

Christmas Memories

By Edward J. Heiser, Sr.

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Having snow at Christmas was not a certainty; sometimes yes, sometimes no. I always hoped for it because it meant being able to go sleigh riding. Believe it or not, there were many great hills for sleigh riding in upper Manhattan. There were parks on both the Hudson River and Harlem River sides of Manhattan. Both parks were within walking distance.

My friends and I would also do "belly whopping" on the sidewalks or streets before the snow was shoveled off. "Belly whopping" is done by holding the sled against your chest and then running as fast as you could and then diving face down, on top of the sled and sliding in the snow. We would see who could glide the furthest.

Since both of my parents immigrated to the United States from Hungary in the early 1900s, we followed their European traditions. Quite frankly, I don't know if the Hungarians used Santa Claus and reindeer as symbols for Christmas. I think their symbols were more of a religious nature. But I do know that my parents accepted Santa Claus after they settled here.

My parents would put nuts, such as walnuts, perhaps a candy cane and some jellybeans in my Christmas stocking. The greatest thrill was to get some money, usually pennies or maybe a couple of nickels. Back then, you could go to the movies all Saturday morning for three cents. If you paid a nickel, you could not only see the movies, but also get an ice cream cone!

All the Christmas trees were real back then. They were sold in vacant lots or on street corners in our neighborhood. When I was real young, my parents would keep the tree hidden and when I went to sleep on Christmas Eve, they would put it up and decorate it as a surprise. The next morning they told me that Santa Claus brought the tree and decorated it. I really did believe in Santa Claus. My dad, as the building superintendent, would also put up a Christmas tree in the lobby of the apartment house.

Courtesy: Carole Glass Personal Historian
<http://www.caroleglass.com/>

The major event on Christmas Day was dinner. My mother, who today would be considered a professional cook, would prepare an unforgettable meal. Just as in Charles Dickens' story the "Christmas Carol," the main dish was a roast goose. There were also a number of Hungarian pastry dishes.

One of my favorites was a seven-layer chocolate cake that was only about three inches tall. It was called *dobos torta*, but we always called it a "seven layer cake" because it had seven layers of thin cake in between seven layers of chocolate frosting. My mother also made a number of strudels, which in Hungarian are called *rétes*. We would have apple or *almá* (in Hungarian) *rétes*, walnuts or *diös rétes*, poppy seed or *mákos rétes*, and cabbage or *káposztás rétes* and others.

For Christmas dinner, Aranka Neni would make plum dumplings which consisted of a piece of fresh plum wrapped in potato dough, then cooked in boiling water. They were called *gombóc*, which in English we jokingly referred to as "gunboats."

I don't remember ever being asked what presents I wanted for Christmas. My parents decided on all the presents themselves. During the Great Depression people did not have much money to spend on gifts because it was much more important to save money to pay the rent and buy food. So we kids didn't expect to get a lot of gifts.

I remember that when I was a little boy, the best Christmas gift I got was an electric train set. I was probably six or seven. I am not sure how my parents could afford it because electric trains were only invented in 1927, and I must have had one of the first ones. It was a Lionel, standard gauge train set. Standard gauge is no longer available today. Standard gauge train cars were at least 6-8 inches high and about 18 inches long. I loved playing with the train set. It was my favorite. None of my friends had anything like it. My friends would come over to our apartment at Christmas time and helped me set it up and run it.

Each Christmas season after I got the train set, I would play with it for about a week or two or maybe a little bit longer. Then my father would pack it up and put it into the basement storeroom of the apartment building until the next Christmas. I played with it for a couple of Christmases and really looked forward to when it could be brought out again. All of a sudden, one Christmas it was missing. I was really upset. My parents told me that it had been stolen. Maybe that was true, but thinking back on it, I suspect they had to sell it in the early 1930s when they needed money during the Great Depression.

Another year when I was older, my sister Margaret and her husband Fred gave me a bicycle. I probably was 11 or 12. They were living in Scarsdale at the time, a town north of New York City. I was so thrilled that when I got the bike, I took it outside and rode it back and forth across their backyard all that evening. I think that's why my sister labeled me a "spoiled brat" because the backyard had just been re-seeded and I left bicycle tracks all over the place.

On New Year's Eve, it was my parents' tradition to put out a plate for the "New Year's baby". On the plate they would put a glass of water, a large pinch of salt and a slice of bread. According to Hungarian tradition, these were the "essentials of life" that would provide nourishment for the New Year baby so he would get off to a healthy start. It was also supposed to bring good luck for the coming year.