



Christmas

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December is a month of colors defined by Christmas — whites, reds, and greens. December also has a blue hue — not the color of the sky, but the color of my nostalgic mood.

No other month affects me the way December does. I guess I have the typical symptoms of the nostalgia of someone suspended between two worlds, the old and the new, the distant and the close. It is in December when I travel to Poland most often, but only in my imagination. I bounce between here and there.

The most frequent trips are to past Christmases when I was about ten years old. All those years of my childhood overlap into one colorful film, with some pictures extremely sharp and focused, and others quite foggy.

Looking into the past, it is fun to see myself as a small girl with big, colorful ribbons braided in her hair. Early on the morning of Christmas Eve day, she is sitting with her mother on the train to Warsaw. They are going to visit her grandparents and other relatives and spend Christmas there.

In Poland there are two days of Christmas, December 25th and 26th, but the most important part of a Polish Christmas is the Christmas Eve supper for which families and friends gather together.

Although our trip was only an hour and a half long, I became restless. I tried to entertain myself by watching through the train windows and counting the stations. With each one closer to our destination, my excitement grew. Soon I was going to see all my cousins with whom I could play! For an only child, such a possibility had special value.

My father did not travel with us on that day. He had a very important event of his own, the traditional Christmas hunt, ending with a meal of hunter's stew in the forest. It became a family tradition that he would be the last guest at the Christmas Eve supper, arriving by one of the late trains. That evening his face would show signs of being outdoors all day, and he would talk proudly about his hunting.

Our destination was a quiet village in the suburbs of Warsaw with private homes scattered among the woods, and pine trees covered with snow.

It was only a short walk from the train station among those pines, and soon we were at the gate of a large villa, the home of my aunt and uncle and my two favorite cousins. That was the house where all large family gatherings took place. Nearby were the homes of my grandparents and my other cousins.

Excitement, screams, hugging, and I found myself inside the house. I spent much of my childhood in that large house, and remember details of the furniture and the paintings on the walls. My favorite place was the library, with my uncle Felek's impressive collection of books. But that day, the most important places were the spacious kitchen and the large dining room. In the corner of the dining room was a Christmas tree that reached to the ceiling.

It was the children's responsibility to trim the tree, while the adults were busy with the preparations for supper. The smells coming from the kitchen were very tempting. We were allowed to nibble a bit, but not too much, as it was a day of fasting.

I do not remember much excitement in connection with gift-giving. Giving presents was always a tradition, but it was secondary and mostly for the children. When we were very young, one of the fathers would play Saint Nicholas and bring the presents in a burlap bag. In later years, they were just left under the Christmas tree. Presents were opened that evening after supper.

Christmas Eve supper had a very special aura and sense of anticipation that characterized the day. The supper was always meatless, with a large variety of fish dishes dominating the menu. As children, we knew that we would have to try each dish to be polite, and for that evening we would not be excused early from the table. Those rules made the evening even more important, and we did not complain.

The first star appearing in the sky would indicate when to start supper, and it was the children's job to find that star. I remember running back and forth looking for it, since by that time we were eager to eat almost anything. Finally it was there, high in the sky. Then, all dressed up, we would approach the beautifully set table.

The tree was sparkling and Christmas carols were heard for the first time that season. The table was always covered with a crisp, white tablecloth under which small bits of hay had been spread in remembrance of the manger.

It was not easy to seat more than 20 people, but even so, one extra place was always set, ready for any "lonely stranger."

Our grandparents would sit together at the head of the table. Grandfather, Josef, was everyone's image of a grandfather, a handsome old man with thick white hair, a beautiful mustache, and sparkling blue eyes looking out from under his bushy eyebrows.

With everyone at the table, Grandfather initiated the ceremonial breaking of bread. At Christmas, the bread was a traditional *oplatek* (Christmas wafer), in many ways the essence of a Polish Christmas. It was a symbol of love, friendship, and forgiveness.

Through years of living in this country, I had forgotten about this concept of forgiving being associated with Christmas. With so much emphasis now on giving and receiving gifts, it might do us all some good to think of Christmas not only as a time *for giving* but also as a time of *forgiving*.