

## Oh Tannenbaum

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, November 2013

Any day now my husband will again gently chastise me by pleading, "Louise, I just can't see why in the world we can't just get an artificial Christmas tree like the whole rest of the world!" And again, as always, with a rehearsed look of shock on my face, I will firmly respond, "Absolutely not!" And again, after 30 years of marriage, I will win.

I pick up an old black and white photo with faces which appear to be frozen in time. My parents and I, along with my older brother and my Oma, are sitting on a sofa near a small Christmas tree, which is perched on a small side table. I am sitting stoically on my mother's lap clutching a doll. Everyone has pursed lips and no one is smiling as we pose beside a miniature evergreen, which boasts lit wax candles and a bowl of fruit underneath. A small lace curtain hangs behind us as a backdrop on the wall. The photo was taken in Germany, December 1956. I have vague recollections of having set our shoes out for St. Nick on December 6th. I can smell the pine needles and burning candles on the tree. I set the photo back on the window sill in my father's room. It is the one and only Christmas photograph of my childhood that I have.

Growing up in Canada, I always knew the Christmas season was approaching once my mother began to write countless letters to her numerous relatives across the pond. Coming home from school, the dining room table would be filled with dozens and dozens of pages of news from Canada written on thin "airline paper". Her script was meticulous and she always wrote as if she were having an actual live conversation with her siblings. Conversations which were of course few and far between, not to mention being very costly. I would quiz her as to who all these relatives were and became not only accustomed to, but also came to terms with at a young age, the fact that I had absolutely no cousins living in Canada. Our immediate family consisted of my parents, my brother, my father's mother, and my mother's sister and her husband, Onkel Hans.

Once the letters and parcels were sent, the Christmas baking began, as my mother clamped the bulky and heavy silver iron cookie press onto the kitchen table. Pans and pans of various spritz cookies, peppermint cookies, and gingersnaps filled with jam and glazed with icing sugar were produced in her kitchen. The spritz cookies were dipped in chocolate at one end, and in later years, as the grandkids came along, she ventured out and began to dip them in colorful sprinkles as well. In the early years when I first met my future husband, I became starkly aware of the fact that not every Mennonite housewife in Canada had the same baking expertise. Chocolate peanut clusters, along with something the kids called "dried up's" were retrieved from the basement freezer. "What in the world are those things?" I recall mumbling to myself as they made their initial debut, and I watched my husband and his 4 siblings devour them in handfuls. His mother also had a silver tinsel Christmas tree with blue lights and blue ornaments. "Are you kidding, you guys actually enjoy sitting around this thing?" I smirked to myself as they all tore open their presents in a frenzy and in unison.

Our Christmas centered around the children's Christmas Eve service at church which was comprised of both German and English segments. My mother would sew me a new dress which always included a heated discussion on what length of hem line was acceptable. On this special night, all of the Sunday School students sat in the choir loft pews, our legs bordered by heavy burgundy velvet drapes. When we were not mesmerized by the feel of the rich velvet, we were mesmerized by the gigantic sparkling evergreen off to the left, which was

usually donated by one of the farmers in the congregation. My brother and I, being fluent, would recite a poem or skit, and of course always sang the German hymns. I can still recite verbatim "Leise Rieselt der Schnee", "Welche Jubel Welch Freude", "Ihr Kinderlein Kommet", and of course we all sang together "Oh Tannenbaum". After the service, Santa came in the back door and gave all the kids a brown paper bag with nuts, candy, oranges, and apples. At home we would then gather with my aunt and uncle as we would open a few presents purchased at the dime store. None were ever extravagant, and I always got stationary. In the early years, my immigrant parents gave us recycled toys wrapped in newspaper, yet I never recall complaining. I always wished for a Barbie, but it never came to be. My mother did not approve. We feasted on a variety of nuts, figs, oranges, and halva in a tin, as my Onkel Hans would haul out his old accordion and play carols as we sang along, albeit sometimes off key. Each gift was opened individually and admired by all. We all lived in a section of town called "the wartime housing", which consisted of several blocks of identical looking bungalows built for returning soldiers after WW 2. We often walked back and forth to my aunt's home, and in a faded cameo in a distant corner of my mind, I recall a Christmas of the past. As I rounded the corner beneath the street light, which shone brightly in the dark winter's sky illuminating the powdered snow falling softly from the heavens, I raised my head and shivered, giving thanks that we had shelter and that I would soon be home safe and snug in my warm bed, as opposed to freezing in a limestone hut in the Siberian wilderness. I am tightly clutching my mother's hand.

Having a December 23 birthday was not always in my favor and I often felt short changed as it was usually lumped together with Christmas. At age 10 my father sacrificed, I am sure, and presented me with a full size typewriter. It was the perfect gift for this budding author and I was of course thrilled. Every Christmas, and dozens of times in-between, my mother would relay to me with great elation the circumstances of my birth in Germany on their first day of arrival there after 10 years of exile in Kazakhstan.

On Christmas day, we were often invited to the home of a distant cousin of my Onkel Hans. They had 5 children and owned a small tomato processing plant with a large sewage pond in the back, which served as a skating pond right out of a Norman Rockwell painting. We climbed down the steep banks behind our fathers as they threw bricks onto the ice to test its safety. Amongst the stately evergreens and wild brush we girls practiced our pirouettes as the boys shot pucks around. If we were home with my aunt and uncle on the 25th, roast duck or chicken was served, along with some type of wild game which my Onkel Hans proudly brought fresh to the table. Hamburgers comprised of half bear meat and half beef were common, as was rabbit. Turkey was foreign to me for many years.

Many years have come and gone. My daughter's Barbie dolls have all been passed on to some grateful offshore migrant workers who flock in droves to our area and work in agriculture. The lace curtain in the old Christmas photo hangs on the back door in my brother's entryway. As I regularly round the corner near our old neighborhood, I recall the night I thankfully raised my eyes and thanked God for our new life in Canada. The doll in that long ago photo has long since met her demise. In a faded cameo in a distant corner of my mind, we have exited the ocean liner in Montreal Canada. It is July 1961. We are in a stampede of people lining up to produce our coveted immigration papers. I am tightly clutching my mother's hand as to my horror I watch my doll fall to the pavement below. There would no time to retrieve her my mother briskly informs me, as we continue marching. "Yes, I know we should have stopped to pick up your doll," my mother remorsefully tells me decades later. "I am so very, very sorry".

On a recent day my, 17 year old daughter and I are out shopping as the shelves around us in the store are being stocked with Christmas décor. “Hey, look at those tinsel Christmas trees!” She shrieks with excitement. “And look at all the colors,” she continued as I did a double take.

Last week, tycoon Warren Buffett announced that he would be closing his local Heinz processing plant, which had operated for over 100 years. Almost 1000 jobs will be lost, and listening to various media reports, I feel as though I am have tuned in to a nostalgic Garrison Keillor broadcast on the radio. The mood in our town is somber as I pass the Heinz plant on my way to Walmart to see if any fresh Christmas trees are available yet.

At the nursing home, I remind my parents that it is my 30th wedding anniversary. My dad reminds me that he can't remember that stuff anymore. My 94 year old mother chimes in and states, “Yes, but, your birthday is coming up soon. December 23”, as she gives me a thumbs up.

As I sit at the computer to send off this anecdote, I look around the room at the emerging pile of household items I am gathering for my daughter's university dorm. I am sure that the small blue tinsel tree will be used for years to come.