



Roots and Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

*“What we have heard and known
we will tell the next generation.”*

Psalm 78



Wanderers Nachtlied / Wanderer's Nightsong

By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Moonlight on Snow
Painting by Erna Ewert

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.

O'er all the hilltops
Is quiet now,
In all the treetops
Hearest thou
Hardly a breath;
The birds are asleep in the trees:
Wait, soon like these
Thou too shalt rest.

New Girl in Canada - First Christmas

From *New Girl in Canada* by Magdalene Barwich Vanderkamp

In her previous book, Magdalene in Paraguay, Barwich Vanderkamp describes her family's journey from western Siberia, where her parents were born, to western Germany. She was born after World War II when her family were refugees planning to escape war-torn Europe. When she was 6 months old the family left for Paraguay in South America. She writes, "My parents hoped to make a new beginning there, and that is where I spent a remarkable childhood. My family endured the harsh, tropical climate in primitive circumstances, surviving only by subsistence farming with inadequate tools.... I had playmates, tropical fruit to eat and warm showers to enjoy sensuously. I did not have books, paper, toys, or television. But I lacked nothing in those early years in Paraguay. My world ... was complete. After seven years it became possible for Canadian relatives to sponsor us and we immigrated in 1955. In Canada my family faced challenges common to new immigrants: new language, new customs, financial stress."

The following story describes the family's first Christmas in Canada, as Magdalene experienced it as a child.

Christmas

One day it gets cold. Really cold. I play outside with my friends, but when the streetlights come on I am happy to go up the stairs into our kitchen for dinner. Soon my fingers and toes begin to tingle and ache. They feel as if they are on fire. My mother rubs them with her warm hands. "Kalt, eh?" she asks. It was even colder in Russia where she lived when she was little, she says.

And then one day it begins to snow. Snow! I have never seen or felt snow. I try to hold the flakes in my bare hand but they disappear. I am puzzled. Anneliese and Werner (my sister and brother) laugh at me. They know all about snow from when they were little before we moved to Paraguay. The snow was so deep that it was higher than their heads. How could that be? I watch the snow fall and cover the roofs and fences. I say the word SNOW over and over while I am colouring.

The snow brings Christmas. Everyone at school is talking about Christmas now. In Paraguay it was very



Magdalene and her two new dolls. Photo: courtesy of the author

hot at Christmas time, and the *Weihnachtsmann* came. In Canada the *Weihnachtsmann* is called Santa Claus. He flies through the sky on a sled pulled by eight reindeer and lands on the roof. Then he climbs down the chimney carrying a big bag of toys and leaves presents for the children under the Christmas tree. He has a drink of milk and eats some cookies and goes back up the chimney and on to the next house. Missus Baker (my teacher) lets me take home a book with a poem in it. It's called "The Night Before Christmas." I read it many times. Soon I know it by heart.

My family doesn't know about Christmas in Canada. They know about the *Weihnachtsmann*. And they know the other Christmas story too. The one from Paraguay about the baby called Jesus. We don't talk about that story in school. My mother says that the story about Jesus is the true story of Christmas. I know the story. Jesus' parents were so poor that his mother had to ride on a donkey to go to their hometown for Christmas. And when they got there they couldn't even get a hotel room. They had to stay with the donkey in a barn. That's really poor. When the baby Jesus was born, his mother who was called Mary put him into the box that the donkey ate straw out of. The baby Jesus lay right on the straw but the donkey didn't bite him. His father Joseph was not the Dad really. Joseph was like a

Snow! I have never seen or felt snow.

foster Dad. The real father of Jesus is God. Somehow. Some angels in the sky sang to Jesus which is nice. And some rich men came by camels and brought him presents which is also nice for him. I don't know which story I like better, Santa Claus or Jesus. But both stories are about presents. That's good because that's what I like best about Christmas.

On my first Christmas in Canada I get lots of presents. The confusing thing is that I get two dolls. One from my mom and dad and one from Anneliese. How can I love two doll babies? Will they get jealous of each other? I also get a baby buggy. And a tiny pretend iron and ironing board.

