Louisiana Yule Retains German Customs

By KATHLEEN MALLOY

Lake Charles: The cold, the loss of light and the thought of Mass in the hushed stillness so peculiar to snow, the coffee and cake at home afterwards, are memories a European-born woman cannot carry out in Louisiana at Christmas time.

A year ago, Janey Ieyoub, the former Ursula Trykowski, who grew up in the Schlesian region of East Germany, and does follow customs and traditions of her family in the family she shares with her husband and their six children: the latest are four and-a-half-month-old twins.

There is always an Advent wreath, with prayers said each Sunday before Christmas. This year, because of the babies, the wreath was not put up until a week after the children take part in the ceremony.

The tree is put up Dec. 6. St. Nicholas comes, bringing sweets baked by their mother, as well as small gifts, to the Ieyoub children.

The cookies and candies are put in the children’s shoes which, if they place inside by side on the floor by their beds. Last year there was so much talk of this visit in the school car pool that the parents of the other children also put St. Nicholas sweets in their youngsters’ shoes on that Good Saint’s feast day.

Comes Again

St. Nicholas comes again, but not as Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. Rather, the Christmas tree and distribution of presents are always on Christmas Eve night.

Ieyoub, who grew up in Lake Charles, remembers the big Christmas morning at his grandparents with his sister and brothers and cousins. He did not like the Christmas Eve present-giving when he first married. “But I really like it now,” he claims.

Then on Christmas the children play with their toys and wear their new clothes and there is the traditional turkey dinner at mid-day.

The turkey is a change for Mrs. Ieyoub. “I never even saw a turkey before I came here,” she said.

But the goose, traditional with her family, was not a success when she tried it here and she abandoned it, along with its red cabbage and potato accompaniments, in preference for the American fare.

The babies’ arrival and their care, along with the care of Michael, 10; Mark, 9; David, 6; and the little girl of the family, Kristen, 3, also delayed Mrs. Ieyoub’s baking, with which, according to her mother, she became rather obsessed each Christmas. “I’ve just got to do it,” she says of this “obsession.”

But although she got to it later than usual, this year her custom of cookies baked and cut and decorated for her family’s consumption, the popcorn seed cake and other cakes which she remembers from when she was a girl.

In Germany, when she was young, only real candles were used on the Christmas tree (with a bucket of water nearby!). Later, Mrs. Ieyoub recalls, there were electric lights but her family always retained some lighted candles on their tree.

Icicles

Icicles were placed in bunches, tapered, like the usual one-strand method used here. They really looked like icicles,” Mrs. Ieyoub remembers.

There are no stockings, no visits from Santa Claus, in her memories. And, probably because most everyone included her family, live in apartments, there are no outdoor decorations at Christmas time.

The tree, put up by the parents on Christmas eve, is not seen by the children until the moment for gift-giving arrives. It stays up until the visit of the Three kings on Jan. 6. Mrs. Ieyoub deploys some of putting trees in early December only to take them down the day after Christmas.

To her and her family, there is nothing more meaningful to the holy season when the tree and the creche remain up from the night of the Nativity until gifts are brought to the Christ child.

But there is evidence of some murmuring in the ranks about not seeing the tree until it is all decorated. Michael, the oldest child, has asked his mother if he is ever going to be allowed to help trim the tree. Her reply was, “Not until you decorate the tree in your own home.”

Mrs. Ieyoub’s parents are Georg and Ilse Trykowski, now living in Erlange, Germany. They visited here early last spring, meeting four of their grandchildren, but leaving too early to see Timothy and Jonathan, born in July.

The father is a retired vocational teacher. Their other children are Hartmet, a landscape architect now living in Switzerland and the father of their only other grandchild, Michael, 21, now serving his time with the air force, and another daughter, Renate, employed by a travel agency in Spain.

Met on Visit

Danny and Ursula met while she was visiting here in 1960. They were married the following year and spent their honeymoon in Germany.

They are members of Immaculate Conception Parish. Danny is on the parish council, is in the choir, and is president this year of the Parent-Teacher Organization of Immaculate Conception School. He is assistant principal at Lake Charles High School and is active in Artists Civic Theater and Studio.

Ursula, a lovely blonde, loves to sew, but finds little time for it right now. She is determined however, to make the baubles for her tree and thinks that in about five years she will be the little Santa Claus figures, gingham balls, angels and the like, to compete the job.

Her memories include the post-war period when her mother, with Ursula and the two other children (Michael was not yet born), along with countless other mothers and their children, traveled in box cars from East Germany into West Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. and back again, as authorities attempted to place them. “As bad as it had to be for my mother and the other women, so responsible for us children. I do not remember this as a very bad time. I remember the kindnesses, and strangely enough, especially the kindnesses from Russians,” Mrs. Ieyoub said.

Her father, taken from his home, was at last released. He searched for his family first in Silicia, and then in Berlin, until the ultimate reunion and decision to live in West Germany.

A grandmother, two aunts and their families remained in East Germany and for many years visits with them were few. The grandmother and Mrs. Ieyoub’s mother’s sister have since died, but her father’s sister resides in the east sector today. Because of her age, she is now allowed to go to West Germany on occasion, but younger members of the family, who cannot leave, must be visited by the West German relatives.

“Christmas needs snow,” is Mrs. Ieyoub’s cry. “Since I can’t have that, I pray for rain and drizzle at least, not the hot, muggy weather we so often have, and people think I am crazy,” she said.

But whatever the weather, Christmas to the Ieyoub family means the family and Christ, and the Ieyoub children will grow up with their own memories, many translated to them from Germany by their mother.