

The Christmas Shawl

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, November 2016

As Americans get ready to celebrate Thanksgiving, many Canadians have been busy getting ready for Christmas since the beginning of November, having already eaten their turkey in October. It is not uncommon for Canucks to decorate the tree on the first of November and start their outside decor. Now, I should clarify that blanket statement. I am referring to MANY Canadians who are creatures of this habit. And I am not among them.

Today is November 23, 2016, and we have been enjoying a wonderfully mild Indian summer, with many new temperature highs being recorded. The stores have been playing Christmas music for weeks and the Salvation Army Santa has been seen ringing his bell around town as well. I am still wearing my loafers without socks. As I sat at the dining room table today eating my oatmeal, I admired the pine decor of the houses across the street. And the ribbons. And the lights. I quickly decided today would be a good day for me to start.

Still wearing my pajamas, I opened the linen closet and reached for the top shelf where for safe keeping, I place the fragile items which annually adorn our fireplace mantle. And then I saw it again. The shawl. My mother's black shawl. I picked it up and inhaled deeply, fingering the crocheted edges. It still had the smell of my mother's linen closet. The smell of her sheets and towels. She loved to shop for linens and always had unopened packages in her closet. I suddenly felt a pang of guilt, reminding myself that the terminology used to describe people who keep, and hang on to items of their deceased loved ones is "enshrining." Well, this had certainly not escalated to an unhealthy habit in my case, I reminded myself. I had never seen the shawl until a couple of years ago, when I was cleaning out my parent's linen closet. And there it was. Oh, I had seen it once, or so I thought, in an old black and white photo. My mother appears to be wearing it as she stands at the casket of her 10-year-old son Egon, buried in Martuk, Kazakhstan in 1952. Her face is etched with grief, the black shawl expertly fashioned around her head. Although I was well versed in all of this, the shawl had never been discussed. Or even shown to me for that matter. It was only when I began researching articles on Bessarabia in 2012 that I became aware of the wonderful textiles our ancestors painstakingly, but with much love, labored to produce.

Among the items on the top shelf is a small trophy of a puck, commemorating my son's first goal in minor hockey at the age of five. Of course, I happened to be at work on that special day. I take down my daughter's first pair of ice skates. They look so tiny. I also retrieve a silver lantern which had been sent containing flowers, to the funeral of my mother. I will fill it with colorful ornaments. I can already envision my eye-catching display as it comes to life. A vintage replica of a red oil lantern, sent by a relative to the funeral of my father, will be filled with Christmas bulbs as well.

Also in the linen closet, of all places, I store my mother's large baking pans. They have not seen much recent action from me, I will admit. This Christmas I will not produce peppermint cookies or watermelon syrup cookies. Or honey cookies. Or spritz cookies by the dozen, the ends of which we dipped in chocolate and then decorated. Beside the pans are large pieces of Tupperware, including a green bowl always used for potato salad. Now that might make an appearance over the holidays, I muse to myself.

Enduring ten hard years of exile in Siberia from 1945-1955, my parents were unable to celebrate Christmas at that time, yet their traditions were never forgotten or far from their minds. Although they brought many of them along to Canada in 1961, they have evolved over the past several years. I will not need a nutcracker since my walnuts now come from Costco in a large bag, ready to eat. Instead of wild duck or goose we will have turkey. We will purchase a fresh tree the week before.

I might go to the Polish store in the city to buy halva. I will probably pick up a package of dried figs from Turkey. We will continue to open our presents on Christmas Eve, after going to church. My 82-year-old aunt will once again recount her Christmas memories in Leipzig, Bessarabia before the resettlement of 1940. I will hear about the little embroidered sacks all the students made in school, to be filled with Christmas treats: the orange and some candies, purchased at the market in Tarutino. The teachers went from house to house soliciting coins to buy the goodies. If a parent was unable to contribute some coins, a few kernels of wheat were enough to guarantee a smile on the face of their child. I heard this same story verbatim last summer from a German woman when we visited Leipzig.

We will again give thanks for our freedom in Canada, for God's guidance and provision. As we celebrate my birthday on the 23rd of December, my husband will again buy me a dozen red roses, although I always remind him that there are many other beautiful types of flowers available which last much longer. I look at the one and only baby picture that I have. It is a tiny photo, and my mother is lying in a hospital bed. I am bundled up beside her, full term and healthy. She looks exhausted and her long black hair is disheveled. Her thin lips are drawn tight yet I know her heart was singing. This was, after all, her first day of freedom, having just arrived in Friedland, Germany from Russia. An MCC worker (Mennonite Central Committee) from Winnipeg, working in post-war Germany at that time, visited her at the hospital in Göttingen and brought a baby layette, as my mother rested on the clean linens, which were akin to a dream come true, she often told me. Last year I visited the resettlement center in Friedland, where many of the old buildings remain and the streets were filled with recent Syrian refugees milling about.

Yesterday, when I again taught English literacy at a local government center, as usual, there were many recent Syrian refugees gathered about. The women all wore a hijab. I also finally mailed a kind note to that MCC worker who ministered to our family so many decades ago. She is in her nineties and resides in a rest home in Winnipeg, information given to me by a fellow volunteer at the local MCC shop where I spend every Monday. At the shop, on a large TV screen behind the front counter, a video continuously runs, relaying the history of the MCC and their present work around the world. My baby photo would fit right in there. I envision my mother's black shawl lying at the foot of her hospital bed.

Unfortunately, my Christmas decorating abruptly stopped this morning before I barely got started. I have pushed the pause button once again as I prepare to dash out to the local pharmacy to get my flu shot. But first I have to fold those three sets of sheets I got on sale at Ikea this past weekend.

"And the angel said unto them, fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10