My Uncle Jake comes to visit us on Christmas day. He has a camera and I ask him to take my picture with my two doll babies. I want my picture taken under a Christmas tree. But we have no Christmas tree. Anneliese knocks on the neighbour's door across the hall.

"Surecomeonin," the neighbour says. "No problemo." They have a tree with lights and decorations. I sit on a box of beer cans and have my picture taken.

Editorial

By Julia Born Toews

"Home for the holidays" is an oft-stated goal for the Christmas season. To arrive "home," however, often requires relocation or, at times, "wandering," a theme running through the Nativity narratives. The items in this Christmas edition of *Roots and Branches* reflect this sort of transition: a song written two hundred years ago is transformed from a love song to a familiar Christmas carol; a father takes his young daughter for a walk to a secret Christmas celebration, an event she remembers the rest of her life; another young girl moves to Canada with her family in the hope of a better life, coming from the heat of Paraguay to a snowy Christmas. As you wander towards the Christmas celebrations, may hope and inner peace be part of the journey. Christmas greetings to all of you from the editorial committee and staff of *Roots and Branches*.

Our Christmas Wonder

By Linda Maendel, Elm River Hutterite Colony, Newton Siding

This year Christmas will be different,
Without dad's jovial presence at our house,
Leading us in song,
"Der Tag, der ist so Freudenreich..."
O day, so rich in joy!

Gently reminding us that Christmas is more
Than receiving and giving presents.
Sharing his favourite from our school Christmas concert
Reminiscing over coffee, with a childhood crony,
Reflecting on Christmas teachings
Heard throughout the Holy Days
Adding his sense of humour to our gathering,
"If things don't get fixed in this house,
It won't be because I didn't receive tools!"

Still, despite the ache of missing him
Christmas will be ...

The quiet joy of
Singing German carols with family,
"Stille Nacht" with the choir and
"O Du Fröhliche" over communal Christmas dinner,
Creating handmade gifts,
Sharing home baked dainties with a neighbour,
Planning a celebration supper for our children,
Writing letters to loved ones seldom seen,
The whole community preparing
Gifts for disadvantaged children,
Visiting elderly friends and receiving
A clumsy card with a childish message,
"I like you. You are a good teacher."

So ...

Our ongoing Christmas peace
Is celebrating Christ's birthday by
Continuing to build community,
Faithful to the way dad taught us –
Patient and steadfast to the end.
Anticipating the time when we
Celebrate together again in that Other Home!

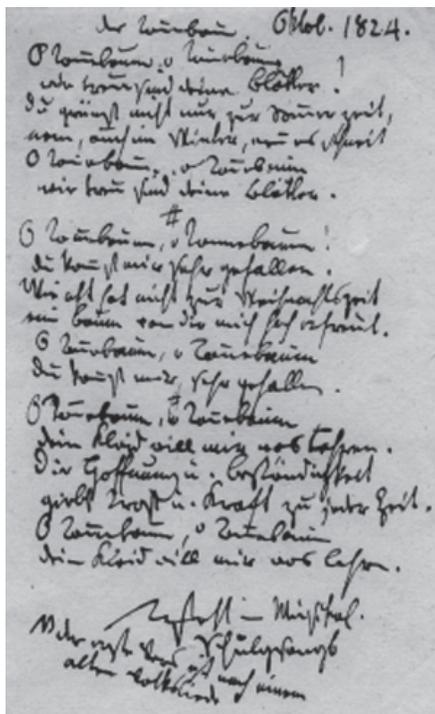
Source:
Preservings No. 26 (2006): 91.

From Hurtin' Song to Christmas Carol: the Story of "O Tannenbaum"

By Louise Bergen Price

O Tannenbaum, wie treu sind deine Blätter. "Fir tree, how faithful are your branches." When August Zarnack (1777-1827), a theologian and educator in Potsdam, wrote these lyrics in 1819, he didn't have a Christmas carol in mind but a song of unrequited love. The branches of the fir tree, the poet writes, are faithful, green both in summer and winter. This steadfastness is in contrast to the love of a faithless maiden: "You swore to love me when good fortune was with me; now I'm poor, you've left me," her spurned lover moans. In fact, she takes inspiration for her bad behaviour from the nightingale, who flies away when winter arrives, or the brook, which flows gaily when it rains but dries up completely when the rain stops.

