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CHRISTMAS PAST

Doris Yanger

“IS A PICTURE REALLY WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS?” A challenging concept for an artist, and I hoped it really was so, when I created an etching “Christmas Past,” showing the house in Brooklyn where I grew up. As I worked the copper plate, I became aware that it was going to require words to bring life to the generation of American immigrants who lived behind the Victorian façade that I so fondly remembered.

The setting for “Christmas Past” was the holiday season during December 1944, the final winter of World War II. Back then, we were constantly reminded of the hardships and limitations in this time of air raid drills, gas and food rationing. The Gold Star Banners in many windows that told of the sadness of lost warriors in many families. Our two front windows, fortunately, only displayed benign holiday wreaths, taken out of storage, acknowledging and identifying my parent’s belief in the Lutheran version of the season’s festivities, done with a German flair, in memory of the “Old Country.”

Officially, the holiday rituals began with cookie baking, about the second week of December. My mother had the reputation of being the best baker among her small coterie of friends. I helped by extruding the rich butter cookie batter mixture through the shiny old aluminum funnel that came out of the storage pantry each year. Producing a variety of shapes, I then found great enjoyment in decorating them with sprinkles in holiday colors, prior to baking.

Other favorite cookies we made were “Nuß Platzchen” (nut cookies,) made almost exclusively of ground walnuts, sugar and egg whites. These exquisite little culinary delights were the German equivalent of coconut macaroons, and as a child, I thought, much better tasting.

Mom would inspire jealousy among her German friends and relatives for her skill in creating the perfect “Deckle Platzchen”, an anise cookie. It was not one of my favorites, because it was hard, with a crisp smooth cover, formed while baking. The batter required hand stirring for at least an hour, to achieve the appropriate chemistry to form the hard upper shell. Mom’s friend Hedwig would never master them, even though she tried, annually, to her chagrin. Today, stirring a batter for an hour would not pose a problem for any cook, but those were the days before electric mixers were accepted in the kitchens of traditional cooks.

On Saturday Mom and I took a brisk walk from our Italian neighborhood to the Ridgewood area, across Myrtle Avenue into the German section where many of our family friends lived. Uncle Otto promised Mom some baking staples that he was able to secure from the large commercial bakery where he worked. During wartime sugar, butter and a fresh chunk of yeast were valuable treasures in a time of rationing.

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That night, air raid sirens shattered the silence, again reminding us that we were a country at war. While Mom and Pop went about the house, quickly pulling down the blackout shades, my brother Rudy donned in his official Junior Air Raid Warden helmet, and armband, grabbed his flashlight, and went out into the night. He was responsible to report any houses not complying with the blackout regulations to his district command post.

A few days before Christmas, Pop and I dressed in warm clothing and old gloves, and walked the five long blocks uphill to Myrtle Avenue, where we selected our fresh tree from a vendor, and together carried it home. This was a wartime hardship, because we really liked driving out to rural Long Island, to purchase a tree from one of the farms, and load it on to the roof of our car. Gasoline was conserved for the troops, and Pop's limited gas ration coupons were unavailable for luxury uses. His auto remained garaged for months at a time.

Decorating the tree was a family effort, with Pop wiring the lights, and Mom placing the fragile imported glass ornaments. Rudy and I would clip on the traditional little wax candles that we would never touch a match to. I received the treasured honor of placing the Nativity Scene under the tree, on the blanket of cotton snow.

Pop and Rudy then completed the "installation of the tracks" for a set of large scale Lionel trains that ran through every room in our "railroad" apartment. I estimate that we had almost 900 feet of track curving, crossing, running under beds, over carpets, around tables and other obstacles, becoming a fascinating obstacle of its own, particularly when it was running full speed ahead, screeching to a halt at a crossing, then running slowly up a hill to the little village under the Christmas tree. There was no "peace" until January 2, when the big production was dismantled, and returned to storage for another year.

Christmas Eve was one of the few times a year we attended church with Mom. We hurried home afterwards eager to see if Santa had remembered to stop at our house, and had left something for us under the tree. Pop had barely finished his Santa duties, and was settling back into his favorite easy chair, puffing on his smelly cigarillo, when we all rushed in. That year I remember my gifts well. From my father I received a huge doll with long blond hair, and she was almost tall enough to be my sister. I was disappointed that I could receive such a "childish" gift at twelve years of age, Pop thought I treasured her too much to touch her, and he never knew my true feelings about Hilda. She was the final doll I ever received, thank goodness. My brother thoughtfully gave me a box of genuine "artists oil colors", packed in a sturdy wooden box. I was very impressed, because he paid for this expensive gift with his own earnings. I have the box, and even a few of the dried out tiny tubes of paint to this day. He was sometimes a good and understanding friend as well as my big brother. I gave him a Parker pen that required saving my baby sitting money for a long time. I bought Mom an electric mixer. Pop received his 5 packs of "Between the Acts", those smelly little cigars the size of cigarettes that would keep him content in his easy chair for weeks. As usual, Mom gifted me with some handsome sweaters from the knitting mill, where she was forelady.

German food has never excited me. I didn't like the big greasy goose we had every year at Christmas. "Kartoffel Kloss", served with the crisp goose was another matter. The huge potato orbs, the size of baseballs, were culinary masterpieces. First she would grate

the raw potatoes, then squeeze the be Jesus out of them in a large press. The fluffy mass would be shaped into big balls, with a crouton in the center, and then dropped into boiling water until they floated to the surface. I delighted in the sliced leftover potato dumplings, fried in lots of butter the next morning for breakfast, sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon.

Preparing for our traditional New Year's Eve feast meant a special trip to the Moore Street district of Brooklyn, a predominately Jewish neighborhood. From one of the push cart vendors my mother would select two schmaltz herrings, and have them securely wrapped in newspaper, for our long journey back home on the Wilson Avenue trolley. When we arrived home, Mom would soak the critters in cold milk for a few days, to reduce their saltiness. The final step was to clean them, cut them up into chunks, layered with pickles and sliced onion, and covered with sour cream. In a day or two, by New Year's Eve, they would be well marinated and ready for presentation with hot boiled potatoes.

New Years Eve at our house was really strange, now that I think of it... We performed a "ritual" so unusual, and I wonder if others did so, also? Rather pagan, I thought, even then. It took place late in the evening, and we watched intently as Pop and Rudy would recycle a few damaged or imperfect "lead soldiers" from the vast toy army and melt them down. A little pot, wired to heat lead to a melting point was used. Rather than pour the liquid into the little soldier forms, we watched as the lead was slowly trickled into a pot filled with swirling boiling water, on the gas range. The result was allowed to cool. Odd little abstract squiggles emerged, and from the shapes we tried to predict our future, like a group of fortune tellers.

While we impatiently waited for supper; that special feast of herring in sour cream, we restlessly tossed a ball around the large kitchen. Someone missed the catch and the ball dropped into the tureen filled with herring. Sour cream flew everywhere, beginning our New Year's celebration with a memorable splash! My mother, stoic lady and woman of proper dignity, wanted to begin the New Year in a manner befitting the important occasion. Since none of her fine German Meissen china, taken out of storage for the mini-festival was damaged, she decided the big mess would be seen a positive omen, and joined us all in laughter, as we cleaned up what we could, and saw the New Year in with a bang.

NIGHT OF FIRE

Terry Chen

