



***We wish all our kind Readers a very blessed Christmas!
Áldásos karácsonyi ünnepeket kívánunk minden kedves Olvasónknak!***

Betlehem

Juhász Gyula

A kocsma ajtaját kitárják,
S hozzák subában a telet,
Az istállóban ott a jászol,
A jászolban a Szeretet.

A gyémánt csillag áll fölöttük
Füstös lármában szeliden,
Nyájas barmok között az almon
Az Ácsnak Gyermeke pihen.

Kántálnak a háromkirályok,
S velük a jámbor pásztorok,
A söntés mélyén egy elázott,
Elbúsult zsöllér tántorog.

Könnyes szeme bámulja báván
A betlehemi csillagot,
A jó reményt, mit körülállnak
Szegények, árvák, magyarok!



A Gulag Christmas

Like thousands of other innocent citizens, Benedictine Fr. Placid Oloffson was sentenced, on trumped-charges, to 10 years of forced labor by a military tribunal of the Soviet forces occupying Hungary, in 1946. He was accused of anti-Bolshevik propaganda, conspiracy and terrorist activities.

Father Oloffson will celebrate his 97th birthday on December 23rd this year. Last year at this time, he spoke vigorously, in a very strong voice, during a celebratory Mass, mentioning that he had experienced all kinds of Christmases in the course of his long life. Here is one that he described in an interview ten years ago by the Hungarian Catholic weekly "Új Ember" for the December 21-28, 2003 issue. This is an excerpt of that interview by István Elmer.

In 1952, I was in a prison camp some 500 miles east of Moscow, where 52,000 of us, in 36 prison camps, were clearing the forest. There were 30 of us Hungarians in the camp, and we discussed how we could observe Christmas, a holiday unknown in the Soviet Union. In its stead, they would set up a 90-foot high pine tree in the Kremlin on January 1st, and the Young Pioneers would dance around it, because Uncle Frost had arrived. (In Hungary, under Communism, they called it 'Father Winter'.) My boss was a young lieutenant, and his four-year old daughter had been

stricken with polio. She was encased in plaster, and was lying in bed. I had previously made her some toys out of paper, and I asked him whether I might make a paper pine tree for her for the January 1st festival. I knew he would allow me to do it.

I was finished with it by December 24th. I put it on the small table in the barracks, and we Hungarians agreed to get together after work, after we had finished eating the cabbage soup and oatmeal, to celebrate Christmas. One of our fellow prisoners had found a candle stump. If we put it in front of the paper and lit it, he said, we'd be able to feast our eyes on the shadow of a large Christmas tree.

We each offered a piece of bread from our rations. I separated the crust, and cut the rest into small cubes. I asked our Ukrainian fellow-prisoners – who, being Soviet citizens, were allowed to receive packages – for a clove of garlic, and rubbed the bread crusts with it. This was our 'sausage'. (In ten years we never once saw meat.) I put a pinch of sugar on the bread cubes (we received four ounces of sugar per month); these were our 'cookies'.

Two of our fellow-prisoners could not take part in our Christmas Eve because they were on duty at the electric generating plant. They came up with the idea that they could create a short circuit at the time we were to assemble, and thus cause a blackout. Then the guards in the four guard towers would send up colored flares so that the prisoners wouldn't escape. We didn't have sparklers, but for 15 minutes we saw wonderful fireworks, and meanwhile no one paid any attention to us.

And we prayed and sang, recited the Gospel of Luke, thought of those at home – we tried to forget our misery, and ate the 'sausage and the cookies.'

□All of a sudden, the door opened and looking at us was a Soviet fellow-prisoner, the Stalin Prize-winning poet Ivan Fadeiev Soloyov. He looked at us, and without a word, shut the door. All of us thought he would report us to the commandant. In the Soviet criminal code, the most serious crime was not murder, but conspiracy. And this was open conspiracy – twenty-odd Hungarians together!



Fr. Placid Oloffson

We nevertheless finished our Christmas Eve, and then it occurred to me that perhaps Soloyov 'wouldn't find' the commandant. I wanted to talk to him: let us live, we hadn't hurt a fly. Next day, I went to look for him. I spotted him at a distance, and saw that he was waving vigorously from afar. When he came up to me, I didn't get a chance to speak. And now I'm going to translate exactly what he said: 'You know very well that I was brought up as an atheist. But yesterday I saw that you, on the basis of your faith, were able to smile even under these circumstances. For me, there is no greater proof for the existence of God.'

