

Christmas in a Russian-German-Canadian Family

Written by Sheila Winkler, Federal Way, Washington, November 2016

As children growing up in Canada in the 1930's and 1940's in an integrated home in the city, our Christmas was influenced by Irish, English and Russian-German traditions.

Many members of our family lived in Germany so Christmas preparations began early, in September. Two of our father's sisters lived in the United States and the three of them would agree on the contents of the parcels that were to be sent. The aunt living in New York City focused on clothing for the adults while the one living in Seattle bought toys and clothes for the children. Our family focused on purchasing the 'groceries'. Large boxes were filled with the basics such as flour, sugar, tea, coffee, canned meats/fish, chocolate/cocoa, powdered eggs and milk. At Christmas several additional items made it into the boxes: candy, nuts, glazed and dried fruits, marzipan, and rice flour essential to the Christmas baking of our Aunt Klara and the extended families of cousins. These Christmas boxes were sent by rail and ship in September. Then we waited anxiously to receive the letters with the strange stamps that let us know that the parcels had arrived safely.

In late November and early December we became increasingly excited about the impending Christmas season as we practiced singing carols and rehearsing speaking parts for the Christmas pageant in school. The pageant was performed three or four times to accommodate all the parents and relatives wanting to attend.

At home we helped prepare for the Holidays by polishing the silver, arguing over who got to polish the cutlery versus the tea service and serving platters! I smile as I think back on the competition to do what I now consider to be a 'chore'. Many days we arrived home from school to find our house smelling of spices and fruits as our mother and the staff prepared the fruit cakes, 'figgy' puddings and cookies that were common in English and Irish homes. Father added to the anticipation of the holiday season by arriving home with fresh herring that he then cleaned and pickled using a recipe that he had learned in a neighboring Swedish colony in Russia. I was the only child who liked pickled herring so I had no competition when asking father to let me help him with the preparations.

The excitement was heightened on December 22 or 23 when father brought home the Christmas tree. A large bucket was weighted down with sand before the trunk was placed on it. As very young children we watched as our father prepared a sugar-water syrup that was then put into the bucket. One of us was then given the responsibility to make sure the water level remained at a certain level every day. We lived in a very integrated neighborhood and it was important to keep the tree looking pristine until early January. Father then strung the lights on the tree telling us how they had used candles when he was growing up. We thought that sounded wonderful but we were never able to convince him to let us have lit candles on our tree. One year he surprised us by bringing home a couple of strings of light that resembled candles, so we finally did have a simulation of the tree in his family home. Our mother was in charge of the remainder of decoration of the tree using fragile glass ornaments that had been passed down in her English-Irish family. After World War II we began receiving beautiful ornaments from our relatives in Germany that added to the beauty and uniqueness of our tree.

One Christmas we were especially excited as our sister was chosen to portray Mary in the pageant that the Sunday school children always performed as a part of the regular service on the Sunday before Christmas. We then waited for the big event, the arrival of Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. The ritual of hanging our stockings on the mantle and making hot cocoa for Santa and setting it out with Christmas cookies on a table beside the unlit fireplace was our last task before going to bed.

On Christmas morning we marveled that Santa had even washed the cup and plate before he left for the next house. Our stockings were filled with mandarin oranges, apples, and nuts and there were presents: books, clothes and toys, from our parents and father's sisters and their husbands. The stockings were emptied into a large bowl for everyone to enjoy over the next few days.

Christmas dinner was a special delight for us as our father was a hunter. We had heard from his sisters that he had been the best hunter in the family and provided the family with wild game throughout the year, first in Bessarabia, then in Tauride and finally in Germany. During hunting season father would return with his limit of game birds including ducks, geese, prairie chicken, partridge and pheasant and the seasonal limit of venison. These would then be prepared for freezing and taken to 'our locker' in a commercial freezer plant for enjoyment during the coming year. The tension increased as we waited to learn what the highlight of Christmas dinner would be. We were always very happy when it was a wild goose or wild ducks. It was also the only time each year when we were permitted to drink a carbonated drink – ginger ale or orange crush.

Indoor activities had a way of settling down quickly after Christmas Day in our home. There were thank you letters to send to our aunts and uncles, books to read and games to play. However, there were many outdoor activities, ice skating, building snow forts and having snowball fights, walks along a country road in the snow in order to enjoy the stars on a clear night, trips into farm country with hay rides followed by winter bonfires toasting marshmallows and drinking hot chocolate. Our parents were guaranteed to have a quiet evening with their friends when we returned exhausted.

The child who had received the tree tending duties were diligent in completing this task until it was taken down on January 3 (our parents wedding anniversary) and 'planted' in the snow in our front yard. As we grew older, each of us in turn would be let in on the 'secret' of the disappearing tree. As I mentioned earlier, we lived in a very integrated neighborhood. Several of our neighbors were members of the Orthodox Christian faith and they knew that our tree would still be healthy and they could enjoy it for their Christmas celebration when the Christmas tree lots in the city had closed for the year. I still remember marveling about this mystery for several years until my older sister let me in on the secret of the 'disappearing' Christmas tree. Then it was my turn to keep the secret until it was decided that it should be shared with my brother who was seven years younger than me. However, it turns out that my brother had a secret of his own. Today, as I was writing this story, I called him to see if he had any memories that I had missed. He laughed and said, no – he thought I had remembered everything, but he had a secret that he had never told me: He had already known the secret of the disappearing Christmas tree because Bill D. who was in his grade at school had told him. Bill would come with his Father (who was our family physician) and pick it up every year. They were members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and used it to celebrate Christmas in their home. Bill and his family lived two blocks from our home. My brother kept this secret, from me, for over 70 years.