Five years later, Leipzig teacher and folk music collector Ernst Anschütz (1780-1861) came upon Zarnack's poem. Anschütz kept the first verse but replaced the faithless maiden with fond memories of past Christmas trees. Perhaps, though, we still find references to Zarnack's *Mägdelein* in the last verse where we are admon-



Anschütz' version of "O Tannenbaum."
Source: Wikipedia.de

ished to dress ourselves in hope and constancy which will give comfort and strength in every situation!

Over the years, the word "treu" (faithful) has often been replaced by "grün" (green) in the German version and by "lovely" in the English translation. The *Tannenbaum* (fir tree or evergreen) is translated as "Christmas tree."



The tune of "O Tannenbaum" dates back to a sixteenth-century folk song and has been used in many other songs (for example: Maryland, my Maryland) as well as in numerous parodies. Many of us remember gleefully singing: *O Tante Braun, O Tante Braun, du hast mir sehr geschlagen. Nun muss ich in die Ecke stehn, und meine blaue Flecken sehn....* (O Tante Braun, you have beat me harshly. Now I must stand in the corner and gaze at my blue bruises.)

Sources
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Tannenbaum
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Tannenbaum
<https://www.volksliederarchiv.de/tannenbaum-falsch-gemuete/>

Christmas in Nieder Chortitza during the Soviet Era

By Irene Sawatzky Bergen (1921-2019)

Translated by Louise Bergen Price

It was Christmas Eve, 1929, but no one was allowed to celebrate openly. The churches had been closed and we were expected to go to school or work as usual. Anyone who broke the law could be sent to prison or banished. So we celebrated in secret. We children had set up our plates and were eagerly awaiting what the Christchild would bring in the morning.

After supper, my father pulled me aside. “We’re going for a walk,” he told me. “But you must promise not to tell the younger children where we’ve been.”

I promised to keep the secret. We dressed warmly and headed out into the snow. Hand in hand we stomped through the village to the Penners’ house.

No light showed; all the windows were shuttered. We knocked. The door opened and we slipped in. Onkel Penner took us to the great room, dimly lit by one kerosene lamp. I recognized some family friends, along with their older children.

Very softly we began to sing the familiar old Christmas carols. As we sang *Welchen Jubel, welche Freude* (What joy Christmas brings), Onkel Penner edged to the corner of the room and began to light handmade candles fastened to a small Christmas tree. To us children, the tree looked splendid, decorated with chains made of straw and colourful paper and a few ornaments left over from better days. We could hardly contain our joy.

Then Onkel read the Christmas story and prayed. Those of us who had learned Christmas poems that our parents had taught us in secret recited them. We sang “Silent Night.” Onkel snuffed the candles. Quietly we slipped out of the house and into the cold clear night air. For me, it was the experience of a lifetime.

I have written this story in honour of our mothers and fathers who tried to keep our faith in Jesus Christ alive. Onkel Penner, who dared to tell the Christmas story in those uncertain days, was probably in his mid-thirties at the time. Onkel Penner’s grandson, Artur Penner, is now pastor at Eben-Ezer Mennonite church.



A 1931 edition of the Soviet magazine *Bezbozhnik*, distributed by the League of Militant Atheists, depicting an Orthodox Christian priest being forbidden to cut down a tree for Christmas.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Year_Tree

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To give, contact the office at 604-853-6177, email archives@mhsbc.com, or visit our office at 1818 Clearbrook Road in the Mennonite Heritage Museum.

Weihnachtswunsch, 1884 (Christmas Wish)

Source from Louise Bergen Price, translated by Robert Martens

From my Uncle Heinrich Pauls, Rosental, South Russia (from the papers of Justina Sawatzky, mother to Irene Sawatzky Bergen). *Weihnachtswünsche* were poems memorized by children and recited to their parents on Christmas morning before gifts were opened.