Translated by Erika Papp Faber



HUNGARIAN CHRISTMAS-TIME – THE SPIRIT OF MY CHRISTMASSES PAST

Olga Vállay Szokolay

Mikulás

In Central and Eastern Europe, the harbinger of the Christmas season is St. Nicholas, by his familiar nickname *Mikulás*, whose name day is on December 6th. Yes, "Santa" is completely separate from Christmas. For most children, *Mikulás* drops some small gifts: fruits and sweets, overnight into their nicely polished shoes placed in the windows. I was very lucky to be annually visited by *Mikulás* in person, on the eve of St. Nicholas' Day.

In anticipation of his coming, we always had company for the evening: some aunts and friends assembled for a light meal, tea and a traditional chocolate-clad chestnut log which, to the present day, remains my favorite dessert. During the wait, my father usually "realized that he had forgotten something" and had to run to the store. It was during his absence – how unfortunate! – that there was a knock on the door and – lo and behold – *Mikulás* arrived! He had a kind face with rosy cheeks and white beard, wore a miter, carried a bishop's staff, a large book and a *put-tony*. He was assisted by *Krampusz*: a scary little devilkin with horns, tail, a bunch of twigs called *virgács*, and chains. He occasionally jumped ahead, trying to whip my legs, but the "boss" chased him back. *Mikulás* then praised me for having been mostly good, but read all my mischief from the big book; that prompted the *Krampusz* to leap forward, but he was ordered to spare me. Then I was given my small presents: rare delights like figs, nuts, dates, tangerines, chocolate *Mikulás* figures and also a small *virgács* to remind me to be good. Shortly after their departure my Dad came back, and we all regretted that he had to miss the attraction... The evening was sheer magic for me.

We were in third grade when my classmates made fun of me for still

believing in *Mikulás*. But I told them in no uncertain terms that I had talked to him, that he visits me every year and knows everything about me. At home, I complained to Dad about their teasing. He smiled and said I was old enough to be enlightened and showed me the mask and other paraphernalia he (or his alternate) had worn every year. From him it was no disappointment – it was information. He could do no wrong. And from then on I just put my shoes in the window on the evening of December 5th, like everyone else.

Years later, after the war, I still enjoyed the window-visits and ever-so-small presents from "*Mikulás*". On December 6th, before leaving for school in the morning, through my presents my glance fell upon the window of one of my classmates who lived alone in Budapest, being put up by some friends in their maid's room, so she could attend school in the city while her family lived in a small village in the country. I realized she must have gotten no presents, so I took half of mine with me. In the classroom, I managed to sneak them into her desk with a small note: "Greetings from *Mikulás*" before she arrived. As she found the little package, she instantly knew where it came from. From that day on, we became and remained friends across the continents. She lives in Brazil.

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION itself was different from that of the Western European, thus the North American one. Again, instead of Christmas morning, we celebrated on Christmas



Eve. Santa Claus out of the picture, the tree and presents were brought by the Little Jesus (*Jézuska* in Hungarian, *Christkind* in German) or, in his stead, the Christmas Angel. Decorating the trees ahead of time was done only in older people's homes. For households with children, the setting up, decoration and first lighting of the Christmas tree was done on the 24th of December.

Christmas Eve

When we were children, I was taken to my cousin Gyuszkó's house in the early afternoon. Only a year apart and living just three blocks away, the two of us grew up as close to being siblings as two only children ever could. While my parents did their preparations at home, the two of us, restricted to their bedroom, were reading Christmas stories, praying, playing, mostly with boys' toys, sipping hot chocolate. This gave a chance for his parents to "assist the Angel" in the living room. Our anticipation was almost unbearable.

It was after dark when my father came to pick me up and walk me home. At a corner he exclaimed: "Did you see...?" I said: "What?" "That light...it was the Angel just flying through". I was mesmerized and mumbled that I saw something but didn't know what it was....To the present day I remember the exact spot in the street and even believe I really saw that magical flash of light...

As we arrived home, my mother let us in and said that she had just opened the window for the Angel – she has to see if things are finished. Usually a dear older lady, Aunt Diri, spent Christmas Eve with us. She lived modestly but was always cheerful and elegant, had a voice like a fine antique musical instrument and – unlike most old people – always smelled really nice in spite of her smoking. Her soft face and clothes were nice to touch and I loved her dearly. She (her *Jézuska*) typically gave me classic children's books that I enjoyed so much.

