

Christmastime in a Child's World

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I don't know if it's the same for other people, but when I look back at the landscape of my world as a child, the scene is great garden full of apples and nuts, flowers and colorful birds. In the wintertime there is the soft, deep snow in which we could play to our heart's content without getting dirty, and there is a smooth sliding hill where we whizzed down on small, homemade sleighs. And a millpond, frozen over to a mirror finish, on which we traveled with *Peikschlitten* to Stettin and Berlin, to Petersburg, Paris and Rome! Or we would glide about on homemade ice skates with a long bulrush in our hands as a spear, playing the part of lancers who struck fear into the hearts of the French in 1870.

When we came home and crept behind the tile oven to dry our wet stockings, the smell of roasting apples wafted from the oven vents. Because it was Advent, and the sacred Christ went about, eavesdropping to see if the children had learned well, I would whisper back and forth with my sister, and the oldest sister, who knew everything and could do everything, allowed us to quietly recite the Bible verses and the songs which the pastor's wife had given us in Sunday School.

The Sunday School conducted by the pastor's wife played a big role in those days of my childhood in Quackenburg [in Kreis Stolp, now Kwakowo, Poland]. As Christmas drew near, the Sunday school was always full to overflowing. Not only did those attend who went to Sexton Borze's school – no! – even the four and five year olds could not be kept away – they had to be with the pastor's wife in Sunday School!

Why? The pastor's wife gave a Christmas gift to each child who attended her Sunday School! What she gave us wasn't much, but her gift had far greater worth to us children than what our parents might give us, which could well be ten times more expensive.

What did we learn in the pastor's wife's Sunday School? Actually not much – and yet a great deal. Her school was not one of slates and chalk, primer and willow switch. It was a two hour long conversation with children, and the two hours went by so fast that the little children often protested: "I want to stay longer." But whoever went to the Sunday School had to be clean from head to toe. Upon arriving, everyone went to the pastor's wife and offered her their hand – and at a glance, the pastor's wife inspected everything – hands and ears, neck and hair. If she found that not everything was in order with a particular little girl, she would have two older girls escort her into the kitchen, and when she came back, the child was clean and smiles wreathed her face. Getting upset about it did not happen with the pastor's wife.

At the time there were truly poor people in the village, especially among the day laborers where the mothers had to work outside the home each afternoon. The amount of good done by the members of the parish for these people cannot be counted, and how they managed to do so much remains a mystery to me to this very day. But the children accepted these good deeds as though it was how things were meant to be.

There was much singing in the Sunday School, but especially during the time of Advent. The pastor's wife usually had new songs at hand. She would play them through two or three times on the piano – and then, while she read the words out loud to us, the singing would burst forth. This lasted barely half an hour, but in that time the entire little flock had verse and melody firmly in their heads – and on the next Sunday some of the little ones could hardly wait to have the pastor's wife hear them perform the songs.

And then the pastor's wife told stories from the New Testament or from the lives of pious Christians in both

ancient and modern times. There is a difference between “telling a story” and “Telling a Story.” Story telling by the pastor’s wife was an artistic rendering for the benefit of the children. We were always involved, body and soul, in the story. When it finally reached its end, we regretted that it didn’t just keep on and on.

While the first hour was a type of religious instruction, the second hour was entirely secular. Naturally there was much singing: folksongs, melodies for summer and for winter, songs both pious and merry, as well as those appropriate for the season of the year.

Then, immediately thereafter, the story telling would begin again. The pastor and his wife had a large collection of books for young people. A book went into every home, but not more than one at a time. We had to report on whatever we read in the book we had. That was the way the pastor’s wife wanted it. But we children wanted her to tell the stories – that appealed to us more.

While this was going on, the very small children sat off in the corner with picture books. Usually one of the pastor’s daughters or one of the missionary sisters from Africa or India was involved in their instruction. They sat among the small children like a mother hen with her chicks, watching them carefully to see that they did not get underfoot. During the time of Advent, all of this activity came to a close with a ginger cookie or an apple – a foretaste as to what Christmas might well bring.

During Advent things were quite different in Sexton Borze’s school as well. The main difference, and the one that was the most obvious, was the singing. The people said that Borze was a great performer on the organ and the violin. As a child, I understood little about music, and I got angry at his organ playing. You see, I pumped the bellows for the organ while he played, and, when he really cut loose and let the organ downright roar, the bellows would fly up so quickly that it was all I could do to hurry and get them tamped down again.