1. Heut' ist die schöne Weihnachtszeit,
wo Jesus Christ voll Freundlichkeit,
vom Himmelsthron hernieder kam
und unsre Menschheit an sich nahm.

2. Verleugnet Hoheit und Gewalt,
erscheinst du Herr in Knechtsgestalt
um uns von Sünden zu befreien
und ewig unser Trost zu sein.

3. Dank sei Dir Herr der Herrlichkeit
für deine Lieb und Gütigkeit,
gib dass ich Dir für deine Treu
mit Leib und Seel' ergeben sei.

4. O mach mich deinen Bilde gleich
von Weisheit und an Liebe reich
Damit in solchen Ehrenkleid
ich sei der lieben Eltern Freud.

5. Und die Eltern segne du,
schenk ihren Herzen Freud und Ruh,
O nimm dich Heiland ihrer an,
vergilt was sie an mir getan.

1. Today is the lovely Christmas time
when Jesus Christ of great good will
descended from his heavenly throne
and became human like us.

2. Disowning magnificence and power,
Lord, you appeared in the form of a servant
to free us of sin
and be our eternal comfort.

3. Thanks to you, glory of glories,
for your love and goodness,
grant that I might be committed
body and soul to your faithfulness.

4. Oh remake me in your image,
make me wise and rich in love
So that, wearing the garment of honour,
I might be a source of joy to my parents.

5. And bless my parents,
impart their hearts with joy and peace,
Oh sustain them, Lord, reward them
for what they have done for me.



Two samovars and doll, Mennonite Heritage Museum collection. Photos: Julia M. Toews

Christmas Recipes

Peppermint Cookies / Ammonia Cookies
Handwritten recipe found in Julia Born Toews' grandmother's recipe book

1 ½ cups sugar
1 cup shortening
3 eggs
2 T. baking ammonia
1 cup milk
2 tsp. peppermint oil
Flour to make a soft dough.

Dissolve baking ammonia in warm milk. (Most other recipes say dissolve in hot water.) Mix all ingredients. Roll out and cut with 2 ½ inch cutter. Bake at 375° for 9 minutes. Cookies will be almost white.

New Year's Cookies

2 pkg. dry yeast
2 cups warm water
5 tsp. sugar
6 cups flour
1 ¾ cups milk – scalded and cooled
2 tsp. salt
4 eggs
1 lb. raisins
2 tsp. baking powder
Powdered or white sugar

Add sugar to 2 cups warm water and add yeast. Let stand 15 minutes. Then mix in 2 cups flour to make a sponge. Let rise in a warm place. When light, add all other ingredients and about 4 cups of flour to make a stiff batter. Let rise until doubled. Fry by dropping spoonfuls in deep, hot fat. Roll in powdered sugar or sprinkle with white sugar.

Hint: soak raisins in water for a while before adding to the dough so they'll stay soft while the cookies are frying.

Finding Hirschhornsalz

By Heather Pauls Murray

It's a tricky thing finding baking ammonia for our annual Christmas cookie baking day. And once purchased, it's so powerful and sparingly used, that we often pass a single jar from household to household until everyone has a turn to take a tablespoonful or two.

I remember my dad telling me about how at Christmas-time as a child, relatively new to Canada, his mother would send him to the druggist for that vital ingredient. She assured him that the English pharmacist would know what *Hirschhornsalz* (deer horn salt) would be. And sure enough, he would measure out the baking ammonia, and wrap it in no fewer than five layers of newspaper. Still, the intense ammonia smell would waft out, accompanying my father his entire walk home.

Baking ammonia was made in the Middle Ages by burning or dry distilling shredded horns, hooves, antlers, and skin in ovens used for heating limestone, hence the name.

Non-Mennonite friends are often confused when I speak of my love for ammonia cookies. They wonder why on earth anyone would eat ammonia! But I assure them, it's a bit like eating a soft white cookie mixed with Vic's Vapo Rub.

Roots and Branches

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Bird in winter. Photo: Louise Bergen Price

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Wagon wheel at the Mennonite Heritage Museum.

Photo: Julia M. Toews