As we all finally were allowed to enter the room, the tree, with a small Nativity set under it, was aglow with live candles, handsome little ornaments, icicles, angel-hair, *szaloncukor* (soft fondant candy wrapped in fringed tissue paper and foil) and the ever-so-magical sparklers. That image alone made you laugh and cry in wonder! We prayed, sang a few Christmas songs (*Mennyből az angyal*, *Pásztorok* and *Dicsőség menyben az Istennek* come to mind). Then the presents could be



"Mákoskalács" by Fényes Adolf
Szaloncukor in Herend dish

opened – each one with a big oooooh! or aaaaah! And we ate fried carp with mashed potatoes and wine sauce, followed by the ubiquitous home baked *beigli* (those logs of walnut and poppy-seed filled pastry). The fact that I was allowed to drink a bit of wine with club soda from about age six had nothing to do with my sleeping like the happiest baby that night.

Christmas Day

Although Christmas Eve was probably the most magical of the holidays, it was far from being the end. On Christmas Day we visited my dear Godmother who prepared the best turkey for dinner. More presents

were waiting for me there, as were my Godfather's two grandsons; the older one, two years my senior being my first heart-throb from age four to about eight...We played house and the two of us were always the mom and dad. In his teen years he became a "poet". We went out for a walk, sat on a bench and he read his poem to me with the refrain: "I give my heart only to you". But by then I was well over him...

December 26th

All of Europe used to celebrate December 26th. For us, it was reserved for a family reunion. All aunts and uncles, with their spouses, gathered at Dad's aunt's house. Aunt Teruska, the matriarch of the family, was my grandmother's younger sister who brought up my orphaned father and his siblings. Of the three brothers and one sister, only two had children: one each. Gyuszkó and myself. This, however, meant that with all those adults around, the two of us were the only kids, showered by attention and gifts. After the praying, carol-singing and delicious dinner we were just playing, attended by our unmarried young aunt Irrike, who enjoyed sitting under the "exotic forest" of houseplants with us. We simply loved the day.

The Siege

The magic changed in December 1944. The Russians were all around the City, the Germans were fighting to their last men and ours. We had been already well trained to get with our little packages (I had my precious stuffed animals in a basket) to the air-raid shelter when necessary, to avoid the bombings. But on Christmas Eve it was different. The shooting became so intense that we had to move down to the shelter of the apartment house's basement for overnight, which turned out to be our residence for six weeks, co-habiting with some 150 other tenants. We slept on bunk beds built beforehand. Being small and skinny, my special nest was on the "third floor" of my parents' "second floor"

bunk. It was cozy and private but very scary when I was startled out of my sleep by an explosion and hit my head in the ceiling.

We played cards and I learned to play chess. When we had used up the water from the building's boiler, the men had to dig a hole in the yard for water. The heaps of dug-out dirt became covered with snow one night. My little friend, seven-year-old Ildikó, received a pair of small skis, the ones you strap onto your snow boots, for Christmas. On a quiet day, we could go up in the yard, try on her skis and slide down from the humps. That little ecstasy, comparable to flying, made me decide I wanted to ski. Ildikó's mother gave me my first pair of skis the next Christmas.

Real Candles

It was a custom to leave the Christmas tree up, lighting it occasionally, until January 6th. Since my birthday is on the 8th, I was allowed to get an extension until then. By that time all Christmas trees were dried out in the heated homes.

So was ours, on top of the piano. My parents lit the candles and the left-over sparklers when – boooooom! – the whole tree flared up in one huge ball of fire.

Dad didn't miss a beat: grabbed the blazing torch, ran with it to the kitchen where he threw it on the tile floor to burn out. He lost his eyebrows and suffered minor burns but spared us from a flash fire of the apartment.

Paying Forward

As I became a teenager I fondly remembered my childhood Christmases. I felt it was my time to pay forward. With my friend, Menga, we put all our monies together and bought food from a deli: all the delicacies poor families could not afford. Having spent our last penny, we prepared a Christmas basket and hand-delivered it on Christmas Eve to

the home of a family who lived in a meager garage apartment near our building. They inquired whom it was from and we said: "From *Jézuska*" – and ran away in the dark.

Afterwards, for many years, it was no Christmas if I had a penny left in my pocket.

Olga Vállay Szokolay is an architect and Professor Emerita of Norwalk Community College, after three decades of teaching. She is a member of the Editorial Board of Magyar News Online.

Congratulations ...

to Nathyn Horvath, son of Marika and Albert Horvath of Newtown, who as a member of the Greater Bridgeport Youth Orchestra, will be playing his cello in the group's Carnegie Hall concert on December 5th.