But nowadays, whenever I hear a violin exulting and rejoicing on the radio, I have to think back on Sexton Borze. I spent a lot of time in the Sexton’s residence. When I heard his violin singing in the dawn, my sensitive young soul sang along with it and the singing stayed with me the whole day until bedtime.

But the singing in school at Christmas time was just never good enough for him. I have often wondered why he could get so upset about our singing when he actually told us that we acquitted ourselves as well as we were capable of. Oh well, in those days he was young and ambitious. He would practice especially with seven or eight of the children – those who were the best singers and who were honored the most by the residents of the village during the Christmas season.

Finally, Christmas Eve arrived and people from all the surrounding areas would come half an hour early just to find room in the church. We young ones had to carry benches from the school to the church. It was so packed in the church, the two church deacons were at their own peril trying to get through the crowd in order to hold the collection basket under every person’s nose, so that each felt it necessary to toss their pennies in. And once in a while a clothes button as well! But everyone had to throw something in, otherwise the collection basket did not disappear from under their noses until they did.

No sermon was given in the church on Christmas Eve. Instead, a lengthy liturgy was presented which was called a Carol Service. The pastor alone determined the content and had Delmanzo [publisher] in Stolp print up leaflets containing the entire service. The leaflets could be purchased in advance in the vestibule of the church for two pennies apiece. If someone bought five copies at once, the sales girl would say, “Thank you!”

In the chancel stood two large Christmas trees, presented to the church by the lord of Klein Silkow after searching his woods for the most beautiful trees. Beneath these trees, which were decorated with many candles and with gold and silver angel’s hair, stood the Christmas Tree Choir. Its number was augmented by children from two or three of the surrounding villages. On the opposite side of the chancel, up in the loft around the organ, was the Organ Choir, also gathered from two or three villages.

As the candles were lit, Borze would let his organ roar, because on such a day as this, he got everything out of the organ that he could possibly get. But, after a while, the organ would grow softer and softer, and then lapse into quiet repose, as when a weary child is laid in the cradle. Then Borze would strike the tuning fork and raise his hand. "Sing ye holy choirs of heaven!" would ring out from the Organ Choir. "Sing to God's joy and honor!" answered the Christmas Tree Choir.

As we sang, we watched our dear Sexton with stern and wooden demeanor. Now and again his face would jerk as though he had a toothache. Then we knew that either a wrong note or an impure tone had crept in. How he was able to hear such a thing among the many voices I have never been able to fathom.

The audience was most appreciative of *Silent Night*, which was sung by two girls and two boys from the upper grades. The Organ Choir quietly joined in, but only at the end. The song must have sounded wonderful, and the adults, as they left the church, looked upon the two girls with their blonde hair and white dresses as though they were princesses or angels from heaven. At the same time they had no use for urchins like us! No one paid attention to the boys!

Following the service, the Sunday School children went directly from the church to the parsonage, with many mothers tagging along purely out of curiosity. Whereas things had been solemn in the church, in the parsonage things were very merry. Here there was something to see! The entire city of Bethlehem, including its surroundings, had been constructed under the Christmas tree and from a rendition of Noah's Ark tumbled an entire collection of animals.

The white haired pastor was just as much a friend of the children as his wife, with little boys clinging to his legs. "Hey, Pastor, what kind of animal is that?" "That is an elephant." The pastor spoke Plattdeutsch (Low German) to the children. "Oooh," said the young boy, "what a long nose the 'lephant has!" "Hey, you, Pastor! I know the name of that horse with the hump on its back!" "So . . . you know that?" "It's called a caravel!" "No, no, my boy, that's not right. It is called a camel. Caravel is the name of a ship from much earlier times." "Well, yah! That's just what I said! Didn't Ernst just read 'ship of the desert'?"

After the children had calmed down a bit, the pastor's wife told the Christmas story in her own manner, as no else could tell it. In the telling, the black and white figures under the Christmas tree, along with all the animals, came alive, and now and then a little one could not resist interjecting a word or two into the telling.

At home, our dear, thrifty mother lit a candle on the Christmas tree for every child in the family, but no more. Around the tree we would play with the gifts we had received from the pastor's Santa Claus. For us, Santa Claus came the following morning. We would awaken to the sound of a willow switch rapping on the windows and nuts tumbling down the hallway. And when we sprang from our beds, all the candles on the Christmas tree were burning brightly, and under the tree were all the glorious things that the Christ Child had sent us by way of Santa Claus. If only one could have just such joy today as was had in the world of my childhood.