

# How we celebrated our first Canadian Christmas

by Sabine Eiche

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Today, 57 years later, I can't even begin to imagine how my parents must have struggled to make our first Christmas in Canada as familiar and reassuring as possible. My mother and I had arrived in October 1956, my father a few months earlier. We were renting a house on Douglas Crescent, in Burkeville. That Christmas Eve we installed a lovely fir tree in a corner of the living room. The tree wasn't tall but became as wide as a crinoline once the branches relaxed. My mother and I hung it with tinsel, colourful ornaments and sugary chocolate sweets, which were irresistible. It was lit with real candles, following the custom in Germany, where, however, the houses are built of brick or stone. In retrospect we have to thank our lucky stars that nothing ever caught fire.

An important part of Christmas is the food, and our family had several traditional dishes, most of them dating back at least to the turn of the twentieth century, when my father's parents still lived in Riga (they fled to Germany during the Russian Civil War).

We eat our celebratory meal Christmas Eve. Preparing this fare would have posed a real challenge to my mother in 1956. Vancouver's German stores (for food and all else) were concentrated along Fraser Street and Robson Street, and the way to get there by public transport from Sea Island was neither fast nor particularly direct. Just gathering the ingredients must have taken my mother a whole day, if not longer.

Three main dishes comprise our Christmas meal – *Speckkuchen* (actually pirogies), *Heringssalat* and potato salad. To make *Speckkuchen*, my mother cut

yeast dough into rounds, onto which she spooned some speck-onion mix. The rounds were folded into a semicircle, edges pinched together, tops brushed with egg yolk and then baked in her Good Cheer oven.

*Heringssalat* is labour intensive. Beets, herrings (matjes are best), hardboiled eggs, pickles and apples are all finely chopped – the smaller the pieces the better the flavour. For calculating the amounts of the ingredients my mother used the rule of three – three cans sliced beets, three eggs, three large pickles, three large apples. The quantity of herring depends on what's available. After the *Heringssalat* has sat in the fridge for 24 hours it's dressed with homemade mayonnaise.

My mother's potato salad was exceptional. She never wrote down the recipe and I've never been able to replicate it, though I remember it, too, was made with homemade mayonnaise.

After dinner we'd open the parcels sent from Germany and unwrap presents. For Christmas 1956 my parents gave me a type of boy's meccano kit – something my father liked to play with as well. I'm certain that in those early years, presents for me meant sacrifices for them, because money was scarce. But it wasn't money thrown out the window. A few of my childhood presents survive to this day, and I treasure them, together with the memories.