Four developmentally sequential orchestras and a wind ensemble make up the 240-member GBYO, and students from grades 5 through 12 are accepted through competitive auditions held in the fall.

The GBYO is planning a 12-day tour of China next summer. Hungarians of the Bridgeport-Fairfield area have heard Nathyn perform during past March 15th observances. We all wish him well in his musical endeavors!

viola vonfi, formerly of New York, is a new contributor to Magyar News Online. She insists that we write her name in lower case.



Kolbász Festival

viola vonfi

I can't believe there is actually a festival for one of my favorite Hungarian foods! Makes my mouth water just to write about it!



Over 100,000 people visited the four-day *Kolbász* (sausage) Festival at Békéscsaba at the end of October this past year. Five hundred teams competed to produce a *kolbász* that local connoisseurs would judge the best. Competitors came from different areas of Hungary, Kárpátalja, Felvidék, Vajdaság and Erdély, and were joined by teams from Poland, Thailand, Africa and Australia. The Festival used over 10,000 pounds of meat, and *kolbász* was produced even from kangaroo meat (by the Australian team, as we might have guessed!) *Csabai* goes back to the 1890's, when it first became popular. Recently, the appellation „*csabai kolbász*” has been declared a protected „Hungaricum”, i.e., a name that may not be applied outside the geographical area.

Csabai is special because every part of the pig is used, including *szalonna*, and the seasoning includes both mild and hot *paprika*, garlic and caraway seeds. Only pigs' guts are used for casing, and the smoking process is also specific. Perhaps it is not surprising that of the 110 types of *szárazkolbász* (dry sausage) entered, the judges found a local entry to be the best, followed by that produced by a master *kolbász*-maker from Mezőberény. (I have seen no mention of how the kangaroo product fared.) Next year, I'll do my best to attend the Festival. Do you think they'll let me be one of the judges?

viola vonfi is a recent transplant from New York City. She insists that we write her name in lower case



Customs Surrounding St. John's Stirrup Cup

Erika Papp Faber

Celebrated on December 27th, St. John's Day became the focal point of many customs dealing with the year's new wine. Here are a few of them.

Blessing the new wine on St. John's Day, December 27th, was probably introduced by the Norbertine (officially known as the Premonstratensian) monks. It is recorded even in a missal from Pécs dating back to 1499. "St. John's blessing", "stirrup cup" or *áldomás*, was a toast with

this new wine.

The custom has perdured to this day in the wine-growing regions of Hungary. In Göcsej, the blessed wine is poured into special casks, and is given to the sick. If a "spell" has been cast on cattle (*"megrontották"*), water is mixed with the blessed wine, and the back of the animal is sprinkled with it in the form of a cross. In Kiskanizsa, they take the blessed wine and pour some of it into every wine cask. Some use it as a remedy for headaches or earaches, and even sprinkle it on the bed of a sick person. In the village of Lajtakáta (Moson County), not only the family members drink of the wine, but it is

also given to the cattle, and is even poured into the well. Dunaszentmiklós farmers sprinkle the blessed wine on the four corners of their vineyard.

In the Bánát region, St. John's wine is kneaded into *kalács* baked on New Year's Day to preserve every member of the family from harm. In other areas, a bottle of wine is placed on the table on Christmas Eve, but no one touches it then, because this is "the wine of the angels". But they take this bottle to church on St. John's day to have it blessed, after which every member of the family drinks of it, and it is then put away for medicinal purposes.

In other villages, people do not drink from the blessed wine at all, using it instead to sprinkle on the wheat to be sown.

It became universally accepted that, when guests were ready to leave, the host would stand up and say, "Let's drink St. John's blessing" – i.e. a stirrup cup. It was meant to protect travelers from all dangers and temptations. That is why it was also given to those leaving for war, and even to the dying. In some places, it was offered also to those taking part in the funeral banquet.

One source indicates a biblical origin for St. John's blessing. It refers to the question Jesus put to the brothers James and John, "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" (Mt 20:22). (That is why John is often depicted with a chalice in his hands.) Another source indicates that the blessing of the new wine is done on his day because according to a legend, the Apostle John was challenged by a pagan to drink poisoned wine, and he did so without suffering any ill effect.

Erika Papp Faber is Editor of Magyar News Online.

Hungarian Deck of Cards

EPF

During the holidays people may have more leisure, including time for playing cards, which may account for the designation of December 29th as the day of the Hungarian deck of cards (magyar kártya napja). But just what is a Hungarian deck of cards?

