanowicz, a resident of Kleszczele, created the largest spider using pieces of straw with two lengths: 30 cm and 10 cm. Smaller cubes (made of pieces of straw 10 cm long) were attached to it in each corner.

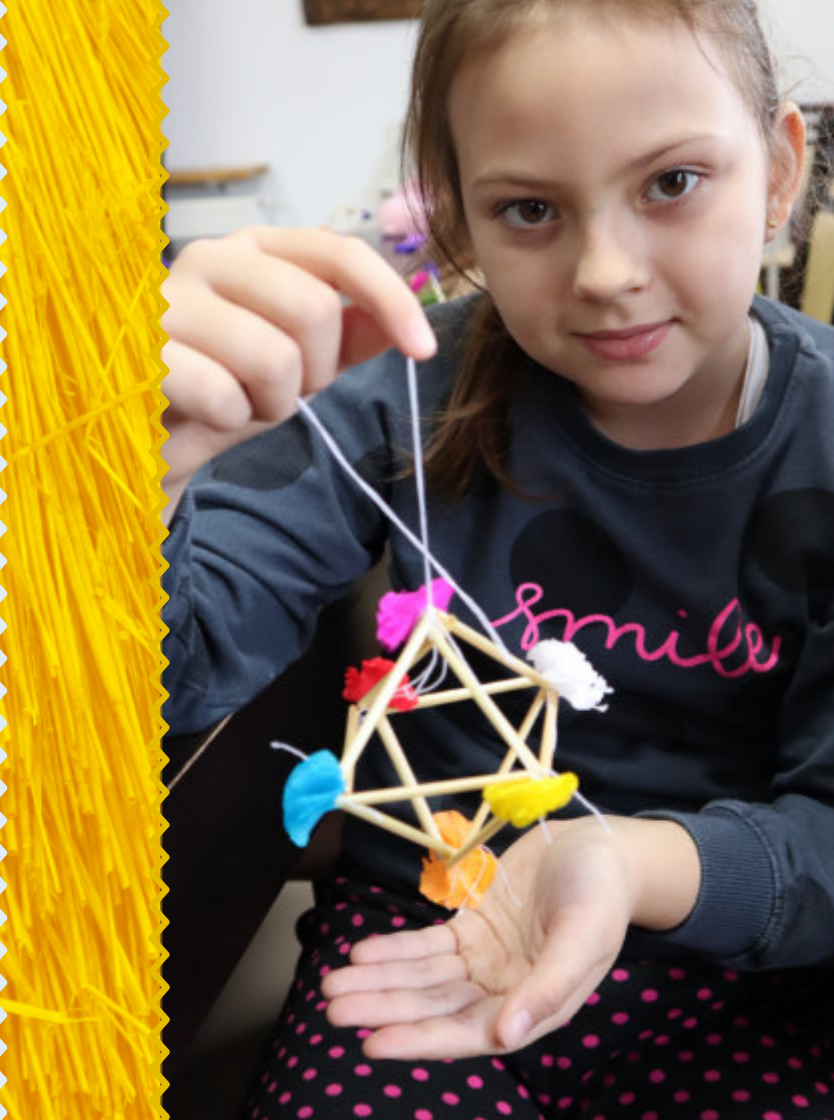
And the structure itself looked like in the illustration below.