A memorial plaque on the wall of the so-called Wichmann tavern (*kocsma*) in Budapest states: "On this spot stood the card painting workshop of Schneider József. This is where, in 1836, the Hungarian deck of cards was made, which by evoking the freedom fight of William Tell, tried to revive the national consciousness of citizens with a playful bent, and which has gone from hand to hand ever since."

Schneider's deck consisted of 32 cards, and used the colors that had been used in German playing cards in the 15th century: red or hearts, green, *makk* or clubs, and *tök* or diamonds. The numbering goes – in Roman numerals – from VII to X, then *alsó*, *felső*, *király* and *disznó*. The kings were all shown on horseback. All the *disznó* were allegories of the four seasons.

Some of the figures on the cards were taken from Schiller's drama "William Tell" written in 1804.

Schneider was obviously inspired by the basic concept of Schiller's drama, the Swiss fight against Habsburg rule. Six of the cards depicted William Tell and his companions, and an additional two showed the tyrant Gessler and his follower. (For that reason, the cards are also called "Tell cards".)

The figures were not chosen from Hungarian history for the simple reason that the Austrian censors would have confiscated them. (Remember: this was still the time of Austrian absolutist rule.)



But the Austrians could have no objection to the depiction of characters from a German author's play.

The "Hungarian cards" were very popular, because they reminded the players that the country was not free under the Habsburgs, while the Swiss had driven them out centuries earlier. It is probable that Schneider's cards were confiscated after the Freedom Fight of 1848 was put down, because all trace of them was lost. (Only one pack survived in London in possession of an English card collector.)

In 1865, the Viennese card maker Piatnik obtained the monopoly for the manufacture of playing cards and began to produce the Hungarian cards also, in a somewhat re-designed form. Today, they are again made in Hungary, as well as in Vienna and Prague.

Among the best-known games played with Hungarian cards are *ulti*, *66*, *ferbli*, *lórur*, etc. Our Editorial Board member Steve Jakab recalls that his family played a game they called "víg hetes" with the Hungarian deck of cards. Have fun!



Jókai bableves (Bean soup á la Jókai)

Its name is derived from the writer Jókai Mór (see February 2013 issue of Magyar News Online), for whom it was first prepared.

1 1/3 cups red kidney beans
1-2 bay leaves
10 oz smoked ham shank
1 large carrot
1 large parsley root
1/2 small celery root
7 oz frankfurter sausage
4 tsp butter
4 tbsp flour
1 small onion
1 clove garlic
1 heaped tsp paprika
1/3 tsp vinegar
3/4 cup sour cream
Bunch of parsley

Soak the beans overnight, and also the ham shank, so that the dish will not be too salty. Drain and rinse the beans. Put the beans, ham and bay leaves in a saucepan with 6 cups of water, and bring to a boil over low heat.

Peel the carrots, parsley root and celery root, then dice them finely. After 30-40 minutes add the vegetables with the sausage to the soup. Remove the ham shank and sausage from the soup. Melt the butter, then add the flour, stirring all the time until the flour turns pale gold. Take the pan off the heat. Stir in the diced onion, crushed garlic, and paprika. Stir



the roux into the soup to thicken it, and bring the soup to a boil again. Dice the ham shank, and slice the sausage. Season the soup to taste with vinegar. Add the sour cream to the soup and bring it to a boil again, then add the ham and sausage. Sprinkle chopped parsley over the soup and serve immediately.

Did you know...

..about the New Year's Eve custom of the fiery wheel?
...that on New Year's Eve, it was the custom to wrap a wheel in straw, set it on fire, and roll it down a hill? The idea was that the wheel binds together the old and the new year. This custom was observed mainly in Transylvania, and was especially popular among the Saxons (those of German origin).



It's a Small World!

Olga Vállay Szokolay

Way back, in the sixties, I worked in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I drove a small sports car and, being summer, I had the top down. Sliding through a yellow traffic light, I was stopped by a policeman.

Upon his request, I handed him my registration and license. Recognizing my last name as Hungarian, he addressed me: "Magyar?" I said, "Yes, but are you?" From then on he continued in Hungarian: "Jaj, kedveském, miért ment át a pirosra?" (O, Dearie, why did you drive through the red?) I answered: "Nem volt még piros, csak sárga!" (It was not red yet, just yellow!) Then he: "Jajistenem, piros volt az, mint a Mari néni gatyája!" (OMG, it was red like Aunt Mary's bloomers!)

With that comment, and advice to stay out of trouble, he let me go! *Mert kicsi a világ!*

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