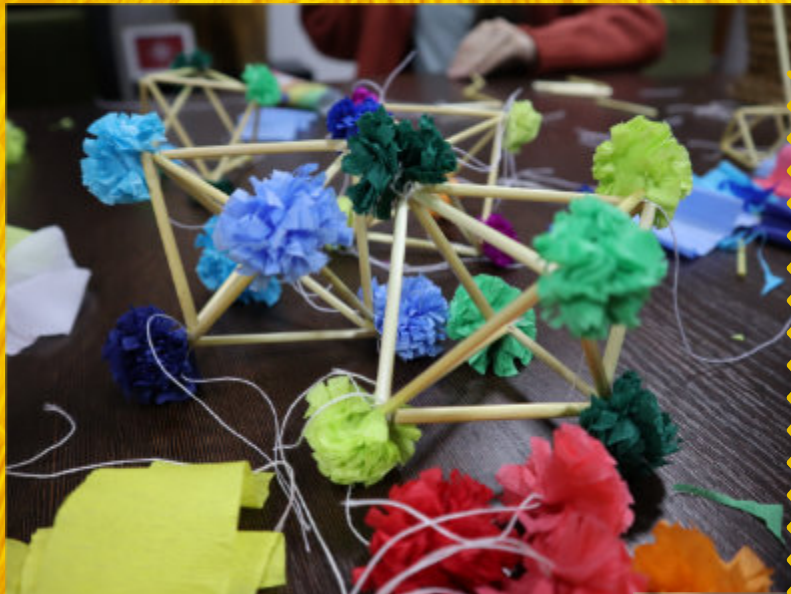


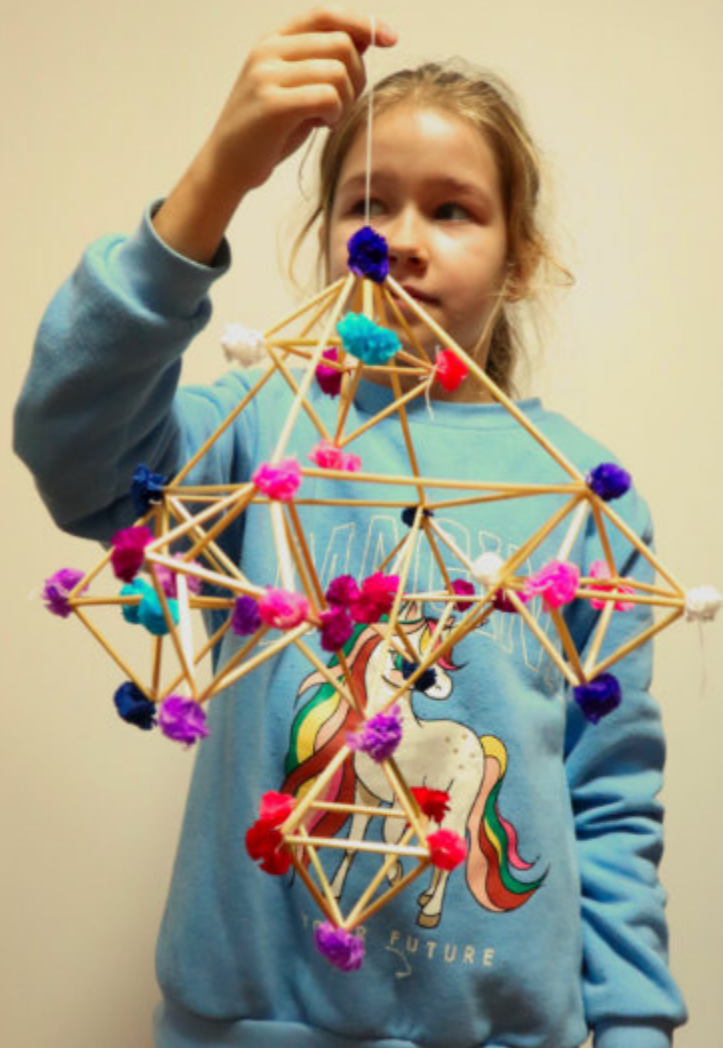


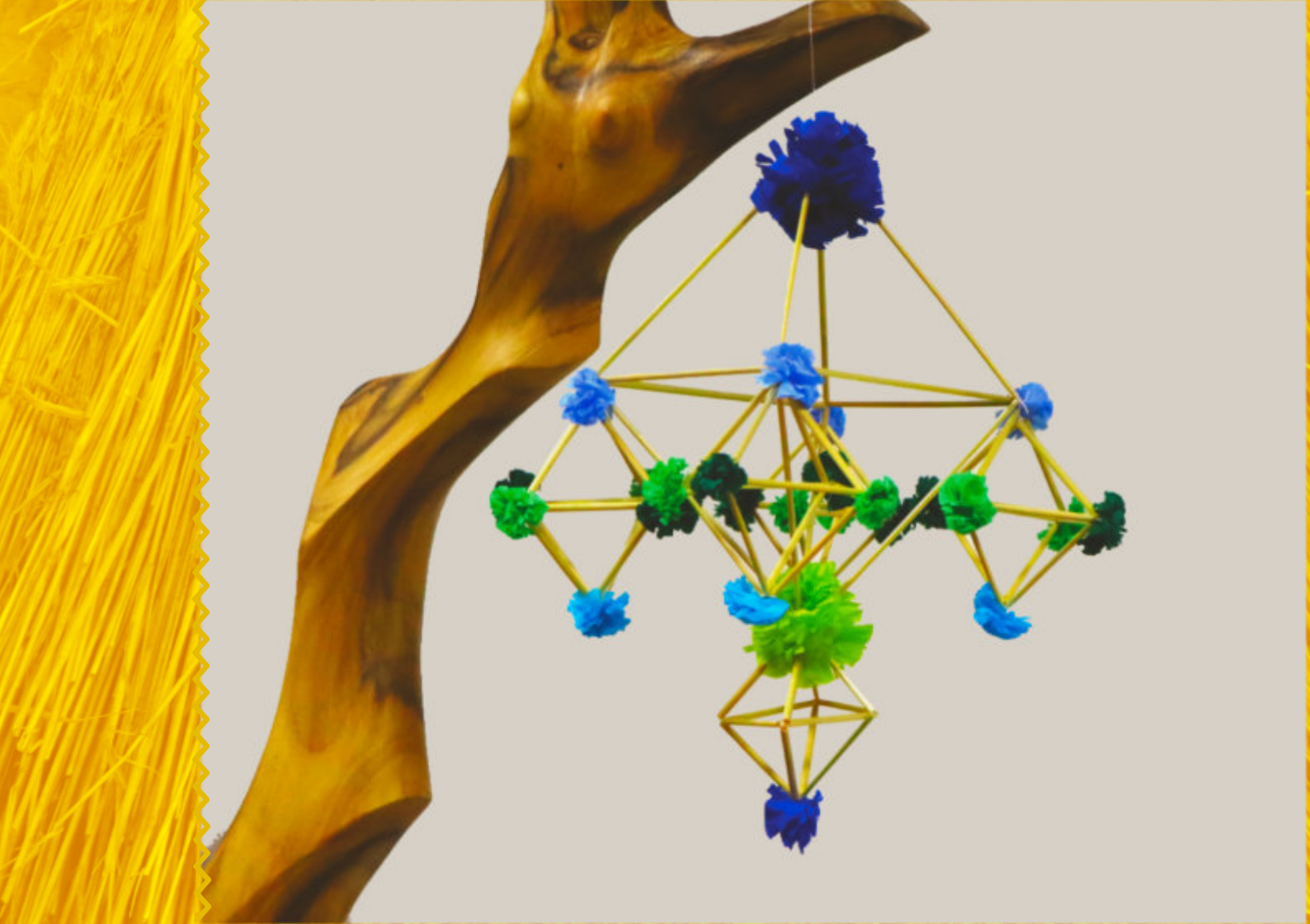


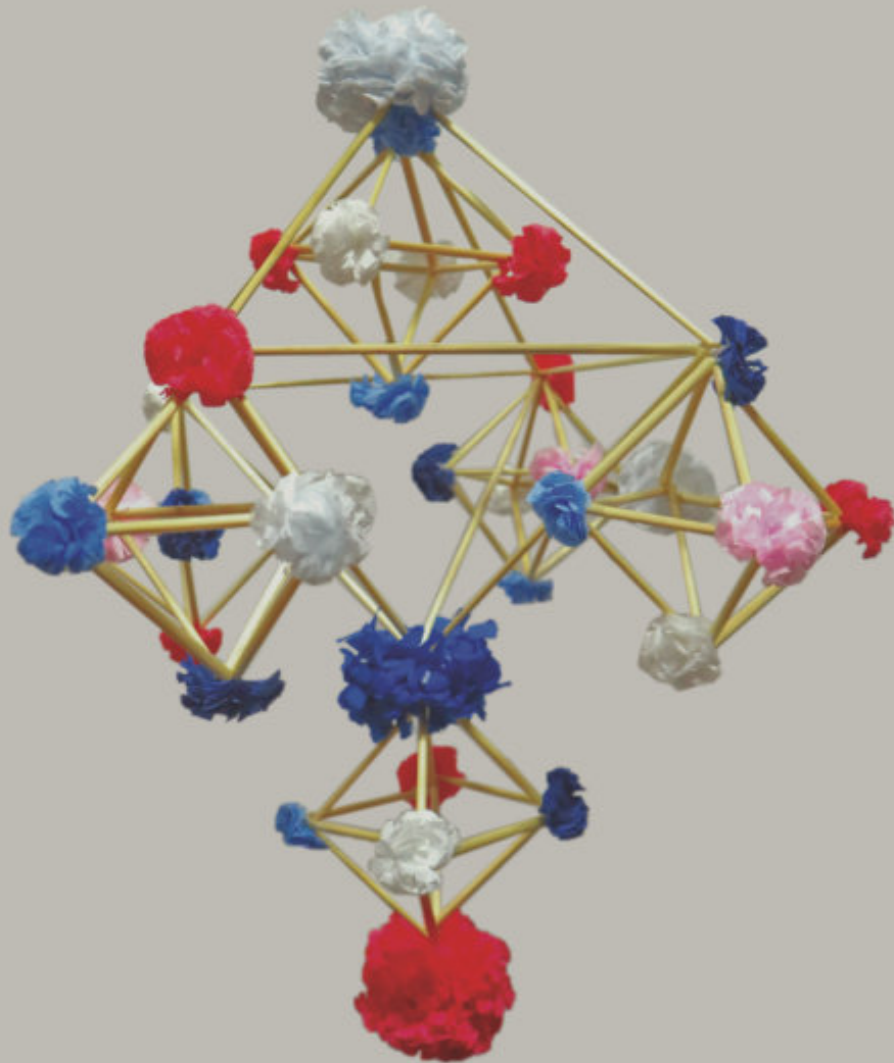














WESTOR





Zoja Majstrowicz - was born in 1952 in the village of Toporki, Kleszczele commune. From an early age she had contact with various straw products because they were used in every farm, for example for storing grain. In the 1960s, Mrs. Zoja's parents sewed straw products for the Cepelia Cooperative Association, which promoted the fashion for straw products. There was a lot of interest from the city and foreign recipients. It was at that time that Mrs. Zoja learned the technique of plaiting (sewing) from her parents.

As she says herself – “The beginnings were difficult”. As a little girl, she started by plaiting round plates. Skills were slowly developing. After some time, she was able to make whole baskets, the so-called korobki. When she started, in her home village of Toporki, almost all residents were plaiting baskets. She remembers the trailers full of baskets going to town.

Until the 1990s, large baskets were plaited, and then the demand changed. Mrs. Zoja specialized in smaller decorative and useful forms such as: laundry baskets, bread containers, seats, cat houses, and even chandeliers and flacons. Today, she treats plaiting as a hobby. She is also a designer of her own works. She is very eager to teach children and teenagers, conducting various shows and workshops. Sometimes she plaits and creates Christmas ornaments also to order.





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